

An Ideal Husband

O. Wilde

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Oscar Wilde improves. The dialogue is even snappier and the main contention of the play, the ruin facing the successful politician unless he commits yet another dishonorable action, far more worthy of our engagement, than the contrivances he has earlier proposed as pivots. Sir Robert Chiltern did as a young man sell a piece of private information to his mentor a wealthy banker Arnheim, the name of which no doubt was meant to convey Jewish roots. The remuneration served as the basis of his present wealth, and the motivation was not so much a matter of simply becoming rich, as independent wealth was seen by the young man as a prerequisite for power and thus merely an aspect of his boundless ambition. Now a 'femme de fatal' appears at a reception given by his wife. She ordinarily resides in Vienna, but has through the late banker, likewise her lover, got possession of an incriminating letter. Sir Robert is in a quandary, whatever he does he will do wrong, and besides he cannot confide in his young wife, who is a straight-laced moralist and has idolized him. He turns to lord Goring for support and assistance. Lord Goring is obviously the alter ego of Wilde, a refined dandy and to the horror of his father a good-for-nothing. Goring has designs on the little sister of Sir Robert, and was once briefly engaged to the femme fatale. The plot is set to unravel. Pointless it would be to relay its various twists and turns, suffices it to say that it is conducted in the classical manner of the bed-chamber farce replete with mistaken identities, doors ajar, and melodramatic furies. In the end there is a happy ending, sir Robert is easily persuaded not to be persuaded by his immature wife to give up a cabinet post, and lord Goring is permitted the hand of his sister, once a potentially incriminating relation with the femme fatale is speedily explained. Of course the plot does not stand up to a critical scrutiny, and I guess it was never intended to, after all the purpose of this theatrical exercise was simply to entertain a bored audience for an evening. In particular what is puzzling is that the resourceful femme fatale so easily relinquish all her good cards.

As a parody of contemporary social mores, supposedly Wilde was on the mark. This is hard to judge independently some hundred and twenty years later. (It is sobering to think that this period was within living memory for many of the people you encountered in your childhood, but has now receded into the past as much as the events of the first half of the 19th century dwelled in that early period of yours.). But as already remarked, the dialogue is snappy in the typical Wildean way. The wit of Wilde is in a sense predictably unpredictable, which is the secret of its charm. 'Life is not fair' laments Sir Robert to his friend, who retorts that for most of us that is our luck. A sentiment most of us must have thought of at one time or another.

Wild is funny, frivolously so, because his barbs never really touch. But below his superficial charm there is pathos, the kind of which unlike his more frivolous banter, embarrasses us today, because if is after all real. How prescient of him to argue for the superficiality of man and to ignore his depth. When sir Robert lectures his wife that men

should be loved because of their weaknesses and not their strengths, and that they should be taken down from their pedestals, there is of course a fair amount of irony involved, yet, one suspects a lot of true feeling on the part of Wilde, who no doubt were in throes with his lover-boy young Douglas at the time of writing. The final lecture given by Goring on how much more important the life of a man is than that of a woman, that its scope is much wider, its issues larger, should give modern feminists cause for outrage, if they cared. But who cares really? And besides, in that particular situation Goring is of course right, and Wilde underscores the fact by letting the young silly wife verbatim repeat his lecture to her husband, the ideal husband (as opposed to the real Goring is about to become?)

We may more than a century later not fully appreciate the various contemporary allusions (the notes at the end of each play gives ample references some of them rather obvious) in the Wildean plays, on the other hand we may more than the contemporary audiences be charmed with their character as period pieces. The life of the upper classes with their butlers and freedom from quotidian worries (allowing them instead the luxury of more intractable ones) seems to us harmless and idyllic, and just as we may envy the simple lives of cartoon characters, we may dream us back into a fictional past with the abandon escape typically invites.

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