“MERELY AS A PERSON IN A PLAY”: PERFORMATIVE GENDER THEORY IN

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY AND

“THE HAPPY PRINCE”

by

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Readings of texts that analyze gender only as secondary to sexuality imply that gender and sexuality always relate the same way. Considering the nature of Oscar Wilde's works, critics are quick to follow this model and incorporate Wilde's texts into the queer literature canon. As a result, much is made of the physical and (implied) sexual relationships between men in the works. While these readings of *sexuality* abound, much less scholarship analyzes the *gender* relationships in Wilde's work; in other words, scholars closely analyze the characters' sexual desires, but deprioritize the many actions and words that make up their gender. Instead of reading the texts from a biographical (and frequently sexual) approach, a more effective way of understanding the complexity of Wilde's work is with a gender theory approach. This thesis addresses the gendered aspects of "The Happy Prince" (1888) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) using the lens of Judith Butler's performative gender theory. Specifically, I will apply three main aspects of Butler's theory: first, that gender is a set of repeating performances; second, that gender does not correspond neatly with sex and desire; and third, that an individual's gender performance can and does change over time.

In order to fully utilize Butler's theories in relation to Wilde's texts, this thesis begins by unpacking the specific theory I use from the rest of Butler's concepts. Butler provides a definition of gender performativity when she argues that people should "[c]onsider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (*Gender Trouble* 139). Butler first introduced her idea of

gender performativity in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988). In this article, she presents a new concept of gender to her audience: “One is not simply a body, but, in some key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (“Performative Acts” 902). Butler further elaborates her earlier ideas in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). As Butler explains, gender has been traditionally viewed as something that an individual possesses—an identity presumed by society to equate with one’s sex and one’s sexuality (what Butler refers to as “desire”). She refutes this assumption, arguing that “*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes.” Butler continues, saying that “gender is always a doing … identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 25). As opposed to the established idea that a person *has* a gender and that gendered acts are expressions of inherent gender identity, gender is not inherent to the subject. Performative acts are not a result of gender; rather, they constitute gender.

Butler’s work also seeks to combat the notion that it is “unnatural” for biological sex to differ from gender performance. Because gender is performative, it does not necessarily equate with an individual’s sex or desire. Indeed, the idea “that the feminine belongs to women” is, for Butler, “an assumption surely suspect” (*Gender Trouble* 123). She writes that the “replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (*Gender Trouble* 31). Not only does gender not match sex and desire, but no “norm” exists with

which to compare these performances. There is no natural or original gender act. However, gender is no less important or real because it functions as a verb and not as a noun. Butler states that to "claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the 'real' and the 'authentic' as oppositional" (*Gender Trouble* 32). Any discussion of sexuality and desire would be incomplete without including a discussion of performative gender as well. However, while sex, gender, and desire are all distinctly different, they are also closely related—so much so that completely disentangling them is impossible.

Another important aspect of Butler's theory is the instability of gender. If gender is inherent in human beings, then an individual's gender would remain constant throughout his or her life. Butler's performativity, on the other hand, allows for a gender fluidity not just between individuals but also within individuals. Butler writes, "[g]ender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (*Gender Trouble* 140). If gender is constructed in time, then it can be created differently at different times by the same individual. The construction of gender indicates that "the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as a part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character" (*Gender Trouble* 141).

This thesis expands on the current discussion of Wilde's works, with Chapter Two focusing on Wilde's fairy tale "The Happy Prince." Oftentimes, Wilde's fairy tales are considered a lesser art form, but gender performativity is just as apparent in this work

as any of Wilde's more "serious" works. "The Happy Prince" illustrates that when individual gender is performed in a way that society does not accept, the individual is often rejected for it. Wilde gives the relationship between the main characters of the Happy Prince and the Swallow a closeness that surpasses friendship. However, what makes the tale most relevant is the imagery of the statue covered in gold. The gilded appearance is the Prince's assumed nature for the benefit of the village. When the gold is removed to reveal the lead underneath, the people tear down the statue and melt it. Expressing alternative gender performances elicits violent rejection from society, and this rejection does not allow the Prince to survive. Individuals cannot exist apart from their gender performance; when the townspeople do not allow the Prince to enact his gender performance, the ultimate result is the Prince's destruction

Chapters Three and Four turn to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For the entire thesis, when I refer to *Dorian Gray* I will be referring to the 1891 novel version of the text and not the earlier serialized version published in *Lippincott's* magazine. Chapter Three will focus on the character of Sibyl Vane and the performative nature of her gender and character. Dorian and Sibyl completely construct her character and from her presence on stage. As a result, her relationship with Dorian and her gender acts are extensions of this performance. Her literal acting exemplifies Butler's theory in a physical sense. Her most desirable feminine attributes are acted out in the form of Shakespearean heroines. The persona that society expects is produced on stage; the "real life" performance she adopts after finding love takes away from the grace and talent that she displays while on stage. Society cannot accept subversion of the feminine ideal. Neither set of characteristics is inherent to Sybil's nature, and her work as an actress only makes Butler's theories more

clearly applicable.

Chapter Four explores the title character himself, specifically how Dorian's behavior highlights the conscious changes in his performance to accommodate the presence of his portrait. At the start of the novel, Dorian displays feminine attributes—a quality mirrored in the language used to discuss him. As the novel progresses, Dorian is greatly influenced by Henry's assertion that London's society is not genuine. Henry is quick to point out falsity, and Dorian embraces his perception. After Dorian becomes conscious of the performances of everyday society, his own performance (both gendered and otherwise) changes drastically. After the death of Sibyl Vane, his masuline qualities largely replace feminine ones. Dorian casts off these feminine acts and adopts gender and sexual expressions which Victorian society considers sinful. His decisions then become conscious as Dorian tries to elicit changes in the painting. While all his pursuits are based on a hedonistic desire for pleasure, his heterosexual behavior is specifically acted out for the benefit of society, while his homosexual behavior is done for the benefit of the portrait. While sexuality and gender are definitely two different discussions entirely, Butler acknowledges that gender, sexuality, and desire are too closely linked to fully separate them from each other. For this reason, I briefly touch on Dorian's sexuality as well as his gender performativity.

In some senses, applying any type of Queer Theory to Wilde is somewhat natural; as Carol Tattersall points out, "his strategies often matched those of modern feminists: an attempt to devalorize the heterosexual white British … male ascendancy; a concentration on the implications of language especially at the level of the individual word; and a reorganization, or perhaps de-organization, of discourse" (129). My goal with this project

is not to discredit previous interpretations of Wilde. The lack of discussion regarding gender in Wilde's work is disturbing mainly because it suggests a rigid correlation between sexuality and gender, and also between Wilde and his narrative as a result. My research aims to offer another reading of Wilde to trouble the prevailing scholarly viewpoint as well as expand on the ideas scholars have already integrated into Wilde criticism. As a result, I will illustrate not only that gender performativity is present in the works (both consciously and subconsciously), but also that the gender performances of the characters change over the course of the texts. Gender performances are rarely cohesive, and they rarely correspond neatly to the sexuality or biological sex of the characters.

CHAPTER II

Social Reactions to Gender Nonconformity in "The Happy Prince"

Michelle Ruggaber argues that the Prince and the Swallow "find their reward in eternal salvation. Certainly it would be possible for the resistant reader to find reason to question this interpretation and outcome, but there is no clear indication in the text that the story can or should be read as more than a straightforward fairy tale" (149). Ruggaber's conclusion is an oversimplification of Wilde's complex and multi-faceted work, and yet her opinion exemplifies the trend in literary scholarship that often ignores Wilde's fairy tales as important literary works. "The Happy Prince" centers on the title character of the gilded statue. The townspeople admire the Prince, but he is secretly distraught at the plight of the poor townspeople around him. He enlists the help of the Swallow in taking his gold coating and jewels and giving them to the poor until nothing remains but the lead underneath. After the Swallow has completed the Prince's wishes, he and the Prince both die and are accepted graciously into heaven for their good deeds while the townspeople melt him down to make a new statue. Although this tale (as well as the others in the collection) is ostensibly for children, undertones in the tale speak towards gender expectations and rejection by society.

Rather than acting in a vacuum, gendered acts originate from society and are ultimately practiced in response to the expectations of society. In the case of "The Happy Prince," the way that the Prince is perceived by the Swallow and the townspeople is important to a gender performative reading of Wilde's text. As Butler notes, "it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender' from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained" (*Gender Trouble* 3). According to Butler,

gender, sexual expression, sexual desire, and biological sexuality are all linked too closely to separate one from the others. While these aspects may be linked, I focus only on the (implicit) sexuality of the Prince and the Swallow in how it relates to their acting out of gender and the society around them. In other words, where many critics have interpreted Wilde's work as a celebration of homoerotic expression or as his attempt at "educating readers on the merits of male love" (Duffy 345), this thesis is not interested in defining the fairy tales in terms of their hetero- or homosexuality because Wilde does not offer a concrete reading in either direction. The performativity of the Happy Prince, the Swallow, and the townspeople are carefully ambiguous and no character performs entirely masculine or entirely feminine acts. Butler comments on the subject:

> What a tragic mistake, then, to construct a gay/lesbian identity through the same exclusionary means, as if the excluded were not, precisely through its exclusion, always presupposed and, indeed, *required* for the construction of that identity. Such an exclusion, paradoxically, institutes precisely the relation of radical dependency it seeks to overcome: Lesbianism would then *require* heterosexuality. (*Gender Trouble* 128)

However, due to the ambiguous nature of Wilde's characters, both in his fairy tales and in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, they cannot be decisively read as either exclusively heterosexual or homosexual.

Because clothing and physical appearance are arguably some of the most noticeable aspects of an individual's performance of gender, an obvious connection arises between the Prince's gilded appearance and his gender performativity. Wilde's tale opens with a physical description of the Prince: "High above the city, on a tall column, stood

the statue of the Happy Prince. He was gilded all over with thin leaves of fine gold, for eyes he had two bright sapphires, and a large red ruby glowed on his sword hilt" (9). Before the reader is aware of the statue's personality or actions, Wilde presents visual aspects of its performativity. The fact that the Prince towers over the townspeople accentuates the position of dominance that he displays over the Swallow later in the story. However, as the reader comes to see later in the tale, the Prince's identity does not conflate with the leaf covering him. Wilde gives the Prince's appearance as the first words of the tale, and symbolically the townspeople emphasize his appearance as well. Indeed, the townspeople notice the Prince's appearance before anything else. The Prince "was very much admired indeed. 'He is as beautiful as a weathercock,' remarked one of the Town Councillors who wished to gain a reputation for having artistic tastes" (9). His remark is somewhat odd considering that the statue commemorates a real person. For the citizens of the town, the visual appeal of the Prince is now more important than the human being was.

However, the gold coating does not match the identity of the Prince. The gold coating and jewels were placed on the Prince by whoever made the statue, but the Prince himself (or rather the Swallow acting on behalf of the Prince) removes the gold leaf. Therefore, because the people of the town affixed the coating, the gold leaf can be understood as the identity assigned to the prince by the society in which he lives, but the removal of the leaf and the revelation of the lead underneath is a reflection of the Prince's rejection of his assigned gender performances and the revelation of conscious gender acts. The Prince's gold leaf (and later his leaden appearance) are synonymous with the appearance aspect of performative theory and can most closely be described as the Prince

“wearing” his gender. As Wynn William Yarbrough notes, “[e]ven something as simple as clothing reveals a subtle critique of manliness and aestheticism” (77). Yarbrough’s analysis equates with Butler’s ideas, but rather than being “seemingly simple,” in actuality clothing is not simple at all. In fact, I would argue that drag theory in Butler’s work is a useful to with which to understand the Prince’s stripping away of his gold leaf. Obviously, Wilde is not consciously equating the Prince with drag symbolism because the idea of a drag queen is a relatively new term; however, the theory related to drag can be related to the Happy Prince. Butler notes “I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity” (*Gender Trouble* 137). In other words, drag brings into sharp relief the performative nature of gender, particularly because the gender performance does not agree with the assigned biological sex. Yarbrough points out that in “English literature, cross dressing has long been a tradition in comedy and satire” (39), so reading the Prince in terms of drag theory is not unreasonable; indeed, similar intimations can be drawn with the Prince. The Prince’s assigned identity, that of dominant, masculine royalty, conflicts with the performance that the Prince chooses to enact, that of generous, impoverished normalcy. As a result, the lead under the gold becomes the “drag”—when I say drag, I mean in the sense that appearance does not reflect the biologically assigned gender.

The expectation that the townspeople have for the Prince does not match the reality in numerous ways, a reaction that critics of Wilde are not immune to either. Rowena Coles asserts incorrectly that “the assigning of a personal pronoun (he/she) to an entity usually referred to by the neutral ‘it’ will automatically identify the character with

a biological sex and therefore with the behavior associated with that sex" (221). Almost the opposite is true. Looking at the townspeople, not only do they see the Prince's identity as dependent on his appearance (an appearance assigned by the town), but they also make assumptions about the Prince's masculinity. A mother scolds her child by saying, "The Happy Prince never dreams of crying for anything" (9). However, the first interaction the audience actually has with the Prince reveals their expectation to be false. During their first meeting, the Swallow notices that the "eyes of the Happy Prince were filled with tears, and tears were running down his golden cheeks" (12). The Prince is not the perfect model of masculinity that he appears to be. However, this is not to say that the Prince has no masculine attributes. Instead, he shows alternating and conflicting gender performances. Individuals do not perform only one set of gender identities and no one performs completely masculine or completely feminine gender.

Many aspects of the Prince's performances are masculine and equate with the town's expectations of him. For one thing, as Wilde's description of the statue indicates, he is the dominant figure in his relationship with the Swallow. The Prince is at an obvious physical advantage over the Swallow because of his large stature. Apart from his size, the majority of his relationship with the Swallow is dominant. When the Swallow hesitates to remove the Prince's jeweled eyes, the Prince replies "little Swallow … do as I command you" (16). The Swallow ultimately follows the Prince's directions to the Prince's destruction as well as his own. The Swallow acts as the Prince's messenger, which in some way reflects the Prince's identity while he was alive. The Prince says of his life, "[m]y courtiers called me the Happy Prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness" (12). In some ways, the Prince's appearance and performance of gender

does relate to his assigned sex/gender. However, as with most of Wilde's work, the end result is not as straightforward.

For one thing, the Prince's size not only acts as a masculine expression of dominance, but also weakens him. He needs the Swallow to do his bidding for him because "[m]y feet are fastened to this pedestal and I cannot move" (13). Additionally, according to Jack Zipes, "Wilde is able to stress the great disparities in English society by ironically making the dead prince's pedestal so high that he can realize how miserable the common people are and how responsible he is for their misery; that is, as the major representative of the ruling class" (*Art of Subversion* 122). The same size and posture that allows him to act out masculine roles also allows him to see the suffering of his people and act out the stereotypical feminine role of sacrifice. In many other instances throughout the text, the Prince performs feminine gender roles as well. Naomi Wood addresses the Prince's overturning conventions, noting that "Wilde deliberately used the Socratean dialectic, upsetting conventional expectations about the relationship between tutor and student. Here the tutor is young and beautiful while the student is a refugee from domesticity, and both elevate themselves through mutual love, conversation, and charitable action" (166). Calling the Prince the dominant partner in the relationship is an imperfect system because the relationship is fairly mutual. For instance, over the time that the Swallow spends with the Prince, he educates the Prince about Egypt. Many critics are eager to point out the pederastic relationship between Swallow and Prince, but neither figure can be seen as wholly adult/teacher or child/pupil. Chris Bartle talks about the teacher/pupil discrepancy when he states that "the child is the one who teaches the adult about social responsibility … One evening, the roles reverse back to their original

form as the Swallow takes the adult role by educating the Prince about the world" (95). So not only is the pederastic relationship not typical but the masculine/feminine dichotomy is upset as well. The Prince exhibits both masculine and feminine qualities, so he is neither inherently one nor the other.

The gender performances of the Prince continue to oscillate between any stable assignments of gender. Another illustration of the dual masculine/feminine nature is the religious and sacrificial nature of the text. The self-sacrifice of the Prince (and also the Swallow) acts in two ways. When discussing the "The Nightingale and the Rose," Yarbrough makes a comment that is useful to my discussion of the Happy Prince: "The nightingale's performance as a savior, dyed with blood and a puncture wound, is designed by Wilde to evoke a performance of masculinity that is far less 'practical' and more 'morally' centered" (103). The distinction between practicality and morality makes the androgynous nature of the Prince's sacrifice more clear. Obviously, the Christ imagery emphasizes society's "ideal" of masculinity; however, the emphasis of morality over practicality brings an element of femininity into the action. According to Nicole Plyler Fisk, religious sacrifice constitutes a sphere in which women can passionately thrive during the Victorian period. She writes that "certain types of female passion were acceptable in eighteenth and nineteenth century society, while others were condemned. Women were often applauded for being passionate about the church, charitable works, and their maternal 'duty' but condemned for being passionate about knowledge, whether intellectual or sexual" (134). Therefore, the Prince is not only imitating the ideal form of masculinity in Christ, he is also imitating the ideal form of "female passion." His mercy is what allows for this destabilization of gender. Although Jerome Griswold is speaking

in terms of mercy over individualism, he comments that the Prince "ceases to exist as 'he' but through mercy exists everywhere, diffuse, as food for others" (106). While Griswold may not discuss the pronoun "he" for intentionally gendered reasons, the end result is the same. At the end of the novel, the Prince no longer exists as an individual that performs gender; Butler espouses his transformation anyway when she writes that gender is "not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (*Gender Trouble* 25). The individual cannot exist apart from their gender performance, and in some sense the individual is created by the gender performances. In this way, once the Prince has spread himself around he ceases to exist.

While the Prince's gilding exemplifies the performative aspects of his gender, the character of the Swallow is a much better example than the Prince of the inherent fluctuations of gender performativity. He illustrates that gender performances are not "as seemingly fixed as sex" as Butler argues (*Gender Trouble* 6). Precipitated by his introduction to and growing relationship with the Prince, the Swallow changes his gender performance greatly throughout the text. Also, Wilde most directly addresses the ideas of sexuality in his text in the character of the Swallow.

The biggest change in the Swallow's gender performance is the stripping away of his dominant nature. When the Swallow originally falls in love with the Reed (a female character), he asks her, "Shall I love you?" and she replies with a "low bow" (10). The Swallow appreciates the Reed most for her submissiveness because she allows him to act as the dominant partner in the relationship. Griswold describes the Swallow's attitude towards the Reed as "selfishly imperious" (104). Ultimately, her inability to submit to the Swallow's every wish causes him to leave her. The Swallow says of the female Reed, "I

admit that she is domestic … but I love traveling, and my wife, consequently, should love traveling also" (11). Again, what he finds most desirable in the Reed is her domesticity, but he cannot accept that she will not conform to his desires. It is tempting to read the Swallow's rejection of the Reed as a rejection of heterosexual relationships; however, what he rejects in the Reed is her masculine attributes, her inability to bend to his wishes to the extent that he desires. In essence, he wants a wife that is more feminine that the Reed. He does not set out to reject the Reed because she is a woman. In addition, the Swallow's attitude towards the Prince conforms to that of the townspeople when they first meet. After perching under him, the Swallow laments that the Prince cannot keep him dry, saying, "What is the use of a statue if it cannot keep the rain off?" Again, the Swallow mimics the expectation that the Prince will adhere to practical male gender performances. Later, when the Prince reveals that he is made of lead, the Swallow confusedly asks, "What! is he not solid gold?" (12). Again, the Swallow expects the Prince's identity performance to adhere to the golden appearance that the townspeople have assigned to him.

An obvious reading of the Swallow's transformation presents his rejection of heterosexual love in favor of homosexual love. At its most basic level, the life of the Swallow revolves around his choice to leave the Reed (a woman) and die for love of the Prince (a man). However, the tale's ending points towards the Swallow's changing gender identity and not towards any change in his sexual orientation. At the beginning of the text, his gender performance is highly dominant and selfish. He performs traditionally masculine gender traits to the exclusion of all else, but his actions change once he meets the Prince. For the most part, the Swallow is the submissive partner in their relationship.

Although he initially still wants to travel to Egypt, he is eventually convinced by the Prince to stay. His love for the Prince changes his gender performance. When the Prince asks the Swallow to remove his eyes, the Swallow reacts with distress: "'Dear Prince,' said the swallow, 'I cannot do that'; and he began to weep" (16). However, he is convinced to follow the Prince's orders. The Swallow is no longer performing dominant gender acts. As Butler argues, gender is dependent on time, and, in the Swallow's case, time makes significant changes to his personality. In addition, the Swallow has not only begun performing submissive gender acts, but also compassionate gender acts. As Griswold points out "the Swallow now feels compassion instead of righteous repulsion for the beggars and children who are hungry" (105). Fisk's notions of mercy as a semi-feminine trait highlight the Swallow's transformation even more.

This is not to say that the Swallow is totally enacting a stereotypically feminine gender performance. While the Swallow is certainly submissive to the Prince in a variety of aspects, it is also an imperfect submissive relationship because the Swallow educates the Prince in several scenarios. In addition, the Swallow still becomes the provider for the Prince after he gives up his eyes. After the Prince is blinded, the Swallow asserts, "You are blind now … so I will stay with you always" (18). The Swallow disobeys the Prince's command to go to Egypt, but the dominance the Swallow displays is still undercut. Right after refusing to leave for Egypt, Wilde writes that the Swallow "slept at the Prince's feet" (18). While the Swallow is definitely submissive to the Prince, he performs some masculine roles in relation to him.

Another important aspect of the interactions between the Swallow and the Prince is the repetitive nature of their actions. According to Butler, "[a]s in other ritual social

dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated* … and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization" (*Gender Trouble* 140). In other words, gendered actions gain legitimacy through their repeatability; these repeated acts become our gender performance. Similarly, the Prince's nightly sacrifice of his wealth and beauty has an equally repetitive element. The Prince always begins his directives with the same introduction: "Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow" (13, 15, 16, 17, 18). Additionally, this direct address is usually followed by similar commands, usually word for word: "will you not stay with me?" (13, 15, 17) or "do as I command you" (16, 18). The Swallow's repetitive words and repetitive actions in flying the Prince's wealth throughout the town shape the relationship between the two, and also shapes their respective gender identities/performances for the remainder of the text.

Scholars have made much of the ending of the tale as proof that Wilde's text can be labeled "homosexual":

> He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. "Good-bye, dear Prince!" he murmured, "will you let me kiss your hand?"
>
> "I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow," said the Prince, "you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you."
>
> "It is not to Egypt that I am going," said the Swallow. "I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?"
>
> And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet. (20)

Reading this scene purely as an expression as homosexual love is tempting, and ignoring

the homoerotic undertones of the character's relationship would be an oversight. Robert K. Martin notes (with validity) that "'The Happy Prince' announces the beauty and value of homosexual love and specifically uses homosexual love as a model of selfless love" (75). In the text, the relationship between the two is not condemned in any sense. When the statue is torn down, the townspeople have no knowledge of the relationship; their destruction of the statue is for purely aesthetic reasons. In addition, the leaden heart of the Prince and the body of the Swallow are marked by God and His Angels as "the two most precious things in the city" (22). Far from a Christian condemnation of these types of acts that the reader would expect in Victorian society, the only mention of religious figures in the text celebrates the bond between the Prince and the Swallow. In addition, the reaction that the other Swallows have toward a relationship with a Reed does not align with the town's reliance on heteronormativity. Lindsey Brooke Kamerer notes that "The relationship was deemed unacceptable by the Swallow's family, because of his love for a woman of a different species" (4). They say, "It is a ridiculous attachment … she has no money, and far too many relations" (10). The only heterosexual relationship in the text is condemned by the Swallow's family (although, admittedly not for sexual reasons). The relationship between Swallow and Reed is ridiculed, while the relationship between Swallow and Prince is glorified.

Despite the many positive aspects of a strictly homosexual reading, from the lens of Butler's criticism the text becomes more complex. John-Charles Duffy is the most helpful resource in arguing that the relationship is not so simple. He argues first of all that even though "Wilde wrote during the period just before the homo-/heterosexual binary became definitive, he did not conceptualize his love for males on the basis of that binary,

nor did Victorian society in general" (328). Critics should pause before labeling Wilde or his characters as homosexual considering that the category had not been invented at the time of Wilde's life and writing. Such a narrow view of sexuality and desire is not conducive to any reading of Wilde. Duffy continues that because "this love is shared between a swallow and a statue, it is patently non-sexual. Yet it is spiritually transforming, redeeming the Swallow from the selfishness which initially characterizes him" (331). The relationship between the Swallow and the Prince is a sexual one, even if the relationship does not have fully erotic elements. Bartle makes a similar comment when he argues that Wilde addresses "the question of mutuality in pederastic relationships, and the deleterious impact that sex can wreak on the nonsexual elements of pederastic bonds" (103). Reading their relationship only by its eroticism does not take into account the complexity of the gender performances that the two characters exhibit in order to form their bond.

The townspeople ultimately end up rejecting the Prince because his gender performance does not conform to their expectations of him. Their perception of his value is related to the gold leaf that coats him, and when this leaf is removed, they then reject the Prince and destroy him. When the Mayor sees the statue's current state of disrepair, he says, "Dear me! how shabby the Happy Prince looks!" and later, "As he is no longer beautiful he is no longer useful" (21). They then tear the statue down and melt the lead to make a new statue. Any memory of who the statue once commemorated is now gone. For the town's people, the statue is a symbol of ideal, beautiful masculinity. At the beginning of the story, they use the statue as a way to inspire themselves to live up to that ideal. The children even remark, "He looks just like an angel" (10). However, when the Prince does

not live up to their ideal, he is no longer useful or important to them. Yarbrough makes note of the fact, arguing the "prince is a statue admired for its beauty by that council. But the beauty is framed in jewels and gold leafing—a superficial reputation based on appearance. This reputation is undone, literally, as the prince sacrifices … The veneer of reputation is what the statue sacrifices, which is a sacrifice of what is deemed masculine (prominence, beauty, respect) by a group like the town council" (92-93).

The council's ideal masculinity is presented in the form of the Prince's "prominence, beauty, respect." The Prince, however, rejects these straightforward masculine attributes in favor of a more complex presentation of gender. Confusion of gender is what the council cannot understand or accept, and as a result they tear the statue down. Ultimately, they are not any more attuned to the statue's presentation of gender than they ever were. Griswold points out that "the poignant symbolism of 'The Happy Prince' escapes them, and they stare as dumbly at the statue in the end of the tale as they did at its beginning" (103). Zipes continues Griswold's line of reasoning, saying "the real beauty of the prince goes unnoticed because the town councillors and the people are too accustomed to identifying beauty with material wealth and splendor" (*Art of Subversion* 122). The radical and important gender change that the Prince has undergone escapes them. They are blinded to the different appearances of the Prince because it does not agree with their own assignment of appearance. The town's reaction then is not altogether surprising because, as Butler states, as a society "we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (*Gender Trouble* 140). The townspeople are not only punishing the Prince for his refusal to follow expected gender roles; they also punish him for his rejection of established class roles. While the removal of the gold leaf from the statue

supports a gender performative reading of the text, it also speaks to the value that society places on the rigidity of class structures.

Another reason that the townspeople react harshly to the Happy Prince's change is their fear of effeminate men—or at least a fear of appearing effeminate. At the beginning of the tale, a "sensible mother" asks her crying son, "Why can't you be more like the Happy Prince?" (9). In other words, why can you as a child not exhibit the same stoic masculinity as a statue? Additionally, the Town Councillor who originally remarks on the Prince's beauty immediately qualifies his statement to avoid criticism: "'He is as beautiful as a weathercock … only not quite so useful,' he added, fearing lest people should think him unpractical" (9). Matthew Schultz comments on the councillor's backtracking. He writes that "the Town Councillor did not care if he actually had artistic taste (perhaps he did not even care about art), but was thoroughly interested in appearing to have artistic taste—he is a performer (and perhaps a bit afraid of being labeled effeminate)" (83). He does not care if he actually is effeminate, but rather that he might be accused of being effeminate.

This firm adherence to "traditional" gender performances reveals itself through other actions of the townspeople. The Prince sends the Swallow on an errand to deliver one of his eyes to the match-girl, saying "give it to her, and her father will not beat her" (18). Their conversation reveals that violent masculine aggression is to be expected from the match-girl's father. He does not subvert aggressive stereotypes in any way. The only action that the Prince can take is to remove the father's reasons to beat his daughter and not actually change the actions of the father in any way. Later, the Swallow sees that under a bridge "two little boys were lying in one another's arms to try and keep

themselves warm" (19). They are removed from their position by the Watchman, who tells them "You must not lie here" (19). Griswold notes the reaction of the Watchman, pointing out that he "scolds the two hungry boys of the tale as if poverty and reprobation were the same" (104). His violent reaction is somewhat more complicated—he is reacting to the boys' poverty, but his objection is also to the two boys' intimacy. Again, the townspeople strive to keep up the guise that gender performance meshes neatly with sex.

Despite the appearance of heteronormativity, the townspeople cannot conform to their prescribed notions of gender because such strict adherence is impossible by Butler's standards. As previously mentioned, the Town Councillor is not actually interested in art or utility, but rather seeks to give the appearance of being interested in art and utility. In addition, the children in the tale subvert the gender specific norm. The "sensible mother" scolds her male child for crying, but her words have no visible effect on him. Also, the two boys under the bridge do not care about appearances because of their hunger and desperation. A final example of reversed gender performances from the town is the brief appearance of a young couple on the balcony. The male lover remarks, "How wonderful the stars are … and how wonderful is the power of love!" while the woman responds, "I hope my dress will be ready in time for the State-ball … but the seamstress is so lazy" (14). In this instance, the male lover utters feminine pronunciations of love, while the woman is cold and utilitarian. Earlier I equated the Prince's spiritual sacrifice with traditional feminine roles; in this instance, these roles are reversed. The male lover emphasizes spiritual and emotional feelings while his female counterpart is focused on the material. Such reversal of roles is possible because the two believe that they are alone. There is no risk that the other townspeople will question their gender

performances, and the only reason that the reader has access to them is a result of the Swallow.

Ultimately, none of the major players in the text, the Prince, the Swallow, nor the Townspeople, conform strictly to any one gender performance. As noted by Butler, their performances do not always equate with their assigned sexuality and they frequently change throughout the tale. Unsurprisingly, when the Prince's performance fails to live up to the expectations of the townspeople, he is rejected by them and melted down. The critic can take away several things from the reading. The first is noted by Zipes when he argues that the tale "reveals how highly disturbed Wilde was by the way society conditioned and punished young people if they did not conform to the proper rules" (199). For the purposes of this study, these proper rules are gender norms that the characters in his stories failed to achieve. Almost any of Wilde's fairy tales could be put to the same analysis and yield similar results. Wilde's characters cannot possibly fit into a proscribed gender identity.

Another result is just how focused Wilde's texts are on performativity, both gendered and otherwise. For Wilde, all of society is performance. Matthew Schultz concludes that "The Happy Prince champions artificial poses and performativity above mere reality" (86). For Wilde, performativity is more authentic than the artificiality of society. For Butler, however, all gendered acts are performative, so it becomes not an issue of "performance" versus "reality," but rather of "performance" versus "performance." In "The Happy Prince," these different performances ultimately reduce to those accepted by society and those that are not. Because (ostensibly) the primary audience of the fairy tales is children, Wilde's ideas about gender and performance were

mainly accepted; however, the ideas became more controversial when they appeared in the form of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

CHAPTER III

"When Is She Sibyl Vane?": Gender Performances On and Off the Stage

Jack Zipes writes that "it is not by chance that all his [Wilde's] fairy tales, published between 1888-91, coincided with the publication of his remarkable novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), perhaps his finest achievement in prose" ("Afterward" 205). When examining the two works together, the thematic similarities between them become clear; importantly for my argument, the performativity apparent in the previously discussed fairy tale is just as clearly visible in Wilde's novel. Critics rarely focus on the character of Sibyl and their discussion of her is usually regarding her relationship to Dorian Gray and his spiritual/sexual development. However, the character of Sibyl deserves analysis in her own right, particularly when discussing gender performativity. Because Sibyl Vane's entire character is closely related to her acting, her ever present performance makes her a perfect subject for applying Butler's theory.

In most interpretations, critics ultimately decide that Sibyl chooses "reality" instead of "performance" after Dorian's proposal. Exemplifying this view, Donald R. Dickson states that her "glimpse of reality destroys Sibyl's ability to maintain the illusion—however superior that illusion may sometimes be—that constitutes art" (8). Lord Henry Wotton takes a different approach regarding Sibyl's death. He councils Dorian, "[m]ourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Barbantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are" (99). These two views run strictly opposed to each other, the former arguing that Sibyl chooses reality and the latter that she chooses art. Examining the gendered aspects of Sibyl's character, it

becomes clear that neither stage nor life is more real than the other; instead, they are both performances of gender. Her performance on the stage is undeniably "real" because she performs the same affectations off the stage. When she falls in love with Dorian, her gender performance changes but is equally real. Despite her reality, she is rejected by Dorian (and by society in general), because they do not accept her new performance as desirable. Ultimately, several conclusions can be reached by a performative analysis of Sibyl. First, her identity is neither real nor false, but rather one identity emerges from another. Second, both of these identities are performative in nature, with gender linked almost inextricably in the performance. Third, after Dorian rejects a performance that does not align with his vision of femininity, she is unable to survive in the society that rejects her.

Sibyl Vane is particularly useful for a discussion of gender performativity in that she takes Butler's concepts and transfers them to the realm of literal theater. The reader can observe two performances that change as the novel progresses. The marked change in Sibyl's performance is clear when Dorian asks her to marry him. Before this time, her performance on stage equates with her identity and her life off-stage. After Dorian's proposal, the reverse is true. While both identities are performative as well as gendered, the most important point to be observed of Sibyl Vane is that neither identity is more real than the other.

Sibyl's performative identity before Dorian's proposal is literally her on stage performance. As far as the reader (and Dorian) are concerned, Sibyl Vane does not exist off the stage. Dorian and his actions at this point and throughout their relationship are reflective of society as a whole. Dorian falls in love with Sibyl Vane before he even

meets her. In fact, at first he despises the idea of ever meeting his idyll of beauty. When the “horrid old Jew” offers to take Dorian to meet Sibyl, he responds violently: “I was furious with him, and told him that Juliet had been dead for hundreds of years, and that her body was lying in a marble tomb in Verona” (52). As Dorian relates this event to Lord Henry, the younger man reflects that “it was curious my not wanting to know her, wasn’t it?” (52). Henry does not agree, although he refuses to tell Dorian why. Henry has probably guessed that Dorian has fallen in love with the characters that Sibyl Vane portrays, and not the actress herself. Dorian has not fallen for simply Juliet; he is enamored of Sibyl’s mutability. As Dickson argues, “Sibyl multiplies her personality through the medium of the stage” (6). However, what Dorian seems to value about these performances is their adherence to the feminine ideal. While many of Shakespeare’s heroines subvert traditional gender roles in some ways, the aspects of Sibyl’s performance that Dorian focuses on are her beauty, her voice, and her childlike qualities.

At this point, Dorian’s thinking aligns with Lord Henry’s notion that Sibyl is less real than the characters on stage, but it is probably more accurate to say that they are indistinguishable from one another. Dorian’s ardent desire for Sibyl is based on the perfect feminine ideal that she embodies on stage, and this embodiment carries across to her offstage presence as well. Dorian views himself as an ideal beauty, largely because of Henry and Basil Hallward’s comments as well as the portrait that he would sell his soul to emulate. Henry tells Basil, “Dorian says she is beautiful; and he is not often wrong about things of that kind. Your portrait of him has quickened his appreciation of the personal appearance of other people” (71). Although Henry does not say it, the portrait has also quickened his appreciation of his own personal appearance. Seeing himself as a

hedonistic ideal form, it is not surprising that he searches for a wife who mirrors an ideal back to him. Dorian falls in love with the onstage character, and the "real" Sibyl Vane plays the same role. Her entire life is conflated with the theater and performance; neither she nor Dorian can imagine anything else. Dorian's attitude toward Sibyl can best be summed up in a comment he makes to Lord Henry. Dorian continues to extoll her virtues:

> "Tonight she is Imogen," he answered, "and tomorrow she will be Juliet."
>
> "When is she Sibyl Vane?"
>
> "Never."
>
> "I congratulate you."
>
> "How horrid you are! She is all the great heroines of the world in one. She is more than an individual." (54)

At this point, the characters and actress do not blur together—the characters totally consume the actress. Sibyl performs the characters of Juliet and Ophelia flawlessly, but she does not perform the character of Sibyl Vane at any point. And this is exactly what Dorian wants.

Her performance is perfection because of the gender performance that is inextricably tied up in it. Sibyl performs the perfect feminine role in the characters of Shakespeare, which then transfer into her "real" life. This idea of Dorian's love for the image rather than the whole woman is an idea with which Anita Levy is deeply engaged. Levy argues that because "Dorian falls in love with Sibyl as surface, he loves 'her' both for the quality of her performance and for the changeability of her appearance … It matters not, then, whether she is dressed as Juliet or cross-dressed to perform Rosalind, her gender becomes virtually irrelevant to erotic desire" (155). I would make a distinction

here, however, that to Dorian it is Sibyl's biological sex that does not matter, and that indeed her gender matters greatly. Her performance and her changeability, both aspects of her gender performance, can be inscribed on both Ganymede and Rosalind, both a male and female surface, with no real change in Dorian's feelings towards her. Everything that Dorian admires about the Shakespearean characters and their performance of gender is reflected in the actual person of Sibyl Vane.

A great part of her femininity lies in her appearance, as Dorian points out—he says that "she was the loveliest thing I have ever seen in my life … I could hardly see this girl for the mist of tears that came across me" (50). He is stricken by her beauty and her voice while she is onstage, and when he finally meets her, the impression continues. He says that she is "so shy, and so gentle. There is something of a child about her" and that "[f]rom her little head to her little feet, she is absolutely and entirely divine" (53). Not just her beauty and her voice, but her childish and submissive nature project the feminine. According to J. Karl Franson, Shakespeare emphasizes Juliet's age in *Romeo and Juliet*; Franson cites numerous symbolic references to her tender age of thirteen throughout the play to prove that "Shakespeare symbolizes Juliet's youth in a display of numerological virtuosity designed to impress upon his audience and readers her unripeness for adulthood and its attendant complexities" (258). This emphasis on childhood (or at least childlike qualities) is mirrored in Sibyl Vane. Dorian describes her as childlike and she is very naïve throughout her entire relationship with Dorian. Her childlike qualities are also symbolic of stereotypical naïve femininity. By Dorian's description, she is shy and gentle, and the emphasis on her childlike qualities accentuates this fact. In addition, she shares with Shakespeare's feminine heroines a willingness to die for love, as well as a

delicate and tragic nature. She is essentially the submissive feminine ideal that Dorian desires to complement his own nature.

Just as in the characters of the Happy Prince and the Swallow, Sibyl Vane illustrates that gender and sex do not align perfectly. While Sibyl is the perfect feminine ideal, there is also a certain amount of gender bending that is also often evident in Shakespeare. The night that Dorian proposes to Sibyl, she is playing Rosalind. Dorian says, "when she came on in her boy's clothes she was perfectly wonderful…She had never seemed to me more exquisite" (73). It is peculiar that, having admired Sibyl so much for her beauty, Dorian would be so overwhelmed by her performance disguised as a man. Liang-ya Liou also delineates this scene as crucial, noting that "Sybil's cross-dressing embodies for Dorian the radical challenge to bourgeois sexual ideologies which he himself fully endorses: the indeterminacy of gender and sexual identity. Sybil's transvestitism makes her look a hermaphrodite or sexual invert; the charming indeterminacy of her gender demystifies the constructedness of the very notion of gender" (121). Liou is partially correct in that Dorian is charmed by her androgynous appearance, but Dorian definitely only wants her to perform feminine gender traits. This points to the fact that Dorian is not enamored of the perfect woman, but rather of the perfect feminine. How she acts out her gender is more important to him than her biological sex. I would equate this with Butler's take on drag's relation to gender. She writes, "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (*Gender Trouble* 137). Sibyl's performance in drag shows a woman imitating masculine aesthetic gender traits, but still retaining many aspects of feminine gender. Even disguised as a man, she still retains the Classical femininity that Dorian so prizes. In

fact, Sibyl's performance as Rosalind makes the performative nature of gender even more clear. Barri J. Gold writes, "[t]he line between playing Rosalind, and playing Rosalind playing Ganymede is a fine one. Does one somehow require more performance than the other? Or does her performance of the second emphasize that the first is thoroughly performance as well? In fine drag style, Sybil's performance of gender has the capacity to render gender unreliable" (28). Dorian himself may not realize these fine distinctions, but he is definitely reacting to them, both in his love for Sibyl and in his eventual rejection of her.

Furthering the idea that the woman Sibyl is overtaken by the characters of Shakespeare is the fact that the reader does not encounter Sibyl until after her life-altering engagement to Dorian. Before that time, all the reader knows of Sibyl is what Dorian reveals; therefore, the reader can only see Sibyl through Dorian's eyes. After Dorian's proposal, Wilde spends a chapter illustrating the family life of the Vanes and introducing some of Sibyl's personality. In this sense, Sibyl does not actually become a character with thoughts and actions of her own (from a narrative standpoint) until after she is engaged to Dorian. She is playing a character on the stage before this point in time; narratively, she is playing a character in Dorian's story to Lord Henry. After his proposal, she becomes her own character.

How Dorian views Sibyl is an important part of her identity. When the reader is finally introduced to Sibyl's family, they smack of theatricality as well. Her mother is the most obvious example, especially in her interactions with her daughter: "Mrs. Vane glanced at her, and with one of those false theatrical gestures that so often become a mode of second nature to a stage player, clasped her in her arms" (61). Sibyl's family life

is made up of the stage and so the performance extends offstage as well. Her mother obviously views Sibyl's performance as completely real as well. Although her brother James Vane rejects the life of the stage and rejects theatricality, he does not reject the idea of Sibyl as frail and childlike. He tells his mother to "watch over Sibyl. Don't let her come to any harm" (62). Additionally, no matter how much James may dislike the stage, he cannot escape its influences in his gender performance either. Kerry Powell notes that the readers' encounters with Sibyl's family reveal the Vanes to be "melodramatic performers off as well as on stage" (114). Powell lumps James into this category despite his vehement opposition to the lifestyle because his life-consuming search for revenge in truth reflects the very melodramatic vision of constructed masculinity to which he seems so opposed.

However, all of this would be somewhat secondary except for the fact that Sibyl views the stage as reality just as Dorian and the rest do. When Dorian describes his first meeting with Sibyl, she tells him, "You look more like a prince. I must call you Prince Charming" (53). She insists on calling him Prince Charming throughout the rest of their relationship and will not even divulge his real name to her family. In fact, she does not actually call him Dorian until the night that she discovers that she can no longer act. Until then, she wholeheartedly embraces the performance of the stage; when she can no longer act, she calls Dorian by his true name. When they first met, Dorian notes quite rightly that Sibyl "regarded me merely as a person in a play" (53), which is the way that she views her whole life. On the night that Dorian leaves her, she describes what her acting once meant to her:

> Dorian…before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was

> only in the theater that I lived. I thought that it was all true. I was Rosalind one night and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows, and I thought them real. (83)

Her performance on stage is real to both her and the people around her, but after she falls in love with Dorian, a change occurs and a different performance takes its place. It would be easy to say that Sibyl rejects the falsity of the stage in favor of reality, but the truth is not so simple. While Sibyl's life is clearly closely aligned with her onstage performance before Dorian's proposal, the events that take place after their engagement are equally performative.

Just as Sibyl once viewed Shakespearean dramas as real, after Dorian's proposal she finds her feelings of love for him to be her consuming reality. She believes in it wholeheartedly, never doubting that this new feeling is reality. Just as the world of the theater overcomes her personal life, she acts out these new feelings as if they are a play as well. In fact, there are many similarities between the two sets of performances. According the Butler, this is no coincidence, because the "act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" ("Performative Acts" 906). In other words, humans learn their gendered behaviors from those around them. In this case, Sibyl learns her gendered behavior from her family and from Shakespeare. For one, the plot of Sibyl's life revolves around love. Unlike her mother and her brother, she is not interested in money or how she will survive. She lacks

this pragmatism and instead believes in the all-consuming love that she feels for Prince Charming. She tells her brother, “I am poor beside him. Poor? What does that matter? When poverty creeps in at the door, love flies in through the window” (66). She envisions a future where the hero of the story carries her away to safety and happily ever after. In addition, although Dorian is definitely guilty of caring for Sibyl in a superficial manner, Sibyl’s feelings for Dorian are similarly located on the surface. While her love is clearly more enduring, she does not recite any feelings for Dorian beyond his appearance. She tells her brother, “To see him is to worship him, to know him is to trust him” (66). In Sibyl’s world, Dorian is the perfect actor to play her Romeo—rich and beautiful. Another obvious similarity between the performances is that they both end in tragedy. At the close of Romeo and Juliet, Juliet drinks poison when she cannot be with her lover. For Sibyl, after her lover has rejected her, she sees suicide as her only option—significantly, by drinking poison made of “some dreadful thing they use at theaters … it either had prussic acid or white lead in it” (94). Renata Kobetts Miller says that by committing suicide, “possibly with a cosmetic that contributed to the artifice of the theater, Sibyl underscores the theme of the Sibyl-Dorian plot: the incompatibility between lived feeling and theatrical performance” (221). I disagree with the conclusion that lived feeling and theatrical performance are incompatible; rather, Dorian cannot accept that the nature of Sibyl’s theatrical performance has changed, and her suicide is a result of his rejection.

The emphasis that Sibyl places on love highlights the gendered nature that her performance still carries. Her new performance is a continuation of the feminine ideal that Dorian so desires because, similar to before, she still wants to be dominated by

Dorian. According to Gold, domination and subjugation are crucial aspects of their relationship. Gold argues that "[a]lthough we are accustomed to considering relationships within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*—both hetero- and homosexual—according to the relative gender of the participants, dominance relations within the text seem to cut across lines of gender" (28). Sibyl's brother James realizes the dynamic between the two and warns her, "He wants to enslave you," and she responds "I shudder at the thought of being free" (66). The scene after her last performance confirms this desire. When Dorian says he is leaving her, she "flung herself at his feet and lay there like a trampled flower" and later Sibyl's "little hands stretched blindly out, and appeared to be seeking for him" (84-85). In her desperate bid to change Dorian's mind about her, she refutes the passionate statement she has just made about reality and the stage: "you are quite right, Dorian, I should have shown myself more of an artist. It was foolish of me; and yet I couldn't help it" (85). Her reversal of behavior is obviously desperation on her part, but her reaction, in addition to her suicide, shows how dependent she is on Dorian Gray.

Dorian tells her that he rejects her because of her performance, but the emotions on the stage have been transferred to reality. Dorian's reaction is somewhat puzzling then, unless he is not lamenting the loss of Sibyl's acting prowess, but rather Sibyl's submissive femininity. Despite her desperate plea to make Dorian stay, her failure to act and the speech that follows the disastrous performance illustrate to Dorian that she is not the idyllic feminine object that he desires. Just like the Swallow and the Prince of Wilde's fairy tales, Sibyl embodies both masculine and feminine traits after the transformation in her performative action.

Dorian is most attracted to Sibyl when she plays Rosalind in drag. In alignment

with Butler's ideas about the fluidity of gender and sexuality, Sibyl's appearance and roles already trouble the "natural" feminine perfection. However, Dorian seems comfortable with her playing a woman playing a man, but not with her inability to play anything at all. Whether Sibyl realizes it or not, by rejecting her role on stage she is rejecting not only the feminine ideal that she originally portrays but also Dorian's domination of her. As a result, the change in her performance is twofold because she changes who she is on and off the stage. Onstage, she is still beautiful as Lord Henry and Basil note, and her voice is described as "exquisite" (80). However, her movements have become false. More importantly, Dorian describes her as "simply callous and cold"—the exact opposite of ideal femininity (81). Before, Sibyl perfectly embodied Shakespeare's characters, perfectly embodied the heroines of classical romance. Loving Dorian has caused her to lose these abilities. When she performs badly, Dorian is forced to confront the fact that Sibyl is more complex than the perfect ideal that she first portrayed. Dorian does not want this complexity because it is not what he has come to expect.

Her confrontation with Dorian after the performance is most telling of her altered state. Always when Dorian has described her, he remarked on how fragile and childlike she was. When she explains to Dorian why she can no longer act, there is none of that image to be seen. She is still described in typically feminine terms, with "music in her voice" and her mouth like "red petals" (82). However, she also shows more control than she has up to this point. When Dorian goes behind the curtain, he sees a changed Sibyl, "standing there alone, with a look of triumph on her face. Her eyes were lit with an exquisite fire. There was a radiance about her. Her parted lips were smiling over some secret of their own" (82). Sibyl is impassioned. Going back to Fisk's comments about

acceptable expressions of feminine passion, Sibyl's passion for Dorian (both emotional and sexual) is frowned upon by Victorian society as a mode of feminine expression. By rejecting her role on stage she is rejecting her role as Victorian idol. She (wrongly) assumes that Dorian will be glad to see this ardent side of her. She explains her transformation to Dorian:

> Tonight, for the first time in my life, I saw through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant in which I had always played. Tonight, for the first time, I became conscious that the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say … I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire. (83-84)

In other words, Sibyl now realizes that in order to embody the perfect Victorian femininity she will have to say words she does not mean and perform actions that she does not feel. She rejects this performance and transforms the theatricality of the stage to her own life.

What Sibyl does not and could not anticipate is that Dorian does not want her on her own terms; he wants her on his terms. He expects her to perform a certain way on and off the stage, but he is surprised on both fronts. He is distraught by her poor acting, but he still goes to see her after the play is over; also, he does not declare that Sibyl has "killed my love" (84) until after she explains her motives. It seems, therefore, that Dorian rejects Sibyl not only because she can no longer act, but also because she has vehemently

rejected the world of Shakespeare in favor of her own performance and her own voice. Ed Cohen notes this reaction from Dorian based on Sibyl's inability to perform her designated role. He writes, "When Dorian impassions Sibyl with a single kiss (the only physical [sexual?] expression that evades his aesthetic voyeurism), her own real passion renders her incapable of making a male-defined representation of female passion 'real'" (810). The concept of a "male-defined representation of female passion" that Cohen presents is critical to our understanding of Dorian's rejection. As if in order to make clear that his motivation for loving her was to dominate her, Dorian tells Sibyl, "I would have made you famous, splendid, magnificent. The world would have worshipped you, and you would have borne my name" (84). Sibyl is no longer what Dorian expects or imagines, so he totally rejects her.

Until this point, Sibyl's performances on stage have been repetition of the ideals that Dorian wants to see. As Butler describes, "the action of gender" is a "performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (*Gender Trouble* 140). However, once Sibyl's repetition threatens to change, Dorian is no longer interested. In this instance, Dorian is reflective of society as a whole. The whole audience for the performance, including Lord Henry and Basil, leaves before the play is over. They reject Sibyl because she is not performing the way that they expect her to. Butler relates an example that helps make Dorian's feelings clear:

> [T]he sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence … On the street or in the bus, the act

> becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act … the transvestite's gender is as fully real as anyone whose performance complies with social expectations. ("Performative Acts" 907)

Fear of a gender that does not align with societal convention is partially what drives Dorian to reject Sibyl. The power she embodies after she rejects acting as the form to express her love does not align with Dorian's expectations of her femininity. Rejected by her society and by the person she loves, Sibyl ends her life. Once she has redefined her gender performance, she can no longer exist without the support of Dorian and society.

Sibyl's impact on Dorian and on the text continues after her death. Just as Sibyl shaped the other aspects of her life so that they would resemble the drama on stage, Dorian and Lord Henry view the circumstances of her death from a similar viewpoint. For Dorian, she ceased to be real as soon as she abandoned the role of Shakespearean heroine. When she begs his forgiveness, he treats her as if she were not really a person. Dorian's entire opinion of her has shifted, and he notes that there "is always something ridiculous about the emotions of people whom one has ceased to love. Sibyl Vane seemed to him to be absurdly melodramatic. Her tears and sobs annoyed him" (85). He later tells Lord Henry that she "was terribly pathetic. But I was not moved a bit" (95). When she was a brilliant actress, she was real to him, and she is not real to him again until she dies.

Dorian is at first shocked by the news of Sibyl's death, but soon he comes to view it in romanticized terms: "I must admit that this thing that has happened does not affect me as it should. It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending to a wonderful play.

It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded" (96). Rita Felski highlights the reductive nature of Dorian's reaction, noting that "Dorian Gray and Henry Wotton prefer to reduce the actress Sybil Vane to a collection of dramatic performances, a collection of texts acknowledged to be more real than the performer herself" (1102). Indeed, Lord Henry seconds this opinion, saying that Sibyl "has played her last part … The girl has never really lived, and so she has never really died … The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away" (99). By her suicide, Sibyl has again taken up the role that Dorian has envisioned for her. At first, she was to be the beautiful and artistic bride; now that she cannot fulfill that role, the only role that is left for her is to reaffirm for Dorian that he possesses some quality without which she must die.

For Dorian and for Lord Henry, the "last part" that she plays is to return to the Shakespearean tragedy. Neither man seems to contemplate that her suicide was an act of agency from Sibyl, an active role that she has not taken previously. They both see Sibyl's death how it relates to them and not how it affects the woman herself. For a moment, Lord Henry seems to come close to understanding that Sibyl is not just reenacting the same rote role. He tells Dorian "not one of the women I have known would have done for me what Sibyl Vane did for you. Ordinary women always console themselves … how different Sibyl Vane must have been from all the women one meets" (97-98). For a brief moment, he points out to Dorian that Sibyl Vane is different from "ordinary" women (perhaps better than these women), but ultimately he sanctifies her for her actions in regards to Dorian. He again tries to fit her into the role ascribed by Shakespeare—a role

which she kills herself in order to escape. Because after all, losing her ability to act is not a conscious choice. The way she relates the event to Dorian, she is taken aback by her inability to perform as she did before. As per Butler, a person's gender performance is composed of both conscious and subconscious actions. Sibyl's drastic change is not necessarily a voluntary one.

Only two characters in the narrative seem to take Sibyl's suicide as a real life tragedy instead of a dramatized one: Basil Hallward and James Vane. Basil is the first person to take the incident out of the sphere of the theater and to place it in real terms. He is appalled by Dorian's lack of emotion, exclaiming, "man, there are horrors in store for that little white body of hers!" (103). As the first person to address the physical consequences of the act, Basil's stark proclamation is even more startling, both to Dorian and to the audience, for its graphic nature. Dorian has not been able to associate Sibyl's death with actual, physical events, so Basil addresses this oversight with brutal honesty. This exclamation is too much for Dorian who has thus far only confronted the event in artistic terms. He reacts violently. When Sibyl failed to live up to his expectations, he was crushed by the disappointment; now that she once again fits into his fantasy, he cannot handle the prospect of dealing with her disappointing him yet again. Basil eventually lets the issue go because he has fallen for the perfection that Dorian embodies.

While the reader never sees the reaction of Sibyl's mother, James Vane dedicates his life to avenging his sister. Despite this expression of love, James fails to accept either performance put forward by his sister just as the rest of society does. James dislikes the theatrical life as he "detested scenes of every kind" (68). He tells his mother that his goal is to "make some money to take you and Sibyl off the stage. I hate it" (61). So James

rejects this performance of Sibyl, but he is no more comfortable with the idea of her engaged in real romance. He treats her somewhat like a child, and proclaims "as sure as there is a God in heaven, if he ever does you any wrong, I shall kill him" (67). James dislikes both performances that she puts forward because, to him, she still has the qualities of a child and not an adult woman. His zeal to track down and kill Dorian further exemplifies Jim's opinion of his sister. While his dedication seems admirable, it is also controlling and demeaning in some ways. For one thing, James has no real proof that Sibyl ended her life because of something that Dorian has done. He is correct in his assumption, but he really has no basis for this fact except for his impression that Sibyl cannot handle being rejected. More importantly, if James actually believed that Sibyl had the depth of love for Dorian that she professes, then he would not want to harm him, no matter his actions towards her. James is more interested in revenge for the death of a perceived child than he is in examining his sister's emotions.

It is ironic to some extent that Dorian rejects Sibyl so violently for refusing to accept and obey Victorian ideals of femininity because, as the novel progresses, Dorian essentially does the same thing. As the portrait changes, Dorian's gender performance changes as well so that he does not align with Victorian expectations for gender and sexuality—if, indeed, he ever did (and I argue that he did not). Gold illustrates Dorian's reaction to her perfectly when he argues that "[i]n both her gender performance and in these scenarios [as Rosalind], Sybil is—to use an erotically charged term—role-playing. What Dorian wants is for her to continue that role-playing under his direction" (29). Because he cannot control her as he desires, Sibyl ultimately leaves very little impression on Dorian because he ceases speaking of her or thinking about her. However, this does

not mean that critical analysis of the text should ignore Sybil or her impact on the novel. As I mentioned previously, the argument that Sybil rejects the falsity of the stage in favor of reality, is an oversimplification. As Butler says, "[g]ender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" ("Performative Acts" 907). This statement eerily mirrors Dorian's comments to Basil following Sibyl's death: "[i]f one doesn't talk about a thing, it has never really happened. It is simply expression, as Harry says, that gives reality to things" (103). Therefore, it is false to claim that one of Sibyl's performances was more real than another. If expression makes an action real, then both Sibyl's life before and after meeting Dorian are equally real because she performs both with equal fervor.

The episode with Sibyl again verifies that just because a situation or a set of actions is performed does not make them less real. There is no divide between performativity and reality in terms of gender. Neither set of performances is more inherent to Sibyl. Growing up in a family of performers, it comes as no surprise that Sibyl would adopt the affectations of the stage in her off stage life as well. Had Sibyl been born with Dorian's status, she would probably have never set foot on a stage and adopted all the performative acts of Shakespeare. Consequently, she might very well have performed the role of the "ordinary woman" towards whom Lord Henry shows such disdain. Similarly, the change in her performance does not reveal any aspect of Sibyl's "true" self more than the stage does. If there are no inherent gender performances, as Butler asserts, than there is no quality that Sibyl more inherently embodies than any other. All of her performances, before she meets Dorian, after she fails to act, and all of the variations in between that lead to this gendered shift, are learned behaviors from those around her.

Dorian’s rejection of her is then revealed to be based on an arbitrary set of expectations that she as a woman will have inherently certain feminine ideals. Sibyl proves this belief to be untrue and Dorian himself will later confirm this fact as the changing dimensions of the portrait change the aspects of his life that Basil once believes to be his “true” self.

CHAPTER IV

Dorian Gray's Ever Changing, Never Conforming Gender Identity

Because Dorian Gray expects Sibyl to strictly adhere to Victorian expectations of gender expression, the reader would expect that Dorian himself would follow these same norms that he seems to prize. However, his actions both before his rejection of Sibyl and after her death reveal that he is just as subversive if not more so. The obvious homosexual overtones both from Basil and from Dorian's interactions with other young men show that the audience's expectations of Dorian will not be fulfilled. However, the suggested homosexual content of the text aside, Dorian's gender performance does not fall within the parameters set by his society. Indeed, these ever changing and yet never conforming gendered aspects of Dorian's character are what most queer Wilde's text. Dorian's deviance from accepted sexual and gender norms could easily be attributed to his life shattering deal for immortality. However, before the transformations begin to take place and even before he utters the fateful words, he does not fit the typical gender stereotype. Rather, Dorian displays many feminine attributes before he begins to adjust along with the painting. For Dorian does indeed become a different person, although not physically. Spiritually and performatively, Dorian alters as drastically as the portrait does physically. As the portrait and Dorian adopt new forms, Dorian ultimately begins to perform more masculine gender qualities as the novel progresses. As if to prove Butler's point that sexuality and gender do not always align, the increase in Dorian's masculine behavior coincides perfectly with the rising accusations of Dorian's homosexual secret life. Although Dorian is undoubtedly performing what the Victorians would label perverse sex acts, he is definitely *performing* them in the sense that he is seeking out

relationships with men partially because he views these actions as sin. As a result, Dorian is ultimately punished at the end of the novel not for his homosexuality, but rather for the violent and aggressive masculinity that enables him to reject Sibyl and murder Basil Hallward without troubling his conscience.

Stereotypes constructed by society assume that homosexual men will be more feminine than heterosexual men. If this stereotype were to hold true and femininity and masculinity were indeed associated strictly with homosexual and heterosexual activity respectively, Dorian's gender traits would fluctuate only based on his sexual activity. Instead, the exact opposite turns out to be true. Dorian begins performing more masculine gender traits at the same time he begins engaging in homosexual activity. This is not to say that Dorian is completely masculine or feminine at any point in the text, because he always combines aspects of both. Just like Sibyl and the Happy Prince, Dorian's character can embody both gender qualities without being strictly defined by either set. Instead, as performative acts, they are subject to fluctuate. As Cohen notes, Wilde's "focus on visual and sexual desirability emphasizes the importance that culturally produced representations have in the construction of male identity" (809). Dorian's identity is definitely constructed: at the start of the novel by Basil and Henry's influence, and later by his obsession with the painting. Observing Dorian's actions, as well as others' perceptions of him, shows a much more feminine Dorian at the beginning of the novel. For these reasons—as well as the fact that labeling Dorian homosexual just because he has sexual relations with men is erroneous—a gendered reading of his character is far more effective than a purely sexual one.

Before Dorian begins to see the discrepancies in the portrait, his behavior is far

more feminine than later in the novel. Dorian's femininity mainly becomes clear in the actions that Wilde ascribes to Dorian, which typically in Victorian literature are reserved for female subjects. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan is one of the earliest critics to note Dorian's association with the feminine, arguing that the "picture Wilde paints of Dorian's early years shows him as identifying with feminine desire against the patriarchal order" (119). Throughout the story, though especially prevalent early on, Dorian is often seen throwing himself onto couches either in fits of despair or petulant outbursts. Joseph Carroll notices these outbursts, and he highlights that "[s]cenes of women lying prone and weeping are common enough in Victorian fiction; scenes depicting males in that posture are vanishingly rare" (297). Upon seeing the finished portrait, Dorian's reaction is quite melodramatic: "The hot tears welled into his eyes; he tore his hands away, and, flinging himself on the divan, he buried his face in the cushions, as though he was praying" (28). Dorian is overcome by the sight of portrait, and his physical reaction foreshadows Sibyl's behavior when she is rejected by Dorian. She too throws herself to the ground, and her reaching towards Dorian carries an almost religious supplication. The Dorian of the first half of the novel is characterized by similar uncontrolled outbursts of emotion. After all, the overwhelming feeling that aging will be disastrous impels Dorian to trade his soul in the first place.

He is completely overwhelmed by the thought of losing his youth and beauty. Again, a Victorian audience would more readily equate an obsession with youth with a woman, especially considering the limited span of time that women were viewed as eligible for marriage. Men of the same period had a much longer window of time in which to find a wife. According to Kay Heath, "[w]hile women contend with limiting

stereotypes of spinsterhood and menopause, men are considered to age much later and with far more freedom. A gendered paradigm of midlife onset ostensibly heralds the end of youth and marriageability at different points for males and females" (30). Heath goes on to say that it speaks to Dorian's feminine traits that he "begins to worry about a future when he will be dropped as both an aesthetic and romantic object" (33). His fear is not surprising, though, considering the power he is able to exert over Basil and Henry based on his looks and his youth.

Importantly, many other aspects of Dorian's character far more resemble Margaret Devereux, his mother, than his father. When Henry seeks information about Dorian's history, he learns that Margaret "was romantic, though. All the women of that family were" (35). Dorian shares his mother's romanticism later in his relationship with Sibyl. He refers to Sibyl as "the greatest romance of my life" (48) and is originally enamored of her. Henry and Basil are both skeptical of Dorian's marriage, with Henry rejecting the idea of love altogether. At the beginning of the novel, Dorian wholeheartedly believes in love and expresses similar feelings about chastity, exclaiming, "Harry! Sibyl Vane is sacred!" when Henry intimates that Dorian is engaged in a sexual relationship with the actress (51). The reverence for virginity speaks not only to Dorian's romantic nature, but also to his feminine nature as well. As Abbie Corey point out, "within the nineteenth century capitalist patriarchy, one of the primary roles of middle- and upper-class women was to produce heirs in order to facilitate the perpetuation of a man's wealth. Virginity at marriage and monogamy after marriage were therefore extremely important" (19). The reader is not given access to Sibyl's feelings on the issue, but the fact that Dorian is the one in the relationship that speaks so vehemently against a

physical connection is significant and continues as an extension of his feminine behavior.

Apart from his emotionality associating with Victorian perceptions of femininity, much of Dorian's behavior is also quite childish. His immaturity is made clear early on by Basil's treatment of him while working on the painting. When Dorian asks him for a favor, Basil replies that the result "entirely depends on how you sit today, Dorian," and Dorian delivers his response while "swinging round on the music stool, in a willful, petulant manner" (17). Their exchange mirrors a father/child relationship more readily than one between two adults. Going back to Dorian's reaction to a physical relationship with Sibyl, his surprise and excitement suggest a sexual as well as an emotional immaturity. I argue in the preceding chapter the Sibyl is associated with childhood (just as in Shakespeare's Juliet) in an attempt to accentuate her extreme femininity. By accentuating Dorian's childish qualities, Wilde is further associating Dorian with the feminine.

Later in the text, Dorian's childish outbursts are greatly diminished. Amanda Witt focuses on specifics of Dorian that relate to his emotional outbursts. She takes note of his "blushes, flushings, and palings" (Witt 85), and points out that as the novel progresses, "Dorian's flushes are no longer qualified as 'faint' or diluted through close conjunction with innocent whiteness; the narrator … begins to construe Dorian's reddenings as signs of selfishness" (88). Where before Dorian's flushes are synonymous with embarrassment or fits, they are now signs of anger. Dorian himself notes the difference in himself, or at least to acknowledge his past behavior. When Dorian moves the painting to the attic, he does so with a recollection of "the stainless purity of his boyish life" (166). His youth as he describes it has ended only a few days ago, but Dorian's musings acknowledge that

that stage is in the past. In addition to his move away from immaturity, emotional displays of any kind become less and less frequent, with the significant exception surrounding the circumstances of Basil's death. When Dorian breaks his engagement with Sibyl, but before he learns of her death, he appears distraught. He wanders around London in a daze, and upon returning to his home he realizes something of his mistake. He resolves to go back to her, and he "repeated her name over and over again" (89). His contrition markedly alters after Dorian observes the modifications in the painting. After this crucial juncture, Dorian learns that Sibyl has died. In direct contrast to his earlier despair, Dorian is largely unmoved by the news. He says "I have murdered Sibyl Vane … Yet the roses are not less lovely for all that. The birds sing just as happily in my garden" (95). His exchange with Henry typifies his emotional state for the rest of the novel. He adopts various religious practices without any feeling or commitment as quickly as he acquires and rejects lovers.

After his deal with the portrait actually goes into effect, Dorian becomes far more masculine and cold. The obvious examples are his rejection of Sibyl and his murder of Basil, but he becomes callous towards everyone he meets. Where once he saw romance as something beautiful during his relationship with Sibyl, his attitude of sacred adoration for love shifts drastically. Basil's pointed question to Dorian—"Why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" (142)—hints not only at homosexual relations but also, and more importantly, a slew of lovers for which Dorian cares nothing and in whose fates Dorian is largely uninterested. If his numerous relations with men is only hinted at, his flippant attitude toward women is overtly stated. He tells Lord Henry towards the end of the novel, "I spared somebody … She was quite beautiful, and wonderfully like Sibyl Vane

…Suddenly I determined to leave her as flowerlike as I had found her" (197-198). The fact that Dorian labels his ending the relationship "the first good action I have done for years" (198) suggests that there have been many women whom Dorian has not "spared." Although his relations with men may be taboo, his multiple partners do not make him unfit for all aspects of society. Edward S. Blackford argues that "Dorian's playboy extravagance only mirrors the shallow social circle charmed by him" (185). His cavalier attitude toward his sexual relationships speaks more toward his masculine behavior now that he is performing for the portrait.

Perhaps more telling than any of his other personality and gender transformations is Dorian's changing relationship with Basil Hallward. Basil clearly loves Dorian (the word "love" is present in the serialized version of the text, but is left out of the novel). Henry M. Alley says of Basil's affections, "he loves naively and extravagantly, in a way that elicits pity and fear" (2-3). However, when Dorian learns of Basil's feelings towards him, he is unmoved. Dorian's attitude towards Basil for the remainder of the novel has shifted drastically. Where Dorian once saw Basil as his friend and confidant, his reactions to Basil become cold and calculating. When Basil all but confesses his love for Dorian, the younger man's only response involves how the confession relates to himself. After learning of Basil's worship, he muses that "he could not help feeling infinite pity for the painter who had just made this strange confession to him, and wondered if he himself would ever be so dominated by the personality of a friend" (110). Additionally, Dorian often ignores Basil in favor of Henry. Eventually, Dorian's relationship with Basil shifts from one of indifference to contempt. Dorian once respected Basil, but no longer. Nowhere is the difference in his attitude clearer than in Dorian's final encounter with

Basil, whose attempts to save Dorian's soul are met with "an uncontrollable feeling of hatred" (149) that lead to murder.

A reason for Dorian's altered attitude is again the shifting gender roles. Originally, Dorian was the young student and Basil the older educator. As with "The Happy Prince," the elder is usually the more masculine role and the younger the more feminine. Dorian is certainly the more feminine at the beginning of the text, but as he loses more and more of his feminine qualities, the roles begin to reverse. Dorian has moved beyond desiring a mentor, or at the very least has replaced Basil with the more corrupting influence of Henry. Nikolai Endres acknowledges that "Henry's teachings thus give birth to Dorian's adulthood" (305). At the time of Basil's death, and even before then when Dorian refusedsto let him see the painting, Basil has fulfilled the more feminine role. Basil's entire relationship with Dorian is incredibly romanticized, at least in the older man's eyes. Basil professes love for Dorian, but Dorian clearly never returns the elder man's feelings.

Originally, Basil treats Dorian like a child and like an object, but he is not alone in doing so. Dorian's treatment from Basil and Henry affirm a feminine reading of the younger man. Before the reader is introduced to Dorian, the only impression Wilde presents is from Basil and Henry's discussion. Henry describes Dorian as a "young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose leaves … he is a Narcissus" (6). Dorian is also equated with an instrument, as Henry compares conversing with him to "playing upon an exquisite violin. He answered to every touch and thrill of the bow" (37). Similarly, Edward S. Brinkley notes the "interchangeability of Dorian with flowers or with the innumerable *objets d'art*" (66). The way the two older men discuss and

objectify Dorian's body is reminiscent of the way women are treated by the male gaze. In addition, Henry also asserts that Dorian "never thinks. I feel quite sure of that. He is some brainless, beautiful creature, who should always be here in winter when we have no flowers" (7). Again, the emphasis on looks over intelligence is generally reserved for discussions of women. Even the act of Basil using him as the subject for his paintings places Dorian in the feminine role. Ruth Robbins points out that the "effect of the picture—or rather, of the series of pictures that Basil has painted of him—is that Dorian is commodified, in much the same way as women of his class and beauty might also have been commodified in the art of the period" (228-229). A similar criticism is furthered by Dirk Schulz who argues that "the bourgeois mythology of female beauty in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* becomes queered by turning Dorian into precisely this role. Henry's statements about women throughout equal those about Dorian" (120).

As the text progresses, the feminizing language surrounding Dorian generally stops, but Dorian's appearance is still tied to his virtue. Appearance alone saves Dorian from being murdered by James Vane. When James looks at the man he has captured, he sees "all the bloom of boyhood, all the unstained purity of youth" (180). The appearance of innocence hides the degradation of his soul. So much of Dorian's identity is tied up in his appearance; he himself trades his soul for his youth and looks, inextricably linking the two aspects of his identity. As proved by his fascination with his beauty, as well as others' fascination with it, much of his gender performance is connected to his appearance as well. Dorian tells Basil, "you met me, flattered me, and taught me to be vain of my good looks" (148). Dorian locates his identity in his appearance and his actions reflect the attitude. Henry and Basil's fascination with Dorian's appeal as a

sexualized object as well as Dorian's response to their objectification move him into the sphere of the feminine. As Suh-Reen Han argues, Dorian's "pretty face is a surface on which discursive objects appear" (183). Her argument aligns with Butler's ideas of gender being located on the surface of the body. She writes:

> [A]cts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core … If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity. (*Gender Trouble* 136)

Dorian's character is obsessed with surface, and in many ways he is nothing but surface, or more accurately a dual surface of Dorian/Portrait. As Cohen argues, "Dorian Gray provides the surface on which the characters project their self- representations. His is the body on which Basil's and Lord Henry's desires are inscribed" (806). It is also crucial to note that Dorian is capable of inscribing his own surface as easily as others can inscribe on him. His gender performance does not affect his own form, but he can see the visible signs on the surface of the painting. As a result, he begins playing the role that will affect the portrait the most—engagement in homosexual sex acts.

While I am not overly concerned with Dorian's sexual behavior, it would be remiss to totally ignore the homoerotic content in the novel because it has been such a focus of Wilde studies to date. Labeling Dorian a homosexual just because he has sexual relations with men does not take into consideration the intricacies of the text. It leaves out his romance with Sibyl Vane and the women after her; it also ignores his rebuff of Basil's

affection, which Alley labels an action of "internalized homophobia" regarding the "male love that would seek him out and speak its name" (6). Additionally, Dorian's sexual behavior should be placed in the context of gender performance in addition to that of sexual desire; from the information that the reader is presented, Dorian's relations with men are not only the result of his search for pleasure, but also a conscious intention to sin.

After Dorian notices the magical qualities of the portrait, one of his greatest aims with his life is to tamper with the image as much as possible. After Sibyl's death, he debates attempting to wish the portrait and himself back to their original states, but ultimately rejects the idea. An obvious reason for his decision is that he will be able to keep the youth that he so values; however, a more complicated reason keeps him from reversing his deal. As he examines the portrait after its first alteration, he offers the following explanation to himself:

> For there would be a real pleasure in watching it. He would be able to follow his mind into its secret places. This portrait would be to him the most magical of mirrors. As it had revealed to him his own body, so it would reveal to him his own soul. And when winter came upon it, he would still be standing where spring trembles on the verge of summer … What did it matter what happened to the coloured image on the canvas? He would be safe. That was everything. (102).

His pleasure in watching the painting borders on fascination; he looks at the changing face of the portrait almost as a science experiment, but also as a transformation that is deeply personal. On the one hand, Dorian is interested in what ways the portrait can

morph into a different form; on the other, Dorian knows that he will relish his own beauty more deeply the more the canvas deviates from his own face. With that idea in mind, and not just the hedonistic desire to chase down every pleasure, Dorian seeks out different sins.

Wilde hints at many of Dorian's indiscretions, from engaging with prostitutes, to addictive opium use, to prolonged absences in shady corners of London. However, both Wilde's contemporaries and Wilde scholars of today identify Dorian's implied homosexual behavior as the most important or the most defining of these supposed sins. However, I argue that his homosexual behavior is no more definitive than any of the others. If Dorian is punished, his opiate addiction just as much as his homosexual behavior is to blame. Because Dorian is consciously and actively seeking out ways in which to affect the portrait, his sexual activity with other men cannot be associated only with same sex desire. In addition to his drive for hedonistic pleasure, Dorian is also looking for what he views as egregious crimes, and the climate of Victorian society was definitely turned against homosexuals following the Cleveland Street scandal of 1889. Richard Dellamora acknowledges its influence on the era, noting that it "crosses lines of class, embracing 'gentlemen' on one side, telegraph boys and members of the Household Cavalry on the other" (*Masculine Desire* 206). Taking the incident as just one example, it is not surprising that Dorian would read the tension in London as incredibly hostile towards homosexuality.

Knowing the general feeling toward homosexuality at the time, Dorian chooses homosexual behavior consciously in an attempt to mar the "most magical of mirrors." As Dellamora says, "[a]ffairs with other men simply provide Dorian with another pre-

scripted role to play" ("Representation and Homophobia" 30). However, I am not saying that Dorian gets no pleasure from these actions, because Dorian seems to get pleasure from almost everything he does. The drive for pleasure in any form is definitely a motivating factor for Dorian. As Henry affirms, "one of the most important secrets of life" is that "anything becomes a pleasure if one does it too often" (200-201). Additionally, Dorian's desire to undo his sins, to undo his sexuality ends in his own death. According to Brinkley, "to kill the 'thing upstairs,' the homosexual in the attic, necessitates the killing of same-sex sexual desire altogether, the killing of the subject itself" (72). Therefore, I am not arguing that Dorian is only pretending to be attracted to men, but that intentional sin motivates him, as well as the pursuit of sensual and sexual pleasures.

The text itself even acknowledges (quietly) that the nature of sin may be dependent upon society. Before Dorian is attacked by James Vane, the text reflects on the nature of passion and sin: "There are moments, psychologists tell us, when the passion for sin, or for what the world calls sin, so dominates a nature, that every fibre of the body … seems to be instinct with fearful impulses" (179). In one moment and seemingly nowhere else, the text itself questions whether Dorian's actions are actually sins or whether they are believed to be sins. But then it moves on, labeling Dorian with a "stained mind and soul" (179). Although the minimal expression of the argument is not surprising considering that Wilde could obviously not come straight out with any commentary along these lines, the digression is noteworthy.

Keeping these ideas in mind, Dorian's sexual behavior becomes performative and becomes attached to his gender performativity. The performance troubles typical aspects

of gender as much as possible. However, this is not to say that Dorian has some “true” identity that he is performing apart from his sexual activity. If he is performing for the portrait, then he is definitely performing for society as well. If Dorian is consciously acting one way for high society, then his performance also includes dressing a certain way for them. As previously noted, gender performance is highly connected with dress, and the text spends a great deal of time addressing Dorian’s careful clothing choices. Apart from the lengthy chapter on Dorian’s obsession with tapestries and jewels, the text also notes that Dorian’s “mode of dressing, and the particular styles that from time to time he affected, had their marked influence on the young exquisites” (123). So Dorian does not defy conventional gender in every way, because he is setting trends in dress. The masculinity he displays in the latter half of the book definitely fits with convention, even if his sexual activity does not.

The novel notes that, no matter how careless Dorian is with his own soul, “he was not really reckless, at any rate in his relations to society” (122). As Antonio Sanna phrases it, “the performance of vices as well as the criminal acts committed by Dorian are mainly enacted in silent locations. Specifically, Dorian’s house is repeatedly described as ‘silent,’ particularly after the painter’s murder” (31). Dorian has an entirely different performance for society, and he is somewhat successful in that sense, “especially among the very young men, who saw, or fancied that they saw, in Dorian Gray the true realization of a type … that was to combine something of the real culture of the scholar with all the grace and distinction and perfect manner of a citizen of the world” (122-123). Although some members of society (usually the older members) are suspicious of Dorian’s activities and avoid his company, young men are often caught up in his charm.

Even Henry is fooled by Dorian's performance. Dorian asks, "What would you say, Harry, if I told you that I had murdered Basil?" and Henry responds with the quip, "I would say, my dear fellow, that you were posing for a character that doesn't suit you" (200).

However, performance of every type suits Dorian. As Powell says, "Dorian is always an actor in a role" (113). He is able to "adopt certain modes of thought" and then "leave them with that curious indifference" (125). So Dorian changes performances in the text just as Sibyl does, but the main difference between the two is Dorian's consciousness and ease of doing so. While Sibyl only transforms after her life-altering relationship with Dorian, she is so transformed that she is unable to return to her previous state. Dorian, who is on some level conscious of his performances (both gendered and otherwise), is able to switch back and forth without any disruption to himself. He embodies a gender fluidity that is both surprising and difficult to achieve. However he is very like Sibyl in the sense that all aspects of his gender are performed. Neither the objectified femininity at the beginning of the novel nor the cold masculinity at the end are any more natural to his character. Both are in response to society's views of him. He is treated like a child by Basil and so he responds in kind; when he begins to tamper with the portrait, he is again responding to societal pressure.

One criticism of an alternative gendered reading could be the fact that Dorian ultimately seems to be punished for his transgressions, whatever they may be, and that the ending is overly moralistic. Jim Hansen certainly espouses a similar view when he writes that the novel "primarily operates at the level of moralism, deploys the supernatural to ironic effect, and ends with the apparently deserved death of its titular

antihero" (64). The painting is definitely worsening in a progression that corresponds with Dorian's drug use, sexual activity (both heterosexual and homosexual), as well as the murder of Basil. So one could argue that the portrait responds to Dorian's "sins." However, the text does not lend itself to this reading.

Instead of Dorian being punished for his actual actions, he is in reality being punished for his intentions or wishes. I have argued that Dorian seeks out many of the actions that readers of the time deemed as sins, precisely because of their view. Because of his intentions, Dorian is being punished for seeking out sinful behavior and not for the behavior itself (because, as the text acknowledges, what is considered sinful has a great deal to do with society). After all, a wish and not an action made the portrait reflect his soul in the first place, and Basil is convinced that a similar wish could reverse the process. Just before his death, Basil in desperation implores Dorian, "The prayer of your pride has been answered. The prayer of your repentance will be answered as well" (149). In addition, when Dorian "spares" Hetty Merton late in the text, he expects the portrait to get better; however, it actually gets worse because his intentions are not any better: "Through vanity he had spared her. In hypocrisy he had worn the mask of goodness. For curiosity's sake he had tried the denial of self" (209). His action is undeniably merciful, but again the portrait is reflecting the intentions of its subject rather than his physical actions. Dorian's wishes affect change on the portrait in every case. This reading would account for the odd circumstance of Dorian being punished for "deviant" sexual behavior, when every other aspect of the text supports the idea that no fixed formula for sex or gender exists.

Additionally, Dorian is being punished not for his homosexual activity, but

instead for his new-found masculinity. Sibyl Vane is ultimately punished because she rejects the feminine ideal in favor of the more masculine and more independent life; when viewed in these terms, Dorian's change essentially follows the same pattern. Basil and Henry originally worship and admire him because of his feminine characteristics. Liang-ya Liou notes that Basil and Henry originally accept him because "effeminacy is part of dandyism, whose acceptability and popularity within the artist-aristocrat circle demystifies the constructedness of gender" (119). However, as he begins to exhibit more masculine characteristics, he strays farther and farther away from their ideal, particularly the ideal of Basil. His soft, feminine performance is to be most admired by society, but because he is very careful to keep up the feminine aspect of his performance for his social benefit, there are still many people around whom Dorian is welcome. The dinner guests at Lady Narborough's home all seem fond of Dorian, despite the circulating rumors. Although, their amiability is probably due to his continued performance: "one never seems so much at one's ease as when one has to play a part. Certainly no one looking at Dorian Gray that night could have believed that he had passed through a tragedy as horrible as any tragedy of our age" (165). After all, Henry cannot even imagine that Dorian would have the ability to murder Basil because he does not appear to have that aggressive passion in him. Therefore, just as Sibyl is punished for rejection of the feminine, Dorian experiences the same backlash.

Ultimately, Basil knows Dorian better than anyone else, including Dorian himself. Having felt such affection for the subject of his art, he can see that Dorian's actions late in the novel are not something inherent, but rather affected. When Dorian goes to reveal the portrait to Basil, he exclaims, "You are mad, Dorian, or playing a part" (147). Dorian

is definitely playing the part of the masculinized, aggressive sinner, but what Basil does not take into account is that Dorian was just as equally playing the part of the feminized, emotional youth. Levy agrees, saying that Dorian "is actually reproduced through writing that approximates performance as the body looks different each time it is acted out. As a result, there is no stable 'body' to act as the ultimate reference for Dorian as character" (146). Like Sibyl, both aspects of his gender and life are performative. In Dorian's case, Basil and Henry would like the version before his unholy deal to be the truth, but both end up being an extension of Dorian's performance. The performance early in his life is put on for society and for the older men who worship him, while the performance of his adulthood is put on for the painting and for the experiments that he can play upon it.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Applying Butler's performative gender theory to the works of Oscar Wilde reveals various new aspects of the works; clearly, the idea of characters performing gender acts is supported by the texts. What is more notable than these performances simply existing is the concept that they can change over the course of the texts. Perhaps most importantly though, it illustrates that one particular gender is not specific to any one particular sex act.

One of the most astounding aspects of these texts, considering the time in which they were written, is that the characters are so successful at performing multiple gender roles. I do not mean this in the sense that performances exist, but that the subjects are at their best when their gender does not match their sex. In "The Happy Prince," the Prince himself is much more admirable once he begins to cast off his riches to help those in need; this is also the time when he most subverts the gender that the townspeople have assigned him. Similarly, the Swallow is only able to make a meaningful connection with another creature when he surrenders the possessive and controlling masculinity that makes him abandon the Reed. His submissive femininity give him the ability to sacrifice himself for love. Additionally, both characters are received into heaven as a result of their efforts.

A similar relationship to gender can be seen in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Sibyl Vane definitely possesses the most agency after she can no longer act and when she has rejected the feminine ideal prescribed for her by Shakespeare. While she herself may be miserable in this moment, only at this point does she possess the power of a fully

developed individual. Finally, Dorian himself is at his most "pure" before he makes his deal with the portrait and when he is still lauded for his feminine qualities. Notably, his masculinity is conflated with his desire to transgress. As Hansen points out, "to be feminine, or, in more aestheticized and Wildean terms, effeminate, no longer seems disempowering. Quite the contrary, effeminacy has the power of style, the power to rearrange, reshape, and occasionally disrupt the bourgeois interior" (74). Because this is true of Dorian, it is certainly true of the aesthetes Basil and Henry, who display feminized character traits as well. When the characters' gender performance aligns directly with their sexuality, there are usually negative consequences.

The characters are also incredibly deft at changing their gender performance over the course of the novel. They are not bound to one particular set of gender aspects. They perform masculine actions at one point in time, feminine actions in the next, and oftentimes both sets of actions in the same time period. This is perhaps one of the most admirable qualities of the characters. In a letter to Ralph Payne in 1894, Wilde writes, "Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps" (Hart-Davis 352). It seems odd at first that Wilde identifies with a character who eventually meets a gruesome end as a result of his actions, but the real magic of Dorian is that he is able to embody many gender performances and many types of sexual desire. It is not so surprising, then, that Wilde would admire and seek to emulate his creation's gender fluidity.

Wilde's work pushes back against the idea that a broad spectrum of gender performances and qualities must be forced into an economy of two poles. Much of the tension in the texts comes from society's attempts to maintain the extremes, while at the

same time not realizing that it subverts what it is trying to uphold. Butler puts forward an ideal for the reception of gender performance when she argues that “we need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*” (“Performative Acts” 909). However, such a world is clearly not present in the Victorian society of Wilde’s day. His literature, then, can be viewed as a reaction to the stifling oppression of the society in which he lived. It was obviously impossible for the texts to explicitly state sexual content of any kind. As a result, it is necessary for Wilde that gender acts *express everything*.

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