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‘Tragedy in the disguise of mirth’: Robert Browning, George Eliot, and Wilde

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We may say of the highest comedy what Demetrius said in another sense of the satyric drama – that it is ... ‘tragedy in the disguise of mirth.’ Indeed it may be likened to the choicest of all fruits, the flavour of which is so cunningly mixed by Nature that we know not whether to call them sweet or acid, and in this wonderful equivoque lies their very exquisiteness.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Wilde’s interest in the relationship between comedy and tragedy is apparent when he notes in his Oxford commonplace book that literary criticism ‘first appears in Greek literature wearing the mask of Comedy’.[[2]](#footnote-2) He is alluding to Aristophanes’ *Frogs,* a comedyin which the tragic god Dionysus is so disappointed by the state of Athenian tragedy after the death of Euripides that he goes to Hades intending to bring the dramatist back to life. In the underworld, he judges a debate between Euripides and Aeschylus over which of them is the best tragic poet. Dionysus eventually chooses to restore Aeschylus to life instead of Euripides: when the two playwrights speak their lines into a pair of scales, Aeschylus’ words prove weightier. The deciding factor is that Aeschylus responds seriously to the question of how to save the Athenian state and restore an environment in which tragedy can flourish, whereas Euripides is witty and cynical. The play’s critique of tragic style and themes is established through parody and debate, and Euripides is recognized as a modern, radical dramatist, who prides himself on the psychological realism of his characters. These qualities resonated with some influential interpreters of Greek tragedy towards the end of the nineteenth century, who challenged A. W. Schlegel’s pervasive critique of Euripides: Kathleen Riley comments that Schlegel had compiled a ‘denunciatory catalogue of complaints which became, for most of the century, the received classicist view of Euripides as populist, libertine, atheist, misogynist, and subversive sophist.’[[3]](#footnote-3) In the era of Aestheticism and Decadence, such characteristics were no longer undesirable. Thomas Prasch remarks that in the 1880s and 1890s there was an academic-aesthetic ‘campaign … to insist on the modernity and value of Euripidean drama’, led by Walter Pater, J. P. Mahaffy, Wilde, and Gilbert Murray.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, Wilde’s fascination with the interplay between tragedy and comedy did not develop in a solely academic setting. Earlier receptions of Euripides and Menander in poetry and periodical articles (by Robert Browning, whose poem *Aristophanes’ Apology* extends the debate begun in the *Frogs* to include comedy, and by George Eliot) examine the intersections between tragedy and comedy in terms of contemporary debates about psychology, realism, and the representation of women.

Greek tragedy played a prominent role in the varied receptions of the ancient world in the Victorian period. Matthew Arnold exalted fifth-century Athens as a high point of civilization, a rare example of a culture that matched a ‘significant, a highly-developed, a culminating epoch’ with ‘a comprehensive, a commensurate, an adequate literature’.[[5]](#footnote-5) The model of growth, perfection, and decline might be exemplified by the great tragedians: the primitive austerity of Aeschylus, the mellow perfection of Sophocles, and the decadence of Euripides. The nineteenth-century reception of the tragedians follows a similar trajectory, as Romantic appreciation of *Prometheus Bound* gave way to acclaim for Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King*, followed by an increasingly sympathetic reading of Euripides’ dramas such as *Alcestis* and the *Bacchae* towards the end of the century. John Woolford notes that Matthew Arnold ‘scarcely ever mentions Euripides in his published works or private correspondence, instead completing the trio of leading Greek dramatists with Euripides’ arch-enemy, the comic dramatist Aristophanes.’[[6]](#footnote-6) For Arnold, Sophocles represented the ‘highly developed human nature’ of the Periclean era from a tragic perspective, and was rivalled by Aristophanes’ ‘true point of view on the comic side’, ‘the boldest creations of a riotous imagination … based always upon the foundation of a serious thought’.[[7]](#footnote-7) As an undergraduate, Wilde (influenced perhaps by Arnold) shared the conventional admiration of Sophocles, but makes few references to the dramatist in his mature work. Wilde prefers Euripides for the realism of his representation of humanity, and connects the belatedness of Euripides with the decadent culture of his own time. Iain Ross argues that Wilde was particularly influenced by his tutor J. P. Mahaffy’s version of the narrative of progress and decline, in which Arnold’s preferred period, the fifth century, is merely a prelude to a period of greater sophistication, and the high point is reached in the fourth century.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Wilde also studied ancient comedy and at Trinity College Dublin, he ‘won the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek in an examination on the fragments of the Greek comic poets’.[[9]](#footnote-9) As a student at Oxford, Wilde published a translation of a choric ode from Aristophanes’ *Clouds*.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, Wilde’s relationship with Aristophanic comedy placed him more as a target for satire than as its author: the ‘English Aristophanes’, W. S. Gilbert, parodied Wilde’s aesthetic poses in *Patience* (1881).[[11]](#footnote-11) Wilde was also mocked in *Aristophanes at Oxford O. W.* (1894), a play that Thomas Prasch describes as an ‘undergraduate romp through the approximate territory of Aristophanes’s *Frogs*’ and a ‘lampoon targeting Oscar Wilde’s aestheticism, directly, and homosexuality, rather more covertly’.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Robert Browning was one of the writers to whom Wilde had sent his own newly published poems in June 1881, as a ‘tribute ... in return for the delight and wonder which the strength and splendour of your work has given me from my boyhood’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Wilde associates Browning with Euripides in a review of a performance of *Alcestis* at Oxford (1887): Euripides is ‘a poet, a philosopher, and a playwright. The most modern of all the ancients, there is something of Browning in him’.[[14]](#footnote-14) That Browning also perceived an affinity between his own art and that of Euripides is suggested by his defence of the ancient tragedian as a ground-breaking writer whose contemporaries failed to understand his work. In the two long poems *Balaustion’s Adventure* (1871) and *Aristophanes’ Apology* (1875), each constructed around a ‘Transcript from Euripides’ (Browning’s versions of *Alcestis* and *Heracles*), Browning argues that the creation of a new kind of art is difficult because audiences prefer the smoothly accomplished work of a Sophocles (or a Tennyson). In Wilde’s ‘The Critic as Artist’, Gilbert acknowledges the awkwardness and difficulty that alienated some of Browning’s Victorian readers: he comments that Browning’s art is ‘marred by struggle, violence, and effort’ and his music ‘monstrous’ and discordant. When Gilbert describes Browning as an imperfect artist, but a ‘great’ one, he emulates the artistic philosophy expressed in Browning’s poems: innovative works of art may lack technical perfection but have more life than a faultless piece. Gilbert applauds Browning’s psychological acuity: ‘though he turned language into ignoble clay, he made from it men and women that live. He is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare.’[[15]](#footnote-15) This description echoes Browning’s own early aspirations: persuaded to write for the stage by the actor-manager William Macready, Browning had imagined himself as a new Shakespeare, a performer, playwright, and stage manager. His verse dramas (like those of Tennyson) remained largely unperformed, and Browning productively redirected his interest in ‘Action in Character, rather than Character in Action’ into the form of the dramatic monologue, which enabled him to explore character and psychology.

In a letter to the editor of the *Telegraph,* Wilde championed Browning’s dramas despite their lack of success in the theatre: ‘the artistic value of *Strafford,* or *In a Balcony,* was settled when Robert Browning wrote their last lines. It is not, sir, by the mimes that the muses are to be judged.’ He argued that there had been only two great plays written in nineteenth-century England – Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *The Cenci* (1819) and Algernon Charles Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) – and that neither was ‘in any sense of the word an actable play’. Commenting on a recent production of Browning’s plays, he wrote: ‘what was being tested was obviously the capacity of the modern stage to represent, in any adequate measure or degree, works of introspective method and strange or sterile psychology.’[[16]](#footnote-16) The Euripidean qualities praised in *Balaustion’s Adventure* and *Aristophanes’ Apology* are strikingly similar to Wilde’s description of Browning.

In Browning’s *Aristophanes’ Apology*, the debate over the lamentable state of tragic writing after the death of Euripides develops into a confrontation between the advocates of tragedy and comedy, Balaustion and Aristophanes.Riley describes the poem as ‘the greatest artistic contribution to the rehabilitation of Euripides as tragedian’ in the late nineteenth century, and remarks that Mahaffy praised Browning’s versions of Euripides as ‘an invaluable resource for the English reader’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Balaustion (a character whose enthusiasm for Euripides’ plays recalls that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning) recites her version of the *Heracles* and emphasises that the Athenians failed to appreciate Euripides’ subtle and sophisticated tragedies, focused on human psychology rather than the caprice of the gods. She is revolted by Aristophanes both as a dramatist and as the drunken intruder who arrives in person to argue about what kind of drama is needed in Athens. Jane McCusker notes that the debate between Balaustion and Aristophanes might be read as a comment on contemporary literature, a response to Matthew Arnold’s 1853 Preface to *Poems* and ‘On the Modern Element in Literature’ (1857), in which Arnold prescribes Greek tragedy as the best model for modern literature.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Browning’s Aristophanes admits that he lacked the courage to experiment with the conservative form of Old Comedy, despite having the foresight to conceive of a drama in which there would be no need for masks.[[19]](#footnote-19) Unlike Browning and Euripides, his work does not give precedence to psychology and realism. He claims that a more subtle art belongs to the future, with an audience more capable of understanding it: he cannot see how to ‘penetrate encrusted prejudice’ or ‘ignorance three generations thick’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Imagining a new, great drama which combines elements of the comic and tragic, Aristophanes jokingly foretells the coming of a ‘superior’ dramatist, who will ‘take in every side at once, / And not successively’, and ‘reconcile / The High and Low in tragi-comic verse’: the ‘tragi-comic’ dramatist to be born in the ‘Tin-islands’ is Shakespeare.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Comedy and tragedy in the Victorian theatre did not necessarily achieve the kind of reconciliation that Browning’s Aristophanes suggests: Stuart Sillars comments that ‘a yoking together of tragedy and comedy’, such as a double bill of *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet* performed at the tercentenary of Shakespeare’s birth in 1864,‘was by no means unusual. The idea of a single play being the focus of an evening’s theatre-going was as yet rare’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Such arrangements might recall the juxtaposition of genres in the Greek theatre, with a satyr play following a tragic trilogy. Jennifer Wallace observes that Euripides’ *Alcestis* (the text Browning translates and critiques in *Balaustion’s Adventure*)was originally performed in place of a satyr play, and that the play ‘comically reduces death to insignificance’ by staging ‘Apollo’s argument with a distinctly greedy and petty Death at the opening’ and the ‘uncomfortable buffoonery’ of Heracles amidst the mourners when he brings Alcestis back from the underworld.[[23]](#footnote-23) The play was performed in Oxford in 1887 with Jane Ellen Harrison playing the heroine. There was a Shakespearean analogue in *The Winter’s Tale*, in whichthe cruelty of Leontes towards the wife he suspects of infidelity parallels Admetus’ selfishness in allowing Alcestis to die in his place. After an absence of sixteen years, Hermione is presented to Leontes as a statue who miraculously comes to life (in George Eliot’s novel *Daniel Deronda*, the reunion is represented in a tableau performed by the heroine). Sarah Dewar-Watson notes that the crucial distinction between the reunion scenes is that ‘the guiding hand of the gods’ in *Alcestis* is more obviously the work of ‘the playwright himself’ in *The Winter’s Tale.*[[24]](#footnote-24)The reunion is complicated by the harshness of Leontes’ rejection of his wife, the death of their son Mamilius and Perdita’s exile. These elements create a distance that is hard to overcome, however firmly the comic reassertion of life is stated at the end of the play.

The recognition scene forms a link between tragedy and comedy in Greek, Latin, and English literature. Sander M. Goldberg identifies contrasting uses of the device of recognition (*anagnorisis*): whereas recognition late in the play is ‘the shattering climax’ to tragedies like *Oedipus Rex,* in the comedies of Menander and Terence recognition is the ‘mechanism for the happy ending, usually by having a lost child grown to adulthood recognized in time to effect a desired marriage or to resolve a complex dilemma.’[[25]](#footnote-25) Ariana Traill ascribes Menander’s ‘increasingly sophisticated’ uses of the device of recognition or ‘mistaken identity’ to a realism that did not rely on ‘supernatural intervention’ but established ‘human psychology as the primary cause’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Goldberg comments that the handbag which proves Jack Worthing is the long-lost brother of Algernon is a ‘descendant of the cradle and ornaments that brought about recognition in such plays as Sophocles’ lost *Tyro* and Euripides’ *Ion’*.[[27]](#footnote-27) Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh argue that either the performance of *Ion* as the Cambridge Greek Play in 1890 or Arthur Verrall’s edition of the play, published in the same year, ‘almost certainly suggested the famous “handbag” scene’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Iain Ross finds a close relationship between the handbag scene and Ion’s reunion with his mother, claiming that Wilde produced ‘an adaptation, perhaps even a free translation, of the Greek: a naturalisation, of the kind recommended by Arnold, so successful as to efface all immediate marks of origin.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Wilde’s version of the Euripidean device was mediated by other dramatic texts. Helena Garfinkel argues that Wilde’s society plays are driven by the ‘New Comedy marriage plot’, yet also ‘possess crucial characteristics of [Aristotelian] tragedy’, in that characters must experience ‘catastrophic losses or die metaphorical deaths’ before the social order can be restored.[[30]](#footnote-30) Serena Witzke has shown that the recognition plot in Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* owes much to Roman comedies such as Plautus’ *Menaechmi* and *Captivi,* and Terence’s *Eunuchus* and *Andria*.[[31]](#footnote-31) In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare combines elements of *Menaechmi* with the *Amphitryo*, the play for which Plautus coined the term ‘tragicomedy’.[[32]](#footnote-32) Climactic recognition scenes feature prominently in Shakespearean comedies such as *Twelfth Night* as well as in tragedies such as *King Lear.*

The motif of a long separation followed by a reunion or recognition scene was used to comic and melancholy effect in nineteenth-century fiction and poetry. When preparing to write *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Eliot copied into her notebook a passage relating to a trope in the oral ballads of Greece and Montenegro, the reunion between a husband who has been absent for many years and his faithful wife (like Odysseus and Penelope) a scene in which the husband first tests the wife’s fidelity and she examines him in return.[[33]](#footnote-33) A wife who does not meet Penelope’s standard of fidelity to her long-absent husband appears in Byron’s comic Venetian tale, *Beppo* (1817); here the husband reclaims his place in society and his wife while maintaining a friendly relationship with her lover. Such flexibility is possible in the relaxed Italian setting Byron depicts, but cannot be imagined in English society: in Tennyson’s ‘Enoch Arden’ (1864), the husband returns after ten years to find that his wife has married again and had a child, and he dies, heartbroken, without ever revealing his identity to his family. Dickens indulges the taste for sentimental recognition scenes in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), allowing the workhouse orphan to be improbably reunited with his mother’s younger sister Rose Maylie, even though his wicked half-brother has thrown the tokens of Oliver’s identity – a locket and ring which belonged to his mother – into the river. George Eliot resists the idealization of reunion in *Daniel Deronda*, when the tokens of identity that the hero receives when he meets his long-lost mother are accompanied by a second and final rejection of their relationship, as she refuses to disclose her son’s existence to her new family. The narrator describes this encounter as ‘a tragic experience which must forever solemnize [Deronda’s] life, and deepen the significance of the acts by which he bound himself to others.’[[34]](#footnote-34) However, Catherine Brown suggests that it is the mother, Alcharisi, who is the tragic figure in this scene, and that Daniel’s ‘Hellenic-Hebraic, tragic-idealist Jewish world involves a complex mixture of genres’ which culminate in a comic resolution.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The late Victorian enthusiasm for Euripides particularly embraced his tragedies with a happy ending, in which characters are brought close to death but do not die (or in the case of Alcestis, do not remain dead). Laura Swift notes *Ion*’s differences in tone and structure from ‘more conventional tragedies’, prefiguring the New Comedy of Menander: ‘the play depicts a movement from sorrow to joy, and ends in harmony rather than catastrophe.’[[36]](#footnote-36) Bernard Knox claims that Euripides in ‘the *Ion*, is the inventor, for the stage, of what we know as comedy.’ Plays such as *Ion,* *Iphigeneia in Tauris,* and *Helen* are notably difficult to categorize, described by Knox as ‘a radical departure from Euripidean tragedy’ and variously hailed as ‘romantic tragedy, romantic melodrama, tragicomedy, romances, romantic comedy’.[[37]](#footnote-37) David Mayer suggests that the ‘tragi-comedy’ described by John Fletcher in 1611 is what would later come to be called ‘melodrama’, a hybrid form ‘which refused to equate disaster and tragic excess with death, which acknowledged and celebrated common folk, and [injected] moments of mirth into serious business.’[[38]](#footnote-38) In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens mocks the crude juxtapositions of comedy and tragedy in ‘good murderous melodramas’, in which ‘the tragic and the comic scenes [are presented] in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky, well-cured bacon.’ Dickens goes on to say that abrupt reversals of fortune are more plausible in real life than in the theatre: ‘we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on; which makes a vast difference. The actors in the mimic life of the theatre, are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators, are at once condemned as outrageous and preposterous.’[[39]](#footnote-39) The mixing of modes might be more successful in genres concerned with psychology and realism, such as the novel. Dickens’s observation that in a ‘book’ abrupt transitions from prosperity to misfortune are considered a credit to the author’s artistry foreshadows realist reworkings of Greek tragedy in the fictions of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. Wilde emphasizes the difficulty of representing unmixed tragedy in a modern setting:

I remember I used to say that I thought I could bear a real tragedy if it came to me with purple pall and a mask of noble sorrow, but that the dreadful thing about modernity was that it put Tragedy into the raiment of Comedy, so that the great realities seemed commonplace or grotesque or lacking in style.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Wilde connects tragedy and comedy, Euripides and Menander, when he observes: ‘If [Euripides] broke with the traditions of the Greek stage, at least he made Menander inevitable’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Witzke points out that Wilde would have had access to Menander’s texts only as ‘a collection of fragments preserved by scholiasts and compilers of linguistic oddities, complemented by a scattering of papyrus finds’, yet ‘Victorian scholars confidently wrote about their Menander as an immortal, accessible through his imitators.’ [[42]](#footnote-42) Menander was not solely the preserve of professional classicists: before she began to write novels as George Eliot, Marian Evans wrote an essay, ‘Menander and the Greek Comedy’ (1855), in which she described the shift from Old Comedy as political satire to the social caricature of ‘the new period, when it became what the highest modern comedy is, a picture of real domestic life and manners.’ Her interest in the fragments of Menander centred on the representation of women and domestic life: ‘we gather that the married woman in Greece had then ceased to be a mere piece of furniture, or live stock, too insignificant to determine in any degree a man’s happiness or misery. The bitter invectives against women and marriage in the New Comedy are the best – or the worst – proofs of the domestic ascendancy women had acquired.’[[43]](#footnote-43) Changing gender roles make a connection between the transitional worlds of Menander and Wilde: both dramatists innovate by questioning the roles allotted to women. Goldberg describes the conventions of New Comedy as a ‘source of power’ for Menander, since the audience would recognize ‘an established set of techniques’ and the dramatist can ‘build upon expectations by reworking conventions and mixing modes.’[[44]](#footnote-44) Wilde takes a similar approach to Victorian drama. Critics such as Sos Eltis and Kerry Powell have demonstrated that Wilde’s plays draw heavily on contemporary melodramas in the construction of plot and character, but that Wilde’s use of such conventions is unexpectedly subversive and ‘genuinely innovative’, ‘challenging rather than reproducing the conventions of the popular nineteenth-century dramas on which they were modelled’.[[45]](#footnote-45)

A stock character for whom there might seem to be no obvious Victorian equivalent is the courtesan: the good *hetaira* in Menandrian comedy or the clever, extravagant, and amoral *meretrix* in Plautus and Terence. Wilde’s interest in the classical figure of the courtesan is evidenced by the play *La Sainte Courtesane, or The Woman Covered with Jewels,* begunin 1894.[[46]](#footnote-46) In this play the beautiful Alexandrian courtesan Myrrhina goes into the desert to tempt a holy hermit who never looks a woman in the face, and is convinced by him to become a Christian. Her beauty, meanwhile, convinces him to abandon his holy seclusion for a life of pleasure in the city. A version of the play survives only as a fragment reconstructed from a first draft, as Wilde left the original manuscript in a taxi.[[47]](#footnote-47) Victorian women writers such as Eliza Lynn and Amy Levy (who wrote articles and fiction for *The Woman’s World* under Wilde’s editorship) were fascinated by the idea of the educated courtesan, like Pericles’ mistress Aspasia, whose exclusion from feminine society was more than compensated by the freedom to participate in political and intellectual discussion with men while wives and maidens remained in virtuous seclusion. Laura McClure describes the *hetaira* as ‘a woman, usually celebrated, who was maintained by one man in exchange for his exclusive sexual access to her’, and as ‘a recognizable comic type, indispensable to plots of mistaken identity and romantic intrigue’; her ‘feigned emotions and equivocal language invite comparison with the dramatic actor’.[[48]](#footnote-48) In Wilde’s society comedies the ‘woman with a past’ may take on the *hetaira*’s role:in *An Ideal Husband* (1895), the alluring Mrs Cheveley is disliked by most of the women in the play, and occupies herself with the masculine topics of politics, diplomacy, and finance. Her superficially flattering treatment of men conceals a mercenary self-interest: she only makes transactions that will increase her wealth and improve her social position. In addition to blackmailing Sir Robert Chiltern on the basis of fraudulent financial dealings in his past, she is involved in the play’s romantic intrigue when she attempts to force Lord Goring into marriage:

I have arrived at the romantic stage. When I saw you last night at the Chilterns’, I knew you were the only person I had ever cared for, if I have ever cared for anybody, Arthur. And so, on the morning of the day you marry me, I will give you Robert Chiltern’s letter.[[49]](#footnote-49)

When Goring declines her offer, she observes that his friend will be ruined, and he himself is missing the opportunity to ‘marry someone who really has considerable attractions left’ (*IH*, 107). She dwells on her past romantic attachment to Goring, but his scepticism about her sincerity and speculations about her infidelity in previous marriages suggest that her emotions may well be feigned. Her principal motivation in deciding whether to bring about Sir Robert’s downfall is not love but hatred:

MRS CHEVELEY (*Bitterly*) I only war against one woman, against Gertrude Chiltern. I hate her. I hate her now more than ever.

LORD GORING Because you have brought a real tragedy into her life, I suppose.

MRS CHEVELEY (*With a sneer*) Oh, there is only one tragedy in a woman’s life. The fact that her past is always her lover, and her future invariably her husband.

(*IH*,108)

After Goring tricks her into giving him Sir Robert’s letter and destroys it, she continues her blackmail with another document, using a deliberate misinterpretation of Lady Chiltern’s note: ‘I am going to send Robert Chiltern the love letter his wife wrote to you tonight’ (*IH*,113). Mrs Cheveley’s machinations are thwarted into a comic resolution by Sir Robert’s misreading of the same note, leading to a reconciliation with his wife and the revelation that his own incriminating correspondence has been destroyed.

In his treatment of the fallen woman, Wilde takes up a figure familiar in Victorian literature and on the stage, but makes her very different from the pitiful outcast of earlier decades. Eltis remarks that ‘at the end of the nineteenth century the fallen woman became an ever-present figure on the English stage’ (having already dominated French theatre for over two decades) and ‘adultery, seduction, and the issue of the sexual double standard’ became staple themes.[[50]](#footnote-50) The use of Greek models to articulate similar themes can be found in poetry, drama, and the novel. Eliot likens the fallen woman Hetty Sorrel to a mortal victim seduced by an Olympian god in *Adam Bede* (1859). In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1892), Hardy’s narrator makes the portentous observation ‘the President of the Immortals (in Æschylean phrase) had ended his sport with Tess.’[[51]](#footnote-51) In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot alludes to Grandcourt’s discarded mistress, the mother of his illegitimate children, as Medea. Euripides’ *Medea* was repeatedly performed on the London stage in the second half of the nineteenth century and helped to shape debates on divorce and child custody.[[52]](#footnote-52) Shanyn Fiske argues that sensational journalism and melodrama ‘both responded and contributed to the destabilization of gender assumptions and domestic values’ by offering a sympathetic representation of the Medea archetype asthe victim of an unjust society and a cruel husband.[[53]](#footnote-53) When not played as a tragic heroine, Medea might be seen as a subversive figure: Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh observe that in burlesques Medea anticipated the New Woman of the 1890s: ‘she extracted herself, triumphantly, from a ruined marriage, while succeeding in keeping her sons alive, or cunningly coerced her husband into mending his ways … or argued with cogency, wit, and panache that women’s lot was iniquitous.’[[54]](#footnote-54)

Whereas Hardy emphasizes the tragic fates of his protagonists, Eliot’s endings suggest a more tragicomic sensibility: despite a melancholy awareness of what has been lost, for the survivors at the end of her novels life goes on, simple pleasures continue, and suffering is recognized as only one part of existence. Wilde’s revisions of the fallen woman figure emphasize potentially tragic resonances but allow for a celebratory conclusion to the drama. In *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)*,* Mrs Arbuthnot conceals the illegitimacy of her son until she is confronted by the child’s father, who had refused to marry her when she was pregnant. When she tells the story to her son without identifying herself, she melodramatically laments the irretrievable downfall of an innocent and trusting girl:

After the child was born she left him, taking the child away, and her life was ruined, and her soul ruined, and all that was sweet, and good, and pure in her ruined also. She suffered terribly – she suffers now. She will always suffer. For her there is no joy, no peace, no atonement. She is a woman who drags a chain like a guilty thing. She is a woman who wears a mask, like a thing that is a leper. The fire cannot purify her. The waters cannot quench her anguish. Nothing can heal her! no anodyne can give her sleep! no poppies forgetfulness! She is lost! She is a lost soul![[55]](#footnote-55)

By the end of the play, the ‘lost soul’ is restored to happiness, the mother and her illegitimate son are reconciled, and the worldly father is thoroughly rejected. Kerry Powell notes that the ‘Puritan’ heroine Hester Worsley expresses the views of contemporary feminists such as Josephine Butler when she ‘challenges the double standard by applying the same morality to men that had always been expected of women.’[[56]](#footnote-56) When Mrs Arbuthnot’s secret is finally revealed, the sexual morality which punishes women more harshly than men has been thoroughly questioned, as it was in the press, pamphlets, and popular literature of the period, and in Hardy’s *Tess*.

In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), the heroine learns that the morality of her youth and the moralistic simplicity of melodrama are not to be trusted. Her rigid outlook is initially established when she declines to take pity on a woman who has thrown away her social position by running away with her lover; she claims that such a woman should never seek to re-enter society. Lady Windermere’s own fall from grace follows swiftly as she runs away from her husband’s house after an argument over her his relationship with Mrs Erlynne. Having returned home undetected at the urging of the woman she believed to be her rival, she concludes:

I don’t think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have terrible things in them, mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. And I don’t think Mrs Erlynne a bad woman – I know she’s not.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Eltis argues that the play may begin as a ‘sentimental melodrama complete with moral’, but Wilde’s ‘reshaping and subverting’ of plots and characters undermine the ‘social principles’ on which melodrama relies. From ‘the established cast of protective male, innocent female, and scheming fallen woman’, Wilde develops a critique of society’s hypocrisy and ‘reverses the hierarchy of the fallen-woman play, challenging the moral values and social conventions on which it is based.’[[58]](#footnote-58) In a Victorian text a mother who has deliberately chosen to leave her child is unlikely to be a sympathetic figure, but Wilde allows Mrs Erlynne, the long-lost and unrecognized mother, to rescue Lady Windermere by appealing to her love for her son and lamenting the typical fate of the fallen woman. In a long and passionate speech, she invokes a fearful conjunction of comedy and tragedy:

You don’t know what it is to fall into the pit, to be despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at – to be an outcast! to find the door shut against one, to have to creep in by hideous byways, afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one’s face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world, a thing more tragic than all the tears the world has ever shed. (*LWF*, 57)

Mrs Erlynne does not follow the usual pattern of the fallen woman in Victorian dramas: she does not repent her past transgressions or tearfully reclaim her daughter. Wilde described the play’s final act as ‘the psychological act, the act that is newest, most true.’[[59]](#footnote-59) The recognition scene is ‘suppressed’, as Lord Windermere and Mrs Erlynne collude to keep Lady Windermere unaware of her mother’s identity.[[60]](#footnote-60) Morris Freedman argues that the ‘final renunciation scene, which can so easily be read as melodrama, borders on the tragic, for we see plainly the possibilities the characters have for genuine, undirected response to one another. They are doomed to denying their feelings, doomed to destroying their identity as authentic individuals.’[[61]](#footnote-61) Nevertheless, the ending of the play is celebratory rather than melancholy: keeping Lady Windermere’s brief disappearance a secret enables her to reunite with her husband without further conflict. Creativity rather than truthfulness is rewarded: Mrs Erlynne’s ability to construct a plausible fiction to account for her presence in a man’s rooms late at night wins her an indulgent husband and freedom from the painful emotions associated with her renewed experience of motherhood.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)*,* Wilde subordinates melodrama to farce. Eltis notes the ‘basic ingredients of the plot’ shared with many contemporary farces, such as ‘misplaced parents, forbidden engagements, false identities, overbearing mothers, and the copious consumption of food’.[[62]](#footnote-62) These ‘ingredients’ have their antecedents in Menander, Plautus, and Shakespeare: for example, when Algernon demands that Jack invite him to eat in a fashionable restaurant or greedily devours butter-soaked muffins, offering in return his witty conversation, he plays the role of the parasite. Witzke lists ‘a plethora of plot elements drawn from Menander and Terence’, such as ‘the missing child, the double love story, disguised identity, recognition and tokens, and formidable wealthy women’.[[63]](#footnote-63) The tragic figure of the fallen woman and the condemnation of the sexual double standard do recur, but only for a moment, in Jack’s misreading of the significance of the handbag:

JACK *(In a pathetic voice)* Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM *(Amazed)* You?

JACK *(Embracing her)* Yes . . . mother!

MISS PRISM *(Recoiling in indignant astonishment)* Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But after all, who has the right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out an act of folly? Why should there be one law for men, and another for women? Mother, I forgive you.[[64]](#footnote-64)

This scene encapsulates ‘tragedy in the disguise of mirth’, the bittersweet elements of the lost child returning to his family only in adulthood displaced onto a melodramatic fiction that can be quickly dismissed. In his ‘Trivial Comedy for Serious People’, Wilde simultaneously invokes and pointedly ignores the dark undertones of his farcical plot, intertwining the comic and the tragic with the subtlety that Browning’s Aristophanes predicted.

1. [George Eliot], ‘Menander and the Greek Comedy’, *Leader* 6 (16 June 1855), 578-9; repr. in Wiesenfarth (1981), 249-53, at 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wilde (1989), 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Riley (2008), 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Prasch (2012), 464-73, at 468. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arnold (1960), 21-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Woolford (2012), 563-81, at 573. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Arnold (1960), 28-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ross (2013), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Bristow (2013, 73-87, at 73-4) observes that this work situates Wilde in the ‘subversive’ tradition of the radical Hellenist poets Shelley and Swinburne. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hall (2007), 66-86, at 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Prasch (2012), 464-73, at 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Wilde (1962), 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ‘The “Alcestis” at Oxford’, *Court and Society Review* 4 (1887), 485-6; quoted in Ross (2013), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘The Critic as Artist’, in Wilde (1990), 1012-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Wilde (1962), 310. *Strafford* was performed by the Oxford University Dramatic Society (OUDS) in February 1890, with H. B. Irving (son of the tragedian Henry Irving) in the main part. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Riley (2008), 182 and 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. McCusker (1984), 783-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Michael Silk comments that ‘Euripides, the great experimenter, holds a special interest for Aristophanes, beyond all other tragedians, precisely because he is an experimenter … uniquely committed to the definition, or redefinition, of his own art’ (Silk (2002), 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Browning (1981), 2: 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. 2: 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sillars (2013), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wallace (2013), 201-24, at 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Dewar-Watson (2009), 73-80, at 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Goldberg (1980), 61. Goldberg lists Terence’s *Andria, Heauton Timorumenos*, and *Eunuchus* (all based on plays by Menander) as examples of plays in which marriages are made possible by late recognitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Traill (2008), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Goldberg (1980), 59. Goldberg also discusses the parodic appropriation of the recognition scene for comedy in Aristophanes’ *The Knights,* a scene that ends in separation rather than reunion (60). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hall and Macintosh (2005), 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ross (2013), 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Garfinkel (2015), 151-67, at 152-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See Witzke, Ch. 18 in this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For the reception of Plautus and Terence in Shakespeare’s comedies, see Miola (1995). For the defence of tragicomedy in Aristotelian terms in the early modern period, see Dewar-Watson (2007), 15-23. Verna Foster argues that, in the Renaissance, tragicomedy was a form of comedy, but with the decline in tragedy by the twentieth century the ‘modal *tragi* in *tragicomedy* has become correspondingly more potent’, to such an extent that ‘tragicomedy has subsumed tragedy’ (Foster (2004), 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Eliot, in Irwin (1996), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Eliot (1984), 621. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Brown (2009), 302-23, at 315. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Swift (2008), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Knox (2001), 3-24, at 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Mayer (2004), 145-63, at 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dickens (1966), 105-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Wilde (1990), 936. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. ‘The “Alcestis” at Oxford’, 485-6, quoted in Ross (2013), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Witzke (2013), 215-32, at 219-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Wiesenfarth (1981), 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Goldberg (1980), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Eltis (1996), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ellmann (1987), 388. I am indebted to Iarla Manny for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Wilde (2003), 734-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. McClure (2006), 3-18, at 6 and 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Wilde (2013*d*), 106. Henceforth cited as *IH*. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Eltis (2004), 222-36, at 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Hardy (2008), 420.Danson (1997, 22) notes that *Tess* was published by the same publisher and in a binding similar to that of Wilde’s volume of essays, *Intentions* (1891), and that Hardy and Wilde ‘belonged together because they were two of the most dangerous writers in England’. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See ‘Medea and Mid-Victorian Marriage Legislation’ in Hall and Macintosh (2005), 391-429. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Fiske (2008), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hall and Macintosh (2005), 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Wilde (1983), 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Powell (2003), 127-46, at 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Wilde (1999*b*), 73-4. Henceforth cited as *LWF*. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Eltis (1996), 54-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Wilde (1962), 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Goldberg (1980), 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Friedman (1964), 518-27, at 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Eltis (1996), 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Witzke (2013), 215-32, at 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Wilde (1980),101. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)