

## CLASSICS AND OSCAR WILDE

RILEY (K.), BLANSHARD (A.J.L.), MANNY (I.) (edd.) *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*. Pp. xviii + 382, ills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Cased, £75, US\$100. ISBN: 978-0-19-878926-0. doi:10.1017/S0009840X18002263

This volume, comprising eighteen essays, had its origins in a one-day colloquium held in Oxford in July 2014, and its scope has been expanded to include newly commissioned essays. In her illuminating introduction, ‘Taking Parnassus to Piccadilly’, Riley sets out with refreshing directness the provocative question that this volume sets out to explore. S. Goldhill, responding to I. Ross’s detailed study, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013), commented that Wilde’s ‘knowledge of Greek and his treatment of classical subjects by and large seem remarkably ordinary and usual for the time’, and went on to ask: ‘What, then, is the relation between Wilde’s genius as a writer and his ordinariness as a classicist?’ (quoted by Riley, p. 9). These essays seek ‘to answer that question, to demonstrate in what ways Wilde’s classicism is typical, in what ways heterodox or distinctive and where it is situated in relation to Victorian and intellectual frameworks’ (p. 9). Wilde’s genius as a writer is, reasonably enough, largely taken for granted here. His ‘ordinariness’, or otherwise, as a Classicist is harder to discern. What does come through, however, is the enduring impact upon his art and his thinking made by his seven years of classical study at Trinity College Dublin, followed by his double First at Oxford. It is no surprise that Wilde’s first published work was an English translation of the Chorus of Cloud-Maidens in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (in the November 1875 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*). But the lasting impact of Greece, and all things Greek, on Wilde’s mind and imagination emerges on page after page of his 1897 letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, *De Profundis*. When Wilde was at his lowest point, he turned instinctively to classical, and especially Greek, models, in an attempt to refashion himself once more in his time of Sorrow and Suffering, just as he had when creating his persona at Oxford 20 years before, in his days of Joy and Laughter. Wilde draws on other models and frames of reference, of course, but his synthesis reveals a deep and lasting immersion in Greek art and philosophy, as Riley argues compellingly in her key essay “‘All the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy’: Wilde’s ‘Epistola’ and the European Christ’.

Whatever his distinction as a pure Classicist – and his array of glittering prizes certainly suggests others recognised his quality –, Wilde’s mind and mode of thinking was profoundly affected by his education, and he continued to reflect upon and develop his intellectual relationship to a number of key figures and forms, including Plato, Herodotus, Heraclitus and the Greek dramatists, above all Euripides. Riley quotes T. Wright’s comment that Wilde could draw upon his Oxford education ‘with the help of the vast library he carried around with him in his head’ (p. 182). In this respect, he was extraordinary.

The book is organised into five sections, with three or four essays in each. Most of Wilde’s major texts come under scrutiny, with the slightly curious exception of his poetry, from which only the late work *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* receives significant attention. The insights provided on almost everything else make one conscious of the omission. Nevertheless, the range provides not only a substantial account of Wilde’s relationship with Classical Antiquity, but a coherent, cumulative reading of his own development as artist and thinker.

Section 1, ‘Wilde’s Classical Education’, guides us through Wilde’s career at first Dublin and then Oxford, beginning with what he learned from Tyrrell and, especially, Mahaffy at Trinity College, and how he differed from him. As A. Blanshard states, ‘On

one point at least Wilde and Mahaffy were united, and that was the “modernity” of the Greeks’ (p. 22). Blanshard teases out the complex relationship between the two men, starkly exposed in Wilde’s speech during his first criminal trial in 1895, on ‘The Love that dare not speak its name’, and comments: ‘It is hard to imagine a passage that stands in starker contrast to the “Greek Love” offered by Mahaffy’ (p. 28). In this one instance alone, the enduring impact of Wilde’s education on the course of his life is laid bare, together with the significance of Plato. In the next essay, on John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, G. Nisbet introduces us to the raw materials for much of this detailed commentary. From this, Wilde’s early interest in individual characters, especially women, emerges: Helen, Penelope, Sophocles’ Antigone. Wilde responded to the literature and philosophy of Greece in much the same way as he did to contemporary artists and philosophies, and, as J. Bristow demonstrates in ‘Wilde’s Abstractions’, he strove relentlessly to master the demands of the syllabus, whilst concealing his efforts from his tutors.

In the second section, on Wilde as a dramatist, J. Stokes examines Wilde’s experience of Greek theatre through the largely undergraduate productions at Oxford and Cambridge of the 1880s. Wilde attended several and reviewed two. Stokes links these with Wilde’s interest in other classical ‘archaeological’ productions of the 1880s, for example John Todhunter’s *Helena in Troas* (1886), staged by E.W. Godwin, which attempted ‘to reconstruct the architectural conditions of an actual Greek theatre’ (p. 93). We are offered a persuasive and wide-ranging analysis of Wilde’s absorption with the theory of drama, and with the varying elements of performance that combine to create a theatre which is ‘the meeting place of all the arts’ (p. 106): the kind of theatre represented by *Salome* – a theatre of movement, dance, gesture and colour as well as of a musically inflected text. C.L.E. Foster’s following chapter takes much the same set of productions and reviews as her starting point, but her emphasis is on the emerging importance for Wilde of text-centred drama. Foster argues that the concept of theatre (in 1887) was on the cusp of change, shifting ‘from visual spectacle to literary experience’ and that the nature of the audience, too, was changing, ‘from social gathering to act of personal analysis’ (p. 113). Other themes from this section include Wilde’s enduring engagement with Euripides, for the realism of his representation of humanity, and the connections that can be discerned with the decadent culture of his own time. I. Hurst also suggests a possible link between the *hetaira* of Menandrian comedy and the ‘fallen woman’ or ‘woman with a past’, such as Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband*. K. Boyiopoulos examines *Salome* in the light of Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, pursuing parallels between Salome and Phaedra and between Iokanaan and Hippolytus. ‘*Hippolytus*’, he comments, ‘is a classical archetype for *Salome* in its deviation from the conventional rules of tragedy, and its erotic, transgressive desire as the cause of misfortune’ (p. 144). Boyiopoulos pays close attention to the Narraboth subplot, in which the young Syrian commits suicide on stage. This section seems satisfyingly rich in the way that each chapter complements or challenges the others.

The first three chapters of Section 3, ‘Wilde as Philosopher and Cultural Critic’, probe the influence of Wilde’s Oxford training on the development of his philosophical ideas, as expressed in ‘The Critic as Artist’, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’, *De Profundis* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. L. Grech argues that ‘Wilde’s critique of the British Empire and the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century England doubles as a critique of the imperialist objectives which defined the classical curriculum at Oxford’ (p. 162). The context is Benjamin Jowett’s success in establishing Plato as a core component of the Greats curriculum, a curriculum also drawn upon for candidates for the Indian Civil Service. Riley offers a new reading of *De Profundis*, arguing that Wilde’s notion of Christian self-fulfilment has its origin in Euripidean humanism, with the idea of redemptive love

being exemplified in Euripides' Heracles. She effectively links *De Profundis* with Wilde's letter to the *Daily Chronicle* (about the dismissal of Warden Martin for having given biscuits to a hungry child) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, characterised by Seamus Heaney as 'an episode in the history of conscience' (p. 192). K. Hext picks up on the increased significance of Heraclitus within Jowett's reforms, linking these with Wilde's 'golden book', Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. Her analysis of Wilde's use of Heraclitus' philosophy of flux provides fresh ways of unlocking the complex meanings embedded in *Dorian Gray* in particular. S. Evangelista's 'Cosmopolitan Classicism' looks at the role of France in Wilde's reception of antiquity, examining the connection between late antiquity and French decadence and locating the spirit of modernity as 'somewhere halfway between Alexandria and Paris' (p. 220). He offers productive lines of enquiry to, for example, Marcel Schwob and Pierre Louÿs, and suggests links between French symbolist experiments to 'translate' Greek antiquity into the present, and Wilde's version of Salome.

Section 4 centres on Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. M. Hill explores the parallels between it and Plato's *Republic*, and argues that Wilde is critiquing rather than endorsing the Wildean mouthpiece Lord Henry Wotton's 'New Hedonism': 'Lord Henry appears to embody Socrates' description of the philosophical soul gone corrupt' (p. 236). N. Endres's essay attempts to answer the question 'What does Wilde mean by Platonic love?', directing us towards the testimony of Petronius. I. Manny's chapter explores the Ovidian Orpheus as an archetypal guide not only for *Dorian Gray* but for Wilde himself. Collectively, these essays offer a slightly bewildering array of interpretations, but certainly invite the reader to re-evaluate a text that at first sight seems icily clear but remains peculiarly elusive.

The final section switches the focus to the significance for Wilde of Rome. It is anchored by a survey from P.E. Smith II, helpfully making us more familiar with the two key Oxford notebooks that supply so much evidence of Wilde's university studies. S. Malik conducts an illuminating and lively tour of Wilde's references to Roman emperors and shows how these stories to some extent defined his concept of decadence. Finally, and startlingly, S.S. Witzke offers a close reading of *The Importance of Being Earnest* through the lens of Plautus' *Menaechmi* (or, perhaps, the other way round). The essay is arguably more convincing in describing the parallels between the two plays than in the analysis and description of *Earnest*, but the sheer weight of evidence cannot be ignored. It would be interesting to place the undoubted parallels in the context of the early scenario of *Earnest*, as sent by Wilde to the theatre manager George Alexander (which seems far removed from Plautus), or to the text of Wilde's first Four Act version. In any event, it is pleasant to think of Wilde returning to his classical heritage as he fashions, or re-fashions, his comic masterpiece.

This is a highly satisfying book, stimulating, varied, visually appealing, refreshingly jargon-free and exceptionally well edited. All the essays hold interest; some of them are outstanding. There is inevitably a little overlapping, and some repetition of quotation, but overall the collection has been smoothly transformed into a text for the eye rather than the ear. (There is, too, an erudite, charming and allusive personal reflection by E. Petherbridge, by way of a foreword.) It has much to offer anyone interested in the enigma of Wilde, and one can only admire and be grateful for the impact of a very particular classical education on this exceptionally gifted and unordinary individual.

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