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Oppression and Repression by Any Other Name: Modern Relevancy of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* for LGBT Youth

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As well as their *bon mots*, fast-paced biting dialogue, and intricately humorous situations, Oscar Wilde's plays are known for the culture work they achieve. In particular, Oscar Wilde's plays are often about hiding a part of one's self because of social pressures, the *comme il faut*, "being in accord with accepted standards" (The Free Dictionary). Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* is relevant today, not only because the issues of respectability and perceived respectability for women still exist, but also because it can be read as a metaphor for repression of all sexuality or behaviors. The outlandish social pressure to be respectable and appear respectable depicted in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is similar to the social pressures that have led to homosexual conversion/reparative camps and therapy that still exist; these extreme measures can be particularly seductive for some parents of gay adolescents because of the social stigma that still exists for being gay.

Taken without the subtext of society's homosexual oppression, *Lady Windermere's Fan* provides food for thought about the treatment of women in the late Victorian Era. Even with the freedom one might assume bourgeois opulence would provide, women were still shackled by the

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*Windermere's Fan* for LGBT Youth

expectations of society. For example, in the first scene, Lady Windermere has to use societally coded language to rebuff Lord Darlington. He cannot say, "I want to have an affair with you," so instead says how much she may need a friend someday. In return, she has to talk about her views on the appropriateness of behavior without saying, "I know you want to have an affair with me." In Act II, he has to be much more blatant with his desires although he knows that if Lady Windermere were to run away with him, she would be the one entrenched in social scandal. The entire premise of the play, how Lord Windermere can help Mrs. Erlynne gain a semblance of respectability without revealing she is his wife's mother, demonstrates not only the gendered societal double standard, but also how the perception of sin stains even those innocent of the perceived sin. That Lord Windermere might be having an affair is societal intrigue; that Lady Windermere's mother left her husband for her lover would be scandalously humiliating, as it would be if Lady Windermere herself were to repeat the behavior. That the work demonstrates the progression of Lady Windermere's own tolerance, particularly as she becomes physically as well as emotionally trapped by the very morals she upholds, encourages more cultural depth than an audience member might expect. The play expertly provides a protagonist with whom staunch arbiters of societal expectations might empathize and then demonstrates how even she may not only be caught up in a web of oppression but also understand another's point of view. The perception switch at the end encourages audience members to look at their own limits of tolerance.

Because Lady Windermere is talked out of running away with Lord Darlington, something she agreed to do only because she believed her husband was betraying her, so she felt she had nowhere to turn, she retains her label as "a good woman." That Lady Windermere is choking to death on societal repression, a repression with which she even agrees to a point, as is evidenced in her rebuff of Lord Darlington's cloaked advances in Act I, becomes important, as she does not wish to relieve the boredom or expectations of her role with infidelity. In addition, to save her daughter, Mrs. Erlynne must not only place herself in a position to destroy the fragile web of respectability Lord Windermere has helped her patch together, she may never tell Lady Windermere of her origins as Mrs. Erlynne's daughter because the humiliation would be thus compounded after their deceptive adventure together. Instead, she sacrifices the potential love of

her daughter on the altar of *comme il faut*. Society's power and the fear of alienation within *Lady Windermere's Fan* are major themes that go unexplored in other works of the era, such as *A Woman of Paris* and *Not by Bed Alone*. Even Vivian, Feydeau's ingénue, notes how she expects to have to take a lover to gain the excitement she craves. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, such a blasé attitude about infidelity cannot occur because of the power of societal pressure: "Fear of social ostracism is consequently a common anxiety in nineteenth-century literature and drama. The corresponding assertion that morality and civility are one of the same is a key theme in the play" (French xii).

The belief that morality and civility, or social acceptability, are the same allows *Lady Windermere's Fan* to retain great cultural ramifications even in the twenty-first century. Although "it is no great mental leap to read something of Wilde's own covert homosexuality in the play's preoccupation with deception, double standards, surveillance, and enigmatic personal preferences," the work's subthemes of homosexuality might too easily be dismissed as quaint or unnecessary in today's more open world, a world in which homosexual unions are recognized in some ways in some states (French xiii). In the Victorian Era, homosexual practices were not only viewed as immoral, they were illegal and punishable by jail time, as Oscar Wilde himself experienced. Kristopher Wells, of The Alberta Teachers' Association, provides an excellent timeline of how LGBT teenagers have gone from being considered abnormal minorities, to being seen as victims, to being viewed as proactive students who fight for their rights. However, much like assuming that the feminist movement has done its job and can be dismantled, assuming that homosexuals are not repressed or condemned by modern society transcends naivety into realms of human betrayal. Although one may argue that, like ambitious women in some, but certainly not all, fields, homosexual adults may fight for societal acceptance and legal rights, the themes of societal repression in *Lady Windermere's Fan* can be more closely connected to a group that suffers daily from mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical societal pressure: homosexual adolescents.

The social alienation and threat of humiliation about which Wilde wrote is pervasive, particularly for young adults. Many recent teenage suicides have been connected to bullying due to homosexuality or perceived homosexuality. The modern societal oppression of perception of homosexuality bears close similarity to the Victorian oppression of perception of infidelity

demonstrated in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Because of the fear of exposure, bullying, and physical altercations, many young people are hiding who they are. Societal expectations, in the form of parents and teachers, may encourage this behavior, intentionally or unintentionally emphasizing that the adolescents are not societally acceptable as they are, so they must change or hide (Harrison).

Although Wells may argue that modern homosexual teenagers are supported by authority figures, Erdley's (2012) article, "OneTown's War on Gay Teens," demonstrates just how similar repression in the modern school system is to the social expectations of the Victorian Era. She provides multiple examples of how teachers in a specific school district (where several gay students and student perceived as gay committed suicide) were required to ignore the needs of LGBT youth due to fears of getting fired, but a religious group, Exodus International, that encourages students to wear "be happy, not gay" shirts and verbally torment gay students was welcomed at the school for their "Day of Truth" activities. This type of hypocrisy and double-standard echoes the Victorian sense of civility equaling morality seen in Wilde's plays. One Arkansas school board member, Clint McChance, who later resigned, encouraged gay teenagers to kill themselves over Facebook (Wing 2010). In addition, in May 2011, the Tennessee Senate passed a bill that would forbid teachers from discussing homosexuality from kindergarten through eighth grade. Actor and activist George Takei has developed a video called "Just Say Takei" to emphasize the ridiculous and potentially harmful nature of the "Don't Say Gay" bill, as he encourages the use of his last name to replace the word "gay" (Takei 2011). Not allowing educators to say "gay" or "homosexual" would create a strong foundation for oppression and alienation similar to that which existed in the Victorian Era, as LGBT-identifying students would not only know that they are not socially recognized in a place where they should be safe, but they are not legally recognized, either, much like women in the *fin de siecle*.

As *Playing With Fire* and *A Woman of Paris* demonstrate, hiding one's passions is destructive and can lead to erratic or dangerous behaviors in a revolt against societal pressure. In their research about the prevalence of depression in homosexuals, Blashill and Vander Wal (2010) connect some of the occurrence of gay depression to the fact that many homosexuals, males in particular, feel the need to hide not only their sexual preferences but also characteristics

that others may perceive as feminine (36). In examining a YouTube video that promotes gay marriage, but where the actor portraying the main character is actually straight, columnist Jeremy Helligar emphasizes this interpretation of societal expectations: “Gay people are most acceptable when they’re conforming to straight standards, or are, in fact, straight.” He goes on to ponder “Don’t those who fit into the more stereotypical portion of the gay and lesbian spectrum deserve the right to marry just as much as gays and lesbians who could be mistaken for straight?” That he asks the question demonstrates how pervasive societal expectations are and why homosexual people, particularly teenagers, might feel pressured to hide who they are rather than provide any evidence to support the perception that they are gay.

Not only do societal strictures encourage gay adolescents to hide who they are, guidelines of respectability might be better adhered to if the teenagers would just change who they are once and for all. Despite multiple suits of torture, neglect, and abuse, anti-homosexual reparation camps, conversion therapy associations, and grass-roots “Ex-Gay” organizations, all aimed at making gay teenagers straight, flourish in the modern century. One young person’s example can be found in the article “A Gay Teen Describes Her Experience at a Utah Brainwashing Facility,” where she describes her experience of being forcibly removed from her home in 2007 to be taken to the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs. This organization is still in operation and runs “therapeutic boarding schools” across the United States. Many similar stories and experiences exist, and several organizations have developed to help young people who have been through such behavior modification. Exodus International’s iPhone application demonstrates the heart of the matter of society’s expectations in regard to the idea that civility and morality are connected, as exemplified by *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (French). Because “psychologists have debunked the belief that you can turn straight through psychology,” this organization and application encourage people to follow the path to *comme il faut* by learning how to “pray the gay away” through a life of abstinence (Dan). Therefore, if the multiple routes to subsume one’s sexuality fails, gay adolescents are encouraged to continue to live as though it is still the Victorian Era by hiding who they are.

Because theatre is the powerful bastion of culture work, often fashioned to encourage audiences to consider new ideas or perceive their worlds in new ways, one would assume that theatre would be the first place to depict multiple types of relationships and how those

connections work socially. However, despite the number of open homosexual individuals who have found acceptance in the theatre, very few plays depict homosexual characters, and they certainly do not depict homosexual characters engaging in the oldest theatrical themes of infidelity and betrayal. On one hand, the lack of attention to this integral theatrical theme within works focusing on heterosexual characters could be because so few canonical works depict open (rather than subtextualized or codified) homosexual characters. In addition, it could also be a result of continued pandering to societal norms: if many heterosexual audiences believe the stereotypes of homosexual infidelity as a reason for decreased marital rights, the theater as a cultural power may disregard this common theatrical theme in favor of only depicting homosexual relationships as faithful, perhaps more faithful than their heterosexual counterparts. For example, for the audiences in the cornfields where many gay teenagers must live their lives uneasily undercover, the only depiction of homosexual characters with which they have familiarity would be from *Will & Grace* and *RENT*. Therefore, theatre companies have to find a way to not only meet their pecuniary needs but also jump on the Born This Way Foundation and It Gets Better Project bandwagon and *do something*: for many gay teenagers, theatre and other fine arts are the only refuge where they feel safe and able to be themselves. If they are encouraged to follow intricate heteronormative social expectations, as demonstrated in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, they are going to remain just as trapped as women of that era were (and some women of this era may still be), and some of them are not going to make it.

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