

COMMENTARY

Post-sexuality? The Wilde Centenary

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Almost one hundred years ago to the day, Oscar Wilde found himself in the midst of the first of three trials that would eventually go against him. Although it was Wilde who initially sued for libel, the defendant rallied sufficient evidence to have him sentenced to twenty-four months in solitary confinement with hard labour for having committed acts of gross indecency with other men. Few historians of sexuality would disagree that these grisly events of 1895 marked a flashpoint in modern understandings of sexuality. For it was in the Victorian *fin de siècle* that a cardinal distinction between homo- and hetero-object-choice would begin to emerge, and with terrible consequences. Wilde, to be sure, figured centrally in these debates about wholly antithetical types of sexual identity. No sooner had Wilde been impugned by Mr Justice Wills for indulging in 'hideous corruption' than he embodied a form of homosexual existence that was subjected both to increasing scrutiny by sexologists and to downright vilification by the press.

But the process by which Wilde came to be demonized for representing an abhorrent form of sexuality perhaps surprised him more than anyone else. In 1897, writing to the publisher Leonard Smithers, he would remark on the rapid rise and fall of his career as a playwright and critic: 'Neither to myself, nor others, am I any longer a joy. I am now simply an ordinary pauper of a rather low order: the fact that I am also a pathological problem in the eyes of German scientists: and even in their works I am tabulated, and come under the law of averages! *Quantum mutatus!*' Although a great deal of Wilde's writing has a fatalistic ring to it, he did not for one moment imagine that he would be unable to defend himself against the charge, brought by the illiterate Marquess of Queensberry, that he was 'posing as Sodomite' (*sic*). Indeed, this is the point that Alan Sinfield emphasizes in his recent study, *The Wilde Century* (1994). Bearing in mind the circumstantial evidence surrounding Wilde's libel suit, Sinfield concludes that 'homosexuality was *not* manifest from Wilde's style.' Even if Wilde was renowned for adopting a dandiacal and flamboyant effeminate manner, he had not, according to Sinfield, 'led either his friends or strangers to regard him as obviously, even probably, queer'. In other words, the connection between effeminacy and homosexuality had not, before the trials had run their course, assumed a 'settled correlation'.

If, in the present *fin de siècle*, one difficult lesson has had to be learned about the history of sexuality, it concerns how we should set about establishing appropriate categories that will enable us to apprehend the 'Love that dare not speak its name'. Sinfield's book counts among a handful of powerful studies that remind us that there is no 'homosexuality' before homosexuality is named as such. 'It may well be,' as David M. Halperin puts it in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1990), 'that homosexuality properly speaking has no history of its own outside the West or much before the beginning of our century.' Such statements strongly caution us against jumping to conclusions about naming a love that remained unnamed or unnameable, and whose contours of desire were shaped by patterns that have been largely, if not wholly, occluded by our modern insistence on the coherence and timelessness of homosexuality. So it follows that literary critics such as Linda Dowling have deplored what

appear to be reductionist readings of those works of Wilde that seem to imply, but never speak, the forbidden love that hides within them. In *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1984) – a study that eloquently celebrates the culture of Platonic ‘spiritual procreancy’ that thrived in the liberal Oxonian ethos enjoyed by Wilde in the 1870s – Dowling grows impatient with those readings of ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H.’ (1889; revised 1893) which seek to ‘name’ the “love that dare not speak its name” as “homosexuality” or “inversion” or some other name’. In reductionist analyses, argues Dowling, this ‘other name’ will ‘always be found to constitute either the sign of its ideological erasure from a dominant discourse that denies public expression to male love or, alternatively, the sign of [Wilde’s] opposition to that very discourse’. Instead, Dowling prompts us to consider how ‘Wilde’s very lack of specificity may itself constitute an aesthetic choice wholly independent of the mechanisms of repression and resistance’. The answer to this apparent absence of such a ‘name’, for Dowling, lies in how ‘Mr W. H.’ is ‘perfectly expressive’ – rather than evasive or euphemistic – of ‘precisely that imaginative richness, that many-sidedness and “variety” so central to the socio-cultural agenda of Victorian Hellenism’: the culture of what Dowling elsewhere calls the Higher Sodomy.

I am highly sensitive to these charges, since the work I developed in the context of a nascent lesbian and gay studies during the mid-1980s sought to unearth the homosexual subtext of two of Wilde’s major works: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; revised 1891) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). (In 1992, I published a student edition of *Earnest*, equipped with extensive commentary and footnotes, as well as an edited collection of essays on lesbian and gay writing entitled *Sexual Sameness*.) Even though, in retrospect, I can certainly recognize the naïveté of my zeal in trying to extract each and every potential same-sex coding that might be detected throughout these writings, it still strikes me that there is something significant in what was a wholehearted desire to reconstitute the gay Wilde, no matter how anachronistically. There was, indeed, a need to wrest Wilde’s writings from the work of critics who had barely mentioned the possibility of same-sex desire in those exchanges in *Earnest* where we find that Algernon and Jack have been leading a ‘double life’. But the results of such a strategy would appear almost as misguided as those who never mentioned the issue of



homosexuality at all. ‘Many commentators,’ writes Sinfield, ‘assume that queerness, like murder, will out... It might be nice to think of Algernon and Jack as a gay couple, but most of their dialogue is bickering about property and women.’ These protagonists, then, are not at all like us. They do not represent our desires – even if we should dearly love them to, especially in the light of how Wilde’s sexuality was construed in 1895. Algernon and Jack are not gay men so the story goes, because they were not even homosexuals.

This kind of approach has notable consequences, not just for students of Wilde’s fiction and drama, but for all of us who wish to radicalise our knowledge of how sexuality has developed as a crucial cultural formation over the past hundred years. To be sure, these critiques of anachronistic misnaming make us question the troubling embeddedness of those identitarian assumptions that shape

contemporary ideas of sexuality as a knowable entity. Perhaps, back in the 1980s, I needed a distinctly gay Wilde – one whose core identity could be found lurking in various textual depths – to secure (perhaps by way of historical guarantee) the fiction of my own valued sexuality. But the problem, I think, is really one of *simply not knowing enough*. The institutional suppression of research in literary patterns of same-sex desire for years managed to perpetuate the obscuration of what it was that gave rise to that suppression in the first place. Only recently have we begun to understand the scope and shape of what Dowling calls the ‘counterdiscourse of homosexuality’ that drew together a varied ensemble of dissident and not so dissident voices.

If one follows the leads given by Sinfield, Halperin and Dowling, one comes up against a wealth of thought-provoking scholarship that begins to suggest how and why the hetero/homo binary – and its forever implied but thwarted bisexual intermediary – emerged in a climate where there was an extraordinary crisis in trying to understand what sexuality actually might *be*. The more we look at the range of representations of sex, gender and sexuality in the late-Victorian era, it is noticeable that the proliferation of materials about each of these formations is remarkably incoherent. Effeminacy – to give just one example – could define a man’s leisure-class bearing, his fondness for boys, or even his uxoriousness. But by the twentieth century, there is a distinctive accent on forcing behaviours and identities together: so that the effeminate is *de facto* queer.

Yet if ideas about sexual identity have been consolidated in the social imaginary, the truth of sexuality has remained persistently resistant to understanding. In this respect, the well-worn Foucauldian axiom about the immense verbosity of discourses about sex bearing an ironic relation to the idea that we are all repressed could not be more to the point. Indeed, if one sets out to find definitions of sexuality in reference books published in our own queer *fin de siècle*, it is really quite surprising how incoherent the whole topic can still appear. As Jeffrey Weeks remarks in his 1986 study *Sexuality*: ‘The more expert we become in talking about sexuality, the greater the difficulties we seem to encounter in trying to understand it.’ Given the range of theoretical positions that have accreted around sexuality (with and without its prefixes), it is hard to know whether we are talking about somatic pleasure, object-choice or lifestyle. Sexuality can usher us towards the analysis of social institutions that seek to regulate our desires or to the mechanisms of identification and disavowal that shape and define our psychic life. Since it seems to dwell both inside and outside – phantasmatically and in materiality – sexuality may well appear to be implied in too many aspects of our lives to be identifiable in its own right. The trouble is that its very centrality is always undone by its dispersal: it is everywhere and nowhere at once.

If we have for the best part of a century suffered too much from the violence enacted by the hetero/homo binary, then the time may well have come for us to take Halperin’s advice and ‘de-centre *sexuality*’. ‘Just because modern bourgeois Westerners are so obsessed with sexuality, so convinced that it holds the key to the hermeneutics of the self,’ argues Halperin, ‘we ought not therefore conclude that everyone has always considered sexuality a basic and irreducible element in it.’ Such a view, of course, may seem implausible at a time when, as never before, we urgently need a sexual bill of rights. A bill of this kind would permit specific practices – such as sexual assembly – to be defended. But if, in campaigning for sexual freedoms, we could focus our energies more on issues than identities, declaring that what we demand is respect for a rich variety of consensual sexual behaviours, rather than focusing on our supposedly authentic selves, then the shibboleth that is sexuality might be cleared away.

The emergence of queer politics in 1990 assuredly marks one vital repudiation of the inhibiting demand to *be* a specific sexuality in name as well as in deed. And it is a part of the queer critical project to tell things slant, not straight. There is no better reason for us to return to the diverse patterning of multi-erotic interests that characterized the period before 1895. Perhaps things were altogether queerer in the years leading immediately up to the trials. But would it, I wonder, be anachronistic to say so?