

Gregory Mackie

**“THE MODERN IDEA UNDER AN ANTIQUE FORM”:  
AESTHETICISM AND THEATRICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN  
OSCAR WILDE’S *DUCHESS OF PADUA***

During his final years in exile, Oscar Wilde derived as much income as he could from selling the rights to his as-yet-unpublished writings. Although at that time he was as pragmatic in his approach to the business of authorship as he had been during the height of his dramatic career in the early 1890s, Wilde nonetheless resisted publishing one of his earliest plays, the 1883 blank-verse tragedy *The Duchess of Padua*. In an 1898 letter to Robert Ross, Wilde noted of the play (which was finally produced in 1891) that “*The Duchess* is unfit for publication—the only one of my works that comes under that category. But there are some good lines in it.”<sup>1</sup> Wilde had not always had such a dim view of his second completed play. Indeed, he once promoted it as “the masterpiece of all my literary work, the *chef-d’oeuvre* of my youth” and had worked hard to see it produced.<sup>2</sup> Literary history, however, has tended to concur with Wilde’s more mature assessment of the play’s artistic merits. Katharine Worth, one of the few critics to assess the play in detail, suggests that it “is the one completed play of Wilde’s which can scarcely be imagined in a modern performance.”<sup>3</sup> Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small place the play among a group of early works by Wilde that “have been judged by modern critics to be failures.” According to their view, *The Duchess* “is seen as an embarrassment.”<sup>4</sup> This essay instead regards *The Duchess* as an uneven experiment in both staging aestheticism and late Victorian theatrical “archaeology,” a practice that sought to mount historical dramas with as much accuracy and precision in costume and design as possible. In a letter to Mary Anderson, the American actress whom he hoped would star in the play, Wilde contextualized

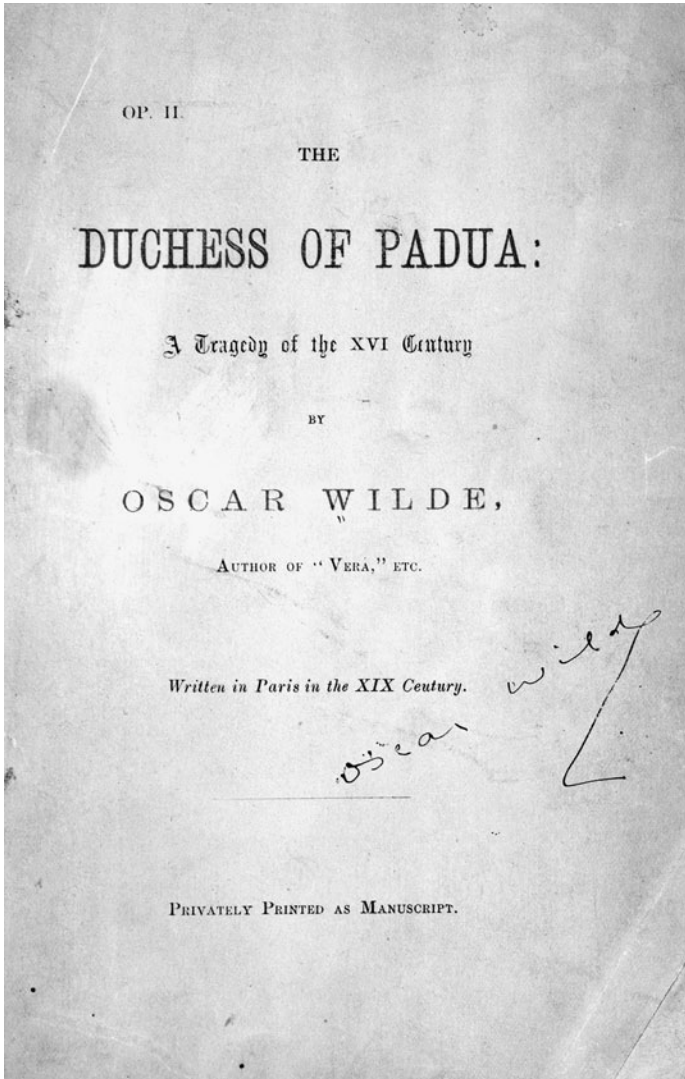
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the spectacle to which he aspired in *The Duchess*: “the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form.”<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, *The Duchess* seems an anomaly when compared to Wilde’s better-known comedies of manners. The subtitle of this period piece proclaims it a “Tragedy of the XVI Century” (Fig. 1), and its characters, staging, and dialogue are remote from the witty world of *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, which secured Wilde’s dramatic reputation in 1892. But the apparent contradiction between a more familiar Wilde writing up-to-date comedy in prose and the historicist playwright Wilde who emulated Shakespearean verse does not suggest that *The Duchess*—and indeed other, lesser-known Wilde plays—ought to be dismissed as eccentric aberrations. *The Duchess* proves less incongruous in Wilde’s corpus of dramatic work if we group it with another set of historicist plays that we might categorize as his efforts in “high tragic drama.”<sup>6</sup> Even though these plays, such as *A Florentine Tragedy*, *The Cardinal of Avignon*, and *La Sainte Courtisane*, remain fragmentary and unfinished, they certainly suggest that “alongside the society comedy . . . [Wilde] retained a lifelong interest in another sort of drama altogether, one more self-consciously ‘literary.’”<sup>7</sup> In that literary vein, moreover, Wilde did manage to achieve a certain *succès de scandale* with historicist drama in the form of his biblical tragedy *Salome* (1893–4), which, like another self-consciously historicist play he adored, Shelley’s *The Cenci*, was banned by the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>8</sup> In the preface to his new translation of *Salome*, Joseph Donohue argues that long after his early dramatic failures, such as *The Duchess*, Wilde retained a long-standing fascination with “Swinburne’s *Atalanta in Calydon* and other pseudo-Shakespearean closet dramas of the Victorian age.”<sup>9</sup> According to Donohue, “Wilde said that he considered Swinburne’s poetic verse-tragedy one of the two greatest dramas of the century. The other, he thought, was Shelley’s . . . *The Cenci*, composed like Swinburne’s play in pseudo-Shakespearean verse and emphatically unsuited for performance in a public theatre.”<sup>10</sup> Donohue’s view of historicist drama, as we shall see, was borne out by the contemporary reception of *The Duchess*.

The playwright’s literary executor, Robert Ross, who included *The Duchess* in his 1908 collected edition of Wilde’s writings, anticipated Donohue’s dismissive critique of Wilde’s catholic dramatic tastes by more than a century. In dedicating the play to Adela Schuster, one of Wilde’s most stalwart defenders during the 1895 trials that destroyed his career, Ross noted that the play consisted of little more than “the prelude to a singularly brilliant . . . life.”<sup>11</sup> I argue instead that it is more useful for us to regard *The Duchess* in terms of the aesthetic theories that Wilde advocated in his early literary career, when he wrote in a number of genres to popularize the aesthetic movement. For the purposes of definition, this movement can best be regarded as a continuum of practices and ideals with as many exponents as variations: these range from John Ruskin’s moral aesthetic to William Morris’s arts-and-crafts utopian socialism to Walter Pater’s impressionistic advocacy of beauty regardless of social utility. For Wilde, aestheticism consisted of finding unities between different art forms and in infusing life with an increased appreciation for beauty. *The Duchess* can thus be regarded as Wilde’s attempt to use the theatre to express the aesthetic movement’s principles and



**Figure 1.**

Prompt copy title page of *The Duchess of Padua* (1883). Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

priorities as he saw them.<sup>12</sup> With its self-evident debts to earlier playwrights (especially Shakespeare) and its keen attention to sumptuous stagecraft, *The Duchess*—however limited its success—affords us a sense of what “art for art’s

sake” might look like on the Victorian stage. Wilde’s engagement with the Renaissance in *The Duchess* gives us a fresh perspective on his conception of drama and his practice as a dramatist. Indeed, such attention places thinking about drama—about the whole sensuous experience of theatre—at the center of Wilde’s aesthetic theory.

#### WILDE’S “ENGLISH RENAISSANCE”

Bankrolled by the D’Oyly Carte Opera Company, Wilde launched himself into transatlantic celebrity in 1882 by lecturing to American and Canadian audiences on aestheticism—which he labeled “The English Renaissance of Art”—while preparing them for Gilbert and Sullivan’s satirical operetta *Patience*. Akin to curtain-raisers, these lectures were intended to complement the traveling production, as Wilde embodied for audiences the movement the operetta mocked. Not coincidentally, it was also during the tour that Wilde composed his “sixteenth-century” tragedy. According to Kerry Powell, Wilde the lecturer “was absorbed into the Gilbert and Sullivan script.”<sup>13</sup> But if Wilde’s life was performed during this time according to a script over which he had less than total control, he nonetheless retained control over another script: his imaginative conception of the Renaissance, the subject of his early outings as a playwright and theorist of art. That is, the Renaissance existed for Wilde as a historiographical construction, a cultural ideal that could be enacted as a series of readily identifiable artistic conventions drawn from Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies and Italianate stage settings. This was a script of the Renaissance whose verbal and visual elements he could orchestrate and arrange, not unlike the ornamental objects—blue-and-white china, Japanese fans, sunflowers and lilies—that, in the aggregate, denoted aesthetic taste in the Victorian household.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore in a decorative sense that *The Duchess* proves a theatrical experiment in aestheticism.

The Renaissance was a concept central to the aesthetic theories of two Victorian thinkers—John Ruskin (who deplored it) and Walter Pater (who praised it)—whose writings profoundly influenced the development of Wilde’s own ideas about art. Indeed, according to Yvonne Ivory, “What Ruskin identifies and rejects is precisely what Pater recognizes and celebrates about the Renaissance,” namely, that period’s promotion of unorthodox individualism and the beauty of the body.<sup>15</sup> Although Wilde’s role as an exponent and popularizer of aestheticism is well established,<sup>16</sup> his interest and investment in the Renaissance has attracted relatively less scholarly discussion. The exception here is the valuable work of Ivory, who usefully locates *The Duchess of Padua* in a “genealogy of Wilde’s engagement with the Renaissance,” reading it alongside the playwright’s fragmentary historical drama *The Cardinal of Avignon*.<sup>17</sup> In Ivory’s appraisal, Wilde “consistently associated the period with the set of phenomena (beauty, crime, passion, secrets, and sin) that usually mapped the topography of the Renaissance for Victorian thinkers.”<sup>18</sup> The Renaissance, moreover, afforded sexually dissident Victorian writers (such as Wilde, Pater, and John Addington Symonds) a stylistic means of articulating a discourse of same-sex desire.<sup>19</sup> However much the themes

Ivory has elaborated structure *The Duchess*, it is the presentation of the Renaissance *on the stage itself* that I explore here.

For aesthetic experimenters in drama such as Wilde, the Renaissance—especially when associated with Shakespeare and his era—also provided access to reserves of cultural and historical authority that had retained a particular purchase on the Victorian stage. In “The English Renaissance of Art,” for instance, Wilde explicitly aligns the nineteenth century’s aesthetic movement with the artistic efflorescence of “the age of Elizabeth.”<sup>20</sup> Aestheticism, he told his largely middle-class and non-British audiences, was no mere passing fad but a theoretically sophisticated and socially engaged reaction against the dehumanizing effects of Victorian industry. In his lectures, he pointedly defined aestheticism as a “renaissance” that provided a model for the concurrent regeneration of art and society—of civilization itself: “This devotion to beauty and to the creation of beautiful things is the test of all great civilised nations,” he insisted.<sup>21</sup> Not unlike the touring productions his lectures helped introduce, this “renaissance” was geographically and temporally portable: it could be brought back to life on the Victorian stage.

Despite Wilde’s highly theatrical persona, which attracted the frequent critique that he was an insubstantial poseur, the writing he produced during that tour suggests that he was working toward a degree of creative coherence by composing and planning to stage an English Renaissance play in the theatre of the nineteenth century. On stages on both sides of the Atlantic in the early 1880s, however, the aesthetic movement had mainly been represented (and denigrated) through satires such as *Patience* and *Punch* editor F. C. Burnand’s 1881 farce *The Colonel*. In Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, the arch-aesthete Reginald Bunthorne, an amalgam of Wilde and the flamboyant American painter James McNeill Whistler, confesses in soliloquy “I’m an aesthetic sham,” intimating that his manifold affectations are far more mercenary than sincere. Although Wilde participated in—and profited from—promoting that satire, he also responded to *Patience*’s insistence that aestheticism was all hucksterism and pretense by staking a claim to high culture mediated through a long-established English literary tradition of blank-verse tragedy. We can call this response *The Duchess of Padua*.

#### DECORATING “THE PLAYHOUSE BEAUTIFUL”

Although its title recalls John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, *The Duchess of Padua* is more indebted to Shakespeare. From Katharine Worth’s perspective, Wilde’s “most heavily derivative play” is one in which “Shakespearean echo is taken to the point of the ludicrous.”<sup>22</sup> The play’s intertextual allusions are so obvious that one can only conclude that they are deliberate signposts indicating a generalized overview of the Renaissance in order to enable theatrical audiences immersed in ever-more-elaborate productions of Shakespeare to associate it easily with the Bard. Shakespearean revivals, of course, were not just popular with Victorian audiences; they were also central to the culture of Victorian theatre. As Gail Marshall observes, “The narrative of the Victorian theatrical Shakespeare . . . represents a complex interaction of cultural and political exigencies and literary

desires, of contemporary practical concerns and the Victorians' obsession with their self-location within the terms of an appropriately configured past."<sup>23</sup> Wilde's own fiction, moreover, records the durable fact of Shakespeare's prominence in Victorian theatre history. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for example, it is Sybil Vane's performances as Shakespearean heroines in a shabby semiprofessional theatre that so entrance (and eventually appall) the novel's protagonist. And crucially, it is her ultimate inability to sustain the illusion of Juliet or Imogen or Rosalind that leads Dorian to reject her.

Wilde never had many qualms about borrowing from others, least of all from Shakespeare. In defense of such appropriation, which he practiced throughout his career, he argued that all good art comes not from pure invention but rather from art itself: "It is only the unimaginative who ever invent," he wrote in an 1885 theatrical review. "The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything."<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare's own practice of borrowing and reworking plots, for that matter, provides Wilde's self-justifying theory of invention with a convenient precedent.<sup>25</sup> Although Wilde's opposition to "nature" and "originality" have tended to be construed as critiques of Romantic aesthetics,<sup>26</sup> his body of writing demonstrates affinities with Renaissance theories of literary production that privileged the imitation of past practices and illustrious models over the novelty of invention. Unlike the Victorian historiographers of the Renaissance whose writings he admiringly reviewed, such as Pater or John Addington Symonds, Wilde did more than write *about* the Renaissance.<sup>27</sup> Instead, he sought to inhabit the cultural space of the "golden age" of English drama and to arrogate to himself the distinction represented by that period. To perform the Renaissance was tantamount to reviving it, thereby costuming "the modern idea under an antique form."

Wilde had a number of such "annexations" in mind for *The Duchess*, and I identify some of them here in the form of plot summary. The play opens with the arrival in Padua of the hero, Guido Ferranti, who learns from the sinister Count Moranzone that he is of noble blood and that his father was murdered by the present Duke. Guido vows vengeance, casting aside his adoring companion Ascanio (who describes their vaguely homoerotic relationship as a "friendship of the antique world").<sup>28</sup> Although there is no ghost here, this revenge plot is the first of several borrowings from *Hamlet*. Masking his true intentions, Guido becomes one of the Duke's most trusted retainers. The Duke is a cruel tyrant who taunts the starving people assembled outside his palace: "Failure," he tells Guido, is "the only crime which I have not committed" (24). Waiting for Moranzone's signal to enact his revenge, Guido bides his time and falls in love with the humanitarian Duchess, who intervenes on behalf of the impoverished populace, only to discover that she loves him, too. Guido's commitment to eschew all love in favor of vengeance, however, becomes a source of dramatic tension, as when he tells the Duchess that "murder has set/A barrier between us far too high/For us to kiss across it" (71). The passionate Duchess misinterprets the "barrier" he identifies between them as her marriage and contemplates suicide in a soliloquy that makes melodrama out of the Danish prince's: "'Tis true men hate thee, Death," she sighs, "and yet I think/Thou wilt be kinder to me than my lover" (84).

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By the third act, the motivations of both main characters change with dizzying rapidity. Guido decides that exercising mercy would constitute the “nobler vengeance” because it would demonstrate moral courage (103). He calls for his father’s ghost to endorse his refusal to take revenge, and when no ghost appears, he takes it as a sign that he has chosen rightly. About to escape to Venice, Guido is startled by the appearance of the Duchess, brandishing a bloodied dagger. She has jettisoned her earlier suicide plan and instead has stabbed her husband. Like Lady Macbeth, she is amazed at the profusion of blood on her hands: “I did not think he would have bled so much,/But I can wash my hands in water after;/Can I not wash my hands?” (110). Horrified, Guido rejects her a second time. When soldiers enter the confused scene, the Duchess, spurned and spiteful, names Guido as the murderer.

Act 4 takes place in a courtroom, like the fourth act of *The Merchant of Venice*. Wilde’s courtroom, however, is sumptuously decorated. The Duchess is stationed above the judicial bench, enthroned, according to the stage directions, beneath “a canopy of white satin flowered with gold” (129; Wilde’s italics). Fearing exposure, she denies Guido’s right to speak, only to be overruled by the Lord Justice. When Guido does speak, he protects her by confessing to the murder, an act of self-sacrifice that prompts the Duchess to forget her bitter anger. “Sirs, put up your swords,” she orders the officers of the court, nearly quoting *Othello* (169). Her intervention comes too late, and Guido is condemned. In the final act, set in a dungeon, a disguised Duchess visits Guido and tries to convince him to escape in her cloak and mask, but not before she has drunk the poison set out for him as an alternative to hanging. In the manner of *Romeo and Juliet* (or *Hamlet*), poison and bad timing are ideally conducive to a tragic *dénouement*: Guido stabs himself once she has expired. The play ends in a spectacular tableau, “a secular *Pieta*,”<sup>29</sup> with Guido “lying dead across her” (210; Wilde’s italics).

Whatever the dramatic weaknesses of its convoluted plot, Wilde’s *Duchess* is a Victorian fantasy of the past—an immersive costume drama of the Renaissance, an aesthete’s assemblage of conventions and quotations. The few surviving prompt copies that Wilde had printed for an abortive 1883 production of the play give *The Duchess* the subtitle “A Tragedy of the XVI Century” while also noting (somewhat misleadingly) that it was “written in Paris in the XIX Century.” (Although Wilde completed the play in Paris, he wrote much of it during his North American tour.) These conspicuous temporal markers—in Roman numerals, no less—make explicit the self-conscious artifice of the play’s distance from the historical (sixteenth-century) and cultural (Italian) milieu it depicts. This is a Renaissance of the Victorian imagination.

*The Duchess*’s stage directions also evidence the distance between sixteenth-century tragedy and nineteenth-century pastiche. According to John Stokes, Wilde had “an unwavering concern with surface, with how things should look and sound in performance.”<sup>30</sup> The prompt copies indicate, for instance, that the “Style of Architecture” for the sets is “Italian, Gothic, and Romanesque.” Appearances that connote temporal and geographical otherness as well as beauty are crucial here—even if they are eclectic and factually muddled. The setting for the first act, for example, is described in extravagant detail:

The Market Place of Padua at noon. In the background is the great Cathedral of Padua; the architecture is Romanesque, and wrought in black and white marbles; a flight of marble steps leads up to the Cathedral door; at the foot of the steps are two large stone lions; the houses on each side of the stage have coloured awnings from their windows, and are flanked by stone arcades. (1)

The settings for each subsequent act are just as elaborate, and they emphasize the visual impact the play is to have by focusing on colors, textures, lighting effects, and fabrics (such as silk and velvet). Decorative principles predominate on a stage decadently crammed with luxuries: we find gold and silver goblets; gilded leather; furniture “of the period”; “chests painted with mythological scenes” (37); and a “canopy of cloth of silver tissue, borne by four pages in scarlet” (34) for the Duchess’s grand entrance at the close of the first act. Even the dagger Count Moranzone gives to Guido, the symbol both of the protagonist’s noble ancestry and of his indecisive approach to revenge, is an aesthetically distinguished object, featuring “yellow leopards wrought in gold” (16). The play’s scenery and costumes make clear that the material objects displayed onstage bear as much of the burden of revivifying the Renaissance as does the poetry spoken by the actors. Indeed, these eminently decorative stage directions recall (albeit on a grander scale) the interior decorating advice Wilde gave to his 1882 audiences in lectures that complemented the theme of “The English Renaissance,” such as his lecture “The House Beautiful.” *The Duchess of Padua* would thus grant theatrical audiences access to the ultra-aesthetic fantasy of a “Playhouse Beautiful,” a gallery that sumptuously frames Renaissance sights and sounds.

To get a firmer conceptual grasp of the importance of the visual and material coordinates of Wilde’s stage Renaissance, I rely on and amplify Andrew Sofer’s study *The Stage Life of Props*.<sup>31</sup> Although Sofer argues that much dramatic criticism and theory renders props and stage objects “invisible” in a critical tradition that he traces back to Aristotle (v–vi), here they are all too visible. Far from subservient to the dramatic text, they occupy a level of representation equivalent to the play’s neo-Shakespearean language. Sofer’s distinction between semiotic and phenomenological readings of stage objects, which draws on the work of Bert States, is helpful when applied to Wilde’s neo-Renaissance tragedy. The elaborate set decorations function as signs of aristocratic wealth, luxury, and cultivation in the play’s Padua and as signs within signs, for the decorative function of an assemblage of Italian Renaissance antiques “of the period” can also signify the cultured tastes—or aspirations—of the Victorian aesthete. In this way, stage objects in *The Duchess* have, in Alice Rayner’s phrase, “a medial function as representations of representation.”<sup>32</sup> The grand collection of things Wilde’s stage directions specify invites audiences to imagine themselves as connoisseurs of the beauty of the past in their apprehension of the Renaissance on display. The play’s quotations and plot borrowings work toward the same purpose.

This representational strategy enmeshes the audience in an aestheticist discourse about experiencing a world (even an imaginary one) through beautiful objects. At times, the play’s stage properties are conflated with dramatic action and gesture, such as in the Duchess’s appearance in act 4 under a satin canopy.



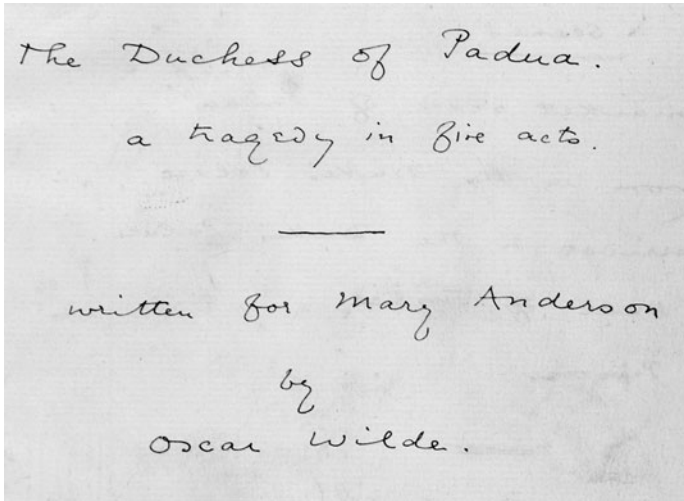
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In this entrance, it is the gorgeous canopy that imparts meaning (and power) to the Duchess. Such foregrounding of the material paradoxically discloses Wilde to be as much the showman his American critics decried as the serious dramatist he aspired to be, for in its material abundance his spectacle of the Renaissance provides audiences with a package tour of an imagined past for the price of admission.

### CASTING AND STAGING *THE DUCHESS*

Wilde, of course, was far from naive about the exigencies of show business. His “sixteenth-century” tragedy required more than lavish scenery and neo-Shakespearean dialogue to return the Renaissance to life. It also needed a star. A celebrity himself, Wilde contributed to the growth of nineteenth-century celebrity culture by extravagantly professing his admiration for famous actresses, including Sarah Bernhardt, Lillie Langtry, and Ellen Terry. Indeed, as Sharon Marcus has recently proposed in an article about Bernhardt and *Salome*, “Wilde attained celebrity as an author by emulating [that very] actress.”<sup>33</sup> Historical dramas both, his first two plays—*Vera; or, The Nihilists* (a vehicle for Marie Prescott that flopped in New York in 1883) and *The Duchess*—were arguably written with a view to emphasizing the part of a great actress; both their titles focused on a central female role.<sup>34</sup> “Writing the Duchess’ part,” according to Wayne Koestenbaum, “[Wilde] inscribes his worship of the actress who will incarnate her.”<sup>35</sup> But Wilde’s diva worship consisted of more than that recognizably queer form of discourse Koestenbaum has identified as “gush.”<sup>36</sup> It also had a pragmatic side, and Wilde realized that he would need flesh-and-blood glamour to complement his play’s ornate language and opulent scenery.

While in New York in 1882, Wilde courted Mary Anderson assiduously and designed *The Duchess of Padua* expressly for her. A rising star on Broadway, Anderson was known for her extraordinary beauty and her histrionic interpretations of Shakespearean heroines.<sup>37</sup> The manuscript of the play, a portion of which is now held by the Clark Library at the University of California, Los Angeles, includes Wilde’s handwritten dedication, “A Tragedy in five acts written for Mary Anderson by Oscar Wilde” (Fig. 2).<sup>38</sup> This inscription suggests that Wilde intended the play as both a form of flattery and a collaborative project: the totality of *The Duchess*’s stage effects could be realized only by combining Anderson’s beauty and nonnaturalistic acting style with the language and set designs Wilde had in mind for a “XVI Century” tragedy. Anderson encapsulated Wilde’s hopes and ideals for the play by representing “art” itself: he not only claimed that his “work of art” was written “for a true artist” but also that “writing this play for *you* has been a task of pleasure, and a labour of love.”<sup>39</sup> After a series of convoluted negotiations, Anderson’s manager, Hamilton Griffin, agreed to advance Wilde the handsome sum of \$1,000 for the play, although Steele Mackaye, the American actor and designer, later estimated that a New York production would cost around \$10,000. This premiere would be a grand spectacle, with its star the most prominent object of (living) stage decor, set off by the theatre’s proscenium arch. Indeed, Wilde promised Anderson that she would “appear in a more gorgeous frame than any woman of our day.”<sup>40</sup> The advance paid for



**Figure 2.**

Wilde's manuscript dedication of *The Duchess of Padua* to Mary Anderson. Courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Wilde's 1883 sojourn in Paris, which turned out to be a sort of spectacle in itself. There, he made a number of contacts in French literary circles while completing the play and living lavishly—"din[ing] with the Duchess," as he quipped.<sup>41</sup>

In a lengthy letter to Anderson written from Paris, Wilde details his vision for the play in terms of the whole theatrical experience, as a production marked by the audience's aesthetic immersion in color, costume, sets, and lighting as well as in dialogue and dramatic situation. His verse drama, he wrote, would stage the Renaissance in formal terms while retaining a contemporary appeal in its content. The audience members "will not expect to find in an Italian tragedy modern life: but *the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form.*"<sup>42</sup> What Wilde means precisely by this characteristic paradox—one he reused, with slight alterations, in a theatrical review praising "archaeological accuracy"<sup>43</sup>—is unclear, although it does articulate a generative relation between form and content. On the one hand, it may anticipate the thesis of his essay "The Decay of Lying" (1889), namely that greater "realism"—the reality of art, as opposed to life—can be achieved only through the representation of what is unreal or imaginary. Aesthetic reality, according to this logic, inheres in its distance from and not its proximity to real life. As he argues in "The English Renaissance of Art," "he who seems to stand most remote from his age is he who mirrors it best."<sup>44</sup> Writing, as the prompt copy records, in "the XIX Century," Wilde wants none of Hamlet's holding a mirror up to nature. On the other hand, "the modern idea," a paradoxical product of "antique form," may suggest socially engaged content—anticipating by some years the New Drama of theatrical modernizers such as

Ibsen (at least in English translation) and Bernard Shaw. We can discern these traces in the Duchess’s outspoken and defiant support of the poor of Padua. In the play’s second act, Wilde tells Anderson,

she appears as the image of pity, and mercy: she stirs the sympathy of the gallery and the pit. I do not know how it is in New York, but in London, where the misery is terrible among the poor, and where the sympathy for them is growing every day, such speeches as the one about the children dying in the lanes, or the people sleeping under the arches of the bridges, cannot fail to bring down the house.<sup>45</sup>

Such speeches may act as triggers for the emotions of aristocrats, but they also indicate Wilde’s sense that the Duchess’s politically reformist—even revolutionary—advocacy of the common people could enhance her contemporary appeal to the social and political realities of “modern life.”

In a letter that is at once a sales pitch and a set of performance notes, Wilde also flatters Anderson (“a true artist”) and returns frequently to Shakespeare to articulate the play’s artistic and emotional stakes. Such references, of course, also indicate the scale of Wilde’s ambition for the play.<sup>46</sup> He “liked to pretend,” in the view of John Stokes, “that Shakespeare was an Olympian precedent to whom he, Oscar Wilde, had been granted special access.”<sup>47</sup> For instance, Wilde describes various scenes in the play by likening them to *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. These comparisons, as we have seen, are borne out by the play’s plot. Shakespeare is his model, Wilde argues, since “in all Shakespeare’s greatest plays he gives, in the last act, lines which the audience can quote to one another as they pass out” of the theatre.<sup>48</sup> Wilde’s Shakespeare is Shakespeare epigrammatized, a process by which a play’s emotional and intellectual complexities are elegantly compressed into a one-liner. At the close of *The Duchess*, as both main characters are about to expire, each receives such a line. When Guido opines, “They do not sin at all/Who sin for love,” the Duchess replies, “Perchance my sin will be forgiven me/I have loved much” (209).

Despite Wilde’s best efforts to sell her the play, Anderson changed her mind and rejected it by the very modern means of a telegram. The actress felt that the play’s studied historicism would alienate audiences. Far from assuring both star and playwright the commercial success they desired, she said, “the play in its present form, I fear, would no more please the public of today than would *Venice Preserved* or *Lucretia Borgia*.”<sup>49</sup> Wilde declined to respond to the comparison of his play to Thomas Otway’s Restoration tragedy or to Victor Hugo’s nineteenth-century melodrama,<sup>50</sup> but Anderson’s comment is telling in its identification of the play’s studied attempt to revive the literary past as its defining flaw. Such an atmosphere, of course, is precisely what Wilde felt would ensure the play’s success.

Although Wilde pursued other projects in the 1880s, making a living mainly in the field of journalism, his hopes for the play were not entirely extinguished by Anderson’s change of heart. In 1885, he tried again to have the play produced, this time in London instead of New York and this time with the help of his fellow

aesthete E. W. Godwin. The polymath Godwin, who is best known as an architect and designer,<sup>51</sup> shared Wilde's enthusiasm for infusing theatrical productions with the principles of the aesthetic movement. Wilde dubbed him "one of the most artistic spirits of this century in England."<sup>52</sup> Godwin had produced an amateur open-air version of *As You Like It* in a woodland setting, an event whose "aesthetic value" and "artistic knowledge" had drawn Wilde's praise in 1885.<sup>53</sup> Godwin was also the "prime advocate" of stage archaeology.<sup>54</sup> According to Joseph Donohue, their plans for *The Duchess* were ambitious: "To judge from the thoroughness of Godwin's preparation and his efforts on behalf of the author, both he and Wilde had reason to anticipate a fine, sumptuously produced premiere and a long run for this 'modern' tragedy in 'antique' garb."<sup>55</sup> But this London production never materialized, for reasons Donohue suggests are "perhaps unrecoverable."<sup>56</sup> In 1885, Wilde had not yet established himself as a bankable commercial playwright in London, and his first play, *Vera*, had already flopped in New York. Perhaps he and Godwin were unable to secure financial backing (the equivalent of the \$10,000 that Mary Anderson's manager had suggested was required?) for their lavish production.

Undaunted, Wilde still did not give up on the play. At one point he tried to interest the famous tragedian Henry Irving in it, but Irving remained impervious to Wilde's flattery. When the play was finally produced, in New York in 1891, it was called *Guido Ferranti*. The new title emphasized the role of the hero over that of the heroine, perhaps to ensure top billing for the American actor-manager Lawrence Barrett, who took on the role of Guido. Barrett had expressed excitement about the play as early as 1882, when the playwright was busily making theatrical contacts in New York, but as Wilde wrote to Anderson at the time, "Mr. Barrett is a good actor and manager, but for my Duchess I need you."<sup>57</sup> Nine years later, Wilde was far less picky—he would have his play produced, even without his chosen diva. Wilde seems to have desired the play's production so badly that he permitted his authorship to be concealed. We can only speculate as to why Wilde and Barrett adopted this particular strategy, but once the production got under way, Wilde, sensing a hit, wrote to several New York newspapers acknowledging his authorship. The New York press did not respond to *Guido* as Wilde had hoped, however; perhaps memories of *Patience*, the lecture tour, and the failure of his earlier play *Vera* meant that he could not be taken seriously there. When he tried to put the theory he expounded in the lecture hall onto the theatrical stage, he met with marked resistance. One of the unenthusiastic reviews of *Guido Ferranti* asserted that the "radical defect of the work is insincerity."<sup>58</sup> The reviewer saw something fake about its staging of the Renaissance. *Guido Ferranti* must have seemed, to borrow a phrase from *Patience*, "an aesthetic sham." It certainly *wasn't* Shakespeare. At three weeks, the New York run was short-lived, and mere weeks after the premiere Lawrence Barrett suddenly died. With such false starts and (at best) mediocre results, it is little wonder that Wilde eventually came to hold, by 1898, a dim view of a play in which he had maintained a great deal of faith for so long. *The Duchess of Padua* was his most sustained failure in the theatre. Aesthetic historicism was not to be his dramatic trademark on transatlantic stages.

## “The Modern Idea under an Antique Form”

In his long letter to Mary Anderson, Wilde enunciated a familiar theory of tragedy based on dramatic timing: “‘too late now,’ he wrote, ‘are in art and life the most tragical words.’”<sup>59</sup> We might also take this formula as an uncanny prognostication of the play’s lack of success, for if *The Duchess* conflates “the modern idea” with “antique form,” such temporal dissonance (however elaborately aestheticized) risks rendering both unintelligible, as Anderson put it, to “the public of today.” “Too late *now*” serves as a metaphor for the fate of the play itself, for, as we have seen in the three moments of its potential and actual production (in 1883, 1885, and 1891), *The Duchess* can be said to have foundered because those three moments proved that it was “too late” to write something new in an “antique” style: “A dramatic poet who is equal to his task,” wrote one of *Guido Ferranti*’s anonymous reviewers, “is not compelled to seek in the graveyard of dead forms of speech for phrases and metaphors.”<sup>60</sup> The first two attempts to stage the play register such stylistic failure, whereas the 1891 production registers that failure in a practical and commercial sense; it proved a “tragedy” in art and in life. The risks and contingencies of theatre are themselves also captured by the “tragical” phrase “too late”: the play certainly came too late in the acting career of Lawrence Barrett, since Guido Ferranti was to be his final role. Wilde’s self-consciously belated play, in other words, was “too (be)late(d) now” to appeal to the “modern” audiences he craved and tried to attract.

### WILDE AND SHAKESPEAREAN “ARCHAEOLOGY”

Mary Anderson did not figure in these later iterations of *The Duchess*’s troubled history. And yet the beautiful and ambitious Shakespearean actress continued to haunt Wilde’s ideas about stagecraft long after her dismissive telegram terminated their professional connection. Indeed, his writings about historical drama and about Shakespeare can be traced back to her, and, by extension, to his foiled plans for *The Duchess*. In 1884, the aristocratic poet and politician Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton contributed an article to *The Nineteenth Century* defending Anderson’s performance as Juliet in a production at Henry Irving’s Lyceum theatre, a performance that had been condemned as “gushing but empty rapture.”<sup>61</sup> Bulwer-Lytton was no disinterested observer, whatever his protestations to the contrary; Anderson had appeared in his father’s play *The Lady of Lyons* in New York in 1877 and he was quite sympathetic to her acting style and interested in the progress of her career. For Bulwer-Lytton, Anderson was not only “eminently free from vulgarity” but also “generally marked . . . by a certain indescribable air of personal distinction and refinement.”<sup>62</sup> Surprisingly, Bulwer-Lytton’s article also attacked the very type of historicist production in which Anderson apparently excelled and in which Wilde had attempted to cast her. In a footnote, Bulwer-Lytton maintains that he praises the Lyceum production of *Romeo and Juliet* “without reference to the archaeology of it. The attempt to archaeologise the Shakespearean drama is one of the stupidest pedantries in this age of prigs.”<sup>63</sup> Lord Lytton had no time for the aestheticist visual spectacle—which I call “archaeological,” in its specific sense in Victorian theatrical

discourse—that Wilde had endorsed as “antique form” and that he had attempted to conjure with *The Duchess*.

Bulwer-Lytton’s position was provocation enough to prompt Wilde to reply in two 1885 articles, “Shakespeare on Scenery” and “Shakespeare and Stage Costume,” both of which he revised and incorporated into the longer essay “The Truth of Masks: A Note on Illusion” (1891). In these pieces, Wilde most fully articulates his vision of “archaeological” drama as *schooling* in aestheticism. In “The Truth of Masks,” for instance, he contends that “perhaps the most complete answer to Lord Lytton’s theory, [is that] . . . the true dramatist, in fact, shows us life under the conditions of art, not art in the form of life.”<sup>64</sup> In “Shakespeare on Scenery,” he explicates these conditions:

Theatrical audiences are far more impressed by what they look at than by what they listen to. . . . And the introduction of self-explanatory scenery enables the modern method to be far more direct, while the loveliness of form and colour which it gives us, seems to me to create an artistic temperament in the audience, and to produce that joy in beauty for beauty’s sake.<sup>65</sup>

For Wilde, the Victorian theatre’s “archaeological” staging of actual Renaissance drama foregoes descriptive exposition in favor of immersive illusion, where sensory pleasure (“that joy in beauty for beauty’s sake”) refines the taste of an entire audience. Such productions, in other words, have the capacity to transform an audience into cultured aesthetes. They function as theatrical counterparts to the lectures on aestheticism that he delivered on his North American tour.

Despite Anderson’s rejection of *The Duchess*, Wilde continued to follow her progress on the London stage with avid interest, and although their professional connection came to nothing, her career remained a consistent inspiration for (or provocation of) his views on “archaeology” as a form of aesthetic stagecraft. As a theatrical journalist, Wilde continued his campaign in favor of “archaeology” by recruiting both Shakespeare and Mary Anderson to bolster his argument.<sup>66</sup> As late as 1887, he penned a measured review of Anderson’s famous production of *The Winter’s Tale* in which he observed with approving vagueness, “It is a privilege to be able to see this play produced under the theatric conditions which Shakespeare himself selected for the presentation of his art, and Miss Anderson deserves our thanks.”<sup>67</sup> The “theatric conditions” under which a spectacle such as Anderson’s *Winter’s Tale* could be produced were not, of course, those of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, since Anderson’s production premiered at that most Victorian of playhouses, Henry Irving’s Lyceum. What Wilde professes here about Shakespeare’s “theatric conditions” approximates Stephen Orgel’s observation about culture’s persistent desire for an “authentic Shakespeare,” namely, that it is the task of an actor, in performance, to uncover something authentic “that is not in the text; it is something behind it and beyond it that the text is presumed to represent.”<sup>68</sup> Even so, Wilde’s statement proves ironic; Anderson had radically altered *The Winter’s Tale* to permit her appearance as both Hermione and Perdita. She edited the text of her “pet play” and wrote in her memoir that “as only six of Perdita’s lines were sacrificed, I did not feel guilty of any vandalism in doing

so.”<sup>69</sup> Like Wilde, who was never particularly invested in authenticity, textual or otherwise, Anderson was less interested in a textually “authentic” Shakespeare than in what she (and presumably Wilde) felt was a more *artistically* “authentic” one—that is, a better show.

Throughout his theatrical journalism that championed stage archaeology, Wilde consistently dwelt on the *pictorial* representation of the past, whether by professionals, such as Irving and Anderson, or by amateurs. For instance, he approvingly reviewed an amateur 1885 production of “*Henry the Fourth* at Oxford,” in which the “archaeological accuracy” of the sets and costumes afforded the audience “a perfect picture of the time.”<sup>70</sup> Wilde’s “perfect picture”—the “frame” that would have encased Anderson in *The Duchess*—also recalls the ostensible “authenticity” of Henry Irving’s “archaeologically accurate” replication of a medieval Dunsinane Castle for an 1888 revival of *Macbeth* at the Lyceum.<sup>71</sup> In a letter to Irving, Wilde praised the actor-manager’s “magnificent performance,” while highlighting the entire production’s “magnificen[ce] . . . wonder, and true artistic delight.”<sup>72</sup> Wilde saw in Irving’s treatment of Shakespeare a set of stage practices that could be understood and experienced in purely aesthetic terms. Indeed, according to Richard W. Schoch,

Irving could display an enviable accumulation of historical accessories. But even this daunting archaeological overload was more a case of aestheticism than historicism since Irving’s overriding concern was to achieve a fully pictorial display through the manipulation of theatrical space, even at the expense of historical correctness. The past was thus reconfigured more as an object for contemplation at a distance—across a darkened auditorium and through a picture-frame proscenium arch. . . . Under Henry Irving, history was not so much restored as beheld.<sup>73</sup>

Similarly, for Wilde, “archaeologically accurate” productions had the capacity to thematize the paradox at the heart of historical realism as a theatrical practice. In other words, the more archaeological precision a production attempted in its foregrounding of the material aspects of stagecraft, the more it disclosed its basic artificiality and the production’s status as a form of illusion. However perfectly realized the historical atmosphere in an “archaeologically accurate” production, the stage effects that generated the fantasy and wonder Wilde felt art ought to inspire could never be more (or less) than a simulacrum of the time and culture the production attempted to return to life. Long after the initial failure of *The Duchess*, Wilde remained a vigorous champion of such artifice, both inside the theatre and out of it.

Identifying his own theatrical concerns with Shakespeare’s in “The Truth of Masks,” Wilde goes so far as to cite “archaeology” as a technique Shakespeare himself used in plays set in ancient and medieval eras. Indeed, as Wilde argues in this essay, “Shakespeare, in the spirit of the true artist, accepts the facts of the antiquarian and converts them into dramatic and picturesque effects. . . . In mounting a play in the accurate costume of the time, according to the best authorities, we are carrying out Shakespeare’s own wishes and method.”<sup>74</sup> If

Shakespeare relied on “archaeology” to produce dramatic effects, Wilde asks, why should the Victorians not borrow his methods when staging Shakespeare’s own time? Wilde is, of course, misrepresenting the technical and material realities of Shakespeare’s theatre here. Rarely in his dramatic criticism, for example, does Wilde express a preference for boy actors in female parts over glamorous actresses.<sup>75</sup> In London’s modern commercial theatres, such as Irving’s Lyceum, where Anderson played Shakespearean heroines, or George Alexander’s St. James’s, where Wilde’s comedies were staged in the 1890s, the “theatric conditions” included the latest technologies, such as an indoor performance space capable of accommodating elaborate sets illuminated by electricity.

In celebrating “archaeological” productions of Shakespeare, “The Truth of Masks” also discloses a defensiveness about the fate of *The Duchess*. In the essay, Wilde sought to equate a particular set of stage practices collected under the rubric of “archaeology” with his own brand of aestheticism. What frustrated Wilde was the mismatch between his aesthetic theories and actual theatrical practices: archaeology could generate successful (and highly aestheticized) productions of Shakespeare, but such aestheticism could quickly falter when the past that was revived onstage was only a contemporary pastiche. In the Shakespearean productions he praises, Wilde nonetheless finds affinities with his own aborted attempt to stage the Renaissance. In “*Henry the Fourth at Oxford*,” for instance, he notes:

Even the dresses had their dramatic value. Their archaeological accuracy gave us, immediately on the rise of the curtain, a perfect picture of the time . . . for the fifteenth century in all the dignity and grace of its apparel was living actually before us, and the delicate harmonies of colour struck from the first a dominant note of beauty which added to the intellectual realism of archaeology the sensuous charm of art.<sup>76</sup>

Although the text of this production was Shakespeare’s, its effects owed as much to another, more “modern,” studied, and self-conscious idea of history: a “history” blended with artifice that comes into view in the very materiality of a theatrical production. Like Sofer’s props, Wilde’s stage costumes “are not mere accessories, but time machines.”<sup>77</sup> The result of theatrical “archaeology,” according to Wilde’s highly partial understanding, is thus not historical realism but the superior aesthetic reality of historicist fantasy. It gives form to an aesthete’s desire for how the past *ought* to look and sound. This is how *The Duchess of Padua* presents, and performs, the Renaissance.

#### CURATORIAL STAGECRAFT

In assessing *The Duchess of Padua* we would also do well to refine the metaphor of “archaeology” that describes late Victorian revivals of old plays. As Schoch reminds us, another popular term in earlier Victorian discussions of theatrical historicism was antiquarianism.<sup>78</sup> Participating in a movement whose origins certainly predate the Victorian period, antiquarians attempted to recover and



preserve both the knowledge of the past and its representative material objects. Arguably, their most durable legacy to the Victorians (and to us) emerged in the rise of the museum and the consequent institutionalization of historical knowledge and historical objects in monumental projects such as the British Museum and the South Kensington (later the Victoria and Albert) Museum. But the idea of the museum can also come into view outside the grandiose architecture of these structures, and in unexpected places. Wilde’s “XVI Century” drama is, perhaps, as much the work of theatrical “archaeology” as the museum that collects and arranges archaeological artifacts.<sup>79</sup> The items in this stage museum are not recent excavations encumbered with the grime of centuries; they have been polished for display so they can be apprehended as instances of “beauty” and “culture.” This museum is a version of the “House Beautiful” about which Wilde, borrowing the phrase from Pater, lectured to North American audiences on the nights he wasn’t delivering “The English Renaissance of Art.” For Pater, the house beautiful consisted of a great transhistorical unity, a totality of aesthetic tendencies and traditions built by “the creative minds of all generations—the artists and those who have treated life in the spirit of art.”<sup>80</sup> In his lectures, Wilde domesticated the museum by importing it into the middle-class home; in *The Duchess of Padua*, he tried to bring it to the playhouse. “For each scene,” Wilde insists of Shakespearean productions, “the colour-scheme should be settled as absolutely as for the decoration of a room.”<sup>81</sup> Victorian playwrights and stage designers of “archaeological” dramas were thus not only collaborators, they were cocurators of museum pieces. But Wilde’s carefully decorated museum is not beholden to the antiquarian’s desire for the authentic past—his museum is designed to generate an impression of the past, in all its framed beauty. To write a sixteenth-century tragedy in the Victorian era is thus an aesthete’s work of collecting and displaying: patterns of imagery, style, form, bodies, furniture, and fabric, not to mention language, are all exhibits carefully orchestrated to actualize this impression. However limited his play’s literary merits, it is through the staging of a virtual Renaissance that Wilde sought to imprint his vision of aestheticism on the drama of “the XIX Century.”

We can thus see that the structuring principles at work in *The Duchess* are primarily those of decorative arrangement. In “The English Renaissance of Art,” Wilde argues that the characteristic feature of the nineteenth century’s “English Renaissance” is the privileging of the ornamental, which gives all cultural productions, as he puts it, “a more decorative value.”<sup>82</sup> His idealized Renaissance draws together two strands: the poetic cadences of the “age of Elizabeth” and the objects and architectures of the Italian Renaissance. But just like the ghost of Guido’s father in the play, this ideal ultimately fails to materialize in a satisfactory or entertaining form. A museum may be beautiful, educational, and even stacy in its arrangement of objects, but it differs crucially from the theatre in its inertness and overt didacticism. This is something Mary Anderson recognized, though not in so many words, when she felt that Wilde’s “play in its present form” would not engage “the public of today.” The difficulty with archaeological theatre, as an experienced performer like Anderson well knew, is that while Shakespeare worked, studied imitations of Shakespeare like Wilde’s would not. Wilde’s aestheticist vision in *The*

*Duchess* was better suited to the page (or the drawing room) than to the stage. Wilde would later discover a more provocative way to conjure “the modern idea under an antique form,” namely in the stylized French of *Salome*.

ENDNOTES

1. A. Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross, 29 July 1898, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 1091.
2. *Ibid.*, 196.
3. Katharine Worth, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 39.
4. See Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.
5. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 197 (Wilde's italics).
6. Guy and Small, 100.
7. *Ibid.*, 102.
8. Wilde enthusiastically reviewed a production of Shelley's play that was mounted privately by the Shelley Society in 1886, which he called “an era in the literary history of this century.” See Wilde, “*The Cenci*,” *Dramatic Review*, 15 May 1886, reprinted in *Oscar Wilde: Selected Journalism*, ed. Anya Clayworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 60–2, at 60.
9. See Joseph Donohue, “Translator's Preface,” in *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act by Oscar Wilde* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), vii–xxviii, at xxi.
10. *Ibid.*, xxi.
11. Robert Ross, “To A. S.” [1906], in *The Duchess of Padua: A Play*, in *The First Collected Edition of the Works of Oscar Wilde*, 14 vols., ed. Robert Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), 1: n.p.
12. On Wilde's impact on aestheticism in the United States, see Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). On the aesthetic movement more generally, see Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996); Stephen Calloway and Lynn Federle Orr, eds., *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement, 1860–1900* (London: V & A Publishing, 2011).
13. See Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 15.
14. The discourse of practical aestheticism, which provided advice on displaying “artistic” taste in the household, especially by means of arranging eclectic objects from different cultures and time periods, can be traced through the writings of a number of tastemakers whose work influenced Wilde. See, for instance, Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful: Essays on Beds and Tables, Stools and Candlesticks* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1878); Mrs. [Mary Eliza] Haweis, *The Art of Beauty* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1878); and Macmillan's “Art at Home” series, especially Mrs. [Lucy] Orrinsmith's *The Drawing-Room* (London: Macmillan, 1878). On Wilde and the aesthetic interior, see Charlotte Gere, with Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2000).
15. See Yvonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850–1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 25.
16. Regenia Gagnier's *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986) arguably inaugurated this influential line of contemporary Wilde criticism, although Wilde's role in disseminating aesthetic ideals is the subject of a chapter in the first book on the subject, Walter Hamilton's *The Aesthetic Movement in England* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1882).
17. Ivory, 84.
18. *Ibid.*
19. For an important account of the invention of the Renaissance as a means of articulating same-sex desire by nineteenth-century historiographers such as Burckhardt, Pater, and Symonds, see Will Fisher,

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“A Hundred Years of Queering the Renaissance,” in *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze*, ed. Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray, and Will Stockton (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 13–40.

20. Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art,” in *Miscellanies*, in *First Collected Edition*, ed. Ross (London: Methuen, 1908), 13: 241–78, at 265.

21. *Ibid.*, 268.

22. Worth, 39.

23. See Gail Marshall, “Introduction,” in *Victorian Shakespeare*, vol. 1: *Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1–12, at 4.

24. Wilde, “*Olivia at the Lyceum*,” *Dramatic Review*, 30 May 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, 53–6, at 54.

25. On Shakespeare’s many sources and textual borrowings, see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, 8 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–75).

26. According to Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist,” for instance, “every century that produces poetry is, so far, an artificial century, and the work that seems to us to be the most natural and simple product of its time is always the result of the most self-conscious effort.” See Wilde, “The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks upon the Importance of Doing Nothing: A Dialogue,” reprinted in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4: *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123–206, at 143.

27. According to W. B. Yeats, Wilde called Pater’s *Renaissance*, which he had read as an undergraduate and which is arguably the single most important source for his aesthetic theories, “my golden book.” See W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 130. Wilde reviewed Symonds’s *Renaissance in Italy* in 1886 and Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* in 1887.

28. Wilde, *Duchess of Padua*, 29. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically in the text.

29. I borrow this description from Worth, 46.

30. John Stokes, “Wilde’s World: Oscar Wilde and the Theatrical Journalism of the 1880s,” in *Wilde Writings: Contextual Conditions*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 41–58, at 51.

31. Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

32. See Alice Rayner, *Ghosts: Death’s Double and the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 74.

33. See Sharon Marcus, “Salome!! Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and the Drama of Celebrity,” *PMLA* 126.4 (2011): 999–1021, at 1018.

34. This, of course, is a pattern that continues throughout Wilde’s career as a playwright, as the later titles *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *Salome*, and the fragmentary *La Sainte Courtisane* and *A Wife’s Tragedy* attest.

35. Wayne Koestenbaum, “Wilde’s Divas and the Pathos of the Gay Page,” *Southwest Review* 77.1 (1992): 101–8, at 104.

36. See, e.g., Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon, 1993), 110.

37. Anderson is perhaps best known to theatre history for her 1887 performance (which Wilde reviewed) in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Her career in London was successful but relatively brief, and she retired from the stage in 1889. Her 1896 memoir *A Few Memories* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine) omits any reference to *The Duchess of Padua* and the then-disgraced and imprisoned Oscar Wilde.

38. MS Wilde W6721 M2 D829, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles. The MS was dispersed after the sale of Wilde’s property following his 1895 bankruptcy; another portion is held in the Eccles Bequest at the British Library.

39. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 202–3 (my italics).

40. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, September 1882, in *ibid.*, 181.

41. Wilde quoted in Robert Harborough Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, [1916]), 235.

42. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 197.

43. See Wilde, "Henry the Fourth at Oxford," *Dramatic Review*, 23 May 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, 50–3, at 51.
44. Wilde, "English Renaissance of Art," 258.
45. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 197.
46. Guy and Small, however, discern a less than confident playwright in what Wilde called his "Titan" of a letter. According to them, "the letter is an anxious attempt to 'sell' the play and discloses a deep lack of confidence on Wilde's behalf." See Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, 100.
47. John Stokes, "'Shopping in Byzantium': Oscar Wilde as Shakespeare Critic," in *Victorian Shakespeare*, vol. 1: *Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. Marshall and Poole, 178–91, at 180.
48. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 200.
49. Anderson quoted in Wilde, *Complete Letters*, 203.
50. Robert Harborough Sherard, Wilde's close friend in Paris and later his biographer, records the playwright's bizarre reaction to Anderson's telegraphed rejection: "Wilde opened it and read the disappointing news without giving the slightest sign of chagrin or annoyance. He tore a tiny strip off the blue form, rolled it up into a pellet, and put it into his mouth." See Sherard, 236. Yet again, the playwright is dining on the Duchess.
51. Godwin had also decorated the interior of Oscar and Constance Wilde's Chelsea house in 1884. See Gere, 97–101.
52. See Wilde, "The Truth of Masks," first published in Wilde, *Intentions* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1891), reprinted in the Oxford *Complete Works*, 4: 207–28, at 216.
53. Wilde, "As You Like It at Coombe House," *Dramatic Review*, 6 June 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, 56–8, at 57–8.
54. See Stokes, "Wilde's World," 43.
55. Joseph Donohue, "E. W. Godwin's Failed Production of *The Duchess of Padua*," *The Wildean* 30 (January 2007): 36–44, at 40.
56. *Ibid.*, 42.
57. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, September 1882, in *Complete Letters*, 181.
58. Anonymous review quoted in Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), 89.
59. Oscar Wilde to Mary Anderson, 23 March 1883, in *Complete Letters*, 202.
60. Anonymous review quoted in Beckson, 87.
61. See [Edward Robert Bulwer-Lytton, "Miss Anderson's Juliet," *The Nineteenth Century* 16.84 (December 1884): 879–900, at 880.
62. *Ibid.*, 883.
63. *Ibid.*, 886 n. 1.
64. Wilde, "Truth of Masks," 224–5.
65. Wilde, "Shakespeare on Scenery," *Dramatic Review*, 14 March 1885, reprinted in *Selected Journalism*, 44–7, at 45–6.
66. On the journalistic debates over the "archaeology craze" in 1880s theatre, see Stokes, "Wilde's World," 41–58.
67. Wilde, "*The Winter's Tale* at the Lyceum" [1887], reprinted in Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), 44.
68. See Stephen Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare, and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 256.
69. Anderson, *A Few Memories*, 249, 248.
70. Wilde, "Henry the Fourth at Oxford," 51.
71. See Orgel, 256.
72. Oscar Wilde to Henry Irving, 30 December 1888, in *Complete Letters*, 378. For an extended discussion of Wilde's response to this production and to Ellen Terry's famous Lady Macbeth costume, see Stokes, "'Shopping in Byzantium.'"
73. Richard W. Schoch, *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage: Performing History in the Theatre of Charles Kean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

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74. Wilde, “Truth of Masks,” 222.

75. Wilde does, however, observe in “*Hamlet at the Lyceum*” (1885) that “the Player Queen should have come in boy’s attire to Elsinore.” See Wilde, *Selected Journalism*, 50.

76. Wilde, “*Henry the Fourth at Oxford*,” 51–2.

77. Sofer, 3.

78. On the linkages between historical theatrical productions and the nineteenth-century discourse and practice of antiquarianism, see Schoch, chaps. 2 (55–80) and 3 (81–112).

79. The history of aestheticism and the role of the museum in Victorian culture are deeply entwined. The design reform movements of the mid-nineteenth century, for example, led to the creation of the South Kensington (1857; renamed Victoria and Albert, 1899) Museum, a repository defined by eclecticism and aesthetic beauty whose Cast Courts displayed reproductions of ancient artifacts for educative purposes. See Anthony Burton, *Vision and Accident: The Story of the Victoria & Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications, 1999); and Lara Kreigel, *Grand Designs: Labor, Empire, and the Museum in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

80. Walter Pater, “Romanticism,” *Macmillan’s Magazine* 35 (November 1876): 64–70, at 64.

81. Wilde, “Truth of Masks,” 226.

82. Wilde, “English Renaissance of Art,” 251.