



“ Foreword ”, Études anglaises, “The Pictures of Oscar Wilde ”

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Foreword « The Pictures of Oscar Wilde »

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One of the latest embodiments of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on screen, in the television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-), reprises the motif of the picture gallery developed in Oscar Wilde's novel. In the sixth episode of the first season (entitled "What Death Can Join Together"), the viewer is made to follow the footsteps of Dorian Gray as he takes the character of Vanessa Ives through a guided tour of his private art gallery. The sequence echoes chapter eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the reader is invited to stroll through the "cold picture gallery of [Dorian Gray's] country house" (*Dorian Gray*, 119). In both cases, the reader/viewer metamorphoses into an art lover musing in a museum, who composes a portrait of Dorian Gray based on the various portraits exhibited in the character's personal museum. The sequence in *Penny Dreadful* is endowed with a metadiscursive quality and provides a *mise en abyme* of the *mise en abyme* already at work in Oscar Wilde's "textual museum" (Heffernan). The heterogeneous collection of portraits showcased in the sequence—among which *Napoleon III* by Hippolyte Flandrin, a portrait of Pierre Corneille by Charles Le Brun, a *Self-portrait as a Young Man* by Rembrandt, the *Country Girl from Nice* by Berthe Morisot and the *Woman Addicted to Gambling* by Théodore Géricault—offers a commentary on the series in which it is embedded, as the plot of *Penny Dreadful* recycles and weaves together several gothic or fantastic texts: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Yet beyond the plethora of visual works, the conspicuous absence in Dorian's gallery is that of the actual portrait of the character—which is never shown in the first season of the series: *Penny Dreadful* also throws light on Wilde's novel, on the elusive portrait of Dorian Gray at its core and on the central role of the reader/viewer's gaze in filling that empty frame, thus completing the picture.

This special issue of *Études Anglaises* is a tribute to Oscar Wilde's enduring legacy as well as to his continuing resonance in France. The perhaps slightly tongue-in-cheek idea of including *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the syllabus of the very serious competitive examination of the *agrégation* in English has sparked renewed critical interest for Wilde among French scholars (see Aquien & Giudicelli, Eells, Dugeon & Vernadakis). The contributions gathered in this special issue of *Études Anglaises* sketch out the various relationships between Wilde's works and the arts, from painting to film and music. They may be read as illustrating Wilde's "absolutely impertinent" stance, to borrow the phrase used as a title for the exhibition on Wilde held at the Petit Palais in Paris in the autumn of 2016, "*Oscar Wilde, l'impertinent absolu*" ("Oscar Wilde: Absolutely Impertinent"). Cumulatively designing a textual museum, the essays invite the reader to stroll through the pages in order to compose a nuanced portrait of Oscar Wilde and to (re)discover Wilde's texts in a new light.

The first two essays take the form of a diptych. Both analyse biographical aspects which underscore Wilde's engagement with the arts. Joseph Bristow's essay draws attention to Wilde's interest in the visual arts by discussing the little-documented connection between Wilde and Sir Ronald Gower, the artist who created the monument to Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon, inaugurated on 10 October 1888, during a ceremony in which Wilde eulogised Gower's work. From that anecdote, Bristow unravels a narrative with far-reaching implications. It enables the reader to discover a circle of influential and wealthy queer artists and thereby to put Wilde's 1895 trials for "gross indecency" into perspective, whilst also

giving indications about some of the sources for Wilde's writings: Lord Gower is one of the models for Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as well as for the portrait of Mr. W.H. in the eponymous story. Wilde famously turned his life into a work of art: Michael Patrick Gillespie analyses how, throughout his career, Wilde cultivated the art of "branding." Gillespie lays stress on Wilde's ambivalent relationship to society and shows how Wilde's carefully staged public persona was used as a tool for attracting attention while eschewing censorship, at least until the infamous 1895 trials.

Wilde's early interest in the visual arts is reflected in his reviews of exhibitions at the Grosvenor Gallery published in 1877 and 1879. These reviews, Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada suggests, reveal the extent to which Wilde's aesthetics was shaped by the *avant-garde* school of painters which was later to be referred to as "Aestheticism," as well as by the texts of such critics as Walter Pater, W.M. Rossetti and Sidney Colvin, who were in favour of those "Aesthetic" works. Wilde's 1877 and 1879 reviews are also harbingers of the critical practice Wilde was to theorise in *Intentions* (1891). Gillard-Estrada's essay offers insightful close analyses of the paintings by Edward Burne-Jones, George Frederic Watts and John Rodder Spencer Stanhope commented on by Wilde. Nicholas Frankel's piece demonstrates how Wilde's fiction reflects and refracts the apogee of portraiture in the Victorian age and the late-Victorian discourses on portraiture. It focuses on the use of portraits in Wilde's fiction, from "The Model Millionaire" to "The Sphinx without a secret," "The Portrait of Mr. W.H" and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Frankel's essay revisits the question, central to Wilde's works, of the interaction between life and art: does life influence portraits? Do portraits in turn have an influence on life? It also tackles the issue of the portraits' function and the dichotomy between secrecy and revelation: do portraits serve to reveal one's identity, or do they rather conceal it and recreate another persona? Frankel offers new insights into the scripting of illicit desires in Wilde's works by studying the "affective relationship" between portrait, artist, model and viewer.

The contributions by Emily Eells and Shannon Wells-Lassagne examine *The Picture of Dorian Gray* from two different standpoints. Eells's essay explores the ways in which French art informs *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It concentrates on the French writers who influenced Wilde—Honoré de Balzac, Théophile Gautier, Edmond de Goncourt—, on the French books which feature in the novel—Huysmans's *À Rebours* and Gautier's *Émaux et Camées*—and on the inscription of French words in Wilde's text. The essay also discusses the importance of the minor French arts of lace and perfume-making in Dorian's world, pointing out that Wilde had reviewed the English translation of Ernest Lefébure's *Broderies et Dentelles* (Paris, 1887). In "Picturing Dorian Gray: Portrait of an adaptation," Wells-Lassagne dwells on the challenges *The Picture of Dorian Gray* poses for film and television adaptations and, more specifically, on the difficulty of proposing a convincing visualisation of the actual portrait of Dorian Gray, be it in its initial beauty or in its subsequent degraded versions. She explores the strategies used by the various adaptations—from Albert Lewin's 1945 film to more recent versions, such as the 1983 television film *The Sins of Dorian Gray*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*—the 2003 adaptation of Alan Moore's graphic novel series—, the 2009 film by Oliver Parker and the recent Showtime series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-)—and argues that adapting *Dorian Gray* provides a *mise en abyme* of adaptation itself.

Marianne Drugeon's essay concentrates on the stage and screen adaptations of three of Wilde's drawing-room comedies, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It analyses a wide range of productions, from the 1940s and 1950s to the early 21st century, providing, for instance, close readings of Oliver Parker's

An Ideal Husband (1999) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2002), with its tongue-in-cheek *tableaux* recalling paintings by Edward Burne-Jones and John William Waterhouse, appearing whenever Cecily is dreaming of her (imaginary) fiancé and picturing herself as the damsel in distress saved by a knight in shining armour. Dugeon's contention is that those productions do not merely showcase the costumes, furniture and art works of the late Victorian period: they enact the Wildean paradox phrased in "The Decay of Lying" according to which "[...] Life imitates Art" (1091), to the extent of sometimes including an image of Oscar Wilde as author and aesthete and thus blurring the line between fiction and reality. Gilles Couderc makes a similar point in his approach to some of the musical creations elicited by Wilde's life and works. He contends that one of the defining features of Wilde's reception in Europe is the confusion between the man and his writings, a confusion possibly stemming from Wilde's own "art of branding," to use Gillespie's phrase—his carefully staged public persona—throughout his life. The essay first looks at musical works inspired by Wilde's life and persona, from Gilbert and Sullivan's 1881 comic opera *Patience* to Theodore Morrison's 2013 *Oscar*, before moving on to some of the operas which Wilde's works inspired, in particular Richard Strauss's *Salome* and Antoine Mariotte's *Salomé*, two works in which a portrait of Wilde as the artist victimised by a repressive society can be made out behind the characters and the action.

In Wildean fashion, this special issue of *Études Anglaises* hinges on a series of paradoxes, tensions and blurred limits: between the public and the private spheres, between art and life, between comedy and tragedy. In the 1895 watercolour portrait by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, discussed by Frankel, Wilde is depicted as a sad clown, or as an actor having donned the mask of tragedy, or possibly also as a gothic spectre, whose presence continues to haunt contemporary imaginations...