



Wilde's Side: Morrissey and the Culture of Queer Distinction

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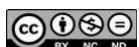
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ABSTRACT

This article examines the queer legacy of Oscar Wilde as deployed by British popstar Morrissey, and as a model of transforming sexual ambiguity into symbolic capital. This practice of “queer distinction,” the article ventures, introduces into the historical, hegemonic binary of queer vs. straight a sociological politics of taste, sophistication, and individual autonomy. In short, Wilde’s marriage of literary sophistication and sexual deviance are mapped onto the mainstream/alternative split within popular music: against “mainstream” emphases on community, assimilation, and coming out are the quiet operatives of insider knowledge, ambiguity, and subculture; against efforts to unravel static, gendered categories altogether is the nostalgic perseveration of masculine identity and struggle for the authority to define it. Ultimately—certainly in Morrissey’s case—social rejection is transformed into artistic credibility. After examining Morrissey’s lyrical and performative evocations of Wilde, this article 1) revisits the dynamic of the Wilde trials as a clash of competing eccentricities, each invested in the patriarchal ownership of culture and homosocial hierarchies; and 2) looks specifically at *A Picture of Dorian Gray* in relation to Morrissey’s own homosocial fixations, deployment of the pederastic educational model, and effort to preserve, even as he alters the proofs for, the autonomous male artist.

Keywords: popular music, queer literature, Bourdieu, distinction, cultural capital.

1. Introduction

A Closet of One's Own

One “dreaded sunny day,” the Smiths’ lead singer and lyricist Morrissey invites a companion—and by extension his listener—for a stroll in the local graveyard. Inside the gates, which cleanly separate this desolate pair from the sun-loving world around them, the two reflect on various headstone names, wistfully conjuring the “loves, and hates / and passions” that once animated such lives.¹

¹ All Morrissey and Smiths lyrics are reprinted as transcribed from the original album sleeves on the passionsjustlikemine.com archive.

Already the moment (from the 1986 single “Cemetery Gates” [sic]) is a literary one, reminiscent of Thomas Gray’s iconic churchyard elegy, or—more contemporaneously—Tony Harrison’s gravestone meditations in “v.” It is also a moment in keeping with the emo/goth genre the Smiths did much to foster in the 1980s, and in which the experience of the outcast becomes curiously muddled with a kind of self-imposed exile: Morrissey and friend, it is made clear, feel more at home in the past than in the present, among the dead than with the living.

And yet this shared bubble of gloom is not impervious to conflict: in what plays out as a momentary altercation of wits, transitioning (rather bizarrely) to a lecture on plagiarism, the singer repeats a peculiar but firm distinction: “Keats and Yeats are on your side / while Wilde is on mine.” There is, then, within the pair’s mutual outsider-ism a need to establish “sides,” within their angsty camaraderie the imposition of a hierarchical, teacher-student dynamic based on the possession and demonstration of cultural knowledge. There is, too, before the song returns to and fades the instrumental hook with which it began, a declaration of victory: “you lose,” Morrissey informs his companion, lending to the otherwise frolicsome outro a (smug) air of vanquished effrontery. What began as an innocuous and leisurely pastime has facilitated the processes of social distinction.

Oscar Wilde himself becomes a key signifier in this subtle power negotiation—a compact, isolate reference with the potential to unload nonetheless an entire queer history onto the scenario at hand, and whose presence brings to the song’s discussion/debate of artistic authenticity (“if you must write prose/poems,” Morrissey pontificates, “the words you use should be your own”) an analogous dialectic of gender secrecy and performance. The song delivers on both accounts a tutorial on the dangers of being “outed” and the requisite art of concealment, for “there’s always someone, somewhere / with a big nose, who knows / and trips you up and laughs / when you fall.” That state of fallenness—of being “ruined,” “finished,” “exposed”—is a deeply entrenched conceit throughout Morrissey’s lyrics, and one that summons before us a Victorian sexual politics and its literature, including Wilde’s incriminatingly homoerotic *A Picture of Dorian Gray*.

I hope in this essay to unpack Morrissey’s Wilde allusion to the fullest and toward a rich (if teasingly paradoxical) analysis of such overlapping practices and personalities. As far as pop stars who make of use of literature go, Morrissey is unique in his self-constructed and sustained connection to a single literary figure; while contributing of course to the singer’s “literariness” and whatever authority that grants him (“I’m well-read,” Morrissey writes, though he softens the boast to “I’ve read well” on the recording), the connection, I believe, runs deeper: it is a self-canonizing maneuver, which directly channels the Wildean aesthetic, including its sexual politics, into the realm of pop. To be Wilde, in this respect, is to engage the literary-cum-rockist trope of a salvageable artistic elite within an overpopulated field, as well as to update and imbue the British “man of letters” with all the romance of contemporary stardom. In singling Wilde out from a cluster of possibilities, Morrissey at once queers and preserves, as a treasured entity, the autonomous male creator, implementing in the tradition of the dandy something we might call “queer capital.” As a case study, then, Morrissey presents an opportunity to affix to the arena of gender performance the class-driven, conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu—to recognize and explore the curious manner in which polarities like queer/straight and high/low are conflated.

What emerges is partially disconcerting. While I recognize in Morrissey’s stalwartly ambiguous persona a disruption of gender norms (“I’m Not a Man,” Morrissey sings in 2014, prolonging in effect his thirty-year-old query “will Nature make a man of me yet?” [“This Charming Man”]), I see too a careful art of closeting and coding—an aestheticized and alternative masculinity that nonetheless maintains a premium on *not* being (demonstrably) homosexual (Hubbs 284; Woronzoff 273). Morrissey, it becomes clear, is less interested in the social phenomenon of sexual liberation than he is the dark, erotic, and individualized psychologies of secrecy and shame—a claim to earlier times that places his performed queerness in an antiquated tension with LGBTQ-era emphases on community and “coming out.” “I Keep Mine Hidden,” he croons as a kind of *modus operandi* on the Smiths’ final recording, thereby opposing, as he does on “Cemetery Gates,” an ethics of secrecy, inaccessibility, and sly one-upmanship to that which garishly “flail[s] into public view.” As with Wilde and his courtroom audience, sex-between-men remains but a blank space among competing discourses, while queerness in its vaguer and performative applications—as mannerisms, ambiguities, effeminacies, or flamboyances—is restored as a potential (if precarious) means to artistic credibility. The Victorian closet, as it were, is repurposed as artist’s den.

“Weird Lovers,” Dueling Eccentrics: Rethinking the Trials

Morrissey at this point could not free himself of Wilde—as worshipped hero, iconic predecessor, literary double, etc.—should he wish to do so. In biographical accounts and interviews alike, Wilde is cited as a key discovery and influence, whose dandyism, wit, and irreverence the Mancunian popstar has no doubt made it a goal to emulate. Photographs show a young Morrissey with Wilde books and in Wilde t-shirts, images of Wilde adorn the backdrops at his concerts, and Wilde quotations have been found surreptitiously etched into the vinyl of multiple Smiths/Morrissey recordings. It is a connection notably absent, despite the burgeoning field of celebrity/persona studies, from Wilde scholarship per se, yet borne out accordingly (as it is here) by those whose focus is popular music: Wilde supplies the epigraph to Gavin Hopps’s *The Pageant of His Bleeding Heart*; is cited in the opening

paragraphs of Nadine Hubbs's article on Morrissey's sexual politics; and is listed, in Len Brown's preface to *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities*, among the influences that ground Morrissey's work within "the great cradle of Irish learning" (10). Meanwhile, devoted fansite passionsjustlikemine.com has gleaned from Morrissey's collective utterances more than forty instances of Wildean allusion—a practice by which Morrissey lays his claim to Wilde as cultural ancestor, and whose cornerstone is the previously quoted lyrics from "Cemetery Gates."

Morrissey's invocation of "sides" within these lyrics conveys at once a sense, even among fellow "outsiders," of alternative "position-takings" (to use Bourdieu's language). From a literary perspective, Keats and Yeats, fettered by the very likeness of their names, represent a safely mainstream literary pairing (and a Romantic-to-Modern continuum), while Wilde (a *fin-de-siècle*, decadent Victorian) remains the literary loner—an eccentric even among eccentrics. To claim Wilde from this perspective is to claim both an isolated individuality and artistic authenticity, as well as to plant one's self into a persona—rather than text-centered tradition in regards to poetic identity. Dueling forms of prestige have entered the playing field, with Wilde proving himself in the end more useful to the postwar consumer, surviving perhaps with greater facility the leap from textbook to t-shirt.

Corollary to this division, I believe, is that between straight and queer, or, taken further, between culturally enriched and culturally impoverished versions of queerness. Wilde—whom Morrissey refers to vocally, but not in print, as "weird lover"²—represents historically both the invention and the persecution of the modern homosexual (Cohen 1-2): his story travels *de facto* with his name, and his eloquence from the stand has been popularized as a landmark defense of male homosexual love. But what was at stake in the trials was not simply Wilde's personal reputation or the practice of homosexuality, but the role of culture and art in relation to masculine identity, including its *authority* to legitimize or to sanction non-normative behaviors. And Wilde's remarks from the stand—in which he repeatedly invokes Shakespeare—are less directly a defense of homosexuality than they are an invocation of art as, in Pierre Bourdieu's words, the "sacred sphere of culture . . . forever closed to the profane" (7). When cross-examiner Edward Carson quotes from Wilde's love-letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde deftly rebrands it a "poem" (Holland 108), and, when faced with excerpts from the scandalous *The Priest and the Acolyte* as well as his own *Dorian Gray*, he defiantly and routinely swaps the discourse of propriety for one of aesthetic criticism: "Did you think the story blasphemous?" "I thought the end . . . violated every artistic canon of beauty" (Holland 105). In short, the supremacy of the artist and his discriminating taste are held up as a kind of deflective and transformative shield against the juridical efforts to "produce" and to criminalize the homosexual; "The word blasphemous is not *my word*" (Holland 71; *my italics*), Wilde informs his cross-examiner, thereby projecting himself outside the discourse of morality, and hopefully licensing his particular freedoms by way of the purified aesthetic.

The trials, then, dramatized before a gawking public the powers of sheer *cultural* capital—including its potential to transcend both religious norms and civic law—against the weakened, aristocratic capital represented by Douglas's father (and Wilde's accuser), the Marquess of Queensberry. Entangled within the clash of sexual moralities were a myriad of power struggles and social anxieties, including a "fear that dangerous, otherwise disempowered elements of society would act, pretend, counterfeit, or otherwise perform their way . . . into undue privilege and influence" (Salamensky 1-2). Claims to the title and the persona of "gentleman" became, in the space of the trials, acutely personified, with Wilde (whose upper-middle-class birth, aided by a distinguished literary education, held the aristocracy within reach) mirroring by way of the dandy Queensberry's own, proudly eccentric character, and showcasing through eloquence of speech, mannerism, and demonstrations of refinement a sophistication once exclusively reproduced through bloodlines. This in some respects was a (highly successful) challenge to aristocratic culture by way of middle-class affectation, an affront to tradition by way of celebrity panache. But what is conventionally represented as a battle of polarized identities resulting in the reinforcement of hegemonic norms, may alternately be approached as competing eccentricities: a struggle between two famed personalities with a mutual interest in male autonomy and homosocial formations. Queensberry, whose lamb-chopped, top-hatted caricature may be found in an 1877 issue of *Vanity Fair*, knew how to develop and make use of his persona; in addition to being a scandalously-vocal atheist, he was, his biographer notes, "widely read on philosophical and social subjects, and spoke French" (Stratmann, "The Marquess"). His legacy as Wilde's adversary, furthermore, has yet to fully eclipse his heralded place among the godfathers of modern boxing, to whose barbarisms he infused, by way of the "Queensberry Rules," a degree of gentlemanly conduct and sportsmanship.

To what extent then had Wilde, whose charisma transformed the witness stand into a stage, infringed upon Queensberry's, the outcast politician's, cultural turf? To what extent had Queensberry, notorious for interrupting and haranguing the audiences of theatrical productions, infringed upon Wilde's? Keeping in mind that 1) both men were floating among the same social circles and gentlemen's clubs, and are reported to have walked away from a visit over lunch with mutual admiration (Holland xviii; Stratman, "Oscar Wilde"); 2) Queensberry had, as an atheist,

² The vocal is in fact unclear, with interpretations ranging from "well the love of Wilde," to "wild lover Wilde," to suggestions of a vocal mishap along the lines of "will-dulubba-Wilde" ("Cemetery Gates. What Does Morrissey Say?"). Morrissey, however, continued to reproduce the utterance in live performances precisely as it sounds on the recording, and "weird lover" remains the consensus lyrics among fans and on websites.

no sincere objection to his son's homosexuality on religious grounds, but, rather, was left—as rumors swelled—to weigh the social benefits of a Wilde connection against its perils; and 3) the trial-inciting note left by Queensberry at the Albemarle Club, “Oscar Wilde posing sodomite [sic],” confounds with its adjective the lines between *being* and *practicing*, *faking* and *flaunting*, it makes sense to suggest that the trials were less a shocking revelation of unthinkable deeds than they were a contest for the authority to define and to capitalize on the concept of masculinity; despite their enmity, both parties sought to retain the marriage of masculinity to culture, fashion, and taste that the classes below them, whose husbands were increasingly defined by their labor, had effectively offloaded onto the “feminine domestic” as an ancillary form of capital (Veblen 51). Whereas Queensberry imported to his persona the hyper-masculinity of fisticuffs and, to his philanthropy, the enculturation of young ruffians, Wilde substituted art for sport as the medium for male-to-male mentorship and social elevation. Furthermore, Wilde had become evidence of queerness itself as a potential, if precarious, social asset; whether by affiliation or affectation, as a sign of rebelliousness or as a new and ironical form of closet, the “queer snob” possessed the power to cast others as culturally-devoid simpletons. Against the narratives of homosexuality as sinful acts to be repented, or, as Queensberry voiced in the case of Wilde, the lamentable product of a “diseased mind” (Foldy 65), dandyism countered its evidence of a conscious and stylized way of life, if not the very coinage of sophistication. Wilde, after all, had used dandyism as a stepping stone to his claim on high art, and not the other way around (Salamensky 6-7). And thanks to an increasingly widespread media-culture and audience, his was a position—a queer claim on the arts—more readily available for export and imitation.

Wilde and company had in a sense been tight-roping their society's “show don't tell” contract, through which the identity of homosexual could be sublimated to that of “eccentric” and thereby kept palatable; “You said it, not me,” Wilde seems to respond to his interrogators, whose task it was to exchange artistic for legal discourse, sophistication for decency. In his exasperated but eloquent explanation of “the love that dare not speak its name,” Wilde summons the pinnacled whole of the Western cultural tradition, citing, in addition to Shakespeare, the Bible, Plato, and Michelangelo, and hierarchizing male homosexuality as the “noblest form of affection,” as “pure as it is perfect” (Foldy 117)—not an abandon to hedonistic pleasure but part of an educational process by which an older man ushers a younger toward the sweetness and the light: a step out of the dull and sheepish conventions of domesticity and into an exclusively masculine experience of art. Queensberry's brand of homophobia, in turn, was not simply an intolerance of “queers” but a reaction to “queer culture,” most notably its claim on the signs and symbols of sophistication and authority once reserved for families such as his own; against such threats, the trials would instigate an era in which the “homosexual” was more clearly sought, identified, and defined, and where the friction between sexual privacy and the legally-, politically-, and socially-coerced narratives of “coming out” would be increasingly mediated by popular culture.

Morrissey has, both through deliberate artistry and as the product of his times, become the heir of Wilde's legacy as such. In the Smiths' Thatcher-era debut alone, one encounters an eschewal of heterosexual possibility (“Pretty Girls Make Graves”), suggestions of sexual temptation of a younger by an older man (“Reel around the Fountain,” “This Charming Man”), and a relishing of dandyish display in the face of public judgment (“Hand in Glove”). The dandy himself provides at times Morrissey's subject matter, while a sense of being ruined by taboo sexual experience persists in songs like “He Knows I'd Love to See Him,” “You Have Killed Me,” and (in another queer-lit grab) “Billy Budd.” Indeed, the very narrative of the Wilde trials, as Eoin Devereux and Aileen Dillane demonstrate, may be unpacked from the cryptic verses of “Speedway,” where Morrissey responds to an (unspecified) set of allegations waged against him, playing (as he routinely does) the scapegoated and crucified celebrity.

But if Morrissey's songbook “traffics heavily,” as Nadine Hubbs says, in “gay-insider-coded meanings” (287), it does so in a way that keeps the Morrissey persona itself at a clean remove—a method that, by being comprehensively suggestive rather than explicit or elucidative, puts it upon his listener to manufacture a queer reading, thereby converting vagueness (texts eliciting third-party exegesis, *ala* literature) into artistic credibility, and sustaining by way of a symbolic breadcrumb trail a mentor/mentee dynamic. Wilde in this respect offers not only a figure bridging the artist with the pop star, but one who preserves in the very outward show of otherness and eccentricity a kind of sexual hiding place, transforming as it were moral transgression and/or condemnation into a socially advantageous resource. Morrissey goes yet a step further by renouncing sexuality altogether, seal-proofing through a (secularized) display of celibacy his individuality, and taking his place on both stage and screen as the fetishized object of others. To pronounce one's self inherently “Unlovable,” to prophesize one's place at “The End of the Family Line,” or to proclaim that “I will live my life as I / will undoubtedly die—*alone*” (“Will Never Marry”) doubles as the crow of artistic legitimacy—a lyric resume of sorts for genuine, isolated, and discriminatingly male creativity. As with Wilde, “ordinariness” above all else is to be avoided. Morrissey therefore embraces rather than discards the antiquated diagnoses of mental illness, prizes rather than dismantles the psychologically-embedded conventions of secrecy and insularity.

And this tendency is not altogether anachronistic: in an era in which “the popular deployments of ‘homosexuality’ . . . continue[d] to reassert the normative potential of ‘procreative heterosexuality’ along with the corresponding normative gender expectations in new, more expansive ways (Cohen 11); that saw the AIDS crisis met with widespread apathy, ridicule, and hostility; in which socially-liberal sentiments, as articulated even by conservative leaders and the Monarchy itself, continued to be undermined by anti-gay policies; and where, as of late, mass-attended pride parades are tragically matched by a surge in homo- and transphobic hate crimes (Marsh), it makes sense that an *aesthetic* or *cultural* means of empowerment and identity—though one unevenly circumscribed, no doubt, along the lines of social class—maintains its appeal. Stan Hawkins finds, for example, in 1980s Britain a “move towards style culture,” in its pop music “a critique of [Margaret] Thatcher’s vision . . . as well as [a] pandering to elitism and materialistic gain” (20). Growing consumer markets for alternate masculinities, he continues, fixated on dandyism “as a prime selling point” (33). In contrast to a growing, public-spirited gay rights community, invested in mainstream representation and whose membership is attained by way of “coming out” (Hubbs 284-5), remained the more insular domain of gay subculture, affixed by way of “insider” networks and locations to British nightlife, art, dance, music, and fashion, and subverting with coded, sex-centered activities like cruising a dominant, heteronormative set of conventions. Whereas the first seeks recognition and assimilation, the other actively eschews them, stoking its internal value by way of external marginalization. Though the “British eccentric” perseveres amidst such fragmentation as a recognized and cherished persona, its social uses and means of distribution are perhaps increasingly up for grabs. More specifically, the dandy’s marriage of cultural sophistication with deviant sexuality—its connection of queer identity to poetic genius—has been to varying degrees displaced, absorbed, and appropriated by a range of successors, be they late-century waves of flamboyant popstars; the fashion-meticulous and resolutely-urban metrosexual; or even politicians whose oddball theatrics and scandalous behaviors—excused as the quirks of genius or evidence of candor—may lend credence to even the most reactionary agendas. “[T]he dandified subject,” Hawkins explains, “is a historical and cultural construct that has evolved through the evolution of new gender roles and masculinity” (34).

Morrissey’s blurring, mixing, and matching of such conflicting representations seems to match Susan Bordo’s (critical) notion of practices that refuse “to embody *any* positioned subjectivity at all,” celebrating instead a “continual creative escape from location, containment, and definition” (qtd. in Hubbs 283). If there is a subversive element in his work, it is not expressed as a proud declaration (prerequisite, it seems, for 21st-century hitmakers) of being one’s true self, but in the collapse of ultra-machoism and dandyism, of homophobia and homosexuality, into a shared and confused iconography—the kind of “highly conflicted but intensively structured combination” of homosexuality and homophobia that, Eve Sedgwick has argued, provides a “special link between male homosocial desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (25). Indeed, Queensberry, not just Wildean, eccentricity perseveres in Morrissey’s fixation on exclusively male subculture; Morrissey “is now more interested in thuggery than buggery,” Richard Smith observes: “His stylings are increasingly masculinist, both in terms of his recent band’s harder guitar edges . . . and his scrapping of his fey ways in favour of professing a predilection for boxing, skinheads, the Krays, tattoos and Herman Melville” (qtd. in Hopps 49). Dandies and thugs seem at times to become one, or to mutually occupy and confuse the space between the homosocial and the homosexual. Such instances include the “gang of boys” in “Piccadilly Palare,” whose coded speech at once buffers and betrays their availability on the London sex market; the listless, “practicing troublemakers” of “Nobody Loves Us”; and the “men full of bluff and ardor” in “A Swallow on My Neck.” In the latter example, a tattoo whose nautical history was later coopted by skinheads and football hooligans becomes an emblem of forbidden romance—a coded confession (“and more I will not say”) that, like the telltale hickey for which it substitutes, cannot appreciably separate pride from shame: “And soon,” the singer coyly bemoans, “everyone knew.” Within these homosocial environments, the concept of “manhood,” the potential for earning or possessing it, remains imperative: the dynamic and rite of passage between older and younger, experienced and innocent, insider and initiate permeates the songs, though, as with “Cemetery Gates,” it gets channeled—transposed, even—into the correlating binaries of artist against wannabe, poet versus poseur. Indeed, the very market-driven division of “mainstream” vs. “alternative” pop within which Morrissey attained stardom bears connection not simply to a queer/straight cultural split, but to a century-deep, symbiotic relation between high-art apologetics and queered performance—a gender inversion in which the mainstream is equated to the feminine, the embracing of the domestic status quo to an artist’s “selling out.” This is concomitant to Miles Parks Grier’s assessment of “rockism,” whose “identity-coded market moralities” and “anticommercial ideologies” he finds aligned “with the pursuit of white male freedom,” and whose adherents continue to make “moral distinctions between ascetic artists and debased whores” (32-4). In terms of Susan Sontag’s delineations of camp, Morrissey maintains, as did Wilde, characteristics of the “old-style dandy,” who “hated vulgarity” and was continually “offended and bored,” rather than fully embracing the “continually amused, delighted” figure of the new (289).

It is within such highly-gendered dichotomies that Morrissey’s representation of “the poet” is put to use. His scattered, direct references to poetry-writing, though seemingly whimsical, serve time and again to reinstate social

boundaries or as means of putting others into their respective places; “If you *must* write prose and poems,” Morrissey condescendingly prefaces his advice in “Cemetery Gates” (italics mine), while turning, in “Frankly Mr. Shankly,” a disliked boss’s effort to impress (and thereby traverse the boundary between commerce and artistry) into evidence of inferiority: “oh, I didn’t realize that you wrote poetry / (I didn’t realize you wrote such *bloody awful* poetry)” (italics in original). To claim one’s self a poet is, of course, always a risky move, requiring both rhetorical and social savviness, and necessarily inviting accusations of both phoniness and pretension. It is, furthermore, a title whose rewards, if they are to be maximized, necessitate demonstrations of social detachment—Bourdieu’s “interest in disinterestedness” (*Field of Cultural Production* 39)—and whose authenticity is maintained through visible (re)enactments of “being” versus “trying.” In “Ask,” for example, the less-discriminating sense of “frightening verse” as “poetry with dark subject matter” is made suspect by its alternate meaning of “frighteningly bad,” and yet further invalidated by the mundane, caricatured audience of “a bucktoothed girl in Luxembourg.” This kind of meta-enactment—juxtaposing (and at times confusing) the naïve practitioner with the knowing *auteur*, errantly tending and bending the line between what one *is* and what one *does*—takes center stage in “Sister I’m a Poet.” Here, as if to shift the burden of meaning onto his listener, or to place “poet” among a (Wilsonian) lineage of “unspeakable” identities, Morrissey simply omits the word “poetry” as supplied by the title (“That’s cause I’m a / Sister I’m a”). Like the dandy, Morrissey’s poet operates within the precarious discourse of authenticity and public “outing”; chief among his defenses are the befuddling tactic of pretending to be what one *is* (Hopps 120), and a display of culture so lavish and secure in its snobbery as to disarm the accuser: there’s “no reason,” Morrissey touts (again from the position of experience and knowledge—“this once was me”—directed at a neophyte “you”) “to talk about / the books I read / but still, I do.”

Finally, in “Girl Least Likely To,” Morrissey takes the position of the pitying critic and benefactor, perusing the efforts of a girl whose yearning for fame will, he sees all too clearly, be disallowed by her lack of talent and poetic skill. Like this girl, who, the singer hopes, can push poetry aside and embrace life as a passive recipient of others’ efforts (“Oh Darling, it’s all for you,” he croons in conclusion), Morrissey’s women are consistently held at bay from the world of aesthetics, becoming instead emblems of “real world” suffering and martyrdom, as in “Sheila Take a Bow”; “When Last I Heard from Carol”; “Julie in the Weeds”; or, en masse, “All the Lazy Dykes,” whose escape from the injustices of heterosexual marriage leaves nothing but a kind of tranquil inertia. In contrast, Morrissey’s men—whose escapades may airily suggest sexual mischief but who are never classified by terms so definitive or headstrong as “dyke”—are overwhelmingly presented as *characters*—objects of criticism and critique, if not outright competitors, and coyly nicknamed in titles like “Spring-Heeled Jim,” “Dagenham Dave,” “Papa Jack,” and “Tony the Pony.”

There remains, then, despite Morrissey’s various disruptions, challenges, and reconfigurations of the sexual status quo an adherence to maleness and femaleness as a (culture-constituted) power dynamic. There is, too, in a departure from the postmodernist notion of category demolition, a concerted interest in building, ordering, and hierarchizing by way of the teacher/student dynamic: a “pop pedagogy,” tapping and mediating the resources of formal education, and in which a thematic trail of references, signs, and images are slyly meted out as an invitation for “insider” research and recognition. The doting fan, to put it another way, is given an opportunity to become the footnoting critic.

Fagging Dorian: Books, Looks, and Secret Educations

Just as Morrissey, in titles/lyrics like “Stretch Out and Wait” and “I Started Something I Couldn’t Finish,” diffuses the sexually-potent moment of sex, his settings—including the carnival (“Rusholme Ruffians”), the car (“Driving Your Girlfriend Home”), and the previously-discussed cemetery (a potential site, as with Victorian graveyards like Abney Park, for gay cruising)—seem to awkwardly displace erotic potential and fulfillment with an artist-sanctioning individuality. So, too, Wilde—though in the face of graver consequences—specializes in the erotically-charged setting drained of sex. In *Dorian Gray*, it is the garden, a setting familiar to the Victorian reader as backdrop for courtship, that takes immediate precedence, its intoxicating, floral aromas wafting into and among those inside Basil Hallward’s studio. Soon thereafter, the garden becomes the space to which Dorian (nose-deep in “the great cool lilac-blossoms, feverishly drinking in their perfume as if it had been wine” [21]) leads his gentleman-suitors, Lord Henry, for their first one-on-one interaction.³ This queering of literary convention harbors the “out” of simultaneously being the moment of artistic and philosophical education—a space in which the artist/muse relation inside (between Basil and Dorian) gives way to a transformative lecture on the supremacy and transience of youth. It is also the sensually-charged space in which the bees and birds are active with nature’s bidding, and in which the two men—Basil having remained indoors—find themselves evocatively alone.

³ All *Dorian Gray* quotations are taken from the 1891 edition, edited by Wilde for book publication, as opposed to the 1890 manuscript.

While displacing an actual female character with a young man, the scene subscribes to traditionally recognized gender roles: Henry, coming up from behind and surprising Dorian, assumes the role of the wooing “man,” while Dorian, at once intrigued but coyly guarded, and in the precarious position of distinguishing a gentleman from a rake, is cast as the “woman.” Henry philosophizes and Dorian listens, concluding silently that, while he likes Henry, “he felt afraid of him, and ashamed of being afraid” (22). Henry’s power of influence appears limitless: not only is Dorian’s “true self” revealed to him through this single interaction (22), but the process of replicating and pleasing his seducer/tutor—his “homework” of hedonistic endeavors, delivered as evidence of a heightened individuality—forms the basis of Dorian’s character development; later in the book, when he is well on his way to becoming a trendsetter among England’s fashionable young men, he begins to reproduce as his own the aphoristic language of his teacher: “A man who is master of himself can end a sorrow as easily as he can invent a pleasure,” he pontificates, for example, in the face of Basil’s admonishments (91).

Dorian’s “fall,” despite Wilde’s efforts to position it archetypally or as a portrait of psychological demise, is very much a *social* development, bound to its era’s shifting forms of capital and consumption. More specifically, it is the product of a (fairly rigorous) educational process, sponsored (competitively, if not quite adversarially) by two elder gentlemen, and including lessons in language, literature, fashion, philosophy, and theater. Even Dorian’s foray into heterosexual romance develops, under Henry’s cynical and shrewd gaze, as a childish melodrama—one in which the female lead is rendered absurd and valueless, a mere prop in Dorian’s education and bid for autonomous masculinity.

Such (homo)eroticized power-dynamics tap into, I believe, broader insecurities and ambiguities regarding education and sexuality. These include 1) an intensified confusion between the “fashionable” and the “good,” predicated on the rising value of scandalous literature and its justifying tenet that great art dismantles rather than upholds conventional values; and 2) a feared potential for liberal education to *produce*, if not simply protect, homosexuals. More broadly speaking, *Dorian Gray* and the trials realized as spectacle the nation’s anxieties regarding the future of education itself, including a nascent suspicion that cultural refinement was inherently effete, as well as the conflicted notions of education-as-corruption versus education-as-enlightenment. Wilde himself, the London *Telegraph* voiced in 1985, might be gradually dismissed: the real problem was the conspiracy by “[him] and his like” to “set up schools in literature, the drama, and social thought” (qtd. in Salamensky 1).

It is significant in this regard that a *book*—one loaned to Dorian by Henry, and suggestive of the scandalously fashionable “yellow books” published in France at the time—contributes centrally to Dorian’s moral corruption. “It was a poisonous book,” Wilde writes, though we understand it is modeled on Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À Rebours*, a title whose translation of “Against Nature” or “Against the Grain” very much reflects the intersection of social nonconformity and sexual deviance, and whose influence Wilde acknowledged during his testimony (Holland 94–97). Books as (generically) *the* symbol of education and growth here meets head on their notoriety as agents of corruption and candidates for censorship; Wilde’s narrative condemnation doubles, ironically as well as meta-textually, as a recommendation: “check it out,” he seems to say on the sly, and with all the tantalizing authority of his own celebrity. When Dorian reports back to Henry on the book, their exchange feels strained and awkwardly curtailed: “I didn’t say I liked it, Harry. I said it fascinated me. There is a great difference,” the young man explains, after having confessed that he could hardly put it down, and with the bratty air of a pupil attempting to “school” his instructor (105). “Ah, you have discovered that?” Henry “murmurs,” more patronizingly than impressed, before the pair drift into the dining room and the chapter ends. One detects in this exchange a certain let down, a suspicion that Dorian does not have what it takes or has drifted from his educational trajectory. If the yellow book was meant in part as an (indirect) solicitation—a feeling out of Dorian’s sexual appetite and a way of authorizing for him an identity—it has either been rejected (Dorian prefers, it could be, *younger* men), or else naively overlooked. The same is true, however, for the book as a test of intellect: whereas someone like Basil may be able to engage Henry on literary matters, Dorian has nothing to offer beyond his immaturity and flared ego; never will he be mistaken by Henry for an intellectual (and therefore *truly* masculine) peer, and the yellow book, in this respect, remains at the outskirts of his cultural property.

Dorian’s relation to the book is feminized in several other ways as well. First, he demonstrates a lack of objectivity, that requisite tool of the critic, approaching the book instead as a kind of prophetic reflection of himself: “indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (105). Dorian’s distinction between “liking” and “being fascinated by,” though an attempt at demonstrating taste, places him in a passive rather than active relation to the text; there is, in his refusal to say he “likes” the book, an air of ethical admonishment, a hint of prudery, yet these too reveal his incapacity for the pure aesthetic. This intersects, albeit contrastingly, with Wilde’s language on the stand when questioned about *The Priest and the Acolyte*—a more blatantly homosexual and pederastic story published by gay-aesthete John Francis Bloxam while at Oxford. “I think it disgusting twaddle,” Wilde asserts (Holland 72), realigning as it were the tone and would-be term of moral indignation (“disgusting”) to the judgment of highbrow aesthetics (“twaddle” providing a pejorative for the inartistic, and presumed feminine, use of language), and citing on multiple occasions his status as a “man of

letters" who cannot possibly engage literature on moral grounds (Holland 68). Second, Dorian's obsession with the yellow book is subsequently shown to be materialistic and decorative; from one chapter to the next, the book's significance shifts from an educational tool and conversation-piece to a fetishized commodity, a middleclass corruption of art into vulgarity: "He procured from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours" (105). Like a young Morrissey, photographed repeatedly in bed with Oscar Wilde books, in front of library shelves and bookstores, or bathing (in the "Suedehead" video) with a volume of Byron's poetry nearby, Dorian transforms private and formal education into the iconography of the trendsetter—a direct exchange of knowledge for social capital, and by which he hopes to garner notoriety, if not respect.

Which use of literature, then, proves more effective in terms of social prowess and power? Which forms of capital more effectively protect or make possible gay identities, lifestyles, and sexual activity? Wilde goes on to explain that the respect others afford Dorian, the silence that befalls them when he enters the room, has to do with his perplexing immunity from "the stain of an age that was at once sordid and sensual" (106). In other words, Dorian is admired and envied for his ability to "get away with it." This crowd of men, Dorian's larger homosocial environment, are well acquainted with the "the strange rumours about his mode of life" (106), and are likely aware of what sometimes takes place in the private rooms of gentlemen's clubs. In the short-term, Dorian appears to be beating the game, engaging in acts of "gross indecency" without repercussion. In the long-term, he has overestimated the power of performance and culture against a dominant, heteronormative ethics—a failure that is in part, the story suggests, a product of Dorian's ambiguous place in the class system. Whereas Henry's (potential) homosexuality is protected by his aristocratic status and notoriety as an entertaining personality (to be enjoyed, but not *believed*), Basil's by his artistic prestige and the closeting context of art itself, Dorian's remains more highly susceptible to scandal: compared to his companions, he remains something of an imposter or neophyte. He is also, we learn, an orphan raised by a high society to which he may not genetically belong; his "ancestors," in one instance from late in the book, frown menacingly upon him from their attic portraits (121). Dorian in this respect seems very much to embody the realization that queerness as *culture*, as a profitable resource, remains firmly contingent upon social class, requiring a network reproduced through education and imbued with its own hierarchical complexities. As a trophy in the opera box with Henry, Dorian remains safe; as a young man attempting to establish his own identity, and visiting the shady recesses where the like of Henry would never be found, he becomes exceedingly vulnerable.

The potential for homosexual relationships in Victorian England's education system is well-established. Verne and Bonnie Bullough argue, for example, in their 1979 study, that public boys' schools "tolerated, if they did not actually encourage the development of strong homoerotic friendships between students," and, further, that "most of the English upper class males who attended these schools accepted such homoerotic attachment as not only natural but desirable" (262). Such boys, Jennifer Kushnier explains, would be expected upon graduation to reclaim heterosexual status, transferring the gender binaries of their homosocial education to their relationships with women (61, 69). Writing about Victorian Oxford, Linda Dowling discovers a clash between a lingering "dread of 'effeminacy'" and a "fear of cultural stagnation"—one that found in Greek Studies and Hellenism an "opening in which 'homosexuality' might begin to be understood as itself a mode of self-development" (31). The effort to validate homosexuality, then, is not easily parsed from the institutional machinations of patriarchal culture: "It is . . . such elite male schools," Richard Nemesvari states, "which by definition exclude female participation, that form the homosocial bonds at the heart of British patriarchal power" (qtd. in Kushnier 61).

Wilde's reference to Henry's "Eton days," during which, we learn, Henry displayed and gained recognition for his flamboyant charms (13), seems to whiff nostalgically at the notion of a lost space in which homosexuality—condoned, perhaps, as an unsurprising *phase*—was both learnt and protected. Eton, especially, as Kushnier's study make evident, raised concern as a breeding ground for homosexual relations and practices (62-64), including its hierarchical system of "fagging," or the practice in which an underclassman slavishly performs chores for an upperclassman (Bullough 262; Kushnier 62). C.S. Lewis, in his recollections of Wyvern, identifies a similar dynamic, distinguishing the "tart"—"a pretty and effeminate-looking small boy who acts as a catamite," and enjoys status akin to "mistresses of the great"—from the older and more conventionally masculine "bloods" (qtd. in Bullough 264).

For Morrissey, school figures as a monumentally negative and often humiliating ordeal: a place where confused adolescents are "kicked" into the showers by toxically-masculine gym teachers ("The Headmaster Ritual"); where psychologically-tormented, bureaucratically-handcuffed educators welcome even public ruin as an end to suffering ("The Teachers are Afraid of the Pupils"); and where impressionable children "all line up" to robotically "do what they are told" ("Suffer the Little Children"). Having little of the Victorian prep-school's prestige and insularity, his mid-century Manchester affords far less protection and flexibility within its education system. In angsty resistance to such conformity is Morrissey's Dorianesque refusal to "grow up"—a kind of self-imposed adolescence that celebrates individual choice in the face conventional wisdom: "I know I know / . . . but I don't mind" he responds against accusations of childishness ("Swallow on My Neck"), deploying thereby the persona of manchild as a

potential buffer for sexual deviance. Such emotional retreats to a maternally-protected space or state of mind (“I want to go home” he wails in “The Headmaster Ritual”) collude darkly, as they might on the analyst’s couch, with notions that “something went wrong” (“Used to be a Sweet Boy”); “I just want my face in your lap” (“In Your Lap”) he sings on 2017’s *Low in High School*, superimposing onto the maternal and the innocent the shadier contours of oral sex.

This anti-school disposition, a staple for the rebellious rock star, aligns pop culture not just with Wilde but a tradition of queer literature that, as Ma Ángeles Toda concludes of novelist E.M. Forster, seeks an alternative to “public school ideology” (133). Indeed, the very idea of becoming a rock star, or even a fan, searching and spinning LPs at home as a kind of alternate and personalized library, symbolizes youthful resistance to formal education. It is in this spirit of romantic individualism that Morrissey realigns the resources of his formal education—including state-funded lessons on Keats, Yeats and company—to a narrative of private and independent discovery; artifacts encountered in the school curriculum are presented instead as unmediated epiphanies, texts with the power to show one one’s “true self,” or with which to negotiate one’s status in relation to others.

It is in keeping with Sedgwick’s claim that homosociality remains in all of its manifestations a mechanism “of the enduring inequality of power between women and men” (5)—as well as Kerry Powell’s placement of Wilde in contention with late-nineteenth-century feminism (2)—that Morrissey’s alternative, queered pedagogy struggles to shed the misogynistic impulses that plagued his predecessors. The women in Morrissey’s lyrics appear regularly as unattractive, smothering threats of domesticity: “How can you stay with a fat girl who’ll say: / ‘Would you like to marry me / and if you like you can buy the ring,’” he asks in “William, it was Really Nothing,” while accusing the bride in “Kick the Bride Down the Aisle” of merely wanting “a slave” so “she can laze and graze.” In *Dorian*, the vapidity of women is a central point of connecting and learning for Henry and his young protégé. “My dear boy,” Henry interrupts Dorian, “no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex . . . [They] represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals” (34). Women, who quite literally are written to the margins of Wilde’s story, and are divided by Henry into the equally-unflattering categories of the “plain” and the “coloured” (43), maintain a metaphorical and hierarchizing importance for the homosexual men at its center; Henry in effect reproduces the social system he learned at school, in which some men are “real” and some men are “women,” while Dorian is at risk of stalling in the latter category. Like the freshly graduated man whose new environment will not support the values of the old, Dorian faces a doubly-impossible challenge: how to be a “real man” without descending into the easy strictures—the emerging, “structural opposition between ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’” (Cohen 6)—of the unsophisticated.

As Henry’s Frankensteinian project, Dorian flounders and fails, becoming a reckless violator of norms with insufficient charm (i.e. cultural, social, or linguistic capital) to offset the damage; unlike Henry, whose diatribes are met with a mock-scandalized “oh you!” by his entertained audiences—a mitigating sense of “Henry being Henry”—Dorian lacks the personality by which to dwarf his indiscretions. His attempt to master the art of his sexuality—to negotiate, at first, his more secretive, homosocial circle with his heterosexual courting of Sibyl—slowly derails, resulting, we learn, in his rapid-fire corruption of young, aristocratic men:

Why is your friendship so fateful to young men? There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England, with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent’s only son, and his career? . . . What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him?” (126-7)

Quite unlike the flirtatious diatribes among the book’s inner-triangle, this passage broaches with its laundry-list of names the plain and unartful territory of sex-between-men. It is the discourse of the unspeakable, and the space in which Dorian, but not Basil or Henry, becomes the middleclass corruptor of the aristocracy, a representative of cheapened homosexuality. And it is precisely this kind of ellipsis—culminating in Dorian’s blackmailing, by way of a mysterious note, a man who later kills himself—that Morrissey makes a staple of his aesthetic: an ongoing display of saying without saying, of revealing and concealing, which reconstitutes sex as pure discourse (language that, as Salamensky says of Wilde’s epigrammatic paradoxes, exists in a limbo between “talk and materiality,” between language and the body [112-13]), and reinvokes Wilde as the lost guardian of sexual ambiguity and artfulness.

Morrissey’s use of ellipsis, explored extensively by Hopps as “the art of coyness” (120-69), is anywhere and everywhere one wishes to look: we are not told, for example, what “rumors” are “keeping [him] grounded” (“Speedway”); what “deadly deeds” his name “conjures” (“He Knows I’d Love to See Him”); or what, exactly, in “I Know it’s Gonna Happen Someday,” is expected to take place. Repeatedly one finds peripheral suggestions, without a centralizing or concrete narrative, of deceit, disloyalty, and deviance: “My only weakness is a list of crimes / My only weakness is . . . well, never mind,” he sings on “Shoplifters of the World,” while beginning, with similar evasiveness, the mock-confession of “What Difference Does it Make?”: “All men have secrets and here is mine / so let it be known.” Though distinctions between a womanly and a masculine partner are less clearly demarcated than

they are in *Dorian*, the dynamics of powerful and powerless, teacher and student, corruptor and corrupted are everywhere and emphatically present. In a kind of courtly reenactment, Morrissey's "speakers" assume intermittently the role of the victimized, ruined, yet devoted lover—"I would happily lose / both of my legs . . . if it meant you could be free" ("Billy Budd"); "My Love, I'd Do Anything for You"; "I Am Hated for Loving"—as well as the marauding, egotistical, or reckless paramour: "The More You Ignore Me, the Closer I Get"; "All You Need is Me"; "I Don't Owe You Anything." The vague notion of shameful homosexual encounters at times accompanies such sentiments, as in "Suedehead" ("why do come here / when you know it makes / things hard for me?"), and—with a glaring sexual pun ("there must be somebody else / who can take your gaze away")—"If You Don't Like Me, Don't Look at Me." Yet more suggestively, and again with a sense of psychological ruin, he sings on "You Have Killed Me": "I entered nothing / and nothing entered me / till you came / with the key." These, along with sporadic references to gay hotspots like Earl's Court, Soho, and Piccadilly, essentially open a space for mediation, an invitation for listeners, should they choose, to "fill in the blanks." Thus a blogger like "Queer Jesus" can offer explicitly gay interpretations of Smiths' songs, comparing, for example, "Handsome Devil" to an Allen Ginsberg poem "of homosexual love that is unparalleled": "This song will leave many gay fans wondering," he writes, "'how can this guy sing this stuff and still say he isn't gay?' Ah, but he's been saying it all along." This process, while undoing Morrissey's own ambiguity, functions to restore the marriage of queer identity to cultural sophistication; unlike straight pop songs, such comments suggest, queer songs require coding and interpretation, and so take on the credibility of literature.

What seems to make Morrissey a valued spokesperson for such listeners is not simply his writing about something typically absent in pop lyrics, but his doing so by way of artful innuendo and wit—his demonstration of literariness in opposition to a vapid or commercial mainstream. He might be usefully contrasted in this respect to pop-peer and fellow-Brit George Michael, a megastar whom the *Guardian* calls a "defiant gay icon" (Jones), but whose career nonetheless delivers the more familiar (and tabloid-friendly) narrative of a confused young celebrity and closeted personality who eventually "finds himself," assuming in the end and with a restored pride the identity of "gay man." Would a writer like Estlin McPhee, who crowns Michael his "first queer hero," feel similarly toward the dispirited singer of "I'll Never be Anybody's Hero Now"? Can the two popstars be aligned and mutually "claimed," or do they uphold a queer-cultural divide spearheaded by class differences? Together, they seem to validate that the tension between a public- and a private-spirited homosexuality remains harnessed to the divisions between high and low, mainstream and alternative culture. Wilde, of course, had no recourse to a "coming out" narrative, nor even, except in a culturally-nascent sense, the possibility of identifying as a "homosexual man." Art, for him, was not, as his prosecutors wished to show, simply a coverup for socially disallowed behavior, but a means of negotiation: an attempt to purify sex between men by way of the aesthetic disposition, and as the product of teacherly enculturation. The real gut-punch to homophobic Britain, however, was the potential for homosexuality to *accrue* value by way of moral condemnation—turning, as Hopps says of Morrissey, "ineptitude into a virtue" (1), and making of Queensberrian outrage an indicator of cultural naivete and inferiority. Morrissey therefore looks back yearningly to an era in which homosexuality was "not a thing"—certainly not a social movement—but, rather, a murky terrain of suggestions, accusations, secrecy, and showmanship. Granted new freedoms but still in an era of considerable intolerance, Morrissey makes of sexual identity and experience just such an absence—something to be hinted at but fiercely guarded from both public sanction and condemnation; in doing so, he not only enhances his artistic credibility among popstars, but—as a "national treasure," a "saint," a sanctified "poet"—takes a chair among Britain's cultural pantheon.

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