

'THE USUAL PALM TREE': LOVERS IN THE CONSERVATORY ON THE LATE VICTORIAN STAGE

Anjna Chouhan
(School of English, University of Leicester)

Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, urban gardens, parks and conservatories had become fashionable as well as culturally and socially accessible. Creating pockets of nature within towns fused the spheres of countryside and city into one location.

The escapism inherent in nature is a common theme in literature and art, as well as the theatre. Because the countryside within drama often functions as an escapist location, the late-Victorian penchant for faux or urban nature posed important questions for dramatists of the period. The dramatic paradigm of escape to the pastoral and return to the town, notable in Shakespearean plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, hinges around the idea that identity can be established by the act of travelling.

However, the fascination with urban gardens and conservatories challenged conceptions of territorial shifts as integral to the process of self-discovery. It was, therefore, within the realm of the urban conservatory that the late century playwrights Arthur Wing Pinero and Oscar Wilde subverted the traditional theatrical pastoral escape. In Pinero's farce *The Schoolmistress* (1886), and Wilde's society comedy *An Ideal Husband* (1895), rather than retreating to the countryside, characters retire to the palm trees in the conservatory to find escape and, more importantly, lovers.

This paper is an exploration of how these playwrights used the domesticated conservatory to negotiate the concepts of escape and return. By addressing the image of the conservatory as a late Victorian substitute for the pastoral escape, and probing the construct of the off-stage space, this article ultimately argues that romantic escapism, particularly within the parameters of the stage, does not necessarily require travel to a rural or idyllic location. Rather, the whole construct of the dramatic pastoral escape for lovers hinges not so much on 'usual', physical territory as the idea of imaginary experience.

Northrop Frye's twentieth-century paradigm of the pastoral or countryside setting in drama established a discourse within which to approach the 'green world' or place where 'the comic resolution is attained and the cast returns with it to their former world'.¹ Frye used Shakespeare's comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, with their respective dream and golden-world atmospheres, to demonstrate how physical movement to woods and forests beyond social order allows 'normal' or town rules to be temporarily suspended (p. 141). Experiences of inversion, saturnalia and festival are wound into the 'green worlds' of these plays, meaning that individuals subjected to their influences undergo a holiday or dream-like experience which furnishes them with sufficient insight and confidence to return to their homes

¹ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 141.

and combat the very things from which they sought escape. The point, of course, was that a shift to a 'green world' was often integral within Elizabethan comedy to the linear trajectory towards self-discovery and resolution.

Anticipating Frye's dramatic paradigm of territorial escape to a 'green world' and return to a homeland in Shakespeare's drama, Victorian literary scholars such as Charles Knight (1791-1873) and the Anglo-Irish Edward Dowden (1843-1913), agreed on the power and significance of nature within Shakespeare's comedies. In the 1840s, in what Frye would later call 'green world' drama, Charles Knight suggested that the plots unfold 'till the illusions disappear and the lovers are happy'.² Much later than Knight, in 1875, Dowden observed that these plays hinge around 'the woodland scene [...] possessed of a flora and fauna that flourish in spite of physical geographers'.³ Whether it was Dowden's concept of self-sufficient nature, or Knight's focus on lovers at the centre of Shakespeare's pastoral comedies, these attitudes are indicative of a Victorian trend in approaching the pastoral plays: that is that the action occurs within a natural idyll, and keeps going until lovers are united. To echo *Twelfth Night's* Feste, 'journeys end in lovers meeting'.⁴

As well as the relationship between nature and the romantic plot, Victorian dramatists like Oscar Wilde and Arthur Wing Pinero appropriated the journey of self-discovery through exposure to nature into their late-century dramatic worlds. For instance, in Pinero's farce *The Amazons* (1895), a piece that Pinero himself described as 'mainly sylvan', three tomboy sisters escape to the forest in order to discover their femininity and, of course, to encounter lovers.⁵ Similarly, the transfer from urban to rural surroundings as a pretext for a simultaneous shift of personality is demonstrated by Wilde in a comedy from the same year: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). In this play, the name and personae of the protagonist, John Worthing, are dependent on his geographical location. But what can this dramatic fusion of self-development, nature and romance reveal about late Victorian theatre? To answer this question, it is necessary to turn to the nineteenth-century glass construction: the conservatory.

This paper argues that the conservatory can be seen as a romantic, imaginative space like the mystical pastoral realms of Shakespeare's drama. This study uses two late century plays, *The Schoolmistress* (1886) and *An Ideal Husband* (1895), as a means of entering the Victorian world of the glasshouse in order to question the concept of the conservatory as a territory for escape and, most significantly, imagination. First, Arthur Wing Pinero (1855-1934), a London born actor and

2 Charles Knight, *Studies of Shakespeare: Forming a Companion Volume to Every Edition of the Text* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), p. 213.

3 Edward Dowden, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875), p. 80.

4 William Shakespeare, 'Twelfth Night' (2.3.42), *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 691-714.

5 Arthur Wing Pinero, *The Collected Letters of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero*, ed. J. P. Wearing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), p. 139.

playwright best known for his comedies, wrote the farce *The Schoolmistress* which was first performed in 1886 at the Court Theatre, London. The play was the second in a series of five comedies which became known as Pinero's 'Court Farces'.⁶ Despite being described as 'a fragile thing' by the manager Augustin Daly (*Pinero Letters*, p. 90), the play was a success, albeit short-lived. Secondly, just under a decade later than Pinero's *Schoolmistress*, Oscar Wilde's society comedy *An Ideal Husband* opened in early January of 1895 at the Haymarket. During its opening week, the theatrical paper *The Era* dismissed the drama as a 'deep and bitter disappointment'.⁷ Nevertheless, the play has stood the test of time, having been adapted for the screen on at least three occasions in the twentieth century, as well as having its most recent stage revival at the London Vaudeville in 2010. Both *Schoolmistress* and *Husband* subvert preconceptions, such as that of Charles Knight, about comic plots being driven by pairs of lovers, and involve peripheral couples who, after the fashion of the travellers in Shakespeare's 'green worlds', seek escape, not through a geographical shift to the rural space, but by the establishment of a faux countryside within the urban territory in the form of an off-stage conservatory.

In order to understand the conceptual significance of the conservatory, it is necessary to begin with the Victorian literary interest in nature. George Levine has discussed the notion of the 'landscape' in Victorian fiction as a fusion of the 'sublime' and 'mundane'. Levine traces the Victorian Realism of George Eliot and John Ruskin, arguing that 'for Ruskin, as for the Realist novelists everywhere, the quotidian, the merely human, must fill up the space of the sublime'.⁸ By imbuing the mundane with an inherently 'sublime' experience, Levine suggests that Victorian writers and artists drew upon traditional conceptions of an idyllic, pastoral world that R. L. Patten has recently defined as having 'sunshine, birds, blue sky, green fields, vitality, beauty, happiness, and peace'.⁹ All of these 'ingredients' (p. 154), as Patten terms them, are part of what Andrew Griffin has called the Victorian 'thirsty yearning' for landscapes: a yearning that is 'touched by nostalgia'.¹⁰ This provides a tidy segue to the concept of 'nostalgia' which Ann C. Colley has defined as a combination of melancholy, longing and recollection.¹¹ Colley challenges the sense of *unfulfilment* suggested by

6 Jeffrey Huberman, *Late Victorian Farce* (Michigan: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986), p. 91.

7 'An Ideal Husband', *The Era*, 5 January 1895. April 2011. www.galegroup.com.

8 George Levine, 'High and Low: Ruskin and the Novelists', *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (California: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 137-52; 149.

9 Robert L. Patten, "'A Surprising Transformation": Dickens and the Hearth', *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (California: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 153-70; 154.

10 Andrew Griffin, 'The Interior Garden and John Stuart Mill', *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, eds. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (California: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 171-86; 171.

11 Ann C. Colley, *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1998).

these terms by discussing Victorian literature, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), that draws on sentimentalised conceptions of 'an arcadian past' in order to impress upon readers the significance and demands of the present (pp. 76-7). This circles back to Levine's observation that Victorian fiction and art drew longing for a lost 'pastoral' world into everyday 'mundane' activity.

Nevertheless, 'recollection' and 'longing' for a pre-lapsarian arcadia, however 'naïve' (Colley, p. 77), is decidedly regressive in a culture that admired the social reformer Samuel Smiles' (1812-1904) ethos of 'self-help', and Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) model of survival and progress. In real terms, Patten's pastoral 'ingredients' provided an idealised escape from labour and industry associated with city life. Thus the countryside became an increasingly popular working-class holiday retreat.¹² From the mid-nineteenth century, high levels of employment and the development of friendly societies encouraged a saving culture amongst working-class families. Samuel Smiles argued that 'honest earning and the frugal use of money', together with 'prudence and self-denial' offer 'hope until better days come around'.¹³ Given the dedication involved in saving money, holidaying in the countryside proved that individuals could elevate themselves, their situations and futures through self-help. In other words, progress or self-improvement was necessary in order to realise a nostalgic dream of the 'pastoral'.

Ideas of renewing influences within rural atmospheres were arguably fuelled by Darwin's theory of natural selection (1859). The 'healing' or reviving elements of the countryside could be likened to the power within nature to adapt or 'select' species for survival. Nature, by Darwin's logic, transforms individuals into physiologically and mentally adept beings. But this progressive influence conflicted with the connotations of nature as a pre-lapsarian idyll. If the need for rural escape pertains to nostalgic desires for a pre-industrial, agrarian utopia, how could it signify an evolutionary, teleological movement towards perfection? Michael Waters has offered a solution to this seeming paradox by claiming that Victorian gardens and rural recreations were 'visionary and forward-looking rather than nostalgic genuflections to the myth of a Golden Age', and that it was precisely this 'forward' ideology that underpinned the 'thirst' for nature.¹⁴

Assuming that nostalgia, the 'sublime' and 'mundane' are reconcilable concepts, what happens when the essential 'ingredients' of the pastoral world are missing or unattainable? It is here that the 'imagination' becomes paramount. In his essay on the Victorian suburb, Walter L. Creese suggests that, in the urban landscape where a 'Wordsworthian' escape is desirable but unfeasible, public gardens were designed to

12 Incidentally, the sea-side did become a popular holiday destination. See John K. Walton, 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian England', *The Economic History Review* 34 (May, 1981), pp. 249-65.

13 Samuel Smiles, *Self Help* (London: John Murray, 1905), p. 295.

14 Michael Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1988), p. 218.

provide 'a maximum variety of spacial experience' with trees planted in such a way as to obscure the view of the ugly suburban world (p. 58). In short, nature was brought into the city and suburbs in much the same way that the 'sublime' was introduced into the everyday world in literature. Public gardens were spaces in which various fantasies (nostalgia and the pastoral) combined to form an imaginary retreat within an urban environment. The imagination, Creese suggests, gave writers, artists, architects and landscapers the potential to bring together seemingly disparate worlds: the urban and the rural, and reality and nostalgic fantasy.

With respect to the depiction of the garden in literature, Waters has observed that 'when used as a pastoral metaphor, "garden" inevitably defines the country as something to look upon and enjoy rather than as something from which to derive a living' (p. 185). Gardens, in this way, transcended all suggestion of urban and rural labour, becoming realms in which observers and participants could indulge in the aesthetic quality of nature. Because of agricultural hardship and the labourer's subjection to economical fluctuations, gardens became miniature, idealised and, most importantly, controllable recreations of rural landscapes. The artistic and entirely manageable patch of land provided an alternative to what Oscar Wilde called 'uncomfortable' nature in which 'grass is hard and lumpy and damp'.¹⁵

The fusion of 'pastoral' fantasy or imagination and reality, in literature, drama, poetry, art, parks and gardens: in short, the Victorian world in general, was encapsulated nowhere more fittingly than in the image of the Victorian conservatory. It is this domesticated form of nature preserved under a glass roof that offers a unique insight into late-Victorian dramatic engagements with the 'green world' paradigm and the romance plot. By focusing on the non-presence of the conservatories on stage, this paper draws on Bert O. States' theory of theatrical 'phenomenology' whereby the complex realm of the 'stage' calls upon actors and audiences to offer up their collective imaginations, giving 'meaning' to signifiers like props and sets, and incorporating the boundaries between on- and off-stage spaces into the imaginary dramatised world.¹⁶ By playing on audience conceptions of the 'pastoral', escape, conservatory, expectations of comedy and willingness to suspend belief in favour of 'phenomenology', this paper argues that Pinero and Wilde, within the paradigm of drama and the equally artistic parameters of the conservatory, were consciously experimenting with the notion of imaginary spaces.

The conservatory

The fusion of urban and rural landscapes into a domesticated, fantasy territory, in the

15 Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', *Blitz Editions: The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Bookmark Limited, 1990), pp. 909-31; 9.

16 See Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: The Phenomenology of Theatre* (London: University of California Press, 1985).

shape of parks and gardens, offers important conceptual groundwork for the study of Victorian dramatic conservatories. Michael Waters and, more recently, Isobel Armstrong have both observed the significance of the conservatory within Victorian literature. Armstrong notes that the conservatory is often a place of romantic 'licence' which, through its proximity to the home, operates 'in dialogue' with the domestic space.¹⁷ Similarly, Waters proposes that conservatories, again in Victorian fiction, appear 'within the here-and-now world of the privileged classes' where 'lovers find privacy, and experience a sense of being in an other-world environment' (p. 270). According to Waters, conservatories 'captured the Victorian imagination', because while gardens involved 'uncomfortable' nature, and uncontrollable climates, the conservatory had manageable 'airiness and profusion, and darkness and luminosity' (ibid.).

Together with ideas about domesticated nature and its conduciveness towards wooing, in Armstrong's study of Victorian conservatories there is a clear 'imaginative' theme that comes to the fore. Under a grand glass roof, with rigid temperature control, seasons could be artificially created, the town house and city itself transported into rural and even exotic worlds, and socio-economic reality temporarily broken down in public glasshouses where everyone is part of an organic community united by nature. The whole idea, Armstrong suggests, made the glasshouse 'an exercise in imagining another time' (p. 180).

Although ideas of imagination, nostalgia and romance all echo through these discourses on the fictional Victorian conservatory, collective focus on the glasshouse does not extend to the off-stage experiences of characters within plays in the performative context of the theatre. What, if anything, does the 'imagined' space of the conservatory bring to the study of late nineteenth-century drama? In order to answer this question, the following sections examine Wilde's and Pinero's uses of the conservatory as a romantic territory, a site of escape and a marginal, imaginary zone where peripheral characters and plots can thrive without interrupting the main action of the drama.

Romantic spaces

Like Waters' notion of privacy for lovers within literature, *The Schoolmistress* and *An Ideal Husband* present the conservatory as a designated spot for love making. Beginning with *Schoolmistress*, the first mention of a conservatory is by the schoolgirl Dinah Rankling, who claims that 'Reginald proposed to me in the conservatory [...] then we went into the drawing room and told Mamma'.¹⁸ The

17 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 182.

18 Arthur Wing Pinero, 'The Schoolmistress', *Plays by A. W. Pinero*, ed. George Rowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 17-74; 21.

conservatory is, here, a space for romance, necessitating a shift to the more practical, social territory of the drawing room within the house in order to engage with the real world. Conversely, in the third act, a different couple move from the drawing room into the conservatory. The character Mallory questions, 'is the conservatory heated?' to which Peggy replies, 'I don't mind if it isn't', whereupon they both exit through glass doors (pp. 61-2). They re-emerge much later when Mallory announces, 'while looking at the plants in the conservatory, I became engaged to Miss (Peggy) Hesslerigge' (p. 71). The heat, plants and alternative atmosphere of the conservatory seem to render it a conventional love-making territory. Proposal occurs very matter-of-factly in the conservatory 'while looking at the plants'. So conventional is the conservatory that characters treat it as a tactical, pragmatic arrangement rather than a liberating retreat.

After a similar fashion, in *An Ideal Husband*, the conservatory is another off-stage space in which characters engage in flirtation. The dandyish figure Lord Goring encounters a former fiancée, Mrs Cheveley, who claims that their engagement ended because he 'saw, or said (he) saw, poor old Lord Mortlake trying to have a violent flirtation with me (Mrs Cheveley) in the conservatory at Tenby'.¹⁹ But the chief conservatory related incident in *Husband* relates to Lord Goring's current love interest, Mabel Chiltern. After having received a proposal from Goring, Mabel instructs him to enter the conservatory and find the 'second palm tree on the left' or 'the usual palm tree' (p. 253). She also confesses that Goring's proposal 'makes the second today': 'it is one of Tommy's days for proposing. He always proposes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, during the season' (p. 250). The audience is led to assume that the 'usual palm tree' is the place where these frequent proposals occur.

Like *Schoolmistress*, the would-be romantic experience is compressed into a pre-meditated, practical affair. Mabel precludes any romantic spontaneity by providing her suitor with strict instructions about his proposal. Similarly, Mrs Cheveley's 'violent flirtation' or deviation from propriety is thwarted by Goring's intrusion into the conservatory at Tenby. As Russell Jackson has pointed out, Wilde included a longer exchange concerning Tenby between Goring and Mrs Cheveley in his initial draft of the play. Goring was to make the observation 'you had not quite realised that conservatories have glass walls. They are not like boudoirs. They are not so convenient' (p. 333). The transparent walls, rather paradoxically, draw attention to the false nature of the liberty or licence attributed to the literary and dramatic conservatory. Despite the omission of this observation in the play itself, Goring's discovery of the clandestine affair, coupled with Mabel's clear wooing instructions, all contribute to the overwhelming sense of *control* encapsulated by the heated, transparent and law-abiding glasshouse.

19 Oscar Wilde, 'An Ideal Husband', *Two Society Comedies: A Woman of no Importance and An Ideal Husband*, eds. Ian Small and Russell Jackson (New York: W.W Norton & Company Inc., 1983) pp. 121-270; 233.

Here, it is worth noting Wilde's claim in his essay *The Decay of Lying* (1891):

Out of doors, in nature, one becomes abstract and impersonal, one's individuality absolutely leaves one [...] if nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer houses to the open air. (p. 909)

The confined and paradoxically unnatural natural retreat, in this way, is a space in which identity can be retained and controlled, rather than expanded and challenged. So, far from being a zone of spontaneous romantic licence where rules are broken down, Mabel perceives the transparent conservatory as a 'usual', designated and navigable space where rules are to be observed.

Escape

If nature is 'unnatural', how can the characters find their 'pastoral' escape? Given the lack of liberty within the glass walls of the conservatory, the supposedly subversive experience of the 'green world' becomes limited. As François Laroque has argued, 'alternation, contrast and reversal are the basic concepts that are always inseparable from the phenomenon of festivity' within the plays of Shakespeare.²⁰ This allows for the rejection of the order associated with what Frye called 'irrational society' (p. 141). Plunging into Bakhtinian carnivalesque or saturnalian anarchy, though not of the bodily kind, was something that could be explored within the genre of Victorian farce.

Thus Pinero emulated the mysterious experiences of liberty and subversion in Shakespeare's woods within the confines of Admiral Rankling's home in *The Schoolmistress*. The schoolgirls and their headmistress Miss Dyott, at the close of the play's second act, become homeless. Their college is burnt down by the pyromaniac serving boy Tyler, forcing them to seek refuge in the home of Dinah Rankling's strict and unforgiving father. The scene in this home is entitled 'Nightmare' and occurs in the darkness. The characters cannot sleep so they drift into the drawing room, one by one, triggering a farcical series of events. The girls must hide themselves from Admiral Rankling on several occasions, together with Dinah's clandestine fiancé Reginald, who has been barred from the house. Throughout this scene there are characters hiding from and chasing one another, as well as lovers attempting to find solitude in the conservatory. Time is suspended here, forcing the characters to exist in a preternatural world between night and day. The repeated calls for daylight amplify the sense of lost time: 'you didn't meet any daylight on the stairs did you?', 'there wasn't any daylight in your room when you came down, was there?', 'are we never

20 François Laroque, *Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 235.

going to have any more daylight?' and 'oh will it never be daylight?' (pp. 56-62). The characters are stuck in a kind of limbo, each craving the sanity and security of morning and, therefore, the rediscovery of time. Thus the confusion of the scene coupled with the atmosphere of mystery created by the darkness offer to replicate the experiences in the Shakespearean 'green world' within the confines of an urban townhouse.

It is important to be aware that the 'Nightmare' scene unfolds *outside* of the conservatory. Turning to the plot, during the Christmas holiday, the girls at Volumnia College abandon their regimental routines while their schoolmistress is away, culminating their frivolities at the moment of the incineration of their school. One example of their saturnalian experience is a feast that takes place during an illicit wedding party thrown for Dinah Rankling. Once the schoolmistress is out of sight, the girls become careless with expenditure and indulge themselves with food. Practical finances such as rent, fire insurance and wages are spent on 'oysters and a *paté de foie gras*', 'lobster salad', 'lark pudding', 'champagne', 'tarts and confectionery' and 'a wedding cake' (pp. 36-7). Emily Allen has recently observed that the wedding cake was a 'symbol of social standing', noting that royal cakes were produced 'for ocular not oral consumption'.²¹ Indeed, Pinero's wedding cake is never consumed, and nothing of the other victuals is even touched by the characters around the dinner table. This on-stage *non*-feasting expresses a desire for unfettered and infinite supplies of food without regard for availability and budgets, and places the action within a subversive realm where the rules of everyday, economically bound existence have no place. By the time the girls reach the 'Nightmare' scene, therefore, the sense of lawlessness has been well established.

While the anarchy within and preceding Pinero's 'Nightmare' brings the *lack* of mystery in the conservatory to the fore, Wilde seems to have subverted the entire notion of the festive, saturnalian experience in *Husband*. Having entered to meet Mabel under their palm tree, Goring 'returns from the conservatory looking very pleased with himself and with an entirely new buttonhole that someone has made for him' (p. 259). Earlier in the play, Goring makes some comic and essentially nonsensical remarks about the importance of buttonholes, concluding with the ridiculous request, 'for the future a more trivial buttonhole [...] on Thursday evenings' (p. 214). That a flower can be trivial, age-enhancing or even, as in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), 'as beautiful as the seven deadly sins' attributes to nature inappropriate, potentially impossible qualities.²² Goring, then, emerges from the 'usual' dramatic 'green world' brandishing a piece of nature as an aesthetic garment.

21 Emily Allen, 'Culinary Exhibition: Victorian Wedding Cakes and Royal Spectacle', *Victorian Studies* 45 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 457-84; 65, 77.

22 Oscar Wilde, 'A Woman of No Importance', *Two Society Comedies: A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband*, eds. Ian Small and Russell Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1983), pp. 11-129; 28.

The traditional sense of mystery or anticipation about 'green worlds' like the Forest of Arden, for instance, is parodied by Wilde through Goring's reaction to Mabel's invitation to the conservatory: 'second on the left?', and her rather flippant response delivered 'with a look of mock surprise': 'yes, the usual palm tree' (p. 253). Just as Goring's pre-escapist experience seems underwhelming, so too does his emergence from the conservatory make him predictably *au fait* with the 'green world' experience. As well as incorporating nature in a sartorial accessory, when conversing with his father, Goring unconsciously refers to the conservatory as 'the usual palm tree' (p. 262). So, whereas the 'usual palm tree' was an unintelligible euphemism for the conservatory before his visit, it is readily adopted into his discourse upon his emergence.

Wilde, it seems, refused to engage with the details of experience within the mock 'pastoral' realm, reducing romantic symbols and gestures to comic banter and commonplace locations. Assimilators of Wilde's epigrams delight in listing witty truisms about love and romance, and indeed Wilde's comic phrases coalesce in his depictions of actual lovers' unions within his drama. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for instance, Algernon claims that 'the very essence of romance is uncertainty'.²³ Marriage, on the other hand (according to Mrs Cheveley, in *Husband*) is categorised as a 'settlement' (p. 222). The polarised concepts of 'uncertainty' and 'settlement' reflect Wilde's equally disparate definitions of romance and marriage; and it is these opposites that he brings together in the 'romantic' but ritual wooing ground of the conservatory with its navigable layout and rigidly controlled climate. Just as matrimony is a 'settlement', so too does the romantic experience become localised and organised: in short, it is categorically *unromantic*.

In both plays, the 'sublime' escapist experiences are fused comically with the 'mundane' worlds of townhouses and their adjoining conservatories. In fact, the conservatories are accessed via doors that lead straight into them, narrowing the distance between the natural and urban spheres. Far from moving to the 'green world', the alternative territory is brought to the urban or, what Shakespeare terms, 'the working-day world'.²⁴ The proximity of the romantic glasshouse to the home domesticates what ought to be a character-challenging 'green world'. By their very natures as conservatories, rather than woods, forests or even gardens, these spaces inhibit the escapist, character-developing experiences around which the 'green world' paradigm hinges. It is not, in other words, in the conservatories – the designated 'green world' space – that anything approaching saturnalia takes place in these plays because the glasshouse's 'pastoral' significance seems to be entirely imaginary.

23 Oscar Wilde, 'The Importance of Being Earnest', *Blitz Editions: The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Bookmark Limited, 1990), pp. 321-69; 23.

24 William Shakespeare, 'As You Like It' (1.3.12), *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 627-52.

Peripheral plots and spaces

Shifting farcical and seemingly lawless activities into the urban territory outside of the designated escapist space seems to defy all concept and, ultimately, purpose of the 'green world'. If the lovers choose to retreat to a quasi-pastoral ground, why opt for the conservatory? As well as its inherently paradoxical status as domestic, organised house of nature and the exotic, the conservatory exists on the boundary between the in- and outsides: in other words, it occupies a peripheral territory.

On the subject of the 'peripheral', it is necessary to turn to the love plot. An article in the weekly theatrical paper *The Era*, from the end of 1881, suggested that 'few plays, if any, fail when they possess real love interest' and that 'if love proved of so much value to the Elizabethan playwright, what must it not be for the Victorian playwright?'²⁵ Given the supposed indispensability of romance within comedy, it is fascinating that the love plot has been shifted by both Pinero and Wilde away from the 'reality' of the performance space. Before turning to performance theory to expand on this business of relocating plots, it is vital to return to the plays in question.

Romance, within these comedies, is entirely secondary or supplementary to the plots. A significant indicator of Pinero's and Wilde's respective successes in demoting romantic interest can be found in reviews of each original production. In newspapers as socially and culturally diverse as the weekly *The Era*, the cheaper *Penny Illustrated*, the high-brow *Morning Post* and the daily *Pall Mall Gazette*, a common complaint about both plays was the superfluity of the final acts and, crucially, the lovers' unions. For instance, of Pinero's farce, *Pall Mall* claimed 'if the author will only cut two pieces of dialogue out of the last act [...] *The Schoolmistress* will not be far from the cleverest and best-acted farce for a good many years'.²⁶ Similarly, of *Husband*, *The Morning Post* complained that the last act is full of 'disjointed and ineffective incidents'.²⁷ Together with these concerns about the closing scenes, the romantic unions occurring in the conservatories were considered unnecessary by reviewers. The *Pall Mall* suggested that the wooing between Goring and Mabel in *Husband* has 'nothing whatever to do with the development of the play'.²⁸ A similar sentiment was expressed earlier by *The Era* in relation to *Schoolmistress* in which Peggy and Mallory's wooing was dismissed as 'a bit of love making'.²⁹

But the 'bit of love making' in each play seems to have been consciously incidental. In Pinero's initial manuscript for *The Schoolmistress*, the play concluded

25 'Love Dramas', *The Era*, 19 November 1881. June 2010. www.galegroup.com.

26 'Mr Pinero's New Play', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 30 March 1886. April 2011. www.galegroup.com.

27 'Haymarket Theatre', *The Morning Post*, 4, January 1895. April 2011. www.galegroup.com.

28 'The Theatre', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 January 1895. April 2011. www.galegroup.com.

29 'The London Theatres', *The Era*, 3 April 1886. April 2011. www.galegroup.com.

with Mallory's proposal to Peggy.³⁰ Pinero himself considered Peggy – played by the actress Miss Norreys – to be 'the hit of the piece' (*Pinero Letters*, p. 86). It is surprising, then, that the final version banishes this character's marriage proposal to the conservatory, and the play closes not with the prospect of matrimony, but rather with the promise of a new career for the titular schoolmistress, Miss Dyott. By shifting the focus away from the love plot at the close of the play, Pinero clearly privileges the practical, real world over the romantic 'green world'.

This prioritising can also be distinguished in *An Ideal Husband* when Lord Goring coaxes his father, Lord Caversham, into the conservatory to woo his fiancée on his behalf with the request, 'just go in here for a moment, father, third palm tree to the left, the usual palm tree' (p. 262). By abandoning Mabel and the conservatory, Goring chooses the real world over the escapist albeit limited, licence of the glasshouse. Interestingly, Goring mistakes the location of the palm tree, which Mabel specifically refers to as 'the second on the left'. Of course, this demonstrates a dismissive attitude towards the romantic quality of the 'nature' within the conservatory. Rather than wooing centre-stage, Goring tactfully ushers the peripheral characters into the confined, navigable conservatory, remaining on-stage to join the chief non-romantic plot. Curiously, in a letter from 1894, Wilde claimed, 'I like comedy to be intensely modern, and I like my tragedy to walk in purple and to be remote'.³¹ The comic wooing in *Husband*, by this logic, becomes a 'modern', commonplace or 'mundane' activity. In fact, Sos Eltis has suggested that the play 'criticises ideals'.³² Though Eltis refers specifically to political and marital 'ideals', the play's 'critical' stance on *unreality* can easily extend to the issue of romance. In other words, just as consciousness stricken politicians and ideal husbands are imaginary, so too is romance 'remote' in the 'modern' world of 'mundane' reality. Like *Schoolmistress*, then, the climax of *Husband* does not hinge around the union and marriage of the lovers. The inevitable linear movement towards matrimony within comedy appears to be mocked in these plays so that not only are lovers and nature no longer centre-stage, but they are no longer centre-plot.

If the conservatory is the single locus upon which escapist fantasies about heat, fertility, beauty and peace are thrust, it becomes a peripheral territory between reality and the imagination. Since the stage itself exists in a temporal and spacial reality, it seems fitting to navigate any potentially fantastical or romanticised activity away from the 'reality' of the performance space. It is here that performance theory becomes a useful medium through which to conceptualise the off-stage conservatory as an imagined territory.

30 See George Rowell's Appendix to *The Schoolmistress*, pp. 73-4.

31 Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 2000), p. 626.

32 Sos Eltis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Submission in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 148.

Taking *Schoolmistress* as an example, Peggy and Mallory leave the drawing room in order to pursue their flirtation in the privacy of the conservatory. By denying the audience access to this space, Peggy and Mallory are offered a period of privacy. But the characters' experiences in this conservatory depend on the audience's ability to extend belief in their existence and activities away from the visible performance area. As Jeffrey Huberman has noted, 'reported spectacle' 'accounts for nearly all of the play's knockabout' (p. 97). Indeed, this is the case throughout the drama, but with respect to the conservatory, upon opening the adjoining door, one character reports seeing 'two persons under a palm tree' (p. 22). Theatrical reported action and dramatic irony, coupled with the act of moving on and off the stage, all raise questions about the concept of physical, territorial escapism.

Performance theory, then, offers a way of approaching the issue of on- and off-stage movement. The dramatic and literary theorist Bert O. States categorised the theatre as a phenomenological experience in which 'signs', defined as actors and props, 'achieve their vitality [...] not simply by signifying the world, but by being *of* it' (p. 20). Because of this theatrical occurrence where the performed is, marginally at least, 'real', the stage as a territory in its own right becomes another kind of phenomenon. States observes that:

Theatre is the paradigmatic place for the display of the drama of presence and absence; for theatre produces [...] its effect precisely through a deliberate collaboration between its frontside ("on" stage) and its backside ("off" stage) whereby anticipation is created through acts of entrance and exit (the recoil of the world beyond), and finally between the frontside illusion (character and scene) and the backside reality (the actor, the unseen stage brace that "props" up the illusion).³³

In other words, the entire experience of observing performance hinges on self-deception and the illusion that the stage space is its own reality, its own world. Reconciling the front- and back-sides with the illusion of the stage evokes the 'dialogue' that Armstrong argues is present between the conservatory and the home. Crossing the thresholds between both worlds depends on an act of faith or, ultimately, imagination.

It is possible to liken this enigmatical theatrical 'dialogue' between 'presence and absence' on and off the stage, to nineteenth-century assumptions about travel between town and country. Since the country was away from over-populated industrial areas, it was immediately associated with health and wellbeing. In 1898, the town-planning enthusiast Sir Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928) argued that while towns were valuable for the establishment of communities, 'the country is the symbol

33 Bert O. States, 'The Phenomenological Attitude' *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (U.S.A: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 26-36; 28.

of God's love and care for man [...] its beauty is inspiration[...] it is the source of all health'.³⁴ It follows that travelling between the town and countryside was a simultaneous accumulation of experience, wellbeing and a widening of ideological spheres.

This idea that physical and mental identity can be established through the act of territorial shifting evokes Salman Rushdie's twentieth-century theories of migration as integral to artistic productivity. Rushdie claims that the process of being uprooted through travel enables individuals to develop a 'fractured consciousness' which provides 'new angles at which to enter reality'.³⁵ This, incidentally, seems to echo Wilde's image of a stable personality being expanded or 'lost' in the act of travelling out of doors. Perhaps more pertinent to the issue of self-discovery through urban and rural travel or 'migration', is Rushdie's concept of the homeland as 'imaginary' and, ultimately, independent of physical territory and geographical location (p. 10).

Rushdie's conception of the imaginary 'land' is, arguably, a helpful way of approaching the problem of the off-stage glasshouse for lovers. Despite the signifiers of escape: the trees and plants that audiences assume are contained in the conservatory, the very fact that neither it nor its natural contents can be seen suggests that escapism is, to some extent, imaginary and dependent not on locations or even surroundings, but on the propensity to create a mental space within which the rules of normality associated with town life can be deconstructed.

It is necessary, then, to return to the original questions posed earlier: why the combination of romance, the conservatory and the imaginary? What can the dramatic fusion of self-development, nature and romance reveal about late Victorian theatre? What, if anything, does the 'imagined' space of the conservatory bring to the study of late nineteenth-century drama? It seems that the literal marginality of the escapist territory in both plays implies that the conventional dramatic trope of the romantic 'pastoral' retreat had become a commonplace at the end of the nineteenth century. The temperate, contrived and domestic conservatory tamed nature in much the same way that audience expectation of comic linear plots had stripped love making of its 'romance' and spontaneity. The self-conscious futility of the love plots in both Pinero's and Wilde's comedies draws attention to the equally superfluous construction of the expensive, aesthetic glasshouse, and so both constructs, romance and the conservatory, become peripheral. The only way to inject an element of real romance, however ironic, back into this 'mundane' wooing ritual, was to shift the entire episode and its 'green world' surrounding to an imaginary, invisible territory: the off-stage.

34 Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1946), p. 48.

35 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992), p. 12.

Conclusion

When transferred onto a stage signifying a townhouse and travel between *thresholds*, rather than geographically and ideologically disparate *territories*, the uprooting, challenges, and regeneration of characters that should occur through movement between town and country enter this microcosmic world of on- and off-stage movement. In an age when transport between town and country could be made frequently with ease, the rural haven, to some degree, was losing its novelty and, more importantly, in its very accessibility, was devoid of social exclusivity. It was, it seems, within the domain of upper and middle class urban gardens and conservatories that escape could be, not necessarily found, but certainly evoked in the same way that drama does not transport audiences to, but rather *signifies* other worlds.

Levine's notion of drawing together the 'sublime' and 'mundane' in Victorian art hinges around the imagination in a similar way to States' phenomenological theatre where the real and unreal coalesce rather than collide.

As Wilde argued:

Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place. As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy (*Decay of Lying*, p. 909).

The 'myth' that nature is implicitly purifying and, ultimately, ideal, is asserted by the imagination and its manifestation, art. Fashioning a perfect natural retreat under a glass roof is arguably the quintessential aesthetic response to the tension between reality and the fancy. It is, essentially, within the imagination that all alternative, escapist and even romantic experiences occur; and there is no better way, both Pinero and Wilde seem to suggest, to convey this ambiguous territory of the mind than within the equally imaginative parameters of the transparent, unnatural conservatory that is not-quite present on the phenomenon that is the stage.

Bibliography

Allen, Emily, 'Culinary Exhibition: Victorian Wedding Cakes and Royal Spectacle', *Victorian Studies* 45 (Autumn, 2003), 457-84

Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Colley, Ann C., *Nostalgia and Recollection in Victorian Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1998)

- Dowden, Edward, *Shakespeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* ((London: Henry S. King & Co., 1875)
- Eltis, Sos, *Revising Wilde: Society and Submission in the Plays of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)
- Frye, Northrop, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965)
- Holland, Merlin, and Hart, Rupert, eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 2000)
- Howard, Ebenezer, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1946)
- Huberman, Jeffrey, *Late Victorian Farce* (Michigan: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986)
- Knight, Charles, *Studies of Shakespeare: Forming a Companion Volume to Every Edition of the Text* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004)
- Knoepflmacher, U. C. and Tennyson, G. B. eds., *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (California: University of California Press, 1977)
- Laroque, François, *Shakespeare's Festive World*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)
- Pinero, Arthur Wing, 'The Schoolmistress', *Plays by A. W. Pinero*, ed. George Rowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 17-74
- Rushdie, Salman, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1992)
- Smiles, Samuel, *Self Help* (London: John Murray, 1905)
- States, Bert O., *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: The Phenomenology of Theatre* (London: University of California Press, 1985)
- States, Bert O., 'The Phenomenological Attitude' *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (U.S.A: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 26-36
- Walton, John K., 'The Demand for Working-Class Seaside Holidays in Victorian

England', *The Economic History Review* 34 (May, 1981), 249-65

Waters, Michael, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988)

Wearing, J. P., ed., *The Collected Letters of Sir Arthur Wing Pinero* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974)

Wells, Stanley, and Taylor, Gary, eds., *The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 627-52

Wilde, Oscar, *Blitz Editions: The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Bookmark Limited, 1990)

Wilde, Oscar, *Two Society Comedies: A Woman of No Importance and An Ideal Husband*, eds. Ian Small and Russell Jackson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1983)

Newspaper Articles

'An Ideal Husband' *The Era*, 5th January 1895

'Haymarket Theatre', *The Morning Post*, 4th January 1895

'Love Dramas', *The Era*, 19th November 1881

'Mr Pinero's New Play', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 30th March 1886

'The London Theatres', *The Era*, 3rd April 1886

'The Theatre', *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 4th January 1895

[all articles are taken from www.galegroup.com]