Title of Paper: **A Silly Girl’s Insight: Mabel Chiltern’s Commentary on Public Versus Private Spheres in “An Ideal Husband”**

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Abstract:

First performed in 1895, Oscar Wilde’s “An Ideal Husband” explores the intricacies of the Victorian social scene through the eyes of a few privileged members of London’s political landscape. While the extortion that marks the majority of the plot centers on the Chilterns, Lord Goring, and Mrs. Cheveley, it is Mabel Chiltern who embodies the social liveliness and youthful triviality that is often showcased in Wilde’s writing. Although Mabel is only a secondary character, her comments often call into question the boundaries of the public and private spheres of life and to which of these spheres the “self” is allocated. The fluidity between public or private spaces can be understood as the overarching problem throughout the course of the play – especially in consideration of the fact that Wilde’s own immorality case occurred the same year as the play’s production.

Mabel, with her flirtatious behavior, can be easily written off as a silly young girl but, when examined more closely, her seemingly trivial opinions become more complex. I argue that Mable Chiltern is the character through whom Wilde grappled with questions of the private versus the public self; the idea that the “self” may not be a private entity marks much of her speech and is the focal point of her sole monologue in the text. While the youngest character in the play, and a female at that, it is Mabel who acts as the vehicle for Wilde’s conceptions about the nature of the “self” in society.

Keywords: An Ideal Husband, Wilde, Gender, Mabel, Marriage, Public, Private

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Mabel, with her flirtatious behavior, can be easily written off as a silly young girl but, when examined more closely, her seemingly trivial opinions become more complex. I argue that Mabel Chiltern is the character through whom Wilde grappled with questions of the private versus the public self; the idea that the “self” may not be a private entity marks much of her speech and is the focal point of her sole monologue in the text. While the youngest character in the play, and a female at that, Mabel is the one who acts as the vehicle for Wilde’s intellectual struggles with the proper nature of the “self” in society.

According to Wilde scholar Arthur Ganz, plays like “An Ideal Husband [sic] do in fact have foolish plots and brilliant dialogue. But the foolishness of these plots does not prevent them from expressing Wilde’s personal and artistic positions” (16). Mabel Chiltern embodies both of these Wildean characteristics: she is both foolish and brilliant. Her story arc is little developed but, on the way to her ultimate goal of marrying Lord Goring, she consistently entertains the audience with seemingly trivial, if witty, dialogue. She is the only character in the play who can give the dandiacal Lord Goring the witty repartee that he constantly desires. This is the genius behind Mabel Chiltern’s character design. Her youthfulness and sporadic presence throughout the course of the play’s action could easily cause an audience to disregard those important comments she makes. Mabel’s character design allows an author to safely use her to drop hints at their own qualms with society’s rules and regulations. Likewise, Wilde’s notorious use of his plays as social commentary makes this assertion all the more believable.

The public versus private debate, especially in the context of late Victorian British Society, still enamors modern scholars. When examining Mabel’s character, her absolute dedication to making herself noticed in the public sphere would stand in direct opposition to the play’s overarching themes of secrecy and personal privacy. In a play that hinges on multiple cases of blackmail, why would a character like Mabel Chiltern seem to undermine the necessity of a private life by always upholding the need for public spectacle? In her article “Further Thoughts on the Public/Private Distinction,” Joan B. Landes explains, “access to the public sphere could provide a woman with some freedom from the patriarchal structure of the home” (30). A single woman like Mabel has yet to experience the confines of the Victorian home – save for her guardianship by her older brother, Sir Robert. As the youngest single woman in
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the play, Mabel has an ability to revel in public Society life that the other, more experienced women would seem to avoid. Female characters like Mrs. Cheveley, Lady Markby, and Lady Chiltern, are too preoccupied with their own personal interests so the allure of public life is clearly secondary. With Lady Chiltern and Mrs. Cheveley, their constant stance in the private sphere (the only sphere where blackmail can be carried out) precludes them from exploring the public sphere for fear or threat of exposure. Lady Markby, while still a gossipy old woman, is too old to partake in society as frequently and flamboyantly as Mabel. Therefore, Mabel is perfectly suited to be the vehicle through which Wilde can explore whether the “self” should be public, as Mabel begins the story, or private, as she ends the story.

The dichotomy between the public and private spheres is something that “An Ideal Husband” spends a great deal of time discussing. It would typically be understood that “‘public’ and ‘private’ are categories of relationship posed as opposite and mutually exclusive terms” (Landes 33). However, this play takes those “mutually exclusive terms” and deliberately inverts them. The main course of the play’s action takes something that should be public (e.g. the selling of cabinet secret by Sir Robert Chiltern) and makes it an issue of privacy (e.g. Mrs. Cheveley’s blackmail on Sir Robert’s reputation). Not dissimilar is the intentional inversion of politics, a public issue. Politics are often considered an issue of public concern – though Mrs. Cheveley makes it point to emphasize the role of private lives in politics. In “An Ideal Husband,” Mrs. Cheveley aims to reverse the course of public politics, specifically the Argentine canal venture, by privately threatening Sir Robert’s status in British Parliament. However, Mabel is not only absent from the public versus private political issues that mark the majority of play’s action, she is ignorant of it all. This is precisely why Mabel is suited to discuss the nature of the “self” as a public or private entity. While all other main characters are actively engaged in subverting the nature of public and private, Mabel is ignorant of the subversion and able to clearly discuss whether the self should be one or the other free from biases that would sway her opinion. Wilde’s use of Mabel as an arguably neutral, third party character enables her dialogue to be free from personal bias; she has only her experiences as a female member of British society to inform her judgments.

With all of the political blackmail and intrigue that is explored throughout the play, it seems interesting that Wilde would need a character to represent the unbiased view (i.e. those uninvolved in the subterfuge)– as many of Wilde’s plays hinge on that very bias. The play’s publication and first performance in 1895 places it at a contentious time for the public versus private problem in late Victorian Society. 1895 also being the year of Wilde’s immorality trials, Wilde is intimately poised to discuss whether or not the “self” is inherently private or open for public judgment. Wilde was accused of engaging in immoral sexual activities (homosexual activities with young men) that violated “section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885” (Humphreys 12). This act, which had not come into effect until January 1, 1886, included a clause “creating the new offence [sic] of indecency between male persons in public or private” (Humphreys 12). This new statute, agreed upon by British Parliament a decade before Wilde’s trial and the performance of “An Ideal Husband,” made the very private act of an individual’s sex life a matter of public discourse. This
new wording significantly blurred the lines between what was previously considered private and public. Without knowing the extent of the wording’s effect, the Parliament unknowingly created what was referred to by newspapers as the “Blackmailer’s Charter” (Humphreys 12). This shift in wording now enabled blackmailers to more easily accuse their targets of illegal behavior (whether it be public or private). It is no surprise then that Wilde’s choice of blackmail on the part of Mrs. Cheveley inverts the natural order of the public and private as discussed earlier.

Sir Travers Humphreys, in his forward to the book The Trials of Oscar Wilde, explains that the wording “public or private” did not immediately change the perceptions of those who would serve as jurors in the British judiciary system. Humphreys notes, “the reluctance of juries to convict in such cases is notorious” and questions “whether the satisfaction of sending to prison some of those who offended against it ‘in private’ outweighs the harm done in other directions” (13). In other words, did the moral necessity to punish such acts outweigh the importance of privacy in the everyday lives of British citizens? This idea of punishing immoral behavior over a man’s right to privacy proved to be the case in the trials of Oscar Wilde. Because the first of the three immorality trials against him resulted in a hung jury, some speculated that the unpopularity of section 11 would assist Wilde in winning the case but, as Humphreys notes, it seemed to boil down to “which the jury dislike[d] most – section 11 or Oscar Wilde” (13). The private life of Oscar Wilde was no doubt on display during the cross-examinations of the three trials but,

It is, I think, doubtful whether the average juryman knew much of anything of Oscar Wilde. As a poet he had never acquired a reputation, at least with the general public; his name was no doubt familiar to playgoers as the author of some brilliant and successful comedies, but after all what does the public know and what interest does the public take in the private lives of authors? I think we are bound to assume that the jury convicted Wilde as another jury had convicted Taylor – upon the evidence in the case. (Humphreys 14)

Wilde’s private life was thrust into the public spotlight and used as fodder for gossip in upper, middle, and lower class social circles. It seems especially pertinent that “An Ideal Husband” premiered the same year that Wilde faced the exact struggles being grappled with by his characters. Before having faced these issues himself, he grapples with the nature of the private and public “self” through the dialogue and interactions of Mabel Chiltern.

Mabel’s infatuation with the public sphere and Society life is apparent from her first appearance in the play. One of her first lines is “Oh, I love London Society! I think it has immensely improved. It is entirely composed now of beautiful idiots and brilliant lunatics. Just what Society should be” (I.i. 41-44). Although a woman, her opinion on Society life is not dissimilar from that of a dandy – the persona embodied by Lord Goring and Wilde himself. She revels in the idea that those around her fall into one of the two categories presented above: a beautiful idiot or a brilliant lunatic. These broad categorizations would have easily incorporated many that considered
themselves “active” in public life, be it a politician and his wife or a dandy and, his arguable counterpart, the New Woman. Mabel’s soft classification as a New Woman would not have been shocking, as “strong women seem to have fascinated Wilde throughout his life” (Meier 121). Most Wilde scholars recognize that “female dramatic characters such as Cecily in The Importance of Being Earnest or Mabel Chiltern in An Ideal Husband come conspicuously close to sympathetic portrayals of the New Woman” (Meier 121). The New Woman, as explained by Meier, are “perfect matches for Dandies” because of their similar opinions on Society life and the public presentation of the “self.” This “perfect match” would make it simple for Wilde to explore the “self” through a character who draws less attention from the audience then, say, the ever-present Lord Goring – a character which might seem more logically similar to Wilde.

Mabel’s speech throughout the course of the play serves to reinforce her similarity to the dandified Lord Goring and explore how the “self” should, or should not be, flaunted in public life. Because of her marked purpose within the play (i.e. entice, and eventually secure, Lord Goring’s affections), Mabel’s dialogue centers around her desire to involve herself in all things “Society” and discusses how her affections can only be won through public display and spectacle. When upset with Lord Goring for leaving her with Tommy Trafford, her less than enchanting beau, Mabel comments on her “dislike” of Lord Goring. When he responds with a quick, “I like you immensely,” she can only respond, “well, I wish you’d show it in a more marked way!” (I.i. 347-48). Her interest in Lord Goring’s opinion of her focuses on whether or not she, and subsequently everyone else in the vicinity, can see it clearly. Affection, though usually reserved for private moments between lovers or spouses, is only worth Mabel’s consideration if those around her can see it happening as well. Not only does Mabel spend an inordinate amount of time seeking out public affection, she makes sure to expose herself to the public even in her charity. Later on in the play, Mabel exits the presence of Lady Chiltern, Lady Markby, and Mrs. Cheveley by stating, “I am so sorry but I am obliged to. I am just off to rehearsal. I have got to stand on my head in some tableaux” (II.i. 506-07). Upon explaining the strange nature of this public spectacle, Mrs. Markby observes, “You are remarkably modern, Mabel. A little too modern” (II.i.517). Mrs. Markby, from a different generation than young Mabel, is struck that an upper class woman would expose herself to the public in such an unrefined way. But Mabel’s tendency to do away with notions of privacy and good conduct manifests itself in her desire to be out in public life whenever the opportunity presents itself – in this case, charity.

The most ostentatious questioning of the public versus the private “self” manifests through Mabel’s confusing responses to the proposals of her two suitors: Tommy Trafford and Lord Goring. From the opening of the play, it is clear that young Tommy Trafford is unrelenting in his pursuit of Mabel’s hand in marriage. In her longest, albeit only, monologue throughout the play, Mabel explains, “Tommy has proposed to me again. Tommy really does nothing but propose to me” (II.i. 440-41).

1 A tableaux is a staged rendering of a, typically, classic painting or work of art.
The persistence of his proposals would seem to indicate his strong affection for Mabel. However, it is not his affection that Mabel seems to care for. She never discusses any disdain for Tommy’s self – rather, she is only upset that his affections are saved for her ears only. Later, in the same monologue, an irritated Mabel says, “And then Tommy is so annoying in the way he proposes. If he proposed at the top of his voice, I should not mind so much. That might produce some effect on the public. But he does it in a horrid confidential way…I am very fond of Tommy, but his methods of proposing are quite out of date” (II.i.457-62). Here, Mabel admits that she does care for Tommy; she is not spurning his advances because she lacks affection for the man. Rather, her main reason for denying his repeated proposals is due to his private means of proposing to her. A proposal is typically noted as a private event between two individuals. The lovers’ engagement need only be exposed (in the immediate sense) to the guardian who can bestow approval of the union. However, in this monologue, Mabel expresses her opinion that a private proposal is of no use to anyone because the nature of a proposal is that it be a spectacle for all of the public to see. The love of Tommy Trafford is worth nothing unless all of London Society can see it. Driving home this insistence on public proposals, Mabel ends this speech with “it [a proposal] should always be done in a manner that attracts some attention” (II.i.465-66). Mabel’s use of “always” in this phrase denotes that she believes all proposals should be a public affair. The one-on-one proposal many are familiar with is useless because it does nothing to make oneself a spectacle. The private “self” has nothing to gain if the public does not regard their achievement.

While this analysis has served to cement Mabel’s dedication to the “self” as a distinctly public entity, her penultimate interaction with Lord Goring complicates this stance by both reinforcing and subverting it. Lord Goring finally proposes to Mabel in Act IV of the play. However, his proposal is impromptu and extremely private. Lord Goring arrives at the Chiltern’s home and, with no one else around, proposes to Mabel with no pomp or circumstance to speak of. Simply, Lord Goring says, “I have something very particular to say to you” with Mabel responding, “Oh! Is it a proposal?” (IV.i.134-36). Upon replying in the affirmative, Mabel merely responds, “I am so glad. That makes the second today” (IV.i.138). In this proposal, the one Mabel eventually accepts, Lord Goring has done nothing by way of public spectacle. Not even the Chilters are around to see the proposal happen. It would seem that, given Mabel’s track record, she would be more than happy to reject the proposal on the basis of its overt privacy. However, Mabel enthusiastically accepts Lord Goring’s proposal.

Further complicating this private proposal, Mabel makes it clear that her affections for Lord Goring have been quite public. In accepting his marriage proposal, Mabel enlightens Lord Goring to the fact that “everyone in London knows except you. It is a public scandal the way I adore you. I have been going about for the last six months telling the whole of society that I adore you” (IV.i.161-64). Her love, made ostentatiously public for the whole of London, is used as evidence for her affection towards him. Both Lord Goring and Mabel readily accept this as indisputable proof of her love and affection. How, then, can Mabel simultaneously stand by her monologue on Tommy’s lack of public spectacle and accept Lord Goring’s swift and private
proposal? It seems that Wilde himself has no further explanation on the subject as Mabel says little else for the remainder of the play. It could be that Wilde meant to make a comment about the nature of this paradox within the play. When it comes to Mabel’s behavior towards the proposals and those who made them, there is no consistency and there is very little, if any, resolution. The play’s refusal to grant the audience closure in this matter seems representative of the private versus public issue in the text. Just as there is little resolution in Mabel’s attitudes on the issue, there is, comparatively, no resolution to overarching question of whether or not people have the right to a private life outside of public eyes.

Mabel Chiltern’s presence in the play seems to contribute little to the overall plot. However, as explored above, Mabel’s dialogue is curiously encoded with several different approaches to the public versus private “self” debate. When looking more closely at her words and actions, it would seem that she simply contradicts herself. But Wilde scholar Ganz argues that, “to Wilde anything that interfered with the untrammeled expression of the self was intolerable” (20). Therefore, there need not be any logic or conclusion to Mabel’s, or Wilde’s, opinions on the nature of the “self.” The only thing that is important is that it not interfere with how one expresses oneself. By this reasoning, Mabel’s actions make some sense and can also be related back to her author. Mabel rejects Tommy’s private proposal but accepts Lord Goring’s private proposal. Additionally, she is free to express her adoration for Lord Goring in a very public way. In essence, Mabel is embodying what Ganz asserts in terms of an “untrammeled expression of the self.” Her public and private “selves” have a tendency to be interchangeable, this much is certain. Therefore, when it comes to her private affections, she has no qualms about expressing them openly for all of London Society. Similarly, when Lord Goring proposes quite privately, she accepts him immediately because that is the unrestricted expression of her “public self.” Mabel, making it a point to gossip on her feelings for Lord Goring, has not done so with her feelings for Tommy Trafford. Therefore, Mabel’s limited expression of her feelings for Tommy in proper Society cannot compensate for Tommy’s private proposals as it does for Lord Goring’s. Ultimately, both aspects of her relationship with Tommy were not at all expressive of her public or private “selves.” Nevertheless, Mabel expresses her private “self” publicly as symbolized by her engagement to Lord Goring.

Though Mabel’s dialogue does not spell out a clear position on the public versus the private “self,” her actions and commentary can be seen as Wilde grappling with his own beliefs on the subject. Through the play, the audience can see a ready inversion of what can be deemed as public or private. But, it is Mabel’s character that seems to deal exclusively with this debate. Wilde no doubt had cause to question whether or not an individual has a right to a private life when their actions could be interpreted in opposition with the good of the public – as exemplified by his immorality trials. But Mabel’s seemingly insignificant dialogue masks Wilde’s internal struggle to define his own conceptions about the nature of the “self” in society. The desire to please the public while also being true to their private “selves” marks both character and author, as each seeks a balance between their public personas and their personal affections. It seems Wilde found in Mabel a kindred
The Victorian spirit; both individuals are classified as ahead of their time while also being powerfully defined by the society around them.


