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Into the Wilde Garden:

Moral Landscapes and Reflection in *A House of Pomegranates*

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“I had about as much intention of pleasing the British child as I had of pleasing the British public,” Oscar Wilde declared shortly after the 1891 publication of *A House of Pomegranates*, his second volume of fairy tales (Letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* Dec. 1891). Some reviewers had taken issue with the moral element of the tales; the moral question of *A House of Pomegranates* has been a problem for readers and critics ever since. How should one judge the seemingly moral stories of a man who made such inflammatory statements on morality as: “All art is immoral” and “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written” (preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). He went even further when he claimed, “no artist has ethical sympathies” (preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). But as John Allen Quintus says, for all his posturing, “the author of... *A House of Pomegranates* clearly has ethical sympathies” (562-563). They may not entirely align with the established moral order, but that does not make them nonexistent. In fact, the deviation from accepted Victorian morals and the mixing of different systems of thought and belief is crucial to these stories. Many have pointed out that Wilde’s fairy tales do not subscribe to a singular orthodox code. As Kate Pendlebury says in “The Building of ‘A House of Pomegranates,’” “the moral world of the tales is difficult to get a handle on, contradicts conventional Christian codes, and cannot be accommodated within any sort of simple dichotomy” (125). Christianity certainly is a powerful force here, though it is closer to Jarlath Killeen’s “Folk-Catholicism” than to the establishments of either the Catholic Church or the Church of England (142). Killeen defines Folk-Catholicism as “a fluid and osmotic religion which combined the orthodox and the heterodox and allowed belief in apparently contradictory things, fairies as well as angels, holy wells and baptismal water, healers and priests, the ballad book and the Bible, and saw these elements as complementary rather than contradictory” (142). Love and sacrifice, which are

almost always better understood by the simpler characters than by the churchmen, take precedence over the other virtues. Greek ideals of art and behavior also occupy a significant place: Wilde borrowed some ideas from Greek philosophy, the most prominent being the concept of καλὸς κἀγαθός¹, which is operative in “The Star-Child” and “The Young King” especially. Ideas about socialism, folklore,² skepticism of certain kinds of progress, and of course Aestheticism are all evident in the tales. Some of these systems of belief seem to be diametrically opposed, but they are woven together coherently through complex symbols and clever repositionings of accepted norms; if *A House of Pomegranates* was reducible to a singular set of beliefs, it would not be nearly as compelling.

The non-human world is often the site of these collisions. Empowered by the fairy tale form, some of the plants and animals have the ability to speak, while others do not need voices to be expressive. Many of these collisions take place in gardens, which serve as lenses through which characters and situations can be analyzed. Often, along with a series of literal mirrors, they reflect the characters back to themselves and reveal their faults to them, though those characters are not always perceptive enough to read the clues. The natural settings of Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales in *A House of Pomegranates* reflect and inform the actions and dispositions of his protagonists.

The garden motif is not unique to *A House of Pomegranates*; in fact, gardens appear in almost all of Wilde’s works. The beauty of gardens, which particularly appealed to Wilde as an

¹ This phrase is a shortened form of καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός, which means “beautiful and good” and which appears in Classical Greek philosophy. Someone who is καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός has attained the ideal state of man because he has approached perfection in both body and mind. It is also related to the idea that the beautiful equals the good, which Wilde alternately supports and subverts.

² His interest in Irish folklore was driven in part by his parents who were both noted collectors of Irish stories, as well as “social celebrities and writers, who led eccentric lives in Dublin” (Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, 112).

Aesthete, often reveals truths about their occupants. Basil Hallward's studio opens on a garden, which becomes an obvious parallel for Eden as the site of Dorian's temptation. In Basil's garden, Dorian is drawn to the purple lilacs, which in the *Language of Flowers* symbolize the "first emotions of love" (66). The garden in "The Selfish Giant" is walled off to shut the children out like the giant's heart, which he has closed to love. The nightingale in "The Nightingale and the Rose" flits from the white rose of worthiness to the yellow rose of "decrease of love" to the red rose of love—an ironic movement since the student is unworthy of her sacrifice and his love no longer loves him (Greenaway 86). In "The Devoted Friend," the Miller treats the garden, which is Hans' livelihood, with as little respect as he does Hans. And this is only a sample of the places where gardens and their associates collapse into each other in Wilde's works.

But the gardens in *A House of Pomegranates* go further than this; most are actively hostile. The symbolic landscape becomes more than a place that can be twisted by evil. The gardens themselves become emblems of evil. In the four stories, there are two natural "gardens," both of which resonate strongly with the story of the fall of man, and four cultivated ones, which showcase the corruption and pettiness of society. The natural gardens, that is, the ones that are not contained within the walls of a house or palace, are physically threatening. The apocalyptic garden in the Young King's final dream is like a poisonous postlapsarian Eden and the plants and animals in it hold great potential to harm. The grove in which the Star-Child searches for the treasure is unnaturally inhospitable and quite literally attacks him. The enclosed gardens are no better. The flowers in the Infanta's garden parallel the Infanta's court in their mockery of the Dwarf. In "The Fisherman and His Soul" the gardens are more decorative than they are in the rest of the stories, but the plants are coded with warnings of danger. In all three gardens, the soul

finds a building in the middle of the garden, enters it, and kills its occupants to gain material goods.

These hostile landscapes mirror the actions of those who occupy them. The forest in the Young King's third dream is beautiful and dangerous, but not actively evil. Likewise, the Young King has unwittingly been the cause of pain for larger groups of people, though he has no animus against them. His love of beauty is not as harmless as he thought it was. Similarly, the Infanta's garden mirrors her: the flowers are so self-absorbed that they can only see the Dwarf in terms of his immediate effect on them. Neither the Infanta nor her plants grant him full personhood. The Star-Child, too, fails to extend consideration to the poor, the ugly, and the unloved; the grove he visits wounds him physically just as he has wounded others in the past through both his words and his actions. Finally, the decorative palace gardens the Soul visits are filled with ominous symbolism and strange characters. They are undoubtedly beautiful, but they are as unnatural as the split between the Fisherman and his Soul. The literal mirrors in *A House of Pomegranates* often appear in close proximity to the landscape mirrors. On one occasion, the mirror is actually part the landscape: when the other children laugh at his ugliness, the Star-Child says, "I will go to the well of water and look into it, and it shall tell me of my beauty" (117). These mirrors allow the characters to see themselves as others see them or, to rephrase that statement, to see themselves as the Other.

Though the stories were initially published separately, the title of the collection points to the major themes of the book. As Kate Pendlebury says in "The Building of a House of Pomegranates," pomegranates are an immensely powerful symbol in both the Classical and the Biblical traditions. In both traditions, pomegranates are associated with love and passion, earning them the nickname "passion fruit." In the Classical world, pomegranates were associated equally

with death and the underworld, and with birth and rebirth (126-27). One of the most well known Greek myths is the story of Persephone, who ate a few pomegranate seeds in the underworld and therefore is bound to spend half the year there. Every year, her return to the upper world marks the beginning of spring. In the Midrash,³ the pomegranate is said to have 613 seeds, one for each commandment in the Torah, aligning the fruit with divine justice (Abram 28). In both Jewish and Christian studies of Genesis, there are two parallel traditions; one identifying the tree of knowledge of good and evil as a pomegranate tree and the other identifying the tree of life as a pomegranate tree (Modenke 191). The association with the tree of life is stronger, but the association with death and knowledge is still there, making the “straightforward Judeo-Christian meaning” less straightforward⁴ (Pendlebury 128). The ambiguity of the pomegranate as a symbol is in keeping with the complexity of the moral codes in the stories and the connection to Eden: something that is good can be perverted without much effort and vice versa.

At the beginnings of all four stories, the protagonists lack the self-knowledge to recognize their own faults. But by the ends, all except for the Infanta have developed into self-aware adults. She remains in ignorance because she refuses the opportunity to look beyond the surface when she disregards the Dwarf’s death. Ignorance is one term to describe her relationship to the world. Innocence is another. Innocence is a key word in fairy-tale criticism, so it is useful to know what exactly it means. In these stories, innocence is not just similar to ignorance but synonymous with it. It is not simply the state of being unacquainted with evil, but the state of knowing nothing about the distinction between good and evil. Consequently, the distinction between good and evil is often blurred for the innocent, and their innocence is not intrinsically good, but neutral. As they develop into fully actualized adults, this innocence is lost and replaced

³ Rabbinical commentary on the Torah

⁴ Although there may have been crossover between the two traditions

with knowledge. This theme of the movement from ignorance into knowledge fits well with the motif of the Edenic garden that features so prominently in Wilde's tales. In *A House of Pomegranates*, all of the key characters begin as innocents, but by the end, they have lost that innocence. The Young King has been transplanted from the forest to the palace, where he exchanges natural beauty for the beauty of art and then from the palace to the dream-landscape, where he learns that his existence in the palace is not separate from the rest of the world. The Infanta, who best embodies the idea of neutral innocence, because she never makes the leap to knowledge, lives in "an Eden of art" (Shewen). The Star-Child finds the Edenic grove in the forest, but is unable to enjoy its beauty because its plants stab him with their thorns wherever he goes. It is closed to him, as Eden after the fall was closed to Adam, Eve, and their descendants. And the Fisherman, when he leaves the sea and rejoins his Soul takes on the burden of the evil the Soul has done and thereby loses his innocence. Still, though the fall from innocence is painful, it is necessary for the characters to become fully actualized adults. As Christopher Nassaar says in *Into the Demon Universe*, "the movement from innocence to experience is inevitable and must be made" (36).

Jones is right when he says, "with very few exceptions, moral education brings a destructive sense of reality to Wilde's fairy tales, and that reality slowly dissolves the colorful and tactile luxury of those tales from the inside and ruins any hope of a happy ending" (887). In the stories of *A House of Pomegranates*, the Young King is the only one who finds some joy in moral education. But his tale is left in limbo: he ascends the throne, in his simple clothes, which have been transfigured, and then it is over. What happens afterwards? Once they get over their awe, do the people reject him or accept him? Is he able to affect any change? These questions are never answered. The story ends with a greater separation than there was before because "no man

dared look upon his face” (23). He may have learned compassion and charity, but rather than bringing him closer to his subjects, it has separated him from them in a fundamental sense. He is almost an otherworldly being. He has not literally died, but the part of him that accepted the established order—which his people support even though it harms them—has. The Star-Child also attains partial happiness: he gains regard for the value of the human person, a mother and a father, and he rules his kingdom for three years, during which “there was peace and plenty in the land” (129). But he dies young, and his successor “ruled evilly” (129). The happiness and prosperity of his rule, both for him and his people, is short-lived. When the Fisherman is partially reunited with his soul, it drives him to do evil and he is only wholly reunited with it when his heart breaks in death. Moral education brings him no joy. The Dwarf, too, gets only misery from his moral education: his heart breaks when he confronts the reality of the world’s cruelty and his own ugliness, which is so antithetical to his pure spirit. The gaining of self-knowledge brings consequences that can only be avoided by refusing to develop.

The Young King: Walking in the Valley of the Shadow of Death

“The Young King” is the story of a prince who was raised in the forest by a goatherd because of his illegitimacy. But he is the only heir to the throne, so when the king is dying, he sends men to seek the prince and bring him to court. In the palace, the Young King surrounds himself with beautiful things and orders a magnificent robe, scepter, and crown to be made for his coronation. The palace is like a new world for him, “fresh-fashioned for his delight” and full of wonders (5). He pays as little attention to the world outside of art as he can and the study of beauty entirely absorbs him as he goes through the palace “upon these journeys of discovery, as he would call them,” which “were to him real voyages through a marvelous land” (6). But the night before his coronation, he has three dreams. In the first, he sees the terrible conditions in

which his own citizens are working to make his robe. In the second, he sees a slave ship the captain of which overworks a diver to the point of death searching for pearls, the most beautiful of which is destined for his scepter. In the final dream, he sees Death and Avarice arguing over a large group of men toiling in an apocalyptic valley. The men had been mining for rubies for the king's crown, but by the end of the argument between Death and Avarice, "no man was left alive" (16). The next morning, when his courtiers bring him the crown, scepter, and robe, the Young King refuses to wear them and tells them about his dreams. They laugh at him for putting so much faith in his dreams, but he continues to refuse, even after they ask, "how shall the people know that thou art a king, if thou hast not a king's raiment?:" there is something more to a king than his clothing (18). Instead he proceeds to his coronation in the simple garments he had worn as a goatherd. The people mock him and the bishop chastises him, but he is vindicated when his clothes are transformed as he prays before the altar. He has gained his people's respect, but there is a new gulf between them: as he leaves the church "no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel" (23).

In his dreams, the young king moves from ignorance to knowledge as he moves from his own city to a distant land and finally to a semi-allegorical place. He has to travel as far as possible from his own experience to be able to understand the world and to see the enormity of his influence. The places he visits in his dreams are removed both from his new life in the palace Joyeuse and from his childhood in the forest: the palace is a place of refined beauty, while the forest is a place of natural beauty and innocence. The Young King, quickly transplanted from one to the other, has never known the "real world" or been touched by the evil in it. The king's men found him in the forest "bare-limbed and pipe in hand" like a Greek hero "following the flock of the poor goatherd who had brought him up" (3). He needs the dreams to "fall into the

demon universe” so he can understand the world without being physically endangered—the knowledge he gains will be useless if he dies getting it (Nassaar 25).

The sequence and the temporality of the Young King’s dreams are important. He goes to bed at midnight and moves from ignorance to understanding as the night becomes day. After the first dream it is full night: “And the young King gave a loud cry and woke, and lo! he was in his own chamber, and through the window he saw the great honey-colored moon hanging in the dusky air” (11). Though it is still dark, the night is past its midpoint; the journey has begun. The “honey-colored moon” brings some illumination and is the gold of the robe the weavers are making for the king. He wakes from the second dream in the early hours of the morning: “And when the young King heard this he gave a great cry, and woke, and through the window he saw the long grey fingers of the dawn clutching at the fading stars” (13). The grasping fingers of the dawn, usually described as “rosy” in Classical literature, are ominously grey here and prefigure the grasping natures of Death and Avarice in the Young King’s third dream and the King’s own attempts to grasp Beauty. After his last dream, he wakes to the full light of day: “the bright sunlight was streaming into the room, and from the trees of the garden and pleasure the birds were singing” (17). The terror of the night has passed away and all of his illusions have been lifted. The waking world remains as he had known it.

The idea of the mirror is closely linked to the idea of the gaze, which plays a vital role in the Young King’s three dreams. In his first dream, he is not just a looker but also the looked-upon. The weavers are able to see and interact with him as if he is physically present in their workshop. Because of this forced interaction, he sees himself as they do, as an outsider, one whose “face is too happy” to be a laborer (10). When the king asks about their master, one of the weavers says, “He is a man like myself. Indeed, there is but this difference between us—that he

wears fine clothes while I go in rags, and that while I am weak from hunger he suffers not a little from overfeeding” (9-10). The king cannot help but think of the “fine clothes” the weavers are making for him at that very moment. Because of this, he is forced to align himself with their master and begin his painful journey to understanding. He first sees the pain of these laborers and pities them, and afterwards realizes with horror that it is he who has brought this misery upon them: “It is the robe for the coronation of the young King... what is that to thee?” (11). The weaver does not recognize him as the king. Indeed, who would? For most of his life, he lived in the forest hidden from the people he will rule one day. And then he was spirited away to the castle, where he spends his time isolated with his art; he has gone from the confines of one secret and mysterious place to those of another.

The contrast between the beautiful things he loves and the production of those things is great. “All rare and costly materials had certainly a great fascination for him” (6-7). Beauty is his god, and those “rare and costly materials” are its physical manifestation, valuable to him as such. The first dream is hideous: the faces of the workers are “pinched with famine” and “A horrible odour filled the place. The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp” (9). The next dream has beauty, not “true beauty” in the moral sense, but the beauty of the grotesque, but in this dream all is ugly. In his second dream, he is only an observer. He tries to speak once but, “his tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of his mouth, and his lips refused to move” (13). Here it is not his place to speak, but to listen and to watch. He is no longer in his own city. He is not even in his own kingdom. This dream takes place on a slave ship in the ambiguous east and is peopled by the stock characters of Victorian stories about “the east”: the master of the ship is “black as ebony” and “three Arabs mounted on wild asses” are on the shore with “a woman wrapped in a yellow veil” (11-12). No one remarks on the Young King’s sudden

appearance on the deck of the ship—he seems to be invisible as well as dumb. He has affected this world from such a great distance that he cannot interact with it, as he did with the weavers in his city, he can only watch.

In his third and final dream, the young king is once again able to speak and to be seen. The first clue that this is so is the adders, hissing at him as he passes through the forest (13-14). The hissing is a warning to him that he is in an evil place and he is observed. The snakes among the fruit and flowers also conjure the image of Satan in the Garden of Eden. Like the second dream, this dream is cast in an exotic mold. But it is also allegorical in a way the other dreams are not. The Young King has entered an apocalyptic Eden: “he thought that he was wandering through a dim wood, hung with strange fruits and with beautiful poisonous flowers” and filled with snakes (13). It is Eden-like in its beauty but deadly as Eden would not have been, since nature’s hostility to the human race is a result of the fall. The King, too, is both beautiful and deadly, though he is only just beginning to realize the harm he has done.

The wood ends on the edge of a barren valley, at a “dried-up river” bed that can sustain no plants except for cacti. Genesis says that a river flowed from Eden: “A river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted and became into four heads” (Gen 2:10). But the river in the dream is dead and waters nothing; the valley is far removed from paradise. The men toil in it like ants, watched by the cruel “gods” of their world: Death and Avarice. Death and Avarice are arguing over three grains that Avarice is holding. Death says “give me one of them... to plant in my garden; only one of them and I will go away” (14). But Avarice refuses, allowing Death to kill everyone in the valley rather than surrender one of the grains. Death and Avarice are not purely allegorical figures: they were first brought into the world by the fall and they are called up by those who seek objects at the expense of human lives.

The Young King has, quite literally, come into the valley like that of Psalm 23⁵—a valley of the shadow of Death. But he has no guide to lead him through safely. Instead, he encounters a pilgrim who forces him to confront himself when he asks who is the cause of all this misery: “Look in this mirror, and thou shalt see him” (17). He sees his own face and is literally brought face to face with the reality of his actions. All the beauty he loves and desires originates in someone else’s pain. But he does not have to entirely sacrifice Beauty for Good; he merely has to reorient his conception of goodness and beauty. He can attempt to make a new Eden with the knowledge he has gained. When he is transfigured in the church, he is given a new baseline for true beauty: “the sunbeams wove round him a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold” (22-23). The red roses of love and the white lilies of purity supersede even the most beautiful rubies and pearls and the beauty of nature is far more precious than manufactured beauty. The Young King was spiritually as beautiful in his goatherding attire as he is in the magnificent robe, but it takes divine intervention for his people to even begin to understand.

The Birthday of the Infanta: The Cultivated Garden

The “The Birthday of the Infanta” is the only story where the title character resists learning, thereby avoiding suffering also. In this story, there are two opposing subjects: the Infanta, who is as compassionless as she is beautiful, and the Dwarf, who is as joyful as he is ugly. Both are still children, but they are on the edge of adulthood. The Infanta lives in what Shewan calls an “Eden of art:” her palace and its garden are beautiful, but in a constructed rather

⁵ “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.”

than a natural way (56). Everything in it is solemn and heavily regulated—even the flowers have a hierarchy. In opposition to the refined Infanta, the Dwarf is a “wild” creature. Hunters from the court had found him in the forest and obtained permission from his father, who was “but too well pleased to get rid of so ugly and useless a child” to bring him back to the court as entertainment (38). Like the Young King, the Dwarf has been raised in the forest and thus sheltered from the rest of the world. The Infanta has also been sheltered, though her separation from the world is measured and intentional. From the start, the atmosphere of this story is stifling and conveys a profound sense of alienation. The Infanta is almost entirely shut off from the world: “on ordinary days she was only allowed to play with children of her own rank, so she had always to play alone, but her birthday was an exception, and the King had given orders that she was to invite any of her young friends whom she liked to come and amuse themselves with her” (25). This statement is laden with irony—how can someone who is not allowed to play with other children have any friends to invite? But it also goes a long way to explain the Infanta. She has acquired her “childish gravity” from the stiff and solemn adults who surround her (26). She is constructed, unnatural, like a hothouse flower or a doll; her life has been so regulated she has never had the chance to be a child. In contrast, the Dwarf has had no occasion to learn any etiquette: their frames of reference are completely separate.

As part of her birthday celebration, the Infanta and her guests watch an elaborate show in which the Dwarf is the crowning act. But the Dwarf is artless—he does not know that he is putting on a show. When he laughs and plays for the Infanta and her guests, he believes that they are laughing with him. This lack of knowledge delights the court: they think, “perhaps the most interesting thing about him was his complete unconsciousness of his own grotesque appearance” (35). His ignorance is part of his charm for them. The Infanta is often read as a cruel and

heartless character, a precocious woman who is already using her powers to harm others. But this does not quite fit. She certainly on the path to becoming such a person, but she has not developed enough yet. She is only beginning to understand: at the end of the Dwarf's show, "partly for a jest and partly to tease the Camerera," she gives the Dwarf her white rose (36). White of course is the color of innocence, which neither the Dwarf nor the Infanta will have for much longer. By playing the game of courtly love, the Infanta progresses in the realm of art. The death of the Dwarf, precipitated by his realization that she and her court are laughing at him, not laughing with him, is an opportunity for her to grow in another way, to gain compassion and understanding. But she lets it pass by unnoticed.

After his performance, the Dwarf runs off to the garden where his ugliness offends the flowers: "the flowers were quite indignant at his daring to intrude into their beautiful home, and when they saw him capering up and down the walks, and waving his arms in such a ridiculous manner, they could not restrain their feelings" (37). Like the forest in the Young King's final dream, nature is unkind here. But its hostility is not innate, it is unnatural: they gossip about him instead of physically attempting to harm him, though the cactus threatens to "sting him with [its] thorns" if he comes close enough (38). Most of their violence is verbal: they make fun of him and his joy.

The Dwarf and the Infanta are delighted by each other, the former because he sees a great beauty, and the latter because she sees a grotesque. Each is enchanted by the opposite. In "Oscar Wilde and G. F. Hegel: The Wildean Fairy Tale as Postcolonial Dialectic," Kate O'Keefe says: "The Dwarf and the Infanta are essentially two individual consciousnesses in a solipsistic understanding of self, meeting an Other self-conscious individual and each believing their own solipsistic version of reality in which they believe that the autonomy they have is actual"

(O’Keefe 178). For the Infanta, all things seem to be set in the world for her amusement. Reality and fiction blur in the entertainments at her birthday celebration. For the Dwarf, the world is suffused with the joy he feels in being alive, until he realizes that he is the only ugly thing in it. The world he observes is beautiful, the people in it are beautiful; why should he not be beautiful? He gives no thought to the condition of his body until he sees it in the mirror and realizes with horror that they are laughing at his ugliness. His idea of himself is antithetical to his actual appearance that his first thought on seeing his reflection is that it is “a monster, the most grotesque monster he had ever beheld” (48). It mirrors his actions, which he finds strange, but it is only when he sees that “the monster had a rose of its own, petal for petal the same!” (49). The symbol of innocence is, ironically, what strips him of his innocent allusions.

When the Chamberlain announces that the Dwarf’s heart has broken, he does mean that it has literally stopped. But the secondary meaning, obvious to everyone except the Infanta, is that the pain and shock the knowledge of his ugliness has brought him has killed him. He has died of both a literal and a metaphorical broken heart. In her mind, the Dwarf is still on the same level as the Italian puppet-theater, the wickerwork bull, and the troupes of performers. The former two move with actions that are “extremely natural,” except when they aren’t and the latter are exoticized, interesting to their audience as curiosities rather than as human beings (32). She has so little a conception of the natural that she thinks the Dwarf is “almost as good as the puppets, only, of course, not quite so natural” (50). In this story, nature and artifice run up against each other again and again. The Infanta, though still a child, has already adopted the manners of the court. Even the flowers of the palace, ironically, are full of artifice. In contrast, the forest flowers that the Dwarf loves are “not so splendid,” but are “more sweetly scented” (47). The flowers in the palace garden have lost something in their artificiality just as the people of the court have.

The Infanta and the Dwarf are not the only ones to confront the question of knowledge. The death of the queen, the mother of the Infanta, is associated with two trees: the fig and the almond. The queen had died “before she had seen the almonds blossom twice in the orchard, or plucked the second year's fruit from the old gnarled fig-tree that stood in the centre of the now grass-grown courtyard” (26). Both of these have been proposed as the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, an association that is solidified by the fig’s location at the center of the courtyard (Moldenke 107). For her, as for the Dwarf, the burden of knowledge was too much. The Infanta’s days of acceptable ignorance are running out. Already, her innocent ignorance has become harmful. Already it has resulted in death. The death of the Dwarf is major step in her transformation into an uncaring person. She is still not quite “evil” because she still lacks understanding, but if being the cause of a violent death does not show her the impact of her actions; it is unlikely that anything ever will. Soon she will be an adult, possibly the ruler of Spain, and it will be even more so. If she does not cross the line herself, time will push her over and thoughtlessness will become cruelty, her delight mockery.

The Fisherman and His Soul: The Garden as the Gateway to Sin

The best example of splitting in *A House of Pomegranate* come in the longest and most complex tale, “The Fisherman and His Soul”. In this story, a young fisherman falls in love with a beautiful mermaid, whom he has accidentally captured in his net. He agrees to release her on the condition that she comes to sing to him when he calls. At first, their interaction is clearly commercial. He tells her: “I will not let thee go save thou makest me a promise that whenever I call thee, thou wilt come and sing to me, for the fish delight to listen to the song of the Sea-folk, and so shall my nets be full” (54). He sees the Mermaid as a means for getting ahead and he has no problem leveraging his position. There is no love here yet. He feels nothing, and all the

Mermaid feels is “a strange fear” (55). Eventually, they realize that they love each other. But they have a problem: she cannot come to live on shore and the Fisherman cannot come to live with her in the sea unless he gets rid of his soul. So he thinks about it and decides that her love is worth more to him than his own soul: “of what use is my soul to me? I cannot see it. I may not touch it. I do not know it. Surely I will send it away from me, and much gladness shall be mine” (58). Like the Infanta, he has difficulty seeing the importance of intangibles. So, he sets out to find out how he can accomplish this. First he goes to a priest, who is horrified at his proposal and who attempts to correct his theology: “Alack, Alack, thou art mad, or hast eaten of some poisonous herb, for the soul is the noblest part of man, and was given to us by God that we should nobly use it. There is no thing more precious than a human soul, nor any earthly thing that can be weighed with it.” (58-59). Since the soul has such great worth, he goes next to the merchants to sell it. They laugh at him and tell him: “Of what use is a man's soul to us? It is not worth a clipped piece of silver. Sell us thy body for a slave...but talk not of the soul, for to us it is nought, nor has it any value for our service” (60). Confused, he eventually makes his way to a witch and tells her: “My desire is but for a little thing... yet hath the Priest been wroth with me, and driven me forth. It is but for a little thing, and the merchants have mocked at me, and denied me” (62). The witch is fearful, and tells him that to get rid of his soul is “a terrible thing to do”, but she agrees to help him get rid of the soul for a price: he must dance with her under the full moon, where his soul is in more danger than he knows, for it is a witches Sabbath (63). When he approaches the Devil, he makes the sign of the cross, which causes the Devil and all the other witches to flee. But he manages to obtain a knife with a viper-skin⁶ handle from the witch, who tells him to cut his shadow away from his body because the Soul will be in the shadow. “The

⁶ As in “The Young King,” the snake-skin should be a warning to the Fisherman, but he is too innocent and too focused on his love to worry about the methods he uses to get to her.

main point of the scene at the witches' Sabbath is to establish the Fisherman's essential innocence" (Shewen 63). He may not understand the priest's teaching on the soul, but he also does not understand the draw of the black arts. In fact, he understands and desires nothing but love, which is more powerful than both good and evil.⁷

The Soul begs the Fisherman not to send it away, but to no avail. After he cuts it away from his body, "it rose up and stood before him, and looked at him, and it was even as himself" (71). Though it looks like him, it has a will of its own. In fact, it has everything a complete person has except for a heart and a soul. It is like an empty vessel and can be filled with anything, good or evil. With no other recourse, the Soul exacts a promise from the Fisherman: he must allow it to come back once a year to tell him of its adventures. Wilde offers no description of the Fisherman's new life under the sea, focusing instead on the adventures of his Soul. The Fisherman's new abode, it seems, is "intrinsically undescrivable" (Shewen 64). Presumably, he is living in a paradise—albeit a pagan one⁸—while the Soul journeys out into a beautiful but clearly fallen world. It goes in two of the four cardinal directions: east and south. "The East" was both the reputed location of the Garden of Eden and a major focus of British colonial interests. Both were reputed locations of wonders, sites of alleged decadence, and the subject of travellers' tales. The Soul does find many marvels, but they are surrounded by the evils of the world: war, slavery, murder, and above all, deceit. It quickly adapts to this world, becoming more corrupt each year while the Fisherman maintains his innocence. The Soul returns three times and each time it tries to get him to allow it to reenter his body. The first time, it tries to tempt him with the Mirror of Wisdom, which it has found in a strange temple in the east. The Fisherman refuses it

⁷ Another deviation from orthodox Christianity, where the highest love is always linked with good and self-sacrifice. The sacrifice of the soul is a type of self-sacrifice, but it is misguided.

⁸ For the Fisherman, who is still in his state of essential innocence, the sea is like Eden before the fall.

for “Love is better than Wisdom” (80). It begins the story of its journeys in a way that mirrors the story of creation in Genesis: “six days I journeyed, and on the morning of the seventh day I came to a hill that is in the country of the Tartars. I sat down under the shade of a tamarisk tree to shelter myself from the sun. The land was dry and burnt up with the heat” (72). This also echoes the state of the world after the fall. God built the world in six days and on the seventh he rested; the Soul journeys for six days and on the seventh he rests. But the “land was dry and burnt up with the heat” (72). This world is already barren and, instead of building a world, the Soul is building a self. The tamarisk, his shelter, stands for crime in *The Language of Flowers*; making it an appropriate starting point for the Soul (72). The first thing it learns to do is lie. When a merchant asks it “who was the prophet of God... [it] answered him Mohammed,” though it considers Mohammed a “false prophet” (73). It travels with the merchants for some time, committing more crimes as it goes. Finally it comes to the city where it finds the garden of the city’s god. The temple of the god is in the center of the garden and it is here, after two decoy “gods,” that the fourth mirror of *A House of Pomegranates* appears:

There is no god but the mirror that thou seest, for this is the Mirror of Wisdom. And it reflecteth all things that are in heaven and on earth, save only the face of him who looketh into it. This it reflecteth not, so that he who looketh into it may be wise. Many other mirrors are there, but they are mirrors of Opinion. This only is the Mirror of Wisdom. And they who possess this mirror know everything, nor is there anything hidden from them. And they who possess it not have not Wisdom. (79)

Wisdom is not bad, but it is decidedly inferior to Love: as the Fisherman rightly says, “love is better than Wisdom” (80). And the “wisdom” the mirror offers seems to be more like knowledge:

wisdom is the “capacity of judging rightly in matters relating to life and conduct,” of utilizing knowledge, which is a baseline acquiring of facts (OED). The mirror “reflecteth all things than are in heaven and on earth, save only the face of him who looketh into it,” but it does nothing else (79). The looker may be wise enough to realize that he must look past himself, but he also must use his own wisdom to decide what to do with the information he gains from the mirror. Knowledge without wisdom is more dangerous than ignorance.

The second year, it tries to tempt him with the Ring of Riches, which it has taken from an emperor in the south. The Soul passes through a garden in the palace where he finds the Ring of Riches. This garden is full of ominously symbolic plants: “it was planted with tulip-cups and moonflowers, and silver-studded aloes” (85). There is a sort of harmony in this garden: tulips open during the day and moonflowers at night, which means that at any time of the day, half the flowers will be open. But it is a deceitful harmony. The moonflowers, also known as thorn-apples, represent “deceitful charms,” perhaps the deceitful charm of riches to which the soul succumbs and with which he hopes to tempt the Fisherman (Greenaway 93). Tulips, representing fame, are less negative, but fame is not to be trusted (Greenaway 94). The aloe lends a sense of exoticism to the garden, but also represents grief and “religious superstition” (Greenaway 29). Finally, cypress represents death and mourning, both of which are intensified by the comparison to “burnt-out torches” and the song of the nightingale (Greenaway 41, “The Fisherman and His Soul” 85). In the middle of the garden is a pavilion, where the Soul finds the emperor and kills his bodyguard, bringing death into the garden. The Fisherman refuses the Soul’s offer again, preferring love to riches.

The third year, the Fisherman falls to its temptation: it tells him of the beautiful dancing girls it has seen in a nearby village, how their feet move “over the carpet like little white

pigeons” (90). The Fisherman remembers that the Mermaid has no feet, is overcome by the desire to see the dancing girls, and climbs back onto land. He thinks, “I can return to my love,” not realizing that nothing will be the same once he returns to land (90). He has betrayed his love and lost his new life—the Soul can only be separated from the body once. Like Eden, the underwater realm cannot be regained once its rules are broken: “The fisherman leaps into the sea in a frantic effort to rejoin her, but he is no longer innocent (that is, he now knows both good and evil through experience), and therefore he cannot live underwater” (Quintus 563). Even this leads back to Eden, as some believe that lust was the original sin and that the fruit was metaphorical. There is certainly a link between dancing—which could be a stand-in for sex—and evil in this story: the witch’s price is a dance in the moonlight, and the Fisherman’s downfall is the feet of the dancing girls. The Fisherman narrowly escapes the danger that awaits him at the witches’ Sabbath because of his innocence, but he consciously chooses to leave the sea to see the dancers. Later, when the Fisherman learns to resist the temptation of the Soul he says, “nay, but thou art evil, and hast made me forget my love, and hast tempted me with temptations, and hast set my feet in the ways of sin” (95).

Though the Soul has reentered the Fisherman’s body, but it is unable to enter his heart, it is “so compassed about with love” (100). It is only when he goes to the shore and finds that the Mermaid has died in his absence that it finds a way in: his heart, overflowing with love and sorrow, breaks, allowing the Soul to be “one with him even as before” (103). When their bodies are found, the Fisherman and the Mermaid are buried in an unmarked grave but “strange flowers” grow on the grave and the Priest, repenting his former harshness, finds himself unable to preach about anything but God’s love and blesses “all the things in God’s world” (104-105).

It is easy to reduce the story to the claim that the Fisherman is good and his Soul is evil, but the story is not so simple. The soul is not originally evil. It, like the Fisherman, is innocent and knows neither good nor evil. It becomes evil through contact with evil things and because it has no heart. The Fisherman does evil, albeit unintentionally, when he sends his Soul out into the world without a heart. The heart cannot be divided without breaking and he has given it to his love so he cannot give it to the other half of himself. Before the Fisherman cuts it away, the Soul is both a part of him and separate from him. It is the most literal Other within any of the protagonists of *A House of Pomegranates*. When the Fisherman goes to cut it away, it cries, “Lo! I have dwelt with thee for all these years, and have been thy servant. Send me not away from thee now, for what evil have I done thee?” (69). By the way it speaks, it is clear that, though it is his and within him, it is not him. The Soul is his “servant” and has “dwelt with” him. Once the two are separated they have no effect on each other—they are two separate beings although neither can be complete without the other.

The Star-Child: Thorns Also and Thistles Shall It Bring Forth to Thee

In “The Star-Child,” two poor woodcutters see a star fall and rush to it, hoping to find treasure, but instead find a baby, wrapped in a golden cloak and lying alone in the woods. One of them takes the child home and raises him with his own children. The Star-Child grows up to be beautiful but cruel to all creatures, human and not: he thinks he is nobler than the rest of the village because he sprung from a star. One day, a beggar woman comes to town and recognizes him as her long-lost child. But he reviles her and “shut[s] the doors of his heart against her” saying, “thou art too foul to look at, and rather would I kiss the adder or the toad than thee” (116). And he flees. But when the other children see him coming, they laugh and say, “Why, thou art as foul as the toad, and as loathsome as the adder” (117). Immediately, he realizes that

his new physical ugliness is a direct result of his ugly behavior. He begins to wander, looking for his mother so he can ask her forgiveness. For three years he searches unsuccessfully and is shunned everywhere he goes. Eventually, he is sold as a slave to a magician, who sends him into the forest to find three treasures, which he does with the help of the creatures of the forest, to whom he has been kind. Yet, he does not return to his master with any of them, because he gives them to a leper who sits by the city gates. On the third day, having learned compassion for both animals and humans, he regains his beauty and his mother the beggar-woman reveals herself as the queen, and the leper as his father, the king. The Star-Child has gone through the trial, learned his lesson, and proved himself worthy to rule, “Yet he ruled not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly” (129). Like “The Birthday of the Infanta” and “The Fisherman and His Soul,” this story ends on a negative note. The protagonist is able to redeem himself and bring some material good to his dependents, but it does not last long.

And, as in the other stories, the heart is the most vital organ; a hard heart alters one’s perception of the world entirely and overrules any good qualities that may otherwise be present. This story in particular highlights the value of self-sacrificial love, the blindness of the world to true goodness, and the lack of an earthly reward for such goodness. At the beginning, the woodcutter’s wife has hardened her heart against the baby because she is afraid the addition of another child will make it even harder for her to raise her own children. But her husband overrules her saying, “into a house where a heart is hard cometh there not always a bitter wind?” (111). She quickly repents and, with eyes “full of tears,” accepts the Star-Child and places him with her own children. She, like the Fisherman, acts through misplaced love, which makes it easier for her to reorient her love to include others. The Star-Child fails to understand the

inherent value of every human life from the beginning, so it is much harder for him to learn to love the other. He is split between his perception of himself and the reality of his actions. He believes that he is superior because he has come from a star, but he is inferior in love, which is vital to human interaction and survival. The appearance of his mother forces him to reject the mythology he has created for himself:

If in very truth thou art my mother,' he said, 'it had been better hadst thou stayed away, and not come here to bring me to shame, seeing that I thought I was the child of some Star and not a beggar's child, as thou tellest me that I am. Therefore get thee hence, and let me see thee no more (116).

His great fault is his pride, which leads him to devalue those he sees as unworthy. Once he realizes this, he becomes the most self-conscious protagonist in *A House of Pomegranates*. As soon as he sees his own ugliness, he realizes what he has done wrong, saying: “Surely this has come upon me by reason of my sin” (117). His moment of recognition comes instantaneously when he sees his ugliness in the pool. He realizes not only that his former behavior was cruel but also that he must reform himself and do penance for that realization to matter. He refuses the Woodcutter’s daughter’s offer to shelter him because he realizes that hiding from his actions and his appearance will not fix anything. Though the offer was made kindly, it would keep him from bettering himself. This is in marked contrast to the Young King, who only sees the reflection of evil he has unwittingly done in his third dream, and to the Fisherman, who does not realize the harm he has done to his soul until his dying moments.

In the wood outside the city where he seeks the three treasures for the magician, he finds an analogue for his behavior:

Now this wood was very fair to look at from without, and seemed full of singing birds and of sweet-scented flowers, and the Star-Child entered it gladly. Yet did its beauty profit him little, for wherever he went harsh briars and thorns shot up from the ground and encompassed him, and evil nettles stung him, and the thistle pierced him with her daggers, so that he was in sore distress (122).

Like the Star-Child, the wood is beautiful in appearance but cruel in actuality. For him, the wood becomes a kind of hell, as the world was to Adam and Eve after the fall: God says of the tree of knowledge “in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee” (Gen 3:17-18). Nature will no longer be as benevolent as it was and they will have to struggle to live. The Star-Child’s struggle in the wood is brief in comparison, but it is his atonement for his past abuses of the natural world. For a short while, he is forced to live in the world he has created. He cannot fully expiate his past behavior until he is on the receiving end of it.

At the gates of the city, after he has given the last piece of gold to the beggar and believes that he faces death at the hands of the magician, the Star-child confronts his own image for the second time: “Then he, whose armour was inlaid with gilt flowers, and on whose helmet crouched a lion that had wings, held up a shield, and cried, ‘How saith my lord that he is not beautiful?’” (127). He has undergone a complete reversal. Where before he had been convinced of his beauty, he is now convinced of his ugliness and unworthiness. But this has made him all the more beautiful, once he brings the condition of his soul to match his former beautiful appearance. He has become the *καλὸς κάγαθός*—good and beautiful both materially and spiritually. No longer is he Narcissus in love with his own face. Now he is a Christ-figure, willing to sacrifice himself for the good.

The soldier “whose armour was inlaid with gilt flowers, and on whose helmet crouched a lion that had wings” is akin to the uncomprehending mob in “The Young King,” the priest in “The Fisherman and His Soul,” and the denizens of the Infanta’s court (120, 127)⁹. He is the world; he is convention; he could be anyone. He does not, could not, know that the beautiful young man standing before him is the same boy he sold as a slave only three days before. Though this soldier has no name and no personality, the exact same phrase is used to describe him in both incidents. This, and his position at the gate, makes it clear that it is the same man.

This end of this tale is more overtly Christian than that of the Young King, though both characters become Christ-figures. The Star-Child performs most of the corporal works of mercy¹⁰ and some of the spiritual works of mercy in his interactions with his people:

Much justice and mercy did he show to all, and the evil Magician he banished, and to the Woodcutter and his wife he sent many rich gifts, and to their children he gave high honour. Nor would he suffer any to be cruel to bird or beast, but taught love and loving-kindness and charity, and to the poor he gave bread, and to the naked he gave raiment, and there was peace and plenty in the land (128-129).

The specification of justice and mercy is important because, at the beginning, he had no understanding of either on its own, much less the distinction between the two. Justice is giving what is due to each person; mercy is extending forgiveness and goodwill even to those who do not deserve it. He has been shown mercy and has finally learned to extend it to the world in turn.

⁹ Both page numbers are listed because this description appears on both pages, word for word.

¹⁰ Which are: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, bury the dead, shelter the traveler, comfort the sick, and ransom the captive.

(OED). When he was beautiful, he tormented both people and animals; justice is the treatment he receives when he is ugly. Justice is the wood encompassing with thorns when he tries to pass through. Mercy is the second chance and the reversal of his ugliness.

Conclusion

As always, the temptation to read Wilde's work autobiographically is almost irresistible. This is not always a useful impulse, but in this instance, it does shed some light on the persistent importance of the landscape in these stories. The deep tie of the people to their lands can be read biblically, historically, and personally. For an Irish writer coming out of the famine, the tie between land and people could not have been more obvious. As Jarlath Killeen says of the landscape of the Young King's third dream: "The story presented is a Christian one and the world presented in it is fallen. It is no coincidence that the King moves from the Edenic happiness of *Joyese* to the post-lapsarian horrors of a famine-stricken Ireland through the gaining of knowledge" (Killeen 119). That which once supported the people has grown hostile. The passage from Genesis comes to mind again: "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow thou shalt eat of it all the days of thy life" (Gen 3:17). On the personal level, there is Wilde's attachment to England, which he refused to flee even when flight would have helped him avoid his very public trial and imprisonment. The Soul's defiance of the emperor uncannily foreshadows this: "the people marveled at my boldness, and counseled me to flee from the city. I paid no heed to them" (84).

Like the Genesis story of the fall, *A House of Pomegranates* is concerned not with the individual alone but with the universal through the individual. All four protagonists are royal—the Young King, the Infanta, and the Star-Child by birth and the Fisherman by association.¹¹ As

¹¹ It cannot be called marriage because the word marriage is never used.

such, the actions of all four affect people farther outside their immediate circles. The orders of the Young King bring pain to his own citizens, but also to inhabitants of other lands. The Infanta, shut off from the world as she is, still has royal power and can compel others to come and go as she desire. The love between the Fisherman and the Mermaid changes the whole of society both on the land and in the sea. The priest is inspired by the Fisherman to bless the natural world and its pagan inhabitants, but the Sea-folk move out of the bay to protect themselves, increasing the distance between themselves and land-dwellers. The Star-Child becomes a just king and is beloved by all his people. But like all that is good, he does not last long. It is much easier for an individual's actions to have wide-reaching negative effects than it is for it to have a positive influence on the world.

Wilde's stories do not fit the moral code that people often construct for Victorian fairy tales. There are no happily-ever-afters and although good usually triumphs, it never remains in power for long. There is a moral code, but it is not powered by "a devotion to encouraging people to be good or to conform to popular standards of behavior" (Quintus 563). Instead, it presents patterns of good or evil: "Wilde refuses, in short, to be obviously didactic even if he cannot help being moral." (Quintus 563). All its victories are qualified victories, laden with the knowledge that the wheel will soon turn again. The Young King has the greatest triumph, but it is his newfound goodness itself that divides him from his people. God transforms the Young King's simple clothing and the people see that he is right, and yet "no man dared look upon his face, for it was like the face of an angel" (23). If the Young King wants to redeem the world, he must first alter his peoples' focus. By changing his own, he has come part of the way, but he still has a long way to go: "the gaze of the poor is still being misdirected" (Killeen 119). The parallel with Moses here is strong: "when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the

skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him” (Exodus 34:29). This is after Moses has smashed the first tablets in his anger at the people. The Young King has managed to bypass Moses’ anger and destruction, but not his transformation. The Dwarf and the Infanta, on the other hand, get no redemption. The Dwarf is unable to see both the good and the bad in himself, and the knowledge of his ugliness kills him, while the Infanta is unable to perceive her own cruelty or to see the beauty of the Dwarf’s joyful spirit. The Fisherman is posthumously justified by the growth of the strange flowers, but after that, “never again in the corner of the Fullers’ Field grew flowers of any kind” and the sea folk leave the bay (105). The Star-Child rules for only three years, exhausted by the “fire of his testing,” and “he who came after him ruled evilly” (129).

In “The Moral Implications of Oscar Wilde's Aestheticism,” John Allen Quintus says: “The "moral" is that an absence of spirituality, of faith, of regard for human life separates individuals like Huysmans' *des Esseintes* and Wilde's *Dorian Gray* from humanity and makes monsters of them” (563). This is what happens to the Soul in “The Fisherman and His Soul.” It is what is happening to the Infanta when she denies the Dwarf’s humanity. And it is what would happen to the Star-Child and the Young King if they had continued with their original trajectories. The journeys they make help them avoid becoming “lost soul[s] condemned by [their] egotism” (563). The Fisherman is saved by the strength and purity of his love, which is inherently un-egotistical, though it excludes everyone except the beloved. Wilde “decried Victorian ethics and intransigent moral positions but not moral truths, truths of the human heart” (Quintus 563). The good is not ambiguous, but the way to achieve it is. Just as the fall is often called a *felix culpa*,¹² the trials of Wilde’s protagonists are “happy.” Through them, the “moral”

¹² happy fault

characters are elevated to a higher state: “the passage into consciousness of evil and suffering—the descent into a symbolic underworld, where some process of illumination occurs - that takes place in all of the stories” (Pendlebury 138). He “uses death as an ironic reward for the moral characters in his tales,” but those characters also die because they have reached their teleological ends (Jones 887). The Young King, the only moral character who does not die, has not fulfilled his mission; he has only just begun. The Star-Child, on the other hand, has made changes in his kingdom, even in his short reign. Both the Fisherman and the Dwarf die disappointed: the Fisherman is filled with remorse after yielding to his Soul and abandoning the Mermaid, while the Dwarf’s view of the world has been so profoundly altered he would not be able to live happily in it again.

The stories in Oscar Wilde’s *A House of Pomegranates* switch between various systems of belief in an attempt to reckon with a world that is just as broken as the real one, but come to the ultimate conclusion that, though matters can be improved for a time, temporal happiness is unstable and fleeting. The worlds of these stories teeter on the boundary between the real world and stereotypical fairytale worlds, a fact that becomes especially apparent in their use of symbols and motifs, particularly those of the garden and the mirror. The cyclical story of the fall, punishment, and redemption is repeated again and again because it is the most human story. As the characters in “A Woman of No Importance” say, “The Book of Life begins... in a garden and “It ends with Revelations.¹³”

¹³ *A Woman of No Importance* Act I

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