Title	The transference of a hole : femininity and male homosexuality in The Portrait of Mr. W. H.
Sub Title	
Author	鈴木, 英明(Suzuki, Hideaki)
Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	1997
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.73, (1997. 12) ,p.274- 286
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	安藤伸介, 岩崎春雄両教授退任記念論文集
Genre	Journal Article
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00730001-0274

The Transference of a Hole : Femininity and Male Homosexuality in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*

Hideaki Suzuki

With the rise of lesbian and gay studies, new light has been thrown on Oscar Wilde's homosexuality in Wilde criticism especially in the past ten years[1]. Yet the point I wish to emphasize is that such criticism as what is now called "queer reading" is already practiced by Wilde himself as can be seen in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, where the characters try to demonstrate the existence of male homoerotic desire in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H*[2]., however, is not a critical work but fiction, which means that the demonstration of the "Willie Hughes theory" is attempted only in the framing narrative. This may lead us to think that it is not so much male homosexuality or male-male desire itself as the relationship between male homosexuality and its representations that Wilde intends to enact in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*. The narrative implies Wilde's critical consciousness of the system of representation in late Victorian Britain ; and it is through the eventual failure to prove the Willie Hughes theory in the text that Wilde undermines the system which sustains homophobic discourse of the fin de siècle.

On the other hand, as Rita Felski has pointed out, fin-de-siècle aesthetic discourses appropriating the feminine too often lead to the repression of women[3] : in *The Portrait of Mr W. H.*, the milieu of the beautiful effeminate youths seems to be established only through the exclusion of real women just as a closer relationship between Dorian

Gray and Lord Henry is brought about by the death of Sibyl Vane, who might be considered as a victim of misogynistic narrative logic of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Although late nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse, which can be a disguise for male homoerotic desire, is intimately linked with misogynistic one, yet in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, as we will see later, the failure to verify the Willie Hughes theory, which makes possible the subversion of dominant heterosexual discourse and the transference of male homoerotic desire, is caused by the very female character. Focusing on the significance of the failure, to which little attention has been given by critics, I would like to show not only how Wilde's politics of representation is actually performed in the story but how ambiguous is the relation between male homosexuality and femininity in the novel.

I

In the first trial of Lord Queensberry on a charge of criminally libeling Oscar Wilde opened on 3 April 1895, Wilde replied at Edward Carson's cross-examination :

> *Carson* : I believe you have written an article to show that Shakespeare's sonnets were suggestive of *unnatural vice*?
> *Wilde* : On the contrary, I have written an article to show that they were not. I objected to such a *perversion* being put upon Shakespeare. (emphases added)[4]

Wilde's statement quoted above may appear untrue : it is possible that Wilde was obliged to make such a reply for self-protection under the circumstances where all forms of homosexual activities were criminalized by Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, which was passed by Parliament in 1885[5]. Yet we can take Wilde's statement at face value because the Willie Hughes theory the novel's characters

try to verify can be interpreted as the argument that the *Sonnets* sublimates the male homosexual passion into art, which is no longer "unnatural vice"or "perversion."

The way how the *Sonnets* aestheticizes the homosexual desire is found in the expressions which make art erotic especially in sexual metaphors. Wilde's narrator, who is converted to Cyril Graham's theory by Erskine, gives an interpretation of the *Sonnets*, merging his voice with Shakespeare's:

> My thoughts, also, are my "children." They are of your begetting and my brain is:
>
> "the womb wherein they grew"
>
> For this great friendship of ours is indeed a marriage, it is the "marriage of true minds." (1167)

In this passage Shakespeare's "brain" is figured as the "womb" from which his thoughts are delivered; and in addition, the use of the word "beget" evokes sexual contact between the poet and a fair youth. It is therefore evident that their artistic relationship is here compared to physical one. Their friendship is indeed a marriage between the two men.

What has to be noticed, however, is that in the Renaissance, when Neo-Platonism prevailed among poets, it was popular for them to liken artistic creation to sexual reproduction. The narrator mentions Marsilio Ficino's translation of the "Symposium" of Plato and says:

> In its [Platonic dialogues'] subtle suggestions of sex in soul, in the curious analogies it draws between intellectual enthusiasm and the physical passion of love . . . there was something that fascinated the poets and scholars of the sixteenth century. (1174)

Wilde's characters must also be fascinated by this "something that

fascinated the poets and scholars of the sixteenth century," "something dangerous, something unlawful" (1176), not least because their passion for the Willie Hughes theory seems to reflect their repressed homosexuality. Cyril Graham entreats Erskine to believe the Willie Hughes theory so ardently that Cyril goes so far as to offer his life "as a sacrifice to the secret of the Sonnets" (1160) and entrusts his theory to Erskine, who not only admits that he was devoted to Cyril and has never recovered from his horrible death, but tells with deep emotion that the narrator reminds him of Cyril. The narrator, who compares the tone of Erskine's voice to the touch of a particular woman's hand, confesses that the *Sonnets* has explained to him the whole story of his "soul's romance" (1195) as if Cyril's theory revealed to him his repressed homosexual passion. Viewed in this way, the homosexual desire of Wilde himself appears to be aestheticized through his characters, who try to read in the *Sonnets* male-male desire aestheticized by appropriating Neo-Platonic discourse.

The appropriation of Neo-Platonism is an essential strategy in order for Wilde to legitimize and enact his homosexuality in late Victorian Britain. Judith Butler points out that oppression works not merely through acts of prohibition but through the production of a domain of unnameability, that is, through the exclusion of homosexuality from discourse itself[6]. Homosexuality had not in fact been articulated before the word "homosexual" was made popular by Charles Chadock's 1892 translation of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*[7]. Even the Criminal Law mentioned earlier called it "gross indecency." It thus became necessary for homosexuals who would resist dominant heterosexual ideology of the day to name their sexual orientation and make it present within discourse. The word "homosexual," however, made its appearance as a term which defined

homosexuals as perverts, the objects of medical administration[8]. If Wilde attempted to evade medical and juridical administration and to make his homosexual desire visible through representations, he had no other way but to appropriate some legitimized discourse like Neo-Platonism as a sort of "mask". Seen in this light, the aestheticization of homoerotic desire through Neo-Platonic discourse can be regarded as a strategy for resistance to the erasure of homosexuality from literary discourse.

II

Yet in reading *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* from the standpoint of politics of representation about homosexuality, the most important point to note is the fact that the strategy adopted in the story does not work : none of the three characters, Cyril, Erskine and the narrator can prove the actual existence of Willie Hughes, a boy-actor of Elizabethan stage, which means that aestheticization of homoerotic desire ends in failure. An interpretation of the significance of this failure must begin by making sense of the paradoxical status of the portrait of Mr. W. H. forged by a young painter on Cryl's orders. While the portrait as the only external evidence is supposed to fill the hole in the Willie Hughes theory, it actually makes the hole more conspicuous just because of its being a forgery. The portrait is at once that which ensures the aestheticization of male same-sex desire and that which exposes the failure of that attempt. In other words, the portrait as a forgery reveals that the hole in the theory is a void which can never be filled up, or rather, the portrait itself becomes the signifier of the void, the inability to complete the theory.

It follows from what has been said that *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, in which a "queer reading" of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* fails,

paradoxically enacts male homosexuality by showing the impossibility of aesthetic representation of male homosexual desire. At the same time we should notice that, contrary to Ed Cohen's argument about the picture of Dorian Gray[9], the portrait of Willie Hughes does not represent male homoerotic desire as a visual icon, which cannot naturally be represented through words. Instead, the forgery is a mark of the failure of words : it is the incarnation of the unrepresentability of male homosexuality. To put it another way, the portrait enacts male same-sex desire as the unrepresentable, as a hole=void. This does not necessarily mean the exclusion of homosexuality from discourse, against which Judith Butler has warned us, for it is one thing to be evicted from discourse, and yet another to be present within discourse as a hole=void.

We are now ready to consider the process through which the portrait passes from hand to hand, and in which the transference of male homosexual passion, a chief theme of the novel, is clearly epitomized. The first point to notice is that through the other's words do both Erskine and the narrator become fascinated by Cyril's theory. Needless to say, the narrator is converted to the theory by Erskine, and more interestingly, Erskine himself is reconverted to the theory right after he reads the narrator's enthusiastic letter that drains the narrator of his conviction of the truth of the theory : it is through the other (the narrator) that Erskine makes up his mind for the first time to devote himself to researching the theory. We may thus say that male homosexual desire implied in Cyril's theory is transfered by the other : it always comes from the outside of the subject.

At the same time it can also be said that male homosexual desire was already lurking in the minds of the two men : it existed inside the subject. This is especially true of the narrator, who comes to realize

what his "soul's romance" means:

> [T]he soul itself, the soul of each one of us, is to each one of us a mystery. It hides in the dark and broods, and consciousness cannot tell us of its workings. (1194)

Here, we notice, the word "soul" signifies something like unconscious, whose workings "consciousness cannot tell us." The "soul's romance" of the narrator is thus what was within him, as can be seen in the following quotation:

> [T]hey [works of art] have given form and substance to what was within us. . . . Some such impression the Sonnets of Shakespeare had certainly produced on me. (1194)

Male homoerotic desire Willie Hughes theory suggests was inside the subject as unconscious. Nevertheless, it can be conceived as something which did not exist within the subject but came from without just because it would remain invisible without "form and substance" which was to be given by the theory. In short, male homoerotic desire implied in the novel entails some sort of ambiguity: it is at once in the inside and in the outside of the subject.

This topological ambiguity is the very status of the portrait, which enacts homosexuality as something unrepresentable. Cyril Graham, realizing the impossibility of proving his theory on internal evidence, finally commits a forgery in order to convert Erskine. Although the portrait as external evidence is supposed to fill the hole in the theory, yet it effectively reveals the incompleteness of internal evidence of the theory. The portrait itself is, as it were, a hole=void, which is both inside and outside the theory.

Given the parallelism, in terms of topological ambiguity, between the portrait and male homosexual desire in the novel, we can explain why the portrait passes from hand to hand: its radically ambiguous

status causes the portrait to continue to pass at once into and out of a character's hand. This continual transfer of the portrait perfectly expresses the transference of male homoerotic desire from one subject to another, thereby making the ending of the novel open : in the last line of the story, the narrator, looking at the portrait hanging in his library, says : "I think there is really a good deal to be said for the Willie Hughes theory" (1201). This indicates that the narrator can be reconverted to the theory, and would transfer his homoerotic passion to another, possibly to us. The potrait, which enacts male homosexuality as the unrepresentable, is made grotesque and uncanny by the death of the two men, Cyril and Erskine. Looking back to the whole story, the narrator gives his impression : "There was something horribly grotesque about the whole tragedy" (1200). As Sigmund Freud states in his essay "The 'Uncanny'"[10], the repressed (male homoerotic desire) returns to the narrator as the unrepresentable hole, the portrait, which was exactly a hole made in dominant heterosexual discourse in late Victorian Britain.

III

The novel establishes a close link between the portrait and the two women : the wife of the painter and the mother of Erskine. But before turning to the consideration of the linkage, let us look briefly at the novel's relation to effeminacy[11]. Kate Chedgzoy observes that in the novel Wilde appropriates female reproductive power, thereby rendering effeminacy active and creative, not passive[12]. Indeed effeminacy reflected in Cyril and Willie Hughes, both of whom play female roles in Shakespeare's play, appears to formulate male homoerotic milieu from which women are to be excluded. After all, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick acutely puts it, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* involves

the marginalization of women[13]. Analyzing how the bond between the poet and a fair youth is strengthened in and through the bodies of females, Sedgwick points out that the relation of male homosexuality to male heterosexuality is different from the relation of femaleness to maleness within a dominantly male-homosocial sphere, in which women are mere mediators of men's desire for each other. This argument could apply especially to Lady Erskine, who hands the portrait over to the narrator in accordance with Erskine's wish ; and indeed Lady Erskine and "a rather common-looking wife" (1159) of the painter are both marginalized in the plot. Yet careful examination of the relation between the portrait and these women will reveal their particular significance for male homosexual desire.

If the fact that the portrait of Willie Hughes is a forgery had not been disclosed to Erskine, the whole story would have been totally different ; then Cyril's theory could have been completed, making the portrait not a hole=void which enacts male homoerotic desire as the unrepresentable, but the positive and aesthetic representation of Shakespeare's passion for his master-mistress. Such a representation could not be so recalcitrant as a hole=void not least because it could be placed within the established system of representation and subsumed under dominant heterosexual ideology as mere "queer" aesthetic image to be consumed. Instead, the portrait of Willie Hughes is in fact a forgery, a mark of the failure of such aestheticization, and it is the painter's wife who reveals the fact to Erskine. Without the painter's wife, the transference of male homosexual desire could never have occurred. The wife is at once a marginal and a central character who makes the portrait function as a hole and characterizes Wilde's politics of representation.

Lady Erskine, who appears only in the ending, is marginalized in

the plot, but important as well, because she suggests heterosexual ideology through her maternal quality, when she hands the portrait over to the narrator, who received a letter from dying Erskine, which reads : "The truth was once revealed to you, and you rejected it. It comes to you now, stained with the blood of two lives—do not turn away from it" (1199). The truth "stained with the blood of two lives" is not only implied in the Willie Hughes theory but incarnated in the portrait, which was supposed to complete the theory. In this context, we can understand the phrase "stained with the blood" as more than a metaphor, because, in the first version of the novel, Erskine describes to the narrotor the scene of Cyril's suicide as follows : "[H]e shot himself with a revolver. Some of the blood splashed upon the frame of the picture[14]. . . ." This passage, which was deleted from the second version, gives the phrase a horrible reality : the portrait, the incarnation of the "truth", is literally "stained with the blood" to come to the narrator. The important point to note, however, is that the portrait is actually handed over to the narrator not with the blood but with Lady Erskine's tears : "Lady Erskine returned to the room carrying the fatal portrait of Willie Hughes. . . . As I took it from her, her tears fell on my hand" (1201). It seems as if Cyril's blood is replaced with Lady Erskine's tears, which means, we may say, the "purification" of male homosexual desire by motherly love. The plot of the novel appears to work toward the integration of male unlawful desire into the sphere of domestic ideology which maternal love of Lady Erskine represents. Yet male homoerotic desire is not fully "purified" simply because the portrait, which enacts male homosexuality as a hole, is after all handed over to the narrator to make the ending of the novel open. It would therefore be better to say that the ending of the novel dramatizes complications between male homoerotic passion and motherly love.

It is a woman (the painter's wife) who makes male homosexual desire present as a hole in discourse; at the same time, it is also a woman (Lady Erskine) who unconsciously attempts to "purify" the desire in order to incorporate it into the sphere of domestic heterosexual ideology. *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* shows not the denial and repression of women but the ambiguity of femininity which inevitably have complicated relation to male homosexuality in late Victorian Britain. We can thus read the novel as a text which thematizes the contemporary critical debate about femininity and gay desire. The stereotyped argument that male homosexual discourse of the fin de siècle always represses or evicts women needs to be reconsidered at least in reading *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*.

NOTES

(1) On homosexuality implied in *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*, see, for example, William A. Cohen, "Willie and Wilde: Reading *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.*," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (1989) : 219-45; Lawrence Danson, "Oscar Wilde, W. H., and the Unspoken Name of Love," *ELH* 58 (1991) : 979-1000; and Kate Chedgzoy, *Shakespeare's Queer Children : Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 135-76.

(2) The earlier version of this novel first appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for July 1889. The second version, which was completed in 1893, was not published until 1921. The revised, expanded version is included in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989) 1150-1201. Except where otherwise noted, all references to this novel are to this edition. The page references are given parenthetically.

(3) Rita Felski, "The Counterdiscourse of the Feminine in Three Texts by Wilde, Huysmans, and Sacher-Masoch," *PMLA* 106 (1991) :1094-1105. Along the same line, Elaine Showalter states that the aestheticization of homosexual desire has as its subtext an escalating contempt for women. On the other hand, Sally Ledger,

ciriticizing Showalter for ignoring radical socio-cultural phenomena of the fin de siècle, analyzes the nexus among gender, class and race in late nineteenth-century England. See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy : Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London : Bloomsbury, 1991) ; and Sally Ledger, "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism." *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge : Cambridge UP, 1995) 22-44.

(4) H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York : Dover Publications, 1972) 113.

(5) For further details of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, see F. B. Smith, "Labouchere's Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill," *Historical Studies* 17 (1976) : 165-75.

(6) Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out*, ed. Diana Fuss (London : Routledge, 1991) 13-31.

(7) See, for example, Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side* (London : Routledge, 1993) 9.

(8) Homosexuals, however, were also able to appropriate the medical discourse to construct their identities. Michel Foucault states about his well known "reverse discourse" : "[H]omosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturality" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified." See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, trans. Robert Hurley (New York : Vintage,1980) 101.

(9) Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde : Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," *PMLA* 102 (1987) : 801-13.

(10) Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, trans. James and Alix Strachey (London : The Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953 -1974) 217-56.

(11) According to Richard Dellamora, the word "effeminacy" often connotes male-male desire in the nineteenth century. Alan Sinfield has countered Dellamora, arguing that the connection between effeminacy and male same-sex passion was not clearly established until Wilde's trials. See Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire : The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill, U of North

Carolina P, 1990) ; Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century : Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London : Cassel, 1994).

(12) Chedgzoy, 165.

(13) Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men : English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York : Columbia UP, 1985) 28-48.

(14) Oscar Wilde, *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde,* ed. Robert Ross, vol. VII (London : Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1993) 169.