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The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", and "The Canterville Ghost": Laws of Desire, Counter-Fictions, and Counter-Fantasies

Abstract: This essay argues that Oscar Wilde's story "The Canterville Ghost", written in 1886 and published in February and March of 1887, was a response to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (to which was appended the now famous Labouchère Amendment outlawing 'gross indecency' between men) and more particularly to W.T. Stead's scandalous newspaper story, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", written in support of the bill and published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July of 1885. Wilde takes the central plot of Stead's sensational story of older men pursuing young virgins into secret chambers in order to victimise them and radically inverts it. In doing so he inverts not only a patriarchal ideology and an associated psychology, but also one of their major corollaries, the prohibition of same-sex desire. In its place he proposes a counter-fiction that authorises a counter-fantasy.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde. "The Canterville Ghost". Criminal Law Amendment Act. Sexuality.

> The originality which we ask of the artist is originality of treatment, not of subject […] it is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything.
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> O. Wilde, "*Olivia* at the Lyceum" (1885)

It is by now a commonplace of Oscar Wilde studies that it was under the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 and its now notorious Labouchère Amendment, which criminalised 'gross indecency' between men, that, following his unsuccessful libel suit against the Marquess of Queensberry in 1895, Wilde was prosecuted by the Crown, found guilty, and imprisoned for two years, an experience that would lead, just a few years after his release, to his ignominious death in Paris in 1900. Shortly before his death, Wilde singled out the law by name and noted its significance: "the road is long and red with monstrous martyrdoms. Nothing but the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act would do any good".[1] Even when the Act was originally passed a good decade earlier in 1885, it must have had a major effect on Wilde's mind and life. As Nicholas Frankel has recently put it, "Section II of the Criminal Law Amendment Act had the profoundest impact on the subsequent course of Wilde's life and career".[2] Although Wilde had married Constance Lloyd in the previous

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[1] O. Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds M. Holland and R. Hart-Davis, New York, Henry Holt and Co., 2000, p. 1044.

[2] N. Frankel, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard U.P., 2020, p. 18.

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year, 1884, and promptly sired two sons in 1885 and 1886 respectively, he was also at this same time beginning to take up a new, minority, and dissident sexual position, if not a new sexual subjectivity. He fell in love with Cambridge undergraduate Harry Marillier in 1885 and began his first significant relationship with a man, Robbie Ross, in 1886.[3] Again, as Frankel writes, "What seems indisputable […] is that Wilde's affair with Ross brought him into conflict with a harsh new law criminalizing 'gross indecency' between men that came into effect in 1885".[4] How Wilde responded to that conflict, however, seems to be more disputable. On the one hand, Richard Ellmann thought that Wilde's coming into his same-sex sexuality at this time actually galvanised him: "homosexual love roused him from pasteboard conformity to the expression of latent desires. After 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent".[5] On the other hand, Frankel sees a more timorous Wilde in retreat from the new law and victimised by it, noting that "[i]nsofar as Wilde's short fiction was concerned, in concert with his affair with Ross, the statute activated a newfound sense that love must be pursued in secret, illicitly, because it conflicted with the strictures of the state", and then proposing in direct rejoinder to Ellmann, "It seems just as likely that, in light of his affairs with Ross and other men, the new criminal statute exacerbated in Wilde a sense of himself as one of society's victims, precipitating a fisherman-like conflict between his desires and his 'soul'".[6] Wilde was himself a contradictory figure, delighting in contradiction, and so it is perhaps even more likely that he was *both* galvanised by his new sexuality in the face of this new law, as Ellmann suggests, *and* at the same time more secretive and circumspect about it, as Frankel does.

While Wilde does not appear to have registered a spontaneous and explicit reaction to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, either in his correspondence or in any other personal writings, I would like to propose here that he did respond to it in a considered and implicit way, at once directly and indirectly, forcefully and obliquely, in the writing of his most substantial piece of prose fiction to date, "The Canterville Ghost", which he very likely began in 1886 and published in early 1887. Specifically, I would like to suggest that he responded to the main section of the Act, officially "Section I", which regulated sexual relations between older men and younger girls, rather than the Labouchère Amendment, officially "Section II", which regulated sexual relations between men, though in responding to Section I he was also responding indirectly to Section II. In engaging with the head of the beast he was also engaging with the tail.[7]

Still more specifically, I want to argue that Wilde was responding to W.T. Stead's sensational newspaper story published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885, an early if not the first instance of scandal journalism, written to generate support for and spur the passage of the bill, well before the Labouchère Amendment/Section II was proposed. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* splashed over the pages of his newspaper a week-long exposé on the

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 4. See also *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, pp. 266-74.

[4] N. FRANKEL, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, p. 17.

[5] R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, New York, Random House, 1987, p. 278.

[6] N. FRANKEL, "Introduction" to *The Short Stories of Oscar Wilde: An Annotated Selection*, p. 18.

[7] In his recent biography of Wilde, Matthew Sturgis has suggested that the death of architect-designer E.W. Godwin might have prompted Wilde to write his gothic story as "an *hommage*" to his friend. See M. STURGIS, *Oscar: A Life*, London, Head of Zeus, 2018, p. 346. This seems to me a rather simplistic account of literary inspiration in general and of Wilde's motivations in particular. It underestimates how Wilde responded to the world around him and what he undertook to do in his work.

London traffic in young girls, aged eleven to fifteen, with a particular and even fetishistic focus on the traffic in hapless young virgins and with the aim of garnering support for the bill that proposed to raise the age of consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen. The exposé, titled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", runs to about one hundred and fifty pages in a modern book reprint and describes, in sundry and sordid detail, the whole scurrilous operation in which young girls were procured, assignations with older men arranged, and violations carried out, often in secret chambers. Stead even procured a virgin himself in order to show how easy it was, something for which he was subsequently tried. More than anything else, it was the Stead story that animated the bill and brought its issues into public discourse and the public imagination.

While the bill and the supporting Stead story might appear to have been progressive efforts to protect against the victimisation of vulnerable young girls, the bill itself was the result of the work of the growing middle-class social purity movement of the 1860s and 1870s, while the complementary story was the ardent intervention of a notorious middle-class 'Puritan'.[8] If Wilde took a literary or imaginative interest in these two, legal and journalistic stories respectively, and their shared motif and narrative trope of the victimisation of young girls, it was in part, no doubt, because he recognised them as clear and problematic signs of an emergent Victorian middle-class ideology exercising its new-found power as a part of the regulatory apparatus to legislate and otherwise control moral and sexual life, signs only confirmed by the later addition of the Labouchère Amendment, which of course would legislate and thus regulate sex between men.[9] But if Wilde took a literary and imaginative interest in these stories, it was in larger part, I think, because he recognised in them the operation of not merely the juridical (regulatory) law of desire but also, and more significantly, the psychoanalytic and anthropological (structuring) law of desire, namely, the *law of the father's* desire. These stories retold and thus reinscribed in the cultural imagination the old plot of predatory men and victimised virgins, the plot essentially of patriarchy, while the Labouchère Amendment reasserted and reinscribed one of patriarchy's most fundamental corollaries, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss at least—the prohibition of same-sex desire.[10] Thus, when Wilde radically inverts or controverts that plot, as I think he does in "The Canterville Ghost", he inverts and controverts not only the one, juridical plot but also the other, deeper anthropological and psychoanalytic plot, and with it, theoretically at least, that fundamental corollary. Further, Wilde gives us in its place both a counter-fiction and a counter-fantasy, of a phallic virgin subduing and even castrating a three-hundred-year-old ghost, an alternative fiction and alternative fantasy that, in turn, authorise the same-sex fantasy.

[8] See A.E. SIMPSON, "Organized Prostitution in 19th Century England: Legal Campaigns and the Origins of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885", Introduction to W.T. STEAD, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, originally published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885, ed. A.E. SIMPSON, Lambertville (NJ), The True Bill Press, 2007, pp. 9-49. Havelock Ellis wrote of Stead: "In his life and actions he was undoubtedly a rigid moral Puritan and his strong self-control kept him in the narrow path" (quoted in F. WHYTE, *The Life of W.T. Stead*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1925, Vol. II, pp. 341-42). Wilde will take up the theme of puritanism explicitly in *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

[9] This was not the first or last time that the sex lives of children have been invoked to regulate the sex lives of adults.

[10] As the great twentieth-century anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would show, patriarchal systems are constructed and perpetuated by the exchange of women between men.

Wilde had begun his professional career about five years earlier as something of a critic. Although he had published a volume of poetry in 1881 – in which, incidentally, he had indicated an early interest in the topic of same-sex desire, perhaps most notably in the long poem *Charmides* – he set out in that same year on his now famous tour of America in which he took up the persona of a public intellectual and positioned himself as an aesthetic and cultural critic. While touring America, he not only gave public talks upon a variety of prepared subjects on art and aesthetics, but also made a number of astute observations about American culture. Not unlike de Tocqueville earlier in the century, he was able to perceive and identify many of the most salient characteristics of American experience, which he encapsulated in witty aphorisms and often deployed and redeployed in his works, including, of course, "The Canterville Ghost", which includes sharp observations about American materialism and American pragmatism, in which he anticipates by a few years the pragmatic philosophy of William James. Of course, in this story, Wilde is also noting and responding to the demographic phenomenon of rich American girls coming to England to marry into the English aristocracy in the mid-1880s, in which he parallels the fiction of Henry James. Following his return from America, Wilde took his tour through the UK before settling down as a so-called 'journalist' in London. There he was a regular reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Dramatic Review*, for which he wrote theatre reviews, as well as an occasional contributor to other journals like *The Court and Society Review*, in which he would first publish "The Canterville Ghost" in two parts in February and March of 1887. He would become the editor of the *Woman's World* magazine in that same year, 1887. Both during his tours and later as a journalist Wilde was very much a public figure actively engaged with the world around him, keenly aware of contemporary cultural issues and sharply attuned to ideological structures. By the end of the decade, with the publication of *Intentions* in 1891, he would become a major critical theorist, not only deftly handling some very large ideas, from the Greeks to the present, but also and more often than not turning them on their heads. There can be little question that if Wilde was a critical theorist, he was more particularly a contrarian theorist. While there are many examples of Wilde's witty reversals, perhaps the largest was his reversal of the most fundamental principle of western aesthetics, Aristotle's idea, advanced in *The Poetics,* that art imitates life, Wilde counter-proposing in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) that life might imitate art. Notably, in that novel, Wilde was also concerned to overturn the psychological structure of the Ego, the Id, and the Superego, well before Freud even described them. Wilde had art do the work of sublimating not the Id (as perhaps it had throughout much of history) but the Superego, thus permitting him to conceptualise an Ego founded upon the principles of the Id and to work out a notion of the subject of desire, or a subjectivity organised around its desire.[11]

Just at the time that Wilde set out to America in 1881, the Criminal Law Amendment Bill was introduced into Parliament. As indicated above, the bill was the result of the growing social purity movement of the 1860s and 1870s, and it proposed several legal reforms to protect young girls from the predation of older men, including raising the age of consent

[11] It was actually Walter Pater who first conceptualised such a subjectivity in his review essay "Poems by William Morris". See my "Walter Pater's Dialectical History of (Same-Sex) Desire: Queer Conclusions", in A.-F. GILLARD-ESTRADA, M. LAMBERT-CHARBONNIER and C. RIBEYROL (eds), *Testing New Opinions and Courting New Impressions: New Perspectives on Walter Pater*, New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 148-65.

for girls from thirteen – to which it had only recently been raised from the age of twelve, set by the Common Law of the eighteenth century – to sixteen, and providing for the prosecution of brothel keepers. The course of Wilde's early professional life was paralleled by the course of the bill's parliamentary life. Just as Wilde's career might be said to have languished, so did the bill's, finding little or no traction for four years. Then in July 1885, W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to which Wilde was a contributor at the time, published his sensational story aimed at rescuing the flailing bill and pressuring a reluctant Parliament to pass it into law. The story dominated the paper for a week, fixed a set of narrative tropes in the public imagination, and actually succeeded in spurring the eventual passage of the bill, together with the eleventh-hour Labouchère Amendment.

Wilde was poised to notice, register the significance of, and react to the bill and the supporting Stead story. At the time he was not only living and working in London but also, as indicated above, working as a regular contributor to the *Pall Mall Gazette*.[12] Even if Wilde had not been contributing to the paper at the time, he could hardly have missed the biggest story in London that week and perhaps the whole summer, especially as a first and no doubt shocking instance of scandal journalism. Further, the bill and the story would have had special interest for Wilde: a juridical interest, insofar as they concerned the government's regulation of male desire, which might lead to the regulation of other kinds of such a desire – as of course the bill eventually did with the later addition of the Labouchère Amendment, just at a time when Wilde was coming into his own same-sex subjectivity – but also, and moreover, a literary and psychological interest. First, Wilde would have recognised the story of old men pursuing young maidens as the fundamental, structuring story of patriarchy, and so have seen an opportunity to overturn it and the ideology it re-inscribed. Of course, insofar as the story of patriarchy, or the law of the father, is also the narrative of compulsory heterosexuality, he would have seen a chance to overturn it, in a gesture that would have had not only public and social, but also personal and psychological value. He could rewrite the major cultural narrative and at the same time (re)write a personal narrative and give imaginative expression to an alternative narrative and structure of desire. Indeed, while Wilde might be responding most directly to a public story, it was surely in large part because it resonated so deeply with his own personal story. And I think there can be little question that Wilde is working out here his personal relations both to his virgin sister Isola – who died at nine years old when Wilde himself was just twelve and in whom he had a fundamental psycho-sexual investment ("all my life's buried here", he wrote upon her death) and whose death, more than anything it seems, helped to shape his psycho-sexual subjectivity – and to their father, William Wilde.[13] Wilde would represent a string of adolescent virgin girls entering into sexuality from "The Canterville Ghost" (1887) and "The Birthday of the Infanta" (1889) to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) and *Salome* (1892) in an effort to work through issues of fe/male sexuality, an effort that is, to be sure, more oblique in the first two texts but certainly more obvious in the last two. Further, he surely would have recognised the story of old men pursuing young vir-

[12] "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" ran in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4-10, 1885; Wilde wrote a letter from his Tite Street home, postmarked 8 July 1885 (see *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 263), putting him in London at the time.

[13] See Richard Ellmann's account of Wilde's experience of his sister Isola's death. Also, see my "Oscar Wilde's *Las Meninas*: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl", in M.F. Davis and P. Dierkes-Thrun (eds), *Wilde's Other Worlds*, New York and London, Routledge, 2018, pp. 110-33.

gins into dark spaces and secret chambers where they victimised them as the primary plot device of Gothic literature from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* on.[14] Stead, who was himself an occultist who was said to have predicted his own death, a theme Wilde takes up in his next story, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime" (1887), recounts the sensational plot of the procurement of and subsequent pursuit of virgins in the recurring hallmark language and distinctive imagery of the gothic mode.[15] He repeatedly describes these scenes in the sensational terms of 'horror'. Stead's newspaper story reads much like a gothic novel. To what extent, we might ask, were the Bill and the Stead story, the Act and its now notorious Amendment, themselves 'gothic fictions', with the new sensational horror stories being told by the rising middle class as it assumed its new role as a part of the regulatory apparatus, of policing and controlling moral and sexual life?[16]

Wilde's taking up of the mock-gothic mode in "The Canterville Ghost" was in many ways overdetermined. Although above I described Wilde's early development as a critic in order to establish his fundamental critical temperament, he was of course also an artist, and as his 1890 essay "The Critic as Artist" makes clear, often both at once. The criticism is often artistic and the art often critical. In the period from 1881 to 1885 and beyond, Wilde experimented in a number of different literary genres and modes, including a variety of poetries, dramas and fictions, in part, as the criticism has had it, because he was a fledgling artist trying and failing to find his stride, but in larger part I think because from an early age, just as he perceived the structures of ideology, he also perceived the structures and conventions of genres and understood that the structures and conventions of one were often implicated in the structures and conventions of the other and, moreover, that a strong enough mind might intervene in and contravene them. If the bill and the Stead story especially presented a kind of gothic fiction that reinscribed the plot of patriarchy, then the mock gothic might well be the most 'appropriate form', to recall Coleridge, to redress them. Further, while the gothic might have often reproduced the plot of patriarchy, it often did so precisely in order to expose, resist, and thwart that plot, the female victims often seen fleeing from and struggling against their pursuers. We might read Wilde's taking up of the mock-gothic mode, then, as both participating in and, of course, in true Wildean fashion, revising or even radicalising that tradition. In addition, the gothic was from its inception a privileged mode for the exploration of the unconscious and of desire. In the words of George E. Haggerty, "Gothic impulses are connected to the secrecies of private desire", and, as Haggerty goes on to suggest, to the exploration of queer desire.[17] When Wilde's story takes its medial turn from the mockery of the ghost to the elopement of the ghost and Virginia behind the wainscoting, it shifts in tone from the comic to the serious, as it tries to address the deeper, more serious issues of what I think is a fundamentally psycho-

[14] As George E. Haggerty puts it, "Walpole establishes this image of the victimized female – very much the object of sexual victimization – as a central Gothic trope" (G.E. HAGGERTY, "Gothic Fiction and Queer Theory", in J.E. HOGLE and R. MILES [eds], *The Gothic and Theory: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2019, p. 151).

[15] Stead would die on the *Titanic* in 1912.

[16] This could well be an instance of what Sue Chaplin describes as the gothic "inhabit[ing] or possess[ing] the rule of law". For more on the relation between the Gothic and the law, see S. CHAPLIN, *The Gothic and the Rule of Law, 1764-1820*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. For more on the relation between the Gothic, the law, and the queer in *fin-de-siècle* Britain, see J. MUSTAFA, "Strange Cases of the Queer Fin de Siècle", in A. HAEFELE-THOMAS (ed.), *The Queer Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P. [forthcoming].

[17] See G.E. HAGGERTY, "Gothic Fiction and Queer Theory".

analytic (genital and familial) rather than social (discursively constructed) understanding of sexuality. Indeed, the gothic is, as David Punter has observed, a domestic genre concerned with the family drama, just as Freud and psychoanalysis will be. Finally, as a mode or genre concerned with the family drama, it was also fundamentally theatrical, as Walpole himself points out in his preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*: "The rules of drama are almost always observed throughout the conduct of the piece".[18] Thus Wilde could exploit the dramatic and even melodramatic potential of the gothic while also trying his hand again (after *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua*) at the theatrical and exploring the question of performativity, calling out the theatricality of the ghost and the essential performativity of the law of the father.

It should come as no surprise to find that Wilde should have responded to this new law and the discourse surrounding it in the experimental way of an *inverse* story and in the *mock* gothic mode, which permitted him to overturn not only the new ideological structure but also, and moreover, a well-established (patriarchal) psychological structure. While Stead had inscribed the one cultural plot and scurrilous story of older men pursuing much younger, hapless virgins into secret chambers where the men victimised them and robbed them of their virginity, all in the interest of provoking Parliament to pass the bill and raise the age of consent to sixteen, Wilde of course constructs the *inverse* plot, taking a fifteen-year-old, empowered virgin as his protagonist, who ultimately accompanies not just an older man but a three-hundred-year-old Renaissance ghost into a secret chamber, where, it is strongly insinuated, she has some sort of intimate intercourse with him. In this intercourse Virginia appears to be the active agent and partner 'ministering' to his needs – she is herself the daughter of a minister of state – and she emerges with her virginity seemingly intact, while the Renaissance ghost 'dies', perhaps in the full Renaissance sense of that word.

There is a lot to unpack here. To begin, given the recent cultural context of Stead's scandalous "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" and the Act that followed fast upon it, Wilde's decision to make his protagonist a fifteen-year-old-virgin is significant.[19] It appears to be a reference to Stead and the Act that is at once ironic and subversive, the Act having passed into law in the autumn of 1885 and gone into effect in January 1886, officially raising the age of consent to sixteen, only months before Wilde sat down to write the story in late 1886. In a way, then, Wilde is pulling a 'character' out from Stead and out from under the law in order to illicitly reimagine and redeploy her. Here is a place where we can appreciate Ellmann's observation about Wilde, that "[a]fter 1886 he was able to think of himself as a criminal, moving guiltily among the innocent".[20] Wilde not only takes a fifteen-year-old virgin as his protagonist but wrily and blatantly points to her virginity by naming her, in a symbolic and perhaps even allegorical vein, 'Virginia', a name he astonishingly reiterates fifty-one times over the course of the story.[21] Wilde is not only pointing to her virginity here but also marking it out, not as the sort of hapless virginity we see in

[18] H. WALPOLE, *The Castle of Otranto*, ed. W.S. LEWIS, Oxford, OUP, (1764) 1982, p. 4.

[19] Maureen O'Connor notes the "text's frequent references to Virginia's youth—she is barely an adolescent, merely a 'little child'" (M. O'CONNOR, "The Spectre of Genre in 'The Canterville Ghost'", *Irish Studies Review*, 12 [3], 2004, p. 335).

[20] R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 278.

[21] Wilde often uses and foregrounds blatantly symbolic names, including of course both 'Dorian Gray' and 'Ernest Worthing', calling explicit attention to and even dramatising the idea or practice of naming in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Stead, but as a potent, or what we might call 'phallic' virginity. For the name 'Virginia' originated, of course, as a moniker for Elizabeth I, the so-called 'Virgin Queen', a potentate who wielded her virginity like a phallus.[22] Wilde introduces that very moniker into the text as if to underscore the allusion when he says that the ghost "had worn [his suit of armour] with great success at the Kenilworth tournament, and had been highly complimented on it by no less a person than the Virgin Queen herself".[23] And he further reinforces this notion of a phallic virginity when he calls Virginia 'a wonderful Amazon', identifying her with that mythic race of self-sufficient warrior women.

But it is Virginia's connection to Elizabeth I that is more significant in the story and has more conceptual value in and for it. For Wilde develops the reference into a full analogy in which Virginia functions as a kind of modern-day Elizabeth. Of course, while Wilde makes Virginia a phallic virgin, he also makes her an (English-born) American and thus in his characteristic contrarian fashion sets into motion a series of inversions and reversals. Notably, it was Elizabeth I who had initiated the English colonisation of America in the sixteenth century, with the exploration of the "Outer Banks" in 1584, which were promptly called 'Virginia' (now North Carolina) after the Virgin Queen herself, and with the view towards establishing a colony. Wilde appears to point to this colonial event by stipulating that it was precisely the year 1584 in which the Canterville ghost first appeared, as if he were the ghost of Elizabethan England's original colonial crime and Virginia the avenger of that crime, something perhaps like 'Hamlet's sister', a point of psychology I will return to later. In mobilising his own phallic virgin, 'Virginia', and having her travel (back) across the Atlantic to England, Wilde effectively activates the reverse colonial plot of a counter-colonisation. If the sixteenth-century English colonial story was of a well-known Virgin, who wielded her virginity like a phallus and penetrated America – a sexual trope Virginia Woolf would deploy not long after in her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, there to lesbian effect – then the nineteenth-century story that Wilde tells some three hundred years later is the inverse story of an unknown American virgin and a 'wonderful Amazon', similarly possessed of the 'phallus' and penetrating both the English landscape and the private spaces of an Elizabethan ghost. Unlike Stead's series of hapless virgins, Wilde's virgin has agency over her sexuality and, far from being victimised by a much older predatory man, is indifferent to his hauntings and, moreover, appears to subdue him.

While Wilde makes his protagonist a fifteen-year-old phallic virgin, he is also keen to sexualise her and to position her at the point of entrance into sexuality. In the very first instance in which Wilde introduces "Miss Virginia E. Otis", he eroticises her as "a little girl of fifteen, lithe and lovely as a fawn", calling attention to her appealing body and identifying her with a young deer, which in the tradition of the Renaissance sonnet was a common figure for the female love object. Further, Wilde's deployment of the early, major image of the blood-stain on the carpet seems to be, among other things, a symbolic suggestion of Virginia's having begun to menstruate and thus to have entered into her sexuality as well as a suggestion of the imminent loss of her virginity. Just after the Otis family arrives, Mrs

[22] Wilde may also have been inspired here by the name 'Eliza Armstrong', which was the real name of the thirteen-year-old virgin whom Stead arranged to procure and abduct himself in his investigation, a name that became public in Stead's trial in September of 1885.

[23] O. WILDE, "The Canterville Ghost", in ID., *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, HarperCollins, 2003, p. 190. All further references to the tale are cited from this edition.

Umney escorts them through "a fine Tudor hall into the library" and sits them down to tea before a "large stained-glass window". The setting before the stained-glass window is significant insofar as it establishes both a context for and a clear correspondence with the stain on the floor. That correspondence is both linguistic, Wilde repeating the word 'stain' in very close proximity, and visual, Wilde working in the theatrical terms of dramatic setting and scene design. The stained-glass window is in a perpendicular spatial relation with the blood-stain on the floor, and the family seemingly seated in between. Any avid reader of John Keats – and Wilde was not just any avid reader, but a dedicated acolyte and a brilliant reader – would have noted Keats's own connection in his long gothic poem "The Eve of St Agnes" – set on the eve of the patron saint of virgins and concerned with the sexual initiation of a virgin – between the stained glass in the room and Porphyro's sexual induction (and subsequent abduction) of the virgin Madeline. Keats describes a casement that is elaborately carved "And diamonded with panes of quaint device, / Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes".[24] In describing the stained-glass window, he employs the phrase "quaint device", using the evocative and provocative word 'quaint', which any avid reader of Shakespeare's sonnets would recognise. Once again, Wilde was no average reader, and possibly meant it as an indication of the female genitalia, as if the thin jeweled glass were an image of, or a figure for, both the delicacy and the fragility of female sexuality and a suggestion of its imminent shattering. It is in this context, spatial and symbolic, that the Otises discover the blood-stain on the floor.

Of course, the blood-stain comes and goes, appears and disappears, and so even further suggests menstrual blood or menstruation, though it comes and goes, to be sure, not naturally or biologically: it comes, it is thought, supernaturally, and it goes, we might say, 'practically' or 'materially', when Virginia's older brother, Washington Otis, removes the irremovable stain with "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent". Here Wilde wittily develops the major theme expressed in his subtitle of "a hylo-idealistic romance" – itself a variation on Walpole's attempt to blend "the two kinds of romance: the ancient and the modern"[25] – concerning the encounter between American materialism and English spiritualism, American pragmatism and English idealism. But in having the older brother rub out the stain, Wilde also appears to be developing a major, though less obvious, psychoanalytic theme, the older brother perhaps trying to prevent or at least forestall the younger sister's entrance into sexuality, female castration, gender difference, and, to the extent that Wilde has in mind his own younger sister Isola here, even death.[26] While the older brother's practical efforts seem at first to succeed, they ultimately fail, as the stain soon 'magically' reappears. And so are the complementary psychological efforts destined to fail as well, Wilde himself having to move off of the simple, wry solution of an easy 'scrubbing out' of this psychological stain and undertake the much more involved and serious solution of a deeper 'working out', which he does later in the major, covert action of the story in the private chambers of the ghost. Here, however, Wilde continues to press his irony a step further in carrying out another reversal, now exposing the supernatural

[24] J. KEATS, "The Eve of St Agnes", XXIV, lines 4-5, 1820, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44470/the-eve-of-st-agnes (last accessed on 29 November 2021).

[25] In Walpole's Preface to the Second Edition.

[26] It is perhaps worth noting that the brother-sister trope occurs in *The Castle of Otranto*. It is also important to outline that the trope of the blood-stain and its removal recur in *Salome.*

recurrence of the blood-stain as the practical and material work of the ghost, who comes into the library late at night in order to engage in the art/artifice of repainting the stain. But this too has psychological or psychoanalytic implications. While the figure of the brother tries to scrub out the stain, the figure of the father – the specter of a castrating patriarchal authority, not unlike Hamlet's father, we might say – artificially reestablishes it and, with it, the law of the father, or the law of the father's desire.

Wilde goes on to further suggest that the blood-stain is the sign of Virginia's entrance into sexuality when he indicates that the ghost has actually dipped his paint brush in Virginia's own paint box in order to refurbish the stain. While on the one, literal level, this indicates that the blood-stain was actually made with paint from Virginia's own paint box and thus confirms the connection between the two, on the other, metaphorical or symbolical level – and the sexual innuendo seems clear enough – it strongly suggests that that blood-stain is made from the fluid of her own, new adolescent sexuality, the box being an old symbol of the female genitalia that George Eliot had deployed about fifteen years earlier (in 1872) and that Freud would invoke about fifteen years later (in 1901).[27] When, at one point, Wilde has the ghost dip his brush in Virginia's box and repaint the stain *green*, this horrifies Virginia precisely because the blood-stain is an image of her own bleeding. What fifteen-year-old girl would not be horrified at bleeding green? Of course, in having Virginia 'bleed green', Wilde also seems to be suggesting if not a literal Irishness – though this is possible too – then at least a symbolic Irishness. Although Wilde's Otis family is American – and here Wilde is very likely playing with the Otis name widely reproduced on American elevators in the nineteenth century, and thus with American materialism and even social ascendancy – some Otises had migrated from elsewhere in Europe to Ireland, and so might some of those, in turn, have migrated to America. Of course, Virginia could also be Irish through her mother: if not through the mother's paternal line, whose name is 'Tappen', then perhaps through the maternal line. But whether or not Wilde is indicating Virginia's literal Irishness does not really matter. Far more significant is the suggestion of a symbolic Irishness, which functions in two ways. First, it suggests that this American virgin might also be a stand-in or a proxy for an Irish virgin, Ireland of course having also and earlier been colonised by old England.[28] Second, and perhaps more significantly, it further corroborates the hypothesis that she might be a stand-in for Wilde's own (Anglo-Irish) sister Isola. Wilde is working through here not only the one (double) trauma of her entrance into sexuality and death, but also the other trauma of his own adolescent entrance into sexuality, traumatic insofar as that entrance was linked to hers and was also a kind of castration.

While this plot detail of the ghost's dipping his paint brush in Virginia's paint box further marks the stain as Virginia's, it also implicates the old ghost, of course, in the illicit penetration of Virginia's private possessions, her private 'property' or private 'parts'. This appears to be a riff on Stead's repeated plot of older men penetrating young virgins, and the implicit conflation in Stead between the first blood of menstruation and the first blood of penetration/devirgination becomes a more explicit conflation in Wilde. While,

[27] In *Middlemarch* and *Dora*, respectively.

[28] James Joyce's story "After the Race", written in 1904, makes an implicit comparison between the colonisation of America and the colonisation of Ireland, to the favor of the former, America having won its independence, unlike Ireland, and become a major player in world capitalism. Wilde seems to be making a similar point here: the independent American virgin is more empowered to carry out the counter-colonial plot.

like the stain on the floor, the blood of menstruation comes and goes, the blood of devirgination, one might think, does not. But there is a very curious 'motif' in the Stead story that provides for such a recurrence and that Wilde may have in mind here. In a few different places, Stead describes the ostensibly common practice, in the London industry of supplying maidens to the marketplace of older men, of procuresses' *repairing* the virginity of already 'fallen' girls so as to re-present them as virgins. These procuresses would resew an ersatz hymen and then doctors would recertify the girls' virginity. Wilde seems to allude to this practice when he has Virginia return from a ride and tear her dress when passing through a hedge. Section V begins,

> A few days after this, Virginia and her curly-haired cavalier went out riding on Brockley meadows, where she tore her habit so badly in getting through a hedge that, on their return home, she made up her mind to go up by the back staircase so as not to be seen. As she was running past the Tapestry Chamber, the door of which happened to be open, she fancied she saw someone inside, and thinking it was her mother's maid, who sometimes used to bring her work there, looked in to ask her to mend her habit. (p. 196)

The passing through the hedge and the tear in the dress both read like sexual violations, especially in the coming light of Virginia Woolf, and the mending of the dress similarly reads like a sexual repair, just as Clarissa's mending of her dress in *Mrs Dalloway* does. Here in Wilde, as later in Woolf, the mending is interrupted, however, by the unexpected and abrupt encounter with an intrusive male, here the ghost himself, which seems to suggest the Stead scenario of an older man about to devirginise a revirginised girl.

In addition to the largely symbolic action of the ghost's dipping his brush in Virginia's paint box, there is one other less symbolic and more literal action that implies a sexual, even lecherous relation between the ghost and the girl. It occurs before the moment of Virginia's return from her ride and her imminent 'elopement' behind the wainscoting and into the private chambers of the ghost. The ghost would come late at night and finger her counterpane, an episode that is eerily predictive of a scene Woolf describes in her memoir *Moments of Being* when her half-brother came to her bedroom when she was thirteen, hoisted her onto the counterpane and, well, 'fingered' her. But far from being frightened, much less traumatised by this experience, Virginia Otis merely shrugs it off and dismisses the ghost's attentions.

Indeed, while Wilde might be suggesting a sexual relation between the old ghost and the young virgin, often in the same idiom as the Stead story, it is not to imitate the 'horror' of that story with sincerity and earnestness or to reproduce its moral outrage, but rather to *mimic* it to ironic and parodic effect. Wilde carries out that irony/parody on two fronts simultaneously. On the one front he utterly disempowers the figure of the old ghost, while on the other he thoroughly empowers the figure of the young virgin girl.

Wilde disempowers the figure of the ghost by systematically exposing the gothic conventions that support him as mere conventions and laying bare his supernatural powers as all artifice, theatrical trickery and, moreover, old-fashioned contrivances that are no match for the new real-world practices of American materialism. He 'dismantles' the ghost in the two senses of that word. While in the one, more recent sense, he takes apart, piece by piece, his whole gothic/ghostly apparatus and the machinery by which he creates the illusions of supernatural power – thus deploying as author a materialist and pragmatic strategy – he also, in the other, older etymological sense of the word, takes away the 'mantle' of the

ghost's authority. Wilde's deft dismantling of the ghost, carried out with levity and light humor, operates at both an ideological and a psychological level. At the ideological level, it represents the comic undoing of an old figure of patriarchal history and its patrilinear legacy and the comic exposure, writ large, of the threat of the father through which the law of the father itself is maintained. At the psychological level, it represents the playful dismissal of the Oedipal demands of the internalised figure of the father. Wilde seems to have *Hamlet* in mind here, which features the most famous Elizabethan ghost of all (from which the gothic might be said to have derived and descended): the ghost of Hamlet's father, who initiates the play by issuing the patriarchal/Oedipal demand *par excellence* upon the son, namely that the son avenge the death of the father.[29] Instead of taking that ghostly demand seriously, as Hamlet does, and carrying out a serious and arduous male revenge plot that would uphold and perpetuate the law of the father's desire, Wilde uses humor effectively to simply unmask the ghost as something of a Polonius, a doddering old fool who struggles to wield any authority at all.

Further, instead of having the figure of the son (Washington Otis, for example) carry out a male revenge plot, Wilde has the figure of the daughter, Virginia Otis – whom I have called 'Hamlet's sister' with reference to and anticipation of Virginia Woolf's 'Shakespeare's sister' – carry out an Oedipal/Electra plot (not in the modern regulatory Freudian sense as above, but in the ancient mythical sense). In this plot, Virginia, already eroticised in the ways previously described, enters his private chambers where she both conducts a secret tryst with and simultaneously lays to rest the ghost of the dead father.[30]

Just after she has returned from her ride, during which she tore her dress while passing through a hedge, and just after she has gone into the Tapestry Chamber to ask her mother's maid "to mend her habit", Virginia finds instead the ghost himself, who promptly whisks her through the wainscoting into the deeper recesses of the house and into his more secretive, private spaces, where the story comes to its climax. On the one hand, the ghost's abduction of Virginia and the absconding into a private chamber recalls the repeated plot of Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", with men carrying virgins off into what he sensationally calls the 'fatal chamber'. Here Virginia might be thought of as such "maiden tribute", a kind of Iphigenia, who herself represented a sacrifice of 'maiden blood', though of course revived, re-empowered, and repurposed. On the other hand, Wilde's having Mr Otis and the young Duke search for her first at the railway station recalls a curious detail of the Stead story in which Stead identifies the railway station as one of the primary sites for the procurement/abduction of virgins. According to one of his sources, a girl who had escaped abduction, "[it] is almost invariably the rule that the seller must deliver the girl at some railway station. She is brought to you, placed in your cab or your railway carriage, and it is then your business, and an easy one, to see that she does not escape you".[31] But, once again, while Wilde might have a sustained topical interest in that cultural story and an enduring ideological investment in satirising it, he has a deeper interest, I think, in his own personal story and a pressing psychological commitment to exploring it.

[29] Walpole, in the Preface to the Second Edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, discusses *Hamlet,* so that the connection between the gothic and *Hamlet* is perhaps fundamental.

[30] This might be said to be the primary concern of Wilde's next story, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", to throw off the demands of the law of the father, including the demand to enter into compulsory heterosexuality—the 'duty' to marry and procreate.

[31] W.T. Stead, *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon: The Report of the Secret Commission*, p. 74.

As some critics have observed,[32] the tone of the story shifts fairly abruptly from the satirical to the serious – and perhaps beneath satire there is always something serious – at this moment of the abduction of Virginia and the retreat into the recesses of the house and, indeed, the recesses of the text, for Wilde or Wilde's narrator does not (or cannot) follow the action into that space. While this shift in tone is partly due to the plot movement itself (particularly against the immediate backdrop of the Stead story and the more remote backdrop of the gothic tradition) and the very palpable threat of a behind-closed-doors sexual violation, it is also due to the sudden plunge into the space of the unknown and of the unconscious. It is the equivalent of the space of the hidden canvas of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* – which also features a young girl – facing away from the viewer, a pictorial trope that Wilde will take up shortly in "The Birthday of the Infanta". And here in this story, as there in that one, it is the secret space in which Wilde seems to be working out the linked psychological problems of the sister and the father. Although we do not know exactly what happens in this space, there is a strong suggestion of an erotic if not a sexual encounter, for all of the reasons given above. Further, we do know what happens as a result of that encounter. We know that Virginia has been instrumental (sexually or otherwise) in laying to rest the ghost of the dead father, and we know that Virginia emerges from this obscure space in which sex and death are mixed up, not only alive, but also in possession of jewels, another common figure for the female genitalia that we see in both George Eliot and Freud. Moreover, these jewels are given to her by the ghost, or, alternatively, are the inheritance/legacy of the ghost (of the dead father).[33]

It would appear that here Wilde is inverting the prevailing mytho-psychological structure of things and proposing an alternative structure. Instead of having the ghost carry out a violation of the young virgin and a theft of her virginity – what we might think of, as I think Wilde does, as a castration of the female phallus, which he often figures in physical, material, or plastic terms, like the cut rose in "The Birthday of the Infanta" or the fan in *Lady Windermere's Fan* – Wilde has Virginia carry out a symbolic, reverse, double castration of the ghost. While on the one hand, she is the instrument that cuts him off both from life as a ghost (death is castration writ large) and from his entailment to the estate (and thus from patrilinear history), on the other hand, she might be said to cut off and appropriate from him the material sign of the genitalia of the father—the family jewels. Wilde may well have two classical stories in mind here. First, he may have the story of Agamemnon in mind, as he often did, particularly Agamemnon's sacrifice of his young virgin daughter Iphigenia, inverting that structure now and having the young virgin sacrifice the figure of the father instead.[34] And he may also have the story of the birth of Venus in mind, as I think he does in both "The Birthday of the Infanta" and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in which Venus is born from the foam of the castrated genitalia of the father and might even be said to be the re-incarnation of the father's castrated phallus.

Whether or not Wilde is reimagining his own personal history and reconfiguring his own psychological story, in which he reanimates and remobilises the virgin sister to kill off

[32] Maureen O'Connor, for instance, who observes the presence of a "dramatic textual caesura" (M. O'CONNOR, "The Spectre of Genre in 'The Canterville Ghost'", p. 334).

[33] Of course, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, so here there is the strong suggestion of the possibility of a father-daughter incest. Further, as in *The Castle of Otranto*, there is the theme of righting a wrong, illegitimate legacy.

[34] The classical and the gothic story both share the central figure of the labyrinth, something that might have further connected them in Wilde's imagination.

in her place the figure of the father and of patriarchy itself ("Remember, dans la litérature il faut toujours tuer son père", Wilde wrote to Will Rothenstein),[35] he does seem to be suggesting that there is an intimate if not inextricable connection between the conceptualisation of female sexuality and the conceptualisation of 'same-sex' subjectivity, or a subjectivity organised around same-sex desire. In inverting the narrative structure of the Stead story and reimagining the hapless virgin subjected to the violation of patriarchy as the phallic virgin who carries out a successful – even bloodless – reverse castration of the patriarchy, Wilde might be said to be cutting off not only the entailment in which the ghost is attached like a tail to the estate, but also the other 'entailment' of the Labouchère Amendment, the eleventh-hour attachment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act, all the while, of course, retaining the phallus for her/himself.[36]

Wilde concludes the story with a curious conversation between the young Duke and his new fifteen-year-old wife Virginia in which the Duke asks her what happened between her and the ghost, which seems to be Wilde's meta-textual way of calling attention to and emphasising that central narrative mystery and even baiting readers and critics to make inquiries themselves. Virginia demurs and insists on keeping her secret. While there are of course many kinds of secrets, there is a strong suggestion here of a sexual secret. When, in the closing dialogue of the whole story, the Duke asks her if she will tell her secret to their children, Virginia blushes, and this blush functions as the final image and punctuating end-stop for the story. While on the surface this might be read as an indication of Virginia's Victorian modesty at the prospect of having children, there is nothing in the text to suggest that Virginia is the least bit modest. Rather, Virginia's embarrassment seems to be a deeper one, not at the prospect of sex so much but perhaps at the (supernatural) experience of having had it. She keeps inside of her the secret of the ghost and, in the context of the Duke's question regarding future children, that internal secret begins to sound like a sort of impregnation. The subtitle of the story is, of course, a "hylo-idealistic romance", and while 'romance' is, to be sure, a narrative mode or genre, it is also one that, in its medieval form at least, often involved a love plot, and it is a term that has increasingly come to signify such plots. The hylo-idealistic romance identifies not only the genre of the story, but also the central relationship between the material Virginia and the spectral ghost. If Wilde is suggesting that Virginia might be pregnant in some way, then that would be a very interesting play on an old gothic theme in which an illegitimate, usurped line of inheritance was replaced by an alternative, more legitimate one, with the promise of a better progeny and perhaps a new law of desire. In addition to this, however, it seems to be, in the main psychoanalytic register in which I have been working here, an instance of Virginia's effort to preserve the lost object by way of a kind of *incorporation*. That is, if Virginia has carried out a castration of the ghost, then she has perhaps, as a way of compensating for that loss, internalised what she has cut off and, in a way, even 're-entailed' it, cut and resized it back into herself. This may also provide a psychoanalytic explanation and paradigm for the male subject of same-sex desire's fundamental relation to the castrated phallus.

[35] Quoted in R. ELLMANN, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 375.

[36] An entailment was, etymologically, a 'cutting in' or a 'cutting to shape'. It is perhaps important to point out that the ghost is himself queer in many ways. He is, after all, an "outlawed nobleman", a class that would be linked explicitly to "perverted telegraph boys" in The Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889, as Joe Bristow has discussed, and he is also of course a man who has eliminated his wife and is a bit of a "drama queen". See J. BRISTOW, "Introduction" to ID. (ed.), *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2003.

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