

## **Fashioning a new brand of modern Irish Celt: Oscar Wilde, Dion Boucicault and the pragmatics of being Irish**

Over recent decades the rise in Oscar Wilde's literary reputation and the wealth of new scholarly studies of his work have also seen an increasing emphasis on Wilde's Irish birth and heritage, his nationalist sympathies, and the relation between his works and the Irish Revival. Wilde has been included in the refigured canon of Irish literature, his writings viewed in a postcolonial context as acts of resistance to English norms, and a number of scholars have traced the influence of Irish oral and written culture on his fiction, in particular his fairy tales.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, as a corrective to what they perceived as an overenthusiastic and on occasions inaccurate emphasis on Wilde's Irish identity and influences, Màire ní Fhlathúin and Anne Markey have challenged the elision of vital class, regional and religious distinctions in the unifying designation of Wilde as 'Irish', instead calling attention to the inconsistencies, evasions and contradictions which punctuate the history of Wilde's self-identification as Irish.<sup>2</sup>

This article will argue that, for all the unevenness and convenience that occasionally characterized Wilde's engagement with his national identity, his reconfiguring and rejection of contemporary theories of racial typing and the inherent inferiority of the Celtic character was thorough and sustained. Furthermore, the pragmatism and apparent inconsistency which have led some critics to challenge the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, David A. Upchurch, *Wilde's Use of Celtic Elements in The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: P. Lang, 1992); Davis Coakley, *Oscar Wilde: The Importance of Being Irish* (Dublin: Townhouse, 1994); Richard Pine, *The Thief of Reason: Oscar Wilde and Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995); Jerusha McCormack (ed.), *Wilde the Irishman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Jarlath Killeen, *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Jarlath Killeen, *The Fairy Tales of Oscar Wilde* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Anne Markey, *Oscar Wilde's Fairy Tales* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011); Jarlath Killeen (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: Irish Writers in Their Time* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Màire ní Fhlathúin, "The Irish Oscar Wilde: Appropriations of the Artist", *Irish Studies Review* 7:3 (1999), 337-46; Anne Markey, "Wilde the Irishman Reconsidered: 'The Muses care so little for geography!'", *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 57:4 (2014), 443-62. For further skirmishes in the occasionally heated debate over Wilde's Irishness, see Richard Haslam, 'The Hermeneutic Hazards of Hibernicizing Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*,' *ELT*, 57.1 (2014), 37-58; and Jarlath Killeen, 'The Greening of Oscar Wilde: Situating Ireland in the Wilde Wars,' *Irish Studies Review*, 23 (4), 2015, 424 -50.

appropriateness of identifying Wilde as an Irish writer are in fact strikingly similar to those which characterize the strategies and career of Dion Boucicault, the most successful playwright of the 1860s and '70s, who turned the 'Irish drama' into an international product, and was celebrated in America and Ireland for bringing new dignity and honour to the figure of the Stage Irishman. The influence of Boucicault in helping Wilde to shape his professional career and develop his stagecraft illuminates not only Wilde's construction of a modern brand of Irish Celt, but also how both writers expressed such a conception on stage. Boucicault and Wilde were not purist or idealist in their conception and use of the term 'Irish', nor indeed when it came to the role of professional playwright. Like W. B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, the staunchly nationalist founders of the Abbey Theatre, Wilde and Boucicault repudiated the stereotype of Ireland as a backward land of 'buffoonery and easy sentiment' but their alternative was not 'ancient idealism' but a modern pragmatism that located them at the heart of an evolving international marketplace.<sup>3</sup>

Boucicault's and Wilde's acquaintance dated back to Boucicault's visits to the Wildes' house in Merrion Square, Dublin, during Oscar's youth. In 1881 Boucicault was on the cards to direct the premiere of Wilde's *Vera; or, The Nihilists* when the production was abruptly cancelled.<sup>4</sup> Their public association was cemented in January 1882, when Boucicault sprang to his fellow Irishman's defence as Wilde came under vicious attack in the press at the outset of his lecture tour of America, accused of affected and rude manners, pretentiousness, and crudely mercenary motives. It was Wilde's manager, D'Oyly Carte, who had made a ridiculous spectacle of the young aesthete, Boucicault declared, whereas he was in fact 'a gentleman of refinement and a scholar', and 'Those who have known him as I have since he was a child at my knee know that beneath that fantastic envelope in which his managers are circulating him there is a noble, earnest, kind and lovable man.'<sup>5</sup> In

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<sup>3</sup> See the Irish Literary Theatre's manifesto in Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1913), 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> See *World*, 30 Nov. 1881, cited in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (Penguin, 1987), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted, Lloyd Lewis and Henry Justin Smith, *Oscar Wilde Discovers America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), 117; included as undated clipping in Papers of

a joint interview with Wilde for the *Boston Herald*, Boucicault, who was overseeing a season of his Irish dramas, *Arrah-na-Pogue* (1864), *The Shaughraun* (1874), and *Daddy O'Dowd* (1873) at the Boston Museum Theatre, gave the support of his name and reputation to his young friend while repeatedly drawing the focus back to Ireland, often cutting across Wilde himself to do so. When Wilde commented that English financial markets were more stable than American ones because of the 'fixed value' of land in England, Boucicault interjected, 'And not in Ireland ... that has a very unfixed value' – a comment that emphasized the fight over Irish land and rents, which lay behind the boycotting tactics of the Irish Land League, championed in *Daddy O'Dowd*.<sup>6</sup> When Wilde commented on the vast number of pretty women he had seen in Baltimore, Boucicault laughingly exclaimed 'Irish!', ambiguously referring to Wilde's admiration for female beauty or to the women themselves, adding that 'there is a deal of fine Irish blood in the old Baltimore stock! That accounts for the mass of feminine beauty there!'<sup>7</sup>

Both Wilde and Boucicault wrote to George Lewis, their mutual friend and Wilde's solicitor, and to Lewis's wife, Elizabeth, complaining about Wilde's treatment at the hands of the press, his management and a rival lecturer, Archibald Forbes. Apparently collecting material for a possible future prosecution, Wilde sent his solicitor copies of his correspondence with Forbes, and Boucicault sent copies of his interview statements on Wilde and what he clearly saw as the most egregious press clippings.<sup>8</sup> The particular selection of excerpts and articles collected by Boucicault suggest that the two authors were particularly incensed by what they perceived to be anti-Irish racial slurs. As Irishmen, they would inevitably have been familiar with a discourse that typed the Irish, alongside African races, as less evolved than the superior Teutonic or Saxon race. Though John Beddoe's influential 'Index of Nigrescence' was not published until 1885 in his *The Races of Britain*, a Belgian

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Elizabeth, Lady Lewis (1844-1931) and the Lewis family, 1849-1982, Dep. c. 838 166. Bodleian Library.

<sup>6</sup> 'Oscar Wilde. The Arrival of the Poet in Boston Yesterday. A Conversation in Mr. Boucicault's Parlors. His Thoughts About Art and a Poet's Life', *Boston Herald* (19 Jan 1882), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Copies of letters from Wilde to Forbes, marked No.1 and No.3, and annotated, 'Please preserve this until I ask for it', Papers of Elizabeth, Lady Lewis (1844-1931) and the Lewis family, 1849-1982, Dep. c.838 fols.149-156. Bodleian Library. See also *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (Fourth Estate: London, 2000), 129-33. (Hereafter *Letters*).

commentator noted in 1880 that press caricatures of the Irish as unevolved, savage Calibans commonly depicted them as ‘a kind of white negroes’.<sup>9</sup> So, from the wealth of mocking comments and snide interviews that greeted Wilde’s opening lectures in America, Boucicault selected a cartoon published in the *Washington Post* on 22 January: juxtaposing pictures of Wilde and a Borneo monkey, the caption asked ‘How far is it from this to this?’ and suggested that ‘Mr. Wilde of England’ showed that the ‘climax of evolution’ had been reached and we are now ‘tending down the hill toward the aboriginal starting point again’.<sup>10</sup> Another clipping, under the title ‘A “Too Utter” Darkey’, tells how students at Rochester, New York, dressed a caretaker in swallow-tailed coat and gloves, and applauded as he walked down the aisle during Wilde’s lecture, ‘with many antics and grimaces’.<sup>11</sup> Notably, when sixty (presumably white) Harvard students had imitated Wilde’s aesthetic dress of swallow-tail coat and knee-breeches to attend his lecture the previous week, Wilde had genially commented that he would have played a similar prank when he was an undergraduate; when parodied by an African-American, however, Wilde commented coldly that a young lecturer in England would at least be treated with respect.<sup>12</sup> Wilde and Boucicault

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<sup>9</sup> Gustave de Molinari in the *Journal des Débats*, 1880, quoted in L. Perry Curtis Jr., *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), 1. As Hofer and Scharnhorst note, Wilde’s condescending treatment of his black valet, W. M. Traquair, and his failure to make any comment on segregation suggest that he himself may have viewed black Americans as inferior. Boucicault’s views on race are critically contested, as he was overtly critical of slavery, but careful not to give offence to Southern audiences – for further discussion see Sarah Meer, ‘Boucicault’s misdirections: Race, transatlantic theatre and social position in *The Octoroon*’, *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, 6:1, 81-95. Meer convincingly challenges Scott Boldwood’s analysis of Boucicault’s plays as critical of inter-racial marriage in “‘The Ineffaceable Curse of Cain’: Race, Miscegenation, and the Victorian Staging of Irishness,’ *Victorian Literature and Culture* 9:2 (2001), 383–96.

<sup>10</sup> *Washington Post* (21 Jan 1882). clipping dated in (?) Boucicault’s hand, Lewis papers, Dep. c. 838 162.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Oscar Wilde Worried. Disgraceful Conduct of Students in the Rochester Grand Opera House’ (By Telegraph to the *Herald*). Rochester N.Y. Feb 7, 1882. Lewis Papers, Dep c.838 fol.165.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Oscar Wilde in Brooklyn’, *New York Sun*, 4 Feb 1882, 1, and ‘Truly Aesthetic’, *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 13 Feb 1882, 2, reprinted in *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, edited by Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (University of Illinois Press: Urbana and Chicago, 2010), 51, 63. For further examples of caricatures of Wilde as African-American, native American and Chinese, see Curtis Marez, ‘The Other Addict: Reflections on Colonialism and Oscar Wilde’s Opium Smoke Screen’, *English Literary History*, 64.1 (1997) 257-287, though Marez’s framing

were not the only ones to see anti-Irish prejudice as the root-cause of such mockery; as one journalist noted in a further clipping collected by Boucicault, ‘The *Sun* can see no reason why a young Irish poet of honorable name and extraction should not be treated as well as a young English poet or German transcendentalist.’<sup>13</sup>

Inherent in the American press’s mocking responses to Wilde’s lectures on aesthetics was the notion that it was absurd for an Irishman to lay claim to a place at the forefront of civilized progress, the same sneer that stung the author to angry protest at Charles Brookfield’s satirical farce *The Poet and Puppets* (1892), which began with the aesthete singing:

They may bubble with jest at the way that I’m dressed  
They may scoff at the length of my hair,  
They may say that I’m vain, overbearing, inane,  
And object to the flowers I wear.  
They may laugh till they’re ill but the fact remains still,  
A fact I’ve proclaimed since a child.  
That it’s taken, my dears, nearly two thousand years  
To make neighbour O’Flaherty’s child!<sup>14</sup>

Artistic sophistication and Irish birth, Brookfield’s lyrics imply, are an inherently absurd combination.

Coming to Wilde’s defence at a formative moment in his career, Boucicault offered a useful model of how to balance commercial interests, nationalist loyalties, and literary ambitions, while keeping a knowing eye on the multiple possibilities of different markets. Boucicault’s influence on Wilde is perceptible in the consonances and parallels between the two writers’ negotiations with their nationality and cultural heritage, an influence that extends beyond the pragmatics of negotiating anti-Irish prejudice and maximizing profits to the disruptive potential of imaginative self-fashioning. A consummate businessman, Boucicault was keen to teach Wilde greater financial acumen, as he wrote to Mrs George Lewis:

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argument that Wilde sought to escape his Irish identity by re-locating himself within a European aesthetic world is unconvincing given Wilde’s consistent support of Irish Home Rule and his enduring self-identification as Celtic.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Literary Pretence’, untitled clipping, Lewis Papers, Dep c.838 fol. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Brookfield, *The Poet and the Puppets. A Travestie suggested by ‘Lady Windermere’s Fan’* (New York: Garland, 1978), scene 1.

I do wish I could make him less Sybarite – less Epicurean. He said this morning, ‘Let me gather the golden fruits of America that I may spend a winter in Italy and a summer in Greece amidst beautiful things.’ Oh dear – if he would spend the money and time amongst six-per-cent bonds! I think I told him so, but he thinks I take ‘a painful view of life’.<sup>15</sup>

Boucicault’s own career was exemplary in showing how to negotiate ‘six-per-cent bonds’; he led the way in securing a percentage of box-office receipts rather than a flat fee for his plays, and Wilde followed his example when rejecting George Alexander’s offer of a flat fee for *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, instead negotiating royalties which brought him in a healthy £100 a week.<sup>16</sup>

Boucicault was master of the art of moulding his texts to suit diverse and multiple audiences, with all the attendant opportunities for selling the same product more than once. His sensational melodrama, *The Poor of New York*, for example, opened in New York in 1857, and was subsequently performed in a wide range of locations, retitled and reworked accordingly as *The Poor of Liverpool*, *The Poor of Leeds*, *The Streets of Dublin*, *The Streets of London* and so forth – as Boucicault cheerily commented, ‘I can spin out these rough-and-tumble dramas as a hen lays eggs. It’s a degrading occupation, but more money has been made out of guano than out of poetry.’<sup>17</sup> Boucicault was similarly skilled in refashioning plays about which he cared more deeply, gauging just how radical he could be without alienating his audience. *The Octoroon* (1859) centred on the fate of Zoe, the mixed-race heroine of the title, who is sold into sexual subjection in a sensational slave-auction scene. Boucicault spared the particular prejudices of his American audiences by having Zoe take poison and die in the arms of her white true-love, thereby avoiding the more scandalous possibilities of miscegenation. Adapting the play for English audiences, Boucicault changed the ending to spare Zoe’s life, allowing her to be happily united with her lover, in a version he advertised as ‘composed by the public and edited by the author’.<sup>18</sup> He similarly revised *Arrah-na-Pogue* after its successful opening in Dublin, heightening its sensational appeal with the escape of the rebellious Shaun

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to Mrs George Lewis (29 Jan 1882), *Letters*, 135n.

<sup>16</sup> See Richard Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault: A Biography* (London: Quartet, 1979), 68-9, 126-7. For full details of Wilde’s contracts and earnings from his plays see Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde’s Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), chap.4.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Richard Fawkes, *Dion Boucicault: A Biography* (London: Quartet, 1979), 148.

<sup>18</sup> Playbill quoted in *ibid*, 128.

(played by Boucicault himself) from prison by climbing a precipitous ivy-covered tower, for the London premiere in 1865; under cover of heightened crowd-pleasing thrills, he also made the play more defiantly nationalistic, adding the patriotic song ‘The Wearing of the Green’, to produce the version of the play which by September was being played simultaneously in Glasgow, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Melbourne.<sup>19</sup>

Wilde became similarly adept at tailoring his works to diverse markets, with all the consequent opportunities for multiple sales: he tactically re-wrote his early play *Vera; or, The Nihilists* for a New York audience in 1882; and revised the 1890 Lippincott’s version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* for publication by Ward Lock and Co. in 1891. He was equally skilled at revising his plays to meet the particular exigencies of the theatrical marketplace, reworking *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, partly in response to the commercial requirements of actor-manager George Alexander.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as a number of critics have recently argued, Wilde’s writings are not necessarily to be viewed as working towards a single finished product, but rather as a more flexible process of producing multiple versions for different markets and readers, an argument reflected in the recent publication of *Dorian Gray* and *De Profundis* in two distinct versions in the new Oxford English Texts edition of Wilde’s complete works.<sup>21</sup>

Unsurprisingly, as the foremost Irish playwright of his day, who intervened to provide generous support at a crucial point in Wilde’s career, Boucicault’s influence on his young friend can be seen not only in the model he provided for negotiating the marketplace, but also in both writers’ particular brand of ‘Irishness’ and their response to anti-Irish prejudice. Boucicault’s public self-identification as Irish was a late development in his career. It was only in 1860, nearly twenty years after his first stage success, the Regency-style comedy of manners, *London Assurance* (1841), that

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<sup>19</sup> For further details see Deirdre McFeely, *Dion Boucicault on Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 42-4.

<sup>20</sup> For further details on Wilde’s revision and republication of his works, see Josephine Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde’s Profession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Russell Jackson and Ian Small, ‘Oscar Wilde: A “Writerly” Life’, *Modern Drama*, 37:1 (Spring 1994), 3-11; *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol.III, The Picture of Dorian Gray, the 1890 and 1891 texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and *Vol.II, De Profundis: Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Boucicault made much of his Irish birth to accompany publicity for his sensation drama, *The Colleen Bawn*, in which the peasant heroine Eily is feted as an embodiment of Irish beauty and purity. The play traces the painful progress of Eily's aristocratic Anglo-Irish husband from shame at his wife's lowly birth to acceptance and even pride in her native beauty, a theme which appealed strongly to the sympathies of the large Irish-American audience at its opening in New York in 1860. When it opened in London four years later, however, reviewers overlooked its themes of national pride, laying emphasis instead of the spectacular 'sensation scene' in which Boucicault, as the vagabond Myles-na-Coppaleen, performed a head-first dive into an underground lake to rescue Eily from drowning. The nationalist sympathies that underpinned Boucicault's next two Irish hits, *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *The Shaughraun*, were even more overt, centring respectively on the daring escape of an Irish rebel during the 1798 uprising, and the pardoning of a Fenian fugitive. In the wake of the popular success of *The Shaughraun* in both London and Dublin, Boucicault even called upon Prime Minister Disraeli to free all the real-life Fenian prisoners then incarcerated in British gaols. But Boucicault was also careful to retain as broad an audience appeal as possible, making his melodramatic villains Irish middle-men and informers who betray and steal from their countrymen, while his English officers and officials are well-meaning and honourable, their nobility rewarded in some cases by the love of a true Irish woman. Reconciliation not conflict was the keynote in Boucicault's presentation of Anglo-Irish relations.

Until recently Boucicault has figured most prominently in histories of Irish theatre as the epitome of what W. B. Yeats and the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre despised. Dismissed in Yeats's words as having 'no relation to literature', it was Boucicault's drama that stood as the primary reference for Yeats, Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn when they declared in 1897 that their newly formed Irish Literary Theatre would show that 'Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.'<sup>22</sup> At first glance the law-defying, scapegrace comic heroes of Boucicault's famous Irish plays - Myles-na-Coppaleen, Shaun the Post and Conn the Shaughraun - might seem a continuation of the childish, hot-headed and uncontrollable stage Irishman whose

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<sup>22</sup> Yeats, 'Windlestraws', *Samhain* (Oct 1901), 7, quoted in McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, 177; Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (London and NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913), 8-9

stage history stretched across hundreds of years, and encompassed Teg in Sir Robert Howard's *The Committee* (1665), Lucius O'Trigger in Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775), and Brian Boru in Charles Farley's *Harlequin Pat: or, The Giant's Causeway* (1830). Distilling illegal whiskey, stealing horses and spinning yarns, Boucicault's Irish heroes were clearly allied to the drunken, irresponsible stage Irishman whom the Irish Literary Theatre was committed to expunging from the stage. But, as well as providing the actor-playwright with his most famous roles, these outlaw-heroes were also an important corrective to the debased stereotype, being noble-hearted, loyal, selflessly brave and, most importantly, guided by a moral code that left English-made laws looking emptily rigid and inhumane. As modern scholars of Irish theatre, such as Nicholas Grene and Richard Allen Cave have argued, Boucicault was himself challenging the stereotype of the irresponsible and childlike Irishman, instead reworking the conventions of melodrama in order to give his heroes a new dignity and honour.<sup>23</sup> So, in *The Shaughraun*, Conn poaches salmon and grouse to feed both the destitute sister and the sweetheart of Robert Ffolliott, an Irish gentleman transported to Australia as a Fenian, and Conn then 'poaches' Robert from exile and brings him back to his homeland, thereby liberating and re-appropriating goods and lives that have been requisitioned under English rule.<sup>24</sup> Conn carries Robert ashore 'in his two arms as tender as a mother would hold a child' - an image of care and responsibility which refigures the irredeemably childish stage Irishman as a heroic and nurturing parent.<sup>25</sup>

Wilde was, like Boucicault, an expatriate Irishman who laid emphasis on his birth as and when it suited his convenience. Perhaps having learnt from Boucicault the value of appealing to a considerable Irish-American audience, Wilde played up his Irish identity after his encounter with the older playwright in Boston, even giving a lecture on 'Irish Poets and Poetry of the Nineteenth Century' in San Francisco in

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<sup>23</sup> See Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Brecht* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 199); Richard Allen Cave, "Staging the Irishman", in J. S. Bratton, Richard Allen Cave et al, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Boucicault, *The Shaughraun*, in *The Dolmen Press Boucicault*, ed. David Krause (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1964), I, iv, 192.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, I, i, 182.

April 1882.<sup>26</sup> Having dropped his Irish accent when he arrived as a student at Oxford, Wilde was happy to assimilate as suited him. So, for example, he reluctantly allowed the editor of *Irish Monthly* to change a reference to ‘our English land’ in his poem ‘Heu Miserande Puer’ to ‘the English land’ when it was published in 1877, but changed it back to ‘our’ in his 1881 volume of poems - thus aligning himself with the English Romantic tradition of Keats and Shelley.<sup>27</sup> Wilde’s support for Irish Home Rule and his criticism of English government in Ireland were, however, remarkably consistent. As Thomas Wright and Paul Kinsella have recently revealed, Wilde joined the Eighty Club in 1887, a Liberal society then dedicated to campaigning to secure self-government for Ireland, attending dinners and lectures, and giving speeches.<sup>28</sup> Wilde was outspoken in his views on English misrule in numerous book reviews and articles. Reviewing J. A. Froude’s *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy* in 1889, for example, he wrote acerbically that, ‘If in the last century [England] tried to govern Ireland with an insolence that was intensified by race hatred and religious prejudice, she has sought to rule her in this century with a stupidity that is aggravated by good intentions.’<sup>29</sup> Wilde’s caustic irony here echoes that of the Irish clan leader, The O’Grady, in Boucicault’s *Arrah-na-Pogue*, who comments of the English major’s determination to court-martial Shaun in the name of law and order, ‘There goes a kind-hearted gentleman, who would cut more throats on principle and firm conviction than another blackguard would sacrifice to the worst passions of his nature.’<sup>30</sup>

Irish nationalist sympathies should not be confused with questions of citizenship in the case of either Boucicault or Wilde, for both of whom the

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<sup>26</sup> See also e.g. ‘Oscar Wilde: An Interview with the Apostle of Aestheticism’, *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 March 1882, 2, and ‘Loveliness and Politeness’, *New York Sun*, 20 Aug 1882, 5.

<sup>27</sup> For further details see Joseph Bristow, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Poetic Traditions’, in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. Peter Raby and Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 74-6. For the argument that Wilde’s *Poems* (1881) should be seen as a deliberate strategic self-positioning in an English poetic tradition, see Nicholas Frankel, *Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books* (Univ. of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2000), Chapter 1.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Wright, ‘Party Political Animal: Oscar Wilde, Gladstonian Liberal and Eighty Club Member’, *Times Literary Supplement* (June 6, 2014), 13-15; Thomas Wright and Paul Kinsella, ‘Oscar Wilde, A Parnellite Home Ruler and Gladstonian Liberal: Wilde’s Career at the Eighty Club (1887-1895)’, *The OScholars*, August 2015 - <http://oscholars-oscholars.com/may-i-say/> Accessed 21/3/2016.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Mr. Froude’s Blue-Book’ *Pall Mall Gazette* (13 April 1889), 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Arrah-na-Pogue*, in *Dolmen Press Boucicault*, II, ii, 140.

technicalities of national identity were secondary to professional and artistic expediency. As Màire ní Fhlathúin has rightly observed, Wilde's much quoted declaration that 'I am not English. I am Irish which is quite another thing', after the Lord Chamberlain's refusal of a performance licence to *Salome*, is not 'a statement about the essential nature of nationality, it is a proclamation of the supreme importance of "artistic judgement", of the right and duty of the artist to repudiate a country which could refuse his work.'<sup>31</sup> Just as Wilde had identified himself with the land of Shakespeare and Keats when seeking to align himself with a Romantic tradition of English-language poetry, so, as William Cohen has observed, he was ready to embrace both the French language and French citizenship when Paris appeared to him the city of artists, offering refuge from the petty provincialism of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, and, in French, a language of art which transcended mere questions of nationality.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as Cohen has noted, the French journalist's account of Wilde's declaration rendered Irishness an even more transitory state, subject to hourly change: 'Je ne suis pas, à l'heure où je vous parle, Anglais, je suis encore *Irlandais*'.<sup>33</sup>

Wilde's declared determination to become a French citizen, like his devotion to the land of Shakespeare and Keats, did not necessarily contradict his allegiance to his Irish roots and identity. As he wrote two years earlier in regard to the Irish-American influence on the social development of Ireland, 'To mature its powers, to concentrate its action, to learn the secret of its own strength and of England's weakness, the Celtic intellect has had to cross the Atlantic. At home it had but learned the pathetic weakness of nationality; in a strange land it realized what indomitable forces nationality possesses.'<sup>34</sup> Boucicault's experiences were available to Wilde as a valuable demonstration of the power of the expatriate Irish community and its relation to citizenship. When *The Shaughraun* opened in New York in 1875, a debate opened up in the *Irish World* as to whether Boucicault's dramas offered an accurate portrait of Irish life and manners. The playwright dismissed the criticisms offered in this

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<sup>31</sup> 'The Censure and "Salome", an interview with Mr. Oscar Wilde'" *Pall Mall Gazette* (29 June 1892); Fhlathúin, "The Irish Oscar Wilde", 342.

<sup>32</sup> William A. Cohen, 'Wilde's French', in Joseph Bristow (ed.), *Wilde Discoveries: Traditions, Histories, Archives* (University of Toronto Press, in association with the UCLA Center for 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Studies and the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library: 2013), 233-48.

<sup>33</sup> *Le Gaulois*, 29 June 1892, 1, quoted in *ibid*, 248.

<sup>34</sup> 'Mr Froude's Blue Book', 3.

Irish-American newspaper by declaring that the final verdict on such matters must lie with ‘the Irish people sitting in judgment at the Theatre Royal, Dublin’; to which the editor of the *Irish World* retorted that no audience sitting in ‘the shadow of the Castle’ could compare to that of New York, ‘the greatest Irish city in the world’.<sup>35</sup> Only if Boucicault forswore allegiance to England by taking American citizenship would the *Irish World* deign to employ him, the editor declared. A year later Boucicault had indeed taken up American citizenship, and reaped the rewards: he was congratulated by the Irish-American community of New York on ‘the service His Literary and Artistic Works Have Been to Ireland and the Irish people’ and presented with a statuette of himself in the role of Conn.<sup>36</sup> In an international marketplace, citizenship, national identity and political allegiance were separate matters.

There are several reasons for the omission of both Boucicault and Wilde from the standard roll-call of the Celtic Revival: the overt pragmatism and commercial interests which strongly influenced their public presentation of their Irish identity; the anti-idealism which runs as a clear line through so much of their writing; and their repeated emphasis on the ‘modern spirit’. The sensational effects for which Boucicault’s plays were famous, including a tenement building going up in flames and its roof collapsing in *The Poor of New York*, a paddle-steamer exploding in *The Octoroon*, and a tower which reversed to enable the audience to view both the prison within and Shaun scaling its ivy-covered walls without, were all dependent on and showcased cutting-edge technology.<sup>37</sup> Skilfully targeted at a burgeoning transatlantic theatrical market, Boucicault’s Irish plays were unmistakably modern, not only in the commercial and mechanical sophistication that underpinned their appeal, but also in the particular vision of Ireland that they offered. Folk music, ballads and romantic landscapes played a crucial role in Boucicault’s theatrical representations of Ireland, but, despite plays like *Arrah-na-Pogue* and *Robert Emmet* being set in the nationalist resistance at the turn of the nineteenth century, his Irish dramas hinged on the

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<sup>35</sup> Boucicault, ‘Dion Boucicault on Irish Caricatures’, ‘Response to Letter of Dion Boucicault’, *Irish World* (6 Feb 1875), 6, quoted in Gwen Orel, ‘Reporting the Stage Irishman: Dion Boucicault in the Irish Press’, in John P. Harrington (ed.), *Irish Theater in America: Essays on Irish Theatrical Diaspora* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 73.

<sup>36</sup> Dion Boucicault statuette (1875) by John Rogers, National Gallery of Ireland, quoted in McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, 98-103.

<sup>37</sup> For further discussion see Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

necessary transition from a society of inherited status to one ruled by the modern imperatives of contract and commerce.<sup>38</sup>

Despairing in 1882 of the young Wilde's un-worldliness and his need for better management, Dion Boucicault had wished he would 'take his legs out of the last century' – a comment on Wilde's much-mocked knickerbockers, which highlighted the nostalgia implicit in the romantic aestheticism that Wilde was propounding in early 1882.<sup>39</sup> Whatever Boucicault's particular success in influencing Wilde's clothing may have been, modernity was to become a key element in Wilde's artistic theories and in his approach to Irish art and culture. In his book reviews, Wilde was an enthusiastic and consistent supporter of the Revivalist project of chronicling and celebrating Irish history, art, folklore and literature, from his call for subscriptions to support Irish art historian Henry O'Neill in 1877 to his admiring review of Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín* in 1889.<sup>40</sup> Wilde was also, however, wary of the backward-looking aspect of the Revival, urging that any native resurgence of art and architecture must be 'expressive of the modern spirit'; so he warned that, 'A recent writer on house decoration has gravely suggested that the British householder should take his meals in a Celtic dining-room adorned with a dado of Ogham inscriptions, and such wicked proposals may serve as a warning to all who fancy that the reproduction of a form necessarily implies a revival of the spirit that gave the form life and meaning, and who fail to recognize the difference between art and anachronisms.'<sup>41</sup> While proud of his parents' contribution to the project of recovering and recording Irish history and culture, Wilde quickly positioned himself in the artistic avant garde, closely associated with the latest Decadent and French Symbolist movements, and in his 1891 essay 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' he celebrated art as a progressive and cosmopolitan force, not to be bludgeoned into conformity

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<sup>38</sup> For further discussion see Marjorie Howes, 'Melodramatic Conventions and Atlantic History in Dion Boucicault', *Éire-Ireland* Volume 46:3&4, Fomhar/Geimhreadh / Fall/Winter 2011, 84-101.

<sup>39</sup> Boucicault, to Mrs George Lewis, 10 Feb 1882, *Letters*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> 'Mr. Henry O'Neill, Artist' (*Saunders's News-Letter* (29 Dec 1877), 3, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol. VII: Journalism*, ed. John Stokes and Mark W. Turner (Oxford: OUP, 2013), I, 14-15; 'Some Literary Notes', *WW* 2:17 (March 1889), 277-80, II, 178-80

<sup>41</sup> 'Early Christian Art in Ireland', *PMG* (17 Dec 1887), 3, in *Ibid*, II, 39.

with established rules. The culture of the past, like that of other nations, was to be plundered to the artist's own ends, not revived and revered.

Perhaps most significantly, the humorous pragmatism at the heart of both Boucicault's and Wilde's plays ran counter to the Revival's celebration of 'ancient idealism'. In Boucicault's Irish plays resourceful rogues like Conn and Shaun undercut the heroic principles and unshakeable probity of the romantic leads; they forge a more effective path by disdaining high-minded ethics, their physical daring matched with a comic disregard for legality or truth. In *The Shaughraun*, for example, the English officer Molineux nobly offers to take Father Dolan's word for it that Robert, the escaped Fenian, is not hiding in his house, but Father Dolan cannot bring himself to lie, and Robert abandons his safe hiding-place to release the priest from any pressure to perjure himself. When all this nobility delivers the rebel to his English captors, Conn comments wryly, 'I wish he would take my word', being eager to lie his friend out of trouble, and wryly amused at the others' scrupulous truth-telling.<sup>42</sup> With ceaseless energy, Conn by contrast lies, drinks, poaches, steals, disguises himself, and fakes his own death to bring about the play's happy ending.

Idealism comes under direct attack in Wilde's society plays, where his dandies' witty paradoxes challenge ethical assumptions, and the plots centre on the dangers and limitations of Puritan values and punitive moral absolutes. 'Ideals are dangerous. Realities are better', warns Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, briskly summing up her views on a debate that was to become a crucial site of contention within the Irish literary movement when Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and *The Playboy of the Western World* outraged the champions of nationalist idealism. Indeed, Wilde makes false idealism and an inability to confront the messy realities of life a specifically English failing. Turning upon the English their own image of the Irishman as a savage Caliban, as depicted for example in Tenniel's famous cartoons for *Punch*, Wilde repeatedly typed the English public as complacent, philistine and hypocritical, its dislike of realism 'the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass', as he put it in the Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.<sup>43</sup> So Lord

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<sup>42</sup> *The Shaughraun*, I, iv, 196.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. 'The Irish Tempest', *Punch* LVIII (19 March 1870), 111. On English press images of the Irish see Curtis Jr., *Apes and Angels* and R. F. Foster, *Paddy & Mr Punch: connections in Irish and English history* (Penguin: London, 1993), chap.9. Preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, Vol.3: The Picture of Dorian Gray, The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow

Illingworth comments in an early draft of *A Woman of No Importance*, 'Every now and then this England of ours finds that one of its sores shows through its rags and shrieks for the nonconformists. Caliban for nine months of the year, it is Tartuffe for the other three.'<sup>44</sup> Pious idealism and deformed savagery are two aspects of the same self-deceiving, crude philistinism.

Anti-Irish prejudice and the assumed English superiority that accompanied it were a regular target for humour in Boucicault's Irish plays. As Declan Kiberd has argued, England 'invented' Ireland as its colonial other, the caricature of the drunken, feckless, irresponsible and childlike Irishman being a vital tool in constructing the national myth of the Englishman as self-controlled, authoritative and industrious. Boucicault's Irish protagonists are adept at switching the perspective from English to Irish. So, for example, Arte O'Neal and Claire Ffolliott dismantle English assumptions of superiority in the opening scene of *The Shaughraun*, as they repeatedly flip Captain Molineux's prejudices back at him, from his stumbling mispronunciations of the language, to his realisation that they are not peasant-born but rather Irish aristocrats who are living in poverty:

**MOLINEUX:** You have to suffer bitterly indeed for the ages of family imprudence, and the Irish extravagance of your ancestry.

**ARTE:** Yes, sir, the extravagance of their love for their country, and the imprudence of their fidelity to their faith! (I, i, 178)

Arte redefines Molineux's terms, to replace the English history of Ireland as one of native profligacy and incompetence with an Irish-authored one of depredation, appropriation, and determined and principled resistance – a fuller version of which can be found in Boucicault's *The Fireside Story of Ireland* (1881).

The witty re-appropriation and dismantling of terms to challenge the authority of a supposed superior is a staple of Wildean comedy, most notably in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) where Lane sidesteps Algy's complacent sense of class superiority, and Cecily undermines the patronising language of an urban man encountering a country-bred maiden. Wilde's most pointed exercise in demolishing the language of moral superiority in the specific context of English national identity lies in *An Ideal Husband* (1895), where the corrupt politician Sir Robert Chiltern is

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167.

<sup>44</sup> Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, ed. Ian Small (London: A & C Black, 1993), 119-20.

outplayed in the game of projecting his own suppressed and denied qualities onto a despised 'other'. Sir Robert is described in a stage direction as a man who seems to have achieved '*an almost complete separation of passion and intellect, as though thought and emotion were each isolated in its own sphere through some violence of will-power.*'<sup>45</sup> When Mrs Cheveley offers to pay him handsomely for giving his backing to an investment scheme that he has just condemned as 'a swindle', he declares disdainfully that 'You have lived so long abroad, Mrs Cheveley, that you seem unable to realize that you are talking to an English gentleman.' To which Mrs Cheveley coolly replies that she is 'talking to a man who laid the foundation of his fortune by selling to a Stock Exchange speculator a Cabinet secret'. (I, 179) By the end of the play, Sir Robert is installed at the heart of the English government and is lauded in *Times* as representing 'what is best in English public life... Noble contrast to the lax morality so common among foreign politicians.' (IV, 231)<sup>46</sup>

It was in his engagement with theories of race that Wilde far outstripped Boucicault. Where Boucicault challenged reductive Irish stereotypes and championed the nationalist cause, Wilde subverted the fundamental assumptions on which racial typings of the Irish were based. Wilde's self-identification as Irish was inconsistent, but his description of himself as 'Celtic' was by comparison strikingly frequent: for example, he addressed Gladstone in a letter as 'one whom I, and all who have Celtic blood in their veins, must ever honour'; he wrote to George Bernard Shaw as a fellow Celt, linking their plays together as Opuses 1 to 5 of 'the great Celtic school'; and many years later, in exile, he noted with pride that those who supported the Prison

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<sup>45</sup> Wilde, *An Ideal Husband in The Importance of Being Earnest and other plays*, ed. Peter Raby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), I, 168.

<sup>46</sup> Wilde's mockery of such racial self-fashioning may also have been a side-swipe at fellow Eighty Club member, Sir Charles Dilke, who, like Sir Robert Chiltern, held the position of Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs and whose political career was ruined by a scandalous divorce case. Dilke was also an enthusiastic advocate of theories of English racial superiority; in his best-selling book *Greater Britain* (1868) Dilke asserted the grandeur of the Saxon race and dismissed the Irish and the Chinese as 'cheaper' races who were the natural subject of 'dearer' races like the Saxon and German peoples. Quoted in L. P. Curtis Jr., *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (Conference on British Studies at the University of Bridgeport, CT.: University of Bridgeport, 1968), 46. For further details of Dilke's career and racial views, see David Nicholls, *The Lost Prime Minister: A Life of Sir Charles Dilke* (The Hambledon Press: London and Rio Grande, 1995).

Reform Bill were ‘Celtic to a man’, its opponents being of the unimaginative ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ and hence ‘so stupidly, harshly cruel’, whereas ‘every Celt has inborn imagination’.<sup>47</sup>

The notion of the Celtic type and its counterpart, the Teutonic Saxon, was part of a racial discourse that rose to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century. The most influential proponent of Celtic racial characteristics was Matthew Arnold, whose 1866 lectures, published as *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), had been influenced in turn by Ernest Renan’s *La Poésie des Races Celtiques* (1854). Arnold, like Renan, celebrated the noble and poetic aspects of the Celtic character, refuting imputations of savage barbarism; he made an impassioned plea for the serious study of Celtic art and writing, and the establishment of a Chair in Celtic studies at the University of Oxford. For the sake of the future peace and cohesion of the United Kingdom, Arnold sought to demonstrate that the Celtic character was not the crude opposite to the English temperament, but rather a crucial element within it. The German genius of ‘industry, the patient steady elaboration of things, the idea of science governing all departments of human activity’ guaranteed the ‘immense development’ of their race.<sup>48</sup> The English genius included this Germanic ‘*steadiness with honesty*’, but avoided its elements of the humdrum and ugly, instead achieving ‘*energy with honesty*’, thanks to the vital injection of the airy, insubstantial Celtic genius of sentiment.<sup>49</sup> According to Arnold, the Celt was ‘quick to feel impressions, and feeling them strongly; a lively personality therefore, keenly sensitive to joy and sorrow’, but, fatally lacking the crucial qualities of ‘Balance, measure, and patience’ of the English and German races, the Celt was hampered by his temperamental rebellion against ‘*the despotism of fact*’ and so habitually condemned to failure.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite the Celts’ mastery of style, Celtic art excelled only in the ‘comparatively petty art of ornamentation’, and their want of firmness and self-control left them particularly backward in the spheres of business and politics; lacking ‘sanity and steadfastness’ and the resolute application of means to ends necessary to make progress in civilized states, the Celt has failed ‘to reach any material civilization

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<sup>47</sup> To Gladstone (June 1888), 350; to Shaw (23 Feb 1893), 554 and (9 May 1893), 563-4; To Georgina Weldon (31 May 1898), *Letters*, 350, 554, 563-4, 1080.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1867), 98-9.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 97, 100-101. Italics in original.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 100, 102.

sound and satisfying, and not out at elbows, poor, slovenly, and half-barbarous'.<sup>51</sup> Irish Home Rule was, therefore, to Arnold an absurdity, for the English were their natural leaders:

The Celt, undisciplinable, anarchical, and turbulent by nature, but out of affection and admiration giving himself body and soul to some leader, that is not a promising political temperament, it is just the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon temperament, disciplinable and steadily obedient within certain limits, but retaining an inalienable part of freedom and self-dependence.<sup>52</sup>

This formula remained a common feature of parliamentary debates on Home Rule, and it was J. A. Froude's fictional embodiment of these racial types in his novel *The Two Chiefs of Dunboy* in 1889 that provoked Wilde's contemptuous and angry review.<sup>53</sup>

In February 1891, in an article in the *Fortnightly Review* on 'The Celt in English Art', Grant Allen built upon Arnold's ideas and gave credit to a 'return wave of Celtic influence over Teutonic or Teutonized England', evidenced not only in the Celts' characteristic melancholy, mystery, pathos, and excellence in decoration, manifest in new art works by Burne-Jones, William Morris, and Walter Crane, but also in a new spirit of political radicalism and democracy 'pushing aside the weeds and briars of privilege and caste'.<sup>54</sup> Allen thus re-positioned Celticism as a modernizing force, but, nonetheless, labeled the Celts as the 'less successful race', whose contributions to the English national character were the subsidiary values of 'lightness, airiness, imagination, wonder, the sense of beauty and of mystery', while the Teuton remained unquestionably dominant, supplying 'the muscle, the thews, the hard-headed intellect, the organization, the law, the stability, the iron hand'.<sup>55</sup> Wilde wrote to thank Allen for this essay, including its description of him as 'a man of rare insight and strong common-sense' and 'an Irishman to the core', and he expressed his delight at Allen's 'superb assertion of that Celtic spirit in Art that Arnold divined, but

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 109. For further discussion see Owen Dudley Edwards, 'Matthew Arnold's Fight for Ireland', in Robert Giddings (ed.), *Matthew Arnold: Between Two Worlds* (Vision and Barnes & Noble: London, 1986), 148-201.

<sup>53</sup> For a direct non-fictional expression of these racial beliefs, see J. A. Froude, *The English in Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol.1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1872), 20-23.

<sup>54</sup> Grant Allen, 'The Celt in English Art, *Fortnightly Review* (Feb 1891), 267. Wilde's 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' was published in the same issue.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 268.

did not demonstrate’, and proposed a Celtic Dinner where he and fellow Celts could ‘show these tedious Angles or Teutons what a race we are, and how proud we are to belong to that race.’<sup>56</sup>

The power of racial typing was recognized by a wide range of Irish and Anglo-Irish writers. As Declan Kiberd has argued, one tactic adopted by Celtic Revivalists was to attempt to correct the notion of the intemperate and savage Celt by accepting the fundamental characteristics but repackaging them in positive terms – ‘superstitious’ became ‘religious’, ‘backward’ became ‘traditional’, and ‘irrational’ became ‘emotional’ – but, as Kiberd concludes, this strategy left the ultimate power of description in the hands of the English and gave respectability to fundamentally racist slurs.<sup>57</sup> In *John Bull’s Other Island* (1904), Shaw mocked the drunken, irresponsible stage Irishman as an absurd fiction, revealing the scrounging wastrel with a heavy Irish brogue to be a Glaswegian, adept at playing up to English expectations. Shaw made his Irish hero, Doyle, coldly rational, clear-sighted and self-controlled, whereas Doyle’s English business-partner, Broadbent, is sentimental, ebullient and comically self-deceiving – qualities that enable Broadbent to plunder and exploit the Irish land with a self-satisfied sense of benevolence. By reversing the stereotypes and offering a romantic Englishman and an empirical Irishman, as Kiberd has noted, ‘the Anglo-Irish antithesis is questioned, but only to be reasserted in a slightly modified form.’<sup>58</sup> Wilde’s strategy was more radical: he did not just reverse or sanitize racial stereotypes, he challenged and destabilized the fundamental assumptions upon which they were based. Celtic qualities, in Wilde’s formulation, were not backward but modern, not the decorative seasoning to the solid English character, as Arnold would have them, but rather the ultimate core of intellectual culture and the shaping force of human progress.

Wilde’s dialogue, ‘The Critic as Artist’, published in *Intentions* in 1891, was titled ‘The True Function and Value of Criticism’ when it first appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* in September 1890, thus clearly announcing its engagement with Arnold’s famous essay ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1865). As has long been recognized, Wilde rejected Arnold’s notion that the first task of the

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 273; to Grant Allen (c.7 Feb 1891), *Letters*, 469-70.

<sup>57</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995), 32.

<sup>58</sup> Declan Kiberd, ‘The London Exiles: Wilde and Shaw’, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol.II (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), 422.

objective and disinterested critic was 'to see the object as in itself it really is', drawing on Walter Pater's acknowledgement in his Preface to *The Renaissance* (1873) of the necessary subjectivity of experience that required the critic first 'know one's own impression as it really is', and replacing it with a wholehearted celebration of personal vision whereby 'the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not'.<sup>59</sup> Wilde's simultaneous engagement with Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* and his reversal of its racial hierarchy has not, however, been critically acknowledged.

The ideal critic, as described by Gilbert in 'The Critic as Artist', must develop his own individuality and subjectivity. The critic is not to mirror and measure the work of art as accurately and fairly as possible, but rather to flout the tyranny of fact, celebrate the particularity of his own impressions, and creatively re-imagine and transform the object of his criticism. Significantly, Wilde likens the critic's cultivation of his personality to the development of a national culture through contact with other nations – a process which leads not to the absorption and unification that Arnold advocated for the United Kingdom, but rather to a more intense individuation and self-realization: 'just as it is only by contact with the art of foreign nations that the art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality, so, by curious inversion, it is only by intensifying his own personality that the critic can interpret the personality and work of others, and the more strongly this personality enters into the interpretation the more real the interpretation becomes, the more satisfying, the more convincing, and the more true.'<sup>60</sup> The critic is not to stand outside the fray, judging with disinterested detachment, but rather to enter into every mood, emotion and style, absorbing himself in the experiences of all previous centuries and cultures in order to enable his society 'to realize, not only our own lives, but the collective life of the race, and so to make ourselves absolutely modern, in the true meaning of the word modernity.'<sup>61</sup>

It is racial inheritance that is to enable this infinite mutability. In the external, material world, heredity has prophesied our doom, but in the subjective world of the

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<sup>59</sup> 'The Critic as Artist', *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Vol.4: *Criticism*, ed. Josephine Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155, 159. Preface, Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxix.

<sup>60</sup> 'Critic as Artist', 164.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 176.

soul heredity magically gives us access to all the thoughts, sensations and myriad lives of those who came before us. While setting limits to our physical selves and actions, heredity enables us to re-live experiences of the dead; as Gilbert explains, in terms that deliberately echo Pater's famous description of the Mona Lisa,

it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity, making us personal and individual, created for our service, and entering into us for our joy. It is something that has dwelt in fearful places, and in ancient sepulchres has made its abode. It is sick with many maladies, and has memories of curious sins.<sup>62</sup>

It is imagination that gives access to these countless lives, and 'imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race-experience'.<sup>63</sup> Wilde thus ingeniously reconciles the apparently contradictory notions of racial heredity and the self-defining, mutable model of selfhood that lies at the heart of 'The Soul of Man under Socialism'. By defining imagination as the ability to inhabit an infinity of preceding lives and minds, the primary attribute of the supposedly backward Celtic race becomes the embodiment of the modern critical spirit, and the very quality that supposedly confined the Celts to the margins in the march of progress instead makes them the superior race.

While retaining the critical aim of learning 'the best that is known and thought in the world', Wilde redefines 'disinterest' from Arnold's detached and unbiased objectivity to an infinite subjectivity, an unfixd multiplicity akin to the Keatsian 'negative capability' of existing 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.<sup>64</sup> Celtic mysticism, irrationality, inconsistency, emotionality and rebellion against fact thus become the necessary attributes for accessing the highest thought and exercising the greatest discernment. Thus, 'every mode of criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood, and ... we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent'; an unbiased opinion is 'absolutely worthless', because 'Art is a passion, and, in matters of art, Thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, depending upon fine moods and exquisite moments, cannot be narrowed into the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 177; and see Pater, *The Renaissance*, 79-80.

<sup>63</sup> 'Critic as Artist', 178.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 21 Dec 1817, in *A Selection from John Keats*, ed. E. C. Pettet (Harlow: Longman, 1974), 236.

rigidity of scientific formula or a theological dogma.’<sup>65</sup> Far from being an engine of progress, the Englishman’s Teutonic qualities of industriousness, practicality and accuracy render him ‘coarse and undeveloped’, tied to mundane ‘*doing*’ rather than Celt’s dedication to ‘not *being* merely, but *becoming*’.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the fictional English exponent of these theories, Gilbert, calls for England to cut back on the colonial acquisitions that tie her to the distractions of practicalities and facts, and leave no time for dreaming: ‘England will never be civilized till she has added Utopia to her dominions. There is more than one of her colonies that she might with advantage surrender for so fair a land. What we want are unpractical people who see beyond the moment, and think beyond the day.’<sup>67</sup> Celticism is no longer a decorative sprinkling of fairy dust on the vital project of imperial expansion, industry and scientific progress; it is the driving intellectual force of civilization.

Wilde’s relocation of traditional Celtic racial characteristics as the guiding spirit of aesthetic and intellectual modernity clearly owed little to Boucicault, but the older playwright’s inspiration can be seen in the dramatic realization of the infinitely mobile, self-creating Celt, transformed into an expression of contemporary society. Though there is direct evidence of Wilde attending only one of Boucicault’s plays – *London Assurance*, which he saw in Charles Wyndham’s 1891 London revival – it is hard to believe that he could have avoided knowing them. Boucicault was a family friend whose Irish plays were smash-hits in Dublin long before Wilde left for Oxford and remained so popular that playgoer Joseph Holloway noted in 1898 that ‘the audience knows every line of the text and every bit of by-play in the various parts’ of *Arrah-na-Pogue*.<sup>68</sup> His dramas were virtually ubiquitous in London and across the United States in the 1870s and ’80s. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892), Wilde imitated the scandalous denouement of Boucicault’s *Formosa* (1869), in which a doting and none-too-bright aristocrat marries an elegantly self-possessed fallen

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Critic as Artist’, 185, 188.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 201, 178.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 181.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph Holloway, *Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer*, 7 September 1898, quoted in Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Irish Drama, A documentary history, Vol. 1: The Irish Literary Theatre 1899-1901* (The Dolmen Press: Dublin, 1975), 19.

woman.<sup>69</sup> As with all from whom he learnt and borrowed, Wilde reshaped what Boucicault offered to his own ends, appropriating and reshaping it according to his own dramatic style and vision. Even at the outset of his dramatic career, he was resistant to the established wisdom of the older playwright. On being sent a copy of Wilde's early play, *Vera, or the Nihilists*, Boucicault advised that, 'Your action stops for dialogue – whereas dialogue should be the necessary outcome of the action exerting an influence on the characters.' – advice that Wilde blithely went on to ignore, declaring proudly of the first act of *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) that 'there is absolutely no action at all. It was a perfect act.' – a drama of talk, of being and becoming, not doing.<sup>70</sup>

The ultimate theatrical realization of Wilde's philosophy of inaction, self-creation, and the power of imagination over fact was, of course, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), a play in which lies become truths, identities mutate and multiply, and talking is all that anybody does. *Earnest* is the play critics have most often identified as owing a debt to Boucicault, though the particular sources named for Wilde's borrowing have varied: Richard Pine and Davis Coakley have pointed to *A Lover by Proxy* (1842); Deirdre McFeely has suggested *Daddy O'Dowd* (1873); and each revival of *London Assurance* (1841) leads theatre critics to note the debt that Wilde owes to it.<sup>71</sup> The reason for this over-determination of influence is that fluidity and uncertainty of identity, and a wealth of proliferating and multiplying selves lie at the core of a host of Boucicault's plays.

Mistaken identity is an age-old theatrical comic staple, and *A Lover by Proxy* is unremarkable in this respect: a man about town proposes to the wrong sister on behalf of his more bashful friend, under the disapproving eye of the spinster Miss Prude. But for all its disorder the play rests on a stable and familiar structure where each character has a single true self which is easily recognised when misconceptions are sorted out, and each suitor is correctly identified and matched with his true love.

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<sup>69</sup> For further details see Sos Eltis, *Acts of Desire: Women and Sex on Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapters 3 & 4.

<sup>70</sup> Letter from Dion Boucicault to Oscar Wilde (n.d.), in Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde Revalued: An Essay on New Materials and Methods of Research* (Greensboro, NC: ELT Press, 1993), 96-7; Wilde, quoted in Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 225, n.40.

<sup>71</sup> Pine, *Thief of Reason*, 248-9, Coakley, *Oscar Wilde*, 185; McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, 72-3; see e.g. *Telegraph*, 11 March 2010.

In *London Assurance*, however, Charles Courtly anticipates Jack and Algy's double-lives by inventing an *alter ego* for himself as 'Augustus Hamilton' in order to escape his creditors and enjoy a trip to the country. Encountering his father, Charles maintains the pretence, and makes love to his father's fiancée, Grace, in his new persona, only to encounter difficulties when he is later obliged to appear as Charles Courtly – a dilemma he solves by killing off Augustus. Tying himself up in knots, while Grace watches with knowing amusement, Charles cannot keep track of his proliferating selves – 'Oh, I forgot I was dead', he corrects himself at one point – but his true identity is finally revealed when he is arrested for his debts and restored to a single self.<sup>72</sup> In *The O'Dowd* (1880), Mike O'Dowd, son of an Irish fisherman, similarly invents for himself an *alter ego* as the upper-class 'Percy Walsingham', a persona in which he courts an English aristocrat and gambles away his father's Irish estate.<sup>73</sup> Both names appear over the lintel of the London lodgings that Percy claims to be renting from Mike, and when his home seat comes up for election, he looks set to run against himself. When Mike's duplicity is revealed, his father, Daddy O'Dowd, is traumatized by his son's shame at his parentage and suffers a stroke, losing any memory of his own identity in turn. It is only years later that Mike restores both his own and his father's sense of self, by using his native knowledge of the Irish harbour's hidden dangers to steer a ship to safety – the same act of heroism that first made the family fortune. As Daddy watches his son negotiate the coast's hidden rocks, his memory and paternal pride are instantly restored.

Boucicault's dramatic confusions are corrected and his doubled selves regain their integrity, with the glorious exception of Dazzle, the embodiment of the chutzpah and 'London Assurance' of Boucicault's first breakthrough play. As Charles Courtly's newfound drinking companion, Dazzle inveigles himself into everyone's company, acquiring invitations on the basis of fictional friendships. At the play's denouement, when all the other confusions have been explained, Charles turns to Dazzle and asks, 'But who the deuce are you?' – to which Dazzle happily replies, 'I

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<sup>72</sup> Boucicault, *London Assurance* in *Selected Plays of Dion Boucicault*, ed. by Andrew Parkin, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), V, 91.

<sup>73</sup> *The O'Dowd* opened at the Adelphi Theatre in London on 4 October 1880, having been extensively revised from an earlier version *Daddy O'Dowd* which had played to thin audiences for four weeks in New York in 1873. For full details of the two plays and Boucicault's revisions, see McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, 69-74, 146-64.

have not the remotest idea.’ (V, 95) Infinitely mobile and lacking a core, Dazzle takes Boucicault’s trope of the self-created and multiplying identity to a new level.

These doublings and confusions of character are the by-products of a society where identity is determined by money and class. A name, manners and the ability to run up debts are all that are required to invent yourself and progress in English society. This is most clearly expressed in Boucicault’s lesser-known *The School for Scheming* (1847), in which John Perkins launches himself as a capitalist, multiplying himself into endless fictitious personae, all variously named ‘MacDunnum’, in order to manufacture and sell shares in a spurious company. This is the game that has taken over society, where fantasy selves proliferate as everyone rushes to sell themselves in a speculative market where appearance is all. As Perkins says of Claude Plantaganet, an ageing and penniless aristocrat, who, laced, stuffed and wigged, passes himself off as thirty-five, he is,

A man, whose individual occupies a remote and obscure corner of his person – oh – but it is the same everywhere – all unreal. Facts exist no more – they have dwindled into names – things have shrunk into words – words into air – cash into figures – reputation into nothing. This is the reign of NOTHING; to possess it is the surest foundation of fortune in every walk of life. <sup>74</sup>

Boucicault’s diagnosis of a society entranced by financial speculation anticipates Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5); but, where Dickens’s Merdle despairs and commits suicide, and his Veneerings are bound together in mutual hatred, having tricked each other into marriage with the false prospect of wealth, Boucicault’s fraudsters break free from the false values of their society, and are joyfully reunited with a rooted sense of self. Having married each other on the false prospect of wealth, Claude Plantaganet and his wife discover the contentment of honest poverty and true feeling, while Perkins not only dwindles into singleness but also finds love when he acknowledges his true self and is no longer distracted by financial speculation and self-multiplication. These doublings are ultimately born of anxiety, a sense of self fracturing in a society where, in Perkins’s words, ‘there’s no reality anywhere – the very age is electro-plated – figures on top – humbug underneath.’ <sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Boucicault, *The School for Scheming* Webster’s National Acting Drama, Vol.13 (London, 1847), I, i, 8.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, I, i, 7-8.

Boucicault was no essentialist when it came to race or identity. In *The Octoroon* Zoe's character is not determined by the one eighth of African blood in her. Her blackness lies in the eye of the beholder, – literally so when she was played by Boucicault's white English wife, Agnes Robertson – and her social status is the product of the accidents of law, property and contract, and of a complex network of manners and attitudes that place her uncertainly between upper servant and member of the plantation-owning family.<sup>76</sup> A similarly complex web of economic, class and racial values are at play in *The Colleen Bawn*, where Hardress must be educated beyond his snobbish adherence to them in order to acknowledge the inherent value of his fair and true-hearted wife, Eily. The feisty and self-assured heiress, Anne Chute, proudly declares her fluidly Anglo-Irish identity – 'When I am angry the brogue comes out, and my Irish heart will burst through manners, and graces, and twenty stay-laces.' – she refuses to be constrained by the corseted singleness of class or ethnicity.<sup>77</sup>

Notably, it is amongst Boucicault's Irish characters that this self-assured and mutable identity is most clearly to be found. Myles-na-Coppaleen and Shaun the Post know themselves and those they love, while being masters of adaptation and disguise. But it is Conn the Shaughraun – the role that the Irish-American community of New York memorialized in their statuette of Boucicault as a champion of Irish culture – who is the living embodiment of the unfixed, multiple and infinitely self-creating Irish character, whose boisterous energy reveals the limitations of unimaginative English authority, just as his resourceful pragmatism shows up the absurdity in others' fixed idealism. Conn defies definition, described in the *Dramatis Personae* as '*the Shaughraun, the soul of every fair, the life of every funeral, the first fiddle at all weddings and patterns*'.<sup>78</sup> Generous, loyal, quick-witted, warm-hearted and irrepressible, Conn is the heart of the play, re-creating the world to his own convenience: accused of stealing the Squire's horse, he delivers a bravura account of how, as he informs the owner, 'it was your horse sthole me!' (I, iii, 188) Truth and reality are irrelevant to Conn, whose infinite mutability includes dressing in Robert Ffolliott's coat to draw away his pursuers, being shot and taken for dead, and then

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<sup>76</sup> For a full expression of his argument, see Meer, 'Boucicault's misdirections'.

<sup>77</sup> Boucicault, *The Colleen Bawn; or, The Brides of Garryowen*, in *Dolmen Press Boucicault*, II, ii, 73.

<sup>78</sup> *The Shaughraun*, 174.

attending his own wake and surreptitiously drinking all the punch. His integrity is unquestionable, but it has nothing to do with fairness, reason, honesty, accuracy or legality. As Richard Allen Cave has commented, ‘Conn is a man in whom subterfuge is an art that expresses his total condition of being.’<sup>79</sup> Conn’s condition is that prescribed by Wilde’s Gilbert: not doing, but being and becoming. Though heroically active, his deeds are simply expressions of himself, less purposive than simply realizations of a mood; as he says of his journey to Australia in a skiff, ‘I didn’t think at all – I wint.’ (I, iv, 192). He is a rural dandy, a natural aristocrat, as his mother and sweetheart recognise:

**MRS O’KELLY.** Conn nivar did an honest day’s work in his life – but dhrinkin’, an’ fishin’, an’ shootin’, an’ sportin’, and love-makin’.

**MOYA.** Sure, that’s how the quality pass their lives. (I, iii, 271)

Like Wilde’s Lord Goring, he is a stylish riposte to the unimaginative Teutonic creed of industry, steadfastness and practicality.

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Wilde took this mutability and joyous self-creation to an extreme, in a theatrical realization of the Celtic critical spirit. Unquestionably modern, *Earnest*’s characters use the power of imagination to access multiple lives; objective reality gives way to fictions, falsehoods and fantastical diary entries. Happy to support each other’s inventions, the youthful dandies are dedicated to mood and appetite, energetic only in their speech. They are aristocratic shaughrauns; expert at spinning yarns, they regard rules as a challenge to be evaded or manipulated to their own purpose. But, like *London Assurance*’s Dazzle, they are entirely at home in their society, using the very superficiality of its manners and value systems to create for themselves an impenetrable carapace of style. Assured of their skills, they have no anxiety about existing in a society that values appearance over substance; instead they embrace the opportunities it offers for self-creation and performance. Lady Bracknell, the embodiment of society’s power and judgement, is ultimately rendered impotent in the face of their antics like the English authorities in the face of Conn. Nor does the play’s end confine the characters to truth and integrity. When Jack asks Gwendolen whether she can forgive him for having accidentally told the truth all his life, she lovingly responds, ‘I can. For I feel that you

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<sup>79</sup> Cave, “Staging the Irishman”, in J. S. Bratton, Richard Allen Cave et al, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 115.

are sure to change.’<sup>80</sup> Algy is quick to inform his Cecily about his ailing friend Bunbury, and there is no sign that marriage will end her fantastical diary entries. A world away from Boucicault’s heather-covered hills and rocky cliffs, they nonetheless bring a disruptive Celtic spirit to the heart of English society.

Just as Wilde transformed the shaughraun into the dandy, reworking the irresponsible agent of lawless defiance and loyal generosity as an aristocratic exquisite, equally indifferent to authority and moral convention, so he transformed the supposedly primitive, uncontrolled, irresponsible and unevolved Celt into the sophisticated, all-encompassing, intellectually expansive embodiment of the critical spirit, a modern civilizing force which left the unimaginative, provincial Englishman behind. Adept at playing the market, skilled at containing his disruptive political views within crowd-pleasing commercial vehicles, ready to refashion his works and his persona to fit the moment, Boucicault offered Wilde a new model for the modern Irish writer in an international market. Hard to assimilate within romantic notions of nation identity or artistic integrity, both writers were anathema to the deliberately anti-commercial ideology of the Abbey Theatre, and the Irish Literary Theatre’s vision of Ireland as a home of ‘ancient idealism’. Protean, self-fashioning, politically engaged and wittily pragmatic, Boucicault and Wilde teased and entertained English audiences with an Irish multiplicity that reduced their ‘steadfastness with honesty’ to the backward and provincial.

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<sup>80</sup> *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest and other plays*, III, 307.