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# The Importance of Being Nameless in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

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"I am going to live abroad again. The English climate doesn't suit me"
Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*

## I. Introduction

While there has been very few studies on Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, especially in comparison to his other works, the play actually offers a means to understand Wilde's *oeuvre*. Critiques of Victorian thinking and habits are common in Wilde, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* is no different in that regard. In *Oscar Wilde*, Donald H. Ericksen pays attention to Lord Darlington's role. Throughout the play, Lord Darlington often mocks Victorian society's attempt to make women submissive and docile. He tells Lady Windermere: "You are not what I thought you were. You are just the same as every other woman. You would stand anything rather than face the censure of a world, whose praise you would despise . . . you have no courage;

none!" (2. 310-16). However, despite Lord Darlington's efforts to criticize the social ills, he all of sudden disappears at the end of the play. As for this, Ericksen writes: "Lord Darlington's role as a dandy [who mocks Victorian society] seems to diminish after the first act. He becomes little more than one side of a conventional love triangle and his dandiacal qualities correspondingly diminish" (133). Paying attention to his diminished role, Ericksen argues that Lord Darlington eventually fails as a social critic. If Ericksen deals mainly with Lord Darlington, two critics are interested in Lady Windermere, especially Lady Windermere's realization. Observing the conversation between Lord Windermere and Lady Windermere in Act Four, Morse Peckham, in "What did Lady Windermere Learn?," argues that Lady Windermere does not learn anything. Peckham says that "Lady Windermere is not permitted to learn the truth because she has not earned the right to the truth. Her ideals are still the same" (11). However, going against Peckham, Kerry Powell, in "Pure Wilde: Feminism and Masculinity in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Salomé*, and *A Woman of No Importance*," argues that "Lady Windermere—no longer advocating purity as a law for women or men—pronounces Mrs. Erlynne a 'good woman' and understands at last the difficulty of dividing people into 'the good and the bad'" (57).

Aside from these readings of the play, there has in fact been no research on the meaning of being named in that play, especially for Lady Windermere. While The *Importance of Being Earnest* portrays the instability of names with its plethora of interchangeable names, *Lady Windermere's Fan* empties the meaning behind names by depicting Lady Windermere both as a named *and* nameless figure. Thus, based on Jacques Lacan's theory of language, I would like to explore how the meaning of namelessness demonstrates Wilde's satire of male-dominated Victorian social norms. In other words, having a name—more specifically a father's name—means one's entrance into the "symbolic"

—represented as male-dominated Victorian society. Since, at the end of the play, Lady Windermere becomes a named figure after being a nameless figure, she is considered a typical and good Victorian woman. In this respect, Wilde's play seems to solidify Victorian society. However, through Mrs. Erlynne's wish to remain a nameless figure and to leave England, Wilde in fact criticizes Victorian moral and social consciousness.

## II. The Importance of Being Named in Victorian Male-Oriented Society

At the center of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, readers find Mrs. Erlynne positioned in a social setting dominated by the patriarchal principle. As such, she is depicted as an "inadmissible," "wicked," "useful," "dangerous," "clever," "commercial," "worthless," and "vicious" figure. In this light, Mrs. Erlynne can be understood as a fallen woman.[1] To Victorians, good Victorian women should be submissive and faithful. The conversation between the Duchess of Berwick and Lady Windermere shows what it means to be a good Victorian woman. The Duchess of Berwick tells Lady Windermere that "My dear nieces—you know the Saville girls, don't you?—such nice domestic creatures—plain, dreadfully plain, but so good—well" (1.250-52). By calling women "domestic creatures," the Duchess suggests that women should stay home and be their husbands' faithful and useful companions. Moreover, the Duchess of Berwick calls Lady Agatha a sweet child because Lady Agatha is always faithful to her. Lady Agatha's repetitive

1) In "Lady Windermere's Fan," Alan Bird argues that "Mrs. Erlynne retrieves all her earlier losses and is able to walk off the stage with her head held high, as had many another such 'fallen' women in late Victorian society" (107).

and automatic response of "yes, mamma" to nearly every question represents the typical submissive Victorian woman. However, unlike these *good* Victorian women, Mrs. Erlynne deserted her husband and ran away with another man, thereby abandoning her maternal responsibilities. When Mrs. Erlynne attempts to get back into Victorian society, she still does not follow traditional feminine roles assigned by Victorian social conventions. Instead, she, as a masculine woman, blackmails Lord Windermere to maintain her lifestyle and get married to Lord Augustus. She also makes fun of many male characters including Lord Darlington.[2] As if knowing that she is not a typical Victorian woman, Mrs. Erlynne says that I was "despised, mocked, abandoned, sneered at to be an outcast" (3.146-47). By saying "to be an outcast," Mrs. Erlynne emphasizes that she is willing to be a fallen woman if she can be a *different* woman－not a Victorian one. By staging Mrs. Erlynne as a fallen woman and showing her "undesirable" attitudes towards male characters, Wilde critiques irrational social issues presented by male-dominated society in the Victorian era. In doing so, Wilde allows the Victorian audience to laugh with Mrs. Erlynne at the absurd patriarchal world. In this sense, for men in the Victorian era, Mrs. Erlynne is a "wicked," "vicious," and "dangerous" woman who is "inadmissible" to their society, but, for Victorian women, she is a "good" woman in that she no longer lives by Victorian rules, therefore breaking up Victorian male-centered society.

By the same token, for Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne is both a wicked

2) To some degree, Mrs. Erlynne is like Irene Adler in Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia." In the story, Adler is portrayed as a masculine-woman, who threatens the King of Bohemia and uses various costumes to change her identity. In addition, she is the only woman that beats Holmes. The King describes Adler: "she has a soul of steel. She has the face of the most beautiful of women, and the mind of the most resolute of men" (18), and Holmes, when he sees her for the first time, calls Adler as "the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet" (22). Considering all these characters, Adler is much like Mrs. Erlynne.

*and* good woman. On the one hand, Mrs. Erlynne is evil because she gives up her maternal responsibilities; when Lady Windermere was very young, Mrs. Erlynne left her for personal reasons. But, on the other hand, Mrs. Erlynne is a good mother because she helps Lady Windermere restore her name, therefore allowing her to enter the symbolic, if I borrow a Lacanian term, represented as language. Without Mrs. Erlynne's help, Lady Windermere would remain a nameless figure; she is an orphan both literally (through her father's death) and symbolically (her name, Margaret, is the same as that of her missing mother). As a result, Lady Windermere would fail to be accepted into the symbolic, and would therefore become "an outcast" just like Mrs. Erlynne.

To understand how language and naming represents and how identity works in Wilde, we must turn to Sigmund Freud. Freud's *fort-da* game, which he provides as an example in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, signifies the birth of language for the child because, while repeatedly throwing and pulling back a cotton reel—the symbol of his mother—the child reveals his painful separation from his mother by saying "*fort*" (in English, *gone*) with pain and "*da*" (Latin for *there*) with pleasure, Jacques Lacan develops his theory of the subject through the mirror stage. Lacan suggests that the child realizes that he, as a fragmented subject, is separated from his mother by looking at his reflection, not his mother's reflection, in the mirror. Lacan says, "It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this *context as an identification*, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [*assume*] an image" (76). In conjunction with Freud's *fort-da* game, Lacan suggests that the child's separation from his mother symbolizes his entrance into the "symbolic," which is represented by language. Thus, according to Lacan, entering into the symbolic means learning language as well as living by language; in other words, entering into the symbolic is to follow Victorian

norms.

But applying Lacan's theory to Lady Windermere's situation is inapplicable on the surface because Lady Windermere did not experience the child's agonizing experience of her mother's absence. Lady Windermere's father lied to her about her mother by saying she passed away. Lady Windermere says, "my mother die[d] when I was a mere child" (1.75). Nevertheless, Lacan's theory becomes more powerful and convincing, when paying attention to Lady Windermere's miserable situation. Considering that Lady Windermere was not named after her father, it is possible to say that she does not enter the symbolic; as a result, she becomes a nameless figure because she maintains her absent mother's name, "Margaret." Thus, in the world of the Name of the Father, she is not considered the subject. If Jack in the *Importance of Being Earnest* keeps attempting to get his father's name, Lady Windermere nothing but keeps wandering in the darkness without having her father's name.

But if Lady Windermere does not gain her father's name, how does she enter this male-dominated society? Lord Darlington says, "[Lady Windermere's house is] very small, very early, and very select" (1.161), and the Duchess of Berwick agrees with Lord Darlington by saying that "of course it's going to be select" (1.162). As both of these characters suggest, her house is a so selective place that Mrs. Erlynne, as an inadmissible, wicked and fallen woman, is not supposed to enter. To be a selected or qualified member of society, Lady Windermere must find her way through marriage. To Victorian women, marriage was understood as the only way for women to guarantee their security. Lord Darlington criticizes this Victorian marriage system: "It's a curious thing, Duchess, about the game of marriage—a game, by the way, that is going out of fashion—the wives hold all the honours, and invariably lose the old trick" (1.180-83). By calling marriage a game, Wilde argues that

marriage is not for love, but for one's security, especially for money. In addition, when Cecil Graham asks Lord Augustus how many times he has married and divorced, Lord Augustus answers, "I have a very bad memory. I really don't remember which" (2.114). Lord Augusts aptly stresses the contradictions in marriage in the Victorian era.

However, whether or not marriage at that time was for only one's own security or money, there is no other way than marriage for Lady Windermere to gain her father's name. In other words, Lady Windermere can be a named-figure by earning Lord Windermere's name, and, in turn, Lord Windermere can function as a symbolic father to her. In this respect, the absent mother's return is enough to destroy Lady Windermere's social status literally and symbolically. In Lacan's view, the return of the absent mother signifies the child's retreat from the "symbolic" and, as a result, she will lose her father's name. When Lady Windermere misunderstands that Lord Windermere has a secret affair with Mrs. Erlynne, she trembles with fear—not only because she is on the brink of losing her husband, but also because she is going to be a nameless woman by losing her symbolic father. Lady Windermere says, "I shall strike her [Mrs. Erlynne] across the face with it [Lady Windermere's fan]" (1.481-82). Here Lady Windermere's fan is the evidence for her acceptance into society because Lord Windermere gives it to her as a birthday present. If we focus on the meaning of birthday, the fan is a new beginning for Lady Windermere, now as a named figure. In this respect, Lady Windermere's attempt to hit Mrs. Erlynne with her fan can be understood as her desperate effort to keep her father's name. However, Lady Windermere fails to stop Mrs. Erlynne. Thus, the dropping of the fan, when Lady Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne meet, causes an "uncanny" moment (her reunion with her absent mother), and the event signifies Lady Windermere's loss of her "father's" name. With the return of the absent mother, Lady

Windermere becomes a nameless figure again.

However, in spite of Lady Windermere's loss of her name, the stage direction implies that she has another chance. As soon as Lady Windermere drops the fan, the stage direction says, "[Lord Darlington] picks it up and hands it to her" (2.146). Lord Darlington's handing over the fan to Lady Windermere shows his willingness to give her his name by becoming another symbolic father to her. As Lord Darlington later tells Lady Windermere "Oh !go－go out of this house" (2. 298) and "Be brave!" (2.306), he asks Lady Windermere to take that chance. Nonetheless, Lady Windermere, as a rigid moralistic Victorian woman, does not recognize this indication to take a chance. She reveals the pain resulting from the loss of her name, saying that "How alone I am in life! How terribly alone!" (2.326). Lady Windermere's becoming a nameless figure means that she has become unqualified as a member of society; she is forced to leave the dance and eventually her house. Lady Windermere says, "To stay in this house any longer is impossible" (2. 442). Mrs. Erlynne's repeated phrase "out of the house" emphasizes Lady Windermere as "an outcast." When discussing Lady Windermere's flight from her home, one might argue that Lady Windermere is escaping male-dominated society or she is accepting Lord Darlington's proposal; however, it should be viewed as her desperate attempt to find another name to be accepted to Victorian society again. Thus, as the stage direction and Lord Darlington suggest, her visit to Lord Darlington's house signifies her desperate struggle to find another symbolic father in order to become a named figure again so that she can re-enter the symbolic.

However, Lady Windermere does not succeed in finding another symbolic father because of the interception of Lady Windermere's letter. When Mrs. Erlynne is looking for Lady Windermere, she happens to find Lady Windermere's letter to Lord Windermere that details Lady Windermere's

decision to run away with Lord Darlington. Mrs. Erlynne goes to Lord Darlington's house, hoping to prevent Lady Windermere's hasty decision. When Mrs. Erlynne meets Lady Windermere, Mrs. Erlynne says, "Here is the letter. Your husband has never read it. He never shall read it" (3. 85-86). Emphasizing Lady Windermere's role as a mother, Mrs. Erlynne urges her to return to her house. Mrs. Erlynne says, "go back to that child [Lady Windermere's little boy] who even now, in pain or in joy, may be calling to you" (3.165-66). Mrs. Erlynne then tears up the letter, and that highlights her concern for Lady Windermere's maternal responsibility. The action symbolizes Mrs. Erlynne's transition from an absent mother to a present one. Convinced by this, Lady Windermere asks Mrs. Erlynne to take her home, but when they are about to leave, they hear a group of men, including Lord Windermere, coming to the house. With the help of Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere escapes the house, accidentally leaving her fan. To hide the fact that Lady Windermere was in the house, Mrs. Erlynne says, "I am afraid I took your wife's fan in mistake for my own, when I was leaving your house tonight" (3.413-14). Again, the possession of Lady Windermere's fan, as in the earlier case when Lord Darlington took it, insinuates Mrs. Erlynne's taking over Lady Windermere's name. Nevertheless, in this case, the symbol of the fan should not be understood as Lady Windermere's loss of her symbolic paternal name; rather, it should be understood as Lady Windermere's return to the "symbolic." In other words, Mrs. Erlynne finally becomes a present mother.

On the following day, when Mrs. Erlynne returns the fan, she asks Lady Windermere if she can keep it, to which Lady Windermere replies, "Oh, certainly, if it will give you any pleasure. But it has my name on it. It has 'Margaret' on it," and Mrs. Erlynne answers, "But we have the same Christian name" (4.358-60). Mrs. Erlynne's re-taking of the fan from Lady Windermere means her taking the maternal name "Margaret" from Lady Windermere. This

repetition of the loss and return of the fan recalls Freud's *fort-da* game. Following the similarity between the repeated loss and return of the fan and the child's *fort-da* game, Mrs. Erlynne's decision to leave Lady Windermere forever seems to be understandable. The absent mother finally returns to become the present mother, but, in order for the child to enter into the symbolic, the cotton reel must not return. In Mrs. Erlynne's case, for her to fulfill her role as a Lacanian mother, she symbolically must leave Lady Windermere so that Lady Windermere can regain her paternal name. In this respect, the fan has another meaning: Mrs. Erlynne and the audience realize that Mrs. Erlynne is Lady Windermere's mother at this moment. With the departure of Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere regains her lost paternal name, and, as a result, becomes a named-figure.

Lady Windermere, who was a nameless figure because of her absent mother, finally becomes a named figure with the help of Lord Darlington, who functions as a symbolic father, *and* her absent mother. Since she is now a named figure, she can enter into the symbolic, which means that she is now acceptable to Victorian society. Thus, by describing the process that Lady Windermere undergoes to become a named figure, Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* supports Victorian society.

## III. Conclusion: The Importance of Being Nameless

In this sense, to strengthen Victorian society, Mrs. Erlynne, who is a social outsider and mocks and destabilizes Victorian society, must leave England. If there are more Mrs. Erlynne-like women in England, then Victorian society would break down. Thus, the absent mother's removal is necessary for the enforcement of the patriarchal society. Nevertheless, Mrs. Erlynne claims that

"I have no ambition to play the part of a mother. Only once in my life have I known a mother's feelings. That was last night. They were terrible—they made me suffer—they made me suffer too much. For twenty years, as you say, I have lived childless still, —I want to live childless still" (4. 225-29). Mrs. Erlynne stresses that she helped Lady Windermere out of maternal affection, not to support Victorian society. Since Mrs. Erlynne had abandoned her child, she did not want Lady Windermere to make the same mistake. But if we pay attention to the twice-repeated phrase "they made me suffer," then Mrs. Erlynne's speech should be viewed as her resistance against the Lacanian mother's role and the symbolic. Her sufferings connote the Victorian women's sufferings under the Name of the Father.

To free herself from male-dominated society, Mrs. Erylnne decides to leave England. She says, "I am going to live abroad again. The English climate doesn't suit me" (4. 115-16). Here we need to pay attention to the words "abroad" and "The English climate." The English climate symbolizes Victorian conventions, which force women to be submissive and faithful servants to their husbands and to Victorian society. Since Mrs. Erlynne stands outside Victorian social norms by being a nameless figure, she does not want to go by these absurd social rules. In other words, Mrs. Erlynne does not want to be a typical Victorian; thus, she wants to live abroad, where Victorian rules supposedly do not exist. To her, being nameless is not accompanied by fear. Instead, being nameless offers her a way of finding freedom and her true identity.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* reveals the absurdity of Victorian social norms through Mrs. Erlynne's refusal to be a named figure. As soon as women become named figures in Victorian society, they are forced to be submissive and faithful. However, throughout the play, Mrs. Erlynne tries to remain a nameless figure, even if she becomes a social outcast and fallen woman. To

Mrs. Erlynne, the importance of being nameless is her desperate effort to escape Victorian society, as she does at the end of the play.

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**Abstract**

## The Importance of Being Nameless in Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

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By using Jacques Lacan's theory of language, this paper discusses the importance of being nameless in Victorian male-dominated society. According to Lacan, having a name, more specifically a father's name, means the subject's entrance into the "symbolic," thereby being accepted to Victorian society. Although Lady Windermere was a nameless figure, she earns the name of Lord Windermere, who functions as a symbolic father. In doing so, she finally succeeds in becoming a typical and good Victorian woman. However, Mrs. Erlynne, who mocks and tries to destabilize Victorian society, is willing to be a nameless figure and eventually leaves Victorian society. Through Mrs. Erlynne, Wilde reveals the absurdity of this male-dominated society.

■ Key words : Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Victorian society, Jacques Lacan, the symbolic
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