

BOOK REVIEW

KATHLEEN RILEY, ALASTAIR J. L. BLANSHARD, and IARLA MANNY (eds). *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*. Pp. xviii+382. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Hardback, £75.

In the introduction to this volume, Kathleen Riley astutely remarks that ‘few authors in the Victorian period were so immersed in the ancient world as Wilde’ (p. 2). When asked what he intended to do with his life after graduating from Oxford, Oscar Wilde replied by declaring, ‘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’ (p. 7). Wilde’s prediction was fulfilled as, like a character from a Greek tragedy, his life and career followed a spectacular trajectory; from fame to infamy.

The Introduction begins with a biographical account of Wilde’s classicism; beginning at childhood and early school days, through to his student years at Trinity College Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford, and to his later literary success. Moreover, Riley argues that Wilde’s classicism was crucial to his self-fashioning and his taking control of his own myth. This volume provides a series of insightful re-examinations of the complex phenomenon of Wilde’s ‘love and appropriation of classical antiquity’ (p. 15). Following a thematic, rather than chronological, approach, this collection is divided into five sections, each of which explores the major genres of Wilde’s writing and unpublished materials from his Oxford notebooks. There are a number of chapters that readers will find insightful and of interest because of their refreshing approach. For example, ‘Cosmopolitan Classicism: Wilde between Greece and France’ by Stefano Evangelista is a delightful exploration of Wilde’s often contradictory relationship with France and Greece, and ‘the relationship between modernity and antiquity as Wilde understood it’ (p. 209). Likewise, Nikolai Endres’s ‘From Eros to Romosexuality: Love and Sex in *Dorian Gray*’ which argues that *Dorian Gray* (1891) subverts the ideas of Platonic *paiderastia* is a stimulating chapter. Additionally, Kostas Boyiopoulos’s ‘Death by Unrequited Eros: *Salome*, *Hippolytus*, and Wilde’s Inversion of Tragedy’, is noteworthy, as it offers a rich and revealing discussion on transgressive desire and the manner that Euripides’s *Hippolytus* (c 428 BCE) anticipates Wilde’s decadence. Arguing that Wilde inverts or recasts Athenian tragedy by using excess as the driving force for his characters, Boyiopoulos demonstrates that *Salomé* (1891) emulates *Hippolytus*, as it pits *eros* against self-control.

Particularly worthy of attention is Gideon Nisbet’s ‘How Wilde Read John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*’ (1873, 1876). In a detailed examination

of Wilde's extensive annotations in his own copy of *Studies*, Nisbet explores how Wilde's understanding of classical literature and how his engagement with *Studies* 'gave him the raw materials for his own self-consciously dissident self-fashioning' (p. 37). Providing thorough transcriptions and an accompanying analysis of Wilde's Oxford notebooks, his personal copies of *Studies* and an undated and unfinished review of Symonds's 'The Women of Homer', Nisbet shows a thorough understanding of Wilde's evolving interest with Aristophanes' absurdism, Euripides's ingenuity, and Menander's sharp eye for social foibles. By placing these sources in a dialogue, this chapter aids in establishing a broader narrative concerning Wilde's classicism and how he studied and responded to *Studies*. Nisbet supports his argument by including an account of the kinds of annotations, the contexts in which they are found, and what may be deduced. Yet, he equally reminds readers that such annotated copies must be read with caution.

In his remarkable essay (perhaps the most perceptive discussion on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in this collection), Iarla Manny's 'Oscar as (Ovid as) Orpheus: Misogyny and Pederasty in *Dorian Gray* and the *Metamorphoses*' provides a refreshing and exceptional analysis of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the model for *Dorian Gray*. Exploring Ovidian references besides those to Narcissus and Pygmalion, Manny stresses the significance of Orpheus's position as a poet in relation to Dorian and Wilde. Comparing the story of Orpheus and Eurydice with that of Dorian and Sibyl Vane, Dorian's actions in relation to Sibyl and Orpheus's grieving for Eurydice, as well as Euripidean sacrificial heroines, Manny argues confidently that the 'Ovidian Orpheus, who makes between the upper world and the underworld and the heterosexual and homosexual realms, is an archetypal guide not only for Dorian Gray, but for Wilde himself' (p. 270). Expanding upon this notion and building on Victoria White's assertion that Wilde's relationship with Constance might have been an extension of his Oedipal struggle, Manny notes 'Wilde's own "suicide" [...] could be said to be even more perfectly Orphic than the "false ending" of his novel or the subsequent self-destruction of its protagonist' (p. 282).

It is true to say that allusions and mentions to Roman history are abundant in Wilde's letters and later works; from his poetry and journalism to critical essays and to *De Profundis* (1905), Wilde displays a wealth of knowledge concerning Roman history, historians, and culture. Keeping this in mind, in 'Wilde and Roman History', Philip E. Smith II surveys the significance of Rome in Wilde's writings. Focusing on Wilde's essay 'Historical Criticism' and to a lesser extent 'The Common Place' notebooks, Smith considers the unused entries on Tacitus and Livy, entries on Roman history and materials drawn from Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome* (1854) to illustrate Wilde's knowledge and nuanced fascination with Roman history. Using these materials, and capitalizing on the unfinished condition of 'Historical Criticism', Smith is able to plot his continuing yet evolving interest in Latin and Roman history. For instance, commenting on 'The Decay of Lying' (1889), Smith highlights that 'Wilde has Vivian include some favourite Romans in his extensive list of notable lying historians' (p. 304). Similarly, Smith concludes his discussion by remarking that 'in a prison letter to Bosie, upon the need to claim for himself suffering [...], it is not surprising to find another reference to Tacitus' (p. 304).

This collection is not an introductory text, it is written for critics and scholars of Classics, Hellenism and Wilde, and it possesses a notable level of jargon and terminology. Given its specialized nature, this is understandable and attests to the level of research conducted. Readers would do well to consult works such as Richard Jenkyn's *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank M. Turner's *Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1984) to contextualize the frameworks that underpin much of the analysis present in this volume. Surprisingly, this volume does not contain a discussion on Wilde's poetry or his short fiction. However, Riley accounts for this omission by noting 'These works, which for the most part, precede his major prose and theatrical works [...] are of less narrative value to our consideration' (p. 12). The analysis and inclusion of a variety of sources, including unpublished, annotated manuscripts, transcripts, and Wilde's notebooks, are an invaluable resource and welcome additions to ongoing discussions on Wilde. While the weaknesses of this collection are few, the debates present are original, well-conceived and offer readers a concrete position from which to expand and further consider Wilde's classicism.

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