BITTERSWEET ATTACHMENTS:
REIMAGINING DESIRE IN QUEER BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE

Theodora Hannan

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
May 2018

Committee:
William Albertini, Advisor
Kimberly Coates
In the last two decades, there has been growing disagreement between queer theorists about the role of affect in both queer theory and queer lives. Theorists seem torn between the necessity of recognizing and attending to the sadness and suffering of queer people and the impulse to reframe queer experiences into feelings of pride and hope. These priorities and lenses are not mutually exclusive, and this project contributes to the reconciliation of these perspectives. As we continue in exhuming queer histories, we have opportunities to address this conflict of affect: literary biographies allow us to imagine the emotional interiors of real queer individuals in their navigation of these diverse affects. I examine Moisés Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* and Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love*, about Wilde’s contemporary A. E. Housman, as texts that negotiate the losses and loves of these men. These two plays acknowledge the genuine hurts of their subjects without languishing in catharsis of negative affect; instead, the concurrence of genuinely positive and more measured negative emotions create feelings of bittersweetness, which straddling the emotional divide. This allows Kaufman and Stoppard to reimagine Wilde and Housman, despite their heavy emotional burdens, as contented by the queer work they devoted themselves to. I argue that these plays present these bittersweet attachments to queer work as a new model of queer desire.

*Keywords: Moisés Kaufman, Tom Stoppard, Oscar Wilde, A. E. Housman, queer theory, biographical literature, affect, bittersweet, desire*
For Moisés, Oscar, Tom, and Alfred,

who have kept me company
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I owe so much to Bill Albertini, whose bountiful stores of patience have encouraged me to cultivate my own and whose genuine joy in working with me and in the project has been deeply gratifying. You truly have contributed fundamentally to a maturation of thought with your insistence that we always focus on possibilities, not problems. Recognition also goes to Kim Coates for her oversight and immediate enthusiasm. It would be neglectful to forget to acknowledge my cohort, Sammi, Katelynn, Morgan, Lindley, and Kiera, for their solidarity and sympathy. I am also indebted to Lee Nickoson and J Clevenger, who have given me joy in my working life these last two years.

To Miguel Franco and Emily Katz: I hope these pages are sign and symbol of my gratitude for all you have done for and with me. And, of course, to Kevin Burke, for broadening my imagination and encouraging me in my first fumblings—I have at present neither the space nor the words to articulate my gratitude for you, my friend. My deepest appreciation goes to Roseanna Boswell and Adam J. Wagner for their friendship, encouragement, and kindness; both of you contributed to not only my personal well-being, but also this project’s. Thank you, Roseanna, for teaching me about love languages, and you, Adam, for wanting to exhume bad queers with me. I am also thankful for my siblings, Greer, Cavanaugh, Darragh, but perhaps especially Nathaniel, the promise of whose enjoyment of this project incentivized me at every moment of discouragement. Finally, all my love to my parents, the sine quibus non, whose visits and phone calls and devotion have provided me succor and solace.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. MOISÉS KAUFMAN’S <em>GROSS INDECENCY: THE THREE TRIALS OF</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>OSCAR WILDE</em></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aestheticism, or: A Desire for Beauty</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silence, Not Shame</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resisting Expectations</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. TOM STOPPARD’S <em>THE INVENTION OF LOVE</em></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling Scholarly, Scholarly Feeling</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue and Love</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Wilde Contrast</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queering Desire</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Places in History</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

“My library is an archive of longings.” – Susan Sontag

There seems, at present, a divide among queer critics as to the dispositional reality and needs of queer criticism and queer theory. In the last two decades, literary theory has been turning towards analysis of affect—the feelings and emotions both of the characters we examine and of the audiences who interact with them. Queer theory has been particularly invested in the development of affective theories, with significant contributions from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performative, 2003), Anne Cvetkovich (An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures, 2003), Laura Berlant (Cruel Optimism, 2011). Remarkably, however, it seems that these theorists have in large part been focused on negative affect: shame, fear, loss, loneliness. At the same time, the queer community in the twenty-first century has turned more and more towards feelings of pride, pleasure, and joy, in part as means of activism. Some theorists have engaged in a scrutiny of this emerging trend toward happiness, such as Elizabeth Freeman (Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer History, 2010) and Sara Ahmed (The Cultural Politics of Emotion, 2014). The divide between the two camps precipitated a conference organized by David Halperin and Valerie Taub, “Gay Shame,” which erupted into controversy among its attendees who critiqued a narrow and non-intersectional framing of the affect issue. The disagreements have not lessened, with vehement prioritization from both ‘sides’ of certain affects, positive or negative. It is my goal with this project to try and articulate how these two perspectives can function in harmony, simultaneously. I am going to examine Moisés Kaufman’s Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde

---


2 For more on this, see Heather Love, “Gay Shame Redux,” American Studies Association (Oakland, 2006).
and Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love* in light of the emotions of Oscar Wilde and A.E. Housman that they respectively depict. Specifically, both plays engage not only negative affects like shame and loneliness but also happier emotions: humor, contentment, triumph. Kaufman’s and Stoppard’s ranges of affects combine into a general impression of Wilde and Housman as bittersweet, a reflective feeling of both longing and contentment, of pain and pleasure. These contentments come in spite of Wilde’s and Housman’s losses—Wilde in his imprisonment for gross indecency and Housman’s lifelong longing for his unrequited love—and Kaufman and Stoppard point us towards a new kind of fulfillment for their queer desires: the achievements of their work as academics and artists. In this way, the plays function as models not only for a unification of competing affects, but also for a conceptualizing of queer love. Kaufman and Stoppard depict men who are queer not only in terms of their attraction towards men, but also in their non-normative emotional attachments to their work. These plays function as love letters from Wilde and Housman to their artistic and philosophical projects, conveyed to us in the affective projects by Kaufman and Stoppard.

One of the most significant contributions to the discussion of negative affect is Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Love sets out to examine texts through a lens that embraces suffering and its embedded place in a queer tradition; she does this because of her “sense that contemporary critics tend to describe the encounter with the past in idealizing terms,” versions of the past that “seem strangely free of the wounds” that queer people have suffered. In focusing on the presentation of shame and loss in queer texts, Love seeks to get queer theory more comfortable with its sad past without immediately turning that past into pride: “there’s no way that any amount of affirmative reclamation is going to succeed in

---

detaching the word [queer] from its association with shame and with the terrifying powerlessness of gender-dissonant or otherwise stigmatized childhood.” If queer itself is steeped in these lonely and burdened feelings, our critical attention should not neglect it, and Love’s project is aimed towards turning our gaze backwards and embracing the uncomfortable parts of a queer past on their own terms. The value in such a method, Love argues, is wrapped up in an honest reckoning of the hurts of the past, “what it is like to bear a ‘disqualified’ identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it.” She is particularly concerned with resisting this ‘fixing’ impulse, the need to create reparative readings or stories out of line with a historical reality of homophobia. What Love calls “bad attachments” are not merely a thing of the past, however, and she reminds us that “contemporary queer subjects are also isolated, lonely subjects looking for other lonely people, just like them.” It is the ongoing status of queer suffering that makes special attention to theory based on negative affect so pressing for Love: we must not abandon queer individuals (past or present) to silence in their loneliness.

Not two years later, however, Michael Snediker publishes *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, which takes issue with both the analysis and assumptions of this attitude in Love’s *Feeling Backward*. While he recognizes the necessary contributions to queer theory from a hermeneutic of loss and shame, he considers that hermeneutic “vital and proliferative, but also foreclosing, in its demarcation of an intellectual field that reinforces the intellectual nonviability of a different terrain, which I am calling queer optimism.” This critical lens of optimism is the result “from a sense that queer theory, for all its

---

5 Ibid., 4.
6 Ibid., 43.
7 Ibid., 36.
8 Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 15.
contributions to our understandings of affect, has had far more to say about negative affects than positive ones.”9 Such a preponderance of criticism toward those negative affects of shame and loss may then be limiting a field that has made a strength of multiplicity of interpretation, and Snediker seems deeply concerned that such limitations would be in danger of oversimplifying the field of queer theory. By optimism, Snediker clarifies that he means “meta-optimism: it wants to think about feeling good, to make disparate aspects of feeling good thinkable.”10 Feelings of shame, he argues, are tied to a desire for “another self, and more acutely, want[ing] to give up the self one has.”11 This interpretation of shame then could lead to rather troubling consequences of a fixation on shame as a critical lens: by focusing on desires that may subconsciously jettison queerness, what are we saying about the value of queerness? Snediker sees queer optimism as an opportunity to encounter texts and queerness through a lens that sees the possibilities of moving forward afforded by queerness, rather than ways of mourning losses attributed to that queerness, which situates us in the past.

Part of the dispute seems to be the result of a different temporal focus. Love wants to look backward in order to give due consideration to those in the past and those currently living with bad attachments; Snediker wants to consider the possibilities opened by a “capacity for loving in spite of feeling damaged,”12 a framework of optimism looking towards the future as viably livable. Love is right insofar as those in the present and the future will have bad attachments that must be dealt with frankly and unflinchingly, lest we neglect their genuine struggles, and that we must steward histories of queer individuals without wallpapering over their hurts and our inheritance of those losses. Conversely, Snediker’s entreaty for us to

9 Ibid., 4.
10 Ibid., 3.
11 Ibid., 18.
12 Ibid., 10.
incorporate hope—not a wishy-washy wistfulness, but true alternative conceptualizations of what it is to love even amongst loss—seems to have equal merit, but Snediker is focusing on the those living in the present developing this sensibility. Snediker tries to forestall criticism that he is creating “another reductive binary” in distinguishing between queer optimism and queer pessimism in discussing this divide among theorists.\(^{13}\) While he wishes to wave this away as an incidental concern, I believe this at the heart of the dispute. Both Snediker and Love seem wrapped up in this dispositional disagreement, but both are thereby missing the danger of such prescriptive attitudes.

Amongst this changing landscape of the possibilities and expectations of queer affect, it seems even more crucial to be engaging in discussions about the nuance of those affects. The purpose of my project is not to survey queer critics and tally the percentage of authors and articles focusing on positive or negative affect—such a daunting project of quantifying would doubtless not address the issue at hand. How can we reconcile the perceptions that the field of queer theory has been overtaken by an overwhelming compulsion towards a certain kind of reading of queer figures and queer texts? Snediker’s reminder that “queer theory’s great contribution to studies of emotion lies in its complication of the ways in which emotion and affect might be measured, experienced, navigated” seems particularly germane.\(^{14}\) Queer theory need not be bound either to negative affect or queer optimism; the theories and the texts they serve need not be mutually exclusive.

I hope in this project to examine strategies of using both positive and negative affect in reconciling these two seemingly diametrically opposed views. In doing so I hope to bring Snediker’s optimism for the future into the past: looking backward at those looking forward.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 89.
believe that there is much to gain from Love’s desire to reexamine the hurts of the past, but to do so while mindful of the possibilities of the future—a future we ourselves are living in now and looking forward to. This is not entirely new work: Lisa Duggan, generally in support of Love’s thesis about the impulse to negative affect, and José Muñoz, a strong proponent of the value in affective positivity, engaged in such a conciliatory dialogue in a co-written article for *Women & Performance* in 2009. Duggan expresses skepticism about the use value of hope not just in a literary or theoretical mode, but a practice of politics; she writes that she is genuinely puzzled about “what political hope is made of – what kinds of feeling, or emotion, or collections of beliefs constitute it?”¹⁵ Muñoz’s answer is perhaps most succinct when he writes that “Utopia has often been described as the education of desire. To want something else, to want beside and beyond the matrix of social controls that is our life in late Capitalism, is to participate in this other form of desiring.”¹⁶ Other forms of desiring outside of the structures that deprive us of hope are ways of imagining a future in a more concrete, more queer fashion. This reframing of desire is something I wish to particularly attend to in the following chapters; I believe the texts we are about to examine insist on new conceptualizations of desire which provide our biographical subjects with their own hope and contentment.

It seems necessary here to address once more the temporal nature of the scholarly divide, but not just in terms of Love’s looking backward and Snediker’s gaze forward—rather, the theoretical debate in a historical context itself. Queer behavior has been penalized under a legal framework—the 1885 Labouchere Amendment criminalizing homosexual acts in the United Kingdom, which looms large in the works we will be exploring—just as queer literature has a

¹⁶ Ibid., 278.
history of censorship, with obscenity laws targeting works like Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. Well-known in American theoretical discourse is the Hollywood Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays code, which proscribed “impure love, the love which society has always regarded as wrong” from being shown to be “attractive and beautiful” or “right and permissible.” Negative affect was enforced by social structures attempting to suppress depictions of queer people and behavior, and the necessity to deal in negative affect as part of the history of queer storytelling is a relevant backdrop to keep in mind. Queer stories of the past carry more negative affect in part because they were required to, and it is only amid the lifting of such official bans and the loosening of social strictures that a debate about affect is even possible. As that debate has gained steam, we have seen models of embracing both queer optimism and negative affect: the “It Gets Better Project” recognizes and talks about the ways in which queer lives have been full of loss and shame, but also how it is possible to move forward through that suffering. As founder Dan Savage quotes Harvey Milk in his compilation *It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living*, “You gotta give ‘em hope.” Among theorists who tend to consider activism integral to their work, it behooves us to keep in mind the necessity of both the recognition of the wounds of the past and the hope imperative to moving forward even amongst that suffering.

A simple dichotomy of either pessimism or optimism, shame or pride, grief or revelry, does not give sufficient credit to the richness and complexity of queer experiences or queer theory, and both, when considered in isolation, (re)produce one dimensional inevitabilities. Just as Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* admires the production of a “sexual mosaic,” by the

---

increase of discourse regarding sexuality, our understanding of queer stories and people should be able to reflect their complex, convoluted, sometimes contradictory possibilities. One size does not fit all, and one set of theories or set of stories cannot satisfy the gnawing ache of queer individuals searching for resonance with the past. This need for varied and diverse theoretical frames holds true for our literature as well: authors themselves have needed to grapple with this issue in their production of these stories, the original negotiations of these affects. Certain tropes of queer people as doomed, emotionally tortured, ostracized, pathologically isolated maintain their foothold in media and literature, established with those social and legal frameworks with censorship and obscenity laws, even as we have begun to see a growing number of stories that are pursuing other (often happier) affects. The Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in a TED talk from 2009 discusses “the danger of a single story,” the inevitable and one-dimensional stereotypes produced when we only depict people in one way. Drawing on her experiences of perceptions about Africans, Adichie asserts that to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

This is the danger that queer theorists are encountering—the conceptualization of queer stories as either positive or negative, happy or sad, engrossed with trauma or obsessed with recovering

---


20 The last year has already provided an excellent microcosm of these competing affects and their receptions: *Call Me By Your Name* (2017) and *Love, Simon* (2018). Without too much of a digression, the latter is generally considered an affirmative coming out story, set in the modern day—a feel-good romcom with a queer teen protagonist. The former tells a love story doomed to failure, with an impressive seven minutes closing scene of our lovelorn protagonist crying into a fire, face-forward to the audience. In their defense, both films deal with positive and negative affect to some degree: Simon is outing by his brother, while the young lovers in *Call Me By Your Name* have sweet exchanges. However, the overall tenor of each film is of these competing affects; I also think it relevant to note that the more cheerful *Love, Simon* has been lauded primarily for the normalizing of queerness it promotes but little else, while *Call Me By Your Name* was considered highbrow art, nominated for multiple Academy Awards. The differences in reception might comment on the relative acceptability or respectability of these affects.

pride. This deprives us of nuance and leads to the drastic miscommunication evinced by the framing assumptions of Love’s and Snediker’s work. The fault need not be laid entirely on their doorsteps, however; Adichie also notes that “power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.”

The act of storytelling is just as much a part of this dynamic as the act of interpretation from these scholars. We need models not just of scholarship better able to encompass a more nuanced hermeneutic, but also of literature sensitive to this growing divide in the perception of affective work. History here?

I would like, then, to consider how our theoretical and narrative horizons might be expanded by consideration of both sets of affects through the examination of two plays: Moisés Kaufman’s *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* and Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love*. The two texts which will be the subjects of the following chapters might be considered ironic, given my earlier insistence of the necessity of diverse storytelling. I would like to suggest that the plays are diverse in how they consider not only affect, but also how they reconsider queer desire as not related to sex and romance alone, but attachment to other objects, specifically the queer work of both Wilde and Housman. My project emerged from my own desire to exhume queer histories: not simply the historical work of biography, but how literature may allow us to explore the interior lives of queer individuals negotiating both the facts and feelings of their lives. Kaufman and Stoppard were of particular interest to me in their metacognition, their awareness of doing history, as well as their concentration on the work of Wilde and Housman as fully integrated in their personal (queer) lives, and the ensuing effects such concentration has on the overall role of affect in the plays.

---

22 Ibid.
There are many similarities between the plays and their subjects: both plays premiered in 1997, both engage explicitly in historiography, and both depict gay Victorian men—Oscar Wilde and his contemporary A.E. Housman, poet and scholar. However, the subjects of these two plays are only part of my motivation for their selection; I believe that the playwrights’ treatments of these queer figures navigate the supposed impasse between Love’s and Snediker’s interpretations. Both Wilde and Housman’s lives were marked by their losses, and these plays directly explore those hurts, but they do so without getting caught up in cathartic mourning. Instead, the emphasis in both plays is to explore how Wilde and Housman themselves may have both recouped worth, even amongst that suffering, and the value and worth of their activities around suffering. Kaufman and Stoppard examine the suffering of their subjects by expanding their portrayals to include the emotional fulfillment of Wilde and Housman by their queer work, and by doing model not only both positive and negative affect through intense bittersweetness but also an alternative concept of queer attachments: Kaufman and Stoppard, by placing Wilde’s and Housman’s work as objects of their queer desire, are giving us another way of understanding the nature of love.

Primarily and explicitly composed of quotes from historical documents (trial transcripts, newspaper articles, memoirs, and the like), *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* covers not just the final conviction of Wilde for sodomy, but the mistrial before it and Wilde’s precipitating lawsuit against his lover’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, for libel, after Queensberry publicly called Wilde a “posing sodomite.” Kaufman centers the play on Wilde’s trials, which frame homosexual acts as illegal and criminal, but Kaufman also emphasizes Wilde’s choice and control in the matter: Wilde brings the lawsuit against Queensberry knowing the potential dangers of losing it, Wilde refuses to flee to France upon being warned of his
imminent arrest, and Wilde’s answers on the stand challenge the moral framing of criminalizing homosexuality. It is Wilde’s aestheticism, it soon becomes clear, that is on trial here, not just Wilde himself, and Kaufman wants to refocus our historical fixation onto Wilde’s queer aestheticism. *Gross Indecency* then becomes a narrative of Wilde’s aesthetic work, which has often been overshadowed by our fascination with the spectacle of Wilde’s flamboyance. Kaufman’s focus on Wilde’s work is also what prevents the play from devolving into a eulogy about Wilde: the man before us is not just burdened by suffering for his queer behavior, but feels many feelings, among them humor, irritation, stubbornness, and pleasure. Kaufman directs us to Wilde’s fall from grace and the misery he experiences during and after, but Wilde’s traumas do not upstage the work that he committed his life to—work that was inextricable from his queerness—and Kaufman shows us a Wilde who is ultimately characterized not only by resilience despite his losses, but as deeply devoted to that work above even his romantic attachments.

In the ambitiously titled *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard introduces us to the deceased A.E. Housman, who like any good Classics scholar meets Charon at the river Styx upon his death. Despite beginning perilously close to the clichéd, the play engagingly presents overlapping tableaux from Housman’s life, centered around a romantic attachment to his very straight best friend. In and around these reconstructed memories are explicit criticisms of scholars of the period, who make their own appearances and commentary. Stoppard centers issues of historical narrative and translation, specifically of the classical poetry so beloved by Victorians. Housman is constitutently incapable of bending his infamous dedication to what he deemed proper translation technique in order to ignore that little problem which the Victorians tried to sweep under the rug: homoeroticism littered throughout the best ancient Greek and Latin
poetry. By engaging in Housman’s larger historical project, Stoppard builds a broader story of his long and somehow strangely satisfying life. Stoppard does not shy from the disappointments and tribulations of Housman’s life, but he eschews what might have been a much easier narrative about an idyllic Oxford adventure culminating in Housman’s inexplicable failure to earn his degree and devastation at the rejection from his best friend. Instead, a minor character informs us very near the end of the play that we have skipped explicit presentation of Housman’s lowest moments of misery, alluding to a possible suicide attempt. The audience is aware of the gravity of Housman’s hurts, but we are not asked to imagine Housman only in reference to them. The play confronts and dismisses the urge to wallow in the admittedly bittersweet life Housman lead; instead, Stoppard offers a look at how his queerness informed Housman’s life’s work and ultimately contented him, despite his burdens.

These plays are engaged in biography, a complex storytelling genre. That adds a layer of interpretation in storytelling that requires us to apply even more care in our renderings of these historical queer figures. Wilde, infamous for his witticisms, deserves to be treated as more than a parlor trick, and Housman deserves more than to be considered pitifully stunted; both men are too often reduced to these oversimplifications. Both *Gross Indecency* and *The Invention of Love* strive to provide us with more nuance to their emotional realities—but they do this by shifting the focus back to Wilde’s and Housman’s work. The emotions explored in both plays are bound up in how both men’s queerness was connected to their work, which provided them with not only intellectual but also personal fulfillment. Stoppard and Kaufman are well aware of both the historical nuances they are exploring as well as the emotional dynamics of loss and misery. Kaufman and Stoppard engage in these explorations in order to contribute to and perhaps reformulate the popular history of these men as public intellectuals, academic luminaries, and
queer men, in a more dynamic and well-rounded way than perhaps earlier depictions have
allowed, through frank confrontation of both negative affect and optimism. Our playwrights are
in their own way contributing to the literary theory debate by providing us with new models of
thinking about feelings.

What we are about to explore in the following chapters are queer figures whose pleasures
and pains are intertwined: their queerness begets both joys and loss, producing moments of
negative affect as well as queer optimism. More specifically, their losses are related to their
personal romances. In Kaufman’s rendering, Oscar Wilde’s conviction is precipitated by his
alleged dalliances with a string of young men, and his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas
after his prison sentence becomes mercurial at best. A.E. Housman’s love for his college friend is
permanently unrequited and he does not engage in any kind of sexual or romantic relationships
in his adulthood, as far as Stoppard is concerned. But there are pleasures to be had in these
losses: for Kaufman, Wilde’s trial becomes a moment for him and his aestheticism to boldly
denounce the Victorian social mores, and for Stoppard, Housman’s romantic energies are poured
into his queer translation work and poetry. The pains of these losses are offset, even eclipsed, for
both Wilde and Housman by the satisfaction that devotion to their work brings. That work is for
both men a fulfillment of their romantic desires, sincere objects of attachment. These
simultaneously coexisting pains and pleasures that Stoppard and Kaufman negotiate beget
another kind of feeling: bittersweetness.

I would like to take this opportunity to explore bittersweet as a possible avenue for a
joining of the discourse between negative affect and queer optimism. Anne Carson discusses this
emotion at length in her *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*, opening her work by saying that “It was
Sappho who first called eros ‘bittersweet.’ […] Eros seemed to Sappho at once an experience of
pleasure and pain.”23 This connection between eros and bittersweetness is in part explained by
the nature of the Greek itself: “The Greek word *eros* denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that
which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him
to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. This is more than
wordplay.”24 There is a conflict embedded in eros of desire for something that one wants,
something that one does not have, cannot truly possess. Carson goes on to expound on this not-
having in desire:

> On the surface of it, the lover wants the beloved. This, of course, is not really the case. If
we look carefully at a lover in the midst of desire, for example Sappho in her fragment
31, we see how severe an experience for her is confrontation with the beloved even at a
distance. Union would be annihilating. What the lover in this poem needs is to be able
to face the beloved and yet not be destroyed […]25

Eros in Carson’s rendering of not only Greek poetry but modern literature, is inherently wrapped
up in wanting, even longing, and a certain kind of dissatisfaction and frustration produced by the
futility of the fulfillment of that desire—producing both pleasure and pain in desiring. This
frustration dovetails nicely with Sianne Ngai’s exploration of *Ugly Feelings,* “minor and
generally unprestigious feelings [which] are deliberately favored over grander passions like
anger and fear (cornerstones of the philosophical discourse of emotions, from Aristotle to the
present) […].”26 As perhaps clear from the title, Ngai wishes to discuss emotions in the realm
of negative affect but that are perhaps neglected in favor of the more cardinal feelings which
Love, Cvetkovich, Berlant, and others tend to populate, such as shame. While Ngai is focused on
ugly feelings, those firmly in the realm of negative affect, I hope considering bittersweetness,
which straddles the supposed divide between positive and negative affect, through her

---

24 Ibid., 10.
25 Ibid., 62.
hermeneutic will help us in parsing out the nuances between the more extreme divides in the emotions Love and Snediker focus on—love versus loss, suffering versus joy can perhaps be reconsidered outside of those oppositions, joined together in this other feeling. In pursuing bittersweetness, I am taking some of my cues from Ngai: bittersweetness does not have a direct object like rage might and is generally noncathartic, two of Ngai’s criteria for ugly feelings. Indeed, as Ngai says, that lack of catharsis is “a kind of politics,”27 in the cases of Kaufman and Stoppard, a bold reimagining of not only the place of both positive and negative affect through the predominance of bittersweetness but also the concept of queer desire through the primacy of Wilde’s and Housman’s work as their emotional fulfillment.

Employing alternative affects does not mean abandoning the confrontation of loss and shame as a component to a queer history and identity. Just as Love objects that we should not be retroactively trying to save queer individuals by reparative retellings of their stories, we should not foreclose the potential for those individuals to negotiate livable lives, as Snediker warns. I do not mean to criticize paying attention to either negative affect or queer optimism; but I would like this project to be an opportunity to consider how those two dynamics can coexist within the same landscape, how we might confront the pain of the past while acknowledging that those hurts do not stand isolated from the whole of these queer lives. There can not only be relief found in that suffering, but positive feelings—hope in the future, fulfillment in sacrifices, conviction for one’s queer contributions, as well as smaller joys and humor. Stoppard and Kaufman adeptly remind us that the significance of Wilde’s and Housman’s work, major contributions to Western canon in addition to a blossoming queer tradition, are part of their navigation of their own lives.

27 Ibid., 9.
CHAPTER I: MOISÉS KAUFMAN’S GROSS INDECENCY:

THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE

“There are curves of your lips rewrite history.” – Oscar Wilde

There have been, in the hundred-plus years since his death, an abundance of works depicting the life of Oscar Wilde. In a rapidly-growing field in search of untold stories and dedicated to the diversity of those stories, what business do we have in producing yet more work on one man whose past is already very well tread? The story of Oscar Wilde may be very familiar for both academics and broader audiences, particularly as a flamboyant man in the Victorian age punished for his sexuality. We popularly know Wilde as a martyr and a dandy, perhaps best by his witticisms: “I can resist everything except temptation” is a favorite example. Audiences walking into a play about Oscar Wilde probably already know the end of the story, Wilde’s imprisonment—but Moisés Kaufman’s Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde asks us to consider unplumbed depths of Oscar Wilde. Those depths include Wilde’s suffering, and Kaufman employs negative affect, but he does so strategically, refusing an audience the comfortably familiar catharsis of Wilde, our flamboyant gay saint, being made to suffer. Pain and loss are present, but Kaufman does not allow negative affect to fully inscribe Wilde—these negative affects are at their strongest in moments when Wilde’s intellectualism fails him. These moments of loss are then dominated by the lack of that which is so dominant in the play as a whole: Wilde’s way with words, most particularly in his articulation of his aestheticism. The legal scrutiny of Wilde’s aestheticism, which espouses the pursuit of the

30 How could they not, with Wilde’s by turns angry and miserable writing from prison titled De Profundis, literally “from the depths”?
beautiful and crosses swords with Victorian moral codes, allows that aestheticism to take pride of place in the play. Kaufman’s Wilde mounts a defense not so much of his own conduct, but of his work, his aestheticism. Kaufman to craft a more human, more nuanced Oscar Wilde, by focusing on Wilde’s work, his aestheticism, and Wilde’s own attachment to it, more steadfast than his relationships with other men.

The play itself is structured around the titular three trials, with achronological memories and recreations of the past occurring as they are interrogated over the course of the legal proceedings. Split into two acts, the first is composed of a prologue and the events of the first trial, Wilde’s lawsuit against the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of Lord Alfred Douglas (also referred to as Bosie), Wilde’s lover, for libel. Queensberry had publicly accused Wilde of being a “posing sodomite,” which Wilde’s lawyer Clarke lets us know early on is to “pose to be a person guilty of or inclined to the commission of the gravest of all offenses.” Wilde loses the libel suit and the second act is composed of the two criminal cases brought against Wilde by the government for gross indecency, the legal euphemism for homosexual sex, as a result of the revelations during the libel lawsuit. The second act begins with an interruption, an interview with a historian of Wilde, after which we work through the two criminal trials: one a mistrial due to a hung jury, and the last resulting in Wilde’s conviction and sentencing. Kaufman then concludes with an epilogue (a kind of film pre-credits debrief of what happened to Wilde after the trial) and a coda, which is a recital of part of Wilde’s poem “The House of Judgment.” In his introduction to the play, Kaufman notes that in creating Gross Indecency “[f]irst, I wanted to tell the story—a story—of these trials. And second, I was interested in using this story to continue to explore theatrical language and form. Specifically, how can theater reconstruct history?”

---


Kaufman, well known for his experimental theatre work (most famously *The Laramie Project*), approached the needs of a historical narrative by making that history explicit for the audience. This is largely accomplished by actors vocalizing Kaufman’s source work, narrators introducing where quotations come from, and is perhaps the most significant craft tactic throughout the play, as much of Kaufman’s text is indeed pulled from historical material. That stylistic choice accomplishes several things for *Gross Indecency*. First, it allows for direct address to an audience, who are being asked throughout the play to grapple with difficult concepts and a complex historical backdrop, as well as competing versions of events. Second, it also creates opportunities for Kaufman and the performers to engage explicitly in a layered conversation about Wilde’s art and aestheticism that might otherwise be too dense or unwieldy. The emphasis on Wilde’s work is enabled by this strategy, but the explicit historical approach also reinforces Wilde’s historical reality. This third benefit is a mechanism for Kaufman to control the negative affect in the play, which might otherwise become overwhelming, given the nature of Wilde’s history. Those reminders of historicity are a double-edged sword: the bitterness of Wilde’s real suffering and the treatment of queerness as crime cannot be other than unsettling and discouraging, but the interjections and interruptions, the start-stop nature of the narrative, continually pull an audience out of potentially re-living the events. With every reminder of a source, the audience is jolted into recalling that what they are watching is not pure fictional entertainment; there is no submersion into narrative and storytelling here. The stage directions insist that “performers should portray the characters in the play without ‘disappearing’ into the parts.”33 The actors are actors, not actually Wilde and his contemporaries, and audiences are reminded of that at every turn—the possibility of catharsis is continually thwarted.

33 Ibid., 5.
While negative affect is surely present in the play, Kaufman is requiring his audiences to connect and engage with his subjects in other capacities. The historiographical approach buttresses Kaufman’s goal of constructing a more nuanced Wilde, who refuses the expectations of an audience who think they already know him: consideration of Wilde’s family, moments a more traditional masculinity, an old-fashioned nobility. Kaufman himself comments on his own experience of beginning to understand a different Wilde than popular culture has enshrined through his research into the trials: in his words “a pivotal event in the history of art in the 20th century—an artist being asked to justify his art in a court of law.”34 What fascinated Kaufman in the project was not the suffering of Wilde or the spectacle of the trials, nor even Wilde’s sheer cleverness, but rather the role of Wilde’s aestheticism in the events and how that aestheticism plays into a new reading of Oscar Wilde. The ‘real’ Wilde, Kaufman shows us, is a complicated man, with all the wit and hardship we are familiar with, but also with wide-ranging emotions and above all an utterly sincere commitment to, prioritization of, and satisfaction in his life’s work—his aestheticism.

**Aestheticism, or: A Desire for Beauty**

To scholars of the period, Wilde’s aestheticism is well-traveled terrain, but his work is less well known popularly outside of his personal losses, as we can see in Kaufman’s own commentary: “a purity and clarity of thought I had not encountered before.”35 But the play explores Wilde’s philosophy, incorporating selections from his work to elucidate what might be considered obscure for a casual audience. Kaufman attempts to clarify Wilde’s aestheticism and philosophical outlook throughout the play, but there are some early moments that might lay the foundation for us. Wilde’s introduction as he identifies himself on the stand first touches on

---

some simple biography, like Wilde’s education and wife and children, but is followed very quickly with his standing as an artist. Kaufman has him explain himself as part of an “English Renaissance of Art,” which “possesses a desire for a more comely way of life, a passion for physical beauty, and exclusive attention to form. […] A desire on the part of man for a nobler form of life […]”36 This focus on beauty and its pursuit, the shorthand of aestheticism, was part of a return to the Greeks and Romans among artists and academics in Victorian England, very much in style (with no small thanks to Wilde for that style). But how can an audience understand this kind of desire? How are we to understand what beauty has to do with “a nobler form of life”? Kaufman teases out these connections throughout the play. Wilde when questioned by Queensberry’s lawyer Carson makes the connection between this aesthetic value and morality. He states that in his writing, “I aim not at doing good or evil, but at making a thing that will have some quality of beauty.”37 We are given to understand that the beautiful is then its own aim, and “good and evil” are not only subsidiary to it, but perhaps redefined by it. These descriptions may be a bit murky—beauty seems to be a slippery word, referring to physical beauty and to feelings, vaguely a sense of beauty. Kaufman does not elaborate on “beauty” here—the true nature of aestheticism is something Wilde grapples with late in the play. What we can see in Kaufman’s construction of a working understanding of Wilde’s aestheticism is a contrast to Victorian values.

The focus on Wilde’s work is central to the trials, from beginning to end. Early on, Wilde asks his friends George Bernard Shaw and Frank Harris if they will testify that The Picture of Dorian Gray is not an immoral book, as his “solicitors tell me that some of the things I have

36 Ibid., 16.
37 Ibid., 39.
written will be brought up against me in court.”

Indeed, Wilde’s lawyer Clarke opens their case by saying that “it would appear, according to this plea of justification, that what is on trial here is not the Marquess of Queensberry but Mr. Wilde’s art.” There is no rebuttal for this and Carson, Queensberry’s lawyer, later tells the court that “in my judgment, even if the case had rested on Mr. Wilde’s art and literature alone, Lord Queensberry would have been absolutely justified in the course he has taken.” Kaufman also utilizes interjections from newspapers at the time to reinforce the issue: “This is how the English behave with their poets.” “This is how English poets behave.” “This is what art leads to.” “There must be another trial at the Old Bailey, and of the Decadents, of their hideous conceptions of the meaning of Art, there must be an absolute end.” Kaufman very firmly reminds us over and over throughout the play in no uncertain terms that what is on trial here is not just Oscar Wilde the private man, but Wilde as a progenitor and figurehead for an entire movement of art and culture and his rebuttal of Victorian sensibilities. This oppositional relationship, Wilde at loggerheads with Victorian culture, is of course made ironic given Wilde’s popularity: Kaufman makes a point to reiterate how much of a public spectacle the trials were, and Clarke, Wilde’s lawyer, explicitly reminds us that Wilde’s plays have been “great successes.” Everyone wants a piece of Wilde—a literal piece, as Kaufman depicts his belongings being auctioned off in the wake of his arrest. The trial itself functions as a public inquiry and engagement with Wilde and with his philosophy—Kaufman presents the Victorians as deeply engaged (even desirous of) Wilde’s queer work.

38 Ibid., 27.
39 Ibid., 32.
40 Ibid., 60.
41 Ibid., 46-47.
42 Ibid., 67.
43 Ibid., 11, 13.
44 Ibid., 13.
The connection to Wilde’s aesthetic and his relationships with men are, of course, critical to the trial’s characterization of Wilde’s queer behavior. While the morbid details of his purported encounters with younger men do make their appearance in the trial, they are not mentioned until near the end of the first trial and do not appear until the second trial in Act II, and by both moments the focus on aestheticism is already firmly established. Kaufman describes aesthetics and desire both by their admiration for beauty. Carson, Queensberry’s lawyer, quotes from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* extensively and zones in on the line “I grew afraid that the world would know of my idolatry [of Dorian],” asking Wilde why he should fear. Wilde references the lack of understanding of “the intense devotion, affection, and admiration that an artist can feel for a wonderful and beautiful personality.” Carson asks the leading question that those who don’t understand “might put it down to something wrong?” To which Wilde responds “undoubtedly.” These people without the artistic sensibility of Wilde are referenced again and again:

[…] so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name,’ and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. […] The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

Kaufman again plays with irony in this assertion about the reception of Wilde’s work, however, as it was not always mocked. Earlier in the trial, Kaufman makes clear that Wilde’s plays and fiction were not only popular, they were considered virtuous: he uses quotes reviewing *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as “serious art” and “a delight,” as well as “the most moral book of this century” for the degenerate ending. How then do we square laudatory and condemning public responses to Wilde’s conceptualization of the beautiful through his aesthetic work? Gross

---

46 Ibid., 46.
47 Ibid., 111.
48 Ibid., 32.
*Indecency* develops a discourse on the question of Wilde’s guilt through an examination of aesthetics and morality.

The core of this discourse on guilt is explored early and often. Wilde’s aesthetics call for a different schema in the evaluation of morality: beauty and its pursuit should be the standard by which we judge goodness. Indeed, we learn that for Wilde the concept of morality is second to the concept of beauty:

Carson: This is from your introduction to *Dorian Gray*: “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written.” That expresses your view?
Wilde: My view on art, yes.
Carson: Then may I take it that no matter how immoral a book may be, if it is well written, it is, in your opinion, a good book?
Wilde: Yes, if it were well written so as to produce a sense of beauty, which is the highest sense of which a human being can be capable. If it were badly written, it would produce a sense of disgust.
Carson: A perverted novel might be a good book?
Wilde: I don’t know what you mean by a “perverted” novel.49

Kaufman here develops Wilde’s aestheticism and understanding of right and wrong for an audience: we may now understand that “good” is a matter of degree of closeness to beauty, and that “perverted,” with all its moralistic implications, has no place for Wilde in a discussion of art. Later, when Wilde tells his friend Harris that he has, indeed, had affairs with men, Wilde says “What you call vice, Frank, is not vice. It is good to me.”50 This prompts a moment of acceptance from Harris—a lovely (if ahistorical) little twentieth-century coming-out—but brings us back to Wilde’s central thesis: the Victorian criminal and ethical framing of homosexuality is not how Wilde conceives of right and wrong. Harris himself had warned Wilde early on that “to judge the morality or immorality of an artist is to ask the court to do what it is wholly unfit to

---

49 Ibid., 41.
50 Ibid., 114.
do," which further distinguishes the public and legal abilities to conceptualize morality in the way that Wilde does. Later in the same conversation, however, Harris tries to convince Wilde not to bring his lawsuit against Queensberry because “[y]ou are an artist and a revolutionary. If you lose you will make it harder for all writers in England.” The threat is not just to those with Wilde’s supposed predilections, but to artists and to Wilde’s lifelong work. Kaufman establishes this discourse on morality as the result of Wilde’s aesthetic, leaning heavily on Wilde’s philosophy rather than his poetry or his literature alone; it is by these larger philosophical statements that we may better understand Wilde’s character.

The Victorian age was misaligned with what Wilde considers the highest good; he informs us that “modern morality consists in accepting the standards of one’s age. I consider that for any man of culture to accept the standards of his age is the grossest immorality.” In this sense, Wilde protesting that he is not guilty of “indecency” isn’t strictly untrue by his own standards. Kaufman reinforces this with a monologue from George Bernard Shaw after Wilde’s not guilty plea during the first of the criminal trials:

Wilde could plead not guilty with perfect sincerity and indeed could not honestly put in any other plea. Guilty or not guilty is a question not of fact but of morals. The prisoner who pleads not guilty is not alleging that he did this or did not do that; he is affirming that what he did does not involve any guilt on his part. A man rightly accused of homosexuality is perfectly entitled to plead not guilty in the legal sense. He might admit that he was technically guilty of a breach of local law, and his own conscience might tell him that he was guilty of a sin against the moral law, but if he believes, as Wilde certainly did, that homosexuality is not a crime, he is perfectly entitled to say he is not guilty of it.

Wilde does not consider himself guilty or indecent, even if he may have had sexual relationships with men. Kaufman reframes the morality question in this way, belaboring the connection to

---

51 Ibid., 28.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 87.
54 Ibid., 84.
aesthetics, both to remind us that Wilde’s attitude is not ahistorical and to force us to reconsider Wilde’s character. We find in *Gross Indecency* not a man lying in order to avoid the consequences of his actions in an unfair society, but rather an artist and philosopher asserting the value of his work and his thinking. Wilde’s commitment to his belief in aestheticism, the pursuit and elevation of the beautiful and what beauty constitutes, holds firm even in the face of repudiation from Victorian legal framings of morality. Kaufman is engaging us here primarily in this intellectual exercise emphasize the importance of it for Wilde the man, who sees his desire for men as a part of his desire of the beautiful, the foundation of his aesthetics and his moral framing. In this way, Kaufman is inviting us to see Wilde’s desire for men as subsidiary to his aesthetics.

The implications and significance of that desire for the beautiful is made perfectly explicit with the opening of Act II, which begins not with continuing action of the trials or the narrators, but with an interview with Marvin Taylor, a Wilde scholar from New York University.\(^5\) Kaufman inserts himself as a character interviewing Taylor, who engages the audience in a conversation more directly about sex, sexuality, and Wilde’s aestheticism. Taylor repeats again and again that the truly pressing issue was not Wilde’s sexuality or sexual behavior: “[…] there is this real nexus of issues that are on trial with Oscar Wilde and they have to do with the role of art, with effeminacy, with homosexuality, with the Irish in England, with class. . . . So sodomy . . . that’s not the . . . major point of what’s going on.”\(^6\) This might be a surprise to an unsuspecting audience unfamiliar with historical and theoretical issues that

\(^5\) Marvin Taylor is, as Kaufman-the-character informs us, a scholar at New York University in real life, not a construction for the sake of the play. One gets the impression from the linguistic tics of the interlude that this is part of a transcription of a real interview Kaufman conducted with Taylor. “Marvin Taylor,” New York University, accessed March 30, 2018, http://library.nyu.edu/people/marvin-taylor/.

\(^6\) Kaufman, *Gross Indecency*, 75.
academics discuss extensively; Taylor here is echoing the Foucauldian theories about the emergence of sexuality as identity and the issues of discourse in the Victorian period established in *The History of Sexuality* and running throughout queer theory ever since. Taylor explains for an audience that Victorian society was trying to “fix homosexuality, to contain the disruption which Wilde presented, and this is a disruption of all kinds of things, of class, of gender, of hum sexuality, hum and they did that, very successfully. But of course by that point he had released these ideas into Western culture that you know . . . are still there.” Just in case the audience has not already caught on, Kaufman with this interruption to the narrative flow ensures that we are thinking about these larger frameworks and understanding Wilde’s desires are not only expressed differently than we might articulate today, but also that Wilde’s desires are not just for men, but for this fundamental idea of beauty that rattled the Victorians.

So what are those ideas Wilde “released into Western culture”? Taylor touches on them: “Oscar’s project was less about sodomy, I think, and more about art, about aestheticism.”

Kaufman’s Wilde in nearly his last words of the play describes himself as a man who stood in symbolic relation to the art and culture of my age. Few men hold such a position in their own lifetime and have it so acknowledged. […] I treated art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction. I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.

These last words nod to Wilde the supreme wit, but they do not merely reinforce that version of Wilde, nor the role as a martyr and monument to homosexuality that history has bequeathed Wilde. The “myth and legend around” Wilde are constructed, and while perhaps those shallower constructions were encouraged by Wilde himself, the greatest significance here is Wilde’s
contribution to philosophy and to art—the power he has held in Western culture. This is the central move Gross Indecency makes in order to re-imagine Wilde: the real interest for us is in Wilde’s work, his fundamental shift of those Western values, and not only as a memento of the suffering and trauma of queer life. Kaufman reframes Wilde as deeply attached to this intellectual work, work which governs his decisions and provides succor and joy to him even in his suffering. This bittersweet relationship between Wilde and his work drives Gross Indecency, and provides us with a model of a kind of desire for Wilde—a desire for the beautiful as a fundamentally significant pursuit—beyond Wilde’s attraction to and experiences with other men.

Silence, Not Shame

While much of the play is engaged in reconsideration of the significance of Wilde’s intellectual work which Kaufman wants to provoke, Kaufman does not dodge Wilde’s personal suffering, and we encounter as an audience several scenes of Wilde’s abjection. Kaufman employs it sparingly, however, for greater impact of that negative affect and to connect it with Wilde’s loss of control over the philosophical argument in the face of the moral condemnation from Victorian England. In the same token, the negative affect also comes most excruciatingly in moments during which Wilde is exhausted or taken aback, silenced by the burdens he bears; the negative feelings are reified by Wilde’s inability to talk back, to reframe his own supposed guilt and suffering into his aesthetic argument. While the negative affect is absolutely necessary in order to imagine Wilde accurately, Kaufman uses affect as another opportunity to explore other aspects of Wilde’s experience beyond his suffering alone.

Perhaps the most chilling moment comes at the close of Act I, upon the report of Wilde’s arrest. Queensberry is gloating over his success and the messages of support he is receiving, which he quotes to end the act: “Here’s a message: Every man in the city is with you. Kill the
Evocative not just of Wilde’s history but also of the violence done to queer people throughout history, this brutish message (to which Wilde makes no reply) raises the stakes significantly from a simple libel lawsuit to a potential lynching. “Every man in the city” cannot have the personal vendetta against Wilde that Queensberry has over the issue of his son’s association with Wilde; the purported majority of London are reacting to their understanding of Wilde’s depravity, his ‘indecent’ behavior, and as the papers have identified him, as leader of the aesthetes. That connection is reinforced by juxtaposition: the beginning of Act II does not take us back to the ‘action’ of the play, but rather the interview with Wilde scholar Marvin Taylor, who reiterates for us that the true issue of Wilde was perhaps less about sex and more about his contribution to the upheaval of Victorian values.

The nadir of Wilde’s personal misery is described near the beginning of Act II: Douglas, Wilde’s lover, details Wilde’s experience in jail after his arrest. This account begins with Douglas explaining the auctioning of Wilde’s possessions as it happens before us: “From affluence he passed suddenly to dire poverty at a time when money was needed for his defense. (The sound of the auction grows. Douglas is forced to raise his voice).” The description of Wilde’s misery in jail that follows is interspersed with the auctioning of Wilde’s possessions, with interruptions from an auctioneer and the general ruckus of a public auction.

Douglas: We were separated by a corridor about a yard in width and a warden passed up and down between us. (Shouting) We had to shout to make our voices heard above the voices of other prisoners and visitors. Nothing more revolting and cruel and deliberately malignant could be devised by human ingenuity. Poor Oscar was rather deaf. He could hardly hear what I said in this tower of Babel. He just looked at me with tears running down his cheeks and I looked at him.

---

60 Ibid., 72.
61 Ibid., 80.
62 Ibid., 80-81.
This is perhaps the most vulnerable version of Wilde we encounter—his injury to his hearing, sustained in prison, and his sorrow are far from the intellectual and dandy with whom we are so familiar. The ransacking and degradation of Wilde’s physical, cultivated aesthetics combines with the depraved conditions of the jail to paint a horrific picture, all the more cutting for our champion of the beautiful who we are forced to understand as mortal and hurting. Of note, however, is that Kaufman keeps it at a description, not a re-enactment of the events, where he could have chosen to show Wilde suffering these indignities and horrors on the stage. There is not the kind of emotional catharsis of seeing this happen to another man, and Kaufman is refusing to actually show Wilde in the deepest of doldrums. Instead, Wilde himself sits on stage silent and implacable until the end of Douglas’s revelations. His response? “The real tragedies in life occur in such an inartistic manner that they hurt us by their crude violence, their absolute incoherence, their absurd want of meaning.”63 This immediately reconnects Wilde’s experience of suffering to his aestheticism. “Real tragedies” are not such just because of the pain or grief they cause, not just because of the emotion or affect they elicit, but because they are “crude” and meaningless—because they are not beautiful. Kaufman’s Wilde is returning us not to a reflection on the day-to-day misery of his imprisonment, abjection and despair, but a milder regret, deciphered by its relation to the aestheticism which Wilde holds dear—pain in this circumstance in some sense is created by the deprivation of beauty, Wilde’s supreme desire. This tactic of description rather than depiction allows Kaufman to turn us towards a more measured feeling of bittersweetness, rather than the more undiluted negative affects that might be elicited by seeing the horrors Douglas relates.

63 Ibid., 81.
These moments of negative affect for Wilde quite frequently are not voiced by him at all, as with Douglas’s description of his misery in jail; Kaufman actually has Wilde silent at his most beleaguered. Act II leaves an audience in distress, ending on Wilde’s sentencing. After the judge announces a sentence of two years’ hard labor (observing that “this is the worst case I have ever tried,”) Wilde tries once more to engage: he asks “And I? May I say nothing, my lord?” The judge waves him away, and Wilde does not speak again—the last lines of the scene are the judge’s dismissal, and then we move to the Epilogue and Coda. Wilde the wordsmith, whose testimony is the center not only of the play but of the events it represents, is not allowed to speak, to respond in any way, and is dismissed casually. The Epilogue tells us of the last years of Wilde’s life, after prison, including the lives of Douglas and Queensberry; this last piece of the narrative, full of disappointments like the troubled relationship between Douglas and Wilde after his release, is related by the narrators, not Wilde. For Kaufman, Wilde’s most miserable are not just a matter of instances of negative affect—they are also moments in which he is deprived of his intellectualism, his control over the philosophical and moral argument.

During the first trial of Act I, Queensberry’s lawyer Clarke debates Wilde on the stand at great length—the scene lasts nearly thirty pages with only a few brief interruptions. Clarke’s interrogation heavily features Wilde’s work, as we have already explored, and attempts to get to the “truth” of Wilde by using Wilde’s statements about his work to prove his activities with men. This strongly recalls Foucault’s discussion of confession as a means of extracting sexual truth in The History of Sexuality: “It is no longer a question simply of saying what was done—the sexual act—and how it was done; but of reconstructing, in and around the act, the thoughts that

---

64 Ibid., 126.
65 Ibid., 127.
66 Ibid., 31-58.
Here, the thoughts, Wilde’s aestheticism and admiration of men in writing, are to prove the deeds. Indeed, Wilde’s questioning culminates in this very disclosure of pleasure, not just action: Wilde says that he hadn’t kissed a young man because “[h]e was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it.” Carson latches onto this with a pages-long questioning of whether the only reason Wilde did not kiss the man in question was because he was insufficiently pretty, not because he was a man. The tone of the questioning shifts significantly after this point, with dread at what might be called a misstep from Wilde on the stand endangering his case; but that change in tone might well remind us just how light-hearted the exchanges had been prior to this point. The questioning had allowed Wilde’s intellect and wit to shine, and even that ‘misstep’ is characterized by Wilde getting carried away with his own cleverness—one can practically hear the mild condescension that Carson would have suggested Wilde might have kissed someone so “peculiarly plain.” We might turn to Foucault again in his suggestion that “we have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it […]” Kaufman’s Wilde here has enjoyed some aspects of his questioning, to the point of becoming too comfortable in his answers. Wilde has revealed himself: his desires are driven by his pursuit and appreciation of beauty above all else. Even while this exchange with Carson results in trouble for Wilde in his legal case, it still has acted as a showcase of Wilde’s genius and of the nature of his attachments.

This enjoyment contrasts with the denouement of this interrogation, as after being badgered by Carson, Wilde is eventually reduced to silence on the stand. Wilde stutters

---

responses to Carson’s questions about why it was ugliness and not gender that prevented him from kissing a man; twice the stage directions read “(Wilde can’t find the words to continue).”

This silence, so uncharacteristic of Wilde, is a stark contrast to the repartee of just two pages earlier. Eventually, Wilde lashes out: “You sting me and insult me and try to unnerve me; and at times one says things flippantly when one ought to speak more seriously. I admit that.” After this feeble defense, Carson dismisses him from the stand, and Wilde’s attempt to salvage the situation by explicit denial of any “gross indecencies” is interrupted by Carson’s insistence he’s done with the witness. Wilde’s silence and loss of control is a turning point in the first trial, and not too long afterwards, Wilde is forced to withdraw the case. This moment is unsettling and carries a sense of dread, and Kaufman uses Wilde’s silence, his inability to massage the situation with his wit, to achieve those emotional tones.

At the close of the libel case, a quiet Wilde returns, refusing to speak and acknowledge the proceedings; the law requires that Queensberry’s “plea of justification has been proved,” condemning Wilde to a charge from the Crown in admitting that Queensberry had justification to accuse him of posing sodomy (at the very least). Afterwards, Wilde’s friends are strategizing what should be done, but all Wilde has to offer is “With what a crash this fell. I thought but to defend him from his father; I thought of nothing else and now . . .” and his friend Frank Harris informs us that “[t]hat was all he said.” In these moments of defeat, Wilde is laid low, not in emotion or affect alone, but also in his ability to articulate himself. This continues into Act II, most especially during the third trial. It commences with the announcement that with a new jury, they will have to go over the evidence all over again; the stage directions read “(Wilde reacts. He

71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 63.
73 Ibid., 70-71.
is exhausted, desperate.)” From there, Kaufman has Wilde speak mostly to the audience in interrupted and truncated snapshots, with a final outburst from Wilde regarding the proceedings. After this, the stage directions repeat “(Wilde is exhausted),” not long after which the trial ends. In every moment, then, in which Wilde’s legal troubles decisively worsen, he is not able to defend himself verbally – the end of the libel suit, his sentencing, the most miserable parts of the trials—just when Wilde’s facility with words are perhaps needed most. These moments of suffering for Wilde are affectively powerful not just because of these events, however, but because Kaufman communicates those negative feelings most effectively through Wilde’s silence. The scenes are not heartbreaking just because of the suffering they betoken, but because of the robbing of Wilde’s most prized possession: his ability to persuade through his intellect and his aesthetics.

The third trial is much shorter than the first two in Gross Indecency, serves an opportunity for Kaufman to present us with Wilde negotiating his own feelings about his aestheticism in light of the suffering he has undergone. “I must say to myself that I ruined myself,” he remarks, for he had “let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease.” Wilde’s regret, rather than devolving into grief or pity, builds into anger. He blames himself, calls himself “weary,” and tells us that “reason cannot help me,” because of he knows the legal framework under which he is being made to suffer is “wrong and unjust.” Wilde switches from this resigned acceptance to something else entirely: “The world is growing more tolerant. One day you will be ashamed of your treatment of me.” An actor could choose

74 Ibid., 119.
75 Ibid., 122.
76 Ibid., 120.
77 Ibid., 121.
78 Ibid., 122.
exhaustion or anger reasonably for these chastisements, but Wilde’s next lines perhaps require a certain measure of both: “I feel inclined to stretch out my hands and cry to them: Do what you will with me, in God’s name, only do it quickly. Can you not see I’m worn out? If hatred gives you pleasure, indulge it.”79 This is followed by another stage direction of “(Silence)” and switches immediately to a factual question from Lockwood and monosyllabic answers from Wilde.

What are audiences to make of such an outburst? Instead of silence, is Wilde at his worst when he denies his past acts and his own defense? Are we to read this as a repudiation of Wilde’s aestheticism—that Wilde regrets the actions and the feelings that have brought him to this point and that his philosophy can endorse any kind of pleasure, even the ugly kinds? Hatred surely is ugly, and the witch-hunt we have seen over the course of the play is just as distasteful. But something as ugly as hatred, while perhaps pleasurable for Wilde’s tormentors, is certainly not beautiful, and it is the strive towards beauty, not pleasure, that is the core of Wilde’s aestheticism, although those concepts often overlap. Kaufman does not have Wilde decry aestheticism, denounce the pursuit of beauty, but rather Wilde here voices regret at his distraction by “pleasure where it pleased me.”80 Those pleasures were of the moment rather than aligned with the nobler goals of beauty; seeing “those people coming into the box one after the other to witness against me makes me sick,” says Wilde, between reminders of the men who claimed to have had liaisons with him.81 Wilde here is not repudiating aestheticism but hedonism and overindulgence. This is the lone scene of regret in the play—Kaufman does not show us an apologetic or self-flagellant Wilde. Instead, this moment of self-chastisement turns into just as

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid., 120.
81 Ibid., 121.
much a criticism of others as it is of Wilde himself: others are engaging in shame and hatred, not Wilde, and that is one of Wilde’s final pronouncements. Kaufman shows us that Wilde’s response to an invitation, an insistence of shame is instead a recapitulation, a crystallization of his aesthetics and his devotion to it. The negative affect in this moment, one of the last contributions to the trials from Wilde, not only allows us a deeper understanding of Wilde’s aestheticism, it provides us with another layer in our conceptualization of Wilde and his feelings. Moreover, it turns the emotional tables to others involved in the events leading to that moment, inviting us to consider the affective roles of those surrounding Wilde.

**Resisting Expectations**

Kaufman’s careful use of affect allows him to expand past an audience’s expectations of what kind of man they will encounter in Wilde. Kaufman himself mentions this at the beginning of his introduction to the play:

> Three years ago a friend gave me a book entitled *The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde*, which contained a collection of his epigrams and witticisms. It was amusing and clever and presented a biting satire of Victorian mores—the sort of thing I had come to expect from Oscar Wilde. The last ten pages of the book, however, were transcripts of Wilde’s trials. In these pages I found a fascinating event: an artist being asked to justify his art in a court of law! Wilde’s responses about the nature and purpose of art surprised me.\(^{82}\)

Kaufman himself had expected Wilde the wit and was taken aback to find Wilde’s intellect encompassing much more than the witticisms he has been made famous for. *Gross Indecency* as an attempt to broaden the characterization of Wilde to resist reduction to either martyr or dandy is at the heart of the play, and that ambition is explicitly hinted at in the play during one of Carson’s cross-examinations of Wilde. As throughout, Carson uses one of Wilde’s aphorisms to trip him up on the stand, after Wilde tries to dodge the accusation that his writing and its veiled homosexuality reflects his actual behavior:

---

\(^{82}\) Ibid., xiii.
Carson: “If one tells the truth, one is sure, sooner or later, to be found out.”
Wilde: That is a pleasing paradox, but I do not set very high store on it as an axiom.83

By distinguishing between a paradox, often the fodder of Wilde’s infamous witticisms, and an axiom, “a maxim, rule, law,”84 Kaufman’s Wilde separates himself and his convictions from the playful persona he has developed publicly. That persona, while part of Oscar Wilde, is just one part, and Kaufman does not want us to continue to engage with Wilde on these terms alone. Instead, Kaufman introduces varied emotional elements, in addition to the focus on Wilde’s aestheticism and care with affect already discussed, in order to enrich our understanding of Wilde’s emotional realities. These diverse emotions, from playfulness to desolation, build an overall tenor of bittersweetness: these affects are inextricably entwined, joined together by Wilde’s experiences, and we are required to access these emotions, felt in an emotional concurrence.

It should not be considered a coincidence, then, that while Gross Indecency contains a few of Wilde’s best one-liners, they are at the service of Kaufman’s much larger project: the aestheticism he was so struck by. Often those witticisms are put to use to help maintain a balance with negative affect. For example, in Act I, Wilde’s lawyer Clarke asks him during the first trial to give his word against the charges “as an Englishman,” which Wilde does; one of our narrators interjects “The thing that Clarke overlooked is that Wilde was an Irishman.”85 Likewise, during a reading of some of Wilde’s work as part of the first trial, a narrator quotes The Pall Mall Gazette: “The Picture of Dorian Gray ought to be chucked into the fire.” Wilde retorts that “[t]o say that such a book as mine ought to be chucked into the fire is silly. That’s what one does with

83 Ibid., 39.
85 Kaufman, Gross Indecency, 51.
newspapers.” Both examples interrupt moments of tight tension in the play, allowing Kaufman to lighten the mood and redirect an audience’s frayed nerves.

However, Kaufman introduces us to another Wilde, beyond the wit, the dandy, or the effeminate, in contrast with Queensberry. In an early scene in the play recounting the escalation of the conflict with his lover’s father, Wilde responds to a threat of violence from Queensberry with “I do not know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot at sight.” This is of course referencing Queensberry’s only other claim to fame, a code of boxing rules, which Kaufman makes mention of briefly early on in the play while introducing Queensberry; these rules were the first to require gloves, and are generally considered ‘gentlemen’s rules.’ This exchange introduces a more active and aggressive Wilde than most depictions of him, especially with the nod to the more civilized and less violent version of what was at the time considered a sport for the upperclass. This moment subvert an audience’s preexisting expectations of the flamboyant pronouncer—it may be Queensberry who starts the conflict, but Wilde is going to end it, with a threat of physical violence. Similarly, Wilde’s first words in the play are “I am the prosecutor in this case,” putting Wilde in a position of power and control, not a hapless victim. These moments allow Kaufman to cue an audience that the Wilde they think they know is not the Wilde they are about to get to know.

The dynamic with Queensberry continues with this project throughout the play, as Kaufman reframes the blame for the trials away from Wilde, to explore other dynamics that fueled the situation. Queensberry is, of course, the central figure for this reconceptualization.

---

86 Ibid., 43.
87 Ibid., 22.
88 Ibid., 13.
90 Kaufman, Gross Indecency, 15.
Right after the comment about boxing, Queensberry tells Wilde that “it is a disgusting scandal,” but Wilde fires back that “if it be so, then you are the author of the scandal, and nobody else.”

It is Queensberry’s aggression and fixation on a public confrontation that takes center stage, and Kaufman once again utilizes the historical approach to reinforce this characterization. Wilde and his lawyer Clarke tell the court that Queensberry had shown up with a boxer to cause a scene at the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a huge threat to the success of the production. In fact, Queensberry had done something similar to another play, not written by Wilde, about religion, and “the Marquess got up from his seat and began shouting at the actor on stage.” These aggressions paint Queensberry not as an aggrieved and concerned parent acting in the interests of his son and the public, but a raging inciter with no public decency, fixated on an agenda of moralistic remonstrances. In a way, Queensberry is the dramatist, not Wilde, attempting to create a spectacle and establish a narrative about Wilde’s public indiscretions when Queensberry’s are of much more public note. Kaufman’s use of this contrast gives an impression of a Queensberry out of control and a Wilde responding with restraint and conservatively—not the reactive dandy.

The issue of Queensberry’s family loyalty is further put to question and develops a much more intimate picture of the personal dynamics leading to Wilde’s trials. Douglas refutes Queensberry’s claim to care for his son: “My mother divorced him; he harassed her for years and by turns neglected and ill treated us.” This sentiment is echoed by George Bernard Shaw: “His pretended solicitude for his son and his alleged desire to save him were nothing but a hypocritical pretense. […] His real objective was to ruin his son and to finally break the heart of

---

91 Ibid., 22.
92 Ibid., 24-25.
93 Ibid., 23.
his ex-wife.”94 The conflicting accounts for Queensberry’s motivation displace some of the blame for the situation onto not just Queensberry, but also Douglas. Queensberry had threatened both Wilde and his son to end their relationship; Kaufman shows us Wilde willing to do so for Douglas “if it would make peace between him and his father; but he preferred to do otherwise.” Douglas wears this as a brand, appearing publicly with Wilde and taunting his father with it,95 and not long afterwards, Kaufman shows us an account of Douglas manipulating Wilde into continuing with the trial, despite his friends’ counsel.96 Wilde’s reactions to Douglas in the play are mixed, by turns voicing protestations of love and devotion and bitter accusations. Kaufman offers us a possible explanation from Wilde as to why he and his lawyers would not allow Douglas to testify in the first trial:

> It would have been impossible for me to have proved my case without putting Lord Alfred Douglas in the witness box against his father. Lord Alfred was extremely anxious to go in the box but I would not let him do so. Rather than place him in so painful a position, I determined to retire from the case […].97

In the Epilogue, however, “the actor playing Lord Alfred Douglas” informs us that Wilde in jail wrote “The Ballad of the Reading Gaol,” which contains the line “for each man kills the things he loves.” Lord Alfred Douglas asked him what he meant by this and Wilde said, “You ought to know.”98 Kaufman’s development of the relationships between Wilde and Douglas as well as Queensberry make the conflict more personal, but they also work to portray Wilde much more dimensionally. Queensberry is villainized, to be sure, but Wilde gets caught up in a larger family feud, through a love affair with Douglas that is not wholly romanticized. Wilde here is noble, trying to protect Douglas, and suffers for these other interpersonal dynamics outside of his

---

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 19.
96 Ibid., 29.
97 Ibid., 69.
98 Ibid., 130-131.
control. This is a different casting of Wilde, and Kaufman’s deployment of it muddies the water of the martyr Wilde with the much more mundane conflicts of domestic unrest.

The Coda, the last part of the play, is a final refusal of a stereotyped Wilde and another instance of Kaufman using negative affect while allowing other traits equal weight. The coda is composed of narrators reading an abridgement of Wilde’s prose poem “The House of Judgment.” In the poem, Man comes before God for final judgment, and God charges Man with sins, most belaboring idols of flesh and lust, to which Man admits briefly without reservation.

Narrator 5: And God closed the Book of the Life of the Man, and said:
Narrator 8: Surely I will send thee into Hell. Even into Hell will I send thee.
Narrator 5: And the Man cried out:
Narrator 1: Thou canst not.
Narrator 5: And God said to the Man:
Narrator 2: Wherefore can I not send thee to Hell, and for what reason?
Narrator 1: Because in Hell I have always lived,
Narrator 5: Answered the Man.
   And there was silence in the House of Judgment.
   And after a space God spake, and said to the Man:
Narrator 7: Then surely I will send thee unto Heaven. Even unto Heaven will I send thee.
Narrator 5: And the Man cried out:
Narrator 1: Thou canst not.
Narrator 5: And God said to the Man:
Narrator 6: Wherefore can I not send thee unto Heaven, and for what reason?
Narrator 1: Because never, and in no place, have I been able to imagine it,
Narrator 5: Answered the Man.
   And there was silence in the House of Judgment.99

Thus ends the play. The poem is difficult, of course, and certainly contains plenty of trauma: the Man “cries out,” has always lived in Hell, could never imagine Heaven. These elements are strong and certainly uncomfortable for any audience. But these sentiments are also just that—

99 Ibid., 132-134. Please note that Kaufman has not abridged this portion of the poem; the cuts are to the early sections of the poem during which God lists the sins of Man, not quoted here. For a comparison with the original, I consulted Oscar Wilde, "POEMS IN PROSE." The Bibelot, a Reprint of Poetry and Prose for Book Lovers, Chosen in Part from Scarce Editions and Sources Not Generally Known (1895-1925) 10 (1904): 165. https://search.proquest.com/docview/124540269?accountid=26417.
uncomfortable. They are uncomfortable for an audience, but they are also uncomfortable within the poem for God, who can make no reply to Man’s charge that he has always lived in Hell, who has no rejoinder for Man’s confession that he has never been able to picture Heaven. The confrontation between Man and God is bold, with Man unwavering and unintimidated, rather than crying for pity, begging for relief, protesting or denying, or even minimizing the emotional magnitude with more of Wilde’s infamous quippery. Man accepts the charges against him, refusing to make excuses or even be shamed for his behavior. Oscar Wilde may have been put on trial for being a dandy, an aesthete, a lover of men, but there is no apology or shame to be found here. The poem has a certain quality of grace under pressure, a refusal to bow or retreat, even before God. Instead, Man commands God, despite his misery—and God makes no protest, no defense—God is silent. Man (and thus Wilde) is more resilient than miserable, and he must be reckoned with. This final moment caps Kaufman’s attempt to show us a Wilde whose losses were real and significant but whom we may imagine outside of that suffering—and Kaufman does it, once more, through Wilde’s own work.

Likewise, Wilde’s turmoil about what to do after the first trial but before he’s been arrested and charged become about not his sexuality alone, but his family’s personal expectations. Wilde’s family are shown. His brother “Willie (drunk): You are an Irishman. You must stay and face the music.” His mother supposedly said that “if you stay, no matter what happens, you will always be my son. If you leave, I shall never talk to you again.” This pressure from his family to stay and face the charges contrasts with what we hear from his wife, who tells him to go.100 These conflicting pressures remind us that Wilde’s decision here is influenced by more than one factor, his sexuality and the public scrutiny regarding it that he was facing;

100 Kaufman, Gross Indecency, 116.
Wilde’s story is also about the complex personal relationships any real, dimensional person has. This complicated characterization is reified by Wilde’s option to leave not just before his arrest, but while he was free between trials on bail. A narrator introduces a letter Wilde wrote to Douglas during this time: “I have decided that it is nobler and more beautiful to stay. We cannot be together. I do not want to be called a coward or a deserter. A false name, a disguise, a hunted life, all that is not for me.”\textsuperscript{101} Kaufman is not only again reminding us of the control and power that Wilde had (the very real ability to leave England before an arrest) but also redirects our attention to Wilde’s reasoning being tied to issues outside of sexuality—namely, his aestheticism. That it is “more beautiful to stay” is a commitment to Wilde’s aesthetics and art as a way of life, a reality beyond simple philosophizing, prioritized over the very real option to leave England, which all of Wilde’s friends counseled him to do. Aestheticism as the clinching factor in Wilde’s decision here, this point of no return, is central to \textit{Gross Indecency}’s understanding of Wilde, which embraces a broader framework than his suffering and misery alone. This framework combines a historical contextualization with Wilde’s work as a writer, poet, and philosopher to showcase a different Wilde than popular culture and memory has crafted.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 116.
CHAPTER II: TOM STOPPARD’S THE INVENTION OF LOVE

“You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented
in the history of the world, but then you read.” – James Baldwin¹⁰²

While not as ubiquitous on required reading lists as Oscar Wilde, his contemporary A.E. Housman’s place in Western canon is solidified by his contributions of his own original poetry and his translation of Latin poetry. His original work, most especially his first (and major) publication A Shropshire Lad, is pastoral, utilizing images of quintessentially English countryside; Housman is also a giant among classicists, both for his translations (of Juvenal, Ovid, Horace, Tacitus, Propertius, among others) as well as his blistering responses to his peers’ work. In 2017, The New Yorker published an article titled “How A.E. Housman Invented Englishness” by Charles McGrath, who muses on the popularity of Housman’s poetry among his countrymen, from soldiers to critics. Housman’s poetry is known for both its sweetness and sentimentality as well as sorrow. The article characterizes Housman as “shy and furtive,” “amusing,” “rude,” “know-it-all,” “repressed,” and “melancholic” by turns. McGrath also relates an anecdote of the prickly Housman: “Willa Cather, who so admired his poetry that she made a pilgrimage to meet its author, found him ‘gaunt and gray, and embittered.’ The whole encounter, she said, gave her ‘a fit of dark depression.’”¹⁰³ McGrath expounds upon a central question: “How to square these two, the poet and the pedant, has preoccupied commentators for decades.”¹⁰⁴

Twenty years earlier, Tom Stoppard had premiered his play The Invention of Love, which McGrath himself mentions briefly but characterizes as focusing on Stoppard mostly as a

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.
“formidable classicist.”105 One can understand why McGrath might view the play this way, with its frequent page-long monologues dedicated to the nuances of translation and ancient history. The play walks us through Housman’s life rather circuitously, with little mind for chronology, and with two A.E. Housmans on stage: AEH, aged and recalling his life after death, and Housman, the vibrant young man. And vibrant he certainly is, in his own way—the play is grounded in Housman’s romantic attachment to his very best, very straight college friend Moses Jackson, to whom he was devoted until his death. The first act of the play recounts their years at Oxford together (with plenty of intellectual detours along the way) and the second act covers (roughly, ambiguously) their first ten years out of school. Those detours and ambiguities we can lay mostly at the feet of a revolving door of historical figures—other academics, journalists, a politician—who contextualize Housman’s world for an audience unfamiliar with the intellectual and social landscape of Housman’s Victorian England (including, significantly, much discussion about and a long-delayed appearance of Oscar Wilde).

While Stoppard’s play does indeed trade heavily in the academic and in Housman’s translation work, it is through that work that Stoppard reveals to us a deeply feeling man. Instead of Housman’s academics as incidental or a barrier to our understanding of his emotional depths, Stoppard’s Housman is a man for whom those academics were an expression of feeling. Stoppard utilizes the many lengthy academic monologues for Housman and AEH as ways into the personal, the emotional component of the passionate poet. By doing so, Stoppard argues for the close connection of Housman’s work to his personal experience, specifically his queerness. The ancient texts we are about to encounter through Housman’s scholarly pursuits are love poems—the progenitors of love poetry, the titular invention of love. That poetry, however, is

105 Ibid.
queer, and Housman’s dedication to it, rather than merely a matter of the grammar and pedantry, is fueled by his affinity for its touching and inspiring emotion. It is this poetry that gives him succor through his personal disappointments, which Stoppard implores us to look at and past, in order to see Housman’s own attachment to that work—an attachment that rivals his lifelong unrequited feelings for his college friend. That work in revealing queerness littered throughout ancient poetry creates a conversation about virtue, allowing Stoppard to include a reframing of Victorian morality, given its obsession with Greek and Roman literature which Housman insists must be reconsidered in this queer sense. That discourse is furthered with the inclusion of Oscar Wilde in the play and Housman’s reactions to Wilde’s losses are yet another avenue of Stoppard’s exploration of Housman’s complex emotional reality. The story of A.E. Housman could easily have focused on personal losses and negative affect but instead Stoppard has expanded our emotional horizons and written us a love letter to Housman, to queerness, and to love itself.

**Feeling Scholarly, Scholarly Feeling**

Stoppard addresses head-on the tension of Housman’s legacy and characterization as removed and awkward academic. The play opens with AEH, older and recently deceased, meeting the Charon of Greco-Roman myth, who is collecting AEH for his boat trip across the river Styx to the afterlife. After an initial greeting, the conversation turns toward the issue at hand:

AEH: […] Are we waiting for someone?
Charon: He’s late. I hope nothing’s happened to him. […]
AEH: […] Doubly late. Are you sure?
Charon: A poet and a scholar is what I was told.
AEH: I think that must be me.
Charon: Both of them?
AEH: I’m afraid so.
Charon: It sounded like two different people.
AEH: I know.
Charon: Give him a minute.
AEH: To collect myself. […]\textsuperscript{106}

Although alleviated by the wry humor characteristic of Stoppard’s writing, the comment is not merely a joke. Housman has already introduced himself as a professor, and if it “sounded like two different people,” then Charon seems to be awaiting a poet—perhaps someone to meet his and the audience’s expectations of someone more passionate or charismatic. But A.E. Housman is not that man, and this tension lasts throughout the play. The more jaded AEH interacts with young Housman; those interactions primarily concern scholarship and translation but constantly divert to the nature of virtue, love, and poetry. The identity of the ‘real’ A.E. Housman is resolved by Stoppard’s fundamental characterization of him as inherently, incontrovertibly, both poet and academic.

In a very straightforward way we can see the academic as poetic with the subject not only of Housman’s work, but the title of Stoppard’s play. Very early on, Housman’s friends Jackson and Pollard (a fellow Classics student) are discussing ancient love poetry, and Jackson asks what happened to Catullus and Lesbia (of the famed “Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love”); Pollard tells him how they both died young, but that “by that time Catullus had invented the love poem.” Jackson, aghast, wants Housman to confirm, but Pollard cuts in:

You don’t have to ask him. Like everything else, like clocks and trousers and algebra, the love poem had to be invented. After millennia of sex and centuries of poetry, the love poem as understood by Shakespeare and Donne, and by Oxford undergraduates—the true-life confessions of the poet in love, immortalizing the mistress, who is actually the cause of the poem—that was invented in Rome in the first century before Christ.\textsuperscript{107}

This distinction creates significance and context for an audience: we don’t care about these poems just because we have a duty to care about the classics, but because there is something

\textsuperscript{106} Tom Stoppard, \textit{The Invention of Love} (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 1-2.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 13.
different and compelling about these works, in ways that have substantially altered how we understand not just poetry, but love. It is also significant that Pollard confirms the import of this poetry, rather than Housman or AEH offering that confirmation. We are first introduced to this concept from a straight relationship (Catullus and Lesbia) and a straight man (Pollard). This allows Stoppard to assert that the invention of love in this sense is undeniable, even perfectly acceptable for scholars. In an exchange later between Housman and AEH, the younger man speaks of “Catullus – he’s madly in love with Lesbia, and in between – well, the least of it is stealing kisses from – frankly – a boy who’d still be in the junior dorm […]"108 Catullus, inventing what we understand as the love poem, writes not just to women, but to men as well. Stoppard by insisting on this historical understanding turns the academic debates Housman and AEH engage in from dusty and pedantic exercises of disconnected erudition to crucial revelations of not only powerful emotions, but of queerness and a place for queerness in history.

This adoration of translation and poetry is both fulfillment and frustration for Housman. The engagement with affect we can see throughout—Stoppard is negotiating what he repeats over and over again as the invention of love while exploring a man whose lifelong love was never realized, physically or otherwise. This is bittersweetness at its height, I might argue, and Stoppard I think agrees with me: he constructs multiple scenes in which Jackson asks Housman to utilize his beloved poetry to help Jackson woo women. One of these scenes, just before Pollard’s explanation of the invention of love, best encapsulates the bittersweet character of these exchanges for Housman:

Pollard: Oh, in English. Come on, Housman. ‘Let us live, my Lesbia, and let us love, and value at one penny the murmurs of disapproving old men…’
Housman: And not give tuppence for the mutterence of old men’s tut-tutterence.’

108 Ibid., 41.
Pollard: He’s such a show-off.\textsuperscript{109}

Even while Jackson listens on for lines to use with girls, surely a difficult reality for Housman, Stoppard shows us perhaps the cleverest of wordplay in the text, outright acknowledging its intelligence. This exchange for Housman provides its own pleasures, even while his inability to engage romantically with Jackson is being dangled in front of his face. Housman finds his satisfaction in his translation, and these complex and competing affects ultimately produce a sense of bittersweetness for Housman throughout Stoppard’s depiction.

Translation scholarship and its politics and pitfalls permeate the entire play, but these issues are more than merely academic questions—Stoppard explores them with us through (mis)translations of classic Latin texts whose queer content has been bowdlerized. Sometimes the corruptions of texts are due to innocuous mistakes from copyists or accidents of history; Stoppard has Jowett explain in a brief lecture to Housman that “[…] mildew and rats and fire and flood and Christian disapproval to the brink of extinction as what Catullus really wrote” has left scholars with the job of trying to cobble together proper translations, which will always be lacking in some way.\textsuperscript{110} However, Stoppard emphasizes for us that often the cause of the mistranslations is more sinister—Housman refers to a translation of Tibullus in which “the he loved by the poet is turned into a she: and then when you come to the bit where this ‘she’ goes off with somebody’s wife, the translator is equal to the crisis – he leaves it out.”\textsuperscript{111} This censorship, the runaway, negligent, intentional meddling with the texts to the detriment of the queer relationships in ancient poetry is central to the academic debates Housman and AEH engage in. Benjamin Jowett, one of the professors of Classics at Oxford, informs young

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 12.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 40.
Housman that he is “to take the ancient authors as they come from a reputable English printer, […]” alterations and all,\textsuperscript{112} and Mark Pattison, another older but contemporary intellectual, warns Housman in his first days at Oxford that “a genuine love of learning is one of the two delinquencies which cause blindness and lead a young man to ruin.”\textsuperscript{113} While this causes a giggle, Stoppard reinforces the notion that through intense and dedicated scholarship, A.E. Housman has inevitably uncovered the queer nature of this ancient poetry; its authors are figures revered to the point of being saved from themselves and their immoralities by more squeamish translators. “Love will not be deflected from its mischief by being called comradeship or anything else,” AEH warns the young Housman.\textsuperscript{114} By embracing A.E. Housman’s brutal honesty in his translations, Stoppard is also engaging us in a recovery of queer love in the Roman and Greek poetry Housman was so attached to—and that attachment is both intellectual and personal. For Stoppard, A.E. Housman, younger or older, is not a stuffy pedant lecturing over insignificant quibbles and dusty distant tomes; this man is lively, sensitive, earnest in his affections. Stoppard wants us to imagine how those affections might be not only expressed but also directed towards that work itself.

That personal connection for Housman is on display most clinchingly in a tour-de-force monologue from AEH that closes Act I. Possibly the longest monologue in the play at two full pages, AEH goes through an example of a translation of a passage from Book Four of Horace. Stoppard has AEH walk through in detail the first two lines, giving the audience a taste of Housman’s agility with the Latin—whether or not one has Latin, AEH’s facility with it is breathtaking, as is his vehemence. The trouble (or rather, trick) with Latin, especially Latin

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 43.
poetry, is that it puts very little stock in word order, and meaning is determined by endings, declined and conjugated suffixes—but disagreements are common among translators about what root word is proper, as endings overlap across organizing categories (parts of speech, declensions, etc); there is also often no straightforward way of determining which clauses go together, since physical juxtaposition is often used for emphasis, irony, or other poetic and emotional goals; the strict subject-verb-object of English is rarely to be found in Latin.115 In the excerpt AEH scrutinizes, the Latin reads “Intermissa, Venus, diu / rursus bella moves? Parce precor, precor!” AEH kicks us off with a chiding of a Mr. Fry, another scholar, who “was determined that bella is the adjective and very likely to mean beautiful, and that as eggs go with bacon it goes with Venus.”116 But that arrangement gives us “Beautiful Venus having been interrupted do you move again?” and AEH cannot abide such nonsense: “It’s war, Mr Fry!, and so is bella. Venus do you move war?”117 So here, “bella” could be the adjective “beautiful” or the noun “war”; Housman translated it the latter, and Stoppard cleverly uses the word to double as an admonishment to Fry, AEH’s interlocutor. AEH continues in this mode, an impassioned tirade of the scholarly missteps with the passage, but does pause to explain to us that “[t]en years after announcing in Book Three that he was giving up love, the poet feels desire stirring once more and begs for mercy: ‘Venus, are you calling me to arms again after this long time of truce? Spare me, I beg you, I beg you!’” AEH’s translation is in some senses looser—AEH lists for us the more literal “move me to war,” which he dismisses in favor of the more liberal but perhaps more poetical “calling me to arms”—but his justification for his improvement over Fry’s much

115 Stoppard does not adequately explain this problem for his audience, and while this passage is the clearest example of the tribulations of translation, it does not straightforwardly address these nuances. Instead, it is a whirlwind even for those of us with a Latin background and reading the text; one can only imagine an audience unfamiliar with Latin trying to keep up hearing it on stage.
116 Stoppard, The Invention of Love, 47.
117 Ibid., 48.
different version is compelling, contextualizing it within Horace’s work as a whole, from Book Three to Four. Lest we get too caught up or confused by this show of intellectual strength, however, Stoppard has AEH continue with the rest of the passage, culminating in:

I take no pleasure in woman or boy, nor the trusting hope of love returned, nor matching drink for drink, nor binding fresh-cut flowers around my brow – *but* – *sed* – *cur heu, Ligurine, cur* – why, Ligurinus, alas why this unaccustomed tear trickling down my cheek? – why does my glib tongue stumble to silence as I speak? At night I hold you fast in my dreams, I run after you across the Field of Mars, I follow you into the tumbling waters, and you show no pity.\(^{118}\)

Stoppard all but ceases the interruptions of scholarly counterarguments that AEH presented earlier in his deconstruction of the lines about Venus; there are not more asides to unembodied interlocutors, no alternative options for grammar arrangements or exploration of phrasing. The monologue and the act end here, with an accelerated and uninterrupted translation—an outpouring of feeling. This passage, from Horace to Ligurinus, from one man to another, is also beautifully mirroring the unrequited love of Housman for Jackson; Housman, who could not attain Jackson as a romantic partner, who pursued him on the “Field of Mars,” Mars, the god of war, but in this case, Venus has called us to war, to love—this, then, is a supreme expression of mourning for unattainable love. Stoppard combines it with AEH’s scholarly disposition, but Stoppard employs this moment of negative affect, perhaps the most wrenching in the play, to cement for us the connection between Housman the poet and the scholar. That field of war and love, which AEH connects not just to romantic but also scholarly conquests, we are witnessing AEH engage in through that astonishing show of translation—the confusion an audience experiences in listening may well be alienating, as witnessing an intimate moment between lovers might be. AEH’s bella is a war of both wooing and of translation and culminates in a stunningly emotional entreaty. Stoppard has created a scene that impresses us with AEH’s

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 49.
abilities which express his attachment to that work, his devotion and love not just as a means of addressing the object of his affections, but in itself an object of affection.

In case that emotional connection slipped past an audience, however, Stoppard goes a step further with his stage directions, to make the connection between Jackson, the object of Housman’s affections, to Ligurinus and Housman’s emotional outpouring. Right before AEH goes for the jugular, addressing Ligurinus directly, Stoppard directs “Jackson is seen as a runner running towards us from the dark, getting no closer.” Perhaps the audience can already form a connection between Jackson, whom we already know to be a sportsman, “a runner first and foremost,” running before us, and Ligurinus, metaphorically being chased by Horace. In a drive by comment a few pages earlier, Housman had mentioned that “Horace is in tears over some athlete, running after him in his dreams, across the Field of Mars and into the rolling waves of the Tiber!” In Act II, Pollard refers to Jackson as Ligurinus while he and Housman watch Jackson at a race, when questioned by Housman, Pollard remarks, “[w]asn’t it Ligurinus? – running over the Campus Martius?” This turns the metaphorical running to literal racing—the Latin “campus” was the word for exercise fields, especially the Campus Martius, outside of Rome. This is the second opportunity Stoppard uses to portray Jackson’s running as a connection to Ligurinus. Those stage directions are almost the same word-for-word much earlier in Act I, while Walter Pater, another older classicist, is in the midst of a monologue of the need “to garner not the fruits of experience but experience itself? – to catch at the exquisite passion, the strange flower, or art – or the face of one’s friend?”

119 Ibid., 6.
120 Ibid., 41.
121 Ibid., 66.
122 Ibid., 69.
124 Stoppard, The Invention of Love, 19.
of that line, as Pater endorses an aesthetic way of life, the seizing of the moment in pursuit of
beauty and passion—something Housman did not put into practice. However, Stoppard’s
drawing the connection between Ligurinus and Jackson allows Housman an avenue for his
declaration of feelings within the context of his intellectual pursuits.

This comparison is not superficial or cursory; it creates an opportunity for Housman,
AEH, and Stoppard to work through the relationship between Housman’s attraction for Jackson
and how that romantic bond allows Housman to communicate those romantic feelings. At first,
we may be forgiven for thinking that Housman is so caught up in the technicalities of Latin that
he misses the emotional content of what he translates, as we see early in the play:

Housman: Basium is a point of interest. A kiss was always osculum until Catullus.
Pollard: Now, Hous, concentrate – is that the point of interest in the kiss?
Housman: Yes.125

The shift between nouns for kiss, the linguistic history lesson, is young Housman’s fixation; we
are meant to be in on Pollard’s teasing that the “point of interest” is the kissing, not the words by
which we name it. But in the conversation between AEH and Housman which culminates in the
end of Act I and AEH’s explosive monologue above, AEH has been engaging Housman in a
discussion of the Latin poets he knows Housman will go on to translate, treating the exchange
like a Latin tutorial session, with grammar and translations back and forth between them;
Housman, meanwhile, is in raptures over the poetry and the possibilities yet before him. AEH is
brought up short by the emotional turn Housman takes after bringing up the issue of Ligurinus
and in turn Catullus’s homoerotic poems:

AEH: Catullus 99 — vester for tuus is the point of interest there.
Housman: No, it isn’t!
AEH: I’m sorry.

125 Ibid., 13.
Housman: The point of interest is — what is virtue?, what is the good and the beautiful really and truly? 126

AEH wants to distinguish the pronoun “your,” the singular tuus or the plural vester. 127 While AEH is preoccupied with this grammatical question, which would arguably change the direction of the translation, Housman is concerned with Catullus’s meaning. This exchange turns into a discussion of virtue and homoerotic love. The cause for that connection—virtue, queer love, and this particular Catullus poem—Stoppard sneakily explains with the reappearance of the same poem, indeed the same line, in Act II. Jackson is, as he does several times throughout the play, asking his friend Housman for suggestions of poetry to send to the girl he’s seeing. This time, Jackson wants something a little chiding after being refused a date:

Housman: Oh, well!—”If that’s the price for kisses due, it’s the last kiss I steal from you”—written to a boy, but never mind—interesting poem, by the way: vester for tuus—

Jackson: She thinks you’re sweet on me.

Housman: —plural for singular, the first use. What? 128

The “point of interest” from the confrontation between AEH and Housman we now know is a site of queerness in the poetry, and now in the play as well. Housman is able to communicate queer sentiments to Jackson, camouflaged in his position of facilitating Jackson’s own wooing. Even just before this reference to Catullus, Housman offers another piece of poetry, translating to “[f]ive years your faithful slave.” Jackson responds “[e]xactly. Two weeks anyway.” Perhaps Jackson has only been seeing this girl for two weeks, but it is Housman who has known him at this point for roughly five years. 129 These exchanges are invitations for Housman to express his

126 Ibid., 41.
127 This does not get thoroughly thrashed out in the play, as the difference between the two words is not actually explained. The importance then becomes the cue of these keywords, vester and tuus; Stoppard is for once less interested in the nuance of the Latin and more concerned with how we might use that nuance as a way to connect with these characters.
128 Stoppard, The Invention of Love, 74.
129 Ibid., 74.
affections for Jackson in code under the cover of heterosexuality, rather than Housman’s academics serving as a barrier or hideaway from his emotional reality. Stoppard shows us how those scholarly pursuits enable Housman’s communication of his queer feelings—the Latin has become Housman’s love language.

It is the development of that love language that is the focus of the work of affect for Stoppard, expanding our imagination of Housman’s emotional reality, rather than focusing on his loss and loneliness. Comedy is one of Stoppard’s favorite tools, of course; there are the barbs and zingers hallmark of Stoppard littered throughout. That comedy comes naturally to AEH and Housman, however, with that particular brand of British sardonic humor. But amongst young Housman’s enthusiasm and AEH’s weariness, between the emotional losses they both suffer over Jackson, that humor abides; even while Chamberlain reads about the political movements about to lead to the criminalizing of sodomy, Housman jokes and deflects.\textsuperscript{130} AEH says twice (once to Charon, once to Wilde) that his life was “marked by long silences,” an apt phrasing from Stoppard that strikes a note of irony: AEH has either just finished before or is about to begin a lengthy monologue after this statement.\textsuperscript{131} Moreover, much like in Kaufman’s \textit{Gross Indecency}, the most disconcerting moments of emotional suffering are not depicted, but rather referenced.

Chamberlain: Fancy you living to a ripe old age, I wouldn’t have put a tanner on it the way you looked.  
AEH: When?  
Chamberlain: Most of the time. Happy days, I don’t think. When Jackson went off to be a headmaster in India. No—worse before. No—worse after, when he came home on leave to be married. No, before—that time no one could find you for a week. I thought: the river, and no two ways about it. But you turned up again, dry as a stick. […]

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 63.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 3 and 95.
It would have been simple for Stoppard to construct a heart-wrenching story with a narrative structure built around these events of A.E. Housman’s life, around his rejection from Jackson and a life of loneliness and misery ever afterwards. Instead, Stoppard references these moments, honest to Housman’s genuine hurt, but forcing our attention instead to Housman’s character beyond that easier story, to the complexities of a man who ultimately found fulfillment elsewhere, through his work, which was as Stoppard constructs it engaged with the expression of queerness as much as any Wilde work.

Indeed, it would have been more than easy, rather perhaps expected, for Stoppard to engage in one of the central mysteries surrounding A.E. Housman: his failure to obtain his Oxford degree. A.E. Housman himself never addressed it in any way known to historians, leaving nothing but speculation about its co-concurrence with a brief falling-out with Moses Jackson during the last year of their undergraduate studies. Stoppard seems to quietly endorse the guess that some conflict related to Housman’s feelings for Jackson caused the failure, but it is indeed quiet, as there are only four references to it in the play, all fairly brief, and Stoppard mirrors Housman’s recalcitrance when the issue is first addressed, with AEH replying to young Housman’s shocked inquiry of how such a brilliant scholar could have been “ploughed” that “that’s what they all wanted to know,” repeating this phrase again to his sister Kate when she implores him to tell her what the matter was. Stoppard makes a small hint near the end that Housman was too busy with his side projects to study properly, but bundles it in amongst discussions of translation and love poetry, barely noticeable in the larger conversation.

132 There is a divide amongst biographers of Housman about the cause of his failure in his final exams. Some attribute it to distraction due to family illness; others argue that he had so little regard for his professors at Oxford that he neglected the set coursework in favor of his own translation interests. However, others suggest that Housman’s agony over Jackson’s lack of romantic reciprocity precipitated a severe mental and emotional decline. Tom Burns Haber, A. E. Housman (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), 46-49.
133 Stoppard, The Invention of Love, 45 and 50, respectively.
134 Ibid., 98.
only explicit reference to it other than the confrontation between AEH and young Housman is with Housman and Jackson, who reports gossip that Housman “ploughed [him]self on purpose.” Housman’s only real response is “I didn’t get what I wanted, that’s true, but I want what I’ve got,” and to immediately divert Jackson to his first translation publication.\textsuperscript{135} The opportunity Stoppard had to double down on a version of A.E. Housman in a frenzy or deep depression over his unrequited love instead becomes a quiet truth which Stoppard treats as ancillary to the project of building Housman’s emotional complexity and the role of Housman’s work in expressing those emotions. Stoppard’s reimagining of Housman here could go even further, if we take Housman at his word: he wants what he’s got, and tells Jackson in the same breath that “friendship is all, sometimes I’m so happy, it makes me dizzy – and, look, I have prospects, too!, I’m published!”\textsuperscript{136} Housman shows Jackson his first publication in the \textit{Journal of Philology}, of Horace, one of the queer poets so vital to Housman’s identity. Housman may not have Jackson as a lover, he may not have any romantic partner, yet he is truly happy. Stoppard has shown us a Housman whose deepest attachments are not just to his unavailable college friend, but the lifelong romance he has with his poetry.

\textbf{Virtue and Love}

Stoppard nearly ends that confrontation in Act II between Jackson and Housman about Housman’s attachment to Jackson in a frustrated détente, but Housman cannot restrain himself, and his confession of the romantic nature of his affections for Jackson Stoppard once more articulates through yet another academic monologue. This time, however, the monologue’s initial display of intellectual knowledge, about Theseus and his ‘comrade’ or, rather lover, Pirithous, shifts focus to the concept of virtue, a lurking concern in the first half of the play. Here,

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
Housman loses his cool completely; on the verge of putting on his British stiff upper lip, Housman instead proclaims to Jackson not an explicit declaration of love, but rather a miniature lecture on the morality of relations among men the best way Housman knows how—through poetry and the classics.

Virtue! What happened to it? It had a good run—centuries!—it was still virtue in Socrates to admire a beautiful youth, virtue to be beautiful and admired […]; virtue in Horace to shed tears of love over Ligurinus on the athletic field. Well, not any more, eh, Mo? Virtue is what women have to lose, the rest is vice.137

Yet again Stoppard joins a situation of personal emotional outpouring with an intellectual discourse, but this time in the broader conversation of morality and changing social standards in the backward-looking culture A.E. Housman lived in. Stoppard shows us a Housman rejecting shame, responding with the affirmation of his beloved texts for support. This discussion of virtue allows us to see Housman as engaged in lively historical discussions about queerness outside of the disappointment (and accompanying negative affect) over Housman’s affections for Jackson.

The Victorian age was marked by an obsession with the Greeks and Romans, which Stoppard introduces early on in a back-and-forth in Act I between famed Victorian intellectuals Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, Mark Pattison, and John Ruskin. These four were roughly a generation older than Housman, his teachers at Oxford, and part of the reform of the English university system in the nineteenth century. This reform promoted Hellenism, the study of Greek and Roman texts, as organizing principles of education. These four men were united in their work with “Greats,” as it was colloquially known, but divided in their feelings about the social implications of their work: Stoppard deftly aligns Jowett and Pattison, who disapproved of the

137 Ibid., 76.
excess and the discourse on male love of the more liberal Pater and Ruskin. This is most
directly (and humorously) addressed by an exchange by Jowett and Ruskin:

    Jowett: [...] Nowhere was the ideal of morality, art and social order realized more
    harmoniously than in Greece in the age of the great philosophers.
    Ruskin: Buggery apart.
    Jowett: Buggery apart.139

As is so often the case with Stoppard, the joke softens the harsh social commentary: the
moralistic Victorians, Jowett and Pattison, reject what they consider repugnant in the Greek and
Roman societies they otherwise emulate, neglecting it entirely, only to be brought up short by
their contemporaries Pater and Ruskin.140 These men are early aesthetes, whereas Jowett and
Pattison are simple classicists; the distinction becomes clear with Pater, who unflinchingly
reminds his contemporaries of the value those Greats placed on the love between men:

    Jowett: [...] In my translation of the Phaedrus it required all my ingenuity to rephrase his
depiction of paederastia into the affectionate regard as exists between an Englishman
and his wife. Plato would have made the transposition himself if he had had the good
fortune to be a Balliol man.
    Pater: And yet, Master, no amount of ingenuity can dispose of boy-love as the
distinguishing feature of a society which we venerate as one of the most brilliant in the
history of human culture, raised far above its neighbours in moral and mental
distinction.141

In this same scene, Jowett and Pattison continually criticize Pater for his alleged involvement
with younger men. Stoppard does not offer Pater as a shameful or otherwise unworthy of the title
of beauty; the brief interlude Stoppard includes of Pater with a young unnamed undergraduate
shows the pair engaging in romance through intellect, admiring each other’s way with words.

---

138 Linda Dowling’s *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) explores this divide more fully; her introduction is a particularly succinct summary of the dynamics of nineteenth century Oxford University.

139 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 17.

140 Ruskin is a somewhat elusive character, with fewer lines than the rest; in a brief speech from him on page 10, we can see him in favor of aesthetics, although he disconnects it in its early days from the “unnatural behavior” now connected with it.

141 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 21-22.
This is the same tender care with which Stoppard characterizes Housman’s expressions of love; the age difference, integral to the Greek and Roman understanding of love between men, is not sullied or chastised here. Instead, that relationship is also framed in terms of beauty and intellect, and the aesthetes’ “love of art for art’s sake [which] seeks nothing in return except the highest quality to the moments of your life, and simply for those moments’ sake,”¹⁴² as Pater describes it, serves double as identifier of those who not only admired the Greats, but mimicked them.

How then do we place Housman in this divide, the classicists and the aesthetes?

Housman does not evoke the image of excess, the pursuit of the beautiful of aestheticism, but a chiding Jowett mistakes Housman for Wilde during these exchanges:

> If you can rid yourself of your levity and your cynicism, and find another way to dissimulate your Irish provincialism than by making affected remarks about your blue china and going about in plum-coloured velvet breeches, which you don’t, and cut your hair—you’re not him at all, are you?¹⁴³

Housman’s markedly different appearance, presumably staid and conservative (cut hair, simple clothes), differentiate him from Wilde, engaging in stereotypes about how properly comported gentlemen behave. Still, something in Housman prompted Jowett to connect him to our more infamous queer aesthete, and as we have seen, Housman’s attitude toward translation and the dedication to ancient texts aligns very clearly with Pater’s views, refusing to alter the ancients to fit more easily into Victorian frames. Timid, lovelorn, morose, lacking passion—these are not how we generally imagine an aesthete. Good thing for us, Stoppard does not claim that Housman is any of these things; it is through Stoppard’s more complex characterization of Housman that we can look past these easy readings to understand Housman’s dedication to the classics unvarnished as the aesthetes did.

¹⁴² Ibid., 19.
¹⁴³ Ibid., 22.
While the older AEH may be easily dismissed as unsatisfied, as we re-live his life with him and see his lack of romantic attainment and his fixation on the technical aspects of translation, Stoppard reminds us of his ferocity as a scholar. AEH here makes some of the excoriating criticisms of his peers that A.E. Housman is so famous for in academic circles: “[Baehrens’s] conjectures, on the other hand, are despicable trifling or barbarous depravations […]”144 “The width and variety of Francken’s ignorance are wonderful.”145 “Trying to follow [Ellis’s] thoughts is like being in perpetual contact with an idiot child.”146 AEH even scandalizes his younger self, shuffling through his books and dismissing them one by one rather caustically, even a scholar under whom Housman himself studied.147 The meat of AEH’s critiques is not exaggerated; it is enough to not only gain him a professorship after the dismal end to his undergraduate career, but as Stoppard has the deciding vote on that professorship tell us, Housman is “very likely the best classical scholar in England.”148 The snappy insults show another side of Housman, a man unintimidated and unapologetic, refusing to beat about the bush in deference to the feelings of people who should know better than to treat classical texts in the irresponsible ways we have seen. These moments also allow Stoppard to show us a more humorous Housman. Our younger man is no less judgemental than the elder AEH; he says to Pollard and Jackson that “[Jowett] can’t even pronounce the Greek language and there is no one at Oxford to tell him. […] I will take his secret to the grave, telling people I meet on the way. Betrayal is no sin if it’s whimsical.”149 This vim and vigor is in stark contrast with the staid discussion between Jowett, Pattison, Ruskin, and Pater, which Stoppard instructs is to take place

144 Ibid., 33.
145 Ibid., 79.
146 Ibid., 80.
147 Ibid., 34.
148 Ibid., 81.
149 Ibid., 10-11.
over the course of a peaceful game of croquet. Stoppard shows us the irony of pretending that Housman was the distant and dispassionate mouse among his fellows—Housman was, indeed, passionate, just as much as a spectacle of intellect as Wilde.

That passion for his scholarship, as we have already begun to explore, may have been most obviously directed towards his academics, but Stoppard insists that the work Housman pursued was an expression as well as object of his feelings. AEH takes the charge of proper scholarship and translation practices quite seriously. AEH lectures his younger self: “Taste is not knowledge. A scholar’s business is to add to what is known. That is all. […] Knowledge is good. It does not have to look good or sound good or even do good. It is good just by being knowledge.”150 This is an oblique reproach, of course, to the scholars we have already seen, who have mangled, censored, or otherwise covered up the Greats because of content that did not comport with their moral expectations. AEH and indeed young Housman do not see this duty of fidelity as a burden, but a virtue; a still fresh out of university Housman expounds to Pollard that [s]cholarship doesn’t need to wriggle out of it with a joke. It’s where we’re nearest to our humanness. Useless knowledge for its own sake. […] It doesn’t mean I don’t care about the poetry. I do. Diffugere nives goes through me like a spear. […] Scholarship is a small redress against the vast unreason of what is taken from us […].151

Housman is not engaged in the philosophical debates of Oxford or Victorian England regarding the moral standing of certain behaviors; for him, the true issue of right or wrong is of accuracy and fidelity. Housman can express his queer feelings—longings and loves—through that faithful scholarship, and these endeavors are a “small redress […] of what is taken from us.” The scholarship and the poetry itself is consolation as well as the opportunity for emotional release for Stoppard’s Housman. Stoppard turns our attention to a different framing of ethics, which is

150 Ibid., 37.
151 Ibid., 71.
not based in the vicissitudes of social morality, but rather an evaluation of accurate representation of the world (especially the past) as it is.

It would be prudent to return here to what Stoppard is arguing for as an accurate representation in this case: the queerness inherent in these ancient texts for which Housman and AEH fight so vehemently in the play, and the virtue in that queerness. Stoppard shows us Housman’s passion not just about those academics, but in the ways those texts describe queerness. Housman’s friend Chamberlain, whom he works with after university, confronts him about his feelings for Jackson in Act II:

Housman: (watching the runners) What do I want?
Chamberlain: Nothing which you’d call indecent, though I don’t see what’s wrong with it myself. You want to be brothers-in-arms, to have him to yourself […] You want him to know what cannot be spoken, and to make the perfect reply, in the same language.152

That language, as we have seen, is part of the invention of love, which we have by this point thoroughly queered. These comments from Chamberlain echo the words of Housman in other places in the play. A young Housman asks AEH if there was “ever a love like the love of comrades ready to lay down their lives for each other?”153 This is the epitome of Greek and Roman virtue, as Stoppard reminds us—AEH describes the Sacred Band of Theban youths, the army made of pairs of male lovers who gave their lives in battle, for whom Philip of Macedon “shed tears and said, whoever suspects baseness in anything these men did, let him perish.”154 This is another reframing of virtue, once more accomplished through connections to ancient texts and cultures. The discussion of virtue does not exclude the disappointment resulting from Housman’s desires; the older AEH says of Jackson that “I would have died for you but I never

152 Ibid., 64-5.
153 Ibid., 39.
154 Ibid., 42.
had the luck!” at both the beginning and end of the play.\textsuperscript{155} In this way, Stoppard insists that the negative affect, Housman’s loss and AEH’s regret, may be understood in a wider context of Housman’s scholarly pursuits and the debate of morality and virtue in Victorian society.

**A Wilde Contrast**

The spectre of Oscar Wilde haunts the play from beginning to end, when Wilde himself makes an appearance; Stoppard uses Wilde as foil for our understanding of Housman and the discourse of virtue ongoing in the play. Stoppard’s Wilde is not Kaufman’s, as here he is characterized by wit and whimsy: even in Housman reminding Jackson that they were at school with Wilde, Housman refers to Wilde’s blue china—one of Wilde’s famous witticisms that he struggled to live up to his blue china—and Jackson response of “[w]ait a minute. Velvet knickerbockers! Well, I’m damned! I knew he wasn’t the full shilling!”\textsuperscript{156} All such hints before Wilde appears on stage are of similar ilk, building the image of the dandy, the shameless aesthete. However, Stoppard does not utilize Wilde as a contrast to Housman, our paragon of English timidity; instead, he shows us a bond between the two, even despite the differences in their personalities.

The Wilde we see here is not foil alone and Stoppard utilizes him to make an argument regarding the affect of Housman’s own work—not as a translator, but as a poet. There is very little of Housman’s own poetry showcased in the play and most of it comes near the end. The first quotation of it is from AEH, upon the news of Oscar Wilde’s arrest and sentencing; the selection is from a poem that A.E. Housman wrote specifically for Wilde:

\begin{quote}
Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 5 and 100.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 57. There are several sly references to blue china specifically as well as other hints scattered through the play.
Oh they’re taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.\textsuperscript{157}

The dynamic here between appearance and virtue echoes what Stoppard constructed in Jowett’s dismissal of Housman as a younger Wilde—the flamboyancy of Wilde as part of the understanding of his punishment. But even more central to Stoppard’s characterization of A.E. Housman’s poetry is information we glean from a back-and-forth between AEH and the ghost of Chamberlain:

Chamberlain: […] You must have been writing poetry all the time you were in Trade Marks.
AEH: Not so much. It was a couple of years after, something overcame me, at the beginning of ’95, a ferment. I wrote half the book in the first five months of that year, before I started to calm down. It was a time of strange excitement.

Chamberlain: The Oscar Wilde Trials.
AEH: Oh, really, Chamberlain. You should take up biography.\textsuperscript{158}

The wry joke for the audience being, of course, that what we and Stoppard are doing here is an exercise in biography. Beyond that aside, however, the important kernel that Chamberlain draws attention to and which AEH will not deny, but rather dodges, communicates Stoppard’s understanding of Housman’s empathy and understanding of Wilde. Housman’s poetry was driven by his empathy for Wilde, by a connection to a fellow queer Victorian. Most of the rest of A.E. Housman’s poetry in the play is recited jokingly by Chamberlain, to AEH’s dismay, with the unfettered emotion reserved mainly for Housman’s verse for Wilde. Chamberlain calls AEH “slyboots” for composing this poetry right under everyone’s noses,\textsuperscript{159} inquiring if AEH had sent any to Jackson, for whom he knows they were written; AEH responds that “confession is an act of violence against the unoffending.”\textsuperscript{160} Thus, Stoppard’s only employment of AEH (or Housman, for that matter) reciting his own poetry is the verse for Oscar Wilde, which functions

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 89.
as an expression of solidarity between two fellow queer men. Stoppard’s AEH seems to protest the use of A.E. Housman’s romantic verse, as it is private, not between either of our Housmans and Jackson, but for AEH himself—something that the “unoffending,” those uninvolved in those feelings, should not be involved in. It seems that for Stoppard the tenderness of the love poetry is private between AEH and the poetry itself.

Stoppard forces us to see again and again that Housman was not aloof or unfeeling, especially through the acknowledgement of Wilde. A.E. Housman’s appointment to his professorship occurs near the end of the play, with AEH interrupting the proceedings of a committee evaluating his suitability with scholarly commentary (scathing remarks on the quality of the committee members’ or other experts’ translations). The final word on his appointment comes from John Percival Postgate, who says he had encouraged Housman to apply only a breath before he separately begins responding in frustration to Housman’s criticisms. Rather than engage in banter over the translation issues, however, Housman interrupts the intellectual exchange:

AEH: Have you seen the paper?
Postgate: I am in the act of replying to it. I intend to make you ashamed.
AEH: The paper.
Postgate: Oh . . .
AEH: Oscar Wilde has been arrested.
Postgate: Oh . . .
AEH: I had no idea I had offended you, Postgate.161

The paper, not a philological journal, but the newspaper, the major social upheaval from Oscar Wilde’s arrest and trials. AEH, usually characterized by his prioritizing of the academic over all else, diverts our attention to this real-world concern, and it is AEH, not the young Housman, who interacts with Wilde over the remaining pages of the play.

---

161 Ibid., 82.
Indeed, it is AEH’s revelation to the audience that he had sent Wilde his book of poetry that summons Wilde to the stage, another integration of AEH’s outpouring of emotion through his work. The culmination of their interaction comes when AEH apologizes to Wilde for, interestingly, not living in the right time: “and not now!—when disavowal and endurance are in honour, and a nameless luckless love has made notoriety your monument.” Interestingly, this is the one sentiment of regret that either Housman or AEH voice—but on behalf of Wilde, not Housman. Wilde’s response, however, diverts the framing of Wilde’s losses back to what Stoppard has been constructing as the true monument of a classicist’s, an aesthete’s, life well lived:

[…] Dante reserved a place in his Inferno for those who wilfully live in sadness—sullen in the sweet air, he says. […] I made my life into my art and it was an unqualified success. The blaze of my immolation threw its light into every corner of the land where uncounted young men sat each in his own darkness. […] I banged Ruskin’s and Pater’s heads together, and from the moral severity of one and the aesthetic soul of the other I made art a philosophy that can look the twentieth century in the eye.162

Wilde’s departure from the play soon thereafter is with the boatman Charon, indicating his death. Thus Stoppard’s Wilde, at the end of his life, has prioritized his work over those personal losses, just as Housman has. The significance of the inclusion of Wilde for Stoppard is an opportunity to embrace the difference kinds of men Housman and Wilde were, dispositionally, but to place them not in competition but rather in harmony. Further, it is for Wilde’s sake that some of Housman’s strongest affect emerges, both positive and negative; Stoppard uses this meeting to further expand our understanding of Housman’s emotional reality, an interior life that is rich and fertile and directed towards A.E. Housman’s work itself.

There’s no question that Housman is a difficult man to come to terms with; quintessentially British or not, his character in life seems ornery, contradictory, off-putting for

---

162 Ibid., 96.
us. Stoppard does not transform Housman into a more amiable or outgoing character, but rather invites us to see Housman as those who were intimate with him may have understood him. This Housman is still somewhat puzzling, perhaps, like when he refuses to tell anyone, even his beloved sister, about his failure at Oxford; ¹⁶³ but he is certainly not reduced to a caricature of a preoccupied academic lost in his ivory tower, incapable of dealing with relationships or feelings. In addition to the insights we glean from the interaction between AEH and Housman, there are also moments of sweetness between the two, as especially AEH treats Housman with kindness, not just in coaxing him along in translations, but in addressing the feelings the young Housman is still learning to cope with. As Housman begins to speak in raptures about the value of the love between comrades, AEH responds “Oh, dear”¹⁶⁴—likely in response to his younger self’s sheer enthusiasm, as is often the case between the two. But Housman stutters and backtracks, saying he wasn’t talking about “spooniness,” (a euphemism for queerness, used several times in the play) but the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.¹⁶⁵ But once AEH confirms that it is not “something to be made fun of”¹⁶⁶ and the two discuss such comradeship seriously, Housman is willing to say that he “would be such a friend to someone,”¹⁶⁷ even with the romantic implications. Housman gets caught up in the beauty of the poetry they discuss, which AEH often treats clinically in order to discuss the nuances of the translation work:

Housman: [...] We catch our breath at the places where the breath was always caught. [...] He answers a friend’s letter – ‘so you won’t think your letter got forgotten like a lover’s apple forgotten in a good girl’s lap till she jumps up for her mother and spills it to the floor blushing crimson over her sorry face’. Two thousand years in the tick of a clock – oh, forgive me, I . . .
AEH: No (need), we’re never too old to learn.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Ibid., 50.
¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 39.
¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 40.
¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 40.
¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 43.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 36.
This seems like a quiet acknowledgement from AEH that he welcomes his younger self’s energy and optimism, that even AEH can step away from the books and the commas and the lacunae in the texts to appreciate the pure feeling of the poetry they both admire. It is also an acknowledgement and encouragement from the older AEH of the sincerity and the goodness of these sentiments from the younger Housman; AEH does not shame or chide Housman for his full-throated expression of love for this poetry. These moments between the younger and older Housmans further complicate the emotional tapestry that Stoppard is weaving—they remind us that we are trying to imagine a life over the course of decades, and all the emotional vagaries that includes.

The final word on Housman, the last pages of the play, are somewhat opaque—fitting for our subject, and Stoppard plays with Housman’s scholarship, his losses, his joys, and the history in which he found himself. The last lengthy monologue, just before the close of the play, addresses in brief the events that caused Wilde to charge Queensberry with libel, but juxtaposed with an aside from AEH that his boots he “left in my will to my college servant.”169 This detail, odd as it is, seems also somehow sad—Housman had so few he was intimate with to include in his will; that lack of intimacy, spoken of in the same breath as the consequences for the kind of intimacy that Housman may have wanted and that Wilde suffered for, encapsulates the difficult position Housman (not to mention many others) was in. The hint of such fear and suffering carries on past the monologue to Jackson asking “[w]hat will become of you, Hous?” This is where young Housman repeats the one piece of Greek from earlier in the play, a fragment from Aeschylus that translates “Does it mean nothing to you, the unblemished thighs I worshipped and

169 Ibid., 101.
the showers of kisses you had from me.”170 This return to negative affect, the mourning (and perhaps just a smidge of resentment) for Housman’s unrequited love, is brief, as Housman goes back to quoting translation, this time assuring the beloved that he will be “a song sung unto posterity.”171 To end, AEH summarizes the conflict of the academics Stoppard has already elucidated—“the study of classics for advancement in the fair of the world versus the study of classics for the advancement of classical studies,” the classicists and the aesthetes—but handily and humorously almost dismisses them: “what emotional storms, and oh what a tiny teacup.” That tiny teacup is what all the fuss has been about, the tussling between scholars of proper translations, but AEH downplays it humorously: he next remarks that “[y]ou should have been here last night when I did Hades properly,” a kind of instant embrace of that tiny teacup, pure enjoyment of the translation work and the “doing” of it. In these last lines, Stoppard is taking us through the affect of the play in a whirlwind, from Housman’s love, disappointment, annoyance, amusement, insecurity—a full range of emotion, not prioritizing any, including negative affect but not at the expense of Housman’s other feelings. In the end, what are we to make of Housman’s emotional reality? Stoppard refuses to tell us; AEH ends the play by saying “How lucky to find myself standing on this empty shore, with the indifferent waters at my feet.”172 Housman is dead, at the river Styx, those “indifferent waters,” and leaves us contemplating that refusal to proclaim a final, cohesive emotion. This reinforces the bittersweet feelings Housman and AEH struggle with, and leave an audience ultimately steeped in this emotion of pleasure and pain, an uncertain emotional terrain.

170 Ibid., 101 (28 for the translation).
171 Ibid., 102.
172 Ibid., 102.
Again and again, *The Invention of Love* resists being reduced to catharsis of negative affect, even though those feelings of loss and loneliness are certainly present. The play is about the intellectual exercises of Stoppard and Housman and how we can imagine Housman’s life in a way that can include those negative affects, those ugly historical realities, without being overwhelmed by their unfairness. Stoppard displays for us a Housman who found virtue not just in his love of his friend Jackson but also in the love of the ancients he curated, in his pursuits that may not have resulted in romantic satisfaction but that provided food for his soul.

Stoppard’s Housman is both poet and scholar, timid and passionate, queer and conservative, suffering and contented.
CONCLUSION

“All that we could do with this emotion.” – Carly Rae Jepsen

I hope the previous two chapters have elucidated ways in which Kaufman and Stoppard have rendered two queer historical figures as complex, dimensional, human figures with deeply felt (if somewhat surprising) attachments and feelings. In drawing our focus beyond his witticisms and refusing to center his character around his grief, Kaufman has rejected the script for Oscar Wilde that our modern memory has reduced him to. This Oscar Wilde feels as any other: love, loss, humor, anger, confusion, resentment, regret, obstinancy, honor, conviction. We see on stage a human being, a person, not just a historical figure to whom we must pay homage. Likewise, Stoppard’s Housman, whose reputation is usually irascible and implacable, becomes more than the stuffy and distant scholar—instead, Stoppard shows us a deeply feeling young man, whose desires he expresses in his own love language. Kaufman and Stoppard both resist easy answers in questioning the constructed personae that history has bestowed on these men.

It has been my intention to argue that these representations from Kaufman and Stoppard were enabled by both playwrights’ measured use of negative affect. There is no question that the men Wilde and Housman both suffered great emotional losses; Kaufman and Stoppard do not shy away from them—indeed, they both (though especially Kaufman) set our explorations of these men during times in their lives with greatest potential for negative affect. There is no sugar-coating of Wilde’s experience in prison; there is no pretense that Housman’s longing and loneliness did not loom large in his life. But Kaufman and Stoppard craft those emotions as parts of Wilde’s and Housman’s emotional landscapes, not allowing those traumas to preclude their other experiences. Disappointment does not become the horizon for despair: sadness is

significant in both plays, but it plays second fiddle to Kaufman’s and Stoppard’s more pressing concerns. Feelings—queer feelings—are fundamental to both Wilde and Housman, but what those feelings helped to create are what have elevated them in history, and what Kaufman and Stoppard draw our attention to. Instead of re-enacting funerals for Wilde and Housman, overcome by witnessing the supreme acts of mourning and grief, Kaufman and Stoppard have given us wakes—ways of remembering not only the losses of these men and our loss of them, but also celebrations of their multifaceted lives and work.

By not being swallowed up by negative affect, Stoppard and Kaufman are better able to incorporate fully Wilde’s and Housman’s queer losses with their work. That work was not insulated from their queerness or from their suffering; rather, those experiences forged their convictions in fire. “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present,” writes José Esteban Muñoz, “we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present.” Wilde’s aesthetics in *Gross Indecency* become a meditation on morality, which ultimately weds queerness with beauty, a moral frame proclaiming the nobility of his love and the work that expressed it. That belief is echoed by Housman in his preoccupation with virtue, which is epitomized in the queer relationships depicted in the ancients’ poetry. Stoppard enables our understanding of Housman’s dedication to faithful translations as integral to his understanding and expression of his queerness, deeply personal as well as academic. While their attraction to men was entangled with both Wilde’s and Housman’s suffering, it also precipitated the crucial work they did—work that holds significance for us now, of course, but also work that

---

became part of how Wilde and Housman lived their own lives. Their queer work to which they devoted themselves were expressions of those feelings otherwise unwelcomed by Victorian society, and thus became their navigation of those personal feelings into mechanisms of pleasure and hope in the future. Stoppard and Kaufman, by focusing on their work, allow us to see another way of understanding queer lives as determined by both many affects as well as by intellect.

These plays, to my mind, function as models for another approach to the debate about the place of affect in queer storytelling and queer history. Love’s admonishment that the hurts and punishments of queerness must not be papered over is not unreasonable, but neither is Snediker’s exhortation for literature to remember the joys and possibilities imaginable through queer lives. These concerns need not be mutually exclusive: negative affect need not be banished, just as hope and pleasure need not be foreclosed. It is incumbent upon us to admit to the misery of the past—but it is just as important that its recognition not breed more misery. It is one thing to insist on negative affect—but how? There is more than one way of ‘doing’ sadness. The Netflix-produced 13 Reasons Why has been heavily criticized in the media and by mental health professionals for its depiction and handling of suicide, who counsel us that “immersion into the story and images may have a particularly strong effect on adolescents […] whose brains are still developing the ability to inhibit certain emotions, desires, and actions.”175 We must have care in how we employ negative affect and depict moments of trauma. By employing both Love’s and

---

175 From an editorial in JAMA International Medicine, which had also done a study finding a significant increase of searches related to suicide (particularly in methods of suicide) after the premiere of the show. From Sophie Gilbert, “Did 13 Reasons Why Spark a Suicide Contagion Effect?” The Atlantic, August 1, 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/08/13-reasons-why-demonstrates-cultures-power/535518/. It is important to note that groups such as the World Health Organization (WHO) have been publishing resources on best practices of reporting on or depicting such matters since at least 2008: World Health Organization, “Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals,” 2008, http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf.
Snediker’s approaches, we can conceive anew how we might imagine the interior lives of queer individuals in history. This kind of biographical approach can help us both in the framing of affective realities of both joy and sadness, as we have seen with bittersweetness, as well as expanding our understandings of desire.

I have argued in the previous two chapters that Kaufman in *Gross Indecency* and Stoppard in *The Invention of Love* have provided us with a new model of affective inquiry; this way of exploring feelings requires us to examine those losses and hurts while crediting the joys and value in these queer lives. This feeling of bittersweetness, the negotiation of these mixed emotions, can help us in negotiating the affective divide amongst queer theorists. In looking backward at experiences that asked these men to feel shame, Kaufman and Stoppard have constructed depictions of a response not of offhanded triumph, in danger of dismissing the gravity of these tribulations, but rather of earnest recalibration concepts of shame. In doing so, this Wilde and this Housman find contentment in the queer work that sustained and propelled them, despite their personal disappointments. These plays have suggested new models of queer desire, an attachment to the queer work they devoted themselves to. We can see through their work the ways in which Wilde’s and Housman’s intellectual lives fulfilled their emotional needs. Kaufman and Stoppard have asked us to consider Wilde and Housman honestly on their own terms, strange or old-fashioned as those terms may feel for some.

**Queering Desire**

There are, of course, possible objections to focusing depictions of queer figures on this new model of desire, namely concerns that such an approach may de-sexualize queerness and sanitize queer identities for straight audiences. Tim Dean writes that “Queer studies […] has won institutional respectability by strategically distancing itself from the messiness of the erotic.
Academic high-mindedness easily edges out attention to bodily desire.”176 His concern is that by only paying attention to sex insofar as it concerns sexual identity, we have made sex dirty and not worth discussion. While Dean’s concerns are not unreasonable, we must keep in mind a few factors, first of which is that not all queer people want to see sex: those identifying as asexual or with dysphoric aversions to sex or the body come to mind immediately. Dean is dismissive of such concerns in his response to Benjamin Kahan’s work on celibacy as “utterly distinct from anything resembling sexuality.”177 Excluding non-normative sexual practices from queer theory, even if they are not quite to an author’s taste,178 is a slippery slope and a dangerous game to play in a field that is still young and full of potential for growth in all directions.

My question for Dean is whether we need to see sex or deconstruct sex explicitly in order to be talking about sex. Certainly in the cases of Gross Indecency and The Invention of Love, sex is not entirely absent. The revelations of Wilde’s assignations with various lovers and their taking the stand are what shift Wilde from posing to sodomite, a man who has had sex with other men. Stoppard makes a point of including stage directions about Housman’s crush Jackson running, a spectacle of body and masculine physique on display for Housman’s gaze. But these gestures would perhaps be unsatisfying to Dean, and do not address the root of the question—Kaufman’s and Stoppard’s plays ultimately depict their subjects as more wedded to the queer work they do, after all. The American, avant-garde, queer filmmaker Kenneth Anger, infamous for his homoerotic productions, said that “explicit sex on screen is like watching an eye operation

176 Tim Dean, “No Sex Please, We’re American,” American Literary History 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 616.
177 Ibid., 617.
178 Dean wraps up his discussion of Kahan saying that “It may be stating the obvious to remark that celibacy was always going to be a bitter pill for this reader to swallow.” (617) I would like to add here that Dean’s article brings relevant critiques to the field of queer theory, particularly in his complaints about its sometimes incoherence of vocabulary. I must also give Dean credit for his praise of Kahan’s close readings, despite his criticism of Kahan’s theoretical framing of the concept of celibacy.
or somebody having their stomach cut open.”179 If pornography (or at least, pornographic material) can address sex at an oblique, as Anger seems to endorse, then why cannot literature and criticism do the same? Moreover, are we not, by inextricably linking issues of sex to queer identity, ensconsing issues of sex more deeply into public discourse? There is no getting away from sex in discussing desire or queerness—it is very much the point of interest in queer theory.

The equation for Dean, as for many queer theorists, is desire with sex. This line of investigation and discussion is necessary and vital to queer theories of sexuality, sexual behavior, sex. But identities and behaviors are expressions of desire—and integral to the understanding and untangling of desire is a serious engagement with feelings. Kaufman and Stoppard have suggested a new way of understanding feelings, not just of positive or negative affect, but feelings of fulfillment and connection through queer work. Their desires are not answered and perhaps not answerable through relationships or interactions with particular persons; for Kaufman, Wilde is ultimately disappointed in his relationship with Douglas and his dalliances, and for Stoppard, Housman does not move past feelings unable to be returned. But in both plays, these men express attraction through concepts: Wilde through his pursuit of the beautiful and Housman through his dedication to faithful translation. Both of these endeavors are firmly queer, concerning same-sex attraction, love, and romance, but they are also intellectual. Dean may find these objects of desire de-sexed and unsatisfying, and readers or audiences may not understand how these pursuits can be true, heartfelt, passionate desires when they aren’t exactly keeping anyone warm at night. But Stoppard and Kaufman make quite clear that queer work, intellectual

179 Kenneth Anger, quoted in Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p.95. His film *Fireworks* (1947) employs just that image: a stomach being opened only to reveal a compass amongst the guts. Such imagery could be communicating intimacy, revelation of interior truth, as well as the physicality of sex: it encompasses many layers of sex and sexuality. The film, while it engages in plenty of sexual imagery, also incorporates political commentary, as Anger himself proclaimed that “This flick is all I have to say about being seventeen, the United States Navy, American Christmas, and the Fourth of July.”
work, are fulfilling desires for Wilde and Housman—more fulfilling than the objects of their sexual desire, despite their accompanying pains. These attachments are expressions, both literal and figurative, of love.

**Places in History**

It is important to note that Kaufman and Stoppard, by choosing Wilde and Housman, are exploring a historical landscape that queer studies is already deeply familiar with: the Victorian period. Foucault’s thesis about the late nineteenth century as a period of emergence of queer as an identity (rather than behaviors) and the expansion of discourse about sex is a pillar of queer theory. Historian David Lowenthal writes that “[h]istory clarifies, tidies, and elucidates. This is the point of Lewis Namier’s paradox that historians ‘imagine the past and remember the future’: They explain what has happened through the lens of subsequent events, events that lay in that past’s future.”¹⁸⁰ Such a hermeneutic is inevitable, impossible to avoid temporally, and perhaps even more a risk for those engaged in imaginative reproductions of the past like Kaufman and Stoppard. In exploring the Victorian period, where our modern sensibilities were beginning to emerge, Kaufman and Stoppard perhaps run the risk of de-historicizing their subjects. The previous two chapters discuss the establishment of Wilde’s and Housman’s moral landscapes at length; I would like here briefly to attend to the historical work that Kaufman and Stoppard do to locate us in the broader politics of queerness during the period.

In *Gross Indecency*, Kaufman expands historical contextualization beyond Wilde’s personal narrative to the Victorian period more broadly by focusing on the law under which Wilde was eventually convicted. A Queen Victoria appears on stage to recite the relevant section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, the law under which Wilde is being tried:

Narrator 2: When asked to sign this bill, Queen Victoria was warned by one of her advisors that:
Narrator 3: Mum, the bill does not include similar behavior between women.
Narrator 2: To which she responded:
Queen Victoria: Women don’t do such things.181

This no doubt gets a laugh in performances, maintaining Kaufman’s hold over the emotional tenor of the situation, but the comedic does not overshadow the very real emotional and social ramifications: we are instantly reminded by Narrator 2 that the bill “remained in effect till 1954.” This comment does double duty to historicize, interacting with a more recent past, in Kaufman’s goal of informing his audiences of the political and legal realities of Victorian attitudes toward homosexuality. He complicates this streamlined picture of condemnation from social institutions and personal ignorance by having George Bernard Shaw interject his opinion: “There is no justification for that law except the old theological one of making the secular arm the instrument of God’s vengeance.”182 This reminder that the bill did not have universal approval forces Kaufman’s audiences to consider the complexities of the historical narrative of Victorian repression, as Foucault exhorts us.

The political realities are even broader yet for Kaufman. In response to the arrest of Wilde, Douglas writes a letter to a French magazine that “the third trial is a result of a political intrigue,” on the heels of which Queensberry’s lawyer Carson, “who had refused to be the Crown’s prosecutor” tries to persuade the third trial’s prosecutor, Lockwood, not to go forward, according to one of Kaufman’s historical sources. Lockwood says that “we dare not,” and Douglas continues his letter saying that “The fact is that the liberal party presently contains a large number of men that have the same inclinations as Wilde does,” that the Home Secretary and Prime Minister have conspired to bring this final trial against Wilde, otherwise “the liberal

182 Ibid., 68.
party would be removed from power.” This sentiment is echoed by Lockwood, who tells Carson that “many people in this government are said to be implicated in similar affairs. It would be said that it is because of those people that we are forced to abandon the case.”¹⁸³ Throughout these addresses, we are reminded that this context is confirmed by two separate historical sources, Douglas’s unpublished letter and a biography of Wilde; this helps to reinforce the veracity of Kaufman’s historical rendering. Kaufman wants us to understand that the issue of Wilde’s trial took on larger, even geopolitical significance, and the pressure to convict Wilde becomes a matter beyond Queensberry’s casual bigotry—it becomes critical to British politics. Kaufman does not limit himself to the political context alone, however, as he broadens our understanding of the public reaction to Wilde’s fall from favor:

   Narrator 5: On the day Oscar Wilde was arrested, six hundred gentlemen left England for the continent on a night when usually sixty people traveled. Every train to Dover was crowded, every steamer to Calais thronged with members from the aristocratic and leisured classes.¹⁸⁴

Kaufman here debunks some potential historical narratives about the isolation of Wilde’s case, while reinforcing the importance of Wilde’s trial outside his own life as a crucial moment for British society and for its emerging queer culture. Wilde’s prosecution in these scenes becomes part of a history lesson.

   History lessons are, of course, ubiquitous in The Invention of Love, but strikingly Stoppard also draws our attention to the legal framework of Wilde’s suffering. The Labouchere Amendment was attached, as we learn, to The Criminal Law Amendment Act; Stoppard shows us Labouchere himself twice, in extended scenes with W.T. Stead, a journalist, and Frank Harris—another journalist and the same man who appears as Wilde’s friend in Kaufman’s play.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 117-118.
¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 82.
These three men discuss the passage of the Act and the attachment of Labouchere’s amendment, which the man himself scoffs at: “I intended to make the Bill absurd to any sensible person left in what by then was a pretty thin House . . . but that one got away, so now a French kiss and what-you-fancy between two chaps safe at home with the door shut is good for two years with or without hard labour. It’s a funny old world.” Throughout the conversation, the three men debate the veracity of their versions of the law’s adoption. Of serious interest to them, however, are the surrounding issues of the law, which we learn was initiated because Stead had “bought a thirteen-year-old virgin for £5 to prove a point,” for his newspaper headlines. The moral panic this raised in London and around the country is what precipitated Labouchere’s addition, which compounded the growing discomfort with Wilde’s aesthetic celebrity. It is by drawing our attention to these cultural changes that Stoppard most eloquently shows us the ways in which Wilde’s and Housman’s morality and virtue were in reaction to more than just their personal situations, but a function of the destabilizing Victorian norms.

Perhaps most germane to Lowenthal’s worries that, as Anais Ninn reminds us, “we don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are,” Stoppard addresses the Foucauldian issue of queerness as an identity was emerging in the period, a change in the history of Western social concepts. Near the end of the play, as the older AEH interacts with his friend Chamberlain:

Chamberlain: […] I know your brother Laurence. We belong to a sort of secret society, the Order of Chaeronea, like the Sacred Band of Thebes. Actually it’s more like a discussion group. We discuss what we should call ourselves. ‘Homosexuals’ has been suggested.
AEH: Homosexuals?
Chamberlain: We aren’t anything till there’s a word for it.
AEH: Homosexuals? Who is responsible for this barbarity?

---

185 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 61.
186 Ibid., 58.
Chamberlain: What’s wrong with it?
AEH: It’s half Greek and half Latin!
Chamberlain: That sounds about right. […]

The comedy that Stoppard employs in Housman’s preoccupation with the linguistics of the word homosexual allows him to linger on the exchange’s true purport: the shift in cultural understandings of the desires that Housman has felt. “We aren’t anything until there’s a word for it” implies a we, a group of people, as well as the anything—an identity contingent on a verbal expression, something fixed (or fixable) and stable, that we can adopt for ourselves. *The Invention of Love* thus posits the change—just as it discusses the nature of love poetry, that invention of love itself—and forces audiences to remember that it is a change, and something foreign (and perhaps off-putting) to Housman, even while others, Chamberlain and Housman’s brother Laurence, embrace this move towards a queer identity. Desire is uncovered as a culturally malleable construction, recognized for its historical place.

In both plays, the attention to the historical also helps us divert another possible pitfall of fictionalized biography. In focusing on Wilde and Housman, our playwrights are exploring two extraordinary men, and as I have argued they have zoned in on Wilde’s and Housman’s work. That focus on their work has expanded our understanding of their emotional realities because their work engaged in their realities—their work was queer, put simply. Some may consider this limiting, as Wilde and Housman in artists on the cusp of the modern age were much more able to engage in queer work than perhaps other historical figures. But with this historical framework, Kaufman and Stoppard have used Wilde and Housman to remind us of their contemporaries as well as longer queer histories. By engaging in these longer histories, Kaufman and Stoppard are able to acknowledge the limitation of the cult of celebrity and make broader statements. Those

---

188 Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, 91.
decisions and strategies should be kept in mind (and even enhanced) in the potential use of these plays as models of queer fictional biography.

Kaufman and Stoppard have foregrounded queerness against a historical background, locating the suffering of Wilde and Housman amongst expansions of their personal histories as well as their historical contexts. This approach requires audiences to grapple with the place of queer people in history and to think about Wilde’s and Housman’s personal lives as well as their work as queer. Kaufman and Stoppard are contributing to the construction of queer history. By tying their queerness to their suffering alone, but to the ideals and the artistic pursuits that they themselves prioritized and the joys in those pursuits, Kaufman and Stoppard are also engaging in a more nuanced historical narrative of queerness through affect—we have been forced not only to reconsider the Victorian period and queer men who lived in it, but how we imagine the interior lives of those men. In *Gross Indecency* and *The Invention of Love*, suffering and negative affect are the result of sacrifice, and Kaufman and Stoppard are insistent that Wilde and Housman deeply valued those sacrifices. Kaufman and Stoppard force an audience to consider those emotional fulfillments as sincere—that Wilde and Housman themselves recuperated meaning in that suffering and that their queer work was ultimately one of their desires, to rival the attachments they had for particular individuals. Biography requires empathy: we must truly try and understand the lives that we examine, not shape them to our own liking. Kaufman and Stoppard are showcasing their interpretations of Wilde and Housman, but I believe those interpretations are fuller recognitions of the emotional realities of Wilde and Housman due to Kaufman and Stoppard’s integration of their work and their feelings and their efforts to engage an audience in the connection between the two.
The purpose of my project has been to consider a more diverse affective range in reimagining the biographies of queer individuals. Oscar Wilde is an incredibly popular figure. As Michael R. Schiavi reminds us, four major projects about him debuted in 1997 and 1998, including both *Gross Indecency* and *The Invention of Love*; just this year, yet another Wilde biopic has premiered, and there have been plenty more between and before. There have been many Wildes for us to consider and consume, and many more options in an ever-growing rich history of queer individuals: it allows us to consider and re-consider Wilde and how we might understand him. Stoppard’s selection of the unpopular and unpopulated Housman is another way of creating a variation for our greater understanding, in producing another Victorian whose similarities and differences challenge our set notions of Victorians and queerness in the period, usually so eclipsed by our Wilde focus. Amongst this embarrassment of riches, we are able to consider affect over and over again—a whole range of affect, negative and positive, or others entirely. What Kaufman and Stoppard have been able to do is consider both at the same time, to remember both happy and sad pasts in the same breath, just as Wilde and Housman had to live with those bittersweet realities. We can approach pasts, with both recognition of indelible suffering as well as the possibilities of succor for those lives.

He says the best way out is always through.
And I agree to that, or in so far
As that I can see no way out but through—
Leastways for me—and then they’ll be convinced.191

The march of time onwards continues inexorably, even as we are looking backwards to exhume these queer histories. Those stories involve love and loss, suffering and joy—they are

bittersweet, as nostalgia often is. Recognizing that range of affect can aid us in more accurate, more human, and more engaging renderings of queer lives of the past. It is especially important for us to expand our understanding of how those in the past have understood or manifested their queer desires. Kaufman and Housman have shown us how Wilde and Housman luxuriated in their queer work in ways that sexual relationships could not rival. Queerness carries on outside the bedroom, in gay bars and cruising locations, in drag shows, in GSA and PFLAG, in online forums and social media, in classrooms and texts. Kaufman and Stoppard have created models for us to understand that queerness in desire and feelings in new, even if uncomfortable or unfamiliar ways, in their reimaginings of Oscar Wilde and A.E. Housman.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Dean, Tim. “No Sex Please, We’re American,” American Literary History 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 614-624.


Schiavi, Michael R. “ Wildean War: Politics of *Fins-de-siècle* Spectatorship,” *Modern Drama* 47 no. 3 (Fall 2004), 399-422.


