

Whispers of the Unspeakable: New York and Montreal Newspaper Coverage of the Oscar Wilde Trials in 1895

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Introduction

A central difficulty in tracing popular attitudes towards homosexuality in nineteenth-and early twentieth-century American society is the lack of documentary evidence on the subject. Same-sex activity was long considered literally “unspeakable” in mainstream circles, and discussion of it was erased. There is one useful source to consult for public discussion of homosexual activities, in the shape past newspaper and magazine reports of sex scandals. Though usually sensational and often moralistic, these newspaper accounts and/or descriptions of homosexual activities nevertheless provide some evidence of contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality, and thereby offer insight into the ways in which of dominant social conceptions of minority sexuality were formed and transmitted.

Undoubtedly the best-known scandal involving homosexual activity at the turn of the century was the trials of Oscar Wilde in England during 1895, which eventuated in his conviction on charges of “gross indecency.” The trial dominated British public discourse. Popular attitudes were both reflected and fueled by accounts of the trials in the press. Both “posh” and “penny press” newspapers devoted extensive daily coverage to the affair, and maintained a steady stream of invective against Wilde in their pages. *The Westminster Gazette*, praising his conviction, claimed, “It will undoubtedly do much good, not only in punishing actual criminals and putting the fear of the law into others, but in checking unwholesome tendencies in art and literature.” Similarly, the *St. James Gazette*, which called Wilde a “perverted criminal”, called for a return of “wholesome bigotry” to art and society.¹

Large sectors of the American and Canadian public were also interested by the

Wilde case. Wilde's North American tour during 1881 had made him a familiar figure, and his works enjoyed popularity among North Americans. Lippincott's, an American publishing company, commissioned Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, while his plays ran in North American theatres. Wilde in turn featured American characters in several of his works. Wilde's trials sparked widespread public comment within North America. Clergymen denounced Wilde, and public libraries, starting with that of St. Louis, withdrew his works from their shelves. The *Police Gazette* ran a series of caricatures of Wilde. Conversely, the anarchist leader Emma Goldman defended him in lectures, as did the anarchist author "Lucifer."²

More importantly for our purposes, North American newspapers devoted a fair amount of space to the affair, if less than their London counterparts. These are very useful to examine for the insight they offer into contemporary attitudes towards homosexuality. Since these newspapers, unlike the English counterparts, were not reporting to a public directly and emotionally charged by the scandal, their accounts may also reveal more clearly the state of everyday public knowledge and discussion of (homo)sexuality, at least west of the Atlantic.

This paper focuses on the press coverage in New York and Montreal. Not only were these the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in their respective countries in 1895, but each remained divided along complex ethnic, class, and linguistic lines, with distinct newspapers and magazines which appealed to different social groups. The different newspapers' approaches—the frequency and placement of their accounts, the attitudes they expressed towards Wilde, and most importantly, the ways in which they attempted to describe the charges against him—provide important evidence of the cleavages in public attitudes towards the "unspeakable" subject of homosexuality.

Background and History of the Trials

Oscar Wilde, playwright, poet, and wit extraordinaire, was born in Ireland in 1854, the son of a distinguished oculist, Sir William Wilde, and Jane Wilde, a salon hostess who also wrote fiery Irish nationalist poetry under the name of "Speranza." The young Wilde attended Trinity College, Dublin, and Oxford, where he made a name for himself as a poet, and even more as an eccentric. Under the influence of John Ruskin and Walter Pater, Wilde became absorbed by the theory of aestheticism, of finding the beautiful in life and divorcing art from morality by championing "art for art's sake." According to historian Neil McKenna, he also became active in Gay circles. He studied the homoerotic poetry of Walt Whitman (with whom he shared an intimate afternoon during his American tour). He also befriended John Addington Symonds, a pioneering defender of "Greek love." During the late 1870s, he became sexually involved with Frank Miles, a society portrait painter, with whom he remained paired until his marriage in 1884.³

In late 1881, Wilde was hired by the theatrical impresario Richard D'Oyly Carte to undertake a North American lecture tour. D'Oyly Carte was producing *Patience*, a new operetta by Gilbert and Sullivan that satirized the aesthetic craze. Fearing that Americans

and Canadians might not get the joke, he hit on the idea of bringing over Wilde, one of the young adepts of the aesthetic movement. It was a slick move. Wilde's tour gave him the opportunity to exercise his great talent for grabbing publicity, and to make money for himself while simultaneously spreading his ideas and aiding his sponsors. When Wilde arrived in New York and was asked at customs whether he had anything to declare, he said that he did not. Pressed by reporters for a wittier response, Wilde quickly grasped what was expected of him, and replied, "I have nothing to declare but my genius."⁴

Over the next year, Wilde gave over 200 lectures. In New York, he caused a sensation by wearing long hair, a velvet jacket and knee breeches. There, his lecture at Chickering Hall on the Arts and Crafts movement moved Cuban expatriate revolutionary writer José Martí was moved to admiration by "this intrepid young man" with his "noble and thoughtful words."⁵ Wilde visited Montreal in mid-May 1882, where his speech on "The Decorative Arts" generated equal enthusiasm (the newspaper *La Patrie* dubbed him the "True, original, and superlatively incredible Oscar.")⁶ The positive reception Wilde received was slightly dampened by the offense proud locals took when their visitor, invited to take a carriage ride around the city's scenic Mount Royal Park, afterwards described the mountain merely as a "hill."⁷

In the years following his American tour, Wilde toned down his public persona, dressed more conservatively, married and had children, and gave up public performances. At first, in order to support his family, he worked as a magazine journalist and critic. The success of his 1889 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* enabled Wilde to take up literature full time. In the years that followed, he turned his hand to comic plays such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. In his novel and plays, Wilde used epigrams to poke fun at social hypocrisy and double standards. In this they reflected Wilde's own double life, as during these years he came out into a gay underground of sexual experimentation with rent boys, which Wilde later referred to in his letter/essay *De Profundis* as "feasting with panthers." In 1892, Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, a parasitic and self-absorbed young aristocrat studying at Oxford. The two swiftly became inseparable, though they continued to see other men for sexual relations. Their passionate and relatively public affair dominated Wilde's emotions. Douglas's father, the Marquess of Queensberry, a bad-tempered and perhaps mentally unbalanced man most famous for devising the Queensberry rules in boxing, firmly opposed his son's connection with Wilde, and began stalking him.

In February 1895, with the opening of his theatrical masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde was at the peak of his fame. It was then that he received a card at his club in London from the Marquess of Queensberry, addressed "to Oscar Wilde, posing as a sodomite [*sic*]." The card marked the climax of the Marquess's long campaign of harassment. Enraged by the card and egged on by Douglas, who hated his father, Wilde sued Queensberry for libel. The libel trial opened on April 3, 1895. The defense, conducted by Queensberry's attorney Sir Edward Carson, quoted passages from Wilde's writings, notably his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as evidence of his "immorality," and introduced a homoerotic letter Wilde had written to Douglas, which Douglas' servant had

stolen and sold to Queensberry:

My Dear Boy—Your sonnet is quite lovely. Your roseleaf lips seem made no less for the music of song than for the madness of kisses. Your slim, gilt soul walks between poetry and passion. I know that Hyacinthus, who was loved by Apollo, was you in the Greek days.

Wilde countered by defending his writings as artistic statements. He freely admitted that he enjoyed the company of young men, and gave them presents, but denied any immorality. However, when Carson asked him during his cross-examination if he had kissed either Douglas or his male servant, Wilde flippantly responded, “Oh, dear no . . . [the servant] was, unfortunately, extremely ugly.” The questioning then grew intense, and when Carson announced that he would offer testimony by young men who had had sex with Wilde, Wilde gave up the case and the jury found for Queensberry.⁸

By giving up the case, Wilde laid himself open to arrest on criminal charges related to his sex life. There is some evidence that Wilde was persuaded to abandon the case after a private pledge by officials to his attorney that if he desisted he would not be further disturbed. Certainly, the government was reluctant to try him—Lord Alfred Douglas, who had committed the same acts, was never charged. However, Neil McKenna has made a strong case that Queensberry blackmailed the government of Prime Minister Lord Rosebury to prosecute Wilde by threatening to reveal Rosebury’s own liaison with the Marquess’s eldest son, Lord Alfred Douglas’s older brother Viscount Drumlanig.

Following a pause—perhaps designed to allow Wilde time to flee England, which he refused to do—Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel. On April 26, Wilde and Alfred Taylor, his alleged procurer, were brought to trial on charges of conspiracy (later withdrawn) and of “gross indecency.” The prosecution brought in two young men, who testified that they had had sex with Wilde for money and presents. However, Sir Edward Clarke, Wilde’s counsel, was able to introduce doubt as to the men’s own reliability and moral character—one was revealed as a blackmailer, another a perjurer. Wilde swore that he merely liked the company of young men. When asked about a line in a poem by Douglas, “the love that dare not speak its name,” he responded:

‘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 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. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, where the elder has intellect and the younger has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. . . . The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

Wilde's eloquence, which drew great applause from spectators, probably saved him from a conviction, as the jury was unable to agree on a verdict. As a result, Wilde was brought to trial a second time on May 22, following the conviction of Taylor in a separate trial. This time, Wilde was found guilty, and on May 28th, 1895, he was sentenced to two years at hard labor.⁹ His reputation was destroyed by his conviction, and the rigors of imprisonment shattered his health. Following his release from prison in 1897, he sought exile in France, where he died in 1900.

The British public was intensely interested by the Wilde affair, which became a defining event for turn-of-the-century English society in very much the same way that the Dreyfus case was for contemporary France. English journalists and social leaders excoriated Wilde as the central figure in a conspiracy to sap the nation's strength from within—the very same accusation French anti-Semites leveled against the Jews. Similarly, even as Dreyfus' opponents had warned of treasonous plots by cabals of “international Jewry,” rumors and press reports spread through England of influential secret networks set to work in Wilde's defense—ironically, given Queensberry's sub rosa (or one might say sub Rosebury) effort to coerce the government to prosecute Wilde.¹⁰

On one level, it was not simply sexual acts for which Wilde was pilloried by British “respectable” public opinion, but his ideas and persona. Wilde had proclaimed that art and artists could not be judged by common moral standards; he acted in an eccentric, theatrical fashion. Nonetheless, Wilde's sexuality was central to the hostility he inspired, inasmuch as his homosexual practices were the visible sign and proof of his “decadence” and of the threat that he posed to conventional mores. In seeking the company of working-class men on an equal basis, Wilde laid bare a double standard in English sexual morality, whereby working-class prostitutes were legally harassed and humiliated while middle-class men bought their services with impunity. Conversely, there was no public outcry for the arrest and imprisonment of the young men who admitted sleeping with Wilde for money. They were popularly portrayed as innocents of whom Wilde had taken advantage. In the end, Oscar Wilde, who had boldly satirized sexual hypocrisy in his work, became a perfect scapegoat for middle-class social and sexual anxieties.

The New York Press

In analyzing the New York press coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials, it is useful to break the treatment down along class lines, into two categories. The first category is the “establishment press,” journals such the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune* that

served a fundamentally middle-class and elite audience. The establishment papers were the most comprehensive in their coverage, but the most reticent in their discussions of sexuality. The second group is the “popular” press, the so-called “penny newspapers,” such as the *New York Sun* and the *New York Herald*. Aimed primarily at working-class and less-educated people of varied ethnic backgrounds, they frequently satirized middle-class attitudes and snobbery, and took a generally more pro-labor position, but also tended to be strongly nationalistic and sometimes openly racist.¹¹

The Establishment Press

The most striking feature of the lengthy *Times* and *Tribune* coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials, especially given the former’s celebrated motto, “all the news that’s fit to print,” is the two newspapers’ failure to state clearly either the charges against Wilde or the nature of the illegal conduct at issue. Rather, they tended to provide delicate hints. Jonathan Ned Katz, who studied the *Times* coverage in his *Gay/Lesbian Almanac*, argues that such delicacy “either left readers quite in the dark about Wilde’s transgression, or forced them to use their imaginations to make sense of the reports.”¹² Still, while some readers were undoubtedly mystified, both newspapers in fact used Aesopian language, that is, apparently innocent code words designed to reveal to enlightened readers the real nature of the matter being discussed.

The first time the Wilde matter appeared in the establishment press was a short article on page 12 of the *Tribune*’s March 3, 1895 issue. It explained that Oscar Wilde was suing the Marquess of Queensberry after having received a card “upon the back of which was written a vile and disgraceful epithet,” and that the porter of the club, on reading the card, enclosed it in an envelope so that it might not be seen by other persons than Mr. Wilde.” Though the *Tribune* did not name the epithet, let alone mention Queensberry’s imputation of Wilde’s homosexuality, it noted pointedly that “Mr. Wilde’s lawyer, in presenting the complaint, set forth that Mr. Wilde was living upon the most affectionate terms with his wife and two sons.” The next day, the *Tribune* added that Wilde admitted writing “an extravagant letter” to Douglas in 1893, but that “the jury must take into consideration the artistic circle in which Mr. Wilde moved.”

Similarly, *The New York Times* began its coverage of Wilde in a report from London on March 10, in which a correspondent commented that, “It is impossible not to mention the Oscar Wilde and Queensberry affair. . . . One of Bohemian London’s choicest diversions is making up a list of the young literary, artistic, and social celebrities whose engagements will probably take them to Brussels toward the end of the month.”

These early reports set the tone for the later coverage of the Wilde affair by the establishment press. What is distinctive is the Aesopian language that pervades the coverage. Terms such as “artistic” and “Bohemian” in the newspaper accounts served as code language for unconventional sexual morality. The use of these terms, coupled with the suggestion that legions of “artistic” celebrities were about to flee the country to avoid prosecution, made it possible for informed readers to grasp what was involved.

The newspapers continued their use of coded language in describing Wilde's libel suit and the cross-examination that led him to abandon it. The April 5th *Times* article summarized the testimony, reporting that Wilde had admitted dining with and giving gifts to "poor" young men because he liked the company of the "young, happy, careless." While neither newspaper described the contents of Wilde's "extravagant" letter or his comments about kissing boys, the *Times* provided a guarded reference to sexual matters: "Mr. Carson's cross-examination . . . was intended to prove that Mr. Wilde is really as bad as he seems to affect to be." Similarly, the next day the *Times* announced that Wilde had been arrested. It emphasized prosecutor Carson's decision to introduce young men to testify about their relationship with the playwright at the upcoming trial. "The ages of these men varied from eighteen to twenty-three years. They were of the class of servants and valets, not of Mr. Wilde's station in life, not interested in literature or art, yet they addressed this distinguished dramatist by his first name. Mr. Carson said he would produce overwhelming evidence of the immorality of this man Wilde."

Though the *Times* did not describe Wilde's precise offense, readers were clearly expected to understand the connection between intimate cross-class relations and immorality. It added a short article based on a cable from London, which commented that "Although Oscar Wilde is languishing in jail . . . on a heinous charge, he still has a number of influential friends who are zealous in his defense, notwithstanding that they are intimate enough with him to know most of the secrets of his private life." Among them was Lord Alfred Douglas' older brother Lord Douglas, "altogether the manliest-looking of the family . . . [who] entirely differs in every respect from his effeminate next younger brother, Lord Alfred Douglas." The reference to Wilde's "private life," associated with the pejorative reference to Douglas as "effeminate" was a strong clue to sexual matters.

The conclusion of the April 7th *Tribune* article provided the only indication in the elite papers of the charge against Wilde. It noted that, "Wilde is being prosecuted under the Criminal Law Amendment act, which classes his offense as a misdemeanor, the maximum penalty for which is two years' imprisonment for each conviction." While doubtless few *Tribune* readers were experts on British penal law, the nature of the offense could be inferred by the newspaper's citation of testimony by a witness, Charles Parker, who "gave in detail the particulars of his introduction to Wilde by [co-defendant Alfred] Taylor, and said that the latter told him Wilde was 'good for money'. Parker told a story which, if true, proves the case of the treasury [sic] against Wilde."

The *Times* article the same day also represented its most direct discussion of the nature of the Wilde trial, by referring to the effect of the scandal in breaking English society's silence on sexual issues. The *Times's* London correspondent wrote that, "like the Beecher-Tilton trial [a notorious adultery trial in 1870s New York], it broke down a number of conversational barriers ordinarily maintained in social intercourse."¹³ Yet the invitation to openness the *Times* claimed had spread in London as a result of the affair was not further demonstrated in the journal's own pages. On April 8th, the *Times* printed an article called "Oscar Wilde's disgrace." Despite the article's title, the piece did not

contain any discussion of the details of Wilde's offense (let alone the use of the word homosexuality). No purpose would be served by any such discussion, the newspaper claimed, which would be simply scandal-mongering. On the contrary, it rather disingenuously protested that it was printing news about Wilde merely to satisfy the curiosity of the Irish (whose national struggle the paper considered to be implicated in the case) and of those who had met Wilde personally. "Aside from the depravity that it has been necessary to make public in the downfall of Oscar Wilde, people who met him here and accepted his letters of introduction as an accredited English gentleman, are curious to know something of his family." Unlike the earlier *Tribune* piece, which pointedly quoted Wilde's lawyer on his relations with his wife, the author of the article portrayed Wilde's mother and family only briefly, as generic victims of misfortune. Yet, the connection with his unmentionable "depravity" made fairly explicit the nature of Wilde's offense.

Over the next weeks, as Wilde underwent his first criminal trial, there was little information. A short article towards the back pages of the May 2nd issue of the *Times* summarized the trial testimony and results. The article printed Wilde's "Love that dare not speak its name" speech (which it called the "most eloquent part of his plea") in its entirety. On May 12, the *Times'* London correspondent cabled that there was "genuine regret at the understanding that Oscar Wilde [was] to remain in the country and stand a fresh trial. . . . There has come a feeling that the man has been punished enough already and that a sentence to eighteen months or a year of the English prison terrors can only make a martyr of him in the minds of many impressionable young men, hence do more harm than good."

Despite this ambivalent expression of sympathy for Wilde, on May 26th, the *Times* gleefully reported the final verdict of guilty in the second trial. Though it failed to list the offense of which he was convicted in the dispatch (whose content strongly suggested that was reprinted from a London newspaper), it echoed the conspiratorial tone of much of the British coverage:

His sentence, which is the maximum, settles the action of the police in a matter which they have been holding under advisement. It is stated on good authority that they have a list of 400 gentlemen of England—some in the peerage, one at least said to be in the ministry, and several well known on the opposition benches—and they are now to be served with notice that they must at once abandon all possible suggestions of offense, including association with people known to the police, or be forced to leave England within three months.

The Popular Press

Two popular newspapers, the *New York Herald* and the *New York Sun*, each provided detailed coverage of the Oscar Wilde trial.¹⁴ These consisted primarily of the same excerpts of cabled dispatches that appeared in the establishment press, plus additional reports from special correspondents. However, there was a marked difference in the coverage: the reports in the popular press contained rather more free discussion of the more delicate (or lurid) portions of trial testimony. At the same time, the articles were sharply moralistic in tone, though there was probably a fair amount of calculated sensationalism in their expressed moral fervor.

The *Herald* began coverage of the Queensberry libel trial on April 4th. Its lavish excerpts from the testimony left no doubt as to the nature of the Marquess's accusation. The article quoted the entire text of Wilde's "prose sonnet" to Douglas, and cited Wilde's attorney on the libelous card, which "alleged that Mr. Wilde had been posing immorally." The Marquess, he said, had repeatedly accused Wilde "of having solicited a number of gentlemen to engage with him in a series of grave offenses."

The *Herald's* and the *Sun's* April 5th articles, which consisted of more or less identical, largely verbatim accounts of Wilde's cross-examination, offered clear details about the nature of Wilde's conduct. For instance, the articles reprinted Wilde's profession of ignorance that Alfred Taylor, who had introduced him to five young men, "had made himself notorious by his practice of introducing young men to older ones." Furthermore, the *Herald* reported that, "Mr. Wilde said that a masseur had attended him at the Savoy hotel, but denied that that person had ever seen him in a compromising position. All of the young men who visited him at his rooms did so as his guests."

The next day, both the *Herald* and the *Sun* printed the United Press dispatch detailing the facts of Wilde's arrest. The dispatch plainly stated the nature of the libel in question, "viz., that Wilde was posing as a devotee of unnatural practices." The *Sun's* article, "Wilde's Career Ended," referred to Wilde as a "pampered exquisite," and regretted the fact that "the poor creature had not sufficient pluck to blow out his brains" before his arrest, as his "friends" had believed was "the only proper sequel to his exposure of his character." In a revealing passage (presumably reprinted from a British journal), the paper concluded:

The effect of the exposure and of the exemplary punishment which is sure to follow in Wilde's case will be far-reaching. It comes none too soon. The growth of evil among certain classes of this country is appalling. The police and others are prepared to make fearful revelations as soon as it becomes evident that no other means will suffice to check and destroy the vice which undermined the civilization of the ancient Romans.

The article provides insight into the nature of popular public discourse, according to which homosexuality was a grave menace not because it was a religious sin, but because it was a “corruption” which “undermined” civilization (the libel that it was homosexuality that destroyed ancient Rome dates at least as far back as Edward Gibbon). The allusion to the evil of “certain classes,” i.e. the lower class, makes clear the equation of sexual hierarchies with class structures. The article’s quasi-pornographic “pulp” style, with its titillating allure of secret networks and “fearful revelations” invests transgression, with great and evil power. It recalls Wilde’s own definition of scandal in his play *Lady Windermere’s Fan* as “gossip made tedious by morality.”

The *Herald*’s article the same day shared many of the themes of class anxiety and titillation. It reported that Wilde was now under arrest “on a charge which, in the eyes of most honest men, is more odious than even that of murder” and expressed relief that he had been arrested, as “rumors and innuendos” had begun to spread about prominent men. “Things had indeed been reaching a point at which no man’s name would have been safe.”

On April 7th, the *Sun* ran an article (entitled, with unconscious irony, “All England Aroused”) that described the outrage over Wilde and the “human reptiles” who had shamed England and were being justly punished. It reproduced passages from the most vitriolic articles from the English press on the affair. Yet the same day, the *Herald* ran a lengthy (five-column) article in its Sunday section, “Oscar Wilde’s Curious Career.” It was a comparatively thoughtful, and by turns sympathetic piece, which summarized Wilde’s career and ideas, trip to America, and home life. It featured an “earnest and flattering tribute” by an “intimate American friend”, Mrs. Frank Leslie (who was in fact the ex-wife of Wilde’s elder brother Willie, though the article did not say so). Mrs. Leslie—herself the widow of a prominent American journalist—praised Wilde’s talent and “the wonderful purity and affection which pervade the man’s private life,” including Wilde’s great devotion to his mother and his “worship” of his wife and sons (who were pictured in the article). Mrs. Leslie that she could not believe evil of Wilde, and minimized the importance of his sexuality, commenting that “Perhaps, alas! He contracted this bad habit, if he is guilty of it, at the University. The unfortunate thing, however, is that in London this abuse is very widespread. In my residence there I have been continuously hearing of it as the by-play to almost every celebrated divorce suit.”

It was the article’s last section, summing up the reporter’s impressions, that provides the most striking statement of contemporary attitudes about Wilde. According to the author, Wilde had “fallen so deep that no hand can raise him without being besmirched by his own infamy.” Social reformers therefore now had to turn on him with increased vehemence, in order to avoid being discredited. “In the fall of Oscar Wilde art and literature have innocently suffered. But better no art and no literature than the acceptance of Wilde.” Clearly, despite his comparatively sympathetic tone, the author of the *Herald* article shared the overall hostility towards Wilde’s offense, and for the same reason—its relation to social dissent. The only difference was that this particular author generally supported, rather than opposed, such protest. While homosexuality, the article

implied, could in itself be dismissed as a “bad habit” (widespread among educated people!), Wilde’s real offense was in giving defenders of the conventional morality and “bourgeois respectability” a weapon to discredit all who criticized existing ways, by associating social protest with criminality.

The *Sun*’s coverage of Wilde reached its term with a pair of editorials on April 8th and 9—the existence of editorial comment demonstrating the importance of the affair—which again seem to exemplify the nature of the popular press attitude toward Wilde. The first editorial, entitled “A Type of Degeneration,” claimed to discuss Wilde’s “intellectual and moral disease and abnormality.” As previously, the *Sun* claimed that Wilde was sick—“The type of his malady is accurately described in medical literature, and the symptoms of it as displayed in his case do not vary from those by which it is usually recognized by alienists”¹⁵—and recommended that he be shut up in an insane asylum and “sequestered from society like an incurable leper.” The editorial went on to argue that Wilde’s real disease was “morbid and hysterical” condition of being a social reformer. The reforming impulse, the *Sun* explained, “has its origin in a diseased discontent with conditions and passions and ambitions which are inseparable from social health and indicative of normal human nature. The natural instincts and the rugged virtues of the people; the invigorating spirit and the hearty sentiment necessary for the preservation and strength of the race, are treated as the evidences of an inferiority of development.” The next day’s editorial discussed the Wilde case by reference to German writer Max Nordau’s then-popular 1892 book *Entartung (Degeneration)*. The editorial singled out Wilde’s “perverted instincts” as displayed in taste for outrageous costume. “The predilection for strange costume was pronounced [by Nordau] a pathological aberration of a healthful racial instinct.” Since normal dress was designed to appeal to those, particularly of the opposite sex, it showed thought for others, “that is to say, with the race.”

The collective message of the *Sun*’s two editorials was that non-conformity or discontent with existing social norms, be it in ideas, dress, or “refinement” was not only sick, but dangerous on racial grounds. According to the editorials, Wilde’s danger did not lie in his “degenerate” sexual activities, which represented mental illness (as the article stated, his condition was not unusual, and was well-known in medical circles) but in his degenerative character. Wilde’s sickness was a lack of “hearty” masculine character, combined with insufficient interest in the opposite sex. While such Social Darwinist arguments were a commonplace of the time, the notion that sexual object choice was at the root of “moral character” and gender-role nonconformity, rather than a symptom of it, was a strikingly modern idea. Ironically, while the elite newspapers attacked Wilde for his overfamiliarity with the working class and those “not of his station,” these editorials singled him out for being overly snobbish and “superior,” and too far detached from “the people”!

The Montreal Press

If the New York City newspaper coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials broke down along class and status lines, it is useful to study the Montreal coverage by breaking it down along linguistic and national lines. Perhaps not surprisingly, the English-language covered the trials in greater detail than the French-language press, relying primarily on dispatches from London. In contrast, French Canadians reacted more personally, and with ambigously, to the affair. On the one hand, they were offended by Wilde and the charges against him. At the same time, they felt a certain sympathy for Wilde as a victim of the hypocrisy of British society. They may have been influenced by Wilde's reputation as a Francophile—he wrote his play *Salomé* in French, and his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was so strongly influenced by Huysmanns and Flaubert that one wit dubbed it the first French novel to be written in English.

The English Press

The main English-language coverage of the Wilde trials came in the *Montreal Daily Star* and the *Quebec Daily Mercury*, which served a largely elite and Anglophile clientele. They published many of the same dispatches, taken from international press services, though they made no editorial comment—suggesting that for them, the scandal was far away. Meanwhile, for some reason, whether economic or moral, Montreal's other mainstream English-language daily, the *Montreal Gazette*, carried only two or three brief reports on the Wilde affair.

On April 27, the *Mercury* carried its first article on the affair, "Wilde's strange career," in which it recounted the career of Wilde, "whose downfall is the talk of two continents." It discussed at length his trip to America and his family, including a line drawing of his son Cyril. It referred only in passing to "the Queensberry trial, with all its unspeakable details," and quoted Wilde's old friend and protégée Lily Langtry as saying that it was all part of Oscar's "fads and doings," none of which should be taken seriously.

The Anglophone press's reticence about dealing with Wilde's offense was further demonstrated by the April 30 article in the *Star*, entitled "Oscar Denies it All," which carried a subheading, "States that he has not been guilty of immoral conduct as charged." In its account of Wilde's disquisition on "The love that dare not speak its name," the *Star* reported, "Wilde said he thought it means spiritual love, as pure as it was perfect," and added that he then enlarged upon the subject, with his eloquence drawing applause. On May 1, the *Star* reported the hung jury in the trial. It repeated the judge's summing up to the jury that Wilde's letters "were couched in the LANGUAGE OF PASSIONATE LOVE" [Caps in original] but that Wilde had denied there was anything in them to be ashamed of. Finally, the judge said that "the jury must exercise their own judgment as to whether Wilde's letters to Lord Alfred Douglas breathed an unnatural passion." On May 25, both newspapers carried a dispatch on Wilde's second trial, in which they noted Wilde's testimony that his letters did "not refer to love between men, but to an old poetic idea, not to a sensual, ignoble love."

In its final article on May 27, describing Wilde's guilty verdict and sentencing, the *Star* printed a report, taken from the *New York Sun's* London cable, that described the judge's tirade at Wilde's codefendant Alfred Taylor as "keeper of a male brothel" and Wilde as "perverter of young men." Repeating the conspiratorial tone of the British press, both the *Star* and *Gazette* remarked that, despite Wilde's "abominable offenses," that there was surprise at the guilty verdict because "the influence behind this shameless friend of princes and nobles" would overturn normal judicial procedure. The police had placed the government in possession of the names of men of rank, wealth, and fashion who undoubtedly shared in some of Wilde's orgies."

The Francophone Press

Quebec's French language daily newspapers, most notably *La Patrie*, *La Minerve* and *La Presse*, were much smaller operations in 1895 than the English-language ones—editions generally ran only 4–6 pages 5 days per week, including advertisements and serialized novels. No doubt as a result, their coverage of Wilde was scantier than that of the *Montreal Daily Star*. Oddly, however, their coverage reflected a more direct interest in the proceedings.

On April 20, 1895, the French Canadian poet Louis Frechette, shadowing the popular press in New York, devoted one of his regular Saturday columns in *La Patrie* to a venomous attack on Wilde as a poseur and social climber. "Here is a personality who, after living as a charlatan and a fraud, sinks into a monstrous and dirty crime, to the shock of those whose snobbery and innocent voyeurism he has exploited." In his column, Frechette recounted in detail Wilde's visit to Montreal in 1882 and the bizarre and effeminate spectacle he made then—he insisted that Wilde's lecture was so dull that fell asleep. Frechette concluded his article with the allegation that he disliked Wilde so much that when he saw Wilde "prancing" up to his doorstep he had his maid tell the visitor he was not at home. In fact, as Kevin O'Brien reveals in his delightful book *Oscar Wilde in Canada*, Frechette was not being truthful about the past events—he actually received Wilde that day and even inscribed for him a copy of his book.¹⁶ Frechette's column might thus be said less to represent an assessment of Wilde's crimes than a prime example of the truth of his observation in *An Ideal Husband* that morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards those whom we personally dislike.

An even more venomous editorial attack on Wilde appeared the same day in the drama magazine *Le Passe Temps*. The pseudonymous critic, who signed the article "Silvio," denounced Wilde in stark terms for his "turpitudes" and lack of manliness: "He tried all over to bring about a reform of male dress, in the name of 'éclectisme'. He only wanted effeminate men. It was long thought that this mania concealed absurdity, before it was realized that it resulted from a shameful passion. As debauched as the residents of ancient Sodom, Oscar Wilde wilted the golden youth of London with whom he had relations."

Whatever his personal feelings about Wilde and his offense, "Silvio"'s account

clearly revealed that his principal interest in the Wilde affair was as a stick to beat the English:

The revelations made to the audience were so odious that they needed to close the proceedings. They revealed, once again, the unbridled corruption that rages among the upper classes in England. . . . It is useless to think that this scandal might have an influence on English morals. The English of England are rotten to the bone and count only on hypocrisy to fool the healthy part of the nation and of other countries. A people who defend virtue only through such a vice deserve the scorn and disgust of all that is honest in the world.

The trope of Wilde's criminality and of the hypocrisy of British prudery continued. On May 7, *La Minerve* asked whether the playwright's "scandalous trial" would be reopened. "Untold efforts are being made by the Anglican Church to the government to stop the whole dirty business, on the excuse that it would harm the scrupulous and chaste population of London." When Wilde was released on bail, with an Anglican clergyman as a guarantor, *La Patrie's* editors commented on May 13, "Decidedly prudish Albion is witnessing a sad spectacle. But what can we say of those who have released this dirty person? Is it true that the scandal might cascade up to the top of England?" On May 27, *La Presse* and *La Minerve*, reporting Wilde's conviction, noted that "the affair had made prudish Albion blush." *La Patrie* added facetiously, "The jury finally recognized that it was impossible to let remain within the very chaste and prudish Albion such a compromised person." It reported gleefully that the trial had kept many people stranded in London into midsummer, as they did not wish to seem to be slipping away from town to flee prosecution.

The emphasis the French press placed on British prudery was a double-edged sword. If, as we have seen, French accounts emphasized the scandalous (if never explained) nature of Wilde's offense, they also portrayed him as a victim of sorts of British hypocrisy over "le vice anglais." On April 29, *La Patrie* reprinted an editorial from a New York newspaper, *Le Courier des États-Unis*, that laid bare the multiple national stereotypes that informed French attitudes towards Wilde:

This is certainly a trial which features nothing but very vulgar, banal, and common elements, as the vices for which a very brilliant writer are reproached are no longer popular except in the lower depths of society and in prisons. If thus attention is paid to it, from the Pacific Coast to the Indian Ocean, and across the Atlantic, it is precisely because it concerns a people whose prudish pretensions are characteristic and legendary. If hypocrisy is a tribute paid to virtue, then there is no country

in the world where it is more worshipped, for nowhere else does hypocrisy play such a large role in language, customs, literature, and arts. . . . What is more, one need not believe that the impure and pagan morals which this quintessential litterateur boasts are very common in England, although they are more common there than in central Europe. They constitute perhaps an exception, with the aggravating circumstance that they are most often practiced by men whose education and high position in the world should shield them from this ignoble depravity and servitude to brute instincts.

Whatever vices existed in French society, the article concluded, at least France had managed to protect itself from “all degrading perversion and to preserve its elegant libertinage from the contamination of the shameful vices of the orient.”

Conclusion

Interpreting the coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials is a complex process. The attitudes towards Wilde reflected class, social, and national prejudices as well as moral ideals. We still can only guess from the articles at the true state of popular understanding of homosexuality in 1895, since none of the New York or Montreal newspapers discussed the subject directly, or even used the word or of its contemporary synonyms. As far as popular consciousness in 1895 was concerned, “the homosexual” did not exist. Yet, Wilde’s crime was described in terms of his deviant, “artistic” and “effeminate” traits, rather than immoral sexual behavior, which suggests that popular ideas on “the homosexual” as a distinct and familiar social type had already formed by that time.

The existence of various (and mutually contradictory) reasons for condemnation of Wilde’s actions in the reports gives them a distinctly modern ring: The asserted grounds range from the historical (e.g., “the vice that undermined the civilization of the ancient Romans”) to the “scientific” (the pathological aberration of a healthful racial—i.e. reproductive—instinct) to the psychological (discussions of Wilde as mentally ill). Intriguingly, the religious and Christian taboos against sodomy were not so much as mentioned in the coverage. In any case, taken as a whole, the tone of the articles on Wilde suggests that in the eyes of the writers, Wilde’s crime lay not so much in having done something that to most newspaper readers was still “unspeakable,” but in the fact that his scandalous actions had discredited social reform. Wilde was thus simultaneously “innocent” and “guilty” of crimes against society that were far more important than any personal transgressions.

Notes

¹ Cited in Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience: Vol. II, The Tender Passion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 231.

² See for example, Lucifer, "The Criminal Jailers of Oscar Wilde," *Liberty (Not the Daughter But the Mother of Order)*, June 15, 1895, 11.3. On Anarchist support for Wilde, see generally Terence Kissack, *Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895-1917*, Oakland, Edinburgh, West Virginia, AK Press, 2008. To be sure, not everyone was interested in such a distant matter. Bertrand Russell noted that when he visited America in 1896, nobody he spoke to seemed to know anything about Wilde's trials. Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, quoted in Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History*, New York, 1976, p. 577.

³ Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde*, London, Arrow, 2004.

⁴ On Oscar Wilde's North American tour, see for example, Roy Morris, Jr., *Declaring His Genius : Oscar Wilde in North America*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press, 2012 ; David M. Friedman, *Wilde in America : Oscar Wilde and the Invention of Modern Celebrity*, New York, Norton, 2014.

⁵ José Martí, (Philip S. Foner, ed. and trans). *On Art and Literature: Critical Writings*, New York, & London, Monthly Review Press, 1982, pp. 294-6.

⁶ "Courrier," *La Patrie*, May 14, 1882, p. 2.

⁷ Kevin O'Brien, *Oscar Wilde in Canada' An Apostle for the Arts*, Toronto, Personal Library/Wiley, 1982.

⁸ For details of Oscar Wilde's trials, see generally H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde*, London, Dover, 1973.

⁹ Details of British public reaction to the Wilde trials can be found, for example, in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, New York, Vintage, 1988, p. 198.

¹⁰ On the comparison with Dreyfus, see Philippe Jullian, *Oscar Wilde* (trans. by Violet Wyndham), New York, Viking Press, 1969, p. 324.

¹¹ One aspect of the New York newspaper coverage of the Oscar Wilde trials that bears further study is that of the ethnic and foreign-language press. The weekly Irish press all but ignored the Wilde trials—no doubt as too embarrassing—though it reprinted tributes to Wilde's support for Ireland and the nationalist poetry of Wilde's mother. Conversely, the German-language immigrant press—as represented by its longest-established journal, the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung und Herold*, and by the Socialist-leaning *New York Volkszeitung*—regarded the Wilde affair as front-page news. The Germans were both straightforward about the nature of Wilde's offense, and clear about the implications for his work. The charge was described in the April 8th *Staats-Zeitung* as "crimes against nature," and it quoted Queensberry's allegation that Wilde "seduced young men into unnatural vice." On April 7th, the *Volkszeitung* presciently concluded, "Up until recent years the death penalty

stood for this crime. However, the legal decision against Wilde may go as it will, he is a dead man in any case and with him Wildeism, the literary direction he represented, is also dead.”

¹² Katz, Jonathan Ned, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac: A New Documentary*, New York, Harper & Row, 1983, p. 258.

¹³ “As it stands,” the *Times* writer predicted at the close of the article, “Wilde will probably get seven years of penal servitude and die before the first year is finished, unless he finds some way of killing himself before.” This prediction, though wrong in detail, was all too precise in its spirit. After his release from prison in 1897, Wilde’s health was broken.

¹⁴ Another local newspaper that covered the trials was the *New York Evening Telegram*. I have not been able to study its coverage in comprehensive fashion. Yet the *Telegram*’s editors ran a much-reprinted editorial on that described Wilde as a “lunatic” and called for the harshest of sentences for him if convicted: “No penalty can be too severe for an abnormal, morbid, and unnatural creature of the sort as he is alleged to be. Pity is out of place and there is no such thing as charity or mercy. Better clean-handed murder than such practices as have been alleged.” “Editorial Comment,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1895, p. 4.

¹⁵ The mention of “alienists” (i.e. psychiatrists), coming five years or so before Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* was even published, is one of the earliest recorded examples in a popular forum of the later near-universal association of psychiatry and homosexuality, and campaigns by liberal psychiatrists throughout the twentieth century to have homosexuality defined as a mental illness (rather than a crime). The article’s description of Wilde as “morbid and hysterical” also matches many contemporary descriptions of educated women and other social non-conformists.

¹⁶ O’Brien, *Oscar Wilde in Canada*, p. 36.