

Wilde's Gender Line: The Limits to Mutable Identity in *An Ideal Husband*

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ABSTRACT: Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* presents a gendered boundary which limits the mutability of identity for the female characters. In this paper, I will show that Wilde presents identity mutability within this play; however, only the male characters hold this privilege. By examining the various blackmail schemes within the play, I will discuss the relationship between blackmail and plausibility. When Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert she must rely on physical evidence because her word, by itself, is not powerful enough to threaten him. In contrast, when Lord Goring threatens to have Mrs. Cheveley arrested for theft he implies that his word alone is substantial evidence to have her arrested. When we consider blackmail as a specific kind of representation, these scenes reveal both men's control over their representations as well as women's lack thereof.

WILDE'S GENDER LINE: THE LIMITS TO MUTABLE IDENTITY IN *AN IDEAL HUSBAND*

Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* presents its audience with a question of identity formation: specifically, what role does the past play in the construction of an identity? The play's narrative follows Sir Robert Chiltern as he is blackmailed by Mrs. Cheveley, who threatens to reveal Robert's morally compromising past to the public. Although such a revelation would certainly damage his career, for Robert, the public revealing of his past is not as problematic as the private effects such a revelation would have. Robert's ultimate fear is not that he would lose his social position but that he would lose his wife—who does not know of his previous misdeeds. Robert believes that “No one should be entirely judged by their past” (emphasis added, Wilde, *AIH*, Act 1, Page 202).¹ The use of the word “entirely” is important to note as it indicates that Robert believes that the past plays a role in forming judgments; it simply shouldn't be the only factor in forming a judgment. In contrast, Robert's wife, Lady Chiltern, believes that the past is the absolute and sole acceptable way of judging an individual: “One's past is what one is. It is the only way by which people should be judged” (emphasis added, 1.203). At stake in their argument is not only whether or not Robert's previous misdeeds should be considered part of his current identity, but also whether or not identity should be considered mutable. If the past is the only means by which people can judge then identity is not mutable because the past is an unchanging structure that defines identity; this is a belief that Lady Chiltern confirms when she states “I never change” (2.228). Lady Chiltern is the

1. In this paper I refer to two of Wilde's works, *An Ideal Husband* and “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” To avoid confusion I will refer to *An Ideal Husband* in citations as the abbreviated *AIH*; for “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” I shall use “S”. Also, in the case of *An Ideal Husband*, which does not have multiple scenes per act or line numbers, I shall give the act the quotation occurs upon followed by the page number as a decimal. Therefore, Robert Chiltern's line which occurs in the first act on page 202 would be cited as follows: 1.202.

only character within the play that holds this belief. In contrast, when Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert, she treats the past as a material object—specifically the incriminating letter that Robert wrote to Baron Arnheim. The past, given physical form through the letter, gains value when Mrs. Cheveley offers to exchange it for “[Robert Chiltern’s] public support of the Argentine scheme” (1.196). Similarly, when Lord Goring “burns [the letter] with a lamp” (3.251), he is acknowledging that the letter is a material representation of the past and, furthermore, that the past, and thus identity, can be rewritten through its material representations. Ultimately, these actions seem to delegitimize Lady Chiltern’s claim that the past is immutable and, in turn, they seem to offer credence to mutable histories and identities.

The idea that identity can be expressed through material artifacts is not an idea that is unfamiliar to Wilde. In “The Soul of Man under Socialism,” an essay Wilde wrote several years before *An Ideal Husband*, he asserts, “A man is called affected, nowadays, if he dresses as he likes to dress. But in doing that he is acting in a perfectly natural manner” (“S” 29). Here, Wilde implies that identity can be expressed through artifacts external to the body. However, this only functions if the association is voluntary: “It is only in voluntary associations that man is fine” (11). For Wilde, the condition necessary for material representation is “voluntary associations” or, in other words, consent. Just as clothes are material artifacts that can reflect an individual’s identity, material representations of past—such as Baron Arnheim and Robert Chiltern’s letters—can likewise reflect an identity. Consenting to an object’s representation can be understood as a dialogic process, but not between the individual and the object. Instead, the individual must consent to the effects the object produces; they consent to the representation that the object provides.

The relationship between an object’s representation and the individual being represented, then, is very much akin to the way Judith Butler describes gender; for Butler, gender “is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). When someone attempts to represent another person through the use of an object—be it a letter, an

article of clothing, or an image—the presenter of the object must be taken into account as their personal reputation (and their own presentation) naturally has an effect upon the plausibility of the representation produced. This is an important distinction to make because when we examine the identities Wilde's characters form through their relationships to physical artifacts it becomes clear that some characters have a stronger degree of agency than others. Although the play does, indeed, suggest the possibility of mutable identity, Wilde only offers this agency to the male characters.

This point is especially important for Wilde criticism which, especially in recent years, has focused on sexual and gender identity mutability. Alan Sinfield, for one, has sought “to recover the [moments] of indeterminacy” within Wilde's work by examining the effeminate tendencies of Wilde's dandies (“Effeminacy” 35). Likewise, and more recently, Carolyn Lesjak has argued that Wilde's work suggests a perpetual oscillation between categorical groups. For Lesjak, Wilde's texts “ask us to sit beside ourselves and the social categories such as gender within which we are embedded” (18). At risk in these arguments, however, is the proliferation of a belief that Wilde's politics were much more radical than they may appear in his plays. This is not to say that Lesjak and Sinfield's focus on the indeterminacies is counterproductive; rather my point is that we need to recognize the boundaries that Wilde draws when displaying these indeterminacies. To do otherwise is to anachronistically suggest that Wilde was somehow capable of existing and writing outside of patriarchal discourse. In this paper, I argue that *An Ideal Husband* depicts a gendered boundary over mutable identities. When Lady Chiltern asserts, “I never change” (Wilde, *AIH* 2.228) she is nearly correct; her statement isn't false, merely incomplete. She would be more precise if she said “I never change by my own accord” or “I never fully enact agency when I change.” In short, the male characters of *An Ideal Husband* are able to exert agency over their material representations, whereas the female characters are trapped by object-representations. Therefore, the female characters' identities are only mutable so far as their permutations of identity favor the evolving and adapting male identities.

Through the course of the play, Mrs. Cheveley makes two blackmail attempts—both fail. In order to best make sense of how these two failed attempts fit into patriarchal power dynamics, it is necessary to examine the relationship between blackmail and patriarchal ideology. Alan Sinfield has argued that ideology's "production is not an external process, stories are not outside ourselves. . . . Ideology makes sense for us—of us—because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world" ("Cultural Materialism" 745). Here, Sinfield is asserting that ideology preexists us and holds an influence over our understanding of the past. Thus, when a person tells a story, ideology allows us to understand that story's continuity with our lived present. When Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert, she is threatening to tell a story that provides a negative representation. The truth value behind a blackmail-story is unimportant when compared to the plausibility of the blackmail story: whether or not the story is true, blackmail relies on prevailing ideologies that allow—or disallow—the plausibility of the story. "The conditions of plausibility are . . . crucial," writes Sinfield, "They govern our understanding of the world and how to live in it, thereby seeming to define the scope of feasible political change" (746). Mrs. Cheveley seems all too aware of blackmail's reliance on plausibility when she remarks, "I am much stronger than you are. The big battalions are on my side. You have a splendid position, but it is your splendid position that makes you so vulnerable. You can't defend it! And I am in attack" (Wilde, *AIH* 1.196-97). Here, "The big battalions" that Mrs. Cheveley refers to are the patriarchal norms of society. Merely telling people that Robert Chiltern was involved in insider trading, by itself, would not be sufficient evidence to ruin him; her word, by itself, would not be considered plausible. She must rely on Baron Arnheim's letter, the words of a man of high social standing, in order to gain power. Already, we can see how Mrs. Cheveley's attempts to control are limited by the statements of men—the plausibility of her story relies upon the patriarchal society she occupies.

The trouble with using a physical artifact to blackmail someone is that the blackmailed individual must recognize the plausibility of the narrative attached to the object. While the

blackmailed individual may resist the representation, if they accept the blackmail they are essentially consenting to the representation the object offers. Although Robert Chiltern certainly does not wish to be in Mrs. Cheveley's thrall, by recognizing the power she holds over him with the letter he consents to the plausibility of the letter's story. However, as Mrs. Cheveley use of the letter shows, patriarchal ideology has an influence on the way objects can reflect our identity. Two of Mrs. Cheveley's statements about dresses reveal her understanding of the relationship between object-representation and patriarchal ideology: "I think men are the only authorities on dress" (2.225) and, later, "a woman's first duty in life is to her dressmaker" (3.245). If men "are the only authorities on dress" and "a woman's first duty . . . is to her dressmaker" then a logical conclusion is that a woman's duty rests in the authority of men. Mrs. Cheveley laments this when she states, "Oh, there is only one real tragedy in a woman's life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband" (3.248). Here, Mrs. Cheveley puts the struggle which women in patriarchal systems face in very concrete terms: women are unable to escape their past and their future rests in the hands of a man they must align themselves for life.

An Ideal Husband's narrative confirms the tragedy that Mrs. Cheveley perceives as she is, quite literally, unable to escape her past.² Richard Dellamora argues that "Mrs. Cheveley's pursuit of individuality... is compromised by the fact that she accepts without question the values—wealth, social notoriety, sexual success—of the demimonde" and is thus "subject to the same limitation that attends other women in the play, all whom achieve their goals only through their roles as wives or mistresses" (129). In other words,

2. This point is also demonstrated in the breakup of Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley's engagement, which occurs outside of the text. When the two characters discuss the matter, Lord Goring asserts that his "lawyer settled that matter with [Mrs. Cheveley] on certain terms" (Wilde, *AIH* 246). Richard Allen Cave, in a note to the text, suggests that this means Lord Goring "chivalrously arranged matters so that it appeared as if he were the guilty party, allowing her to sue him for breach of promise to wed" (Wilde 412n9). To protect Mrs. Cheveley's reputation, it was necessary that Lord Goring (uncharacteristically) imply that the fault was his own—Lord Goring, a man, can survive a public blow to his name that Mrs. Cheveley, a woman, would not so easily recover from in a patriarchal society.

Mrs. Cheveley's position as a woman in a patriarchal society is what traps her—her failed attempts at blackmail are failed attempts to escape. It is important to note that the word trap, in this case, is quite literal: the “diamond snake” bracelet “with a ruby, a rather large ruby” (Wilde, *AIH* 2.223), which she evidently mistook for a brooch when she stole it from Lord Goring's cousin, is the physical representation of Mrs. Cheveley's past. Although Dellamora sees the bracelet as potentially representing “Mrs. Cheveley's unwitting enslavement to male lovers” or “male sodomy,” it seems more likely that it represents her past (130).³ The bracelet transforms into a manacle which she “tries to get . . . off her arm, but fails” while “Lord Goring looks on amused” (Wilde, *AIH* 3.250). Clearly, and for obvious reasons, Mrs. Cheveley does not consent to the representation that the bracelet gives her—this, however appears to be a matter of no importance. Mrs. Cheveley's consent is not required for the object to provide a representation of her.

Most striking in this scene, however, is how miniscule an effort Lord Goring has to make in order to trap Mrs. Cheveley. When Mrs. Cheveley blackmails Robert in the first act, he dismisses her claims until she reveals both her relationship to Baron Arnheim and her possession of the incriminating letter. Robert is capable of dismissing her threats because they would not be considered plausible. In stark contrast, after Lord Goring threatens to call the police on Mrs. Cheveley—presumably with no other evidence other than his word—Mrs. Cheveley reacts in utter terror: “[Mrs. Cheveley] is now in an agony of physical terror. Her face is distorted. Her mouth awry” (3.251). While Mrs. Cheveley's threats need evidence to be taken seriously, Lord Goring's do not. The power he derives from a patriarchal society means that his word alone is ideologically powerful enough—that is, plausible enough—to trap her.

Even Mrs. Cheveley's attempt to reconstruct Lady Chiltern's (recent) past proves to be utterly futile. After Lord Goring relinquishes Robert Chiltern from Mrs. Cheveley's control, Mrs. Cheveley makes one final attempt to attack the Chiltern family by “[putting] a certain construction” on Lady Chiltern's pleading

3. I am far more inclined to agree with Regenia Gagnier who argues that “Goring never acts against conventional ethical standards” (qtd. in Dellamora 130).

letter to Lord Goring (4.261). As *An Ideal Husband* is meant to be a comedy, not a tragedy, this plan quickly fails and Lady Chiltern is able to reconstruct the letter's meaning by writing in Robert's name. It could be argued that Lady Chiltern executes agency over her past by writing Robert's name on the letter, declaring, "it is you [Robert] I trust and need. You and none else" (4.271). However, the fact that Robert has already enacted agency over the letter diminishes Lady Chiltern's role. By assuming that the letter is meant for him—regardless of Lady Chiltern's later alterations—Mrs. Cheveley's attempt to destroy the Chiltern marriage matters naught. While Lord Goring and Robert Chiltern may burn all evidence of their past and suffer no consequences for it, Lady Chiltern must attribute any possible mistake she made to being a woman whose "[life revolves] in curves of emotion" (Wilde, *AIH* 4.268). Furthermore, although Lady Chiltern is capable of changing by the end of the play, her shift is to become submissive to her husband by repeating Lord Goring's earlier lecture: "A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions" (4.268). Even if these lines are not to be taken seriously and meant only to pacify her husband, "they none the less suggest that Lady Chiltern can only assert this view on the grounds of her inferiority as a woman" (Bristow 66). Robert's construction of the letter overrides Mrs. Cheveley's; Lady Chiltern is only able to supplement the construction that Robert has already built.

In the latter blackmail attempt Mrs. Cheveley is, again, relying on patriarchal power in order to attack Lady Chiltern. Furthermore, this attempt offers hints of the ways in which mutability was viewed as possible. As a woman living in a patriarchal society, Lady Chiltern suffers along with Mrs. Cheveley in that neither of them is able to grant plausibility to their statements without first having hard evidence. Just as blackmail stories gain ideological power via their plausibility, any fictional narrative is subject to the same rules. The fact that many reviewers found Lady Chiltern's character unbelievable reveals her lack of power. One reviewer, from *The Sporting Times*, remarked that Miss Julia Neilson—the actress who originally portrayed Lady Chiltern—was "hopelessly handicapped by the author" as "No such woman ever existed or

could exist" (Bill of the Play 6). The reviewer goes even further by asserting that Neilson could not possibly "extricate herself from the web of artificiality which the author has spun around the character" (6).⁴ The reactions to Lady Chiltern's character reveal that, even within Wilde's time period, Lady Chiltern was viewed as an implausible character. However, while the reviews lament Lady Chiltern as a poorly crafted character, this may have been an intentional move for Wilde—many of the characters within the play share the reviewer's opinion and are suspicious of Lady Chiltern. This can be seen in Lord Goring's question, "Is lady Chiltern as perfect as all that?" (Wilde, *AIH* 2.207).⁵ Overall, this reveals the fragility of women's reputation for virtue within the play and the time period—Lady Chiltern is already viewed as implausible and, therefore, Mrs. Cheveley, despite her scandalous reputation, is capable of damaging her reputation. Furthermore, without the agency to change, it is unlikely that Lady Chiltern would be viewed as a woman who made a mistake. Instead, she would more likely be viewed as a woman who was untrustworthy and disloyal from the start.

An examination of Mabel Chiltern, Sir Robert Chiltern's sister, may offer a counterpoint for patriarchally controlled gender mutability. Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern's engagement at the end of the play seems to depict a gender reversal; after all, Lord Goring's duty in the marriage is predicted to be "entirely domestic" (Wilde, *AIH* 4.271). Throughout the play Mabel revels in being a public spectacle and marvels over society's "beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics" (1.181). Ashley Szanter has argued that "Mabel Chiltern is the character through whom Wilde grappled with questions of the private versus the public self" (2). Mabel does, indeed, seem to execute a degree of control over her identity

4. Another reviewer, from *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Standard*, had slightly more praise for Neilson's performance but still admits her character's lack of plausibility: "Miss Julia Neilson played the difficult role of Lady Chiltern with good effect... and if at times the true ring was wanting, the fault was not in Miss Neilson, but must be sought elsewhere" (Eothen 7).

5. It is of note that, aside from Lord Goring, Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon also find Lady Chiltern unbelievable. After Mrs. Marchmont remarks, "dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life," Lady Basildon replies, "I don't see anybody here to-night whom one could possibly call a serious purpose" (Wilde, *AIH* 1.179).

within the public sphere as she “rejects Tommy’s private proposal but accepts Lord Goring’s private proposal” (7). Furthermore, for Szanter, Mabel is “free to express her adoration for Lord Goring in a very public way” which allows her to use her public self to compensate for Lord Goring’s private proposal (7). After Lord Goring proposes, Mabel exclaims:

If you knew anything about . . . anything, which you don’t, you would know that I adore you. Everyone in London knows it except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you. I wonder you consent to have anything to say to me. I have no character left at all. At least, I feel so happy that I am quite sure I have no character left at all. (Wilde, *AIH* 4.259)

This monologue, one of Mabel’s few within the play, depicts Mabel describing her adoration for Lord Goring as a “public scandal” that has been going on “for the last six months.” The fact that Mabel is “happy” that she has “no character left at all” does not immediately imply that she has enacted agency—it implies quite the opposite. Just as Mrs. Cheveley is manacled to her thieving past, Mabel is similarly manacled to her adoration of Lord Goring. The difference between the two is only that Mabel is pleased with her constraints.

While Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband* neither fully explains nor defines what, precisely, an “ideal husband” is or looks like, the play does define what a “real wife” should be. The play reveals that “the ideal husband” is a myth, crafted by women, through Sir Robert Chiltern’s violent rant at the end of the second act:

A man’s love . . . is wider, larger, more human than a woman’s. Women think that they are making ideals of men. What they are making of us are false idols merely.

You made your false idol of me, and I had
not the courage to come down, show you
my wounds, tell you my weaknesses. I was
afraid that I might lose your love, as I have
lost it now. (2.231)

While, arguably, both characters are at fault—Lady Chiltern for forcing an idealized view of what a husband should be onto Robert; Robert for lacking “the courage to come down” and honestly communicate with his wife—the blame is fully cast upon Lady Chiltern. It is instructive that in the final moments of the play Mabel rejects the idea that Lord Goring should be “an ideal husband” and, instead, believes that he “can be what he chooses” (272). Lord Goring, as a man in a patriarchal society, has the mobility to define and redefine himself as he chooses with no lasting effect, just as Sir Robert Chiltern can erase his past without incurring any punishment. Mabel’s desire to be “a real wife” to Lord Goring is indicative of her willingness to accept his view of women. Unlike the term “ideal husband,” which is shown to be a myth, the play legitimizes the term “real wife” when Lord Goring states, “A woman who can keep a man’s love, and love him in return, has done all the world wants of women, or should want of them” (4.268). By identifying what a “real wife” is and establishing “the ideal husband” as a myth, the play completes its task of creating an open and malleable set of roles that men can occupy while maintaining a rigid and structured definition of the singular role society dictates for women.

One of Lord Goring’s early lines in the play provides a counterargument to this rigid structure. He seems to preach a belief in performative identity/gender when he states, “The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies” (1.190). The joke of Lord Goring’s statement relies on a gender reversal which implies gender mutability and equality; if the two terms are interchangeable then it follows that the two terms should be considered equal. However, as Joseph Bristow aptly reminds us, “Dowdies and dandies are . . . hardly discrete. But, there again, they are not quite the same thing

either” (56).⁶ The indeterminacy between dowdies and dandies stems from the effeminate coding of these words and therefore makes a commentary on societal gender boundaries: men are capable of holding a societally coded feminine identity—dowdy—likewise, women are capable of crossing the gender boundaries and performing the societally coded masculine identity—dandy. However, a societal limit for women is also hidden within Lord Goring’s joke: when women take on a masculine role, they are still inscribed as effeminate. Even though women can take on the role of a dandy—a term typically reserved for men—this performativity “is not freedom, but a question of how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Butler, “The Body You Want” 84). Furthermore, as Sinfield points out, “Dandy effeminacy signaled class” (38).⁷ For Sinfield, the dandy’s style reveals “the wealthy and those who sought to seem wealthy” attempting to “repudiate middle-class authority by displaying conspicuous idleness, immorality, and effeminacy” (38). This places an even deeper limitation upon the mutability that Goring presents as the image of the dandy was only available—and, in some cases, safe—for men who could afford it.

While Wilde was, most certainly, a cynical and subversive commentator upon society’s norms, it is important not to idealize him. Wilde, just like his predecessors, his contemporaries, and, unfortunately, like us, is and was the product of a patriarchal society. *An Ideal Husband* does present the possibility of identity mutability, but only within patriarchal limits. While the men are capable of altering their identities and roles as they see fit, the women are capable only so much as their shifts and mutations satisfy the needs of the men. Although the play ends on a high note for all of the characters—with the exception of Mrs. Cheveley who disappears at the end of the third act—it does not end with any sign or even desire for female agency, aside from the agency to submit.

6. According to the *OED*, the term “Dowdy” is used to describe “A woman or girl shabbily or unattractively dressed, without smartness or brightness” (“Dowdy”) whereas “dandy,” on the other hand, is typically reserved for men and describes one “who studies above everything to dress elegantly and fashionably” (“Dandy”).

7. Sinfield’s full quotation reads, “Dandy effeminacy signaled class, far more than sexuality” (38). I choose to leave out the second part of the quotation in order to avoid confusion; a full and direct discussion of sexuality is outside the scope of this paper.

“In the 1890s Wilde was a public figure, in the 1990s he is the public itself,” writes John Stokes; “we want him to be the liberated gay man and a witty feminist, worried parent and a guilty husband” (173). Yet, despite whatever we may want, forcing feminist beliefs into Wilde’s works does not, and cannot, change what was actually written and performed. Thus, when looking back at the great works of over a century ago, we must not search for meaning that simply isn’t there. If there is any hope whatsoever of putting an end to patriarchal societal norms, it cannot be through historical anachronism. As *An Ideal Husband* demonstrates, misogynistic and patriarchal norms are very capable of underpinning what looks like the possibility of liberal change.

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