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INFLUENCES, IMITATORS, OFFSHOOTS, AND OTHER INTERLOCUTORS: *PUNCH RE-ROOTED: COMEDY AND THE PERIODICAL PRESS 1820–1850*

By Shannon R. Smith

IMAGES FROM *PUNCH, OR THE LONDON CHARIVARI*, the nineteenth-century weekly illustrated comic magazine, have long been understood to function as a kind of visual shorthand for the Victorian imagination, appearing in a range of publications concerned with the period, both scholarly and popular. It is this focus on the magazine's content that, until recently, has also shaped much of the academic investigation of *Punch*. However, the publication of Patrick Leary's 2010 consideration of the magazine as a working community – an investigation which draws on sources such as the record of oral exchanges that were behind the production of *Punch* – marked a shift in approaches, with attention now being paid to the magazine's networks of influence. This recent trend in *Punch* scholarship, concerned with looking at the personal, commercial, industrial, and cultural connections that influenced the periodical, strongly informed the *Punch Re-Rooted* exhibition, which ran from 22 October - 20 December, 2013 at Liverpool John Moores University. Co-curated by Clare Horrocks, Brian Maidment, and Valerie Stevenson, *Punch Re-Rooted: Comedy and the Periodical Press 1820–1850* assembled material culture examples that prompted a re-examination of this Victorian print culture stalwart, forcing visitors to reconsider their understanding of its origins and influences. The exhibition title also hints at the way in which such a reconsideration forces a shift in perspective and approach – a re-routing as much as a re-rooting.

If earlier approaches to historicizing *Punch*, such as Richard Altick's *Punch – The Lively Youth of a British Institution* (1999) and Alan Young's 2007 study of Shakespeare in the magazine, can be termed inward-looking in as much as they focused on assessing the magazine's content, *Punch Re-Rooted* was dedicated to the opposite perspective. The exhibition was an outward-looking evaluation of the magazine's diverse networks of influence: the caricature and cartoon culture which preceded it; the earlier wood-engraved, humorous magazines which it recalls; and its longevity and resilience as a brand, both in terms of its own in-house exploration of that success and the popular response to it in the form of imitators and other print culture interlocutors. This outward-looking perspective also informed two key extensions of the exhibition not represented by the material print culture remnants on display: a study day, focused on assessing the role of material and digital print culture collections in research on and teaching of the Victorian period, and *The Punch Contributor Ledgers Project*, a database of the contributor information contained in the magazine's ledgers which, when completed, will be supplemented by biographical notices, facsimile page scans, and active links to the relevant material in Gale Cengage's *Punch* Historical Archive, part of their 19th Century Periodicals database.

Punch Re-Rooted was a small exhibition, held in the Aldham Robarts Library at Liverpool John Moores University. The four display cases which held the artifacts were grouped in and around the space in the library building devoted to the close study of special collections holdings with the display of artifacts being supplemented by poster-sized reproductions of selected images from the exhibition.

Half of the exhibit space was devoted to a reconsideration of the association of *Punch* with ideas of “‘newness’ and brashness,” especially in relation to the magazine's seemingly innovative mix of the visual and the verbal (Horrocks, *Catalogue* 6). In thinking about magazines such as *Punch* and its distant cousins of roughly the same generation – the *Illustrated London News*, the *Penny Magazine*, the *Saturday Magazine*, and *Chambers's Edinburgh Magazine* – the commonplace is that such weekly publications were a break with print culture traditions of the past, focused as they were on a varied mix of illustration, text, news, satire, educative pieces, and social commentary. While the exhibition did not seek to deny this facet of *Punch's* identity, it did look to render it more complex by providing material evidence of the culture that came before, a culture with which the magazine was most certainly in dialogue, and which strongly influenced its development. Both the “Caricature and the Periodical 1780–1820” and the “Wood Engraving and the Humorous Magazine 1820–1840” sections of the exhibition, drawing as they did on Maidment's 2013 *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order 1820–1850*, functioned to remind visitors that *Punch* grew in response to shifts in print culture tradition during the Georgian, Regency, and early Victorian periods, prompted as they were by both technology and market demand. The display of lithographed work by prolific late Regency and early Victorian caricaturist Charles Jameson Grant from the pages of the *Caricaturist* monthly magazine helped to illustrate this transition from the work of earlier artists such as James Gillray and George Cruickshank to the broader social humor contained in the wood-engraved images found in the pages of such publications as *Figaro in London*.

The second portion of the exhibit drew attention to the manner in which characteristics of *Punch* became genre defining standards, inspiring imitators and the magazine's own in-house proliferation of the brand. The assembled selection of imitators on display drove home the degree to which other mid-nineteenth-century humorous magazines had to contend with



Figure 5. (Color online) Display of pages from an 1845 edition of *Mephistopheles*. Photo: Matt Thomas. Photo courtesy of LJMU.

Punch as an industry leader. As the exhibition catalogue notes, many of the magazine's textual and visual content features, as well as its layout and appearance, were viewed as the epitome of "all that could be done with the idea of a comic weekly journal" (Horrocks, *Catalogue* 23). One of the key features of the magazine that the exhibition's selection of artifacts explored in some detail was the notion of a central "satirical literary persona . . . semi-mythical in its allusion, but also urban and highly present" (Horrocks, *Catalogue* 23–24). Mr. Punch, with his easily recognizable visage and stature, inspired a host of fellow figures, including *Mephistopheles*; *Joe Miller*; *the Younger*; and *The Man in the Moon*, illustrations of which from their respective print homes were central to this portion of the exhibition (Figure 5).

Print culture artifacts on display also illustrated the degree to which the strategies of formatting and layout integral to *Punch*'s visual identity on the page were mimicked by competitors, including the wittily titled, *Judy, or the London Serio-Comic Journal* which appropriated the standard font, two-column layout, and squared page defined in places by a double rule. The degree to which these two illustrated comic weeklies were difficult to tell apart was quite striking and worked to emphasize the exhibition's argument concerning *Punch*'s role as a genre-defining publication in this period.

If *Punch Re-Rooted* was keen to illustrate the scope of the magazine's connections to some of its lesser-known predecessors and contemporary imitators, it was also eager to showcase for visitors the way in which the *Punch* brand was deployed in order to keep

the magazine financially solvent. In order to capitalize on the appeal of the magazine's central character, *Punch* developed many offshoots. The exhibition gathered some of these together to demonstrate to visitors the range of items available, as well as the way in which the material objects, in their format, physical characteristics, and content, drew on the magazine's recognizable and familiar features.

The exhibition centered this exploration of *Punch*'s offshoots on one of the magazine's most important ancillary publications, the *Almanack*, a page from the 1842 edition of which was on display. At first devised to assist in strengthening the magazine's troubled financial circumstances, the *Almanack* later became one of *Punch*'s key offerings in the lucrative Christmas market so important to nineteenth-century publishers. Like the other merchandise that followed, the *Almanack* incorporated recognizable visual features into its pages modeled on the eighteenth-century tradition of an astronomer's almanac. Other items in a similar vein were included in this section of the exhibition, demonstrating the way in which the involvement of the publishers Bradbury and Evans in 1843 fostered the development and marketing of other *Punch* tributes, including the *Punch Pocket Book*, a themed agenda that allowed the owner to have access to "a calendar, cash account, diary, and memoranda for every day in the year, and a variety of useful business information" as well as a collection of short poems and sketches that comprised a miniature portable version of the magazine (qtd in Horrocks, *Catalogue* 30). Other Christmas publications were also on display, including copies of *A Shilling's Worth of Nonsense* (1842), *Punch's Snapdragons for Christmas* (1845), and *A Bowl of Punch* (1848), all indicative of the degree to which *Punch* attempted to saturate the market and strengthen the magazine's longevity as a household name. Included as a coda to this survey of imitators and offshoots in this portion of *Punch Re-Rooted* was material evidence of one of the magazine's most infamous print interlocutors, theatrical manager Alfred Bunn's satirical riposte *A Word With Punch* (1847), in which Bunn attempted to settle the score after years spent as the target of Douglas Jerrold's parody and satire. Eventually, Bunn's publication would drive forward years of legal inquiry into whether or not *Punch*'s satire was to be considered libelous, with the outcome of this inquiry being a marked change in tone and style in the magazine from the 1850s onward. *A Word With Punch* so angered the members of the Punch Brotherhood that they tried to collect and destroy all copies of Bunn's product, making the appearance of this copy in the exhibition of considerable interest.

While *Punch Re-Rooted* did not have a web presence devoted to its offerings, the exhibition catalogue drew attention to the growing scholarly resource contained in the *Punch and the Victorian Periodical Press* website, hosted by LJMU. A shorter version of the exhibition's catalogue is hosted there, as is a link to the substantial *Punch Contributor Ledgers Project*. Both the website and the *Ledgers Project* are the ongoing research work of Clare Horrocks and they provide multiple access points for beginning an exploration of the magazine from the outward-looking perspective demonstrated by the exhibition. The catalogue devotes a considerable amount of space to detailing the way in which the *Ledgers Project* specifically can assist in this kind of scholarly work and it was the only shortcoming of *Punch Re-Rooted* that the digital versions of the magazine and its working community as recorded in its contributor ledgers were not more visibly included in the exhibition's assessment of *Punch*'s various incarnations.

Overall, though it was a small exhibition, the work done by *Punch Re-Rooted* to foster a new perspective on a familiar Victorian periodical title, was considerable. It provided a range of print culture manifestations that amply illustrated the context in which the magazine

arrived and flourished on the mid-Victorian market and in doing so it encouraged visitors to think about the different networks that influenced the magazine's development. As a compliment to, and extension of, research work done by two of the exhibition's curators, *Punch Re-Rooted* was an innovative display of *Punch's* material history and a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship concerned with one of the most well-known of Victorian periodicals.

Queen's University

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A ROYAL PASSION: QUEEN VICTORIA AND PHOTOGRAPHY

By Richard L. Stein

VICTORIAN PHOTOGRAPHY RARELY GENERATES blockbuster exhibits. An exception came early in 2014, when the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles presented *A Royal Passion: Queen Victoria and Photography*. The buzz had something to do with the current enthusiasm for British royal images (visitors were overheard discussing Prince George, whether Kate could become Queen, and more). But the excitement could be tracked back to pictures in this exhibit: the first photographs of the Royals not only made Victoria the “first media monarch” (in John Plunkett’s phrase), but generated the still-enduring craze for monarchical media.

The exhibit marked two anniversaries: 175 years since the invention of photography in England and France, 40 since the Getty began assembling photographs from the beginnings down to the present. (Photography is “the only medium of contemporary art we collect,” according to Tim Potts, the Museum’s Director.) But as much as the show celebrated the Getty’s remarkable holdings (the source of most works displayed), it also paid tribute to photographs Victoria and Albert began gathering virtually from the birth of the new technology, creating what may be the greatest sustained contemporary archive of early

photography in the world. Many of the most remarkable images, including many rarely seen, came from that royal collection.

The focus, then, was not Victoria's photographic (not always photogenic) image, although there were many examples of that. It was, rather, her place in the unfolding history of the medium: as subject, of course, and one who learned to use the medium for her own personal and public ends; but also as collector, patron, and audience for a surprisingly wide range of early photographic work. Victoria and Albert, enthusiastic nineteenth-century scrapbookers, leafed through their photo albums together, reviewing events of their recent and more distant experience. If the exhibit demonstrated nothing else, it provided convincing evidence that photography was, indeed, a "royal passion."

After some initial reticence, Victoria emerged as a photographic subject – first for private consumption and later (when she authorized the reproduction and sale of royal cartes-de-visite) for a general public. Those early images tell a fascinating story of her growing comfort in front of the camera and her increasing skill at manipulating the conditions in which her picture was taken. We see her most often in family groups – that is, in images that made her personal albums curiously similar to those of later photo-consumers. Was photography a way to document private life or try to simulate it? However we answer, it is clear that the Queen recognized the potential of the new technology and tried to exploit it in presenting herself, her family, and what is now called the royal brand. As Anne M. Lyden, the exhibition curator, put it in a lecture about the exhibit, "Victoria got it."

Albert agreed to be photographed first in 1842. The first daguerreotype of Victoria was taken a few years later. (The date is uncertain and the original is lost, but the existence of a carbon print copy suggests how early she began to assemble an archive.) The photographs of her with her children taken by William Edward Kilburn in 1852 were made as companions to his portraits of the Prince four years earlier (Figure 6). By 1854, she was being photographed holding Albert's photograph, suggesting a double devotion to her husband and to the medium that repeatedly confirmed their bond (Figure 7). In the same year, Roger Fenton photographed them together (Figure 8). She commissioned deathbed photographs of Albert, and then continued to incorporate his image (in busts, photographs, or miniatures she would hold or even wear) in her own portraits for the rest of her life.

Victoria's photographs, then, remind us of her identities as wife, mother, and widow – a woman and a Queen, a member of a private family as well as symbolically representing a public one, as in Leonida Caldesi's family group of 1857 (Figure 9). She commissioned photographs of her various homes (Windsor, Buckingham Palace, Osborne, Balmoral – the last two built for the expanding royal family in the 1850s), and most of the family groups are taken at home, to depict an intimacy visible in spite of the sitters' relatively formal dress. These are not the views usually provided in official images – even though they became the basis for the kind of official imagery deployed now: the Royals at home, as family, like us.

Victoria recognized the effect, and appreciated it. She described one picture she sent to her uncle, King Leopold of Belgium, as "a little photograph of *our family group*. . . . [I]t has such truth about it & represents us *as we are*." The italics are hers. Lyden notes in a catalogue essay that the remark "acknowledged what distinguished photographic representations of her from other images: an undeniable truth" (134).

But undeniability can take twisting paths. Victoria found Kilburn's 1852 group so unsatisfying as a picture of her own face ("Mine was unfortunately horrid, but the children's were pretty") that she scratched the daguerreotype to remove her image (Figure 6) (Lyden



Figure 6. (Color online) William Edward Kilburn, *Queen Victoria, the Princess Royal, the Prince of Wales, Princess Alice, Princess Helena, Prince Alfred*. January 17, 1852. The Royal Collection Trust/@ Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014.

132). Soon she became adept in staging images that pleased her more: the exhibit makes us aware of her choice of photographers, her developing confidence in posing, even her manipulation of an evolving photo-iconography – as in the use of Albert’s image in her own portraits. Some later photographers (e.g., Alexander Bassano) became adept in trimming her lines (retouching jowls, narrowing skirts) to match the photographic image to her own self-image. This probably explains why she re-used the portrait taken by W. & D. Downey for the Duke of York’s wedding in 1893 as her official Diamond Jubilee photograph four years later (Lyden 142).

And then there is the Prince’s recurring image in photographs of the Queen. Albert’s continuing presence suggests Victoria’s prescience in recognizing a potential of the new medium as an art that “looks through death” (in Wordsworth’s phrase). Even before the emergence of “spirit photography” purporting to depict the ghostly presence of the dead, she was determined to incorporate her late husband in her photo-portraits. It may have had as much to do with her own image as with his. Lyden observes that “her propensity for including Albert’s portrait in her own portraits intensified after his death. It was as though



Figure 7. (Color online) Bryan Edward Duppa, *Portrait of Queen Victoria holding portrait of Prince Albert*. Negative July 1854; print 1889. The Royal Collection Trust/@ Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014.

she could not bear to be photographed without him present in some shape or form, as though her own identity depended upon it” (140). Certainly her identity as a mourner did. These photo-memorials testify to her continuing devotion, to her role as both monarch and widow, perhaps even to her hope of final reunion with the dead.

Such memorial images reveal another important concern of this exhibit: the roles of photography in the nineteenth century – its contexts of collection and consumption, its function as an object of meditation and conversation, its place(s) in private and public life. The exhibit was loosely arranged around these questions, what Ruskin in *Modern*



Figure 8. (Color online) Roger Fenton, *The Prince and the Queen*, 1854. The Royal Collection Trust/@ Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014.

Painters called “the use of pictures.” Various sections of the exhibit framed the questions, and answered them, in different ways.

The main entry space, primarily comprised of portraits, surveyed what large headings termed “The Private Royal Family” and “The Public Royal Family.” The distinctions prove somewhat permeable: the accidents of display placed that second label directly over a Roger Fenton album of tableaux enacted by the royal children for their parents’ anniversary in 1854 and presented to Victoria by Albert as a birthday present later in the same year – private images rarely seen. Another room on “Exhibitions and Societies” centered around the Great Exhibition and the Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857. One wall of this room displayed a nineteenth-century tiered “hang” of twenty miscellaneous photographs, including



Figure 9. (Color online) Leonida Caldesi, *Royal Family*, May 27, 1857. The Royal Collection Trust/@ Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014.

landscapes, architecture, and even O. G. Reijlander's study for the head of John the Baptist – a crowded arrangement of the sort one might have encountered at a Victorian exhibition of paintings. Here the emphasis fell less on individual images than on viewing conditions, as photography began to appear on gallery walls.

The new presence of photography in nineteenth-century exhibitions demonstrates its growing acceptance as a fine art. But photography had other identities. It continued to function as a medium of information, especially as photographers sent back images from war. The emergence of photo-reportage was the subject of another section of the exhibit, titled "Conflict and Camera." It contained one of the most striking objects in the collection.

Alongside the sorts of images we might expect to find in such a collection (Fenton's Crimean photographs, for instance), there was an unexpected example of the kinds of photographic data prepared for the Queen and her household. It was not so much an image as a mini-display – a poster of photographs, drawings (reproduced, however, photographically), and narrative explanations to document the massacre at Cawnpore during the Indian Mutiny. The proliferation of material was what made this record so striking: images and texts, drawings reproduced in photographs, pictures accompanied by explanations to guide our viewing.

And it was that overt guidance, particularly in material sent directly to the royal family, that made this display so remarkable. Its clear political overtones set it apart from Fenton's wartime work, such as the moving but famously ambiguous "Valley of the Shadow of Death." The Indian poster comes closer to propaganda, albeit in private form intended for a specific audience. Scenes of the places where the massacre happened were placed above a photograph of "the butcher of Cawnpore," taken by a Mrs. Archer, identified as "a great sufferer" in explanatory notes alongside the image. The commentary came from several letters, from a Dr. Hafleur (?) to Mr. Negretti and from Dr. Morrat to James Clark – the latter with a request that this material be presented to Prince Albert, "who may be interested." Evidently he was, since the poster remains in the Royal Archives. If it is sometimes imagined that photography speaks for itself, here was contrary evidence: photography here was illustrative, not so much independent testimony as documentation supporting testimony of another sort.

These are side issues, confided to side rooms. The centerpiece of this sprawling display of hundreds of primarily royal images appeared in a glass case in the middle of the entry area: a pair of leather-bound portfolios of royal cartes-de-visite. Here public and private versions of the royal family merge. The portraits by John Jabez Edwin Mayall were authorized by the Queen and published in 1860 as *The Royal Album*. Lyden estimates that millions of prints were sold in the first years they were offered (137). The second album, which belonged to the Queen, contains fifty-four portraits of Victoria and Albert by Mayall, William Bembridge, Frances Sally Day, and Camille Silvy, in a leather portfolio designed to be folded and carried on her travels. As bedside decoration or conversation piece, we can regard it as an early landmark of photography's role in the production of nostalgia.

But if nostalgia is a trademark and recurring effect of photography, the nostalgia quotient rises when the subjects of photo images are themselves nostalgic artifacts. And so it did as one passed to the endpoint of this exhibit. By either an accident of scheduling or a brilliant experiment in co-exhibition, the Getty juxtaposed *A Royal Passion* with the work of a remarkable contemporary (twenty-first century, that is) photographer, in an immediately adjacent space (many of the images visible in the same room). *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Past Tense* displayed eighteen large format (some five feet tall) photographs from museums: habitat dioramas, wax figures, and even some of Fox Talbot's early "photogenic drawings" in the Getty's own collection. These are historic images, then, in various senses of the word, gelatin silver prints meant to evoke the techniques of early photography as well as some of their first subjects. The ensemble constitutes an extended visual meditation on our relationship to historic objects and on photography's role in heightening that fetishism.

The photographs, from a larger series titled *Photogenic Drawings*, included life-sized pictures taken from Mme. Tussaud's waxworks. Portraits of portraits, all (to quote the Getty press release) "distilled through multiple reproductions of the original sitter." Henry VIII and his wives are photographed from wax models based on sixteenth-century panel paintings. The image of Queen Victoria (eerily visible across the room from her own collected photographs) depicts a figure based on the Downey Diamond Jubilee portrait, the waxy complexion seeming to reflect her advancing age as much as Mme. Tussaud's house production style. Such life-sized images seem larger than life, a warts-and-all high-resolution glimpse of history, although the history in question is not so much an actual past as the long story of

our own fascination with its traces. If Queen Victoria's albums anticipate our own, we also share her passion for the photographic image.

University of Oregon

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OSCAR THE OPERA AND THE HIGH-PITCHED LIFE

By Gail Turley Houston

GROWING UP IN ARIZONA IN THE 1950S AND 60S, I attended a conservative Christian church that regularly prodded the youth, girls in particular, to remain virgins, in what I call "chastity nights." In front of an audience of 50–100 teens, boys were asked to take a bite out of a doughnut and then share the despoiled treat with another young man, who gagged at the prospect. An adult leader drove a nail into a 2×4 and then asked if the hole in the wood could ever be taken away now. Of such gripping vignettes were our little lives sexually parsed and gendered. On other occasions, adult leaders showed films that included short narratives about sex-crazed teenagers (illustrated metaphorically through images of Las Vegas as Sin City – the analogue of Hell). These visuals were countered with soft-focus visions of all-white adults in white togas weaving their way through fog machines while keeping their eyes on an old white-bearded gentleman. Heavenly people, we learned, spent eternity being white, looking beatific, and trying to figure out something new to say about the glories of heaven. There was no eating, drinking, sex, art, athletics, games – no humor, no complexity.

The opera *Oscar* by Theodore Morrison based on Oscar Wilde's final years (libretto by John Cox and Theodore Morrison), which had its world premiere at the Santa Fe Opera on Saturday, July 27, 2013, abruptly took me back to those fundamentalist years, as I will lay out presently. Four performances of the opera followed its premiere. I attended *Oscar* on its last night, August 17, accompanied by the kind of Georgia O'Keefe sky only New Mexico can offer – and by a mixed bag of an audience, that was, by turns, audibly chagrined and ecstatic about the two-act opus. The New Age woman sitting next to me saw that I was writing a review and primly admonished me to ignore the bad press the opera had received in Santa Fe; I also could not help but notice some indignant attendees officiously stomping out of the venue in the first thirty minutes.

In a clipped version of Wilde's last three years of life, Act One features Wilde at the height of his fame in 1895 – when his brilliant *The Importance of Being Earnest* was the toast of the town – then brought low by the charge of "gross indecency with other male persons," including, of course, his paramour Bosie, Lord Alfred Douglas. Wilde's friend,



Figure 10. (Color online) “Jack-in-the-Box Justice.” Illustrations of Oscar performance. <http://www.santafeopera.org/pressphotos/landing.aspx>. Web. 6.16.14.

writer Ada Leveson (whom he affectionately named “The Sphinx”), provides him asylum in her children’s nursery when he rejects plans to steal off to the continent to avoid the trial. Thus, as imagined by Cox and Morrison, Wilde is caught in a supernatural night scene, in which the nursery toys metamorphose into enormous jurors, bailiff, and vile spectators, with the bars of the crib transmogrifying into a jail around Wilde and the judge popping up grotesquely as a Jack-in-the-Box, a worthy *mise en scene* depicting the real-life bizarre proceedings (Figure 10).

The setting of act two is Reading Gaol, where we witness Wilde’s agony and budding Christ-like ecstasy. The Silent and Separate Systems impose all but complete isolation of the prisoners (Figure 11). The brutal Lt. Col. Isaacson, who cannot enjoy breakfast until he has inflicted punishments on the inmates he superintends, prohibits Wilde from having writing paper or books. Physically and psychologically brought low (constantly freezing, sleeping on a bare board), Wilde falls in the chapel, creating an abscess in his ear and losing his hearing. Woven throughout the two acts in a beautiful motif – perhaps too beautiful – Bosie dances the grief, fatal attraction, and destruction he represents for Wilde (Figure 12), ultimately appearing to Oscar in prison as Death. But Wilde’s diminishment allows him to grow in empathy for his brother prisoners and in the scope of his capacity for love. Thus, the opera concludes with another, less successful running motif, of the spiritualized Walt Whitman overseeing Wilde’s Beatification and Annunciation into the realm of the Immortals.



Figure 11. (Color online) “No Reading in Reading Goal.” Illustrations of Oscar performance. <http://www.santafeopera.org/pressphotos/landing.aspx>. Web. 6.16.14.

As writer Theodore Morrison explains, “We present Oscar Wilde as hero, not as victim” (“SF Opera To Present”). John Cox adumbrates that his purpose in writing the opera was to depict Wilde as a “tragic hero,” for the “greatness required to qualify for an upgrade is evident in his brilliant career” and the story reflects on “the events that turned his comedy to tragedy,” “plunging him into a purgatory of social humiliation and physical suffering through imprisonment with hard labor, thence to discard him as a spent husk” (“Truth” 76). The director, Kevin Newbury, concludes that, “The opera is ultimately about love and compassion and how we treat other human beings. Oscar gave up everything for love. If the audience takes away anything from Oscar’s story, I hope it’s that. Love, compassion and forgiveness trump all” (79).

All well and good. But if, according to the writers and director, the question could appropriately be asked, WWOWD? (based on the Christian acronym for “What Would Jesus Do?”), then we are left with the great author, Oscar Wilde, to help us through this muddle that in effect unwild(e)s him, castrates his humor, and executes a *coup d’état* on the essential mystery of why we love where we love. For, in the puzzlingly inane denouement to the opera, Walt Whitman, who introduced the events at the beginning of Act One as the “Master of Ceremonies” – and from whose “vantage point of Immortality” the audience obtains the



Figure 12. (Color online) “Uranian Love: Bosie and Oscar.” <http://www.santafeopera.org/pressphotos/landing.aspx>. Web. 6.16.14.

higher ground – ends up deracinating himself and homosexuality while subordinating Oscar in his own opera (Cox, “A historical”). Wilde had met Whitman in 1882 on his American tour, and the two certainly admired each other warily, but they did not establish an immortal friendship, if you will – which tells us that the writers of *Oscar* are after something less biographical, more – er – universal. The result, then, is a tepid *ecce homo* minus the queered double entendre of that moniker.

Immortal is to be taken literally here: the Greats throughout the ages (writers, artists, architects, philosophers, etc., mainly dressed in togas) wander about the stage, acknowledging each other’s place in the Pantheon, and singing their hearts out to the newly-mantled Oscar,



Figure 13. (Color online) “Oscar Becomes Immortal.” <http://www.santafeopera.org/pressphotos/landing.aspx>. Web. 6.16.14.

who is no longer the inimitable Wilde but now a veritable and verified Man for the Ages (Figure 13). From what I understand, audience members gamely attempted to figure out which Immortal was which, based, apparently, on era-appropriate costume design (Isaacs). In an extraordinary lapse of artistic judgment and biographical elision, then, this starched *papier-mâché* incarnation of the Immortals is far more grotesque than the amateur sexually repressed theatricals of my fundamentalist youth.

Indeed, why must the toga wearers stand so smug in their hypostasized state of grace? Where be they now, the Laocoön limbs of masculine love strained to heightened sensuality, where Eros merges into Agape? Where be they now, the Wildean *bon mots*, the perfectly turned aphorisms? Where be the irony, the contradiction – and tragedy – so central to Wilde’s mystery? Where the *cri de coeur*: “I cannot live without the atmosphere of Love: I must love and be loved, whatever price I pay for it” (Wilde, Letter to Robert Ross, 21 Sept. 1897, 942). Where the essential awareness that Bosie, for whom Wilde disastrously, gallantly, exquisitely declared his Uranian love in the court of public opinion, was a tawdry – achingly beautiful – malicious bauble? (Said Wilde: “A slim thing, gold-haired like an angel” [Ellmann 460]).

A bauble about whom Wilde would declare: “‘The Love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare

and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, 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” (Ellmann 463). How to understand that these immortal words were tendered for a pipsqueak? *Ecce homo* that. Wilde would have voiced that mystery, pitched almost too high for human ears to hear.

And the Gordian knot of a question, honing in on, not just the mystery of where we love, but how the personal (love) inflects art? Had Wilde written this opera, he would not have avoided the earth-shattering contradictions; he would have bridled at the easy hagiography at the end. He would have faced his flaws and his pride starkly, as he did in *De Profundis* and the letters. On the one hand, he would make Douglas see the spectacular mess he had made: “From the very first there was too wide a gap between us. . . . You did not realize that an artist, and especially such an artist as I am, one, that is to say, the quality of whose work depends on the intensification of personality, requires for the development of his art the companionship of ideas, and intellectual atmosphere, quiet, peace and solitude” (*De Profundis* 685). He concluded with the ultimate damning statement that because “you could not understand the conditions requisite for the production of artistic work,” during “the whole time we were together I never wrote one single line” (*De Profundis* 685).

And yet, after he was released from prison, Wilde returned to Douglas, writing, “I feel that my only hope of again doing beautiful work in art is being with you,” for “you can really recreate in me that energy and sense of joyous power on which art depends” (Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, ?31 Aug. 1897, 932–33). These inexplicable contradictions, which Wilde understood so well, are nowhere present in the opera, nor the brutal honesty in Wilde’s statements that Bosie “ruined my life, and for that very reason I seem forced to love him more” or the pennon Wilde waved wide, “A patriot put in prison for loving his country loves his country, and a poet in prison for loving boys loves boys. To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble – more noble than other forms” (Letter to Reginald Turner, 23 Sept. 1897, 948; Letter to Robert Ross, ?18 Feb. 1898, 1019).

The one site where ineluctable Wildean paradox exists in *Oscar* the opera is, appropriately, in the voice of countertenor David Daniels, who sings the part of Wilde. The countertenor is a male alto or soprano voice that may include the falsetto mode, and it may also be a very high male tenor voice. As Gregory Sullivan Isaacs suggests, “Daniels has singlehandedly brought the countertenor voice, which is in the soprano range, into the opera house in such a natural way that no one thinks a thing about it. . . . Vocally, he is magnificent. Although the runs and roulades of Baroque music [in *Oscar*] feel snuck in to show off his abilities, his legendarily clean execution of the most complex passages is also a marvel here. On the decidedly un-Baroque side, his passionate singing in the intense moments rivals that any purveyor of Puccini’s *Tosca* or Strauss’s *Electra* could muster” (Isaacs). Daniels’s voice made me think immediately of Antony (of *Antony and the Johnsons*), whose perfect vocal instrument accompanies an exquisite, nuanced emotional range. Upon first hearing Daniels’s voice, one is enthralled by its incomparable tuning fork, register, and texture. It is a voice one hears every hundred years, as it were, if one is lucky, the way Wilde’s was heard at the end of the nineteenth century. To my mind, Daniels’s voice captures the frisson of Wilde’s pitched-high life, the simultaneous striving towards the earthy and the ethereal, the trembling susceptibility entwined in chivalric courage, the jugular honesty, and dreadful

lack of judgment. Daniels shows, as did Wilde, that his voice is *not* Immortal, but, rather, *sui generis*, altro, and absolutely normal.

University of New Mexico

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CONVERSATIONS WITH OSCAR WILDE

By Ann C. Colley

RECENTLY WHILE WALKING IN LONDON from Charing Cross Station to Leicester Square, I made my way up Adelaide Street (behind St. Martin-in-the Fields) so as to pass by Maggi Hambling's sculptured memorial to Oscar Wilde. This monument, dedicated in 1998, has had its share of negative responses. Indeed, there are those who consider it to be among the most unattractive sculptures in London. One critic, for instance, declares Wilde's twisted bronze features to be "worse to look at than Dorian Gray's portrait hidden in the attic" (Spencer). Undeniably, Hambling's gnarled rendition of Wilde's face is bereft of the graceful lines one usually associates with Wilde's aesthetic persona.

This unsettling portrait of Wilde rises from an enclosed green granite sarcophagus that doubles as a bench on which passersby are invited to pause, sit, and converse with the writer. Having risen from the dead, Wilde continues to smoke, laugh, and ironically comment on the state of society. When I walked by last night, two people sitting on the bench seemed oblivious to what the monument was all about; they were more interested in resting their feet and lighting their cigarettes. For those in the know, however, there is a sense that a resurrected Wilde has defied the oppressive hardships resulting from his imprisonment and

public disgrace – that his conversation with the world about him continues. His wit and his voice endure.

At the foot of the monument Hambling has appropriately chiseled in a quotation from *Lady Windermere's Fan*: “We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars.” This “epitaph” prompts viewers to think of Wilde not only as a martyr, but also as an individual who possessed ideals and was sensitive to the paradoxes of life. Though associated with the glitter and aesthetic qualities of high social life, he also understood the less than glamorous world of poverty, political repression, inequality, rent boys, and prison.

Hambling's selection of this line from one of Wilde's plays is appropriate because it is these plays (as opposed to his other writings – except perhaps *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), which keep Wilde alive in the public imagination. People might not necessarily be sitting on Hambling's sculptured sarcophagus-bench to converse with Wilde, but they are occupying seats in theaters (large, small, professional, and amateur) so that they can continue to be in his presence and listen – a practice that becomes almost literal when productions include a character who is either a Wilde stand-in or is sporting a green carnation in his lapel. In two recent Buffalo, NY area performances, for example, the character Cecil Graham (*Lady Windermere's Fan*) was dressed to resemble a youthful Wilde, and Lord Illingworth (*A Woman of No Importance*) entered wearing a green carnation in his lapel. In particular, when watching Wilde's so-called society plays (*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*), modern-day theatergoers are continuing to engage his wit and consider his commentary on the foibles of society as well as its moral codes.

In the twenty-first century, Wilde is still marketable. Indeed, there really has been only a brief interval in which Wilde's plays have not been present. After Wilde's arrest, his name was removed from the theater placards and his plays closed for a short period of time. However, “within a year after his death, *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* were successfully revived by George Alexander” (Sloan 168). There was also a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* on Broadway in April 1895, at the time of Wilde's trials (Chase). Nowadays Wilde's plays continue to be relevant and to attract audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Although it has been over one hundred years since these dramas first appeared on the London stage, their clever, epigrammatic commentary, their exposure of hypocrisy, corruption, and the inequalities attending class and gender as well as their almost camp admiration for the glitter of upscale life still touch the public's imagination. Audiences are not just attracted to the plays' adroit turns of phrases but also are increasingly receptive to the moral fragility that the witty exchanges both mask and reveal. Like many before them, people who now attend productions respond to his wit (though they might not understand all the allusions to politics and people – sometimes there is silence where Wilde would have preferred a chuckle of recognition); moreover, they are attracted to the stylized posture, costumes, and accessories that Wilde once delighted in and exploited. In addition, just as Wilde's contemporary audiences once recognized themselves or their society's duplicity (but at a safe distance), those who attend a production today, though not always the “smart set” who frequented the St. James's theater, still can identify themselves (perhaps from an even safer distance). The coupling or overlapping of comedy/farce and melodrama in many of Wilde's society plays also continues to attract a public drawn to life's never-ending intrigues and tragedies. In this respect, one reviewer of the Buffalo area staging compared a recent production of *A Woman of No Importance* to Bravo's *Housewives* (Danowski). Though

Wilde deserves far better than this, the critic's observation drags with it some shadow of truth.

Recently I have seen two Wilde plays: *Lady Windermere's Fan* performed at The Shaw Festival Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada, and *A Woman of No Importance* produced at the Irish Classical Theatre in Buffalo for a shorter run. Both productions were often sold out, an extraordinary phenomenon, particularly considering the almost six-month run of the play at the Shaw. The performance in Buffalo sold more tickets than any other play during the Irish Classical Theatre's season.

Of the two, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was the more visually elaborate and self-consciously stylized. Peter Hinton, the director, chose to approach the play as a period piece, but one that refused to replicate all the Victorian bric-a-brac that from my point of view oppressed the BBC productions of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, now available on DVD (*The Oscar Wilde Collection*). In these BBC performances, fringes dangling from lampshades, cluttered mantelpieces, as well as heavily furnished oppressive Victorian interiors almost smothered the dialogue's wit. Respecting Wilde's sensibility as well as the *fin-de-siècle's* aestheticism, Hinton in the Shaw Festival presentation very deliberately decided to be more minimalist. Hinton evoked each scene by creating sets that selectively quoted (in color, tone, and composition) paintings that indirectly commented on scenes or situations in the play and that were rendered by artists, such as James McNeill Whistler, John Singer Sargent, Mary Cassatt, James Tissot, and Aubrey Beardsley, who were known to Wilde.

As the program notes explain, Hinton not only infused his production with references to these artists but also called upon them to "elucidate the journey of the play" ("The Art of Oscar Wilde"). Hinton assigned a specific painting or the painter's palette to each act. The opening scene in *Lady Windermere's* morning-room, for instance, was done in the tones of a Whistler – in formal shades of gray and black as well as in pure whites. The second act quoted from works by Sargent and Giovanni Boldini. Throughout, Hinton added visual moments from various paintings or drawings rendered by Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Cassatt, Tissot, and Beardsley. Teresa Przybylski (sets) and Louise Guinand (lighting) arranged scenes and lighting motifs that recalled these paintings. Not wanting to overburden the eye, the designers chose just enough objects or details from these recognizable works of art so that one was reminded of a particular painting. (In case members of the audience were not able to identify these pictorial quotations, the program notes offered full explanations as well as reproductions of these works of art.)

These references or quotations set not only the painterly scenes but also their atmosphere. Characters were placed on stage as if posing in a tableau vivant, at times a little too formally, so that the production occasionally felt posed and more devoted to its visual effect than to its exploration of character. Hinton arranged his actors as carefully as George Alexander had in 1892, when he originally planned the stage design and blocking with a toy theater. Actors were dressed in costumes (designed by William Schmuk) that also took their cue in design and color from the quoted paintings. In the lush ballroom scenes, for instance, society ladies appeared to step out of one of Tissot's paintings and glide slowly from one part of the room to another. A photograph from the production, shows Lady Plymdale posed with Mr. Dumby, looking as if she belongs to a Tissot (Figure 14). In general, the costumes in all the scenes were of the period and reminded one of the time when Wilde's contemporaries as well as Wilde himself took an avid interest in what his characters were wearing. For example, in an early production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Marion Terry's costume (she played Mrs.



Patrick McManus as *Mr. Dumby* and Sharry Flett as *Lady Plymdale* in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Photo by Emily Cooper.

Figure 14. (Color online) *Mr. Dumby* (Patrick McManus) and *Lady Plymdale* (Sharry Flett) in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Photo Emily Cooper. Courtesy Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the Lake, Ontario.

Erlynne) was made by a French couturier. And when Wilde's plays were first performed, the costumes were reviewed in detail and illustrated in the press (Raby 148).

One positive result of these meticulously coordinated and uncluttered scenes was that there were spaces for the words to resonate. Because Wilde's dialogue lingered in the clarity of these artistically arranged moments, words did not trip over the fussiness of the furniture or become confused or muffled by a kaleidoscope of mismatching colors. The various tableaux offered a structured and lucid contextual pattern for the wit as well as for the darker implications of the play's exploration of moral fragility – something that the director, who spoke of the play's "dark heart," was keenly anxious to convey (Hinton). It is significant that Hinton chose to include the subtitle of the play, *A Play about a Good Woman*, in the program.

These visual spaces that pulled attention to Wilde's language and intent were also evident during various scene changes, when a silent black board dropped and black sliding panels eerily opened one at a time, as if a lens of a camera, to expose and momentarily concentrate the eye and mind on a limited, framed view showing a cluster of characters exchanging epigrammatic lines. During other scene changes, these spaces revealed significant objects, and during the lengthier changes large black and white reproductions from the drawings and paintings of such artists as Cassatt, Degas, and Beardsley were the silent accompaniment to Wilde's words projected above. These provocative silences also contributed to the play's bleaker undertones and helped to underline the fear of exposure that pursues the drama's action. As if setting up these darker moments, Hinton commenced *Lady Windermere's Fan* with a silent preamble in which a line of ladies, each carrying an emblematic fan, slowly and ominously glided across the stage like a series of shadow puppets.

Not all, however, was silent or period specific in the production. I suppose wanting to attach the action and the subject to the twenty-first century so that an audience might feel the subject's relevance more acutely, Hinton made the decision periodically to play modern popular ballads and music. (Significantly there was no word of explanation about these choices in the program notes. I suppose it was assumed that a contemporary, with-it audience needed no explanation or help, as it might with the nineteenth-century paintings.) In a production that was so meticulously sensitive to the actual aesthetics of the period, these musical interpolations (or intrusions) were jarring. The director's attempt to translate Wilde into the present century added a layer that interrupted the beautifully rendered quotations from the paintings and certainly did little to enhance the meaning of the play. Rather, the music and the lyrics confused the production's rhythms, even though these pieces were intended to capture, I believe, the underlying rawness of the play's content. This music featured Rufus Wainwright (a gay American-Canadian singer, songwriter, and composer) and his song "The Art Teacher" ("There I was in uniform/ Looking at the art teacher. I was a girl then;/ Never have I loved since then"). This was followed by 1970s psychedelic rock, and then a baroque vocal piece. During the final curtain call, the entire performance concluded with a full-volume version of Katy Perry's celebratory 2010 "Firework" ("Baby, you're a firework/ Come on, let your colors burst/ Make 'em go, 'Aah, aah, aah'/ You're gonna leave 'em all in awe, awe, awe").

In some senses, each of these selections can be defended. For instance, since painting is so important to the production, Wainwright's lyrics referring to the paintings of John Singer Sargent (already referenced in the set designs) are defensible, and so too is Perry's "Firework," which describes the triumph of a young woman who is finally able to ignite her life. The lyrics pick up the dilemma and triumph of *Lady Windermere* and echo the

actual fireworks that had already gone off at the ball scene earlier in the play. However, their commentary was annoying, for it interfered with the so carefully and delicately wrought scenes.

There was no such attempt radically to modernize Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*, performed for the first time at the Irish Classical Theatre in Buffalo. The director, Josephine Hogan, was keenly aware of the period in which it was written and sensitive to the darker issues the play was exposing beneath its glittering and charming surface. (The darker, more autumnal tones in the set's lighting reinforced this perspective.) Having been a child in Dublin and having a life-long fascination with Wilde, Hogan made sure that she reminded the audience that Wilde is not just a clever wit or an aesthete but also a social commentator (an outsider: an Irishman in England who had infiltrated the English Establishment and was intent on deconstructing it), who felt deeply about the Irish question, class, gender, and the vicissitudes of relationships. Reflecting literary studies of the 1980s and 1990s that politicized Wilde's writing, Hogan never lost sight of the fact that beneath the witty, fashionable surface of this play, lie difficult realities concerning gender, poverty, class, and morality: the references in Act I to women regarded as toys, the anxiety about women taking part in politics, and the many snide remarks about the "poorer classes," as well as Lord Illingworth's rather serious observation that the workers in the East End of London are nothing but slaves. Thinking of these moments in the dialogue as well as Wilde's sense, expressed in Act II, that English society is shallow, selfish, and foolish, Hogan impressed upon me that "This play is not about nothing" (Hogan). Perhaps for this reason Hogan cut the play into two halves: an opening that concentrated on the clever repartee and allowed the audience to indulge in Wilde's polished wit – epigrams shot from one part of the stage to another – and a second, more sober part that fully gave in to the melodramatic elements and progress of the plot, becoming almost Chekhovian. *A Woman of No Importance* is especially challenging, for the actual dilemma of the play is almost buried in the repartee of the opening scenes. The audience can easily get lost among its witty paradoxes. The actual story of Mrs. Arbuthnot's former affair with Lord Illingworth and the fact that her son Gerald is also Illingworth's son are not fully revealed until the play is well underway. The play itself, as well as this production, seems caught in the tension between its polished phrases that ironically scrutinize society and the transparent, more realistic melodramatic elements of its second half.

Hogan was directing this play in a theater in the round, so the full stage available at the Shaw Festival Theatre, complete with wings, elaborate set changes, and dropped screens, was just not possible. Her production was designed (David Dwyer was the set designer) so that actors periodically faced sections of the audience. Inevitably, at some points in the play, an actor had his or her back to parts of the audience. Entrances were made through the doors which otherwise admitted those who had come to watch the play. Furthermore, the furniture on the stage had to be cut shorter so that it did not overwhelm or hide the actors. Because scene changes were more difficult than in a conventional space, Hogan made the choice to combine the opening scene that takes place in a garden with the following scenes that are situated in an interior. As a result, the opening was completely indoors. During this first half she orchestrated the epigrams by arranging groups of characters in the open acting space and letting one remark or *bon mot* give way to another. In Hogan's mind, each part was a note or phrase of a melody. And each group created a kind of miniature, often comic, tableau in which to frame the wit. The challenge of these opening scenes is that it is the words and the

wit that create movement, but that was difficult to do, particularly in front of a contemporary audience attached, through popular culture, to action and not used to seeing actors sit still. As a result Hogan, sensitive to this challenge, periodically moved characters across the stage in S-shaped or diagonal lines so as to activate the motion of the epigrams and thought. Brian Cavanaugh's lighting supported this movement.

In terms of visual cues, Hogan also thought a great deal about the costuming. Her sense is that costumes give audiences something to look at, particularly when there is so little physical action on stage. Here she made an interesting choice to move the date of the costuming up and took her designs (Dixon Reynolds created the costumes) from 1912 and not from the late 1800s. These more sensible, less fluffy, and crinoline-less dresses allowed the actors to move more easily in the confined spaces of the Irish Classical Theatre's stage. For Hogan, 1912 was perhaps no arbitrary date. It was still a period when many of the issues plaguing Wilde were current (Hogan asked herself "How far can I go before things change politically?") and, furthermore, it was a period Hogan associates with episodes of *Downton Abbey*, the series that she admires, finds relevant, and which she also wanted the audience to think of (Hogan). In fact, wishing to give her contemporary audience a recognizable context, she not only elicited its style (actors were asked to look at episodes in order to capture the posture of their characters) but also used its popularity to advertise the play. The theater's website proclaimed, "For all Downton Abbey fans!" Although this kind of advertising might attract someone wondering whether or not to attend the play, in my mind, such a reference to an action-packed, swift-moving serial runs the risk of detracting from Wilde's concentrated complexity (the action of the plays tends to take place in a period of twenty-four hours) and of oversimplifying his disturbing, yet charming, paradoxical take on class structure and the status of women.

Hogan's production, like most, is also sensitive to the fact that contemporary audiences are not as tolerant of the long speeches as some audiences might have been – and if one looks at Wilde's script, there are several. Always wanting to keep the story line visible, audible, and relevant, she cut some of the longer passages, but only by giving them what she called a "haircut and a shave" and getting rid of the "cobwebs" (Hogan). Indeed, she showed me speeches that she had cropped, and quite frankly, the "damage" was limited – if there at all. Wilde's and his characters' idiosyncratic voices were still very much present. (Perhaps one should recall that ever since the 1890s the scripts of Wilde's plays have been adjusted and altered.) Hogan's main thought was for the lines and the story line to be clear and for the actors themselves to consider their meaning so that they clearly presented their characters. The production, it should be noted, still lasted with interval almost two and a half hours.

Other productions of Wilde, especially *The Importance of Being Earnest*, go on and on. It is interesting that in the autumn, my college is going to put on *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a nod to its homosexual possibilities (Lady Bracknell is going to be played in drag), that a new production of the play is being performed at the Harold Pinter Theatre in London (with added material by Simon Brett – one wonders what this material is), and that simultaneously yet another production is on tap in one of the colleges at the University of Cambridge, UK. This play is easier to pull off than either *Lady Windermere's Fan* or *A Woman of No Importance*, for nothing dire will happen if anyone is found out. *The Importance of Being Earnest* propagates the clever, epigrammatic Wilde and easily avoids the darker side that both productions I saw allowed to surface from beneath the dialogue's glittering phrases. It is refreshing to see productions that honor Wilde's social conscience

as well as his wit. It is only in these darker social comedies that the true conversation with Wilde can continue.

SUNY College at Buffalo

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Lady Windermere's Fan. Directed by Peter Hinton. The Shaw Festival Theatre, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Canada. May 9 – October 19, 2013.

A Woman of No Importance. Directed by Josephine Hogan. The Irish Classical Theatre, Buffalo, New York. January 17 – February 9, 2014.

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A FELT EXPERIENCE: *TOUCHING THE BOOK* AT BIRKBECK, LONDON

By Ryan Sweet

CURATED BY VICTORIAN BLINDNESS EXPERT Heather Tilley, the National-Lottery-funded Birkbeck exhibition *Touching the Book* explores the history of literacy for blind and visually impaired people in nineteenth-century Britain and Europe through the development of embossed literature. A particular strength of *Touching the Book* is the way that it provides a compelling and accessible narrative of the development of embossed writing technologies without either compromising the historical nuances of the topic or telling its story in a predictable, linear, chronological way.

The exhibition's narrative begins in the Romantic period with John Thomas Smith's 1816 etching of two blind beggars (Figure 15). This image draws our attention to the ways in which written stories were used by blind beggars, such as one of the figures displayed in the etching, to gain alms – the figure on the right wears a placard round his neck with writing on it. Immediately one is struck by the irony of such an image: one imagines that the blind could neither read nor transcribe such narratives. Such use of written stories by supposedly blind beggars highlights the importance of being able to read and write decipherable text in the period in which this image was produced: by displaying and in some cases "reading aloud" such stories, beggars attempted to give the impression that they were literate in spite of their



Figure 15. (Color online) John Thomas Smith, *Two Blind Beggars*. Etching, 1816. Courtesy of Wellcome Library.

sensory impairments in the hope that they could impress passers-by and convince them to offer charitable donations. Unfortunately, however, such displays led to stigma. Many thought that these acts were fraudulent and that the beggars were revealing their able-bodiedness. The exhibition's narrative thus begins by shedding light on the marginalised status of the blind in the early 1800s: they were compelled to use written systems that were poorly suited to their sensory capacities and were frequently associated in the popular imagination with begging and imposture.

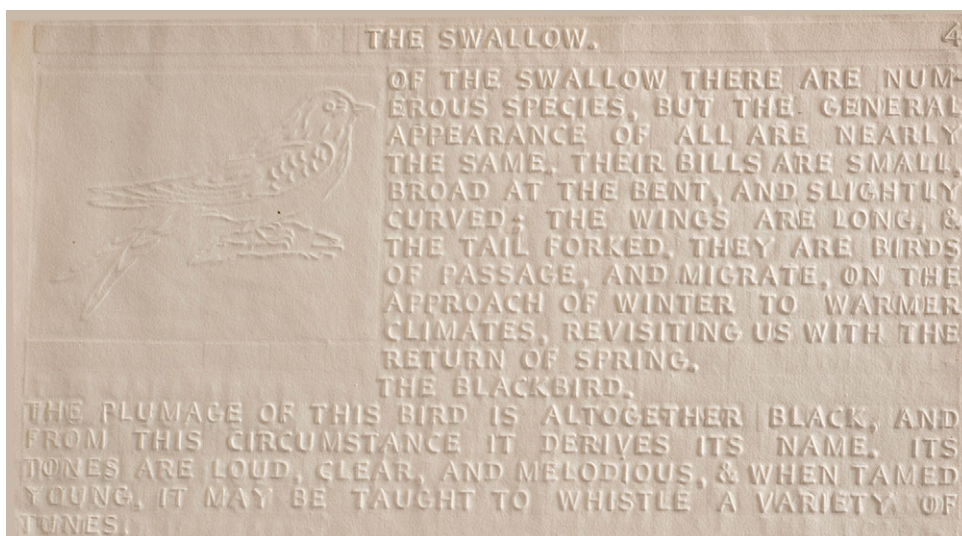


Figure 16. (Color online) Unknown, page opening from *A Peep into the Menagerie of Birds, Embossed for the Use of the Blind* (Glasgow: Printed in the Asylum at the Institution Press by John Alston, 1842). Alston type. Courtesy of RNIB Collection.

While one might expect a technophilic and optimistic narrative of human triumph over sensory impairment to follow, instead what we see displayed and explained is a struggle for finger-reading development punctuated by many conflicting voices – those of doctors, educators of the blind, individuals affiliated with charities, and blind people themselves. As we learn, debates about what and how the blind should read proliferated, resulting in the appearance of multiple systems for blind reading in England, Europe, and the US.

Central to the story told by the exhibition are the heated debates that were waged between educators who favoured a system based on the Roman alphabet and those who advocated arbitrary systems – newly designed scripts that were not directly derivative of the Roman alphabet, such as braille – which were better suited to finger reading. A variety of scripts are displayed by *Touching the Book*, including Roman-alphabet-based systems, such as those of John Alston (Figure 16), The Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum, William Moon, and James Gall; and arbitrary ones – newly designed systems that were not based on the Roman alphabet, which were created to enable easier finger reading – such as those of T. M. Lucas, George A. Hughes, James H. Frere, and, most familiarly, Louis Braille. The number of different types of script on display will come as a surprise to many.

While some of the Roman-alphabet-based scripts look very similar, it is interesting to learn what makes each system unique. Alston, for instance, used Edmund Fry's sans serif version of the Roman alphabet, whereas Gall's major contribution to the development of embossed writing was in the technique of embossing itself – he used metal types and frames, which enabled the printing of larger book volumes and a more even and tactually legible typeset. Other Roman-based scripts, such as Moon's, however, look quite different. Moon's system, which the Brighton-based innovator developed after losing his sight in the 1840s,

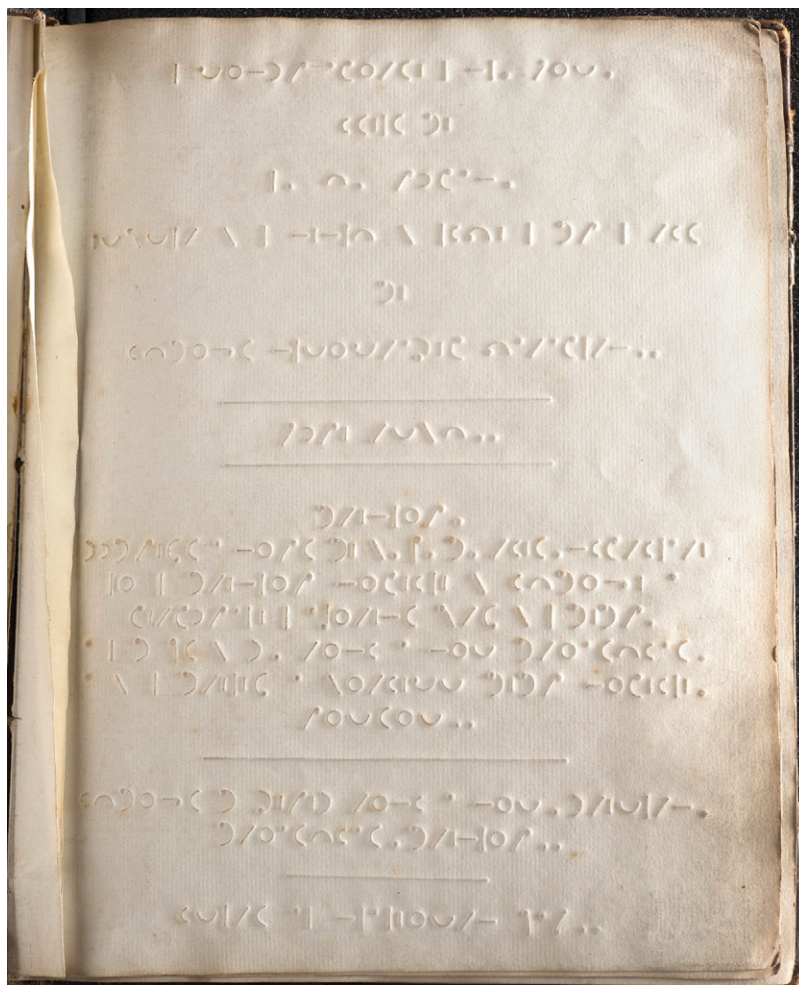


Figure 17. (Color online) Page opening from *The Gospel According to Saint John*, edited by T. M. Lucas (Bristol: Bristol Society for Embossing and Circulating the Authorised Version of the Bible, 1837). Lucas type. Courtesy of RNIB Collection.

encompasses a modified version of the Roman alphabet. The letters in Moon's system are simplified to enable easier haptic reading – the letter D, for instance, looks like a backwards C. This system was the most widely used embossed script prior to the global adoption of braille from 1870 onwards and was successful, in part, due to its relatively cheap production – a result of Moon's invention of a low-cost yet robust stereotype. One of the most surprising facts about the Roman-based scripts is that Moon's system is still in use (albeit infrequently) today.

The arbitrary systems display a number of curious similarities and differences. Lucas's system was based on stenographic (shorthand) principles (Figure 17) as was Hughes's, but

the latter differs significantly as it is dot rather than line based. In fact, Hughes type is not dissimilar in appearance to braille in terms of its dotted cellular units. Lucas's system comprises a series of raised lines, curved and straight, with circles at the end of some symbols. A number of Lucas's signs are identical to those of today's Pitman Shorthand. Frere's alphabet, on the other hand, contains one character for each simple sound that he identified in the English language, which he embossed according to the pronunciation decided by John Walker's *A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary* (1791). Frere's characters look a little like Lucas's but without the circular ends. Just by looking at the various embossed systems, Roman-based and arbitrary, one begins to appreciate why braille eventually came to prominence: to a sighted visitor, it looks like the system that would have the most tactually legible and distinct characters.

As one learns from the exhibition, the emergence of raised print was enmeshed in debates pertaining to religion, functionality, and ableism. Indeed, a significant portion of the exhibition explores the influence of Christianity on the development of reading technologies for the blind. Before the introduction of embossed print, blindness was often seen as a state of faithlessness, since the blind could not read Holy Scripture. Evangelical and religious tract societies thus saw the blind as a social group in especial need of moral and spiritual intervention. A moralising rhetoric is present in several of the embossed texts on display, including the *48th Annual Report of Moon's Society* in which Moon's daughter's motive for following in her deceased father's footsteps is revealed: "she is encouraged to believe that, as the days and months and years roll on (should she be spared to continue the Work), she will still be graciously supported by the hand of a loving Father who will incline the hearts of His dear people to contribute cheerfully of their substance, so that the Blind of *every nation* may have the Gospel of Life presented to them in the simplest of all Embossed types" (3).

Touching the Book also shows us the fascinating machines that were used to print embossed text. An impressive range of raised-text typewriters, braille-printing devices, and other blind-writing apparatuses take up almost all of one of the narrower walls of the exhibition space. Of all the contraptions displayed in this thematic section, the ones that caught my attention were the Klein-type box and Klein-type letters tray – Klein type being an early Viennese form of embossed writing based on the Roman alphabet. The box itself is a portable writing frame with compartments containing the intricate pins necessary for embossing paper. Displayed alongside the box is a tray from a separate writing set in which the specially shaped heads of the pins (letters) are clearly visible (Figure 18). While the ingenuity and craftsmanship of the pins in particular seem impressive to a sighted visitor, one cannot help but wonder about the usability of the Klein system: it looks incredibly fiddly and would surely have required considerable training to master. Furthermore, such equipment was by no means straightforwardly enabling, since blind writing technologies were by and large extremely expensive, thus excluding many from being able to use them. One minor shortfall of the exhibition here is that it does not show how Klein type looks or feels when printed.

The final section of the exhibition shows some of the ways that the blind and their new reading technologies were displayed in visual culture. Four poignant photographs show various blind readers – children, women, and the embossed-writing developer Moon – finger reading. The images expose a cultural fascination with the haptic abilities of the blind, which extended from the Romantic period through the early twentieth century – see, for instance, the travel writing of the "Blind Traveller," James Holman, from the 1820s and thirties; Wilkie



Figure 18. (Color online) Klein Type Box, c. 1840. Folding box, green felt backing to type board, 24 lines, lead type. With key and catches. Courtesy of RNIB Collection.

Collins's 1872 novel *Poor Miss Finch*; and H. G. Wells's 1904 short story "The Country of the Blind." Wells's short story illustrates an interest not just in blindness but in the enhanced perceptive touch of the blind, a compensatory effect of blindness explored in depth earlier by Collins. Victorian blindness and prosthesis expert Vanessa Warne writes that such cultural representations of blind reading reveal more to us about how the blind were imagined in Victorian society than they do about the lived experiences of visually disabled people: more often than not such depictions attest to the idolisation of blind people by the sighted, who focussed upon the achievements of blind readers and the progress of contemporary technology and education systems while ignoring the various difficulties, complexities, and nuances of learning and performing blind reading in this period ("On Bridges and Streets: The Public Face of Raised-Print Readers").

During my visit to *Touching the Book*, I was struck by a number of overlaps between the exhibition and Jennifer Esmail's recent ground-breaking monograph on Victorian deafness, *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Most significantly, the Roman alphabet vs. arbitrary system debate at the heart of *Touching the Book* bears uncanny resemblance to the oralism (the preference for spoken language made manifest by the teaching of speech and lip reading to the deaf) vs. signed language debate, which is central to *Reading Victorian Deafness*. Together, the exhibition and Esmail's book show how language, spoken and written, emerged as much contested topics when considered

in relation to the sensory impaired. In a time when, as Lennard J. Davis has shown us, the concept of normalcy came to the fore, methods of communication that deviated from standard written and spoken forms – such as arbitrary-based raised print writing systems and signed language – were seen as a threat to able-bodied hegemony.

Though there are clear intersections between the language debates surrounding deafness and blindness respectively in the nineteenth century, a comparison of the exhibition with Esmail's book also reveals some curious contrasts. Most notably, there seems to be a crucial difference in terms of freedom of choice for the blind and the deaf with regard to language. As Esmail makes clear, the deaf faced considerable pressure to conform to oralist standards in the nineteenth century – despite the functional superiority of signed languages – culminating in the 1880 Milan Congress of Deaf Educators and the 1889 Royal Commission on the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb, which each recommended oralism over signed languages. The blind, on the other hand, were afforded more freedom to choose the embossed writing system that they thought most effective, hence the widespread adoption of braille by the end of the nineteenth century. Braille was generally accepted as the most cost-effective, practical, and easy-to-use of the systems available. Compared to the Milan Congress and Royal Commission, of which the majority of members were able bodied, the British and Foreign Blind Association, whose highly successful campaign to promote braille after it was found superior to other embossed scripts in 1870, was notably more responsive to the practical needs of the sensory impaired than many educators of the deaf were in this period.

Such differences in the development of communicative systems for the sensory impaired raise important questions for future work in this field: why were the blind given more freedom to choose their preferred script system than the deaf were to choose their own language? Does this signify a difference in attitudes towards deaf and blind communication systems? Were signed languages perceived as more alien than raised print technologies? If so, why was this the case? Can resistances to arbitrary script systems and signed languages be read as part of the same move that sought to “integrate” disabled communities rather than allow them to prosper outside of hegemonic ableist society?

In terms of the public audience that *Touching the Book* attempts to speak to, it is worth taking a moment to think about the exhibition in terms of accessibility – not in the sense of its ability to convey information in an easy-to-understand manner but the extent to which the exhibition is accessible for blind people, whose history the exhibition discloses. A supervised party from a school for the blind happened to visit the exhibition while I was there, rewarding me with a first-hand glimpse of how the blind might experience an exhibition about the reading and writing technologies created for their literate predecessors. Clearly blind visitors were a major consideration when the exhibition space was designed, since a number of resources were made available for the sensory impaired, including transcriptions of exhibition panel and caption text in braille; relief images of eight of the exhibition objects, plus an additional embossed alphabet example, with object descriptions in braille; a full set of object descriptions in a Microsoft Word document on the exhibition blog; booklets of caption and panel texts in large print; magnifying glasses; and enlarged images of ten exhibition objects. In addition to these provisions, the exhibition also provided a series of descriptive guided tours, which, on the day of my visit, the blind visitors made the most of.

While the extent to which the exhibition was made accessible to the blind and partially sighted is laudable, more might have been done to make it tangibly engaging for visitors. Indeed, it would have been helpful if some of the objects on display could have been uncovered

for handling purposes, though gaining permission for such access from the museums and collections that own the items might have been difficult, if not impossible. A tactile alternative might have been to include some enlarged relief images as part of the displays, though financial limitations must, of course, be considered.

A final notable feature of the exhibition that must be commended is its significant online presence. Indeed, I would strongly encourage *Victorian Literature and Culture* readers to make the most of the exhibition's blog, which not only features images, labels, and descriptions of all of the objects displayed at the exhibition, but also has a well-stocked "Features and Articles" section that contains entries from a number of experts in the field, including not just Tilley and Warne but also Noëlle Roy, Jan Seymour-Ford, Jan Eric Olsén, and Hannah Thompson.

All in all, in spite of the space limitations of the Peltz Gallery and the financial and handling restrictions that prevented it from being even more tactile, *Touching the Book* was an intellectually stimulating, uncluttered, and well-displayed exhibition that told a largely forgotten story about the history of visual impairment in a compelling and accessible (in both senses of the word) manner. The exhibition can be considered a result of increased interest in the history of disability, the senses, and human-object relationships. Above all, the exhibition encourages us to think about what life would have been like for Europe's first finger readers. In wider terms, *Touching the Book* makes us think about how we learn and what it means to read through visual, versus haptic, media. To borrow a quote from Mary Ann O'Farrell, who writes on what she calls "blindness envy" in Victorian culture, *Touching the Book* once again reveals that "blindness is . . . a means of contemplating the experience of having and being a body in the world" (512).

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