

**Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla  
Manny, eds. 'Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity'**

Xavier Giudicelli

► **To cite this version:**

Xavier Giudicelli. Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny, eds. 'Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity'. 2018, <http://journals.openedition.org/cve/4550>. hal-02523353

**HAL Id: hal-02523353**

**<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02523353>**

Submitted on 28 Mar 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny, eds. *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity***  
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 382 p. ISBN: 9780198789260

**Xavier Giudicelli**  
CIRLEP, Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne

In the wake of several recent monographs reassessing Oscar Wilde's engagement with the classics—such as Stefano Evangelista's *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) or Iain Ross's *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge University Press, 2012)—, the present volume, comprising eighteen contributions by Wilde specialists as well as by classicists and theatre studies scholars, seeks to show to what extent Wilde's classicism is typical of or at odds with the late-Victorian period and to re-inscribe the Irish author's relation to the classics within Victorian social and intellectual frameworks.

The cover illustration humorously encapsulates Wilde's re-appropriation of classical antiquity, thereby deftly reflecting the volume's aim. It is a caricature by James Edward Kelly from the time of Wilde's American 'tour' depicting the young Aesthete as Narcissus gazing into the waters of a pond wherein the reflection of the sunflower—a symbol of Aestheticism—bears the dollar sign and the Irishman morphs into some sort of circus dog; an inscription with the nymph Echo's words reads: 'He is an aesthetic sham'. That scathing piece of satire draws attention to the fact that Wilde's classicism is, as the present volume aims to demonstrate, related to Victorian commodity culture and that in no way is Wilde himself 'a chronological error', as the classical scholar and poet A. E. Housman would have it in Tom Stoppard's 1997 play *The Invention of Love*<sup>1</sup>. (On the contrary, Wilde is very much a man of his time and the most striking features of his classicism are 'its timing, its theatricality and marketability' (9).)

After a foreword by Edward Petherbridge (v–viii)—in which the famous actor relates his lifelong engagement with Wilde—connecting somewhat uneasily with the contents of the volume, Kathleen Riley's pertinent introduction, 'Taking Parnassus to Piccadilly' (1–15), offers a biographical overview of Wilde's engagement with the classics, from his studies at Portora Royal School, Trinity College Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford, to the infamous 1897 trials. Riley's introductory essay then accounts for the objectives and structure of the book. The latter is coherently organised around five thematic sections, followed by an exhaustive final bibliography (337–58) and a very useful index (359–82).

The first part, 'Wilde's Classical Education' (19–88), focuses on Wilde's training as a classicist at Trinity and Magdalen. The first chapter, by Alastair J. L. Blanshard (19–35), examines the relationship between Wilde and his Greek tutor at Trinity, John Pentland Mahaffy and concentrates on the two men's divergent conceptions of Hellenism. Blanshard relates those conceptions to differing political and ideological outlooks: Mahaffy's imperialist and elitist vision of classicism stands in contrast with Wilde's 'democratic, free, and mystical' model (35). The following chapter (37–55), by Gideon Nisbet, discusses Wilde's reading of John Addington Symonds' *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873–1876) through a close examination of Wilde's annotations in his personal copies of *Studies of the Greek Poets* and an analysis of Wilde's review essay of Symonds's 'The Women of Homer'. Iain Ross's essay

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, London: Faber, 1997, 99

(57–67) then assesses the hitherto mostly overlooked importance of the great Greek historian Herodotus in Wilde's works. The final essay in that section (69–88), by Joseph Bristow, studies Wilde's reflections on the concept of abstraction in the Irish author's 'Philosophy Notebook', resituating Wilde's thoughts within the contemporary debates in philosophy and providing valuable insights into the formation of Wilde's own conceptions.

The second section, 'Wilde as Dramatist' (91–161), looks at the legacy and impact of classical Greek theatre in Wilde's *oeuvre*. In the first chapter (91–106), John Stokes analyses Wilde's responses to Greek Theatre in the 1880s through an examination of Wilde's reviews of the productions of Greek plays. Stokes demonstrates how those reviews testify to Wilde's interests in archaeology, sculpture and scenic space. In the second essay (107–26), Clare L. E. Foster seeks to trace the evolution in Wilde's interest in the 'archaeological' productions of Greek plays in the 1880s and its inscription in his later playwriting. Foster shows how Wilde helped to model a new idea of theatre as a literary, text-based art; she focuses on *The Importance of Being Earnest* in the final section of her essay and argues that the 1895 comedy 'bridges old audience-centred ideas of theatre with the new object-focus of literary drama' (126) through its very self-reflexivity, inviting the audience to look at 'a finely crafted literary text in which they also see themselves' (126). Isobel Hurst's chapter (127–40) discusses Wilde's interest in the interplay between comedy and tragedy in the context of the late-Victorian reception of Euripides and Menander, and lays emphasis on Wilde's use of the scene of *anagnorisis*—a link between comedy and tragedy in classical theatre—in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Hurst also looks at Wilde's take on the stock character of the courtesan (*hetaira*), transposed in his plays as the 'woman with the past'—Mrs Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs Aburthnot in *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*—and sheds light on the intertwining of the comic and the tragic in Wilde's society comedies. The last essay in the section (141–58), by Kostas Boyiopoulos, examines Wilde's re-appropriation of Euripidean tragedy, in particular by tracing parallels between *Salomé* and Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

The third section, 'Wilde as Philosopher and Cultural Critic' (161–227), mainly deals with Wilde's critical writings with the objective of evaluating the impact of his classical training on his philosophical ideas. The first chapter (161–74), by Leanne Grech, underscores the ideological implications of the Oxford classical curriculum, redefined by the Hellenist and Plato specialist Benjamin Jowett in the second half of the nineteenth century as a means to train future statesmen and high-ranking civil servants in India. Grech argues that Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist' and 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' undermine and challenge such a conception of Hellenism. In the second chapter (175–93), Kathleen Riley offers a reading of Wilde's *De Profundis* and stresses the importance of Euripides in Wilde's writings, echoing and supplementing Boyiopoulos's essay in the previous section and drawing attention to the influence of Euripides' *Sophocles* in Wilde's *oeuvre*. Kate Hext's chapter (195–207) then envisages Wilde's engagement with Heraclitus and Cyrenaic and Epicurean Hedonism, making sense of Wilde's use of the Heraclitean notion of flux to define the relationship between ephemeral time and pleasure. Hext shows how Wilde both echoes Pater's famous 'Conclusion' to the *Renaissance* and distances himself from it. In the final essay (209–27), Stefano Evangelista highlights the hitherto relatively unexplored role of France and French literature in Wilde's reception of Greek antiquity; Evangelista argues that the idealized spaces of ancient Greece and France nurture Wilde's conception of cosmopolitanism.

The fourth section, 'Wilde as Novelist' (231–85), provides three complementary perspectives on the relations between Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–1891) and

classical antiquity. First, Marylu Hill (231–49) analyses Platonic intertextuality in *Dorian Gray*, from Platonic images (the ring of Gyges, the allegory of the cave, Plato's tripartite image of the soul, divided between reason, passion and appetite) to the reception of Socratic *eros* in the novel. Nikolai Endres (251–66) then demonstrates how, in his only novel, Wilde subverts and complicates the Platonic erotic model (the *erastes/eromenos* relationship), and sheds light on the Roman models to which Wilde's novel turns, namely Petronius's *Satyricon* and Suetonius's *Lives of the Caesars* and its account of the eccentricities of Roman emperors. Endres's essay finally draws a comparison between *Dorian Gray*'s engagement with Greek homoeroticism and E. M. Forster's posthumously published *Maurice* (1971), suggesting that in both cases Rome, Roman history and literature provide more adequate models for reciprocal and sexually fulfilling relationships. In the third and final chapter of that section (267–85), Iarla Manny (267–285) draws parallels between Wilde and Ovid, and shows in particular how the Ovidian Orpheus is 'an archetypal guide not only for *Dorian Gray*, but for Wilde himself' (270).

The fifth and final section, 'Wilde and Rome' (289–335), contains three essays about Wilde and Roman history and literature. Philip E. Smith II (289–304) looks at Wilde's life-long engagement with Roman history and historians such as Tacitus and Livy, from Wilde's 'History of Criticism' Notebook and 'Oxford Notebooks' to 'The Decay of Lying' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Shushman Malik's chapter (305–20) discusses Wilde's use of the murderous Roman emperors Tiberius, Nero and Elagabalus, in 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison' and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The final essay in the volume (321–35), by Serena S. Witzke, explores the parallels between *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Plautus' *Menaechmi*, which allows for a new reading of Plautus' comedy.

*Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* is an excellently edited volume and very few errors have escaped the three editors' attention: Joris-Karl Huysmans's birth-date is not 1548 (280) but 1848; one might also wonder why two versions of Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde (1987 and 1988) are cited in the bibliography. Moreover, I did not find the very economical system of referential footnotes in the essays very reader-friendly. Finally, even though sin confessed is half-forgiven sin, I still regretted the absence in the volume of chapters specifically devoted to Wilde's poetry and shorter fiction and their relationship to classical antiquity, an omission justified in Riley's introduction by asserting that such texts '[were] of less narrative value to our investigation' (12). Despite those minor flaws, *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* is, in my opinion, a dense and clearly structured volume of the highest scholarly standard, which will no doubt be of interest to both Wilde scholars and classicists.