

BOOK REVIEW

Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece. By IAIN ROSS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xv + 274. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02032.

The exploration of Greek antiquity, in terms of both literary texts and archaeological remains, profoundly influenced the governing classes and intellectual elite of nineteenth century Britain. Seeing themselves as the heirs to Hellenic tradition, classically educated gentlemen felt an affinity between themselves and the Greeks and considered fifth century Athenian society to be a prefiguration of their own.¹ However, the popularization of archaeological science in the 1870s created a tension between the ancient texts, which inspired idealized fictions about the past, and material culture, which presented scholars with snapshots of ancient realities that were less fanciful and more concrete in nature. The writings of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) engaged with both forms of evidence and thereby embodied the late nineteenth century conflict between text and material culture.²

Oscar Wilde experienced ancient Greek literature and material culture through the lenses of specific institutions and texts. By examining Wilde's written work and the formative events of his life, Ross aims to discern the ways in which Wilde's personal brand of Hellenism was shaped by these guiding influences. The first three chapters present an "intellectual biography" (5) of Wilde, drawing on a variety of sources, including unpublished annotated manuscripts. In particular, Chapter 1 is an account of Wilde's education and his only trip to Greece, while Chapter 2 discusses his early writings. Chapter 3 covers his charter membership in the Hellenic Society and emphasizes his advocacy for the use of archaeology in the arts, especially as an aid in reconstructions of the ancient Greek world. In this chapter, however, the author identifies a watershed shift circa 1886 as Wilde abruptly

¹ The seminal works on this subject include Jenkyns, R. 1980. *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Blackwell; Turner, F.M. 1981. *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

² For recent biographies of Oscar Wilde, see McKenna, N. 2005. *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde: An Intimate Biography*. New York: Basic Books; Wright, T. 2008. *How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

rejects the positivism and popularism associated with archaeology and adopts instead an appropriative, anachronistic attitude toward ancient texts. To support this claim, the fourth chapter posits intertextual interpretations of Wilde's mature works, including *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Soul of Man*, "The Importance of Being Earnest" and *De Profundis*. The book concludes with Appendices A–G, which contain Wilde's syllabi from Trinity College in Dublin and Magdalen College in Oxford, notes from his trip to Greece and exercises in Greek composition.

Ross' examination of Wilde's life and literary works provides us with a deeper, intellectual portrait of this notorious historical personage. In Wilde's writings, Ross discerns allusions to Plato, Aristotle and Menander and argues that he used Greek sources in both conscious and unconscious ways. For example, in addition to the direct allusions to Plato made in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, there were also unconscious allusions as the text takes on new meaning when read within the framework of Plato's theory of forms. Ross also identifies a core theme in Wilde's writing: the triumph of the insatiable passions of the modern soul over the Hellenizing proclivity toward form and order. Therefore, the corpus of Wilde's literary works exemplifies two significant sets of dichotomies, namely, the aforementioned conflict between Greek text and material culture and what Ross describes as "[Wilde's] own contradictory impulses towards Hellenist form and the formlessness of desire" (i).

Despite being written for an audience of literary critics and scholars of classical reception, Ross' book will be of interest to classical archaeologists because of its connections to the historiography of the discipline. A contemporary of distinguished archaeologists such as Heinrich Schliemann and Percy Gardner, Oscar Wilde's father, Sir William Wilde, was a surgeon and an amateur archaeologist with a special interest in funerary archaeology.³ Given the status of his medical profession, William Wilde's archaeological observations carried an air of scientific authority, and he was considered to be the preeminent authority on archaeology in Ireland (his 1862 catalogue of antiquities in the Royal Irish Academy earned him a knighthood). Furthermore, Oscar's Oxford notebooks indicate that he himself intensely engaged with the scholarship of early foundational theorists such as Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Therefore,

³ A history of classical archaeology is provided in Dyson, S.L. 2006. *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts: A History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ross' thoughtful appraisal of Wilde's life and written works is a welcomed addition to the literary corpus of classical studies.

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