

Extract from The Shaw Society Newsletter

Shaw and Wilde's Public Disgrace

by Alexis Sotiropoulos, a Wilde scholar who works with prisoners

Wilde's Disgrace

Alexis Sotiropoulos examines the relationship between two great Irish playwrights, GBS and Oscar Wilde.

The recent demise of the Home Secretary David Blunkett brought to mind Oscar Wilde's downfall in 1895 when he launched an ill-advised prosecution against the Marquess of Queensberry for criminal libel for publishing a statement that Wilde was "posing as a sodomite". They both formed an inappropriate intimate relationship which turned sour and caused them to pursue law suits through the courts which eventually caused events to turn against them. Whilst Wilde's consequent suffering stands in the scale of an Oedipus compared to Blunkett's Willy Loman we might concur with George Bernard Shaw's observation of public sympathies, when he said in a letter to Frank Harris in 1918 that "it is in the nature of people to worship those who have been made to suffer horribly: indeed I have often said that if the Crucifixion could be proved a myth and Jesus convicted of dying of old age in comfortable circumstances, Christianity would lose ninety-nine percent of its devotees." The public persecution and demise can make a martyr of its victim, even the popularly disliked Charles I. It is not only that the suffering caused can seem hugely disproportionate to the gravity of their wrongdoing but it is also the capricious nature of fate which presumably could have been very different had they made the right choices at the right time. However, in the case of some public figures such as former Conservative MPs Jonathan Aitken and Jeffrey Archer (who, like David Blunkett and Oscar Wilde, fuelled their own downfall) fashion to suppress media free speech. Also they were male Tory MPs who used blustering pomposity to fuel their careers and defend hypocrisy and repressive values. The inexorable feeling that they each had it coming was palpable.

To Wilde's contemporaries, Shaw amongst them, it seemed clear what would happen if he pursued the Marquess of Queensberry through the courts. He was urged to go abroad but he brushed advice aside. However, he was already trapped in his position, not only between a fanatical father in the Marquess of Queensberry who was baying for his blood but a petulant and voracious young spendthrift in Lord Alfred Douglas who wanted rid of his father's intrusive presence.

The Wilde was lacking money to travel, so much so that, on 1 March 1895 The Avondale Hotel refused to allow him to remove his luggage so he could travel to Paris as he had planned and instead he had found himself in the office of solicitor Charles Humphrey initiating his court action. Furthermore, although Lord Alfred Douglas mother and brother Percy had promised to cover the lawyers' fees and Douglas gave him £360, Wilde had already paid Humphreys 150 guineas and had sold personal possessions to raise £800 to prevent creditor's bailiff's entering his family home in Tite Street, Chelsea. After he was sentenced to two years' hard labour in Reading prison he was made bankrupt by Queensberry and his lawyers for the court costs he owed amounting to £700. In addition to this, as Charles Humphreys reminded us in the opening address before Great Marlborough Street magistrates court on 2 March in respect of the charges against the Marquess, "Mr Oscar Wilde was a married man living on the most affectionate terms with his wife and family of two sons." He could not therefore simply take off and leave his family to face creditors and vicious rumours unless he wished to ruin his whole life. Certainly he may have escaped jail but not the battering of his reputation which had only recently reached its apex following the success of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It was clear that the Marquess would not stop his bullying tactics unless Wilde took court action after he made an attempt he made to sabotage the opening night of *The Importance of Being Earnest* with a "bouquet" of vegetables. Wilde tried to have him bound over to keep the peace but Humphreys wrote to Wilde that none of the theatre staff would testify and so it could not be done. The year before the incident, Queensberry had appeared at Wilde's house in Tite Street, accompanied by a prizefighter and threatened him in his own house. At the same time Queensberry was continually writing letters to his son more or less accusing Wilde of sodomy.

No doubt there were to be benefits for himself but had he considered these more carefully he might have realized that these would fall woefully below what he was putting at stake. "Oscar was not combative, though he was supercilious... he liked to make people devoted to him and flatter them exquisitely with that end." However, Shaw

least the sort of people he could not control, and whom he feared as possibly able to coerce him”.

Though Wilde was clear in accepting “formal responsibility” he spent much of *De Profundis* berating Lord Alfred Douglas for leading him astray with his excessive demands and monopolizing his talents. On the one hand he maintained: “I must say to myself that neither you nor your father, multiplied a thousand times over, could possibly have ruined a man like me: that I ruined myself: and that nobody, great or small, can be ruined except by his own hand”. On the other hand, he admitted: “ I ceased to be Lord over myself. I was no longer the Captain of my Soul and did not know it. I allowed you to dominate me and your father to frighten me... in your hideous game of hate together, you had both thrown dice for my soul and you [Lord Alfred Douglas] happened to have lost.”

Indeed Lord Alfred Douglas and the marquess had also trodden a fine line themselves. It has been reported that Queensberry’s defence barrister, Edward Carson, was prepared to enter a guilty plea until the very last minute when evidence from one of the former rentboys, Charles Parker was turned up. Lord Alfred Douglas narrowly avoided prosecution himself be done. The year before the incident, Queensberry had appeared at Wilde’s house in Tite Street, accompanied by a prizefighter and threatened him in his own house. At the same time Queensberry was continually writing letters to his son more or less accusing Wilde of sodomy.

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The Shaw revealed Wilde’s insistence on going to trial as partly his “fierce Irish pride... It was his tragedy that people asked more moral strength from him than he could bear the burden of, because they made the very common mistake... of regarding style as evidence of strength... Now Wilde was so in love with style that he never realized the danger of biting off more than he could chew: in other words of putting up more style than his matter would carry. Wise kings wear shabby clothes, and leave the gold lace to the drum major.”

It is no secret that we often expect more from our public figures than they ever deliver and the whole process of politics can be seen as the management of public disappointment. Yet public figures are still happy to fuel this misperception by making promises both public and personal to inflate their fragile positions which they cannot keep. It is true of Irish dandy poets as much as of tough talking northern home secretaries. It is a dull truism to say nobody is perfect but our most disastrous flaw is always to expect less of others and more of ourselves up until the point we coming crashing into reality. Shaw’s retrospective comments came 25 years too late to help Wilde but 86 years too early to help Blunkett.