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# Political Censorship on the Late-Victorian Stage: Rereading Oscar Wilde's *Vera; or, the Nihilist[s]*

Sondeep Kandola\*

## ABSTRACT

The publication in 2021 of the *Oxford English Texts* version of Oscar Wilde's Russian melodrama *Vera; or, the Nihilist* (1883), based, as it is, on new archival research by its editor Josephine Guy, deepens the mystery surrounding the alleged censorship of Oscar Wilde's first play. While Wilde himself promoted the idea that the expression of democratic ideals in his *Nihilist* play had prevented its performance in England, a genetic analysis of an early manuscript version of the play (1881) made available in the *OET Vera* and Guy's reconstructed play-text of the first performance, problematizes the putative censorship of the play on political grounds. In conjunction with new readings of Wilde's *Poems* (1881) and his letters from the period, the genetic analysis that follows crystallizes attendant issues concerning the extent of Wilde's radicalism at the outset of his career and the nature of his commitment to Irish republicanism *per se*. Where the Chief Examiner of Plays (E. F. S. Pigott) promoted the idea that there was no political censorship of the theatre at the end of the Victorian period, the examples of the alleged suppression of Wilde's melodrama *and* the experiences of his mentor, the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault, at the hands of the British press evince the multiple forms of political censorship and *self*-censorship that came to shape (and impede) the development of the late-Victorian stage.

**KEYWORDS:** censorship, Wilde, British drama, genetic criticism, Ireland, Nihilism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde's first (and 'failed') play *Vera; or, the Nihilists* (1883), a melodrama about the assassination of an autocratic Czar in 1800 by a cell of Moscow Nihilists, unfolds against a backdrop of rural indigence, state oppression and revolutionary violence.<sup>1</sup> It has been read by critics such as Michael Newton and, more recently, Deaglán Ó Donghaile as an allegory for Ireland's ongoing Land Wars (1879–1891).<sup>2</sup> The publication in 2021 of Josephine M. Guy's authoritative *Oxford English Texts* edition of *Vera*, based on archival research, promises to foster a more nuanced response to the revolutionary and (Irish) nationalist politics to be adduced from Wilde's Russian play than available to us hitherto. The preface to the *OET Vera* saw Guy continue to challenge the so-called 'greening' of Oscar Wilde on the part of some of her peers. Guy's intervention in what Jarlath Killeen has cannily dubbed the 'Wilde Wars' – the contested recuperation of the Irish (and revolutionary) aspect of Wilde's work and identity – has led her to protest against:

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Miriam Reed, 'Oscar Wilde's *Vera: Or, The Nihilist*: The History of a Failed Play', *Theatre Survey*, 26 (1985), 163–77 (p. 174).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Newton, "'Nihilists of Castlebar!': Exporting Russian Nihilism in the 1880s and the Case of Oscar Wilde's *Vera; or, the Nihilists*", in *Russia in Britain, 1880–1940*, ed. by Rebecca Beasley and Philip Ross Bullock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 35–52 (p. 39); Deaglán Ó Donghaile, *Oscar Wilde and the Radical Politics of the Fin de Siècle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 57–80.

A tendency among some literary critics to elide the differences between play-texts and other forms of writing – such as Wilde’s journalism or fiction – [since] to ignore the unique circumstances that attended writing for the stage in the late nineteenth century can seriously distort generalized discussions of the development of Wilde’s political or intellectual views.<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to forestall such ‘distort[ion]s’ and ‘eli[sions]’ Guy’s carefully reconstructed version of the 1883 play-text of *Vera* meticulously identifies the various deletions, additions and other suggestions made to improve the play by Wilde, by its leading lady (the American actress, Marie Prescott) and by others on the eve of its first performance in New York in August 1883. In this, the *OET Vera* supersedes Frances Miriam’s Reed’s 1989 composite text of the play which purported to ‘[set] out the final version of *Vera* as it was performed at its premier’ and ‘may, therefore, be considered the closest we have to the authoritative text of *Vera*’.<sup>4</sup>

Guy’s *OET Vera* also helpfully includes an earlier 1880 manuscript version of the play, originally entitled *Vera; or, the Nihilist*, which was to be performed in London in December 1881 for the purposes of obtaining a theatrical license, but which was mysteriously withdrawn by Wilde three weeks prior to its maiden performance. One newspaper explained this as an act of self-censorship on Wilde’s part, undertaken at the behest of an unnamed ‘committee of literary persons’ who had ‘advised [Wilde] to keep [*Vera*] from the stage’ because ‘its revolutionary sentiments’ might not play well with ‘loyal British audiences’.<sup>5</sup> Wilde, himself, wrote to the American actress Clara Morris that ‘[o]n account of its avowedly republican sentiments, I have not been able to get permission to have [*Vera*] brought out here’.<sup>6</sup>

In response to Guy’s anxieties about the incautious boosting of both Wilde’s Irish and revolutionary credentials and the ‘plausibility’ of Hibernicized readings of *Vera*, this article undertakes a genetic analysis of the amendments and additions that can be adduced from the three extant versions of the play.<sup>7</sup> In line with (French) genetic criticism’s desacralization of ‘the Text’ in favour of exploring the texts inhering in the text, this genetic critique, as invited by the *OET Vera*, explores the play in conjunction with new readings of Wilde’s *Poems* and letters from the period, the so-called ‘*avant-textes*’ of genetic parlance.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, I highlight some inconvenient truths about the ‘Irish Wilde’ as both a landowner and a quasi-Republican at the outset of his career. While the complex and ambiguous censorship of *Vera* – whether governmental, self-imposed, and arguably even fictitious – leaves open the question of the ‘greenness’ of the text and of Wilde, it nevertheless challenges the truism that there was little political censorship in the late-Victorian theatre *per se*.

<sup>3</sup> See Jarlath Killeen’s article ‘The greening of Oscar Wilde: situating Ireland in the Wilde wars’, *Irish Studies Review*, 23 (2015), 424–50; Josephine M. Guy, ‘Preface’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001–), XI: *Plays 4: Vera; or the Nihilist and Lady Windermere’s Fan*, ed. by Josephine M. Guy (2021), pp. vii–xii (p. x).

<sup>4</sup> Frances Miriam Reed, ‘Introduction’, in Oscar Wilde, *Vera; or the Nihilist*, ed. by Frances Miriam Reed (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), pp. xi–xlvii (pp. xi–xii).

<sup>5</sup> D. A., ‘The Stage’, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 3 (3 December 1881), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Wilde, letter to Clara Morris, [c.] September 1880, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Josephine M. Guy, ‘*Vera; or, the Nihilist*: Introduction’, in *The Complete Works*, XI, 3–105 (p. 49).

<sup>8</sup> Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden, ‘Introduction: A Genesis of French Genetic Criticism’, in *Genetic Criticism: Texts and Avant-textes*, ed. by Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer and Michael Groden (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 1–16 (pp. 2, 8).

## 2. CENSORING WILDE

The wide-reaching impact of different forms of censorship on Wilde's career as a whole has yet to be examined systematically. The modes of suppression incurred by Wilde's oeuvre are manifold. The Oxford Union's request for, and subsequent rejection of, Wilde's *Poems* for its library might be loosely interpreted as a juvenile and informal act of censorship on the part of Wilde's peers. And in 2012 the publication of Nicholas Frankel's edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1) has revealed the extent to which J. M. Stoddart (the editor of the American *Lippincott's Magazine* which commissioned the novel) bowdlerized the original typescript Wilde had sent to him for publication. Instructions from Stoddart to his editorial team to excise any material of which an 'innocent woman' might disapprove did not go far enough for the reviewer of the *Scots Observer* who, for one, still felt that the novel was morally questionable.<sup>9</sup> Wilde's French-language play *Salomé* (1891) was refused a performance licence on religious grounds, with the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays, E. F. S. Pigott, privately complaining that the play was 'half Biblical, [and] half pornographic' and that he could 'imagine the average British public's reception of it'.<sup>10</sup> 13 years after his death, Wilde's ex-lover Alfred Douglas launched a libel prosecution against Wilde's biographer, Arthur Ransome, and his publisher Methuen over an expurgated edition of the prison letter *De Profundis*. However, while censorship shadowed Wilde's career from the outset, it did not necessarily always have an adverse impact upon it. Perhaps the most famous example of the productive impact of censorship on Wilde's career is *Salomé*. Deemed 'the first major work' of the Irish Modernist movement by Joe Cleary, Wilde's play not only saw him publicly dissociate himself from what he characterized as a narrow-minded English culture and claim that he would instead take up French citizenship, but also saw him cement his creative standing within the French avant-garde.<sup>11</sup>

Although *Vera; or, the Nihilist* features scenes of regicide, martyrdom and a pan-European revolutionary conspiracy, evidence of whether Wilde's first play was the subject of political censorship remains uncertain. Initially, Wilde's relationship with Pigott appears to have been cordial as he sent him a copy of the play on its completion apparently at the Examiner's request and for the purposes of obtaining a theatrical license for it. Wilde wrote to Pigott in September 1880:

I know only too well how difficult it is to write a really fine drama, but I am working at dramatic art because it's the *democratic* art, and I want fame, so any suggestion, any helpful advice, your experience and very brilliant critical powers can give me I shall thank you very much for.<sup>12</sup>

Wilde's blandishments appear to have failed to move the Examiner since a panicked letter to Pigott in November 1881 reveals that the play had not as yet been examined, a point confirmed by George Rowell who could find 'no record in the Lord Chamberlain's archives of a

<sup>9</sup> Stoddart, quoted in Nicholas Frankel, 'Textual Introduction', in Oscar Wilde, *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2011), pp. 38–64 (p. 45); *Scots Observer*, 5 July 1890.

<sup>10</sup> Pigott, quoted in John Russell Stephens, *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Joe Cleary, 'European, American and Imperial Conjectures', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, ed. by Joe Cleary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 35–50 (p. 41).

<sup>12</sup> Wilde to E. F. S. Pigott, September 1880, *Complete Letters*, p. 98.

license being issued for a performance of *Vera* at this time.<sup>13</sup> However, Richard Ellman and others have deferred to Wilde's explanation to Clara Morris (cited above) that the play had not appeared because it had been censored on political grounds.<sup>14</sup> Continuing in this vein, in 2013 Michael Newton indicated that it was the play's allegorical depiction of the Irish Land Wars and Fenianism, rather than governmental anxieties about offending imperial Russia, that led to its withdrawal.<sup>15</sup> Yet as I argue below, *Vera* and its *avant-textes* reveal the play's 'attack on tyranny' to be a decidedly equivocal one.<sup>16</sup> In this, Wilde's claims that *Vera* had been the victim of political censorship appear increasingly untenable.

Wilde's Russian melodrama focuses on the passionate love affair between its titular heroine, the low-born and beautiful Nihilist Vera Sabouroff, and the disguised Nihilist convert the Czarovich Alexis, whose thirst for democratic change has led him to infiltrate the Moscow Nihilist cell to which she belongs. Though the play abounds in anachronisms in dates and place, *Vera* appears to allude to political events that had recently taken place in Russia.<sup>17</sup> Reed, Matthew Sturgis and others cite as a source for the play the trial, discharge and contemporaneous romanticizing of the female Nihilist, Vera Zasulich, who had attempted to assassinate Fyodor Trepov, the brutal Governor of St Petersburg in 1878.<sup>18</sup> They also point to a subsequent assassination attempt on Czar Alexander II by Nihilists in 1880.<sup>19</sup> A prologue added to the later 1883 performance version of the play explains Vera's conversion to Nihilism, and its tenets of martyrdom, annihilation, and revenge in the name of freedom, as the result of her horrified response to the arrest and torture of her brother who has been sent without trial and in chains to his certain death in Siberia. In contrast to Vera's shock at the mistreatment of her brother and his fellow prisoners, the callous attitudes of her father attest to the extreme desensitization to other people's suffering (famine, plague and other 'natural' disasters) which the heavily autocratic state relies on to (mis)rule an already demoralized people ('Let God and the Czar look to it').<sup>20</sup> Vera flees her village for Moscow in order to seek vengeance for her brother and, ultimately, freedom for the Russian people, and becomes an active and much-feared agent in the deadly Nihilist campaigns underway across the country. The liberal Alexis attempts to reawaken his own father's moral conscience by denouncing the mass starvation, widespread torture, baseless detention and cruel punishments suffered by the people while a venal aristocracy surfeits itself on the profits from this mass exploitation and injustice. In particular, Alexis believes that his once sympathetic father has been brutalized by the advice of his chief counsellor, the amoral, if witty, Prince Paul. Alexis declaims against the fate of demoralized Russian soldiers who have been corralled into mercilessly suppressing any resistance to the Czar's formidable imperial war machine in places such as 'unhappy' Poland.<sup>21</sup> The autocratic Czar is assassinated in the second act of the play by the Moscow Nihilist, Michael. The group's subsequent resolution to kill Alexis, who has now ascended the throne, is only

<sup>13</sup> George Rowell, 'The Truth About *Vera*', *Nineteenth-Century Theatre*, 21 (1993), 94–100 (pp. 94–95).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Newton, 'Exporting Russian Nihilism', pp. 43–44.

<sup>16</sup> Wilde to Hon. George Curzon, November 1881, *Complete Letters*, p. 117.

<sup>17</sup> Wilde represents Moscow rather than St Petersburg as the capital of Russia; although the play is set in 1800, it references the abolition of serfdom which did not take place until 1861. Moreover, the term 'nihilist' only came into popular usage after the publication of Turgenev's *Father and Sons* (1862).

<sup>18</sup> Mathew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Apollo, 2019), p. 168; Reed, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

<sup>19</sup> Another attempt on the Czar's life was to prove successful in March 1881.

<sup>20</sup> Wilde, '*Vera; or, the Nihilist*: The 1883 Reconstructed Performance Text', in *The Complete Works*, XI: 107–56 (p. 110).

<sup>21</sup> Wilde, '*Vera; or, the Nihilist*: The 1883 Reconstructed Performance Text', p. 123.



unsuccessful because Vera chooses to martyr herself rather than stab the new liberal Czar to death, as she has been directed to do by her Nihilist comrades. In her death throes, Vera announces that she has saved Russia.

The representation of Nihilist activity in the '1880 manuscript' of *Vera* problematizes any straightforward recuperation, as advanced by Newton and others, of both the revolutionary and Irish Wilde from the play. The '1880 manuscript' also deepens the mystery of whether, as Wilde alleged, the play was censored on political grounds. Where Guy's and Reed's reconstructed performance texts of *Vera* [1883] open with the explanatory prologue described above, the earlier 'manuscript' instead begins with the President of the Moscow Nihilist cell receiving messengers from various revolutionary groups across Europe. In response to the Professor asking the Messenger from England whether 'the man Cromwell | who slew his king righteously | [has] left no seed in the land', the Messenger assures him that 'there is liberty in England though she wear not the red cap of revolution – men think what they choose, men speak what they think.'<sup>22</sup> The Messenger concludes that 'There is safety in the arms of England for us the exiles of many nations the Ishmaels of our cross.'<sup>23</sup> This exchange is striking. While, admittedly, England was a comparatively safe harbour for Europe's political émigrés at the end of the Victorian period, the Messenger's reference both to crucifixion and the biblical Ishmael (Abraham's banished first son and father of many nations) suggests that Victorian England was also a breeding ground for European revolutionaries seeking martyrdom.<sup>24</sup> In his discussion of Wilde's *Poems*, which were published in the following year, Joseph Bristow has highlighted what he perceives to be the political admiration that Wilde also accords to Cromwell's republic in his poems 'To Milton', 'Ave Imperatrix', and 'Quantum Mutata'. For Bristow, 'This invocation of Cromwell's name provides a fair indication of how far by 1880 Wilde's poetry had shifted towards identifying with a radical English politics that, from Milton onwards, contested the authority of the Crown.'<sup>25</sup> And yet Bristow complicates Wilde's apparent admiration for the Lord Protector with the immediate caveat that 'it is also the case that in Irish memory Cromwell's name is to this day held in contempt because of his brutal imposition of Ascendancy rule on the native population.'<sup>26</sup> In this respect, the Professor's positive reference to Cromwell in the OET 1880 manuscript compromises the unequivocal recovery of the 'Irish Wilde' from the play.<sup>27</sup> Where praise for Cromwell and English freedom appears incompatible with the greening of Oscar Wilde, Vera's later declaration (in the 1883 version of the play) that 'The people are not yet fit for a republic in Russia' similarly undermines Wilde's avowed republicanism.<sup>28</sup>

Likewise, when Alexis becomes Czar he, too, reneges on his Nihilist principles. Rather than creating a Russian republic, Alexis instead instigates democratic reforms and promises Vera that she will join him in ruling the people with a paternalistic love. In this new Russia,

<sup>22</sup> Wilde, 'Vera; or, the Nihilists: The Manuscript', in *The Complete Works*, XI: 161–93 (pp. 164–65).

<sup>23</sup> Wilde, 'Vera; or, the Nihilists: The Manuscript', p. 165.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Bernard Porter, 'The Freiheit Prosecutions, 1881–1882', *The Historical Journal*, 23 (1980), 833–56 (p. 843).

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Bristow, 'Oscar Wilde's Poetic Traditions: From Aristophanes' *Clouds* to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Peter Raby and Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 73–87 (p. 81).

<sup>26</sup> Bristow, 'Oscar Wilde's Poetic Traditions', p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> This position has been most recently advanced in Ó Donghaile's reading of *Vera* (in 2021) based, as it is, on Reed's composite text, Ó Donghaile, *Wilde and the Radical Politics*, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Wilde, *Vera; or, the Nihilist*, in *The Complete Works*, XI: 145.

Alexis pledges that ‘There shall be liberty for every man to think as his heart bids him.’<sup>29</sup> Vera’s subsequent suicide, in which her blood-stained knife acts as the evidence necessary to trick the Nihilists into thinking that she has assassinated Alexis, promises, in turn, to allow the new Czar to continue his politically progressive reign. My reading of the ‘1880 manuscript’ thus contests the claims cited above for Wilde’s investment at this juncture in a revolutionary republicanism. Wilde’s claim to an unidentified correspondent that ‘the note through which the passion of the play is expressed is democratic and for that reason it is unthinkable to act it in London’ is further diminished by Vera’s powerful rejection of Nihilist principles and the political retreat it signals.<sup>30</sup>

The play’s *avant-textes*, in the form of two early letters, reveal further politically inconvenient truths about the ‘Irish’ and revolutionary Wilde as a landowner, albeit an impecunious one. Seemingly more concerned with the direct financial impact of Ireland’s Land Wars and attendant rent strikes on his income from his Bray properties than with the political grievances of his countrymen, two letters reveal how the composition history of *Vera* was shadowed by the continued financial pressures engendered by the reduction of Wilde’s rental income from his homeland. In a letter of November 1879, Wilde confesses to an unidentified correspondent that ‘the extremely unsettled state of Ireland, and the impossibility of getting rents even after the twenty-five per cent reduction, render it really out of my power to settle your bill.’<sup>31</sup> And four months later, Wilde asks Oscar Browning to secure him a position as a Schools’ Inspector because ‘Rents being extinct in Ireland as the dodo or moly, I want to get a position with an assured income.’<sup>32</sup> Hence, though Wilde attributed the withdrawal of *Vera* in 1881 to its democratic principles, the play can equally be read as airing his reservations about revolutionary republicanism and, more worryingly for him, about an attendant ‘mob’ rule. If his Russian drama functions as an allegory for Ireland during the Land Wars, it is a decidedly ambivalent one.

Vera’s qualms about the creation of a Russian republic echo the private reservations that Wilde’s mother, the celebrated Young Ireland poet ‘Speranza’, had about the perceived ineptitude of the Irish people to live under a republic, and her distaste for Fenianism *per se*. A year before the Fenian Uprising of 1867, Lady Wilde had declared to her Swedish friend Lotte von Kraemer that ‘I am not a Fenian and I disapprove highly of their prospects . . . it is decidedly a democratic movement – & the gentry and aristocracy will suffer much from them – their object is to form a Republic. Heaven keep me from a Fenian Republic!’<sup>33</sup> She later wrote to friends during the Land Wars (1883) that ‘Ireland is a very unquiet state’ and that ‘we want a strong hand like the Emperor Napoleon’s over us.’<sup>34</sup> Given her passionate nationalism, Lady Wilde’s disavowal of the democratic cause is certainly unexpected (‘No Democracy. Why should a rude, uncultured mob dare to utter its voice?’).<sup>35</sup> More surprisingly, it is repeated in her son’s poetry. In his poem ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, which appeared in *Poems* (1881), three months before the first projected performance of *Vera*, Wilde likewise deplored ‘mob’ rule and advocated, like Speranza before him, ‘the rule of One, whom all obey.’<sup>36</sup> Although

<sup>29</sup> Wilde, *Vera; or, the Nihilist*, in *The Complete Works*, XI: 198.

<sup>30</sup> Wilde, letter to an unidentified correspondent, September 1880, *Complete Letters*, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> Wilde, letter to an unidentified correspondent, 5 November 1879, *Complete Letters*, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> Wilde, letter to Oscar Browning, mid-February 1880, *Complete Letters*, p. 86.

<sup>33</sup> Lady Wilde to Lotte von Kraemer, 10 July 1866 (National Library of Sweden) quoted in Eleanor Fitzsimmons, *Wilde’s Women: How Oscar Was Shaped by the Women He Knew* (London: Duckworth, 2016), p. 53 (emphasis in original).

<sup>34</sup> Joy Melville, *Mother of Oscar, The Life of Jane Francesca Wilde* (London: Allen & Busby, 1999), p. 170.

<sup>35</sup> Lady Wilde to an unidentified correspondent, quoted in Melville, *Mother of Oscar*, p. 174.

<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde, ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, in ed. by Merlin Holland *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 2003), p. 858.

claiming in this poem to ‘lik[e] best that state republican’ the poem’s speaker appears to endorse strongman politics rather ‘Than to let clamorous demagogues betray | Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy.’<sup>37</sup> For Wilde, the demagogue whose power rested on the acclaim of the masses was more of a threat to liberty than ‘the rule of One, whom all obey’. This was because the former would be beholden to the mob violence that had brought him to power in the first place, as suggested by the word ‘clamorous’. The poet also regrets the state of cultural decline that attended all eruptions of political strife.<sup>38</sup> In another poem from this collection, his ‘Sonnet to Liberty’, the poet again finds that his only attraction to the ‘roar’ of Democracy resides in the way its inevitable decline into the excesses of Anarchy and Tyranny mirrors the ‘wildest’ passions that rage within himself.<sup>39</sup> And, yet, despite the decidedly ambivalent response to political liberty conveyed in the main part of the sonnet, its *volta* admits a degree of affinity to ‘These Christs that die upon the barricades’ with whom, tellingly, he claims to stand ‘in some things.’<sup>40</sup> This *volta* aside, the attraction signalled to strongman politics in the aforementioned poems again appears incompatible with the revolutionary ideas that Wilde claimed had led directly to the censorship of *Vera*.

The first performance of *Vera* was set for December 1881, but plans for it seem to have stalled by November 1881. As noted above, an urgent letter to Pigott written that November reveals that Wilde had not yet received any response from the Examiner with advice about the play. The extent of Wilde’s anxiety is evident from the fact that he went so far as to ask whether he should come to Pigott’s official or private residence on that very day to meet with him.<sup>41</sup> Helen Freshwater’s recent claim that ‘Following a meeting with Pigott, Wilde wrote that he had been unable to get permission to stage [*Vera*]’ appears dubious since his second letter to Pigott demonstrates that at the time of Wilde’s complaint about political censorship to Morris, the play had not yet been officially scrutinized.<sup>42</sup> While the letter of September 1880 suggests that Wilde found the possibility of creative direction from Pigott to be entirely permissible and even desirable, the second letter clearly signals his frustration at the Examiner’s lack of attention to his play. The shift of tone, from insouciant to anxious, in Wilde’s overtures to Pigott, once again belie the play’s alleged censorship on political grounds.

Financial factors also complicate the history of the political suppression of *Vera*. In a letter he had written to the actor Norman Forbes-Robertson in October 1880, Wilde admitted that ‘I have not yet finished furnishing my room, and have spent all my money over it already, so if no manager gives me gold for *The Nihilists* I don’t know what I shall do.’<sup>43</sup> A lack of funds and the difficulty of finding a suitable venue to mount a production were palpable obstacles.<sup>44</sup> Matthew Sturgis has highlighted how, coupled with Wilde’s precarious finances,

<sup>37</sup> Wilde, ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, *ibid.*, p. 858.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Wherefore I love them not whose hands profane, | Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street | For no right cause, beneath whose ignorant reign | Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour, all things fade’: Wilde, ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, *ibid.*, p. 858.

<sup>39</sup> Wilde, ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, *ibid.*, p. 859.

<sup>40</sup> Wilde, ‘Libertatis Sacre Fames’, p. 859, *op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> Wilde, letter to E. F. S. Pigott, November 1881, *Complete Letters*, p. 117.

<sup>42</sup> Helen Freshwater, ‘The Censorship of the Stage: Writing on the Edge of the Allowed’, in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. Raby and Powell, pp. 278–88 (p. 282).

<sup>43</sup> Wilde, letter to Norman Forbes-Robertson, October 1881, *Complete Letters*, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> In response to H. Montgomery Hyde’s and Richard Ellmann’s assertions that Wilde planned but failed to put on a matinee performance to ‘try out’ the play at the Adelphi, with Mrs Bernard Beere in the title role, George Rowell claims that ‘However sure Wilde himself had been of arranging a single matinee of *Vera*, that outcome looked increasingly unlikely by November 1881 unless he could find backing’: Rowell, ‘The Truth’, p. 99.



an ‘underwhelming’ response’ on the part of theatrical figures such as Ellen Terry and Henry Irving to the play may have also contributed to its withdrawal.<sup>45</sup> Not only do the dates of Wilde’s letters cast doubt on whether formal censorship actually took place, they also appear to indicate that he took an early decision to appeal to the democratic ideas aired in the play to deflect attention from its financial problems and from the general indifference to it of the theatrical community. In other words, Wilde sought to exploit the notion of a reactionary form of stage censorship in order to save face. At the very least, this genealogy of *Vera*’s performance history brings into question the pillorying of Wilde on political grounds at the hands of the Censor.

### 3. THE POLITICAL CENSORSHIP OF THE LATE-VICTORIAN THEATRE

Since a formal report by the Examiner of Plays on the reasons why a theatrical licence had been declined for a particular play was not required until 1911, no record exists of the extent to which Pigott, who held the office from 1874 to 1895, actively censored works on political grounds. Miriam Handley notes that ‘The appropriateness and frequency of political allusions in nineteenth-century plays was much disputed during the period’ and that Pigott, for one, ‘actively played down the association between censorship and the suppression of political commentary.’<sup>46</sup> Evidence for political censorship is thus hard to pin down.

Formal theatrical censorship on political grounds had been initiated by the introduction of the Licensing Act of 1737, followed a century later by the Theatres Act of 1843 whereby the Examiner of Plays, who worked out of the Lord Chamberlain’s office, could refuse theatrical licenses without explicit justification. In 1883, Pigott described his role as a comfortably avuncular one and claimed that Examiners fulfilled their duties:

in the most liberal spirit, with the discernment and discrimination that belongs to a wide knowledge of the world, and that cultivated sympathy with literature and art, which is equally regardful of public morality and public decency, and of the freedom and dignity of a liberal profession and a noble art.<sup>47</sup>

With regards to political censorship, Pigott believed he had been entirely successful in his edict to ‘intelligent managers’ against politicizing the stage. He simply asked them ‘to consider for themselves whether, in a country and community so saturated with politics as our own, the public would care to have places of amusement turned into political arenas.’<sup>48</sup> The

<sup>45</sup> Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*, p. 169.

<sup>46</sup> According to Handley, in a memorandum Pigott produced he provided ‘a skewed version’ of the history of censorship ‘by describing the political plays of the early eighteenth century as being merely the “somewhat trivial incident” which led to the Licensing Act . . . [and] claimed instead that from the outset the censor’s real role was to preserve the dignity and morality of the stage’. Miriam Handley, in Dominic Shellard and Steven Nicholson with Miriam Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain Regrets... A History of British Theatre Censorship* (London: The British Library, 2004), p. 36.

<sup>47</sup> Pigott quoted in Stephens, *Censorship of English Drama*, p. 34; G. B. Shaw, for one, virulently disagreed with Pigott’s placatory description of his role and wrote in an obituary of Pigott that ‘he had French immorality on the brain; he had American indecency on the brain; he had the divorce court on the brain; his official career in relation to the higher drama was one long folly and panic, in which the only thing definitely discernible in a welter of intellectual confusion was his conception of the English people rushing towards and abyss of national degradation in morals and manners, and only held back on the edge of the precipice by the grasp of his strong hand’. G. B. Shaw, ‘The Late Censor’, *Saturday Review*, 2 March 1895, in G. B. Shaw, *Our Theatre in the Nineties* (London: Constable and Company, 1932), p. 49.

<sup>48</sup> Pigott quoted in Richard Findlater, *Banned! Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London: Panther, 1968), p. 80.

celebrated Irish playwright and actor Dion Boucicault seemed to confirm Pigott's sense of the public's resistance to a politicized theatre, putting his success as a playwright down to his recognition (as expressed to Bram Stoker in his 'beautiful Irish brogue') that 'a normal audience doesn't go into the theatre with its politics in its breeches pockets'.<sup>49</sup>

Modern commentary on theatrical censorship has generally taken its cue from Pigott and other nineteenth-century Examiners. Richard Findlater and John Russell Stephens (writing in 1967 and 1980, respectively), for instance, suggested that Victorian theatrical censorship largely consisted of checking instances of indecency and blasphemy on the stage and that an implicit discouragement of political theatre had rendered the political censorship of the late-Victorian stage redundant.<sup>50</sup> Findlater went so far as to contend that since its inception in 1757:

the censorship took care not to blow too hard. For the next century and a half it provoked no major riots or scandals. No outstanding dramatists were openly martyred, and no great plays were overtly suppressed. Few were written, although for that sterility the Lord Chamberlain cannot take all the blame.<sup>51</sup>

More recently, however, Handley has argued that the 'extant sources' upon which theatre historians had hitherto relied, such as 'readers' reports, diary entries and private correspondence of examiners . . . present only a partial history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century censorship'.<sup>52</sup> She suggests that a fuller picture of the practice of stage censorship in Britain can only be glimpsed in the 'untranscribed conversations in which a play's fate was negotiated'.<sup>53</sup> Although, self-evidently, 'untranscribed conversations' cannot be used as material proof of acts of governmental censorship, Handley usefully draws attention to the series of informal interventions the Examiner of Plays undertook in order to check how appropriate a play was in terms of the moral and political health of British audiences. Handley argues that Victorian Examiners deployed a form of 'pre-censorship, (where playwrights checked scripts before sending them for licensing), and even pre-pre-censorship where playwrights checked the suitability of their play's subjects before embarking on writing'.<sup>54</sup> As is evident from his first letter to Pigott, Wilde's willingness to negotiate the contents of his play with the Examiner evidences the kind of informal intervention that Handley identifies as a 'pre-censorship' strategy practised on the late-Victorian stage.<sup>55</sup> Wilde's recognition that to comply with Pigott's advice, if any was to be given, was key to the play's success attests to the implicit nature of state intervention in late-Victorian drama.

<sup>49</sup> Stoker quoted in Stephens, *Censorship of English Drama*, p. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Pigott noted that 'During my first year or two of official experience [sic] I found it necessary to restrain (more particularly in pantomimes) an excessive licence of offensive personalities and of scurrilous allusions to members of the Royal Family . . . The restraint was so persevering and effectual, that . . . nothing of the kind has occurred now for years', quoted in Findlater, *Banned*, p. 80.

<sup>51</sup> Findlater, *Banned*, p. 51.

<sup>52</sup> Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain*, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain*, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> Handley, *The Lord Chamberlain*, p. 4.

<sup>55</sup> Rowell reminds us that 'a license was only issued to the manager of the theatre staging the play in question, not to the play itself or its author, and there is no record in the Lord Chamberlain's archives of a license being issued for a performance of *Vera* at this time', Rowell, 'The Truth', p. 95.

My reading of Vera's political apostasy, of Wilde's poems, and of the dates of his letters to Morris and Pigott respectively, urges caution about the level of overt political intervention Wilde's Russian melodrama was actually subjected to. And yet the contemporary proscription of two Irish nationalist plays on the British stage indicates a higher level of proactive censorship of political subject matter on the late-Victorian stage than Pigott, for one, would have cared to admit. Here, the (near) contemporaneous suppression of both Dion Boucicault's *The O'Dowd* (1880) and Frank Marshall's *Robert Emmet* (1881) affords a more nuanced understanding of the prevalent political pressures that may have led Wilde to withdraw *Vera*. Taking his cue from Pigott, in *The Censorship of English Drama 1824–1901*, John Stephens briefly alludes to 'The vexed question of [representing] Irish politics' on the Victorian stage and 'its obvious relationship with the authorities' prescription on the more general topic of revolution.'<sup>56</sup> He mentions in passing the political anxiety generated by Frank Marshall's 1881 play about the martyred Irish revolutionary, Robert Emmet. This play, coming as it did near the end of Ireland's first Land War (1879–1882), was refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain, the Irish peer Lord Kenmare. And in the words of Bram Stoker (acting as the manager to Henry Irving who had been offered the title role), this was because it 'might have a dangerous effect on a people seething in revolt.'<sup>57</sup> Although Deirdre McFeely disputes the extent of Boucicault's role in eventually bringing Marshall's play to the New York stage in 1884, she has identified elsewhere both the strategies that Boucicault deployed to evade the Examiner's infamous pen and the controversies that attended these actions.<sup>58</sup> In particular, McFeely examines the public criticism that Boucicault's play *The O'Dowd* faced for its critique of absentee landlordism in Ireland.<sup>59</sup> As I argue below, the respective fate of both plays challenges the truism that self-regulation on the part of late-Victorian dramatists made political censorship effectively redundant, particularly where Irish issues were concerned. In this respect, Boucicault's apparent influence on the production of *Vera* is instructive.

#### 4. DION BOUCICAULT AND THE POLITICS OF (IRISH) SELF-CENSORSHIP

Wilde's connection to Dion Boucicault, a longstanding friend of the family from its Dublin days, has been widely noted. Wilde was a friend of Boucicault's son Dot; indeed, the *Daily News* reported on 21 November 1881 that Dot was to take a 'prominent' part in the projected matinee performance of *Vera*. As Sturgis and Guy have shown, Wilde had written to Boucicault Sr. asking for his advice on the play, and he had written back with practical suggestions on how the play might be improved but strikingly without any reference to its political content.<sup>60</sup> Richard Ellmann has suggested that Boucicault was going to be the director for the play's London premiere, a hypothesis rejected later by George Rowell who contends that '[b]y 1881 [Boucicault] was widely regarded as yesterday's man' and that '[i]n any case he was in no position to finance the production of an untried and distinctly uncommercial piece at the Adelphi or anywhere else.'<sup>61</sup> A mystery hangs over the identity of an unnamed correspondent

<sup>56</sup> Stephens, *Censorship of English Drama*, p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> Stephens, *Censorship of English Drama*, p. 56.

<sup>58</sup> Deirdre McFeely, *Dion Boucicault: Irish Identity on Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 170.

<sup>59</sup> See McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, pp. 159–68.

<sup>60</sup> Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*, p. 170; Josephine M. Guy, 'Vera; or, The Nihilists: Oscar Wilde's "Wretched Play" and the Challenges of Reassessing "Minor" Works', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 63 (2020), 346–75 (pp. 350–51).

<sup>61</sup> Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, p. 146; Rowell, 'The Truth', pp. 96, 97.

to whom Wilde had sent a copy of the play in September 1880 '[a]t the suggestion of my friend, Mr Dion Boucicault'. Wilde confided to this correspondent that '[t]he note through which the passion of the play is expressed is democratic and for that reason it is unthinkable to act in London.'<sup>62</sup> While this letter, in itself, does not provide clear evidence of shared political sympathies between Boucicault and Wilde, it nonetheless attests to the existence of a friendship between the two men at a time when the former was being pressurized to excise political scenes from *The O'Dowd*.

*The Times*, for one, was particularly censorious of *The O'Dowd* for its negative representation of absentee landlordism in Ireland in the midst of the Land Wars. As McFeely reveals, the newspaper advised Boucicault that the play's overt nationalism was '[i]n the circumstances of the time . . . even something more than unwise: Ireland and the Irish form scarcely now a fit subject for theatrical gasconading.'<sup>63</sup> The newspaper's intervention against *The O'Dowd* is a clear example of the forms of censorship theorized by Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu (in the words of Matthew Bunn) as 'a diffuse, ubiquitous phenomenon in which a host of actors (including impersonal, structural conditions) function as effective censors.'<sup>64</sup> McFeely further notes how 'On the same day as the *Times* reviewed *The O'Dowd*, the government announced that the leaders of the Land League would be prosecuted for their activities.'<sup>65</sup> The active prosecution of Charles Stewart Parnell and other Land League politicians by the government appears to have contributed to public and press antipathy towards Boucicault's play, forcing him to acknowledge in print 'expressions of displeasure from a portion of the audience' and announce that he was withdrawing the play from the stage rather than taking the political scenes out of it.<sup>66</sup> In this, the political proscription directed at *The O'Dowd* stands as a credible forerunner to the atmosphere of political repression that Wilde cited as the reason that he had been forced to withdraw *Vera*. Boucicault had already earned the ire of the press for the suggestion in his play *The Shaughraun* (1874) that the Irish question could be solved by the mutual co-operation of Britain and the USA. In the case of *The O'Dowd*, the Government's political strike against the Land League leaders was mirrored in the censorious actions of a disapproving press and public alike. Again, what Matthew Bunn denominates the 'New Censorship Theory' of Foucault and Bourdieu is relevant. As in Boucicault's case, the press and public, operating as non-state actors, enacted a form of structural censorship on *The O'Dowd*.<sup>67</sup> In this instance, the robust response to public opinion that Boucicault felt that the case of *The O'Dowd* warranted attests to both the extent and insidiousness of state coercion at this time.

Given the personal connection of the two playwrights, Boucicault's decision to withdraw *The O'Dowd* in 1880 for political reasons is surely significant for Wilde's decision to cancel the first performance of *Vera*. While Guy is correct to note that Boucicault gave practical advice on the play rather than alerting Wilde to the 'potential provocation' caused by its democratic

<sup>62</sup> Wilde, letter to an unidentified correspondent, c. September 1880, *Complete Letters*, p. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, p. 161.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After', *History and Theory*, 54 (2015), 25–44 (p. 27).

<sup>65</sup> McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, p. 160.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in McFeely, *Dion Boucicault*, p. 163.

<sup>67</sup> As Bunn helpfully notes, 'domains of power' (the 'field' or 'discourse', for Bourdieu and Foucault respectively) are 'bounded structures produced by rules formal and informal, conscious and subconsciously habitual' where 'power takes on ostensibly consensual, often invisible forms through the cultural and social authority of nonstate actors as well'. Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression', p. 27.

note, this does not detract from the atmosphere of implicit political repression that Wilde alluded to in his letter to Clara Morris.<sup>68</sup> If Boucicault's experience at the hands of the *Times* and other publications represents structural censorship undertaken by non-state actors, Wilde's incongruous request for dramatic pointers from Pigott, a man not known for his artistic acumen, suggests an internalized system of structural censorship, partly to appease his anxiety about the reception of his first play. In Wilde's case (borrowing from Bunn) this 'self-censorship . . . [was] ultimately more powerful and significant than overt, formal repression.'<sup>69</sup>

Whether self-engineered or structural in form, the censorship enacted on *Vera* saw Willie Wilde's column for *The World* of 30 November 1881 announce that 'Considering the present state of political feeling in England Mr Oscar Wilde has decided on postponing for a time the production of his drama *Vera*.'<sup>70</sup> And on 3 December 1881, *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* expanded upon this brief notice with its report that:

Mr Wilde has submitted his play to a committee of literary persons, who have advised him to keep it from the stage. The work, composed about four years ago, abounds in revolutionary sentiments which it is thought might stand in the way of its success with loyal British audiences.<sup>71</sup>

Like the aforementioned letters, these public notices suggest that Wilde felt a disabling degree of political anxiety with regards to the reception of his play.

A degree of self-censorship on Wilde's part can also be adduced from the press interviews he undertook on his year-long lecture tour of America in 1882 where he proved reticent to discuss the suppression of *Vera* when pressed by journalists over the fate of his play. Arriving in America six months after the assassination of the American President James A. Garfield in July 1881 and near the end of the trial of his assassin, Wilde understandably remained silent with regards to the revolutionary sentiments of *Vera*. Moreover, he made no reference to the putative censorship of his play and instead claimed that he could not find a 'suitable cast' to perform it in London.<sup>72</sup> Wilde's decision not to mention *Vera* when asked about the role of the 'Censor' in overseeing the development of England's dramatic arts appears equally discreet. Whilst openly lambasting Pigott for his prudery in not allowing public performances of Sardou's *Divoçons* to take place in London, Wilde's diplomatic silence about his own creative woes suggests a degree of circumspection aimed at guaranteeing a favourable reception for *Vera* which he now planned to rewrite and stage in America.<sup>73</sup> As we shall see, the eventual performance of an expanded version of the play now retitled *Vera; or, the Nihilists* in New York in August 1883 evidences further examples of both political self-censorship on Wilde's part while an alleged press conspiracy to close *Vera* in its first week indicates, like the public reception of the *O'Dowd*, coercion by non-state actors. The production history of *Vera; or the Nihilists* in its American epilogue furnishes further examples of censorship which range from (on Wilde's part) the expedient to the insidious, on the part of the American press.

<sup>68</sup> Guy, 'Wilde's Wretched Play', p. 349.

<sup>69</sup> Bunn, 'Reimagining Repression', p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Rowell, 'The Truth', p. 99.

<sup>71</sup> D. A., 'The Stage', *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 3 (3 December 1881), p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> 'Oscar Wilde's Arrival', *New York World*, 3 January 1882, 1, in *Oscar Wilde in America, the Interviews*, ed. by Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana & Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> 'Oscar Wilde', *Chicago Tribune*, 1 March 1882, 7, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, ed. by Hofer and Scharnhorst, p. 91.



## 5. EPILOGUE: PLAYING VERA; OR, THE NIHILISTS (1883) IN AMERICA

In March 1882, Wilde, when commenting on his favourite amongst his *Poems*, claimed that he had outgrown the political creed expressed in his ‘Sonnet to Liberty’ and that ‘Libertatis Sacra Fames’, with its distaste for mob rule and its preference for ‘the rule of One, whom all obey’, was now the clearest expression of his political beliefs.<sup>74</sup> Wilde’s (public) reiteration of his retreat from a revolutionary republicanism coincides with deletions that Guy identifies Wilde making from the 1883 ‘Reconstructed Performance Text’ of the play. Starring Marie Prescott, directed by Wilde, himself, and supported by an expensive advertising campaign around New York, the play was scheduled to undertake a three-week run at the Union Theatre from 21 August 1883. Three deletions, political in tenor, from the performance text suggest more self-censorship on Wilde’s part. Particularly striking is Wilde’s removal of a reference to the historic failure of Guy (‘Guido’) Fawkes’s Gunpowder plot, and one to the cowardly collapse of revolutions in contemporary ‘Naples, Berlin and Spain.’<sup>75</sup> Also deleted from the performance text is Prince Paul’s politically contentious declaration, made after his own decidedly convenient conversion to the Nihilist cause, that ‘Good kings are the enemies of democracy.’<sup>76</sup> Vera’s most passionate regicidal outburst, this time directed against Alexis (‘To be strong our new republic should be drunk with the blood of kings’), was also deleted by Wilde before the first performance.<sup>77</sup>

Despite Wilde’s excision of the more politically provocative lines from the play, on its eventual premiere in New York another form of censorship appears to have been initiated against *Vera*. While the audience was generally appreciative of the first performance, the play’s reception at the hands of New York theatre critics was deeply hostile. New York’s *Times*, *Tribute* and *Herald* variously lambasted the play for being ‘unreal’, ‘foolish’ and ‘dramatic rot.’<sup>78</sup> Further afield, the *St Louis Globe-Democrat* dismissed the play as ‘a fantastic and false invention, neither reasonable, real, nor dramatic.’<sup>79</sup> The play closed within a week. However, rumours that the play had been the victim of ‘a clique [that] was organized to crush *Vera*’ was reported by the *New York Dramatic Mirror*.<sup>80</sup> It informed its readers on 25 August that:

Reliable information has reached us that previous to the production of *Vera* at Union Square Theatre [the critics of the New York daily press] agreed among themselves to denounce [*Vera*] as a failure and to abuse its author whether the work justified adverse treatment or not.<sup>81</sup>

In this instance, a network of informal censorship by non-state actors appears to have been initiated to forestall the growth of Wilde’s nascent reputation as a dramatist. Ironically, it was now the London press, previously hostile to Wilde, which now proved itself comparatively sympathetic to, and conciliatory about, Wilde’s ‘failure’. The *Illustrated London News* claimed

<sup>74</sup> ‘Oscar Wilde: An Interview with the Apostle of Aestheticism’, *San Francisco Examiner*, 27 March 1882, 2, in *Oscar Wilde in America*, ed. by Hofer and Scharnhorst, pp. 102–3.

<sup>75</sup> Wilde, ‘*Vera*: Reconstructed Performance Text’, in *The Complete Works*, XI: 121.

<sup>76</sup> Wilde, ‘*Vera*: Reconstructed Performance Text’, p. 143.

<sup>77</sup> Wilde, ‘*Vera*: Reconstructed Performance Text’, p. 146.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*, p. 294.

<sup>79</sup> G. E. M., and Special Correspondence of the *Globe-Democrat*, ‘The Season’s Inaugural’, *St Louis Globe-Democrat*, 26 August 1883, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Quoted in Reed, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxiii.

<sup>81</sup> Reed, ‘Introduction’, p. xxxiii.

that London audiences in particular like ‘Russian accessories’ and were ‘passionately fond of fervid utterances about Freedom and the People.’<sup>82</sup> Reducing Wilde’s democratic politics to the level of glamorous costumes, the author of the review (G. A. S.) decreed that ‘With handsome dresses, glittering scenery, and general “staging” regardless of expense, “Vera” might have achieved in London a brilliant success.’<sup>83</sup> The fashionable settings of Wilde’s highly successful society comedies of the next decade suggest that he later took care to clothe his politics in dazzling attire.

140 years after it was written, Wilde’s ‘failed’ play is still the subject of academic controversy. In particular, the question as to whether the play was censored on political grounds or not continues to generate lively scholarly debate. As argued above, a genetic critique of the play both challenges the alleged censorship of the play on political grounds and crystalizes attendant issues about the extent of Wilde’s radicalism at the outset of his career and, by extension, the nature of his commitment to Irish republicanism *per se*. Beyond the performance history of the play itself, the putative suppression of *Vera*; or *the Nihilists* evidences multiple forms of political censorship and *self-censorship* at work on the late-Victorian stage. Despite Pigott’s claim that self-regulation on the part of playwrights made the act of political censorship redundant in Britain, recently theatre historians have identified the informal modes of pre-censorship suppression, involving Examiners, playwrights and stage managers, that shaped late-Victorian drama. In this respect, Wilde’s early letter to Pigott requesting advice and direction on *Vera* suggests both a willingness to compromise his artistic vision and a degree of pragmatism on his part with regards to state intervention in the theatre. While the lack of a response from Pigott belies Wilde’s claim that the play had been subjected to political coercion, his willingness to comply with the Examiner’s advice in pursuit of fame and riches similarly questions his main motivations for writing the play. Moreover, Pigott’s claim that self-regulation on the part of playwrights obviated the necessity of exercising political censorship on the British stage is undermined by instances of the overt and implicit suppression of Irish nationalist plays such as *The O’Dowd* and *Robert Emmet*. It would seem that if the example of Boucicault’s *O’Dowd* offered Wilde any insight into the workings of the stage, it was that he appeared to realize the dangers posed to his fledgling career in alienating both the state and ‘loyal British audiences’ with politically charged material. Later, Wilde’s *actual* experience of having a theatrical licence refused by Pigott (now deemed ‘a common-place official’ by Wilde) for his biblical drama *Salomé* while, in Wilde’s opinion, he continued to license ‘every low farce and vulgar melodrama’ shows the deleterious effects that Wilde, amongst others, felt that stage censorship was having on the development of British drama.<sup>84</sup> Wilde’s declaration to a friend that he was ‘hurt not merely at the action of the Licenser of Plays, but at the pleasure expressed by the entire Press of England at the suppression of my work’ attests to the strength and extent of the influence that theatre censorship continued to exercise over playwrights and the press alike at the end of the Victorian period.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>82</sup> G. A. S., ‘The Playhouses’, *Illustrated London News*, 25 August 1883, 183.

<sup>83</sup> G. A. S., ‘The Playhouses’, *Illustrated London News*, 25 August 1883, 183.

<sup>84</sup> Wilde, letter to William Rothenstein, mid-July 1892, *Complete Letters*, p. 531. See, for example, Shaw’s attack on Pigott in ‘A Purified Play’, in *Our Theatre in the Nineties*, pp. 36–41 (pp. 36–39).

<sup>85</sup> Wilde, letter to Arthur Fish, 11 July 1892, *Complete Letters*, p. 531.

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