

BOOK REVIEW

Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity. Edited by KATHLEEN RILEY, ALASTAIR J. L. BLANSHARD and IARLA MANNY. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xviii + 382. Hardback, £75.00. ISBN 978-0-19-878926-0.

A detailed portrait of the author who may be termed the “poster-boy” of the late 19th century “Decadent movement” in art and literature emerges gradually as one reads on in this collection of essays (originally papers read at a 2014 colloquium on the role of classical antiquity in the life and works of Oscar Wilde). A portrait of the author as dedicated classicist becomes increasingly discernible from eighteen essays that work as a series of overlapping facets of light building up a “three-dimensional holograph” of Oscar Wilde’s often contradictory personality and his career.

A brief “Foreword” by the well-known exponent of Wilde’s plays, the actor Edward Petherbridge, sets the scene (v–viii), followed by a page of “Acknowledgements” (ix). This is followed by an appreciative “Introduction,” subtitled “Taking Parnassus to Piccadilly” (1–15), by Kathleen Riley, one of the editors, who ends with a reference to the “complex phenomenon... [of] Wilde’s love and appropriation of classical antiquity.” Although the subsequent papers are arranged in five sections, each covering a different aspect of Wilde’s career, authorial chronology works as an underlying, secondary system of arrangement. The result is that the book presents a developing picture of Wilde’s career, from his earliest education in Ireland, his years at Oxford, his life in London and incarceration at Reading, to his death in Paris. The papers, however, rightly concentrate more on his intellectual than his physical life.

The five sections comprise: first, four chapters on Wilde’s classical education and his eclectic interest in Greek philosophy, from Platonism to hedonistic Epicureanism (19–88); next, as many on Wilde as dramatist,

showing his debt to the Classics in all he wrote and the influence on him of student productions of Greek drama while at Oxford (91–158); then four chapters deal with Wilde as “philosopher and cultural critic” (161–227), where focus is at first on his intellectually and personally formative years at Oxford, returning again to his study of ancient philosophy, where the curriculum for “Mods” and “Greats” laid particular emphasis on the practical application to modern life of its tenets. This section also treats of Wilde’s debilitating incarceration in Reading Gaol and his reading (and writings) at both Oxford and Reading. After this, a section with three separate discussions of “Wilde as novelist” (231–85) naturally features *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, his only novel, which was informed by both Wilde’s own adherence to the Decadent ethos in his personal life and his interpretation of Platonic *eros*. Finally, a three-paper section on “Wilde and Rome” (289–335) looks at Wilde’s approach to Roman history and his attitude to the more “typically Decadent” (in the Victorian sense) Roman emperors, an attitude that changed over time from apparent admiration to out-and-out disgust, as his attitude to his own life changed during and after his prison experience.

The very last chapter, by Serena S. Witzke (321–35), largely abandons the generally literary-biographical approach in favour of analysis of Wilde’s reception and use of Plautus in the plotting and characterization of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In a reversal of the “from ancient to modern” approach of other authors, Witzke argues that analysis of *Earnest* will help critics to reinterpret vexing aspects of Plautus’ *Menaechmi*.

The overlapping facets that shape the reader’s picture of Wilde feature many secondary names. In the earlier, more biographical chapters, the same names keep appearing: educators such as J. P. Mahaffy and R. Y. Tyrrell of Trinity College, Dublin, where he spent his undergraduate years, and others such as John Ruskin and Walter Pater at Oxford. Also appearing are the classicist J.A. Symington, and, in the later chapters, his tragic relationship with the unworthy and shallow Lord Alfred Douglas, his beloved “Bosie,” and “Bosie’s” father, the Marquis of Queensberry, who persecuted Wilde through the law courts. A double columned index (359–82) facilitates easy comparison of the importance of various personages in

Wilde's literary and personal life: Mahaffy warranted 45 citations, Symington, 41, Walter Pater 52 and Douglas only 14.

The authors have made much use of Wilde's own writings. These were not necessarily aimed at publication, such as his Oxford notebooks and his letters. The copious Bibliography (338–58) features no fewer than 34 publications under his name. More date from 1980 onward than from the 1870s (which starts with his "*Philosophy Notebook*" of 1876–8). These are listed and cited under the dates of editions, a rather disconcerting practice carried on throughout (even the ancients such as Plato and Aristotle are featured under the modern dates of various editions). Most startling is perhaps the dating of "*Oscar Wilde's Historical Criticism Notebook*" as "2016," the date of its first publication, even though its editor (P. E. Smith II) had already in 1989 published a critique of its contents.

The few illustrations are apt. The jacket design features an apparently contemporary caricature of Wilde holding a sunflower and striking a "Narcissus" pose beside a stream. The "reflection" shows a dollar sign as the "true value" of the flower, with, behind, a partly obliterated scurrilous comment apparently linking Wilde's "unnatural desires" with love of money. This perhaps reflects the attitude of the general public to Wilde at the time of his trial, but it is taken from the cover-design for C. Rickett's *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, 1932. Inside, ten "figures" appear in a variety of formats: three Beardsley prints, three reproductions of nineteenth century paintings, a mezzotint illustration for "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," two extracts from Wilde's own manuscripts and an annotated two-page extract from Wilde's copy of a translation of Plato's *Republic*. Potted biographies of the eighteen authors are to be read on xv–xviii. In the entire work I found only one typographical error (308), featuring a garbled date.

That should not be my last word: rather, I end with the lasting impression that I have gained. Wilde emerges as interesting, brilliant, sharply witty, complex, both idealistic and cynical, but a dedicated classicist, sadly out of step with the *mores* of most of his contemporaries. Had he lived in the 21st century, his life would have been simpler and far less tragic, his genius would have been recognized without concomitant censure of his lifestyle,

which would not have resulted in imprisonment. But Wilde *was* a product of his Victorian education, an education which he applied within both his literary and his private life. Oscar Wilde liked to shock his contemporaries, it seems; his “Decadent” pose served to hide his extreme erudition; his apparent cynicism masked a sensitive awareness of beauty, which, however, he sometimes appeared to find in the grotesque, as in his idealisation of the excesses of Roman emperors such as Caligula and Elagabalus. Wilde was a man who was, as has been said of Ovid also, “utterly and completely in love with words” and with all aspects of the Classics. But he was also naively credulous in his assumption that others would accept his view of homoeroticism as the “highest kind of love,” in the spirit of Plato’s dialogues. He was hurt and surprised when others did not share this view, not least the unworthy object of his deepest affections, his erstwhile paramour Douglas. Wilde’s spirit was broken by his two years in Reading Gaol; he stopped believing in himself and in Decadence, but his love affair with the Classics continued until he died, as this collection of essays amply demonstrates.

JO-MARIE CLAASSEN

University of Stellenbosch, jmc@adept.co.za