

Lady Windermere's fan

O. Wilde

February 19, 2012

To read a play by Wilde is always amusing. It is hard to take them seriously, they are more like the spoofs set up by students, although Wilde no doubt worked very hard at them, both to convey his messages as well as taking shelter behind what seems more of a slap-dash effort than anything else.

Wilde cultivated the character of the dandy and thrives on producing one-liners, whose cynicism are so shallow as not to hurt only delight. Kenneth Clark referred once to the temperament of Wilde being very sunny¹. Sunny or not, he also had a melodramatic side, splendidly manifested in his final testament - *de Profundis*, that excessively maudlin epistle addressed to his former lover. The melodrama is always about to emerge in the play, and it is not clear whether for ironic or sincere purposes.

The plot is simple. It hinges on the fact that the young lady Windermere, who has just turned twenty-one and hence come of age (although of course she is already married and a mother) is confronted by a woman of doubtful repute, and is never to know that this woman is indeed her mother, who according to the legend fed to her, died at her child-birth. So there are some ups and down, reminiscent of the bedroom farce, and some displays of social occasions, be it a dance or a meeting of males in the den of a bachelor after a night out. The opinions of the lady with the fan develop somewhat during the run of the play, while those of others stay true to type. Some of the dandies are, as already noted, given some memorable one-liners, others are made to play the fool with gusto.

There is definite charm. The charm of the period, distant enough to easily be reduced to caricature. The antics of the upper classes bespeak an idyllic period when servants took care of practical problems thus freeing the blessed to concentrate on their spiritual. Of course there is a very earnest streak in Wilde, and one should not disparage his ambitions, or at least not his good-will, to reveal to the public the inherent hypocrisy of the contemporary society. In order for this to be efficient and not kill the playwright, it has to be gentle; just as a parasite should not be virulent enough to kill its host outright. Of course the reactions of a contemporary public will be rather different. Instead of providing the proverbial mirror, it will be an exercise in idealized nostalgia.

It is remarkable that the plays by Wilde that was set on stage were all done in the early 1890's. Somewhat late in his career I would have thought. As technical work of arts they leave much to be desired, and I guess Wilde was learning as he went along. He was obviously inspired by Ibsen, and his efforts should also be compared to that of his contemporary Shaw, in order to be appropriately judged.

February 19, 2012 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

¹ An article on Beardsley in the New York Review of Books back in the spring of 1977, I recall