

# OSCAR WILDE AND CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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EDITED BY  
KATHLEEN RILEY,  
ALASTAIR J. L. BLANSHARD,  
AND IARLA MANNY



OXFORD

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*Frontispiece.* Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Climax' (from *Salome*).

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## Foreword

On the other side of the prison wall there are some poor black soot-besmirched trees that are just breaking out into buds of an almost shrill green. I know quite well what they are going through. They are finding expression.

(Oscar Wilde in a letter to Robert Ross)

Can it be that in the twenty-first century a teenage maenad cavorts in Welwyn Garden City along with Lyssa, goddess of Frenzy? I refer to nothing so alarming as real Dionysian abandon, but to the graceful organized chaos of a Classical Greek Dance Festival which awards a cup for the 'Most inspiring use of Greek ideals and technique', named after Doris McBride, for whom I had cavorted as a 17-year-old student at the Northern Theatre School. Only once in Coronation Year did Miss McBride encourage us to create something inspired by Dionysus. Our uncertain attempts to imagine and then embody an Attic relief sculpture come to life dismayed us and our teacher. We were on firmer ground depicting autumn leaves in the wind.

As a fully trained 'classical' actor (fencing, ballet, period dance, the history of dramatic literature from Aeschylus right up to T. S. Eliot, omitting Wilde, speaking Shakespeare, all had been part of our curriculum), I was set free to scratch a living in the late 1950s. Wilde might have been intrigued to note that in 1959 Dame Edith Evans, the definitive Lady Bracknell of the mid-twentieth century, distinguished herself in the small part of Ma Tanner, Jimmy Porter's elderly lower-class friend in the film of *Look Back in Anger*. And I, a boy from a Bradford back-to-back, taught to simulate quite another life, fought to be cast as Algernon Moncrieff in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Imagine a schools' matinee of the play taking place on a hot afternoon in 1959. Dazzling sunlight invades the white-walled multipurpose school hall somewhere in the North Island of New Zealand, putting the stage lighting in the shade, even though its radiant heat adds to the discomfort of the professional actors, finely dressed—high starched collars for the men, corsets for the women. The front row is filled with the youngest children, some of them barefooted. They are not ragamuffins but emancipated, sensibly dressed New Zealand schoolchildren. What I remember from that sultry afternoon is delight, especially expressed on the young upturned faces of that front row, as Wilde ran enchanted comic rings round the Victorian mores and primeval urges of the privileged society of his heyday, half a world and sixty-four years away. Earlier, in the rehearsal period, I experienced what could be called a curious sense of *nostos* (homecoming) as I practised inhabiting Algy's flat in

Half-Moon Street, never in reality having darkened the door of such a fashionable address. Wilde's creations, by now immortals, still effortlessly transcended their resemblance to the stock characters of late nineteenth-century light comedy by being audaciously consummate actors of their own individualism, while requiring of us mere mortals the kind of alchemy needed to transform the basic elements of our training so as to be moved, as Henry Irving had it, by the impulse of *being*.

Copperplate handwriting in two 1895 account books from the St James's Theatre and the Haymarket connects us directly with the first West End triumph of *Earnest* and of *An Ideal Husband*, running concurrently. The books were exhibited behind glass in the Theatre Museum when it still had its home in Covent Garden; there amongst a clutter of ephemera and historic stage props was the neatly preserved evidence of the takings, and indeed Wilde's royalties, which, even as the ink dried, he was in the process of squandering.

On my return from New Zealand, I was often to be put in mind of that fateful year of 1895; nightly from Whangarei to Invercargill I had intimately identified with Wilde's wit and mischief, and now I found myself living in Tite Street, SW3, in a house identical to Wilde's redbrick terrace home on the opposite side of the street, a mere hundred yards away. My wife (Gwendolen of that antipodean summer afternoon) and I occupied the large first-floor drawing room, which had French windows onto a balcony; it was the replica of Wilde's impressive main reception room, but for a tiny rear section that had been partitioned off from our commodious bedsit to form a small box room overlooking a dark yard which was only accessible through the basement kitchen and scullery. Like Wilde's 'house beautiful', the terrace had no garden to rival the one lovingly described in the first chapter of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the scents and sounds of nature enter the very studio in which the portrait is being painted and the hum of London is barely heard. But in the box room our landlord, the Arts Council's drama director, stored a trophy from the soul of man subjected to socialism, a framed oversized poster of the Berliner Ensemble's production of *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, given to him by Helene Weigel on the company's visit to London in 1956.

Three decades later I was reading *The Soul of Man under Socialism* in Agamemnon Road, one of several streets in West Hampstead that in 1893 changed its name to something classical to attract a better class of suburbanite. 'Man is created for something better than disturbing dirt,' I read. 'All work of that kind should be done by a machine.' Wilde was quite certain that, eventually, the machine would leave people free to be poets, artists, and philosophers. I looked out of the window, digesting this prophecy, to see a tableau resembling Ford Madox Brown's famous painting *Work*; not the laying of drains but of sophisticated fibre-optic cable. The 'navvies' were disturbing the dirt in the time-honoured way with pick and shovel—just as

they had done in the 1860s, up the hill in Hampstead proper, when they were portrayed in Pre-Raphaelite style as heroes of work. At the far right of Brown's painting, looking on, is Thomas Carlyle (another resident of Tite Street), who wrote: 'the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work! . . . The blessed glow of Labour in him, is it not as purifying fire, wherein all poison is burnt up, and of sour smoke itself there is made bright blessed flame!'

Courtesy of fibre-optic technology or its equivalent, I discover that Wilde was photographed by William Downey in Ebury Street, a street that furnishes me with an almost Pre-Raphaelite remembered vision from 1957 of the troops, horses, and band of the Household Cavalry, magnificently caparisoned, the sun glinting on brass instruments. The dramatic irony is that my father, a First World War veteran, and I were drawn to watch the spectacle from an upper window of the place where I was to appear before an Appellate Tribunal for conscientious objectors. I was then returned to a Victorian room—the replica of a room known to Wilde, a cell in one of Her Majesty's prisons.

I later read *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, published the year Downey's photograph of Wilde appeared. Don't we all, when reading a novel, uniquely see and hear it, recreate it in the theatre of our mind, so that the definitive print on the page is at the mercy of our ability as 'interpretative artists'? My study culminated in reading to a microphone in a sound-booth. Perhaps a reader in such a performative mode should not impersonate but *become* the narrator and actually *be* at the fashionable lunch party where Lord Henry Wotton performs for Dorian a brilliant conversational scherzo. Wilde is surely giving us a glimpse of himself in performance, entrancing guests at various distinguished dining tables.

I rarely find myself in Covent Garden without remembering Dorian walking home at dawn and being given a bunch of cherries by one of the market carters. Can we doubt that Wilde himself had such an encounter?

A white-smocked carter offered him some cherries. He thanked him, wondered why he refused to accept any money for them, and began to eat them listlessly. They had been plucked at midnight, and the coldness of the moon had entered into them.

Directly opposite the stucco-fronted Royal Opera House in Covent Garden is a stone building in the Graeco-Roman style. Queen Victoria is reputed to have caused the police station it contained to be the only one in the country without a blue lamp, either because, as she left the romance of the opera house, the offending lamp reminded her of the blue room in which Albert had died, or because an ambassador, as they left the theatre together, had asked her what the blue lamp signified and she was disturbed to have to refer to the proximity of crime.

Here indeed was the magistrates' court in which Wilde had appeared at the committal proceedings before he was tried at the Old Bailey.



It so happened that I once stood in the dock at Bow Street, in defence of an unpaid parking fine. No stranger to public performance, and being sure of my ground, I should really have been in my element, but I was extraordinarily nervous. I was not aware that I was standing where Wilde had stood a century before. Is it too fanciful to imagine that on that spot, where so many 'prominent' personages had stood—from Crippin at one extreme to Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst at another—facing potent existential crises, there was something in the very woodwork to unseat the composure of the most confident performer and call his or her individuality to account?

At the time of writing, an exhibition is being planned at Tate Britain to mark fifty years since the decriminalization of homosexuality in England. It will feature a rare full-length portrait of Wilde, the confident young artist on the cusp of greatness. The portrait was a wedding present and once hung above the fireplace in Tite Street; it will now be displayed alongside Wilde's cell door from Reading Gaol. Perhaps it was not until he noticed some brave buds sprouting and 'finding expression' outside his cell window that Art and Individuality, always synonymous with Wilde, began to reassert themselves, that he was once more within sight of Parnassus, of Apollo and the Muses. Sadly, there was to be no *nostos*, no return to the dance on the moral high wire between Tite Street and Parnassus with the dangerous delights waiting far below. Wilde had just one creative work left in him, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, but can there ever have been a more heartfelt, eloquent, and persuasive indictment of the inhuman Victorian prison system? 'It is the cry of Marsyas, not the song of Apollo,' he said. Nevertheless, the shrill green buds at Reading had seemed to offer hope of revivifying his Idea of himself, an idea to which his classical training was pivotal and which his love of antiquity helped conceive and sustain. You might say Oscar Wilde was a classical 'actor' *sui generis*.

Edward Petherbridge

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# Introduction

## Taking Parnassus to Piccadilly

*Kathleen Riley*

Full of wise saws and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part.

(Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II. vii)

When the Queensberry libel trial commenced at the Old Bailey on 3 April 1895, Oscar Wilde had two hit plays running in London's West End, *An Ideal Husband* at the Haymarket and *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St James's Theatre. His 'singular personality dominated the most exclusive dining tables and the most fashionable drawing rooms of London'.<sup>1</sup> Yet when Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, introduced his client to the court on that first morning, it was not the presiding spirit of *fin-de-siècle* London, the master epigrammist, or the 'English' boulevardier he presented; instead Clarke gave weight and precedence to Wilde's academic honours, his credentials as a classical scholar:

CLARKE: Were you a student at Trinity College, Dublin?

WILDE: Yes.

CLARKE: And at that University or College did you obtain a classical scholarship and the Gold Medal for Greek?

WILDE: Yes.

CLARKE: Then, I believe, you went to Magdalen College, Oxford?

WILDE: Yes.

CLARKE: You there had a classical scholarship?

WILDE: Yes.

CLARKE: You took a first in Mods and a first in Greats?

WILDE: Yes.

<sup>1</sup> Foldy (1997), ix.

CLARKE: And obtained the Newdigate Prize for English Verse.

WILDE: Yes.<sup>2</sup>

Wilde's four successful Society comedies were mentioned slightly later, in a single sentence. The emphasis Clarke placed on Wilde's classical education was no doubt tactical, a mark of sound character, intended to reveal the serious and sober intellect behind the dandified mask, and perhaps to prepare the ground for an incriminating letter Clarke introduced in a miscalculated 'attempt to anticipate and defuse a possible line of attack'<sup>3</sup> by defence counsel Edward Carson. In the letter, Wilde had said of Lord Alfred Douglas, 'I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days'; such extravagance of expression, Clarke argued, accorded with Wilde's view of the letter as 'a sort of prose sonnet'.<sup>4</sup> But whatever the strategy behind it, Clarke's manner of introducing his client was also a true reflection of the centrality of Wilde's classical learning to his subsequent life and work, to his carefully constructed identity, and even to his fall from grace. As Blanshard observes, in the Queensberry trial and the two criminal trials that followed, in which Wilde appeared in the dock on charges of gross indecency, 'Both sides repeatedly used Wilde's deployment of classical motifs to prosecute their cases,' and portrayed his Hellenism as, respectively, an ennobling and corrupting force.<sup>5</sup> Thus one of the principal weapons in Wilde's urbane intellectual armoury as a celebrated wit who had an answer for everything was ultimately turned against him by his persecutors. The dramatic culmination of the trials, however, and the moment that has achieved for Wilde a type of *kleos* or immortality, was his explanation of 'the Love that dare not speak its name,' his eloquent defence of the Platonic ideal.

Let us flesh out Clarke's skeletal biography of Oscar Wilde the classicist. William Bedell Stanford, who was Regius Professor of Greek at Trinity College Dublin from 1940 to 1980, remarked on the breadth and depth of Wilde's knowledge of the classical tradition and went so far as to declare: 'he was perhaps the best educated in classics of all the major figures of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition.'<sup>6</sup> Certainly, few authors of the Victorian period were as immersed in the ancient world as Wilde—and that in an era when it was far more common for a professional writer to have a grounding in Greek and Latin. Until the age of 9 Wilde was privately tutored by a German governess, but his exposure to classical antiquity, and particularly to the idea of antiquity as artefact, began in his early childhood. His father, Sir William Wilde, Surgeon Oculist in Ordinary to the Queen in Ireland, was an amateur archaeologist of distinction, with a special interest in ancient burial sites and Celtic

<sup>2</sup> From the transcript of *Regina (Oscar Wilde) v. John Douglas*, in Holland (2003), 45.

<sup>3</sup> Holland, in his introduction to the transcript (2003), xxvii.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, in Holland (2003), 33. <sup>5</sup> Blanshard (2010), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Stanford (1976), 236.

folklore. From him, Ross says, the young Oscar ‘would have learned to consider the country of his birth, with its Homeric bards and monuments, a second Greece, the Greeks literally his kin, and his encounter with them more an intuition of native affinity than a positive examination of a culture radically separate in time and place’.<sup>7</sup> Wilde’s mother, Jane Francesca Elgee, an Irish nationalist poet who published under the pseudonym ‘Speranza’, was ‘an enthusiastic supporter of the neoclassical revival’,<sup>8</sup> and the family home in Merrion Square, Dublin, displayed plaster casts of classical subjects, such as ‘The Age of Love’, ‘Cupid and Anacreon’, and ‘The Dance of the Muses of Helicon’,<sup>9</sup> and a modern bronze version of ‘The Dying Gladiator’.<sup>10</sup> In 1864, Wilde’s tenth year, the National Gallery of Ireland opened on Merrion Square, and, although its initial collection was small, it contained most prominently copies of Greek and Roman sculptures.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas Wright, who has made a mission of tracking down and reading every book Wilde is known to have read or owned in his lifetime, and who has fashioned an intriguing portrait of the artist from this ambitious bibliographic quest, surmises that Wilde’s exposure to the literary artefacts of the Graeco-Roman world similarly began early. Sir William’s library, he says, ‘included several titles from the “Oxford Classics” series, along with a Greek Testament and Liddell and Scott’s folio-size Greek lexicon. The collection also boasted a copy of Lemprière’s *Dictionary* of Greek myths.’ Wright further points out that Lady Wilde was widely read in the Classics and had a particular fondness for the Roman orators, for Plato, and the tragedies of Aeschylus, predilections shared by her younger son.<sup>12</sup>

It was also in his tenth year that Wilde was enrolled as a boarder at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, which originated from an Order in Council of James I, made in 1608, and is sometimes referred to as ‘the Eton of Ireland’ (as it was by Lady Wilde in an upwardly mobile way).<sup>13</sup> Among his fellow pupils was Louis Claude Purser, who would become Professor of Latin at Trinity College Dublin and collaborate with Robert Yelverton Tyrrell on a monumental edition of Cicero’s correspondence. A year after Wilde left Portora, another of Trinity’s future Gold Medallists in Classics (1885), John Sullivan, started there; he became a Jesuit priest and was beatified in May 2017. Later alumni of Portora include the Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett, whose Latin

<sup>7</sup> Ross (2013), 17–18.

<sup>8</sup> Coakley (1994), 52–60, at 53.

<sup>9</sup> Pearson (2000), 316.

<sup>10</sup> ‘The Dying Gladiator’, as it was commonly known until the twentieth century (now ‘The Dying Gaul’ or ‘The Dying Galatian’), was a Roman marble copy of a lost Hellenistic sculpture thought to have been executed in bronze. Sir William Wilde lent his copy to the Dublin Exhibition in 1872 (see Murphy, in McCormack (1998), 193 n. 46).

<sup>11</sup> Murphy (1998), 127–39, at 134.

<sup>12</sup> Wright (2009), 48.

<sup>13</sup> On the school’s history, see Quane (1968), 500–54. On Wilde’s schooldays at Portora, see Ellmann (1988), 20–5; White (2002); and Ross (2013), 18–22.

was excellent and whose Greek was sufficient to help James Joyce with some of the Greek-rooted puns in *Finnegans Wake*,<sup>14</sup> and Bletchley codebreaker Bill Barbour, who taught Classics at Portora from the 1950s to the 1980s.

The headmaster during Wilde's time at Portora, and for many years after that, was the Revd. William Steele, MA, himself a fine scholar as well as 'a good disciplinarian without severity, and a secular teacher both inspiring and practical within the still unbreached tradition of the classics'.<sup>15</sup> Another of Wilde's masters at Portora was J. F. Davies, who produced editions of Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* (1862) and *Agamemnon* (1868); in the latter he was praised for going 'as deep and as fearlessly as any of his ablest predecessors into the vexed readings' and for exhibiting in his translation of the choral passages 'a rough-hewn poetic feeling, very Aeschylean'.<sup>16</sup>

Although Steele modelled Portora on the lines of an English public school, under his headship the teaching of Classics was not driven by the pedagogic principles that compelled the average English public schoolboy to construe and memorize a piece of verse with scant regard for its literary attributes or historical significance, the very principles that, as Lord Byron complained, could desensitize the nascent poetic soul to the beauty, wit, and pathos of an Horatian ode:

I wish to express, that we become tired of the task before we can comprehend the beauty; that we learn by rote before we can get by heart; that the freshness is worn away, and the future pleasure and advantage deadened and destroyed, by the didactic anticipation, at an age when we can neither feel nor understand the power of compositions which it requires an acquaintance with life, as well as Latin and Greek, to relish or to reason upon.<sup>17</sup>

As an example of the more expansive approach to the Classics taken at Portora, Ross cites the fact that in the examinations set by Steele in 1859 'a passage for translation from Plato's *Apology* is followed by questions on judicial procedure at Athens, source criticism and George Grote's presentation of Sokrates; passages for translation from the choruses of Euripides' *Hekabe* are followed by questions on metre and grammar; then comes prose and verse; finally there are questions on Greek history ranging from the Peloponnesian War to the death of Alexander'.<sup>18</sup> The inclusion of Euripides is especially notable at a time when his reputation as tragedian was still subject to the damning and influential opinions of A. W. Schlegel.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See Cohn (1961), 613–21, at 613, and Van Hulle and Nixon (2013), 117–27.

<sup>15</sup> Bodkin (1954), 11.

<sup>16</sup> *Contemporary Review*, 9 (Sept.–Dec. 1868), 463 and 464.

<sup>17</sup> Byron (1852), 150 n. 3. On the part played by memorization in the Victorian public-school classical education, see Hurst (2006), 17–21.

<sup>18</sup> Ross (2013), 20.

<sup>19</sup> See Behler (1986), 335–67.

Wilde penned no first-hand account of his schooldays at Portora, nor of his formal introduction to the Classics. The closest we have to a reminiscence is found in the second chapter of Frank Harris's biography, which, 'though factually unreliable, has considerable impressionistic merit'.<sup>20</sup> Harris claims to draw on a 'realistic miniature'<sup>21</sup> by Sir Edward Sullivan, Wilde's contemporary at Portora; an anonymous portrait by a second contemporary, 'a scholar at Trinity';<sup>22</sup> and his own conversations with Wilde. He records what is purportedly Wilde's description of his Greek epiphany:

I was nearly sixteen when the wonder and beauty of the old Greek life began to dawn upon me. Suddenly I seemed to see the white figures throwing purple shadows on the sun-baked palaestra; 'bands of nude youths and maidens—you remember Gautier's words—'moving across a background of deep blue as on the frieze of the Parthenon'. I began to read Greek eagerly for love of it all, and the more I read the more I was enthralled . . . The headmaster was always holding my brother Willie up to me as an example; but even he admitted that in my last year at Portora I had made astounding progress. I laid the foundation there of whatever classical scholarship I possess.<sup>23</sup>

Whether or not these are an accurate reflection of Wilde's words, they would seem to attest to an essential truth: a passionate and imaginative connection to classical antiquity that was cultivated, if not instilled, in Wilde at Portora. Even before his last year, Wilde's prowess as a budding classicist was recognized with prizes: three in 1868, one in 1869, and the Carpenter Prize for Greek Testament in 1870. In 1871 he won the Assistant Master's Prize in Ancient History and a Royal School scholarship to Trinity College Dublin.

At Trinity Wilde studied under Robert Yelverton Tyrrell, then Professor of Latin, and John Pentland Mahaffy, the College's charismatic first Professor of Ancient History and a complex mix of maverick and reactionary. He remembered Mahaffy as his 'best and first teacher' and 'the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things',<sup>24</sup> but he had a troubled, somewhat Oedipal relationship with him. In his first year, Wilde was elected a Queen's Scholar and 'had the satisfaction of beating Louis Purser by being named first of those in the first class',<sup>25</sup> and in 1873 he was made a Foundation Scholar. As Clarke told the court years later, Wilde crowned his achievements at Trinity by winning the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek in 1874, his set text being Meineke's *Fragmenta Comicoorum Graecorum*. As an example of Wilde's imprudence with money, his friend and biographer Robert Sherard cites the fact that Wilde frequently pawned his gold medal, but says: 'He must have greatly prized the actual medal, because it was one of the few things of his past possessions which he preserved to the day of his death.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hart-Davis, in Wilde (1962), 320 n. 1. <sup>21</sup> Harris (1916), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 28. <sup>23</sup> Ibid. 29–30. <sup>24</sup> Wilde (1962), 338.

<sup>25</sup> Ellmann (1988), 28. <sup>26</sup> Sherard (1917), 148.



On 17 October 1874, the day after his twentieth birthday, Wilde matriculated at Oxford, holding a Demyship in Classics at Magdalen College.<sup>27</sup> He would describe Oxford as 'in its own way as memorable as Athens, and . . . even more entrancing',<sup>28</sup> 'the most flower-like time' in his life,<sup>29</sup> and the first of two great personal turning points (the second being prison).<sup>30</sup> It was the place where he encountered Walter Pater and John Ruskin ('the inevitable poles of attraction'), whose competing conceptions of history and beauty were so crucial to his own moral and aesthetic self-expression; and where he became a fervent reader and annotator of John Addington Symonds, whose prose Wilde rated equal to that of Pater and Ruskin.<sup>31</sup> It was where he was exposed to the major intellectual controversies of the day, and, while studying the languages, literature, history, and philosophy of the ancients, took critical positions on Culture, Progress, Slavery, Metaphysics, and Poetry.<sup>32</sup> And it was where he began in earnest to invent himself.

At the beginning of his second year Wilde's first published work appeared, in the November 1875 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*; significantly, it was an English translation of the Chorus of Cloud-Maidens in Aristophanes' *Clouds* (ll. 275–90, 298–313). Also among his earliest printed poems was 'A Fragment from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus (Lines 1140–1173)' in the Hilary Term 1877 issue of *Kottabos*,<sup>33</sup> the magazine of Trinity College Dublin, edited by Tyrrell.

In June 1876 Wilde achieved a First in Honour Moderations, and the following April he accompanied his former tutor Mahaffy on a tour through Greece. Part of Mahaffy's purpose in inviting Wilde was to prevent the latter's intended pilgrimage to Rome, prompted by his growing attraction to Catholicism, and to sway him 'from Popery to Paganism'.<sup>34</sup> The itinerary included Olympia, Mycenae, Argos, Aegina, and Athens. Wilde was late in returning to Oxford for the new term and was rusticated for six months, or as he put it, 'I was sent down from Oxford for having been the first undergraduate to visit Olympia'.<sup>35</sup> But his temporary exclusion did nothing to prevent his eventual double feat of being awarded a First in Greats and carrying off the Newdigate

<sup>27</sup> A Demyship is a form of scholarship peculiar to Magdalen College.

<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Harris (1916), 45. <sup>29</sup> Wilde (1962), 772.

<sup>30</sup> Wilde (2005a), 99.

<sup>31</sup> See Dowling's seminal study of Oxford Hellenism (1994).

<sup>32</sup> Headings in Wilde's Commonplace Book; see Wilde (1989). For the syllabus of *Literæ Humaniores*, taken from the Oxford Examination Statutes of 1874 and 1878, see Ross's Appendix B (2013, 197–9).

<sup>33</sup> *Kottabos* (κότταβος) was a game of skill played at ancient Greek and Etruscan symposia and was especially fashionable in Athens. It involved throwing the dregs of one's wine from a shallow drinking-cup (*kylix*) onto a central target.

<sup>34</sup> Mahaffy in a letter to his wife (dated 2 Apr. 1877) quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971), 41.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Ricketts (1932), 35.

Prize for his poem ‘Ravenna’, which was full of classical allusions.<sup>36</sup> When Lady Wilde learned of her son’s literary triumph, she sent him a laudatory letter addressed ‘To the Olympic Victor’.<sup>37</sup>

Wilde went down from Oxford at the end of November 1878. Richard Ellmann notes, ‘the years 1878 and 1879 happened to be unusually lean ones in all the colleges so far as Classics fellowships were concerned’,<sup>38</sup> but in spite of his failure to secure one, Wilde’s commitment to Classics did not wane. The following March he wrote to George Macmillan, expressing a particular desire to translate for publication selections from Herodotus and to edit one of two Euripidean plays (*Heracles* or *Phoenissae*). And, in common with Macmillan, he became a founding member, and part of the first Council, of the prestigious Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies, which had its inaugural meeting in June 1879. When, a year later, Frank Benson staged the *Agamemnon* at Balliol College, Wilde claimed considerable involvement in this landmark production and indeed to have suggested it to Benson. He certainly took an active interest in the emergent tradition of Oxbridge Greek plays, insofar as he reviewed the 1887 *Alcestis* at Oxford and the 1887 *Oedipus* at Cambridge for the *Court and Society Review*.

When asked by his friends at Magdalen what he planned to do with his life, Wilde is said to have replied prophetically: ‘God knows. I won’t be a dried up Oxford don, anyhow. I’ll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other, I’ll be famous, and if not famous, I’ll be notorious.’<sup>39</sup> But in a congratulatory note to Herbert Warren, newly appointed President of Magdalen, in October 1885, he confessed: ‘I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly.’<sup>40</sup> In truth, guided by his ‘two great gods, “Money and Ambition”’,<sup>41</sup> he took Parnassus with him to Piccadilly, and for that matter to Philadelphia, Rochester, and to Reading Prison. Parnassus was Wilde’s spiritual home, ‘deep imag’d in his soul’,<sup>42</sup> a home about which he might have felt ambivalent and against which he might sometimes have rebelled, but nevertheless a place in his imagination and consciousness enveloped in a profound sense of *nostos* (homecoming). As Wilde would have appreciated, the Odyssean paradigm of *nostos* is as much about possibility as it is about the past; it is a vision of utopia or a haunting, a focus of aspiration, a repository of memory, a sleep and a forgetting. And just as his childhood

<sup>36</sup> Wilde had visited Ravenna in March 1877, on his way to Greece.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Ellmann (1988), 93.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 101. Ellmann says three classical fellowships were offered, at Trinity, Jesus, and Merton Colleges, and Wilde is known to have applied for that at Trinity. Wilde also wrote, without success, to A. H. Sayce, Professor of Comparative Philology, about the possibility of an archaeological studentship at Oxford.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in ibid. 45. <sup>40</sup> Wilde (2000a), 265.

<sup>41</sup> From a letter Wilde wrote to his Oxford friend William Ward in March 1877, in ibid. 39.

<sup>42</sup> From Alexander Pope’s 1726 translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

home in Merrion Square was ornamented with classical replicas, so too the house Wilde shared with his wife Constance in Tite Street, Chelsea, assimilated in its design the iconography of his imaginative domicile: a large, framed engraving of 'Apollo and the Muses'; a small bronze of Narcissus; a bust of Augustus Caesar, awarded to Wilde for winning the Newdigate Prize; and a plaster cast of the Hermes of Olympia.<sup>43</sup>

The character of Winnie in *Happy Days*, the prattling tragicomic creation of that other Old Portoran Samuel Beckett, says: 'That is what I find so wonderful, a part remains, of one's classics, to help one through the day.'<sup>44</sup> She finds comfort in the verbal fragments of classical works; immortal quotations, even misremembered, are her defence against the weight of time and solitude. Wilde's 'classics' remained always with him, part of his private being and his very public personae, providing him post-Oxford with a formidable critical lexicon and a constant source of artistic inspiration and philosophical nourishment. In the address he gave at a ceremony in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, to unveil a small stained-glass memorial to Wilde, Seamus Heaney commented: 'The lighter his touch, the more devastating his effect. When he walked on air, he was on solid ground.'<sup>45</sup> Heaney was referring to the brilliant paradoxes and high-wire wordplay of Wilde the Society satirist, the subversive insider, and scourge of Victorian hypocrisy, but he pinpointed an intrinsic aspect of Wilde the freelance classicist. Like Heaney himself, Wilde wore his erudition lightly, but the sheer nimbleness of his creative genius, the assiduous court paid to triviality, the formation of so 'delicate [a] bubble of fancy'<sup>46</sup> as *Earnest*, all had a rootedness and authority attributable in large measure to Wilde's formal classical training.

The present volume had its origins in a one-day colloquium at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) in Oxford on 11 July 2014 (160 years since Wilde's birth). That event brought together an international group of scholars comprising those who had already published on Wilde's classicism and those who were currently researching in this general area. The decision to publish the proceedings of the colloquium together with newly commissioned essays was not motivated by any special or immediate anniversary, although 2017 marks 120 years since Wilde's release from prison and fifty years since the Sexual Offences Act decriminalized private homosexual acts between men over 21 in England and Wales. At any rate, we do believe this collection is timely and necessary in terms of both Wildean Studies and Classical Reception Studies.

<sup>43</sup> For a description of the interior design and decoration of Wilde's home at 16 (now 34) Tite Street, see Ellmann (1988), 241–3.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett (2010), 34.

<sup>45</sup> Heaney (1998), 174–6, at 176.

<sup>46</sup> Wilde interviewed by Robert Ross, *St James's Gazette*, 18 Jan. 1895.

In his critique of Iain Ross's meticulously researched 2013 study, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, Simon Goldhill poses 'the large and vexing question'<sup>47</sup> of just why Wilde's classicism merits dedicated examination. The tendency of classical reception scholars 'to hazard that the classical soil was the ground on and out of which the genius flourished'<sup>48</sup> is, he suggests, a kind of wish fulfilment; it conceals or circumvents the fact that Wilde's 'knowledge of Greek and his treatment of classical subjects by and large seem remarkably ordinary and usual for the time', that his 'classical furniture was actually rather shabby and second-rate'. 'What, then,' Goldhill asks, 'is the relation between Wilde's genius as a writer and his ordinariness as a classicist?'<sup>49</sup> This volume seeks 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 social and intellectual frameworks.

It is not merely that Oscar Wilde is an iconic literary and cultural figure who had a solid background and lifelong interest in classical antiquity. The most striking characteristics of his classicism are its timing, its theatricality and marketability, and its part in the evolution of Wilde's own myth, all of which are implicit in the speech he is given in *The Invention of Love*, Tom Stoppard's play about classical philologist, textual critic, and poet A. E. Housman:

I made my life into my art and it was an unqualified success. The blaze of my immolation threw its light into every corner of the land where uncounted young men sat each in his own darkness. . . . I awoke the imagination of the century. I banged Ruskin's and Pater's heads together, and from the moral severity of one and the aesthetic soul of the other I made art a philosophy that can look the twentieth century in the eye. I had genius, brilliancy, daring, I took charge of my own myth. I dipped my staff into the comb of wild honey. I tasted forbidden sweetness and drank the stolen waters. I lived at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new—the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman.<sup>50</sup>

Wilde is a recurrent topic of conversation before he finally appears in exile, a reformed Selfish Giant and passenger aboard Charon's Stygian ferry. The daring and transgressive artist is pointedly contrasted with Housman the scrupulous scholar, all timidity and repression.<sup>51</sup> Wilde of Magdalen is remembered in the play for the affectations of his blue china and velvet knickerbockers and his propensity for linguistic inversion rather than for his impressive Double First. But of course the underlying rigour of Wilde's classicism was crucial to the act of taking charge of his own myth, to his *modus vivendi* as a protean self-stylist; hence the need in *De Profundis* to turn

<sup>47</sup> Goldhill (2014), 182–7, at 185. <sup>48</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. <sup>50</sup> Stoppard (1997), 99–100.

<sup>51</sup> On the accuracy or fairness of these contrasting portraits, see the exchanges between Stoppard and Daniel Mendelsohn in the *New York Review of Books*, 21 Sept. and 19 Oct. 2000.

the grotesque comedy of his disgrace and imprisonment into the stuff of Greek tragedy, complete with *anagnorisis* (recognition). As Evangelista indicates, 'For Wilde . . . the "Greek life" involved a performative dimension that he was able to exploit in the construction of his successful public image as flamboyant aesthete and eccentric',<sup>52</sup> and later as revenant and Man of Sorrows. The importance of Wilde's classicism to his conception of himself is why the caricature of Wilde as Narcissus, featured on the cover of this volume, is a more apt depiction of him than the artist James Edward Kelly could have known.<sup>53</sup>

In a sudden outpouring of compassion for Wilde's fate, Stoppard's Housman says: 'You should have lived in Megara when Theognis was writing and made his lover a song sung unto all posterity . . . and not *now!*—when disavowal and endurance are in honour, and a nameless luckless love has made notoriety your monument.'<sup>54</sup> It is an idea similar to Somerset Maugham's in his novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, 'that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid certain surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. . . . Perhaps some deep-rooted atavism urges the wanderer back to lands which his ancestors left in the dim beginnings of history.'<sup>55</sup> But, as Wilde protests: 'think what I would have missed!' His myth, built on classical foundations, ripened and became meaningful by virtue of both its belatedness and its prescience. In Megara he might not have been put in the pillory, but nor might he have been an 'agent of progress' or 'a fallen rocket'.

In all likelihood Wilde could not have been 'a textual diviner and emender',<sup>56</sup> to rival Housman's skill or Fraenkel's and Wilamowitz's stature,<sup>57</sup> but what distinguishes him from many of his classical contemporaries and makes his reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity deserving of attention is his embodiment of Benjamin Jowett's vision for the Greats curriculum, namely: 'the function of the scholar was to bring Greek ideas into contact with the modern world, and the purpose of university education was to produce not scholars or researchers but statesmen and men of the world'.<sup>58</sup> That Wilde lived 'at the turning point of the world where everything was waking up new', and that he brought Greek (and Roman) ideas into contact with 'the New Drama, the

<sup>52</sup> Evangelista (2009), 126.

<sup>53</sup> The caricature was possibly inspired by the publication of six prose poems by Wilde in the *Fortnightly Review* of July 1894. One of the poems, 'The Disciples', is told from the point of view of the pool in which Narcissus gazes lovingly at his own reflection.

<sup>54</sup> Stoppard (1997), 99.

<sup>55</sup> Maugham (1999), 177. *The Moon and Sixpence* was first published in 1919; it is based on the life of artist Paul Gauguin.

<sup>56</sup> Stray, in his Introduction to Butterfield and Stray (2009), 1–7, at 4.

<sup>57</sup> On the wider issue of Wilde's intellectual seriousness or triviality, see Guy and Small (2006), 77–113.

<sup>58</sup> Clarke (1959), 103.

New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman', is perhaps the most singular achievement of his classicism. What is more, he reached an audience far beyond the world of classical scholarship. In her book *Idylls of the Marketplace*, Regenia Gagnier showed how Wilde's aestheticism emerged out of *fin-de-siècle* commodity culture, how his 'works offer a site where the imagination—a romantic, indeed utopian, imagination—meets the marketplace that inevitably absorbs and transforms it'.<sup>59</sup> In focusing on Wilde the practitioner (the dramatist and novelist) as much as Wilde the student and theorist, the present volume shows how Wilde's classicism also relates to Victorian commodity culture. For Wilde, the Classics were not just essential to education; they were an important part of modern mass entertainment and enlightenment. From his journalism to his plays and his novel, Wilde incorporated the ancient world in literary 'products' designed to be consumed by large middle-class audiences. His taking of Parnassus to Piccadilly was, therefore, a crusade that was critical, creative, and commercial.

In the field of Wildean Studies previous discussions of Wilde's classicism have been sparse and piecemeal, with the result that a pervasive theme of Wilde's literary output has been unfairly neglected. In the field of Classical Reception Studies, with the exception of Ross's monograph, analyses of Wilde's classicism have tended to present Wilde as a small player in larger stories.<sup>60</sup> There is a reason for this curious imbalance. The very nature of Wilde's classicism eludes singlehanded analysis. The vibrancy and breadth of his appropriation of classical antiquity necessitates a corresponding interdisciplinary critical approach, something that even Ross fails to provide. Full studies of individual modern authors have been rare in the discipline of Classical Reception, where there is a discernible preference for investigating themes, genres, motifs, and periods.<sup>61</sup> This volume, however, is offered as a model of how the topic of the individual and the classical tradition might be addressed.

In structuring the collection, we have followed a thematic rather than chronological sequence, partly to establish the interconnectedness of thought and creativity in Wilde's reception of antiquity.<sup>62</sup> We cover the major genres of Wilde's writing, with new perspectives on his most canonical texts and close scrutiny of unpublished material in the form of his Oxford notebooks. And we explore the main aspects of the ancient world that Wilde engaged with, its literature, history, and philosophy. Although the volume has aimed to deal

<sup>59</sup> Gagnier (1986), 15. See also Bowlby (1987), 147–62 and Freedman (1990).

<sup>60</sup> See, e.g., Evangelista (2009), Blanshard (2010), Orrells (2011), and Nisbet (2013).

<sup>61</sup> Exceptions include Tessa Roynon's *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition* (2013) and the 2017 volume *Pater the Classicist*, edited by Martindale, Evangelista, and Prettejohn.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the methodology of Puchner (2010), who argues that the histories of 2 and theatre have been crucially intertwined and that Wilde was a pioneer in the formation of a modern Platonic drama (pp. 83–92).

comprehensively with Wilde's relationship to classical antiquity, it has tried to do that meaningfully, by a sharply evaluative process. We have not sought merely to catalogue and discuss every instance of classical influence or appropriation in Wilde's work, but rather to give detailed critical attention to the evolution, essence, and context of his classicism; to direct our investigation towards texts that are most representative of Wilde the artist, the critic, and the classicist and towards lesser-known material that nevertheless illuminates important and unique aspects of Wilde's reception of the Classics. As a consequence, there are two obvious omissions in our study of Wilde's *oeuvre*: his poetry and his shorter fiction. These works, which, for the most part, precede his major prose and theatrical works, have a richness of imagery and thought drawn from the classical world but are of less narrative value to our investigation. Examples from *Poems* (1881), 'The Nightingale and the Rose' from *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), and 'The Birthday of the Infanta' from *A House of Pomegranates* (1891) are touched upon in the essays that follow, and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898) is considered alongside *De Profundis* and Wilde's letter to the *Daily Chronicle* on the subject of prison reform, but the rest have not been drawn within our chosen parameters. That is not to say they are undeserving of further scholarly attention. That may come.<sup>63</sup> To achieve our objectives we made the choice to include only the work we believed most germane to our cause.

The first section is devoted to Wilde's classical education, primarily at Trinity and Oxford. Blanshard's opening chapter reveals how Wilde struggled against his tutor Mahaffy's concept of Hellenism and eventually formed a distinct version of the Hellenic ideal and the value of the Classics that stands manifestly in contrast to Mahaffy's. Similarly illuminating is Nisbet's evaluation of the influence of John Addington Symonds on Wilde's notion of the classical. Through an analysis of his extensive annotations to *Studies of the Greek Poets* we can see Wilde reading both with and against Symonds in his understanding of Greek literature. Guy and Small have warned scholars of 'the difficulties of using materials written at a very early stage in Wilde's career to explain what happened later'.<sup>64</sup> Without discounting those difficulties, the next two chapters make a compelling case for how Wilde's responses to his undergraduate reading did in fact shape his critical sensibilities and how they surfaced in his later work. Ross uncovers a seemingly unnoticed influence in

<sup>63</sup> Manny's forthcoming doctoral thesis on Oscar Wilde and Graeco-Roman antiquity includes a chapter on 'The Nightingale and the Rose' and 'The Happy Prince' in relation to the Cassandra scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Ovid's Philomela tale. See also several articles on 'Greek love' or Platonic/Socratic *eros* in the fairy tales, e.g. Wood (2002), 156–70. Ross (2013) and Boyiopoulos (2015) have both written on Wilde's poetry from a classical perspective, and Sun (2013), who has addressed Wilde's poetry in some detail, includes in her study a section on 'Wilde the Classicist'.

<sup>64</sup> Guy and Small (2006), 87.

Wilde's work, the Greek historian Herodotus. Although Wilde rarely cites the author explicitly, we can detect from his annotations an intense interest in Herodotus which declares itself in his later writings, most notably 'The Decay of Lying'. Bristow looks at the processes by which Wilde prepared for his *Literæ Humaniores* examinations. In particular, he demonstrates how important contemporary debates in philosophy affected Wilde's reading of ancient philosophic texts and how, in turn, those texts informed his reading of modern philosophy.

In the following section on Wilde as dramatist, the first two chapters present Wilde as critical spectator and dramatic theorist. Stokes describes how Wilde's experience of Greek theatre and its offshoots in live performance contributed to his fascination with the art of the actor, with theatrical space, with the deployment of scenery, and with the relation of archaeology to architecture. Foster considers Wilde's championship of serious theatre and the authentic performance text by analysing his reviews of the first so-called 'archaeological' productions of Greek plays and Shakespeare. She suggests some ways in which Wilde's early enthusiasm for authentic Greek drama (from the Oxford 1880 *Agamemnon* onwards) is related to his own later classically informed playwriting. The next two chapters deal more directly with Wilde as theatre practitioner. Hurst examines Wilde's interest in the relationship between tragedy and comedy in the context of Victorian responses to Euripides and Menander. She points out that Wilde was one of the readers who restored Euripides to prominence and critical favour in the 1880s and 1890s, and that the reception of Euripides' tragedies with a happy ending and Menander's New Comedy, mediated by Shakespeare, inspired Wilde's tragicomic treatment of themes from contemporary melodrama in his Society comedies. Although the biblical drama *Salome* (1893/4) ultimately takes its subject matter from the New Testament, Boyiopoulos traces the origin of the transgressive desire in Wilde's symbolist passion play to Euripidean tragedy, in particular the *Hippolytus*, with its treatment of *eros* and, more specifically, *eros* in its unrequited form, *himeros*. He maintains that in Euripides' deviation from classical Aristotelian conventions lies an ancient prototype for Wilde's own inversion of tragedy.

The first three chapters of the next section detail the impact of Wilde's classical training at Oxford on the development of his philosophical ideas and his role as self-appointed cultural critic. Grech presents a cultural-historical analysis of Oscar Wilde's aesthetic criticism, centred on the use of imperial rhetoric in 'The Critic as Artist' and *The Soul of Man*. She explains how Wilde's critique of the British Empire and the intellectual culture of nineteenth-century England doubles as a critique of the imperialist objectives that defined the Oxford Greats curriculum. Riley offers a new reading of *De Profundis* (or 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis') as the culmination of Wilde's special kinship with Euripides, which he nurtured at Oxford. She argues that



Wilde's notion of Christian self-fulfilment has its foundation in Euripidean humanism, and that his exposition of Christ's 'dangerous idea' (love for the sinner) is steeped in the idea of redemptive love exemplified in Euripides' *Heracles*. By the late 1870s, when Wilde arrived at Oxford, Heraclitus had acquired a new significance through Jowett's reforms to the *Literæ Humaniores* syllabus and the work Wilde famously referred to as 'my golden book', Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*. With reference to 'The Critic as Artist', *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *De Profundis*, Hext reflects on Wilde's use of Heraclitus' philosophy of flux to underpin his conception of the pleasure-seeking, hedonistic individual. The section closes with Evangelista's exploration of how Wilde's practices of classical reception have roots in the French as well as English traditions; how his perceptions of France and the French language (as the only rival to Greek in beauty) were pivotal in his adoption of a cosmopolitan identity in which his close emotional and intellectual engagement with the ancient world also played a key role.

The penultimate section concentrates on Wilde's most extensive prose work and only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1). Wilde's Platonism and reception of Socratic *eros*, especially as delineated in the *Symposium*, have received widespread attention. Hill's essay maps the parallels between the *Republic* and *Dorian Gray*, with specific focus on Plato's concern for the soul, in particular the philosophical soul corrupted. When viewed through a Platonic lens, Wilde's novel is more clearly seen to critique rather than extol Lord Henry Wotton's anti-philosophy of the 'New Hedonism'. Endres draws our attention to the ways in which *Dorian Gray* subverts, or fails to live up to, idealized Platonic *paiderastia*. He suggests that 'Greek love' needs to be supplemented by a more 'modern' ancient sexual ethos, one very different from Socratic sobriety. He proposes that 'Romosexuality' (to use Ingleheart's coinage)—as depicted in *Dorian Gray*'s Latin literary exemplars, Petronius' *Satyricon* and Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars*—affords a better fit for Wilde's novel and its search for erotic reciprocity. Wilde has been superficially likened to Ovid, and *Dorian Gray* has been compared in depth to the Narcissus of the *Metamorphoses*. Manny fuses these two separate critical phenomena and finds in the Ovidian Orpheus another archetypal artist who epitomizes *Dorian Gray*'s (and Wilde's) problematic relations with both sexes.

The final section of the volume is unique, in that it extends the familiar boundaries of Wilde's classicism and provides a useful corrective to the image of Wilde as purely a Hellenist. It begins with Smith's survey of the significance of Rome in Wilde's writings, including entries in his Historical Criticism Notebook and the lifelong range of his references to Roman history, historians, and culture. Malik illustrates how stories of Roman emperors informed Wilde's ideas about decadence, and how Wilde's attitude to the subject of ancient morality evolved over time. The concluding chapter by Witzke delves into Wilde's interest in Roman comedy, and specifically the direct structural,

narrative, and textual engagement of Wilde's theatrical masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* with Plautus' *Menaechmi*.

In assembling this markedly interdisciplinary collection of essays, we aim 'to live up to the glorious blue china of Wilde's multifaceted celebrity',<sup>65</sup> in the firm conviction that a polyphonic approach is vital to examining such a complex phenomenon as Wilde's love and appropriation of classical antiquity.

<sup>65</sup> Goldhill (2014), 182–7, at 187.



# I

## Wilde's Classical Education



# 1

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## Mahaffy and Wilde

### A Study in Provocation

*Alastair J. L. Blanshard*

#### INTRODUCTION

Any discussion of Wilde and the Greeks must begin with John Pentland Mahaffy, Wilde's tutor at Trinity College Dublin. Or so Frank Harris's Oscar Wilde would have us believe:

I got my love of the Greek ideal and my intimate knowledge of the language at Trinity from Mahaffy and Tyrrell; they were Trinity to me. Mahaffy was especially valuable to me at that time. Though he was not as good a scholar as Tyrrell, he had been in Greece, had lived there and saturated himself with Greek thought and Greek feeling. Besides he took deliberately the artistic standpoint towards everything, which was coming more and more to be my standpoint. He was a delightful talker, too, a really great talker in a certain way—an artist in vivid words and eloquent pauses.<sup>1</sup>

These sentiments of affection towards his teachers Robert Yelverton Tyrrell, then Professor of Latin and later Regius Professor of Greek, and the special importance of Mahaffy find an echo elsewhere in Wilde's writing. For example, when Mahaffy wrote to congratulate Wilde on *A Woman of No Importance*, Wilde effusively thanked his former tutor, describing Mahaffy as 'my first and best teacher... the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things'.<sup>2</sup> Although Wilde is slightly too generous in attributing the cause of his love of Greece in its entirety to Mahaffy, nevertheless, when Wilde thought about his relationship with classical antiquity, Mahaffy stood as a starting point.<sup>3</sup> Given Mahaffy's role as midwife to one of the most important

<sup>1</sup> Harris (1916), i. 40–1.      <sup>2</sup> Wilde to Mahaffy (?Apr. 1893) in Wilde (2000a), 562.

<sup>3</sup> Ross (2013) illustrates a number of other important causal factors in encouraging Wilde's love of antiquity, most notably the influence of his father, the antiquarian Sir William Wilde.

intellectual relationships in Wilde's life, it is striking how profoundly distant the figures become later in life.

The decline in the relationship between Wilde and Mahaffy is well known. Initially, as we have seen, they were very close. Wilde arrived at Trinity College as a talented student from the Portora Royal School, Enniskillen. While at Trinity he enjoyed an extremely successful academic career under the tutelage of Mahaffy, and Mahaffy was happy to encourage his talented student in his move to study in Oxford. It is hard not to see the twinkling in Mahaffy's eye when he famously quipped: 'My dear Oscar, you are not clever enough for us in Dublin. You had better run over to Oxford.'<sup>4</sup> Mahaffy was only fifteen years older than Wilde. He had entered Trinity College as a student at the age of 16 in 1855. After a couple of near misses in fellowship competitions, he had been appointed as a very young fellow of Trinity in 1864.<sup>5</sup>

Together Wilde and Mahaffy were foundation members of the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies. When Wilde was contemplating a career after leaving Oxford, he wrote to his former tutor asking if he might help him secure a position as an Inspector of Schools.<sup>6</sup> Yet over the next decade there are clear signs of a cooling in the relationship and a reappraisal of the sense of mutual admiration. Even in the letter asking for Mahaffy to write him a reference for the school inspectorship, Wilde could not refrain from pointing out that while 'your letter in the *Pall Mall* is delightful... I should fight with you over some of the matter of it'. In 1887 Wilde wrote a scathing anonymous review of Mahaffy's *Greek Life and Thought from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* that was perfectly calibrated to wound his old tutor in all the places that he was most vulnerable. By the time of Wilde's trial and subsequent imprisonment, Mahaffy no longer counted himself a supporter. He declined to add his name to the petition to the Home Secretary in November 1895 asking for Wilde's release.<sup>7</sup> In his later years Mahaffy asked that people never mention his famous former pupil.<sup>8</sup> Wilde became 'the one blot of my tutorship'.<sup>9</sup>

Traditionally, the decline in the relationship between Wilde and Mahaffy has been attributed to them having widely divergent views on the topic of Home Rule for Ireland. Certainly, this was a major issue that divided them. Wilde followed his mother, Lady Jane Wilde, in his support for Home Rule and its leading advocate Charles Stewart Parnell.<sup>10</sup> When there was an attempt to discredit Parnell over letters he supposedly wrote in support of violence, Wilde demonstrated his solidarity with him by attending a number of the

<sup>4</sup> Hyde (1948), 31.

<sup>5</sup> For the early career of Mahaffy, see Stanford and McDowell (1971), 16–25.

<sup>6</sup> Wilde to Mahaffy (late Feb. 1886) in Wilde (2000a), 279–80. The letter to which Wilde refers proved to be a forgery, submitted by some Trinity undergraduates as a prank.

<sup>7</sup> Stanford and McDowell (1971), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Papers, Trinity College Library, Dublin 4735/44.

<sup>9</sup> Stanford and McDowell (1971), 87.

<sup>10</sup> Ellmann (1988), 7–8.

meetings of the Royal Commission investigating the allegations.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Mahaffy was an active opponent of the move to Home Rule. He was part of a delegation of 'Irish Loyalists' that petitioned the Marquess of Salisbury to reject any moves towards the establishment of a Legislative Assembly in Ireland.<sup>12</sup> Throughout his life, he remained sceptical about Irish Nationalism. Even when the movement seemed dead in 1895, Mahaffy still warned of the dangerous 'poison' of 'provincial nationalism', whose terrible effects might still be lurking in the body politic and whose cause might yet once again arise through 'mental aberration'.<sup>13</sup>

However, the disagreement between Wilde and Mahaffy on Irish politics was a symptom of a much larger difference between the two. After Wilde left Trinity, there gradually emerged an unbridgeable intellectual gap between them. They differed in their ideas about politics, progress, social class, and the nature of love and desire. One way to appreciate fully their differences is to focus on their differing conceptions of Hellenism. A study of Mahaffy's Hellenism brings into sharp relief how divergent his and Wilde's ideas were about the nature of the world, both ancient and modern. Mahaffy's version of the Greeks, and his attitudes to Classics more broadly, posed specific problems and challenges to Wilde. Rather than thinking of the relationship between Mahaffy and Wilde as one of influence, we should instead regard it as one in which Mahaffy provided challenges and provocations to Wilde's thinking, constantly requiring his student to recalibrate and reaffirm his position. In the following chapter I focus on three moments or encounters with Mahaffy's attitude towards the Greeks that are important for our thinking about Wilde's attitude to Greece. In each, I explore issues that Mahaffy foregrounds and which subsequently form important contours in the shape of Wildean Hellenism and his politics more generally.

## HOW TO APPRECIATE THE GREEKS: *SOCIAL LIFE IN GREECE*

In 1874 Mahaffy approached Wilde with his manuscript of *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* and asked for his comments and reactions. Wilde seems to have leapt at the chance to offer his opinion and was diligent in working through the manuscript. Along with another former student, H. B. Leech (later professor of International Law at Trinity College), Wilde is thanked in the preface for his 'improvements and corrections all through the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 273; Sloan (2003), 39–40.

<sup>12</sup> Anonymous (1886), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Mahaffy (1895), 1027–35, at 1027.



book'.<sup>14</sup> Although it is impossible to quantify his contribution to *Social Life in Greece* exactly, the text is useful for understanding Wilde's ideas on Hellenism because, of all the general studies on the classical Greeks, this was the one that Wilde knew best and most intimately. A study of *Social Life in Greece* reveals a text that both facilitated Wilde's understanding and, at the same time, would prove deeply problematic for him.

On one point at least Wilde and Mahaffy were united, and that was the 'modernity' of the Greeks. The clearest expression of Mahaffy's view on the topic is found in the opening to *Social Life in Greece*. In his introduction, Mahaffy was programmatic about the value of the Greeks and the manner in which they should be studied:

Every thinking man who has become acquainted with the masterpieces of Greek writing must plainly see that they stand to us in far closer relation than the other remains of antiquity. They are not mere objects of curiosity to the archaeologist, not mere treasure-houses of roots and forms to be sought out by comparative grammarians. They are the writings of men of like culture with ourselves, who argue with the same logic, who reflect with kindred feelings. They have worked out social and moral problems like ourselves, they have expressed them in such language as we should desire to use. In a word, they are thoroughly modern...<sup>15</sup>

It is worthwhile stressing the radical nature of this position and its attendant methodology. Mahaffy begins by acknowledging, only then to reject, two different ways of experiencing the ancients. The first is that practised by the archaeologist, the second is the method favoured by the grammarian. One works with objects, the other works with texts, but both are flawed because neither is able to see the liveliness of their subject matter. In his dismissive attitude towards both the archaeologist and the linguist, Mahaffy sought a new third way to think about the value of the Greeks. Their importance lay in their ethical and social developments. The job of the historian was to breathe 'life' into the monuments of antiquity so that they became recognizable and contemporary.

Mahaffy wrestles here with the two poles—the archaeological and the philological—that will come to represent the journey of Wilde's changing attitude towards the Greeks. In his overview of Wilde's Hellenism, Ross has stressed the manner in which Wilde's attitude and interests change from the 'total reconstruction' of the Hellenic world as advocated by archaeologists and ancient historians to one pessimistic about the value of the recovery of ancient Greek life and which instead saw the value of the Greeks lying in their ability to be a 'stylistic resource'.<sup>16</sup> Mahaffy's introduction represents

<sup>14</sup> Mahaffy (1874), viii. Wilde also helped to correct the proofs of Mahaffy's *Rambles and Studies in Greece* (Letter to William Ward, 6 Aug. 1876), although he received no acknowledgement for this contribution.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ross (2013), see esp. 2–5, 97–104, 118–27.