

Masculine Plural and Singularly Masculine. Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly: Three Dandies Seen Through the Prism of the Masculinity of the Nineteenth Century

Antoine Defeyt
Université libre de Bruxelles

Abstract:

An inescapable figure of nineteenth-century society, the dandy still resists any form of normative categorization, and including in his capacity as a sexual being.

As part of this research, we endeavoured to compare this assertion with the non-written sources that are portraits through the media of painting, photography and caricature. This was also done by examining three iconic figures of dandyism, i.e. Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. To do this, as a first step, we sought to establish the markers of masculinity and femininity that prevailed in the nineteenth century. In a second step, we tried to identify these markers in each of the images used for this project.

The analysis of different representations of Wilde corroborates the literature. The Irish author perfectly embodies the androgyny of the dandy as stated in the literature. As regards Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, the images that caught our attention failed to highlight the existence of an identity crisis in terms of gender. On the other hand, we were able to establish, through scrutiny of these portraits, three different attitudes to masculinity.

Keywords: Dandyism, Masculinity, Virility, Decadence, Sexual identity.

Eril ođul ve Tekil Olarak Eril. Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire ve Jules Barbey d'Aureilly: 19. Yüzyılın Erkeklik Prizmasından Yansıyan Ü Züppe

Antoine Defeyt
Université libre de Bruxelles

Özet :

19. yüzyıl toplumun kaçınılmaz bir figürü olarak züppe, cinsel kapasitesi de dahil olmak üzere normatif kategorilendirmenin her şekline karşı hala direnmektedir. Bu çalışmanın bir parçası olarak, biz bu savı resim, fotoğraf ve karikatür gibi yazılı olmayan kaynaklar üzerinden karşılaştırmaya çabaladık. Bu aynı zamanda Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire ve Jules Barbey d'Aureilly'nin üç ikonik züppe figürünün analiziyle de sağlanmış oldu. Bu amaçla, ilk olarak 19. Yüzyılda baskın olan erkeklik ve kadınlığın belirleyenlerini ortaya çıkardık. İkincil olarak, bu projede kullanılan her imajda bu belirleyenleri tespit etmeye çalıştık. Wilde'ın farklı temsillerinin analizinin de literatürü desteklediğini gördük. İrlandalı yazar literatürde de belirtildiği üzere züppenin androjenliğini çok güzel somutlaştırıyordu. Charles Baudelaire ve Jules Barbey d'Aureilly'in kullandığı dikkatimizi çeken imajlarda ise toplumsal cinsiyet oluşumu açısından yaşanan bir kriz öne çıkmıyordu. Diğer yandan, bu portreler üzerinden bir analiz yapıldığında, erkeklige üç farklı bakışın da ortaya çıktığını saptadık.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Züppelik, erkeklik, erillik, gerileme, cinsel kimlik

The starting point of our research was the discovery of a caricature of Oscar Wilde, the preponderant figure of end-of-century dandyism, published in the satirical weekly magazine *Punch* (Partridge 113). At first glance, one is struck by an obvious ambivalence of the character and the assertion of an identity disorder. Having noted the absence of studies proposing a "reading from a gender perspective" of the identity ambivalence that had struck us, which was, at the very most, touched on during the scandal surrounding his trial for homosexuality in 1893, a decision was taken to seek to position Oscar Wilde in relation to the climate of masculinity of the time. Then we develop a bicephalous research topic by focusing on the masculinity of the nineteenth century in order to understand how the dandy fitted into this masculine landscape or, conversely, was marginalised. In terms of time and space, we can say that without having adopted a strict chronological timespan, we focused on a period from 1844 to 1900, a period which corresponds respectively to the publication of Jules Barbey d'Aureville's essay *Dandyism and George Brummel*, and the death of Oscar Wilde. As to the geographical setting, it is no surprise that the characters in whom we are taking an interest are based in Paris and London. For this reason and because it would be very difficult to compile a sufficient corpus of sources concerning Belgium, we did not choose to work on the country.

In this article, we will not develop a reflection on "gender studies" (Defeyt 10-14). We will just settle for pointing out, based on the analysis by Ann Oakley, that masculinity and femininity are not 'natural' substances inherent to the individual, but these are instead psychological and cultural attributes, the fruit of a social process during which the individual acquires the characteristics of masculine and/or feminine (Oakley).

In order to move towards a vision of dandies through the prism of masculinity, we conducted an analysis in three successive steps that will enable Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aureville to be positioned in comparison to a normative environment of masculinity.

We initially performed a deconstruction of a masculinity taken for granted by trying to understand what is encompassed by the concept of masculinity and what are its constituent elements and markers. Our interest here is in the rule rather than the exception, through prescriptive frameworks within which we find the largest possible number of "society of men" as individuals of the male sex.

So the masculine ideal at the end of the 18th century may be defined by a desire for power, the necessary upholding of one's honour, and the importance of courage.

In parallel to that, learned naturalists such as Buffon and Burdach consider Man as dominating creation. The morphological picture that they draw up emphasises the compactness of the flesh, the firmness and solidity of the muscles, warmth, abundant hair, a rough-hewn, upright overall impression. This picture reveals, on the other hand, the lack of manliness given away by a rounded body, soft, smooth, flabby flesh, lack of hair and a high-pitched voice (Mosse 12). This has obvious psychological consequences. Man, like his genital organs, is turned towards the outside, his vigour predisposes him for physical effort, he must control his fear and his emotions, take up challenges and display courage on the battlefield. As for the impotent man, he is cowardly and incapable of exerting dominance over women (Guillet 83-24).

Beyond the body and its importance, appearances and bodily attitudes show signs of a manifestly identifiable virility. So, the muscles which will enable strength to be deployed, the beard and the moustache which are signs of entering manhood are good indicators. As to the figure of the tall, slim and well-proportioned, it comes from warlike imagery and formed a role model for young, bourgeois men from the Restoration onward (Bertaud 109-129).

It should be borne in mind that in the 19th century, masculinity was not considered as the masculine gender, but more as a group of associated characteristics.

Alongside this stereotype of virility to which the masculine gender is supposed to conform, we find 'outcast' figures co-existing, opposites who can not only not attain an ideal masculinity but moreover, enhance and reinforce the stereotype to which they cannot aspire. In this way, Jews, gypsies and homosexuals, pederasts or lesbians all have in common, in the collective imagination and representations of the 19th century, that they are the opposite of the virile ideal, while being unable to escape its influence. They then tried either to imitate the dominant type, or to define themselves in contrast to it.

Finally, to finish dealing with this sacrosanct notion of virility, we emphasise the fact that it is not only defined in contrast to femininity and is therefore not synonymous with masculinity. Therefore, many individuals display a lack of virility without anyone thinking of questioning their masculinity, a term that dictionaries almost gloss over, and which is not part of everyday language. Incidentally, some women can demonstrate masculinity through their sense of grandeur, honour or sacrifice for their country.

In the second part of our analysis, we attempted to understand the crisis of masculinity that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century in the context of economic and social changes brought about by new demands of industrialization and democracy. Feminist claims began to be heard and male anxiety was aroused, both in Europe and the United States.

The republican ideology and access to education for girls that it made possible would be one of the elements that would allow the birth of a women's emancipation movement, against which most men reacted with hostility. At every level of the social scale, they felt threatened by this new creature who wanted to be like them and saw this as "*the death-trap*", to borrow the words of Jules Barbey d'Aureville, leading to the dissolution of their specificity (Badinter 31).

The emancipated woman, suspected of being a feminist, was "*a man in a woman's body, a virago*" one monstrosity that begets another:

the feminised man, the Decadent par excellence. In 1903 Otto Weininger, a misogynist if ever there was one, made the following observation:

There are eras when more masculine women and more feminine men are born. That is precisely what is happening today ... The vast increase in recent years in both 'dandyism' and homosexuality can only be explained by a widespread feminization (Weininger 73).

Note that dandyism, homosexuality and feminization of society are, in the view of the author, all interconnected evils.

This view is interesting to compare with the one expressed twenty-five years earlier by Barbey d'Aurevilly in *Les Bas bleus*. Concerning the dandy,

in the history of humanity, there are periods of real social hermaphroditism, where man becomes effeminate and woman mannish, and when these fusions that are against nature occur, it is always so that order may be disrupted even further; the female that absorbs the male until there is no longer either male or female, but instead who knows what neuter substance, what feed for winners, for the first people who are prepared to assimilate it! (Barbey 19).

The fact that Barbey emphasizes that it is the female that absorbs the male demonstrates that it is on the female side that the danger lies. He describes a passive, victim male whose gender-based characteristics are absorbed to the point of becoming neuter. This image is reminiscent of the figure of the invert that haunts the second half of the nineteenth century, dogged by learned discourse about sexual perversions, the invention of a binarism of sexual categories or orientations into which each individual is now expected to fit, and finally the birth of a modern homosexual world in Paris, London, Berlin or New York (Revenin 23-45).

Concomitantly with Weininger, Karl Kraus denounced the modern cult of the androgen, in other words, a blur, a confusion and "intermediate forms"ⁱ. The androgen is the artistic sex par excellence.

In addition, the concept of bisexuality introduced by Freud forced men to take account of their irreducible feminine side and feel unease as a large proportion of the male intelligentsia realized that masculinity is never permanently achieved.

So the end of the nineteenth century was characterized by the resurgence of defamatory books for the female sex.

Ultimately, the loosening of the prohibitions that inhibited women and the new permissions they were granted to move around, to show themselves at café terraces, to stay at spas without their husbands or family, to openly read sentimental novels, to take the baccalaureate examination and then attend university, curbed the privileges of men and hindered the display of scenes of collective virility. The crisis of masculinity was at its peak and it was not until the First World War that men were able to resume their traditional role of warrior to assuage male anxiety for a while.

In the third and final part of our research, we tried to position the dandy in relation to a surrounding climate of masculinity, impregnated with an imperious injunction to be virile, and in relation to the crisis of masculinity that we just addressed indirectly by considering the situation of women. The starting point of our analysis can be formulated as follows: in a world where the female was emerging, certain questions tormented the collective subjective consciousness; did the male sex still exist, and subject to what rules? Also, could it be that the end-of-century dandyism was the mirror of this identity crisis, by putting on one's body the symbols of a strong but ambiguous sexuality, sometimes showing manhood, sometimes identifying oneself with women? What can we perceive about its positioning in relation to the injunction to show virility that we have described? Can we identify discrete cracks which pervaded the nineteenth century and would lead to a crisis of masculinity that would continue in the twentieth century?

Faced with a complex subject to grasp using the conventional tools of historians, we did not hesitate to use a dose of inventiveness. That is why we used iconographic sources borrowed from the three

different media of painting, photography and caricature. This original approach should be understood in terms of a twofold justification.

On the one hand we witness in the nineteenth century, increased importance of the visual character of exteriority which is shown off, and on the other hand, the existence of photographic portraits of Oscar Wilde and Charles Baudelaire contributed to conveying a certain image of these dandies among their contemporaries but also an image that has been handed down to us. Note that having chosen these figures also allows us to understand their portraits in terms of their textual productions. Finally, we emphasize that we have seen in these iconographic sources a potential for exploration previously unexploited from this viewpoint, and a response to the limited theoretical and conceptual tools that researchers interested in masculinity can use.

Indeed, while Wilde's lifestyle and the scandals surrounding him played an important role in the collective imagination that has shaped the image of the poet and playwright, the epitome of end-of-century dandyism, with his well-known ambivalence and uneasy identity, his numerous portraits, some of which were reproduced as postcards, certainly there were not unconnected with this either. Especially as we can see in Wilde a kind of self-publicity, he does not hesitate to use popular culture to make himself a commodity. In the same way as consumer society shows itself off, the dandy exhibits himself as a work of art and as a commodity.

As regards the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, we examined in detail the analysis of a representative caricature reproduced in the satirical weekly *Punch* in 1892. While his character can, in our opinion, as an illustrious representative of a trend, provide a rich reading of dandyism, it is in terms of sexual and masculine identities that the selected drawing provides the most fruitful questioning.

At first glance, we notice the constructed pose of the character and the artificiality it gives him. This is particularly noticeable in the way of holding the hand¹¹ and fingers against his face, in his manner of holding the fan, crossing his legs, curving his spine while emphasising his hip, all

of which are traits of femininity. In this way, at the end of 19th century, the character of the decadent dandy will tend to be confused with that of the male homosexual. Thus, Wilde became around 1890, the main referent of homosexuality in England (Tamagne 102). Alan Sinfield also emphasizes that homosexual representations are then built around concepts that were brought forward in his famous trial namely: "his effeminate nature, leisure, laziness, immorality, luxury, insouciance, decadence, aestheticism" (Sinfield 11). If the figure of the dandy haunts literature and theatre through authors or their characters, not only in England but also in France with Baudelaire, Balzac, or Huysmans and Proust, obviously not all of them are homosexuals. However, some, like Jack and Algernon in Wilde's *The Importance of being Earnest*ⁱⁱⁱ, maintain sexual ambiguity by their dislike of social obligations and taste for pretence. Moreover, before the Queensberry scandal^{iv} broke, some people have supposed that Wilde assumed the "gender" of an effeminate aesthete and was pretending to be a homosexual (Tamagne 102). It was his trial and its aftermath which contributed to making him a symbol of vice for the middle classes of Victorian England. However, concomitantly, some homosexuals constructed their identity by reference to he who had "the courage of his desires." So pretence was no longer to be understood as a mask or an artifice, but as a symbol of the homosexual struggle for recognition of codes that became easily decipherable to those in the know. In France, the fascination with the figure of the decadent dandy contributed to a certain morbid experience and a taste for the strange and the depraved which was typical of the turn-of-the-century. The choice by decadent artists, to elevate the homosexual dandy, a symbol of social disorder, to the rank of a sort of hero, was a way of marking their rejection of a virile identity that is realized by being built around "*materialistic and imperialist values*" (106). They showed society "*the distorting mirror of its hidden vices*"^v.

In the portrait painted by Toulouse-Lautrec in 1895, undoubtedly one of the most feminizing of those we analysed, we find one of the manifestations of decadence which favours the dissolution of identity

boundaries and hybridization of categories, spreading the nostalgia for a lost primordial unity.

In these portraits, we added a comparison of four photographs of Napoléon Sarony, selected from a series of twenty-seven photographs that illustrate the complexity and ambivalence of the character of Oscar Wilde, imposing, delicate, refined and feminine all at the same time.

Ultimately, it seems particularly interesting to note that, both through the portrait by Toulouse-Lautrec and through the photographs by Sarony, we detect, on an aesthetic level, a shift from masculine towards feminine, part of a broader trend.

Philippe Perrot notices two male ideals: the good masculine "*constitution*", rugged and muscular, defined by contrast to the feminine on the one hand, and beautiful masculine "*conformation*", the slender waist, the lean, graceful limbs, which mimic the female constitution on the other hand (Perrot 164).

With the aim of expanding our analysis by comparing and understanding how they position themselves in relation to the figures previously discussed, we also scrutinised, in a less detailed manner, some images from the substantial visual output concerning two major scholars of dandyism: Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly.

From these various analyses of photographs by Nadar, we note in particular that Baudelaire displays a far less flamboyant and more austere dandyism than his British counterpart would do twenty or thirty years later, according to the portraits. Indeed, several of Nadar's figures that we have used share a gloomy character, which emphasises the face of the subject and does not dwell on the clothes, as Sarony was able to do for Oscar Wilde. In this case, dandyism seems to be more internalised than ostentatious. These figures seem to point, via the facial expressions, to the profound and complex personality of Baudelaire rather than material considerations. This psychological dimension can also be found in the portrait of Etienne Carjat, a portrait in which we perceive a great melancholy. Only his skilfully-knotted tie perhaps evokes the taste for

ploys which we find in his writing. For the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, overall behaviour was more important than clothes. Imposing himself to the point of apparent self-effacement is the ultimate mark of elegance. Finally, we note that these various portraits are not greatly marked by "gendered" characters and depict a dandy character in which we do not recognize the ambivalence of a Wilde a few decades later. With Baudelaire, we are confronted by a dandyism with more profound ethics, before the decadence turns it into a suffering and refined dandyism.

As to the two portraits that we selected of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, a painting by Emile Lévy in 1881 and a caricature of 1892, they reveal at first glance and manifestly some of the markers of virility that we already identified. So, we notice a rigorously disciplined moustache, the rigidity of his stance, which gives him an imposing and authoritarian air, or the wearing of a cape, a masculine attribute of choice for showing off.

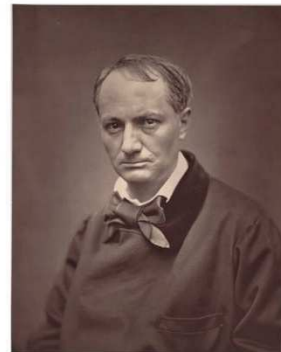
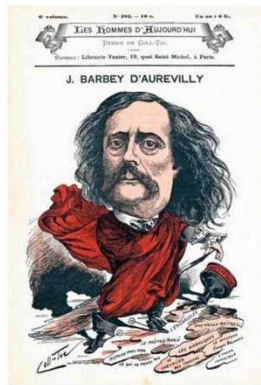
It appears at the end of this analysis, based on an iconographic approach, that the figure of Wilde, who did not fear, in the words of William Pollack, of "*leaving the straitjacket of traditional masculinity*" is, as we had anticipated, the most promising to scrutinise in terms of the norms of masculinity. We can also ask ourselves whether, through the caricature taken from *Punch* and the photographs by Sarony featuring a man with visible feminine traits, these images contribute to the mechanism reinforcement of virility by the invention of fantastical counter-types that Mosse highlighted in *Invention de la virilité moderne*.

It appears, as stressed by David Tacium, and as we were able to notice in these images, that the dandy seems to want to display a sexuality that is in turn masculine and deliberately feminine. Oscar Wilde did not fully erase the traces of masculinity to assume those of femininity, but proceeds to a more aesthetic staging that allows him to become "*a woman in some ways, without ceasing to be a man*" (Tacium 8). This dimension is similar, as we have noted, to a shift in the course of the nineteenth century from the masculine to the feminine aesthetic ideal. A

shift that would reach its climax at the end of the century and which would merge with the decadent aesthetics of the androgynous figure.

In the case of Baudelaire, this questioning was less fruitful. These portraits contain few markers of masculinity, nor indeed of femininity. His dandyism is less fashionable and more internalized. He wears "*the black sun of melancholy*" as Nerval said in his poem *El desdichado* and his discreet elegance is in accordance with the prescriptions of Barbey d'Aurevilly.

The latter, in his portraits, is the champion of the triumphant virility of the nineteenth century. He depicts a kind of hyper-virility in line with the values of the society in which he lives. Thus, his transgression will not be seen, as it is with Wilde, in displaying a gender disorder. It seems to be an illustration of the fact that a normative model of masculinity is, as pointed out by Raewyn Connell, theorist of the concept of "*hegemonic masculinity*" to present oneself as unique, to the detriment of women, but also subordinated masculinities.



Endnotes

- ⁱ By "intermediate forms", here we understand homosexuality.
- ⁱⁱ The placing of the hands has often been a way of confirming femininity in caricatures of men and dandies.
- ⁱⁱⁱ "The Importance of Being Earnest", published in 1895.
- ^{iv} The Marquess of Queensberry, father of Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover, was behind the trial of the famous writer, calling him a "posing somdomite" [sic].
- ^v Idem.

Bibliography

- Badinter, Elizabeth, *XY. De l'identité masculine*, Paris : Editions Odile Jacob, 1992, 31. Print.
- Barbey d'Aurevilly, Jules, *Les Bas bleus*, Paris : Victor Palmé, 1878, 19. Print.
- Bertaud, Jean-Paul. « L'armée et le brevet de virilité », Corbin, Alain (dir.), *op. cit.*, 63-79. Print. And Roynette, Odile. « L'uniforme militaire au XIXe siècle : une fabrique du masculin », *Femmes et Sociétés*, 36 (2012) : 109-129. Print.
- Defeyt, Antoine, *Masculine plural and singularly masculine. Oscar Wilde, Charles Baudelaire and Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly : three dandies seen through the prism of the masculinity of the nineteenth century*, Brussels: ULB, 2013. Print.
- Guillet, François. « Le duel et la défense de l'honneur viril », Corbin, Alain (dir.), *Histoire de la virilité, 2. Le XIXe siècle*, Paris : Seuil, 2011, 83-124. Print.
- Mosse, George, *L'image de l'homme. L'invention de la virilité moderne*, Paris : Editions Abbeville, 1997, 12. Print.
- Oakley, Ann, *Sex, gender and society*, Londres : Maurice Temple Smith, 1972. Print.
- Revenin, Régis. « Conceptions et théories savantes de l'homosexualité masculine en France, de la monarchie de juillet à la première guerre mondiale », *Revue d'Histoire des Sciences Humaines*, 2.17 (2007) : 23-45. Print.

-
- Sinfield, Alan, *The Wilde century, Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the queer moment*, London: Cassel, 1994, 11. Print.
- Partridge, John Bernard, "Fancy portrait", *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 102 (5 March 1892): 113. Print.
- Perrot, Philippe, *Le travail des apparences ou les transformations du corps féminin, XVIIIe-XIXe siècle*, Paris : Seuil, 1984, 164. Print.
- Tacium, David, *Le dandysme et la crise de l'identité masculine à la fin du XIXème siècle : Huysmans, Pater, Dossi*, Montréal : Université de Montréal, 1998, 8. Print.
- Tamagne, Florence, *Mauvais genre ? Une histoire des représentations de l'homosexualité*, Paris : La Martinière, 2001, 102. Print.
- Weininger, Otto, *Sexe et caractère*, Lausanne : L'Age d'homme, 1989 (1903), 73. Print.