

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Douglas Mao: Fateful Beauty

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2008, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@press.princeton.edu

INTRODUCTION

Talking about Beauty

Why, I have seen wallpaper which must lead a boy
brought up under its influence to a career of crime; you
should not have such incentives to sin lying about your
drawing-rooms.



A baby's a baby! It's the environimonament
that molds 'em.

The first of these epigraphs comes from “The Decorative Arts,” a lecture Oscar Wilde gave on his North American tour of 1882. In a sense, the book before you does no more than elaborate some broader contexts for this witticism, asking what meanings it may have had for its utterer, what made it intelligible to its first hearers, and why it might still say something to us today. Answering these questions in depth, however, means tracking a set of ideas about environment’s work on the young through a range of appearances, on terrains as diverse as interior-decoration guides, popular child-rearing advice, juvenile-delinquency codes, innovations in public and domestic education, debates about determinism, the emergence of neurophysiology and psychology, the discourse of the unconscious, the history of aesthetics, and—centrally, in this case—some of the forms of writing we call literature. One could also say, then, that this book describes how a vast array of arguments, speculations, and practices converged, in the last part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, around the matter of the growing human organism’s molding by surroundings and circumstances.

Wilde’s bon mot about wallpaper was probably not, it must be said up front, the fruit of extended deliberation. Nor does it seem to have been intended as much more than a throwaway. As Wilde enthusiasts know, the lecture tour originated with Richard D’Oyly Carte, who was both a manager of lecture-circuit talent and a producer of *Patience*, the W. S. Gilbert–Arthur Sullivan operetta that debuted in London in April 1881, with a parody of Wilde named Bunthorne at its comic heart. Seizing an opportunity to combine business with business, D’Oyly Carte engaged Wilde by way of introducing Bunthorne’s original to North Americans—who could see *Patience* in New York by late 1881 and soon after at many

