

KATHLEEN RILEY, ALASTAIR J. L. BLANSHARD, IARLA MANNY, *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, xviii+382 pp., £75.00, ISBN 978-0-19-878926-0.

The current vogue among literary and cultural historians for Oscar Wilde is itself a phenomenon of some historical and cultural interest. It is true that he was a supremely witty man; it is compelling that his trial changed the public perception of the figure of the homosexual in Britain in a way which ushered both harsher laws and more public and aggressive hostility to sexual transgression; it also the case that at least *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the most repeatedly staged work from his dramatic output, is a wonderful play, structurally and verbally brilliant, and lastingly funny in a way few works of late Victorian humour are. Above all, I suspect that his life story – the toast of the town brought into humiliation and an early death by his own flamboyance and self-confidence – is such an iconic tragic reversal that few can resist its beguiling lure. Wilde has indeed become pervasive in modern culture. When my daughter started her first placement as a doctor in Worthing, person after person (including me) immediately referenced *The Importance of Being Earnest* as their sole knowledge of the town, and she duly, to my wry sense of literary amusement, takes the Brighton line to it from London, though hopefully without any novels of more than usually revolting sentimentality. But even when we understand Wilde's significance for our own self-understanding of the history of sexuality and modern literature, the explosion of studies of him and the fixation of scholars is remarkable.

We could compare Simeon Solomon – a talented, up-and-coming artist from the same decadent circles – who after his arrest for soliciting men for sex in a public toilet was consequently dropped by all his friends and died in lonely penury. This Jewish outcast artist dying in a garret has some claims on iconic victimhood, and is admired and studied by a handful – but there is nothing to compare to the Wilde industry. Or Radclyffe Hall, the author of the *Well of Loneliness*, who was also prosecuted for sexual transgression, and who was as instrumental in the construction of the modern image of the Lesbian as Wilde was for the male homosexual, but who is now all too often no more than a footnote, except in academic studies of the history of Lesbian imagery. Or, even more strikingly, we could notice that Wilde's schoolboy and undergraduate notebooks are being published in scholarly editions, whereas George Eliot, a writer of considerable greater significance both in her own day and subsequently, left an array of mature notebooks

which are of immense variety and real intellectual interest but are barely studied. Wilde has become for a modern audience – and this would no doubt warm his heart – perhaps the most recognisable physical character from the Victorian literary world, and has certainly created a celebrity that dazzles.

Wilde is a contemporary cultural and literary hotspot, then. But, even so, the current fascination among classicists also needs some further explanation. When I reviewed Iain Ross's book, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*, I wondered how it could be, first of all, that so many classicists (and others) conspired to declare that he was a great classicist and a scholar of immense learning. He did get a double first from Oxford, but did not get a fellowship or publish anything of note on classics. He did a standard undergraduate curriculum for the day, and enjoyed it enough to imagine taking it forward into research and wished to publish either some translations from Herodotus or an edition of a Euripidean play. But did neither. His verse compositions in Greek and Latin are pedestrian. There is no evidence that he read Greek and Latin regularly after university – unlike Matthew Arnold, say – though he did ask for some Greek books and a dictionary when in prison. There are, fortunately, few examples of overweening hyperbole in this volume, though shards of exaggeration escape the editorial eyes. There is also among classicists the hope, a rather defensive self-justification, I fear, that classics was the soil out of which and on which his genius flourished. It takes a good deal of care to argue such a case. One of the hardest things to do is to remind ourselves that Wilde was a genius as a writer and as a self-fashioning public figure, but a rather ordinary classicist. To reconcile those two recognitions is one of the express aims of this book.

The volume stems from a one-day conference, but has been expanded and properly organized into a coherent project over the last four years. (It is fun to wonder what a one-day conference of such Wilde obsessives would be like. Were there languid poses with blue china? Rigorous rejections of such triviality by serious tweedy scholars? Knowing nods at quoted juvenilia? Fierce battles over the exact role of this or that lesson at school? Many a witticism?) The volume is organized around five general topics: Wilde's classical education; Wilde as dramatist; Wilde as philosopher and cultural critic; Wilde as novelist (*Dorian Gray*), and Wilde on Rome. There are eighteen chapters, and an introduction, from a nicely balanced cast list of junior and senior scholars, of different genders and nationalities, though the number of people who listed their recent or forthcoming work on Oscar Wilde and aspects of the classics was positively frightening. There was some – though not enough – cross-referencing between chapters, and a good deal of repetition of the same few stories and facts, but overall the standard was high and there was barely a chapter that did not deserve its place.

The first section is paradigmatic of the strengths and weaknesses of the project. There are four chapters, each by a distinguished scholar well-known

for work on the history of sexuality, classical reception, the literature of the fin-de-siècle, namely, Alastair Blanshard (one of the editors, who covers all of those areas); Gideon Nisbet (who has written excellently on the role of Greek epigram in the circles of elite males in the Victorian and Edwardian period); Iain Ross (who knows too much about Wilde's early education) and Joseph Bristow (who has published very widely indeed on all things Wildean). For me, the section divided into two. Blanshard discusses the relation between Mahaffey and Wilde, a formative interaction for both men. Blanshard looks at how different models of Hellenism gradually divided the men, but he does so by investigating the dynamic overlap between Hellenism, political idealisms, religious commitments, and class aspirations. This locates Wilde's interest in classics into a properly nuanced, embedded, situated world of knowledge production and exchange. It allows a focus on classics to emerge without losing either its richness or its floppiness: often classics is an alibi for other concerns. Similarly, Nisbet investigates how Wilde read John Addington Symonds – that is, classics mediated by another writer and his agendas. This chapter is based on detailed archival work on the marginalia and other comments on Symonds that Wilde has left – but Nisbet moves towards thinking about how this relates to Wilde's views on Homer and gender, and thus opens out into a more general case (one that comparison with other readings of Symonds would undoubtedly enrich). Ross, by contrast, essays Wilde on Herodotus. Wilde barely mentions Herodotus, but Ross, typically, finds a route through the juvenilia in particular to show a form of engagement, including the intriguing description of a Herodotean passage as 'very fine and Semitic'. But the interest here is very delimited (the essay is the shortest in the volume) and is a contribution to what might be called a little-known backwater in the history of Wilde's early reading, aimed at fellow Wilde obsessives. It is articulate and clear, but completely within its own blinkers. Bristow is far more expansive and necessarily so since it focuses on Wilde's university understanding of the philosophical idea of abstraction. This is a learned, intelligent and concentrated discussion. But it gives us too little sense of whether Wilde had anything but the usual comprehension. Many of the books Wilde used were text books or set texts; many of the ideas expressed in note form. There is a huge topic lurking here: the role of Greats philosophical teaching on the culture of the period. Too few Victorianists appreciate the place of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* or Plato's *Republic* on moral and aesthetic thinking in this period, despite Linda Dowling's celebrated book on *Hellenism and Homosexuality* which should encourage such work. It is a pity not least because Bristow is one of the scholars who has the learning and intellectual range to produce such a study. It will come as no surprise from what I have written so far that in my opinion Blanshard and Nisbet are very much going in the right direction, and that Ross and Bristow – however good on its own terms such

philology might be – would greatly benefit from lifting their eyes to the wider questions, and allowing a more situated comprehension of Wilde. Here we can see the dangers of studying Wilde as an isolated phenomenon, rather than as a student among students.

The book as a whole reflects such differences though not always so starkly or so competently. Clare Foster offers an exemplary discussion of how Wilde's theatrical technique is modern and classical (a paradox endemic in Wilde) by situating it in broader discussions of contemporary theatre, without losing the pay-off of detailed understanding of particular dramas of Wilde – an argument extended by John Stokes' broad and well-placed discussion of the role of the sculptural in thinking about the aesthetics of drama. Stefano Evangelista opens a new vista (blissfully moving away from Oxford and Piccadilly for a moment) by bringing Wilde's love of France into the picture. His conclusion is outstandingly incisive and deserves a longer quotation (236):

“...Wilde's participation in French Symbolism also took place in the margins of others' work, through ephemeral modes of influence and exchange that go largely unrecorded in traditional literary histories. It is in those margins that the role of the reception of Greece as an engine for cosmopolitan encounters emerges most powerfully”.

Evangelista seems to me to get the balance between marginality and influence, casual remarks and schooling, aesthetic agendas and social interaction exactly right, and allows us to see how French Symbolism and classical traditions intertwine in Wilde's experience.

It was particularly good to see the idea of Rome as well as Greece finding a developed place in the book's argument (though Serena Witzke's comparison of Plautus' *Menaechmi* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* was conceptually rather weak and unconvincing in its repression of all the other intertexts of brothers and mistaken identities, let alone its downplaying of the huge differences between rape in *Menaechmi* and the flirtations between Algie and Cicely in *Importance*). Kathleen Riley, a co-editor, has some very stimulating observations on Wilde's *Epistola*, Euripides and religious imagery of Christ (rare and pleasing to have two essays in a volume on decadence where religion plays its rightful role). Inevitably, sex has its story too: Niklas Endres and Iarla Manny (another of the editors) contribute interesting reflections on *Dorian Gray* (still a very troublesome book), though I found Kostas Boyiopoulos' engagement with unrequited passion in *Salome* rather overheated and undercooked (though not as overheated as Strauss' version). There are a few trivial errors, inevitably: it is, for example, highly unlikely that Cory's celebrated poem 'Heraclitus' is about the ancient philosopher. Nor did George Grote and Benjamin Jowett collaborate to change the classical curriculum at Oxford, though their competing takes on Plato mark out the politics of philosophy in Oxford saliently across the generations.

Overall, this is a reflective and well-conceived book that sets out to offer a more synoptic view than usual of Wilde on the one hand and the role of Classics in the late Victorian era, on the other. It will be stimulating for scholars and students alike. It is at its best when it allows a fully engaged and broad cultural frame to inform its more detailed work. But Wilde scholars at least will find some food for thought in the more specialized and less wide-ranging writing. We still are not clear enough of how to delimit or define Wilde's classicism – but there can be little doubt of the importance of that question for understanding the culture of the era as much as the individual case of the all-too-iconic Wilde.

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