Celebrity trials and tabloid scandals are not recent inventions. A century ago the three trials of Oscar Wilde caused the most sensational scandal in Anglo culture during the 1890s, rivaling the sensation caused by the O.J. Simpson trials of the 1990s. In the Victorian spectacle, a popular dramatist sued a controversial aristocrat for libel and then found himself the center of a media event and two subsequent criminal trials where, his apparent double life exposed, he was found guilty of “unnameable” acts of indecency with younger men—which was what the original libel alleged. To many an appalling but titillating spectacle, the Wilde trials also represent an important moment in the history of modern male homosexuality, providing for historians a marker to locate the emergence of a distinct homosexual identity. In fact, the trials are often implicitly credited as the event where the Homosexual emerged as a social subject. That the homosexual in question was a brilliant and controversial society dramatist who satirically fetishized society, and who fostered his own popular fetishization, only added to the irony and insidiousness of his persona.

However, Wilde was not an ideal gay figure. Writing in 1908 in his apologetic case studies about contemporary homosexuals—or “Uransians,” as he calls them—Xavier Mayne disputes the validity of the “exaggerated personal cult for Wilde” that he observed among English homosexuals:

Wilde’s type of uranism was in no sense classic. It was far below the level of idealism which his intellectuality would lead one to expect. His sexual instincts were concentrated on vulgar boy-prostitutes of the town. His receiving the halo of a “martyr” to homosexualism is also less well bestowed, since he repudiated in his last writings (though perhaps with his constitutional insincerity) the morality of the homosexual instinct, and so died “repentant.” That Wilde was a victim of British social intolerance and hypocrisy, and of the need of new and intelligent English legislation as to similosexual instincts is perfectly true: but Wilde himself was not a little shrewd and superficial poseur, to the very last. (Mayne [1908] 1975:363)
According to Mayne, Wilde was both a victim and a culprit in his own demise. In addition, while Wilde's homosexual activities were the chief focus of the trials, they were not the only aspects of his personality that made him anathema to the Victorian middle classes. In fact, during the course of the trials Wilde symbolized a much broader spectrum of perceived decadence and degeneration that to late Victorians threatened cultural collapse as the century drew to a close. In short, Wilde functioned as a cultural lightning rod for an anxious fin de siècle England. His homosexuality was significant yet incidental: symptomatic rather than causal in relation to his crime.

Yet Wilde would become a role model for other homosexual men. Reexamining this role model at its emergence, therefore, contextualizes not only its significance for the past, but more importantly its function for contemporary gay subjects positioning themselves in relation to it today. The need for this reevaluation is significant not only because of the historical and cultural distance between gay men today and Oscar Wilde, but also the very contestability of gay identities within a post-Victorian culture uneasy with non-heterosexual sexualities. The trials, in fact, dramatize that contest between dominant attitudes and alternative identities and serve as a valuable case study for identity construction. Wilde, a marginally representative figure, became the representation of male homosexuality within a hegemonic institution determined to transcribe (describe, delimit, and incorporate) the role for its own purposes. One could almost argue that Wilde became the modern homosexual precisely because it suited the institutions serving the hegemonic sexual discourse. The implications, then, are disturbing: the gay subject that emerged is the servant of those who damned him.

One hundred years after the trials, it is time to reevaluate the character that emerged from them. Because, like it or not, that character produced a distinctly queer identity for succeeding generations of gay men.

Understanding the process used to create and then destroy Wilde as the modern gay role model may help us to evaluate the product. That process—a series of civil and criminal trials widely disseminated as a media scandal—functioned within a dynamic similar to, if not in fact being, a ritual scapegoating. In fact, examining the trials specifically as a constellation of sacrificial performances reveals how Wilde became the modern gay male subject by mapping the highly problematic terrain in which a gay Wilde can be found.

The trials of Oscar Wilde produced a social drama of the type modeled by anthropologist and performance theorist Victor Turner. For Turner, social order is maintained through a complex matrix of rituals he calls a social drama. The model is trial-based:

In order to limit the contagious spread of breach certain adjustive and redressive mechanisms, informal and formal, are brought into operation by leading members of the disturbed group. These mechanisms vary in character with such factors as the depth and significance of the breach, the social inclusiveness of the crisis, the nature of the social group within which the breach took place, and its degree of autonomy in regard to wider systems of social relations. The mechanisms may range from personal advice and informal arbitration, to formal juridical and legal ma-
chinery, and to resolve certain kinds of crisis, to the performance of public ritual. Such ritual involves a "sacrifice," literal or moral, a victim as scapegoat for the group's "sin" of repressive violence. (1982:70-71)

The juridical proceedings in the spring of 1895 began the marshaling of widespread cultural forces intent on mending the breach in the patriarchy caused by Wilde's public posturing. This essay, based on an understanding of the trials as social drama, examines how Wilde became the scapegoat for fin de siècle Britain, recharacterizes the effigy the trials construct, and, finally, offers an alternative—hopefully broader—interpretation of the nature of the breach, one that bears an understanding of performance linked to the popular reception of Wilde's aesthetic theories. The intent is to foster a deeper understanding of the trials as an act of sacrifice within a rigid patriarchal culture and to allow a richer explanation of their widespread cultural impact. One hundred years after the trials, it is time to reevaluate the character that emerged from them. Because, like it or not, that character produced a distinctly queer identity for succeeding generations of gay men. Just what have they been playing out, and who wrote the script?

Briefly, the facts are as follows: On the 28th of February 1895 Wilde received the card that John Sholto Douglas, the 8th Marquess of Queensberry, had left for him at Wilde's club, the Albermarle, ten days earlier. The card, almost illegible because of the Marquess' handwriting, read "To Oscar Wilde posing Somdomite [sic]" and was only the latest incident in over nine months of aggressive harassment of Wilde by the father of his lover Alfred, Lord Douglas. Strongly encouraged by "Bosie," as the young Lord Douglas was called, Wilde brought a suit of libel against the Marquess. During March of 1895 the newspapers began fueling interest in this match between two notorious celebrities—as the Marquess was not without his own reputation as a belligerent, nonconforming aristocrat—so that the public was properly piqued by 3 April 1895, the day of the first trial.

Though Wilde was the prosecutor, it quickly became evident that he was the one on trial, not, as Wilde had intended, the raving aristocrat. The libel trial lasted three days and contained perhaps the most famous cross-examination scenes of any trial, pitting Wilde against Edward Carson, counsel for Queensberry, in a brilliant battle of wits. During the morning of the third day, 5 April, when the counsel for the defense was beginning its case, counsel for Wilde, Sir Edward Clarke, on Wilde's behalf and with his consent, urged the court to enter a plea of "not guilty" for Queensberry, admitting that the charge of "posing" was correct, and thus preventing the introduction of testimony from the youths Wilde was to have solicited. Queensberry, however, forwarded to the authorities the evidence that he had at great pains acquired, and later that evening Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel on Sloane Street.

Denied bail, Wilde remained in Holloway prison until his criminal trial began on the 26th of April. Standing trial with Wilde was Alfred Taylor, whose rooms at 13 Little College Street in Westminster served as a sort of brothel and social club where youths and their johns could mix. Wilde and Taylor were charged with indecency performed with other male persons and with conspiring with each other to commit indecent acts, implicitly sodomy. Seven days later, on the 1st of May, the jury could not reach a full consensus—most likely because of the legal technicalities of the conspiracy charge, which was eventually dropped, and the unreliability of several prosecution witnesses. The trial ended without a conviction.

Released on bail, Wilde waited for his next trial, not to begin until the next criminal court sessions on the 20th of May. Again Wilde was committed with
Taylor, but Clarke, again representing Wilde, successfully argued that they be tried separately. Taylor’s trial moved quickly, lasting that day and part of the next, and the jury reached a guilty verdict within 45 minutes. On 23 May Wilde was standing trial once more. By the 25th Wilde was found guilty and sentenced to two years of hard labor, the severest sentence possible. In passing sentence, Justice Wills took the opportunity to shame the two men:

Oscar Wilde and Alfred Taylor, the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon oneself to prevent oneself from describing, in language I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honour who has heard the details of these two terrible trials. That the jury have arrived at a correct verdict in this case, I cannot persuade myself to entertain the shadow of a doubt; and I hope, at all events, that those who sometimes imagine that a judge is half-hearted in the cause of decency and morality, because he takes care no prejudice shall enter the case, may see that that is consistent at least with the utmost sense of indignation at the horrible charges brought home to both of you. [...] People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame, and one cannot hope to produce any effect upon them. It is the worst case I have ever tried. (in Hyde [1948] 1962:272)

Wilde’s response was merely, “May I say nothing, my lord?” (in Hyde 1962:272). Wilde was led out of the court and taken to Pentonville prison. He would eventually serve his time at Reading Gaol.

A great deal of the trials’ cultural significance was molded by a sacrificial paradigm. Chief among the projects in any sacrifice is the creation of a proper victim: a scapegoat who embodies those characteristics the community wishes to expel and whose sacrifice will effectively rid the culture of its crisis by destroying the socially repellant attributes along with their embodiment. Wilde, in many ways, provided a readymade figure, ironically referred to in the press as the “Priest of the Decadents.” Long the controversial exploiter of media attention, Wilde parlayed the growing technology of newspaper reproduction and distribution to enhance his celebrity persona while aligning himself with a culturally dissident avantgarde that was increasingly feminist, socialist, and antibourgeois with its utilitarian ethic. Packaging his university studies with John Ruskin and Walter Pater together with his charismatic personality, he marketed himself as England’s leading aesthete and dandy, spearheading—through the media—a movement of like-minded men, and even when necessary consciously changing his image. Thus, Wilde was a known commodity to the press, already familiar with Wilde’s exploits and able to market sales to a fascinated, suspicious, and fetishizing public. With his notoriety developed largely through the media, it was perhaps inevitable that the media would likewise be responsible for Wilde’s downfall. The cruel glee that marks the reporting and editorializing reeks of not only hypocrisy and greed but also the revenge of a spurned lover.

In creating its scapegoat, the court fashioned Wilde as a homosexual type—from Wilde’s own personal characteristics in combination with characteristics of the bourgeois male, in effect redressing both—and the gay subject began to emerge. The process began with a descriptive analysis of Wilde’s character, beginning with his first appearance in the witness box. Shifting the focus from Queensberry to Wilde, Edward Carson, counsel for Queensberry, began his defense by exhaustively analyzing Wilde’s novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, probing for its homosexual meaning and hoping to expose Wilde as an immoral author. On familiar ground, Wilde resisted with wit and paradox, steer-
ing the trials into a forum on literary and aesthetic philosophy. Their debate began by discussing a short story published in an Oxford student publication, "The Priest and the Acolyte," in which a priest poisons himself and the altar boy who is found in his bed:

CARSON: You have no doubt whatever that that was an improper story?
WILDE: From a literary point of view it was highly improper. It is impossible for a man of literature to judge it otherwise; by literature, meaning treatment, selection of subject, and the like. I thought the treatment rotten and the subject rotten.

CARSON: You are of the opinion, I believe, that there is no such thing as an immoral book?
WILDE: Yes.

CARSON: May I take it that you think "The Priest and the Acolyte" was not immoral?
WILDE: It was worse. It was badly written. (in Hyde 1962:141)

They soon turned to Dorian Gray itself. First reading a passage in which the novel’s artist Basil Hallward declares his mad adoration for Dorian, Carson questions Wilde:

CARSON: Do you mean to say that that passage describes the natural feeling of one man towards another?
WILDE: It would be the influence produced by a beautiful personality.

CARSON: A beautiful person?
WILDE: I said, "a beautiful personality." You can describe it as you like. Dorian Gray’s was a remarkable personality.

CARSON: May I take it that you, as an artist, have never known the feeling described here?
WILDE: I have never allowed any personality to dominate my art.

CARSON: Then you have never known the feeling you described?
WILDE: No. It is a work of fiction.

CARSON: So far as you are concerned, you have no experience as to its being a natural feeling?
WILDE: I think it is perfectly natural for any artist to admire intensely and love a young man. It is an incident in the life of almost any artist.

CARSON: But let us go over it phrase by phrase [...] "I quite admit that I adored you madly." What do you say to that? Have you ever adored a young man madly?
WILDE: No, not madly. [...] I prefer love—that is, a higher form...

CARSON: Never mind about that [...] Let us keep down to the level we are at now.

WILDE: I have never given adoration to anybody except myself [laughter].

CARSON: I suppose you think that a very smart thing? [...] 
WILDE: Not at all. [...]
CARSON: Then you have never had that feeling?

WILDE: No. The whole idea was borrowed from Shakespeare, I regret to say—yes, from Shakespeare's sonnets. (in Hyde 1962:112-13)

Soon, however, the debate broadened when another text was introduced for interpretation. A letter Wilde had written to Alfred, Lord Douglas, in which Wilde described the young aristocrat's "red rose-leaf lips" and "slim gilt soul [which] walks between passion and poetry," was subjected to intense genre analysis. Counsel for the defense, Carson, claimed the letter was a ridiculous love letter in purple prose; Wilde claimed it was poetic and of considerable literary merit.

WILDE: I think it is a beautiful letter. It is a poem. I was not writing an ordinary letter. You might as well cross-examine me as to whether King Lear or a sonnet of Shakespeare was proper.

CARSON: Apart from art, Mr. Wilde?

WILDE: I cannot answer apart from art.

CARSON: Suppose a man who was not an artist had written the letter, would you say it was a proper letter?

WILDE: A man who was not an artist could not have written that letter.

CARSON: Why?

WILDE: Because nobody but an artist could write it. He certainly could not write the language unless he were a man of letters.

CARSON: I can suggest, for the sake of your reputation, that there is nothing very wonderful in this "red rose-leaf lips of yours"?

WILDE: A great deal depends on the way it is read.

CARSON: "Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry" [...]. Is that a beautiful phrase?

WILDE: Not as you read it, Mr. Carson. You read it very badly. (in Hyde 1962:116)

Further, also referring to the letter:

CARSON: Have you often written letters in the same style as this?

WILDE: I don't repeat myself in style. (in Hyde 1962:116)

Without question, Wilde was the star performer. The public, eager to witness their celebrities in risqué melodrama on- and offstage, crowded the courtroom during all three trials. Wilde was the chief object of interest and, at least during the early sessions, rarely disappointed. Richard Ellman reports one moment when Wilde used gesture to throw off Carson:

Wilde deliberately turned his back, folded his arms, and looked far away through the ceiling in rapt concentration. It was effectively done. Carson thundered at him to conduct himself properly, and appealed to the judge: "M'Lud, M'Lud." Wilde stared deeper into the void for a full minute. Suddenly he swung round as if he heard Carson for the first time and said, assuming a most apologetic tone, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Carson; I do beg your pardon." (1988:449)
Often, the court would be interrupted by outbursts of laughter or applause. Justice Wills' remarks after one outburst at the close of the third trial express an antiperformance prejudice focused on the participation of the voyeuristic public which threatened to turn the trials into theatre:

To have to try a case of this kind, to keep the scales even, and do one's duty is hard enough; but to be pestered with the applause or expressions of feeling of senseless people who have no business to be here at all except for the gratification of morbid curiosity is too much. I hope no further interruption of this kind will be heard throughout the rest of the trial. If there is anything of the kind again, I shall clear the court. (in Hyde 1962:257)

A performance, sacrificial or not, needs a public, and because this particular performance was media-driven, that public was a reading one.

Wilde's finest moment—and one that received the loudest applause—occurred during the second trial when he was asked to explain "the love that dare not speak its name." Less haughty than with Carson in the first trial and growing weary of being badgered, he nevertheless mustered himself for this moment. Responding on cue and playing the tragic hero he began:

"The love that dare not speak its name" in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. It dictates and pervades great works of art like those of Shakespeare and Michelangelo, and those two letters of mine, such as they are. It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it be described as the "Love that dare not speak its name," and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual, and it repeatedly exists between an elder and a younger man, when the elder has intellect, and the younger man has all the joy, hope, and glamour of life before him. That it should be so, the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it. (in Hyde 1962:201)

The spontaneous burst of applause was recognition of this supreme moment of performance. But, as Neil Bartlett has pointed out, this "spontaneous" moment was partially scripted; Wilde was quoting from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1988:204).

A performance, sacrificial or not, needs a public, and because this particular performance was media-driven, that public was a reading one. With the actual trial transcripts lost, destroyed, or repressed, the newspaper accounts provide the only surviving "firsthand" documentation of the event. In other words, the performance of the first gay subject was heavily mediated, an important aspect to keep in mind. On one hand, as Ed Cohen has recognized, the trials were reported through a filter that treated them as theatrical from the start (1993:130). By deliberately invoking performance tropes—costume, gesture, dramatic dialog, and above all the body of a star actor—the newspapers attempted to write into their accounts an immediacy necessarily lost to those
who could not be part of the courtroom gallery. It was the newspapers’ task to position their readers as if the latter were present in the courtroom, as if they were actual witnesses to the performances themselves. By using a language of performance, the newspapers sought to render the trials real to their readers, to enhance their stories, and, finally, to sell more newspapers.5

Detailed descriptions of Wilde’s body not only placed him more immediately in the minds of their readers, but sensualized the media texts. The reporters focused intently on the minutest of gestures:

Ponderous and fleshy, his face a dusky red, and his hair brushed away from a middle parting in smooth waves, he folded his hands on the front of the witness-box, and replied in carefully modulated monosyllables, accentuated by nods of the head, to Sir Edward Clarke’s leading questions about his early life, already described. (The Star, 3 April 1895)6

As the trials progressed, the tabloids reported how his body was transformed:

The fortnight’s confinement in Holloway Gaol has told severely on Wilde. He has lost a great deal of flesh. His face looked almost bloodless, and his eyes heavy and weary. He entered the dock with faltering steps, and, having obtained Sir John Bridge’s permission to be seated, sank with a sigh of relief upon the narrow oak plank which does duty for a seat in the dock. (The Illustrated Police News, 20 April 1895)

Eventually, Wilde and his charisma were almost completely erased. Wilde’s demeanor changed from “the blandest air of sangfroid” (The Star, 3 April 1895) to helpless defeat:

Wilde crossed his legs, placed his left arm on his leg, and on his hand leant his head. He stared apparently into vacancy, but to anyone watching him closely it was at once perceptible that he was drinking in and listening intently to the grave charges Mr. Gill was levelling at his head. All through the speech, however, he did not move a muscle, and after a time he gave one the impression of a man who was becoming rapidly bored. In some like position Oscar sat hour after hour. He never spoke, laughed, or scowled, but stared incessantly into vacancy, and so on for two long days. (The Illustrated Police Budget, 4 May 1895)

Even at the time of the final verdict, the focus is intently on Wilde’s body and its emissions:

During the recital of the verdict by the foreman, Wilde remained standing, and when the first “Guilty” was uttered, he clutched convulsively at the front rail of the dock. His face became paler than before—if that was possible—his eyes glared and twitched from an unseen excitement within, and his body practically shook with nervous protestation, whilst a soft tear found a place in his eye. At this point there is no doubt whatever that the man felt his position keenly, and his whole demeanor spoke volumes to any casual observer of human nature. Yes, Wilde was indeed affected, and at the last seemed to realise that he was in great danger of not seeing the light of freedom for some time to come. (The Illustrated Police Budget, 1 June 1895 [my emphasis])

As these examples reveal, the mediation performed by the journalistic texts was not only theatrical but homophobic and censorious, creating a stylistic mix
of insinuating innuendo and melodrama. Even as they attempted to render the trials immediate by foregrounding the star’s body, that immediacy was marked by the absence of the very subject of the trials: Wilde’s acts of sodomy with 20-year-old youths. In fact, as Cohen demonstrates, the newspapers often reached a revelation of the physical act through a tortuous route of displacement, finding other ways to signify Wilde’s crime without describing it in clear, concrete terms. This symptomatic mapping of the signs of sodomy, a process carried out by the court as well, functioned alongside the Victorian regulatory discourse on sexuality and effectively created a more complete typology of the male homosexual and his recognizable features. According to Cohen:

By mediating between the defense interpretation and the popular limits for (sexual) representation, the newspapers reiterated the defense’s attempts to construct a new category of sexual transgression that could be signified not by a reference to specific “unnameable” sexual acts but by the depiction of a certain type of sexual actor. (1993:145)

The gesture—sodomy—entered into a more complete discourse through displacement onto a larger character—the homosexual. In other words, the character signified the act. Ironically, Victorian sexual repression incited a discourse of a homosexual identity and lifestyle in order to avoid invoking (or provoking) the body in action.

A fashionably dissident intellectual’s attempts to articulate an alternative desire became the impetus for an explosive spawning of a new sexual discourse in the courts and subsequently the press.

As more and more of Wilde’s private activities with young men were exposed—as more of the sodomite pose was explored—the newspapers recoiled in horror but remained voyeuristically fascinated:

The Wilde case is sinking deeper and deeper into a foul morass where it becomes increasingly difficult to follow it. The fine verbal fencing of the first day has done little to relieve the horrible darkness of the succeeding passages of the trial, and even the Old Bailey recoiled with loathing from the long ordeal of terrible suggestion that occupied the whole of yesterday when the cross-examination left the artistic literary plane and entered the dim-lit, perfumed rooms where the poet of the beautiful joined with valets and grooms in the bond of the silver cigarette case. And when Oscar Wilde left the box the little light that had relieved the awful sombreness of the picture died out, as Mr. Carson went on to paint a horrid nocturne of terrible suggestions, a thing of blackness, only half defined, but wholly horrible. (The Evening News, 5 April 1895)

Thus the scapegoat was created, mediated, and disseminated by a journalistic apparatus—a cultural technology of bourgeois patriarchy. A fashionably dissident intellectual’s casual attempts to articulate an alternative desire became the impetus for an explosive spawning of a new sexual discourse in the courts and subsequently the press. Though the trials and their media coverage articu-
lated that new discourse and gave a name to an otherwise unnameable set of acts, the articulation was intended to condemn. The price paid for a gay identity was the culturally damning discourse that ironically birthed it.

The specific discourse that emerged can be characterized by its recurrent themes—what was “talked about” in the courtroom. From beginning to end, the trials were demonstrably about relations between men, from the moment when only men were allowed in the courtroom (making it, for the most part, an all male performance for an all male audience), to the testimony from the witness box (what Wilde did with male youths), to the scenic background—namely the clubs, educational institutions, and cultured street life that in late Victorian society were almost exclusively dominated by men. According to Richard Dellamora, the more visible homosexuality of the 1890s sent male institutions into crisis.

Wilde-as-dandy provided something of an early-warning signal that the combined prescription and proscription of intense male bonding at public school and the older universities was vulnerable to changes in masculine self-identification [...]. Hence the need to separate the gentlemen from the dandies, to retrench, to generate scandals, and to expel embarrassments like Wilde. (1990:208)

Following Turner's crisis model for performance where crisis generates performance, the massive mobilization of cultural performances—the performances of the newspaper narratives, for example—suggests the extent to which Victorian society was put in crisis and, since the crisis involved almost exclusively men, the extent to which this society was defined by masculinity. Read backwards from the effect (the performances) to their cause (Wilde exposed), the “crime” clearly violated more than sexual propriety and the Victorian sense of decency. Wilde had touched a nerve.

Further, the vagueness of the law under which Wilde was prosecuted broadened the crime the trials redressed beyond acts of sodomy. Specifically, the Labouchere Amendment, or section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, an “Act to make further provision for the Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other purposes,” literally tacked on at the last minute, effectively outlawed “any male person” from soliciting “in public or in private [...] any act of gross indecency with another male person.” By phrasing the crime as “any act of gross indecency” the law allowed the criminalization of more than anal copulation, previously the only criminal sex act between men. In fact, sodomy before the 19th century was not exclusively interpreted as homosexual, hence not necessarily gendered as male, but rather signified anal copulation in general and could take place in heterosexual or even bestial contexts. The language of the amendment shifted the focus of the law from the crime of sodomy—a crime based on a specific act—to a crime against gender. The vague phrasing, then, is not wholly an example of Victorian prudery, but rather a general attempt to regulate male behavior. In short, Wilde was never technically on trial for sodomizing boys; because of the phrasing of the law he was tried for violations against the male sex.

During the trials, the parameters of the male sex were determined by fatherhood, class, and the boundaries between the public and the private. Fatherhood struck the keynote when Queensberry was portrayed as acting in the interest of saving his son, despite the fact that he openly expressed a distaste for his entire family. In contrast, Wilde was characterized as a usurper of
the father's natural rights. Writing to Lord Douglas from Reading Gaol two years after the trial, Wilde seems to suggest his "crime" was attacking Queensberry as a father:

Do you think I am here on account of my relations with the witnesses on my trial? My relations, real or supposed, with people of that kind were matters of no interest to either the Government or Society [...] I am here for having tried to put your father into prison. My attempt failed of course [...]. Your father completely turned the tables on me, and had me in prison, has me there still. (Wilde [1897] 1962:456)

The characterization of Wilde as a father-usurper offers an explanation for why age became such an important factor in the trials. By foregrounding the generational disparity between Wilde, Douglas, and the lower-class boys, the court could effectively accuse Wilde of attempting to pervert not only Queensberry's paternity but the paternity of several working-class men as well. Therefore, when Carson catches Wilde in a falsification of his age (Wilde claimed he was thirty-nine, but he actually was forty), not only did he undermine Wilde's credibility as a witness—and expose his vanity—he also emphasized that Wilde was that much older than the boys. In fact, after establishing Wilde's true age, Carson interjected that the age of the Lord Douglas was twenty-four and then quickly added that he was twenty when they first met, while failing to mention that Wilde would have been thirty-six. In effect, Carson widened the age gap from sixteen to twenty years, increasing Wilde's likelihood of being old enough to be Douglas's father.

In the case of Edward Shelley, a young clerk at Wilde's publishers, Wilde's influence was presented as directly disruptive to a father-son relationship. First Shelley explained why he resigned from the publishers, indicating his relationship with Wilde inverted his patriarchal position from a dutiful son into a wife and daughter:

SHELLEY: They [the fellow clerks] implied scandalous things. They called me "Mrs. Wilde" and "Miss Oscar."

PROSECUTOR: So you left?

SHELLEY: I resolved to put an end to an intolerable situation.

PROSECUTOR: You were in a bad odour at home too, I think?

SHELLEY: Yes, a little.

PROSECUTOR: I put it to you that your father requested you to leave his house?

SHELLEY: Yes. He strongly objected to my friendship with Mr. Wilde. But the difference between us was made up again.

PROSECUTOR: Were you arrested for an assault upon your father?

SHELLEY: Yes, I was.

PROSECUTOR: Were you quite in your sound mind when you assaulted your father.

SHELLEY: No, I couldn't have been. (in Hyde 1962:191)

Ultimately, it was as a malicious corruptor of youth that Wilde was made to seem the most dangerous to the public. The Daily Telegraph, in an editorial
written after Wilde's conviction, warned against Wilde's corrupting influence to the younger members of the patriarchy:

He [Wilde] set an example, so far as in him lay, to the weaker and the younger brethren; and, just because he possessed considerable intellectual powers and unbounded assurance, his fugitive success served to dazzle and bewilder those who had neither experience nor knowledge of the principles which he travestied or of the true temple of art of which he was so unworthy an acolyte. (The Daily Telegraph, 27 May 1895)

The Evening News was more explicit in its indictment and even suggested Wilde was a threat to the nation:

To him [Wilde] and such as him we owe the spread of moral degeneration amongst young men with abilities sufficient to make them a credit to their country. At the feet of Wilde they have learned to gain notoriety by blatant conceit, by despising the emotions of healthy humanity and the achievements of wholesome talent. (in Hyde 1962:18)

Not only did Wilde corrupt young men and their roles within the patriarchy, but he corrupted the boundaries between the classes. When Wilde’s relationships with the boys were restaged in the court dialog, almost consistently it is within an arena of luxurious dinners, extravagant gifts or expensive clothes he bought for them, all of which horrified the court as grossly improper. In other words, Wilde treated his “rough trade” to the dinners, cigarette cases, and clothes that were the props and costumes of the upper class to which these boys had no right. Wilde brought unwelcome guests into the club, dressed in a type of class “drag,” and demonstrated that the lines between the classes were arbitrary (or simply a matter of shopping).

The case of one boy in particular, Alphonse Conway, proved particularly offensive to members of the jury. Conway was of questionable origins and with no clear social position or occupation. (Upon learning during the trials that Conway sold newspapers, Wilde claimed that was the first time he knew of Conway’s “literary” connection.) And yet Wilde had given Conway a cigarette case, a signed photograph of himself, a book, and a silver-mounted walking stick: expensive gifts for a leisured gentleman. These, in one of the more “dramatic” moments in the trial, Carson produced for the inspection of the jury. Further, the opposing counsel explained, on a trip to Brighton, the seaside vacation ground for the wealthy, Wilde provided Conway with a suit of blue serge and a straw hat with a red and blue band, an “unfortunate selection” according to Wilde. Counsel pressed him further, foregrounding the disparity in class, “You dressed this newsboy up to take him to Brighton [...] in order that he might look more like an equal?” (in Hyde 1962:122).

Wilde claimed, however, that the gifts and the vacation were rewards “for his being a pleasant companion to myself and my children” (122-23). In presenting his case to the jury of the first trial, Carson questioned Wilde’s motives by grounding these gestures as violations of class boundaries:

The whole thing in its audacity is almost past belief. Why, if the defence [Queensberry] had proved the fact, instead of getting it from the mouth of the prosecutor [Wilde], you would have said it was almost incredible. But why did Mr. Wilde dress up Conway? If Mr. Wilde were really anxious to assist Conway, the very worst thing he could have done was to take the lad out of his proper sphere, to begin by giving him champagne luncheons, taking him to his hotel, and treating him in a manner in which the boy could never in the future expect to live. (in Hyde 1962:146)

Finally, through the description of Alfred Taylor’s rooms in Little College Street, Westminster—in the shadow of the Houses of Parliament—the court revealed a scene of inverted domesticity and began its redemarcation of the private sphere. The detailed description of his rooms full of elaborate furniture, perfumed, with curtains drawn, and artificially lit, was used not only to reveal Taylor’s homosexuality (as Dorian Gray was used to reveal Wilde’s) but also was calculated to contrast to the domestic scene of the jurymen’s own homes, since what was also described were the domestic activities that occurred there, namely the tea-parties, sleeping arrangements, and general housekeeping chores. Carson questioned Wilde during the first trial:
CARSON: Did his rooms strike you as being peculiar?
WILDE: No, except that he displayed more taste than usual.
CARSON: There was rather elaborate furniture in the rooms, was there not?
WILDE: The rooms were furnished in good taste.
CARSON: Is it true that he never admitted daylight into them?
WILDE: Really! [...] I don't know what you mean.

[...]

CARSON: Can you declare specifically that any daylight was ever admitted into the room?
WILDE: Well, I can't say as to that.
CARSON: Were the rooms strongly perfumed?
WILDE: Yes, I have known him to burn perfumes. But I would not say the rooms were always perfumed. [...] I am in the habit of burning perfumes in my own rooms. (in Hyde 1962:124)

According to historian H. Montgomery Hyde, the effect worked: "The jurymen [...] began to show by the shocked looks on their faces what they thought of this establishment, so different from their own respectable habitations [...]" (1962:124).

In addition, the court demonstrated how Wilde consistently inverted private spaces into public forums, in effect living on the margin between private secrets and public notoriety. With the testimony of valets, masseurs, landladies, and chambermaids, the court followed Wilde to the private dining rooms of public restaurants, to the separate rooms in Piccadilly that Wilde occupied outside his family home in Tite Street, to the street cafés where he lunched, to the bedrooms of public hotels, even to a curious stain left on a bedsheet. Wilde's lack of regard for keeping his romantic interest in young men private outraged middle-class Victorian sensibility, even as it titillated the upper classes Wilde charmed. Queensberry, in fact, was not as outraged that Wilde might in fact be a sodomite in private, but that he insisted on posing as one in public. Wilde’s friendship with Bosie, Queensberry complained in a letter, was already a suppressed scandal. He intended to make it public.

Section 11 actually opened the private sphere for public, legal scrutiny by explicitly outlawing male homosexual acts “in public or in private.” To Victorians who sanctified the private sphere’s inviolability, the amendment was actually controversial. Wilde, as the first person tried under the amendment, tested not only the standards of indecent acts between men, but also the extent to which private sexual behavior could become publicly regulated. Wilde, as suggested above, violated the public sphere by daring society to accept the public “pose” of his private behavior with younger men. Conversely, section 11 violated the private sphere by allowing the public forum of the courts to expose and criminalize private behavior. Wilde was the perfect test case, then, for the very issue that made the law controversial: the issue of the law’s intervention into private sexual activity. Before the trial, a legal expert commented to one of the members of Wilde’s counsel, “We shall see which the jury dislike most—section 11 or Oscar Wilde.”

The issue of privacy was then, in many ways, the defining “theme” of the trials around which the other themes operated. A public scandal was often for Victorians more appalling than private sin. And yet with the technology of the print media that enabled an increased circulation of the press and greater
competition between newspapers for stories that sold, maintaining a discreet control over public scandal was increasingly difficult. Thus the threat to privacy was greater than ever. The ritual scapegoating of Wilde in the press, then, redresses not only the breach in the patriarchy caused by Wilde’s pose, but the breach in the sanctity of the private sphere caused by the press’s dissemination of private lives as public scandals. In effect, the trials demonstrated how class and fatherhood functioned as the boundaries for the private sphere. In other words, class and fatherhood (or rather, paternity) not only determined access into the public sphere, but also—as their use as “themes” in the Wilde trials shows—defined the limits of privacy as well. Class and fatherhood then were designated as guardians of the private sphere when they were invoked as “themes” in a trial that dealt with a definition of privacy."
According to Clifford Geertz, a Balinese cockfight is a “means of expression.” Like the trials, it provides a structure for society’s themes. The cockfight:

catches up these themes—death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance—and, ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them, to those historically positioned to appreciate the construction, meaningful—visible, tangible, graspable—“real,” in an ideational sense. (1973:444)

Throughout, the participants in the trials contested the various interpretations that could be put onto Oscar Wilde. The Queensberry trial began with literary interpretations both of The Picture of Dorian Gray and a letter of Wilde’s. But whereas the trial participants may have partially recognized their participation in a project of constructing interpretations, the one construction they were making was undoubtedly recognized as the true and natural one and hence, paradoxically, to them not a construction at all. The trials began with artificial structures—Wilde’s novel, his character, the stories told about him—and concluded by fixing these constructions firmly and without suture onto the body of the criminal.

Cohen demonstrates how the sensational newspaper accounts systematically foregrounded Wilde’s body. From describing in detail how Wilde stood in the witness box, how he clothed himself, to, finally, how his body showed signs of deterioration by the end of the last trial, Cohen argues that what he calls “somatic displacement” became “the conduit through which the unverbalized/unverbalizable aspects of the sexual charges against Wilde were made available to the reading public [...]” (1993:179). With props (cigarette cases, walking sticks, expensive dinners), costumes (blue serge suits and straw hats), traditional melodramatic characters (outraged fathers and rebellious sons) and drawing room settings, the trials theatrically constructed Wilde as an effigy of decadence and monstrous male sexuality.

If, however, Wilde allowed the young men to dominate the relationships—as the courts seemed also to imply—then Wilde would need to be expelled from the patriarchal circles in which he moved freely. Wilde would have lacked the phallus.

The themes of the trials—male privilege, fatherhood, and class—in one significant way reconstructed the sanctity of bourgeois privacy. In another significant way, they reconstructed men’s “privates.” Ultimately, the trials as performed in the media caught up the “theme” of Wilde’s body, reduced to the activity of his genitals. In other words, Wilde’s body became both the natural site and a citation (in terms of both an authority and deployment) of his “crimes.” Wilde’s penis, then, became both the site of his crime and the instrument of it. Citing Wilde’s body naturalized the construction of the trials themselves; reducing his violation of gender to the activity of his penis as the one prop he had in common with the men conducting the trials rendered the crime understandable to other men. The lowest common denominator, it became the only site for masculinity—its essential nature—since Wilde effectively inverted all others. According to Cohen, “As soon as Wilde himself became the subject of legal scrutiny, it was very clear that it was his body—
and metonymically the constitution of the male body—that was at stake in the production of public meanings engendered by the case" (1993:181).

Paradoxically, the trials were also concerned with whether Wilde in fact had a penis after all. The implications of his unmanly behavior effectively pointed to its absence. His dandyisms and his aesthetic passions were to Victorians more feminine than masculine. Yet as a fellow member of the patriarchy who had progressed through its educational institutions, was productive in its culture, and enjoyed its privileges, Wilde partook as if he had one. He had even produced two sons of his own. Yet clearly Wilde's penis behaved differently than the run-of-the-mill bourgeois male's. In short, the question never asked but clearly center stage was whether Wilde was insertive or receptive in bed. By constructing Wilde as a corruptor of young men or as an upper-class gentleman mentoring lower-class youths in the ways of the patriarchy, however perversely—as the trials in part attempted to do—Wilde would have maintained his phallic identity. If, however, Wilde allowed the young men to dominate the relationships—as the courts seemed also to imply—then Wilde would need to be expelled from the patriarchal circles in which he moved freely. Wilde would have lacked the phallus.12

Wilde's penis, however, was not the only prop that paradoxically appeared and disappeared. Other "gay" bodies were similarly elusive. With each successive trial, the number of witnesses was reduced, replaced with a reading of their testimony from the previous trial. The physical presence of the boys Wilde solicited, so feared by Wilde's counsel in the first trial because seeing them would make Queensberry's charges more "real," became merely the text of their statements, read no doubt by some clerk dryly and with distaste. This "textualization" of the boys' bodies in effect reduces the impact of the activities described, "veiling" the sex behind a screen of language.13 But the elimination of bodies also effectively positions Wilde as the only participant in the act, as the only sodomite present. That the charge of conspiracy to commission acts of gross indecency brought against both Wilde and Taylor was eventually dropped may have benefitted Wilde in terms of the trial, but its dismissal also effectively (though illogically) denied that the acts were something other than an individual tendency, and that several men could agree that the acts were pleasurable. In effect, dropping the charge of conspiracy denied the existence of a community of men who took sexual pleasure in other men, despite the fact that the trials described that community in detail. Isolated, Wilde became a more effective scapegoat.

A key project of performance, according to Geertz, is to reveal the "essential nature" of what gets performed. Wilde, the "unnatural father," was contrasted to Queensberry, the "natural" one; Wilde was belligerently interrogated: Were his feelings for the younger Douglas "natural"? Were lower-class boys "natural" companions? Was it "natural" to dress up young men as gentlemen? Throughout, Wilde was systematically displayed as the ultimate site of the unnatural male, through a constant marking out, a "mapping" of natural and unnatural acts. But Wilde remained elusive on these points about nature. True to his tenets, style and posing were Wilde's paradoxical nature. As a result, the issue for the court was less the specific acts between Wilde and the boys and more Wilde's preference to perform for performance's sake, Wilde's radical Delsartian divorce of performance from an essential nature.14 Perhaps Wilde lacked the essentializing penis after all. To the popular press at least, this was the root of Wilde's evil. According to the Daily Telegraph, "'Art for Art's sake'—that is the original catch-word of half the folly which is talked about in our midst. A falser or more foolish sentiment could not be imagined: it is demonstrably an error both on historical and psychological grounds" (Daily Telegraph, 27 May 1895). The editorial further documents the danger:
Observe, however, how the mournful chain of deductions is drawn, ring by ring and link by link, from this misconceived and parodied first principle. Because Kant and Lessing and Schiller talked sometimes as if 'l'art pour l'art' were the right axiom or postulate of aesthetics—a doctrine, by the way, which was repudiated by Fichte and Hegel, to say nothing of our own English Ruskin—the modern disciple proceeds to urge that art, being non-moral, has no ethical bearing whatever, and therefore may deal frankly with the immoral. Hence has come upon us the detestable invasion of the foul and the squalid and the ugly, in what is called Realism; hence, too, in other writers, the marked preference for the unnatural, the sensual, the erotic—the suggestion of unhealthy passion, the poison of a sentimental dalliance with vice. (The Daily Telegraph, 27 May 1895)

The Telegraph concludes, “We shall never get rid of the products unless we understand the cause; we shall never wash our hands clean of these stains unless we recognize how the waters of art have been fouled at their very source” (27 May 1895). Notably, Wilde’s sexuality was not the source of this outrage, but rather the implications of his aesthetic philosophy. Wilde’s physical sex could be contained—as an effigy or in a prison—but his culturally dissident ideas proved more dangerous.

What was on trial, then, was the “nature” of performance itself. By insisting that his life was a work of art, higher in style due to a cultivated artistic sensitivity, Wilde insisted that all lives may in fact be artificial, that what is seen as “natural” may in fact only be a performance misrecognized as nature. We can only see nature, Wilde insisted, after an artist has shown us a landscape. We can only see masculinity after Wilde the artist has shown us a stylized version of it. In effect, Wilde demonstrated Judith Butler’s postulation about gender:

[I]f gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. (1990:279)

Wilde’s most effective strategy, but the one which he grossly miscalculated, was turning the trials into a performance.

The trials of Oscar Wilde proved a sensational “theatrical” spectacle for the print media and a legal scapegoating of the socialite who turned the patriarchy into paradox. Placing himself (but also placed) at the intersection of performance and sexuality, Wilde (en)gendered a crisis revolving around the rights of a person to perform freely one’s own sexual subjectivity, suggesting in fact that all sexual subjectivities might be performative. And yet, in the process, he performed within parameters well established by bourgeois patriarchal culture—fatherhood, class, and privacy—turning these issues into paradox but never really stepping outside of them. According to Moe Meyer, “By toying with the pathways of power he showed that the dominant culture had a life expectancy. It was constructed; it could be altered; and therefore it could die. Oscar Wilde, posing ‘somdomite’ (sic): a black hole in the fabric of white man’s universe” (1994:99).

By toying with the patriarchal pathways of power, however, he tacitly allowed himself to be contained within them. Wilde transgressively created a space for the gay subject, but that space was ultimately as defined by the agent of desire as by the dominant, frowning discourse with the louder voice.

This fact today should give pause. The gay subject that emerged in 1895 was privileged, urbane, male, and engaging in effectively cross-generational
and cross-class relations, relations the privileged subject could dominate according to and within patriarchal rules. In fairness to Wilde, however, these were the limits of his historical and cultural position. And yet in spite of its problematic context, for his generation Wilde gave quite a performance. He remains a figure of notable interest:

I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colors of things: there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet. [...] I treated Art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction: I awoke the imagination of my century [...]. (Wilde [1897] 1962:466)

Notes

1. According to Moe Meyer,

The trials appear to be the pivotal, historical moment that provided the major impetus for the recognition of a homosexual social identity by the nongay public and the adoption of that identity by homosexuals themselves [...]. [The trials] established a physical site for a labeling process during which Wilde was constructed as the first public embodiment of what, until then, had appeared only in the pages of case studies. (Meyer 1994:95)

Meyer concludes, “Wilde entered the court as a run-of-the-mill sodomite, but exited as the first homosexual” (1994:96). Meyer’s essay on Wilde is one of the best works to emerge from the current reassessment of Wilde as the primary gay subject. Using semiotic analysis, Meyer examines Wilde’s effort to signify his desire, as well as the dominant discourse’s control over its signification.

2. My approach is different from recent studies that evaluate Wilde as the primogenitor of modern gay subjectivity. Ed Cohen’s study, Talk on the Wilde Side (1993), perhaps the most exhaustive analysis of the trials, effectively analyzes the rhetorical strategies and homophobic biases of the news and tabloid accounts. However, while he recognizes the use of theatrical tropes in the daily reporting of the trials, he does not fully deal with actual aspects of performance in the trials themselves. Neil Bartlett’s book, Who Was that Man? A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde (1988), is a far more personal narrative that problematizes Wilde as a role model for gay men today. It is a fascinating book, but not very scholarly. Finally, Alan Sinfield’s recent study, The Wilde Century (1994), places the Wilde trials within a gender controversy between effeminacy and masculinity in men. The figure of Wilde that emerges from Sinfield’s study, and the one that proves the most satisfactory, is not so much gay as it is anti-male—as Sinfield demonstrates, an important distinction. Thus Wilde emerges as a negative model for the late Victorian bourgeois male rather than a positive model for the modern male homosexual. Sinfield, however, is concerned with the broader issues of gender roles within modern “queer” identities and draws on the Wilde trials as an historical turning point rather than as the single area of interest.

3. All quotations from the trials are taken from H. Montgomery Hyde’s history ([1948]1962). Hyde, as Cohen points out, reconstructed the transcripts from the press reports, adding the need for caution in dealing with this text. The “true” events of the trial, like the “true” Wilde, remain elusive and forever mediated.

4. For a thorough and fascinating analysis of Wilde’s use of aesthetics and consumerism as a social critique, see Regenia Gagnier’s Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public. According to Gagnier:

Wilde was removed from life—as his British middle-class adversaries conceived of it—on several counts. By birth Irish, by education Oxonian, by inclination homosexual, he was adjunct to Victorian imperial, commercial, and polite society. His legendary wit consisted in practice of a talent for inverting Victorian truisms, a style that from Hegel through Feuerbach, Marx and Kirkeggaard, to
Guy Debord today has been called revolutionary. Yet the astonishing thing about his wit is not that he could always so quickly find the right word to substitute for the key term of the platitude, but rather that he knew the platitudes so well to begin with. His mind was stocked with commonplaces, and these seem to have been there for the sole purpose of their subversion. The situation is one in which an outsider has to a stunning degree taken upon himself the reflective apparatus of the dominant group then used this apparatus to mock the group on, and with, its own terms. The use of such tactics endears the speaker to the group at the moment he mocks it. This is the technique of ironic reference: the use of popular symbology by its critics in order to be both commercially competitive and critical. (1986:7–8)

5. Or, as Cohen more complexly puts it:

By infusing the metaphor of the courtroom as theatrical extravaganza with the textual markings of epistemological desire, the newspapers structure their texts as “spectacular,” (re)producing what Roland Barthes called “myth”: they imbue their first order representations of the “facts” and “events” (denotation) with a second order of significance that naturalizes the social (con)texts within which these meanings emerge (connotation). (1993:138)

What happened in the courtroom, however, may in fact be more than metaphorically theatrical.

6. Unless otherwise noted, newspaper articles cited are reprinted in Goodman (1988).

7. For a more detailed study of antisodomy laws see Cohen, “Legitimating the Norm: From ‘Sodomy’ to ‘Gross Indecency’” (1993:103–25). This chapter is also published in several other forums.

8. A few years before the trials, Queensberry displayed intense jealousy when his eldest son, Drumlanrig, was given an English peerage before him—essentially bypassing the usual channels of primogeniture of passing titles from father to son. And, while Wilde’s criminal trials were still underway, Queensberry caused another scandal by assaulting his second son, Percy, Lord Douglas of Hawick, on the streets of Piccadilly. The incident made the papers (see Roberts 1980:250–59).

9. Wilde himself was neither truly upper class (the son of an optometrist and poetess/political activist) nor middle class (as an actor in aristocratic circles) but part of the upwardly mobile upper-middle class, making him the perfect target for the snobs above and below him on the social ladder. For a more complete discussion of the class (and political) implications of the trials, see Dellamora, “Homosexual Scandal and Compulsory Heterosexuality in the 1890s” (1990:193–217).

10. Quoted by Travers Humphreys in the foreword to Hyde’s book on the trials. The unidentified person who made the statement was a legal friend of Humphreys (Hyde 1962:13).

11. According to Michel Foucault, in the 19th century women’s sexuality was subjected to a “threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed—qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality.” Once “hystericized,” their sexuality was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility lasting through the entire period of the children’s education). (1990:104)

In other words, women’s sexuality was located on the same three sites as Wilde’s: class (the social body), the home (the family space), and parenting (the life of children). Wilde’s sexuality, then, was subjected to the same “threefold process.” His body was effectively hystericized.

12. According to Frank Harris, Wilde’s friend and biographer, the testimony of the Savoy Hotel chambermaids about fecal stains on the bedsheets in Wilde’s rooms weighed heavily against him. Yet, according to Harris, Wilde revealed to him that the bedsheets were not his at all, but from the adjoining room of Bosie. Harris writes: “‘The chambermaids’ evidence is wrong,’ Oscar declared. ‘They are mistaken, Frank. It was not me they spoke about at the Savoy Hotel. It was - - - - - - I was never bold enough. I went to see - - - - in the morning in his room’” (Harris 1930:198). Wilde withheld
this evidence in order to protect Lord Douglas. If Harris is correct, then Wilde remained posing as a sodomite throughout all three trials. Even to the point of judgment, Wilde was performing. In that same interview, though, Wilde confessed to Harris that he was not innocent: "'Oh Frank,' he said, 'you talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent.' 'But you are innocent,' I cried in amazement, 'aren't you?' 'No, Frank,' he said, 'I thought you knew that all along'" (1930:199).

13. For a further discussion of the "veiling" of sexuality, particularly as it relates to Wilde's Salomé, see Showalter (1990:144–69).


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