Wilde’s Wiles

Wilde's Wiles:
Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

Annette M. Magid

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For Hillel, Suzie, Elie, Jonathan, Tamar,
Yaakov, Shira, Devora, Dov, Sammy and Ella,
who know the beauty of family, friends and education.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART III: PERFORMANCE AND PEDAGOGY

LEGEND FOR COVER IMAGES

Clockwise from the upper left:

Standing: Oscar Wilde after winning the Newdigate Prize for poetry with 'Ravenna' in 1878.
Sitting immediately in front of Oscar: Willie Wilde, Oscar's older brother.
Sitting to Oscar's left (viewer's right): "Possibly [Willie and Oscar's mother] Lady Wilde."[1]

Oscar Wilde, photographed by master photographer Napoleon Sarony in New York, 1882. Image was used illegally to advertise Ehrich Bros. trimmed hats; however, Sarony sued the Burrow Giles Lithographic Co. "He won and the case established the legal basis for American photographic copyright."[2]

Dr. Thomas Wilde, Oscar's grandfather, a country doctor, early 19th century.

Sir William Wilde, Oscar's father with his honorary North Star from Sweden, 1862.

Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, watercolor by Bernard Mulrenin, 1864.

Oscar in costume of Prince Rupert, with an unidentified friend, at an Oxford fancy dress ball, 1878.

Constance Wilde nee Lloyd,1892; after Oscar's imprisonment, she changed her name to Constance Holland.

Oscar Wilde in fur lined great coat, 1892.

Oscar's writing table in Hôtel d'Alsace, where he lived for the last year of his life and died 30 November 1900 from complications of an ear infection sustained in prison.[3]

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[1] Merlin Holland, *The Wilde Album* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 34.
[2] Holland, *The Wilde Album*, 92.
[3] Holland, *The Wilde Album*, 184.

PREFACE

The majority of the papers included in *Wilde's Wiles: Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century* were presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association's [NeMLA's] 2010 and 2011 Conventions at the "Oscar Wilde" sessions I chaired and at the NeMLA Convention at which Margaret Stetz chaired the "Wilde Family Values" panel. Because of the wide diversity related to Oscar Wilde, a monograph of critical analysis is essential in order to more completely understand Wilde as a person, as a writer, and as a profound influence in aesthetics, culture, writing and theater. *Wilde's Wiles: Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century* has a broad spectrum of subjects including: aesthetics, family influence, friendships, children's literature, women's issues, consumer economics, film, queer theory, politics, theater and pedagogy. Part I, 'Aesthetic Approaches,' begins with Paul L. Fortunato's study in chapter one which initiates the discussion of Wilde's aesthetic influences in the twenty-first century. Fortunato discusses Wilde's equating of performative work of consumer and artist. Fortunato's engaging discussion asserts that in moving away from an accurate image, and moving towards stylization, these 'artists' engage with the workings of the irrational fetishism of commodities and consumer culture. Fortunato includes Wilde's theory regarding the artistic value of consumerist 'materialism,' of participating actively in the 'selfish' consumption of goods, and Wilde's idea of attacking 'self-denial.'

In chapter two, Kirby Joris juxtaposes present-day writing with Wilde's nineteenth century aesthetic viewpoint by focusing on a journal, letters, and an interview: three ways of promoting and publishing 'Oscar Wilde' as he might have done it himself during his own versatile, self-advertising lifetime. In other words, revived in a significant body of contemporary biofictions where Oscar Wilde is accordingly the leading man, Joris stipulates that Oscar Wilde continues to play a substantial role in literature.

Loretta Clayton's study in chapter three returns to the beginning of Wilde's aesthetic influence and assesses his audience through her keen insight into the man and his influence in the late Nineteenth Century. Clayton argues that Wilde cultivated an audience of women, and that the

discourse of aestheticism—particularly as articulated by Wilde—found a special appeal in an audience of Victorian women both in England and America.

From Clayton's paper, the transition to Part II, 'Friends and Family,' moves to chapter four, Sema Ege's study of Wilde and H. G. Wells, men of letters, as philosophers or even as social planners with distinctively different thoughts. Ege suggests that 'opposites' or 'opposite ideas' are not contradictions that negate each other but 'complements' that enable Man to have a sounder view of things in life. Ege suggests that as *fin de siècle* intellectuals, Wilde and Wells, though having different concepts of art or literature, entertained similar views and similar aspirations as regards human destiny. Ege's paper focuses on a comparative study of the possible utopian intimations of Wilde and the utopian arguments of Wells, and conjectures that their similarities end with the suggestion that it would equally be a sound proposal to study the diversities of opinion as regards literature, man, life, and systems.

Margaret S. Kennedy in chapter five analyzes Wilde's cosmopolitanism as an international connoisseur of the decorative arts—of fine blue and white china, Venetian glass, Persian rugs, and other pieces from around the world. Kennedy presents Wilde as a man with a multiplicity of tastes and interests: he was an Irishman, living in England, but traveling around Europe and famously to America. Wilde was the master of Greek and Latin classics, and spoke and wrote fluent French. Kennedy brings to the fore a memorable moment regarding fellow cosmopolitan Henry James and his undeserved revulsion of Wilde.

Moving from friends and acquaintances, in chapter six, Annette M. Magid focuses on Oscar's remarkable and much misunderstood and somewhat under-appreciated father, William Robert Wills Wilde. Magid discusses some of the extraordinary accomplishments of William, his life with Speranza and the upbringing of Oscar. Magid proposes that some of William's traits, both positive and negative, influenced Oscar's behavioral choices.

In Part III, 'Performance and Pedagogy,' Pierpaolo Martino's discusses in chapter seven, the 1990s revaluation of Wilde's cultural legacy, as well as a re-examination of public feeling towards Wilde. Martino stipulates that there were a multitude of events, and publications—books, but also films and music—commemorating the centenary dates of Wilde's life. Martino also argues that Wilde's iconicity implies a kind of double articulation based on a complex dialogism involving past and present. Martino further suggests that Wilde's life can be usefully analyzed through the theoretical frame offered by performance studies.

Another performance, Oscar Wilde's *Salomé: a Tragedy in One Act Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde* (1894) is an important literary exploration of sexual discourse and the power of aestheticism to generate agency for the ostracized reader and is the focus of Frederick D. King's paper which is chapter eight. King stipulates that Wilde's play must be re-read with a queer perception of both sexuality and textuality. King states that by reading the book as originally published by the Bodley Head with Beardsley's performative illustrations, and without drawing on either Wilde's or Beardsley's biography for literary interpretation, the relationship between aestheticism and sexuality that the play presents to the reader becomes available in absence of the politically charged motivations of twentieth-century identity politics.

In chapter nine, Anastasia G. Pease reflects on her personal story while growing up behind the Iron Curtain in the late nineteen seventies, when her grandmother read her "The Star Child," one of Oscar Wilde's children's stories. Pease stipulates that the personal story is one of the most compelling pedagogical tools. Pease iterates that Wilde's works had been a part of Soviet life and the State-mandated school curriculum. Many prominent cultural figures in the USSR during the years before the October, 1917 Revolution expressed their admiration for his life and his art; however, between 1933 and 1993, homosexuality was illegal and Oscar Wilde was not discussed or read. Pease shares her journey from the USSR to the American University where she now includes Wilde's stories. Pease shares details about editorial cuts made by Soviet print and television editors.

The final paper of the Wilde monograph, chapter ten, focuses the pedagogical aspects of another of Wilde's children's stories, "The Happy Prince" which Heather A. Evans uses in her first-year English courses for officer cadets in the engineering program at the Royal Military College of Canada. Evans stipulates that "The Happy Prince" has been one of the most popular texts and one of the texts that has fostered some of the most dynamic and engaged class discussions about issues germane to future military officers, including leadership, the value of self-sacrifice, and the construction of the hero.

The entire collection of *Wilde's Wiles: Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century* includes a diversity of approaches and foci from multicultural, national and international scholars and will serve as an informative tool for the in-depth study of the remarkable and often underappreciated Oscar Wilde.

Even though there have been books related to Wilde and the study of his work, there are no other monographs that incorporate the important

contributions of aesthetics with the details of the influence of friends and family as well as the issues of theatrical production and pedagogy.

The intention of this multifaceted approach is to provide the reader with a more complex and diverse appreciation for Oscar Wilde's aesthetic theories, his renowned friends, his amazing family and his enduring influence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Margaret Stetz who chaired the Wilde Family Values panel at a Northeast Modern Language Association [NeMLA] Convention and encouraged me to write this monograph.

Also many thanks to those who attended the NeMLA Convention and showed much interest in the Oscar Wilde panels I chaired over the last several years. Thanks to all those who contributed to this monograph.

Much appreciation is also extended to Dr. Michael Basinski, Curator at the University at Buffalo Rare Book Room, who afforded me the privilege of examining a rare 1894 edition of the Beardsley illustrated Salomé. Thanks also to the wonderful University Rare Book Room library staff for their help retrieving Wilde documents and books. Much thanks to Linda A. Lohr, Manager of the History of Medicine Collection at the University at Buffalo, for the tour of the medical artifacts including some nineteenth century ear examination devices similar to those invented by Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde and allowing me to read William Wilde's *Aura*l text. Thanks to Melissa Peterson, Head Librarian at SUNY Erie Community College, South Campus for her extraordinary skills at locating journal articles. Thanks also to the dedicated staff at the Buffalo Erie County Public Library Rare Book, Grosvenor Room where I was able to read William Wilde's original books documenting his trip to Egypt and his assessment of the medical conditions during the Irish Potato Famine.

Thanks also to Dr. I. Marc Carlson, Librarian of Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Tulsa who kindly helped me contact Merlin Holland, Oscar Wilde's grandson. Thanks to Merlin Holland for his time and help with the cover images and many thanks my son, Jonathan Magid, for his masterful design skills in creating the cover collage.

I am especially grateful for the encouragement and support from my husband Hillel as well as his computer and researching expertise.

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PART I

AESTHETIC APPROACHES

I look forward to the time when aesthetics will take the place of ethics, when the sense of beauty will be the dominant law of life: it will never be so, and so I look forward to it.

—Oscar Wilde, "Letter" Written to Bertha Lathbury, 1890

CHAPTER ONE

"WELL-DRESSED WOMEN DO.": EMBRACING THE IRRATIONAL IN WILDE'S CONSUMER AESTHETIC

PAUL L. FORTUNATO

In both his philosophical essays and in his popular plays, Oscar Wilde develops a consumer aesthetics, a philosophy of art that does not turn away from the commercial world, but that needs it. By his account, essentially the same phenomenon occurs when a person-of-fashion presents a stylized self to the world as when the artist is presenting a painting, or a sculpture, or a story. Both the person-of-fashion and the artist offer a stylized "version" of what they are telling or representing. In fact, it is not really proper to call it a "version" because every representation is by definition a version (and not an original). In critical essays like "The Decay of Lying," Wilde calls that representation a *lie*, something that has been filtered, exaggerated, or in some way passed through someone's consciousness. Since that applies both to life and to art, Wilde can equate the performative work of the consumer and the artist. In moving away from an accurate image, and moving towards stylization, these "artists" engage with the workings of the irrational. And, in Marxian terms, this art therefore relies on the irrational fetishism of commodities. It relies on consumer culture.

Wilde thus theorized art as something counter to the project of the Enlightenment's rational, autonomous subject. It is telling that we see Oscar Wilde's presence in consumer culture right from the beginning of his career. His image was used in 1882 by Straiton and Storms Cigar Co. in order to sell cigars, an advertising image described in a recent article by Michael North.[1] But Wilde also directly theorizes the artistic value of

[1] Michael North, "The Picture of Oscar Wilde." *PMLA*. 125 (1): 185-191. The "picture" is a drawing of Oscar Wilde, based on the photographs used during his

consumerist "materialism," of participating actively in the "selfish" consumption of goods. Through the character, Gilbert, in his dialogic essay, "The Critic as Artist," he criticizes those who:

> rage against Materialism, as they call it, forgetting that there has been no material improvement that has not spiritualized the world.…What is termed Sin [i.e., materialistic consumerism] is an essential element of progress.…Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type.…Self-denial [i.e., in consuming goods] is simply a method by which man arrests his progress.…[2]

He attacks the idea of "self-denial," of not consuming beyond one's needs, because in order to develop one's own personality, one must assert precisely one's "individualism," one must find ways to express one's style, that which is more than strictly a need.[3] In his essay, "The Soul of Man," he defends the idea of wearing what one wants to wear. He decries that "a man is called selfish if he lives in the manner that seems to him the most suitable for the full realization of his own personality," a phrase that could be applied to sexual orientation or to consumerism.[4] For Wilde, one must consume the goods and services precisely that one does not need, one must embrace commodity fetishism.

Let me note that, on occasions when I have given papers on different aspects of consumer aesthetics, invariably I find that people assume that my arguments focus mainly on a (quasi) Marxian critique of commodity culture. We academics often cannot imagine another way of treating consumer culture, and we cannot imagine consumerism with a critical, creative edge to it. I read Wilde's aesthetic as structurally the exact reverse of Marx's. That is, while Wilde and Marx share some common points, for example in their critiques of the exploitation of laborers, they are almost

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American tour in 1882 to promote the play *Patience.* The "cigar card," enclosed in the cigar pack, had the line "Straiton and Storm's New Cigars. Aesthetic sun-flower – Too, too Capadura Patience."

[2] Oscar Wilde, "Critic as Artist," in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Robert Ross (New York: Bigelow, Brown, 1908), 148.

[3] In her "The Soul of Man under Socialism': A (Con)Textual History," in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, edited by Joseph Bristow, 59-85. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003, Josephine Guy has argued convincingly that the very use of the word "individualism" points to a defense of laissez-faire capitalism. In the context of late-nineteenth century England, that word signified capitalism. When Wilde argues in "Soul of Man" that socialism is the way to promote individualism, he is stating a paradox—something not surprising in Wilde.

[4] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 263.

mirrored opposites when it comes to analyzing consumer culture and how it enables artistic experience, in both production and consumption. Many critics, including Regenia Gagnier and Jonathan Freedman, have argued for a more socialist Wilde. I argue, however, that Wilde presents… not necessarily a "capitalist" aesthetics, but certainly a consumer aesthetics. Both Marx and Wilde examine the workings of the commodity in similar ways, in terms of fetishism, one that creates a *false* image, a distortion, a lie. However, for Marx, the lie is something to be overcome; for Wilde the lie is what art is. Just as Marxist analyses can shed important light on the work of writers like Wilde, "capitalist" or "consumerist" analyses can yield up perhaps even more insight into the nature of some works.[5] I argue that Wilde's works are more attuned to these latter critical approaches.[6]

For Marx, what happens to a person when confronted with a commodity is precisely fetishism, a quasi-religious sense of magic, in short, a lie. As noted above, Wilde had expressed much the same idea of fetishism, not as an economic term, but as an aesthetic one, in "the Decay of Lying." In the essay, his main character, Vivian, declares, "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."[7] He clarifies what he means by "lying," and states that the reason he praises Hans Holbein's portraits is precisely because they are so *stylized*. It is that stylization that makes them seem so real. "It is style that makes us believe in a thing—nothing but style."[8] It is not the "real thing" that matters to the person, either as consumer or as artist; it is the admixture of style that the artist has "infused" in the thing. In their recent piece on Marx and aesthetics, Duffy and Boscagli characterize Marx's portrayal of the commodity as being "now redolent of exoticism, orientalism, femininity, waste, and all the 'othered' allures considered counter to a rationalizing modernity."[9] In my analysis, Wilde presents his consumerist aesthetic in

[5] Other related critical approaches that are helpful include post-colonial and feminist approaches. These are similar to consumerist approaches in that they involve a critique of overly rationalist and masculinist analyses, like those of most Marxist critics.

[6] Jonathan Rose and others have made gestures in the direction of "capitalist criticism," perhaps half in jest. [cf. Jonathan Rose, "Was Capitalism Good for Victorian Literature?" *Victorian Studies*, 46 no. 3 (2004), 489-501]. But these approaches are going to be very fruitful, particularly when looking at writers like Wilde who were so heavily invested in the commodities and the rituals of consumer culture.

[7] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 103.

[8] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 99.

[9] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 191.

terms of discourses of the irrational and the Oriental. His strategy is to de-center the rationalist, Western, and to some extent Marxist, subject.

Before turning to Wilde, it is necessary to pause and examine Marx's conception of the commodity and its fetish-effect. Marx, in a certain sense, makes a distinction that is related to the one between the rational and the non-rational, namely, "use value" as distinct from "exchange value." For him, exchange value, the value attributed to things in a capitalist, commodity system, is a distortion of reality, a lie. It occludes what is really at stake in the production and consumption of this item, be it a table or a coat. The more real value—though he does not use this way of speaking—is the use-value. In a sense Marx's point is to get back to use-value (and perhaps the labor value, though that is less appropriate to my point), and to abandon or at least be aware of the pernicious effect of the exchange value.

In Marx's chapter in *Capital*, "The Commodity," he writes that a commodity (and its exchange value) seems to be an obvious reality. "But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."[10] "Metaphysical" and "theological" clearly mean "irrational" here. For example, says Marx, wood can be transformed by labor into a table.

> "But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness…[and it] evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will."[11]

He pictures the object—distorted from its real existence by means of exchange value—magically dancing around, something totally ludicrous. The more real thing is the object measured by use value. What consumers perceive in the object as commodity is less real, even unreal, a lie, something that is invested—falsely—by magical powers.

We must look elsewhere than to Marx in order to find theories of commodity culture that are not skewed by too rationalistic an approach. For example, in his book, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor theorizes the roles of four "horizontal forms of social imaginary," the first three being the economy, the public sphere, and the sovereign people. But he mentions a fourth, the space of *fashion*, the most non-rational aspect of consumer culture.[12] Taylor thus theorizes an important positive, unifying social role

[10] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 163.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 483.

for consumer culture, specifically fashion culture. This social role is perhaps not as important as that of other social imaginaries, but consumer culture's social role is nonetheless enormous, and often closely tied to artistic creation.

Taylor goes on to write: "Now consumer culture, expressivism and spaces of mutual display connect in our world to produce their own kind of synergy. Commodities become vehicles of individual expression, even the self-definition of identity."[13] Taylor does not deny that the culture is constantly manipulated by large corporations, but such negative realities do not negate the powerful, individualistic potentials of consumer culture. Persons make use of consumer culture, the commodities and the lifestyles that they represent, in order to fashion their selves, their identities. Similarly, in their book, *Practices of Looking*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright point out that one problem with Marxist theory is its reliance on the above-mentioned distinction between exchange value and use value. The term "useful" is a very malleable, ideological term. For example, is it more "useful" to drive a Mercedes Benz than a Hyundai? In one sense, no. Both vehicles are equally useful for transportation. But so much of the "usefulness" is tied up with one's self-image, as well as with public image. There are *real* effects—status, the impression one gives to clients, the way one feels when picking up one's date, and so forth. How is one to measure the use value of quantities like pleasure and status? Marx's theories do not deal with these matters because he considers them unreal.

Fetishism and the Irrational as Necessary for Art

In addition to Taylor and Sturken, I submit that Wilde is also a superior theorist for working with the linkages between artistic creation and consumer culture. In his popular West End play, *An Ideal Husband*, a play, incidentally, that was a huge commercial success,[14] Wilde embeds elements of his consumer aesthetics and his conception of "the irrational" in statements by various characters. The crucial dialogue occurs when the woman-of-fashion Mrs. Cheveley introduces herself to Sir Robert Chiltern in Act I. In her statements, we see some apparent gender essentialism, with men occupying the "rational" side of things and women the "irrational." However, one must realize that she is not saying that it is women who

[13] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 483.

[14] Also, the play, like all of Wilde's West End productions, was heavily implicated in the fashion and interior design industries. The playbills listed the fashion designers for various costumes, jewelry, and pieces of furniture.

represent the irrational, but "*well-dressed* women," thus introducing class and consumer culture into the discussion. Moreover, she values the irrational—as she means the term—as more creative and powerful than the rational. The core of the dialogue is the following:

> MRS. CHEVELEY: [Optimism and pessimism] are both of them merely poses.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You prefer to be natural?
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Sometimes. But it is such a very difficult pose to keep up.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: What would those modern psychological novelists, of whom we hear so much, say to such a theory as that?
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women...merely adored.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do.[15]
> . . .
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: . . . may I know if it is politics or pleasure [that brings you to London]?
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Politics are my only pleasure.[16]

First it is important to note Mrs. Cheveley's method. She continually adduces a binary opposition, one that seems rather straightforward on first glance, but every time she abruptly collapses it. She thus forces us to reconsider some assumptions we had felt rather comfortable with. The binaries she proposes in quick succession are the following:

to be natural	: to pose
the rational	: the irrational
politics	: pleasure

In each instance, she asserts that the second term is not in fact an opposite to, but rather an essential part of, the first. With regard to the first binary, she asserts that being natural "is such a very difficult pose to keep

[15] It is not that the woman of fashion is irrational. (In fact, Mrs. Cheveley is extremely rational in her ability to manipulate the people around her, always acting out of rational self-interest.) Rather, the woman of fashion is an icon of the power of the non-rational, including the non-rational power of commodity fetishism.
[16] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 142-43.

up."[17] She, like Wilde, conceives of human life as artistic performance, as assuming certain masks or poses. With regard to the third binary, she says, "Politics are my only pleasure," indicating that pleasure and desire are major components of the political, indicating that the private cannot be cleanly separated from the public.[18] But the crucial binary involves the rational and the irrational.

Through Mrs. Cheveley, Wilde argues that "well-dressed women" represent "the irrational." Throughout this passage he implies that the irrational is a powerful, future-oriented mode. For him, it is not the polar opposite of reason. In fact, reason cannot be reason if it fails to account for the irrational. Note that Wilde deliberately uses the word "irrational" when he could have used non-rational, or subliminal, or some other term. He enjoys using deliberately provocative terms to give more edge to his statements. The fundamental point, in Wilde and in other theorists of the non-rational,[19] is that those who ignore its presence within human knowing do so at their own peril. Through Mrs. Cheveley's statements, he is proposing an alternate account of reason, a conception of reason that needs elements like the body and consumer culture—that needs the non-rational—in order to be reason.

In contrast, Wilde includes in the play characters who, in their ideas and in themselves, strictly divide reason from the non-rational. The play's text describes Sir Robert's face as representing the "complete separation of passion and intellect,"[20] thus indicating the rationalist, masculinist error in his personality. And Sir Robert describes the villain, Baron Arnheim, precisely as a man of "subtle and refined intellect," someone who had made "success an absolute science."[21] Arnheim is apparently the one who has taught him to separate his passion from his intellect. It is the aesthete Lord Goring who criticizes both Sir Robert and Arnheim. He reveals that, far from being a rationalist or pessimist, he has a distinctly romanticist strain. Goring acknowledges the irrational in a way Sir Robert cannot conceive. For example, he implies his criticism of the popular rationalist philosopher, Schopenhauer, in an exchange with Lady Chiltern. Schopenhauer, who was a kind of proto-existentialist, was known as a philosopher of "pessimism." Lord Goring declares himself to not be a "pessimist," and asserts, "It is love, and not German philosophy that is the

[17] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 142.
[18] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 143.
[19] I would place figures like Nietzsche and Freud among these theorists.
[20] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 139-40.
[21] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 179.

true explanation of this world."[22] German (by implication, Schopernhauerian) philosophy is too rationalistic. As Wilde's character Gilbert says in "Critic as Artist," "There are two ways of disliking art, Ernest. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally."[23]

Also, as a result of their rationalism, these characters mistakenly believe in a pre-existing self, a "real" thing that is separate from one's expression in society, from one's relationships with, and performance for, others. Like commodities, human beings carry a misleading, distorting aura around themselves. As a means of self-expression, they self-consciously deploy their physical bodies, their manners, their clothing, and so forth. They do not strive for an *accurate* representation. The idea is that one's very self-expression is one's self, and it represents the moment of becoming oneself. There is no prior self that one must be "true" to as one prepares the social masks one assumes when entering social life. Thus conceived, the self is inseparable from the ambient commodity culture, the social network of bodies and commodities which are on display, as Charles Taylor discussed above.

Because characters like Sir Robert and Baron Arnheim are too rationalistic, and by extension too masculinist, they do harm to their own personalities. True, one might imagine that Sir Robert appears to be living a kind of consumer aesthetic because he creates a fictive, "lying," external persona on top of a hidden core—that core being his crime of selling insider information. But it is precisely the separation between his interior and exterior lives that thwarts the unity of life that a consumer aesthetics calls for. Wilde's consumer aesthetics does call for a distorting exterior, but ironically, the exterior does not conflict with the "real" interior because one discovers that there is no real interior. One *is* one's stylized self-presentation.

Wilde's Use of "the Oriental"

Just as Wilde defends the aesthetic role of "the irrational," he includes the discourse of "the Oriental" in his aesthetic writings. This makes sense because theorists like Edward Said similarly react against the excessive "rationalism" of Western imperial discourses. Such discourses tend to conceive of Westerners as civilized and rational subjects, and Orientals as feminized, irrational subjects. In "Decay of Lying," Wilde describes artistic creation as "the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank

[22] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 192.
[23] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 188.

rejection of imitation [i.e., its stylization] . . . and our own [Western] imitative spirit."[24] In making this statement, and developing it with a clear bend towards the "Oriental," stylized side, Wilde was rejecting the reigning aesthetic hierarchy. He was bending away from rationalistic aesthetics and placing value on non-Western approaches.[25]

Marx, as Said has argued, was heavily invested in Orientalist discourses.[26] The very reason Marx uses the term "fetish" in the first place is that he sees it as an irrational lie, something appropriate to "uncivilized" peoples. For Marx, a fetish is a sign of a primitive, religious— *false* value. Describing the commodity, he writes: "In order therefore, to find an analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own...."[27] When most nineteenth-century scholars write of religious "fetishes," they are talking about non-Western, "primitive," "uncivilized" peoples. These were the people they were colonizing in the Americas, Africa and Asia, and one of the bases of the superiority complex of Westerners was the exotic character of these people's "primitive" religious practices.

Wilde, on the other hand, elevated the status of these "Oriental" artistic practices. In one piece in the *Woman's World*, the magazine which he was editing in the late 1880s, Wilde writes about the dynamic within a text between its non-rational stylistic element and its logical, strictly rational element. He describes the beauty of Japanese script, and says that "it is decorative in its complete subordination of fact to beauty of effect, in the grandeur of its curves and lines." He goes on to note that "there is also an intimate connection between their art and their handwriting or printed characters. They both go together and show the same feeling for form and line."[28] A text is precisely a rational, *logos*-centered phenomenon, yet Japanese script twists it into beautiful, completely non-rationalized forms—the word (*logos*) bleeding into the image (*ikon*). In "Decay," Wilde's character Vivian discusses the Japanese painters, Hokusai and Hokkai, and humorously declares that "if you set [one of their paintings] beside a real Japanese gentleman or lady, you will see that there is not the

[24] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 86.
[25] Of course, many theorists and artists, even in Wilde's generation, were learning from non-Western artists. There were "Oriental" fads and movements, with many artists borrowing from Japanese and Chinese painterly styles, for example.
[26] Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 153.
[27] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 165.
[28] Wilde, *Complete Work*s, *Vol. 4* (2007), 392.

slightest resemblance between them."[29] That is, the artists stylized their images, creating inaccurate, culturally-inflected works.

Marx accurately saw the spread of global capitalism as a rationalizing force. It was dissolving all feudal, national identities (and styles), moving us towards a homogeneous world market culture—something he viewed as a positive development because it was setting the stage for the coming revolution, signaling the end to national, ethnic, religious—for Marx, insignificant—differences. All these differences fall into the category of the "irrational." They block the basic economic, "rational," relationships between human persons. Granted, I am painting with broad brush strokes here, but I argue that in orthodox Marxist analysis, the elements of culture that are deemed "irrational," "Oriental," and "fetishistic," are negative and are to be eliminated. It is here where Wilde wants to locate art, in the fetishism, where style lies, and where individualistic personalities happen. For Wilde, social relations—particularly those of artists—are in part made up of that irrational, Oriental, fetishism; they are not blocked by it.

The Irrational, Consumerist Element Applied to Persons

Let us apply these considerations about commodity culture to the status of the woman- or man-of-fashion. What if persons invest themselves with aspects of commodity fetishism, and thus partly surrender their personalities to the irrational forces of exchange value? I argue that Wilde, through his essays and plays, was theorizing the positive, creative aspect of art's link to consumer culture. First I will argue that he shows how owning commodities and experiencing and performing the resultant lifestyle can be a type of artistic work. Secondly, I will describe how he analyzes the way the person-of-fashion works in order to shape the larger culture.

I turn first to the way art is created by means of consumer culture. As we saw, Mrs. Cheveley plays with the binary opposition between the rational, which is gendered masculine, and the irrational, which is gendered feminine. The dialogue reads:

> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: You think science cannot grapple with the problem of women?
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Science can never grapple with the irrational. That is why it has no future before it, in this world.
> SIR ROBERT CHILTERN: And women represent the irrational.
> MRS. CHEVELEY: Well-dressed women do.

[29] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 98.

She asserts that the rational is a flat-footed, passive mode in comparison to the more creative, powerful, and future-oriented irrational. When Sir Robert asks her if women then represent the irrational, she replies, "well-dressed women do."[30] Through his character, Wilde is indicating that the experience of beholding a work of art is at its core the same phenomenon as beholding a person-of-fashion. And the implication is that the artist and the person-of-fashion are up to the very same thing—representing an object (in the case of the woman, herself) not in an "accurate" flat-footed mode, but rather in a style-inflected, distorted mode.

Mrs. Cheveley says that women-of-fashion enact and tap into the irrational. Her ideas at this moment resemble those of Nietzsche; she is asserting that many "rational" thinkers have improperly de-emphasized the irrational, the unrestrainable, the Dionysian, aspect of life. Through his character, Wilde critiques the Enlightenment drive towards extreme rationalization. For Wilde, those who are unable to deal with the irrational condemn themselves to self-deception and passivity. And, paradoxically, it is precisely the fact that women-of-fashion are commodified, that they are "well-dressed," that they gain agency and power. It is not that she is a woman. It is that she is a woman who is not afraid of commodity culture, who embraces the irrational "logic" of the commodity.

So when Mrs. Cheveley asserts that "men can be analyzed, women . . . merely adored," she is talking about women—or men—who have a certain purchase on the irrational, both because of their physical beauty and the integration of the rational and non-rational within their personalities. In the rationalist mode, a person simply looks at an object without any emotion, as in a medical procedure or scientific experiment. In what Wilde might call the "irrationalist," consumer culture mode, a person for the first time *sees* the object, experiencing it not medically or analytically, but in *adoration.* This person experiences the object as an embodied human being, with body as well as mind , and recognizing that there is no such thing as mind without body. Notice that Wilde uses the word "adore," which can indicate the experience of a lover or of a religious devotee, someone devoted, say, to a fetish.

Wilde thus theorizes the import of the non-rational, and of its impact on both commodity-fetishism and creating art. The persons-of-fashion—and all creators of art—have a conception of the subject that is embodied, that is not purely intellectual, that goes to the head, but also to the heart and to the gut. Mrs. Cheveley argues that people who fail to grasp the

[30] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 143.

import of the irrational have "no future before [them], in this world."[31] And it is precisely the future that the artists are creating. Wilde writes in his essay "Soul of Man": "For the past is what man should not have been. The present is what man ought not to be. The future is what artists are."[32] Wilde thus makes the woman-of-fashion an icon of what art is.

But note something more. Mrs. Cheveley first seems to put it in the generic terms of gender—"women"—but then we realize that she is using *class* terminology, as well as consumerist terminology—"well-dressed women." So the not-well-dressed women—ie, working class women, or women detached from consumer culture—are perfectly graspable. Middle to upper-class status is necessary for the creation of this effect, and for this type of art. The world of fashion is a world of commodities, dresses, accoutrements, carriages, shopping districts, magazines, cafes, and so forth. The text of the play describes Mrs. Cheveley as being dressed "in heliotrope, with diamonds." Also, "in all her movements she is extremely graceful. A work of art, on the whole, but showing the influence of too many schools."[33] She creates a self-presentation—clothes, jewelry, movements, attitude—that is described as a work of art, though perhaps overly complex.

In fact, more than being about commodities, consumer culture is about lifestyles, something that Marx did not bring into his discussion. When a consumer buys some product, they generally are not just interested in the thing, but in the lifestyle represented therein. Women- and men-of-fashion, those who have sufficient leisure and the wealth, cultivate their own lifestyles as works of art. The separation between life and art is collapsed. They turn up the volume on the fetishism, the mystical, almost religious aura that they can produce around themselves by means of consumer culture. Note too that the descriptive "well-dressed" refers at once to Mrs. Cheveley's social class and to her fashion sense (ie, her knowledge of consumer culture). Wilde picked a highly suggestive turn of phrase here.

Now, I believe that Wilde would not deny that commodification can have exploitative effects, hiding the violence inflicted on workers and the alienation imposed on them. While it is true that embedding oneself in consumer culture is often not an entirely positive thing, I believe that Wilde was emphasizing the self-fashioning, creative aspect. Whether or not people get exploited in the process is not something Wilde was particularly concerned about, certainly not when discussing aesthetics. (In

[31] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 142.
[32] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 262.
[33] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 137.

fact, I believe even his "socialist" essay, "The Soul of Man," represents Wilde's turn away from concerns about members of the working class.)[34] I use Wilde's writings to theorize consumer aesthetics, and to do so in order to isolate the positive aspect of surrendering one's person to the world of the commodity.

Besides showing Mrs. Cheveley's creation of art, Wilde presents other characters who do the same artistic work by means of consumer culture. For example, the hero, or anti-hero, of the play is the dandy aesthete, Lord Goring. Goring is a man Wilde describes in the text of the play as "the first well-dressed philosopher in the history of thought," a title that Wilde probably saw himself as holding.[35] He implies that the tradition of philosophy has been dominated by poorly-dressed philosophers. That is, previous philosophers had no investment in style and turned away from the workings of the irrational as part of human experience and knowledge. And it is true that philosophers as a whole have cultivated a deliberately boring tone, one almost bereft of *style*. Goring and Wilde, on the other hand, are philosophers of the irrational and the stylized, and, by implication, of commodity culture.

Similarly, when in the play's text Wilde describes Goring's butler, Phipps, he says "The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner," illustrating the "dominance of form."[36] Like his employer, Phipps places form over function, thus elevating the "superficial" above the "substantive." Also, the eventual fiancée of Lord Goring, Mabel Chiltern, declares herself to share the same aesthetic ideals. When Goring asks her who "the most ornamental person" in London is, she "triumphantly" states, "I am." Goring gladly agrees with her, "How clever of you to guess it!"[37]

Goring in particular surrounds himself with the stuff of commodity culture, not just individual commodities, but settings, actions—his entire lifestyle. When he meets with people in his urban townhouse, he uses the "Adam Room," which is the style of room that banks like Lloyd's of London tended to utilize at gentlemen's clubs. Goring cultivates an atmosphere of power, in this case, precisely of financial, banking power. When Goring first appears, the play text describes him as "a flawless

[34] I agree with Josephine Guy, who sees the essay as defending "individualism," which in 1890s Britain signified laissez-faire capitalism. Cf. "The Soul of Man under Socialism': A (Con)Textual History," *Wilde Writing (London:* Contextual Conditions, 2003).
[35] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 212.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 194.

dandy…[who] is on perfectly good terms with the world."[38] Later on in the play, we see him:

> in evening dress [i.e., a tuxedo] with a buttonhole [a flower in the lapel of his jacket]. He is wearing a silk hat and Inverness cape. White-gloved, he carries a Louis Seize cane. His are all the delicate fopperies of Fashion.[39]

Goring assembles all the necessary commodities with which to adorn himself. His exterior is a perfectly executed representation of his lifestyle.

The Consumer Artist as the Shaper of Culture

Writing in *A Secular Age* about how arbiters of fashion shape the lives of millions of people, Taylor declares:

> … for many young people today, certain styles, which they enjoy and display in their more immediate circle, but which are defined through the media, in relation to admired stars—or even products—occupy a bigger place in their sense of self, and…this has tended to displace in importance the sense of belonging to large scale collective agencies, like nations, not to speak of churches, political parties, agencies of advocacy and the like.[40]

We are dealing with identity construction, how individuals come to create a sense of self, making use of the cultural elements at their disposal. In earlier times like the Middle Ages, people drew largely from the works of art produced by the church, and to a lesser extent by the state. In modern times, says Taylor, people do not as much turn to churches or politics, or other more "serious" associations. More people turn to "admired stars—or even products," iconic personalities like Princess Diana, Michael Jordan, Angelina Jolie. And they turn to the products associated with such people, like Nike sneakers, Banana Republic blouses and jeans, and so forth. Rather than looking to churches or government monuments, people turn to malls, films, and popular music. People also do turn to religion and political and philosophical figures, but these usually command a lesser allegiance, and a less passionate allegiance.

Perhaps this is because the more iconic personalities are more embedded in commodity culture. Also, the world of the commodity is always already distorted, stylized, made more than it is because it harnesses the power of the irrational. It is the work of iconic persons to

[38] Ibid., 146.
[39] Ibid., 212.
[40] Ibid., 484.

make use of that style and that distortion as a means of self-expression, the creation of art, and ultimately the exercise of cultural power. Daniel Herwitz, in his *The Star as Icon*, analyzes the functioning within culture of certain women of fashion, particularly Princess Diana, Grace Kelly and Jackie Kennedy. He notes that "The word *cult* is not out of order for a woman who could generate this intimacy, gestate her 'particular brand of magic.'"[41] He is arguing that these women, partly consciously, partly unconsciously, emerge in culture as quasi-religious figures, icons that represent both a distance from the public, and an intimacy.

Characters like Mrs. Cheveley, Mabel Chiltern, and Lord Goring create their public personae in such a way as to reach something approaching this iconic status. These characters do not have as global a provenance as a Princess Diana, but they participate in the same cultural cachet and influence, though on a smaller scale. We know, for example, that Mabel Chiltern is a public beauty because, earlier when a certain Vicomte calls her "the dragon of good taste," Goring replies, "So the newspapers are always telling us."[42] One of the descriptions of Goring in the play's text reads: "One sees that he stands in immediate relation to modern life, makes it indeed, and so masters it."[43] What Wilde seems to be saying is that Goring functions as a kind of icon of his world's social life. He stands as a symbol of a certain type, and shapes the lives of many people who see him as such a symbol.

Further insight is gained into Wilde's point by comparing his women and men-of-fashion with other characters of his: Mr. W.H. and Dorian Gray (from the story "The Portrait of Mr. W.H.," and the novel of the name.) Both are characters he more explicitly shows to be grand shapers of culture, artists of a high order. Both Mr. W.H. and Dorian stand as beautiful icons, each inspiring artists to create great works, and in turn to create new cultural forms. In the stories, the artists so inspired are Shakespeare and Basil Hallward (and to some extent Lord Henry Wotton), respectively. Wilde asserts that men like Mr. W.H. and Dorian are not mere "pretty" figures who have no artistic agency, but rather that their physical beauty is integral to their whole personalities, and those personalities are intensely creative. Because of Dorian's striking appearance, he inspires the artist Basil Hallward to create his best work of art, the picture of Dorian Gray. There is no literal painter inspired by them, but Mrs. Cheveley, Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern all are similar artists and inspirers of art. Their physical beauty, and their capacity to cultivate a

[41] Wilde, *Complete Work*s (1908), 12.
[42] Ibid., 148.
[43] Ibid., 212.