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Looking with Narcissus: Oscar Wilde's Reception of the Dying God

Doctor of Philosophy, Classical Studies

The Open University/St Hilda's College, University of Oxford

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Abstract

‘It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,’ writes Oscar Wilde in his ‘Preface’ to the 1891 book edition of his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. By transferring agency away from the originator to the recipient, Wilde’s aphorism could be considered a late nineteenth-century version of reception theory, which has sought to challenge conventional critical ideas of influence or tradition in classical studies in recent decades.

The Introduction to this thesis relates the classically educated Wilde’s epigram, which supposedly originated with his Trinity College Dublin tutor, John Pentland Mahaffy, to the dissolution of authority both inside and outside Classics during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter 1 explores the broadly similar critical sentiments in Wilde’s press correspondence and his defence of his writings in his 1895 libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry. Wilde’s inverted ideas of reading, I argue, are informed by the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes.

Chapters 2 and 3 turn Wilde’s inverted ideas of reading on their head. Chapter 2 argues that Wilde’s use of the Orpheus story in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is revealing about not only Dorian Gray’s but also his author’s troubled relations with both sexes. Chapter 3 shows how Wilde uses Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in his fairy tales and plays to represent unhappy heterosexual relations in contradistinction to a positively portrayed Platonic pedagogical pederasty—a juxtaposition that is reflected in Wilde’s life as well as his work.

Chapter 4 reverts to Wilde’s idea that artistic meaning is in the eye of the beholder. The religious relativism and oscillation between literary sources in Wilde’s drama *Salomé*, which is viewed as an example of ‘Alexandrian’ Euripideanism, contribute to an atmosphere of narcissistic subjectivism and projectionism that meet with the full condemnation of official authority.

For my mother

GERALD You are my mother and my father all in one. I need no second parent.

Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*

ΑΘΗΝΑΙΑ μήτηρ γὰρ οὐτις ἐστὶν ἢ μ' ἐγένετο, [...]

κάρτα δ' εἰμι τοῦ πατρός.

Aeschylus, *Eumenides*

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.
Wilde, 'The Nightingale and the Rose'

CECILY Dr Chasuble is a most learned man. He has never written a single book, so you can imagine how much he knows.

The Importance of Being Earnest

Acknowledgements

‘Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow,’ said the Prince, ‘far away across the city I see a young man in a garret. He is leaning over a desk covered with papers, and in a tumbler by his side there is a bunch of withered violets. His hair is brown and crisp, and his lips are red as a pomegranate, and he has large and dreamy eyes. He is trying to finish a play for the Director of the Theatre, but he is too cold to write any more. There is no fire in the grate, and hunger has made him faint.’

‘I will wait with you one night longer,’ said the Swallow, who really had a good heart. ‘Shall I take him another ruby?’

‘Alas! I have no ruby now,’ said the Prince; ‘my eyes are all that I have left. They are made of rare sapphires, which were brought out of India a thousand years ago. Pluck out one of them and take it to him. He will sell it to the jeweller, and buy food and firewood, and finish his play.’

Wilde, ‘The Happy Prince’

Friends who have kept me sane throughout this whole process are Faheema Ali, Judy Brown, Karen Caines, Kate Rowan, Johanna de Vos, Rachael White, and the members of St Hilda’s College Drama Society, who enabled me to fulfil my adolescent dream of treading the boards as Lady Bracknell.

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My mother, Geraldine Manny, who believes in religion, and brought me up to believe in it also, has provided unwavering spiritual and material support for all my endeavours.

My examiners, Prof. Lorna Hardwick, Dr Stefano Evangelista, and Prof. John Stokes—like the screenwriter Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard*—helped me greatly to doctor my *Salomé*.

A version of Chapter 2, entitled ‘Oscar as (Ovid as) Orpheus: Misogyny and Pederasty in *Dorian Gray* and the *Metamorphoses*’, was published in *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity*, ed. Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Those who kindly read and commented on drafts of this chapter are Fiona Macintosh, Kathleen Riley, Alastair Blanshard, Karen Caines, Fiachra Mac Góráin, and Cillian O’Hogan.

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Abbreviations

<i>AJPh</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
APGRD	Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama
<i>Aristophanes</i>	Y. T. O. [= Leopold Charles M. S. Amery, Francis W. Hirst, Henry A. A. Cruso], <i>Aristophanes at Oxford: O. W.</i> (Oxford: Vincent, [1894]).
<i>Browning</i>	Terence Rattigan, <i>The Browning Version</i> , in <i>Plays: One: 'French Without Tears', 'The Winslow Boy', 'The Browning Version', 'Harlequinade'</i> , Methuen Drama World Classics (London: Methuen Drama, 1981).
<i>Complete Letters</i>	<i>The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde</i> , ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Holt, 2000).
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Classical Journal</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>Criticism</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde</i> , iv: <i>Criticism: 'Historical Criticism', 'Intentions', 'The Soul of Man'</i> , ed. Josephine M. Guy, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2007).
<i>Culture and Anarchy</i>	Matthew Arnold, <i>'Culture and Anarchy' and Other Writings</i> , ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).
CUP	Cambridge University Press
<i>De Profundis</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde</i> , ii: <i>'De Profundis': 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis'</i> , ed. Ian Small, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2005).
<i>Dorian Gray</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde</i> , iii: <i>'The Picture of Dorian Gray': The 1890 and 1891 Texts</i> , ed. Joseph Bristow, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2005).
<i>Earnest</i>	Oscar Wilde, <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> , ed. Russell Jackson, NM (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015).
<i>Fan</i>	Oscar Wilde, <i>Lady Windermere's Fan</i> , ed. Ian Small, NM (2nd edn, London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 1999).
<i>The Happy Prince</i>	Oscar Wilde, <i>The Happy Prince and Other Tales</i> , in <i>Short Stories</i> .

<i>History Boys</i>	Alan Bennett, <i>The History Boys</i> (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
<i>Husband</i>	Oscar Wilde, <i>An Ideal Husband</i> , ed. Russell Jackson, NM (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013).
<i>Invention</i>	Tom Stoppard, <i>The Invention of Love</i> (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).
<i>Journalism, i</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde</i> , vi: <i>Journalism, i</i> , ed. John Stokes and Mark W. Turner, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2013).
<i>Journalism, ii</i>	<i>The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde</i> , vii: <i>Journalism, ii</i> , ed. John Stokes and Mark W. Turner, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2013).
‘Lord Arthur’	Oscar Wilde, ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’, in <i>Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories</i> , in <i>Short Stories</i> .
<i>Marius</i>	Walter Pater, <i>Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas</i> , ed. Ian Small, The World’s Classics (Oxford: OUP, 1986).
<i>Maurice</i>	E. M. Forster, <i>Maurice</i> , ed. P. N. Furbank, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2005; first pub. Arnold, 1971).
‘Nightingale’	Oscar Wilde, ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’, in <i>The Happy Prince</i> , in <i>Short Stories</i> .
NM	New Mermaids
<i>OCD</i>	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> , ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (rev. 3rd edn, Oxford: OUP, 2003).
OCT	Oxford Classical Texts
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OET	Oxford English Texts
OU DS	Oxford University Dramatic Society
OUP	Oxford University Press
OWC	Oxford World’s Classics
<i>OW&AG</i>	Iain Ross, <i>Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece</i> , Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture (Cambridge: CUP, 2013).
<i>OW&CA</i>	Kathleen Riley, Alastair J. L. Blanshard, and Iarla Manny (eds), <i>Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity</i> (Oxford: OUP, 2018).

- Oxford Notebooks* *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks: A Portrait of Mind in the Making*, ed. Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (Oxford: OUP, 1989).
- Patience* W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride* (London: International Music Publications, 2014).
- Plays* *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, v: *Plays*, i: 'The Duchess of Padua', 'Salomé: drame en un acte', 'Salome: Tragedy in One Act', ed. Joseph Donohue, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2013).
- Poems* *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, i: *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, OET (Oxford: OUP, 2000).
- PMLA* *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*
- 'Portrait' Oscar Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.', in *Short Stories*.
- 'Prince' Oscar Wilde, 'The Happy Prince', in *The Happy Prince*, in *Short Stories*.
- RSC Royal Shakespeare Company
- Salomé* *Salomé: drame en un acte*, in *Plays*.
- Salome* *Salome: Tragedy in One Act*, in *Plays*.
- Short Stories* Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. John Sloan, OWC (2nd edn, Oxford: OUP, 2010; first pub. as *Complete Shorter Fiction*, 1980).
- Studies* Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont, OWC (2nd edn, Oxford: OUP, 2010; 1st edn, 1986).
- TAPA* *Transactions of the American Philological Association*
- TCD Trinity College Dublin
- Trial* *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland (London: Fourth Estate, 2003).
- Woman* Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, ed. Ian Small, NM (2nd edn, London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama; first pub. 1983 as part of *Two Society Comedies*, combined with *An Ideal Husband*, by Benn).

Introduction: Trials and Tragedies

MRS ARBUTHNOT You don't realise what my past has been in suffering and in shame.

LORD ILLINGWORTH My dear Rachel, I must candidly say that I think Gerald's future considerably more important than your past.

MRS ARBUTHNOT Gerald cannot separate his future from my past. [...]

LORD ILLINGWORTH Look how you have brought him up.

MRS ARBUTHNOT I have brought him up to be a good man.

LORD ILLINGWORTH Quite so. And what is the result? You have educated him to be your judge if he ever finds you out. And a bitter, an unjust judge he will be to you. Don't be deceived, Rachel. Children begin by loving their parents. After a time they judge them. Rarely, if ever, do they forgive them.¹

Oscar Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance* (1893)

LADY BRACKNELL It is my last reception, and one wants something that will encourage conversation, particularly at the end of the season when everyone has practically said whatever they had to say, which, in most cases, was probably not much.²

Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895)

I

In his chapter on reception in the Blackwell *Companion to the Classical Tradition*, Charles Martindale takes as his point of departure the libel action that the painter James McNeill Whistler brought against the art critic John Ruskin. An affronted Ruskin had caustically accused Whistler of 'Cockney impudence' for asking 'two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face'.³ On his painting *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*, exhibited in Brighton in 1875, at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1877, and before the jury at the Old Bailey in 1878, Whistler pronounced in the High Court, 'It was not my intent simply to make a copy of Battersea Bridge. [...] As to what the picture represents, that depends upon who looks at it.'⁴ Martindale comments:

We have here what might be called a late nineteenth-century version of reception theory. The unconventional title of Whistler's picture can be seen as a provocation, encouraging the viewer to cooperate with the painter in performing, so to say, an interpretation of the work, one that 'depends on who looks at it'.⁵

¹ Wilde (1993), *Woman*, ed. Small, New Mermaids, 60–2.

² Wilde (2015a), *Earnest*, ed. Jackson, NM, 20.

³ Merrill (1992: 47, 139, 193). Quoted in Martindale (2007: 297).

⁴ Merrill (1992: 460). Quoted in Martindale (2007: 297).

⁵ Martindale (2007: 297–8).

Ideas of reception clearly did not emerge fully formed from the brain of critical theorists in the 1960s, like Pallas Athene being born from the head of Zeus.

Martindale might just as effectively have opened his chapter with a discussion of another, even more (in)famous late nineteenth-century libel case, one initiated by a figure as familiar to the *fin-de-siècle* London art scene as his personal acquaintances and mentors Whistler and Ruskin. Oscar Wilde's ill-advised libel action against the Marquess of Queensberry, John Sholto Douglas, as well as the two subsequent trials of Wilde himself,⁶ shook Victorian society to its core and indelibly defined the 'Naughty Nineties', the 'Decade of Decadence'. In his '1932 Notebook', a young Northrop Frye paradoxically muses in a way that prefigures ideas of reception as dialogic, a two-way process, backwards and forwards: 'The Whistler–Ruskin libel suit was the obverse of the trial of Wilde, almost a protest against it.'⁷ Unlike the *Whistler v. Ruskin* trial, *Wilde v. Queensberry* dealt mainly with issues outside the aesthetic sphere, hinging not so much on opposing critical opinions as on hard, publicly demonstrable facts. Nevertheless, the student Frye stresses, 'Wilde's is the most profoundly significant event, marking as it does the final collapse of eccentricity in the grand manner. I do not approve of buggers, but that really had little to do with the matter.'⁸ Wilde's compatriot and literary colleague William Butler Yeats diagnosed the 'matter', telling H. Montgomery Hyde that '[t]he rage against Wilde was [...] complicated by the Britisher's jealousy of art and the artist, which is generally dormant but is called into activity when the artist has got outside his field'.⁹

Midway through Wilde's *De Profundis (From the Depths)*—the title given to his prison 'Epistola' on its posthumous publication in 1905 in abridged form—the author looks back

⁶ The three trials in which Wilde was involved in 1895 were: (1) the case of criminal libel he brought against Queensberry, *Regina (on the prosecution of Oscar Wilde) v. John Douglas (Marquess of Queensberry)*; (2) and (3) the criminal charges brought against Wilde immediately afterwards by the Crown, *Regina v. Wilde*. For the sake of clarity, I refer throughout to Wilde's action against Queensberry as 'the Queensberry/libel trial'. The two actions against Wilde are referred to as the first and second trials of Wilde or Wilde trials.

⁷ Frye (2015: 17).

⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

⁹ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 164 n. 1).

on his life prior to the Queensberry libel trial and his painfully public fall from favour in 1895. In this long, harrowing letter, Wilde tells his ostensible addressee, his beloved and Queensberry's son Lord Alfred ('Bosie') Douglas,¹⁰ 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age.'¹¹ Wilde's *De Profundis* has variously been described as a therapeutic exercise, a confession, and by Wilde's seminal biographer Richard Ellmann as a love letter and a dramatic monologue.¹² As well as the letter's divided aim (to self-recriminate and to reproach and reconcile with Douglas), Ellmann saw that Wilde's epistolary soliloquy was deeply indebted to his favourite Greek tragedy, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.¹³ In *De Profundis*, Ellmann explains, Wilde repeatedly uses the word 'doom' (as opposed to mere 'destiny'), and the author acquired this sense of doom, which, he says, suffused his works (*De Profundis*, 172; *Complete Letters*, 740), from the *Agamemnon*, with which he had been acquainted since at least his schooldays in Ireland.¹⁴

More recently, Kathleen Riley has read *De Profundis* as the culmination of Wilde's special kinship with Euripides, which the author nurtured from his days as an Oxford undergraduate. Riley singles out the Euripidean *Heracles* and its idea of redemptive love as inspiration for Wilde's exposition of Christ's 'dangerous idea' (love for the sinner) in his 'Epistola'.¹⁵ Alison Hennegan observes more generally that the miraculously surviving notebooks that Wilde kept while at Oxford in the 1870s record their young owner's thoughts on such tragic critical themes as the relationship between Pain and Thought, Unhappiness and Memory, and Emotion and Action, which resurface in *De Profundis*.¹⁶ As numerous dramatizations for stage and screen have demonstrated, a three-act tragedy

¹⁰ In what follows, 'Douglas' refers to the son, Lord Alfred Douglas, while the father, John Sholto Douglas, is referred to as '(the Marquess of) Queensberry'.

¹¹ 'To Lord Alfred Douglas', [Jan.–Mar. 1897], in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Holland and Hart-Davis (2000), 729; *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ii: *De Profundis*: 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis', ed. Small, Oxford English Texts (2005), 94, cf. 106; 162, cf. 170. Where applicable, I refer respectively throughout to both the unabridged 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis' and the abbreviated *De Profundis* (1905, 1908) when citing Small's OET edition of Wilde's prison letter.

¹² Ellmann (1988: 482–4).

¹³ *Ibid.* 482.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 89, 360.

¹⁵ Riley (2018b).

¹⁶ Hennegan (2007: 215).

can easily be structured around Wilde's three trials as well as his life as a whole (before, during, and after the trials), with the hubristic author himself as the architect of his own downfall.

In disputed circumstance at some stage during the early 1890s, Wilde, a middle-aged married father of two small boys and already a major and very public literary personality, had become romantically entangled with the young aristocrat and aspiring poet Alfred Douglas.¹⁷ The dangerous and mutually destructive liaison between the two men of letters would go down as one of the most famous love affairs in literary history. Douglas was an estranged younger son of the ninth Marquess of Queensberry, a Scottish nobleman also remembered for lending his name and patronage to the 'Queensberry Rules', the code of conduct on which modern boxing is based. On 18 February 1895, the pugilistic, paranoiac (and, apparently, practically illiterate) marquess left an insulting visiting card at Wilde's club, the Albemarle, in Piccadilly. The calling card was inscribed with a sloppily scrawled and misspelled message, addressed to the author and accusing him of 'posing [as a] sodomite [*sic*]'.¹⁸ The allegation was serious, since sodomy (the ancient, biblically derived term for 'unnatural' sexual acts) was a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment, as well as social ostracism.¹⁹ Goaded by the impetuous Douglas, who was spoiling for a fight and sought revenge on his father for a variety of reasons, and against the advice of lawyers, friends, and colleagues such as George Bernard Shaw, Wilde made the disastrous decision to prosecute Queensberry for criminal libel.

¹⁷ See Holland (2003a: xvi–xvii).

¹⁸ The hall porter at the Albermarle Club, Sidney Wright, testified in his deposition on 2 March 1895 that what Queensberry had written in his presence was 'ponce and sodomite'. The marquess himself interjected and stated that his words were 'posing as sodomite' (*Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Holland (2003), 4). Hyde (1962: 76) suggests 'posing as a sodomite'. See *Trial*, 300 n. 41.

¹⁹ Sodomy was a criminal offence under both the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and the 1861 Offences against the Person Act. Wilde was eventually convicted under Section 11 of the 1885 Act, the so-called Labouchère Amendment, which criminalized all acts of 'gross indecency'. As Cocks (2007: 112) explains, 'What "gross indecency" actually meant in law was never specified in the legislation, but the courts seemed to have merely added it to existing offences and used it to describe consenting acts which fell short of sodomy.'

Wilde's alleged first male lover, 'devoted friend', and later literary executor, Robert ('Robbie') Ross was, unusually for the time, openly homosexual and had been disowned by his family. See Ellmann (1988: 260).

Wilde's misguided libel suit against the marquess may well have been motivated by Whistler's very public success on the witness stand. However, Whistler's victory was ultimately a pyrrhic one: he won the case but lost the argument. The jury found in his favour but awarded a mere farthing in damages, and the judge refused costs. The artist was financially devastated and was forced to flee to Venice. The author, editor, and journalist Frank Harris, who published an early, if notoriously unreliable, biography of Wilde in 1916, claims that, when Wilde informed him that he was bringing a libel action against Queensberry, he reminded his friend of the Whistler–Ruskin case: 'You know that Whistler ought to have won. You know that Ruskin was shamelessly in fault; but the British jury and the so-called British artists treated Whistler and his superb work with contempt.'²⁰ As it turned out, the author fared much worse than the artist. Richard Dorment incisively sums up:

When Wilde recklessly sued the Marquess of Queensberry for libel in 1895, he was once again simply imitating Whistler—and with the same aim of using the trial as a soapbox from which to lecture the British people about art and beauty. The difference is that Whistler won his case, both legally and morally. Wilde lost on both counts.²¹

In an ironic Aristotelian reversal or *peripeteia*, reminiscent of the clever plot twists in Wilde's own dramas, private detectives employed by Queensberry and his defence team dug up damning evidence of the author's associations with young working-class men, among whom were 'renters' (in today's parlance, 'rent boys', or male prostitutes). Meanwhile, in advance of the libel trial, Wilde and Douglas were *en vacances* in Monte Carlo, unaware of the impending tempest. When the nature and extent of the defence's unexpected incriminating evidence came to light in court, Wilde, this time following the legal advice given to him, abandoned the libel action but was subsequently arrested on a charge of committing 'indecent acts'. After two further trials, in which the defendant was Wilde himself, the roundly humiliated author was convicted of committing and procuring

²⁰ Harris (1918: 193).

²¹ Dorment (2013: 104).

‘acts of gross indecency’ with other males and sentenced to two years in solitary confinement with hard labour—the severest sentence possible under the eleventh section of the Criminal Law Amendment Act. The Labouchère Amendment, as it is more commonly called, after its author, the Liberal Member of Parliament for Northampton, Henry Labouchère, had only been enacted a decade previously in 1885, the year before Wilde, with characteristically impeccable timing, is supposed to have embarked on his sexual ‘double life’.²²

As in the Whistler–Ruskin case, issues of art and interpretation made their presence felt in the Wilde–Queensberry libel trial, as well as the two subsequent Wilde trials. As we shall see in Chapter 1, Wilde’s private correspondence and published writings were used in the Queensberry trial to prove and disprove the defendant’s potentially libellous claim that the author was ‘posing [as] sodomite’.²³ In particular, Wilde’s most extensive and controversial prose work, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1), predictably dominated what Wilde’s counsel, Sir Edward Clarke, would call ‘the literary part of the case’.²⁴

More importantly for my purposes, Classics/the classics played a not inconsequential role in the Wilde trials. The leading players in the Queensberry libel trial had, almost to a man, studied the subject at the ancient universities of Britain and Ireland, most notably Wilde himself. The key classical concept for my reading of the libel trial is the ancient *agon*, the institution of the contest. In the nineteenth century, Jacob Burckhardt and Friedrich Nietzsche notably observed that the *agon* is foundational to Greek life.²⁵ The philhellene Victorians’ comprehensive self-identification with the ‘Glory that was Greece’ is well attested.²⁶ The three agonistic pillars of Greek culture were the law courts, the

²² It was around this time that Wilde was supposedly seduced by a seventeen-year-old Robert Ross. See Ellmann (1988: 260–1).

²³ While it may be tempting to take Queensberry at his word in court (see above, n. 18), Ellmann (1988: 412) explains that ‘posing as sodomite’ was easier to defend than simply ‘posing sodomite’.

²⁴ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 196).

²⁵ Burckhardt first presented the idea that the *agon* was the essential trait of Greek culture in 1872 in his lectures on *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* (*History of Greek Culture*), attended by Nietzsche, which formed the basis for the Basel scholar’s two-volume posthumous publication of the same name that appeared in 1898 and 1902. See Young (2010: 205); Santini (2014: 176 n. 2).

²⁶ The two seminal studies of ancient Greece in Victorian Britain remain Jenkyns (1980) and Turner (1981).

athletic games, and the dramatic competitions. The *agon* is thus the obvious classical principle for interpreting the legal battle between Wilde, the consummate man of the theatre, and Queensberry, the gung-ho sportsman.

While it is true to say that Wilde was being manipulated like a hapless pawn by his beloved in the latter's personal, albeit increasingly public, feud with his father, the author was also caught in the crossfire of wider critical and cultural conflicts and shifts, which I outline in the remainder of this Introduction. I also propose that more attention should be paid to the tragic aspect of Wilde's work. In addition, I introduce my other two key critical concepts for this thesis, inversion and mystery.

II

Although well overdue, Wilde's reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity in all its aspects has finally arrived as an area of academic research. That a serious concern with this subject has taken such a long time to materialize is in some ways surprising, seeing as '[t]he nineteenth-century has come to be a privileged period within classical reception studies, with Romantic and Victorian Hellenism as prominent areas of interest'.²⁷ Ireland has also attracted much interest from scholars of classical reception, but attention has overwhelmingly been focused on the twentieth century, as is exemplified by the work of Fiona Macintosh and Brian Arkins.²⁸ Wilde may be best known as a wit, epigrammatist, and dandy, but he was also a more than capable classical scholar whose engagement with antiquity spanned almost the entirety of his tragically cut-short life. He has been hailed as 'perhaps the best educated in classics of all the major figures in the Anglo-Irish literary tradition' by none other than William Bedell Stanford, probably the greatest Irish classicist

²⁷ Hurst (2010: 484).

²⁸ Macintosh (1994); while Arkins has devoted book-length studies to the classicism of Yeats (1990) and Joyce (1999), he dispatches Wilde in a single chapter (2003).

of the century after Wilde.²⁹ One of Wilde's biographers, Philippe Jullian, even went so far as to describe his subject as 'the best Hellenist of his generation'.³⁰

While several earlier scholarly volumes discuss Wilde's classicism as part of wider examinations of such topics as nineteenth-century British Aestheticism,³¹ the reception history of the Greek Anthology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,³² and sex, gender, and sexuality in the ancient and modern worlds,³³ Iain Ross's meticulously researched monograph, *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013; henceforth *OW&AG*), constitutes the first dedicated book-length study of its subject. Ross writes from a background in English studies rather than from the vantage point of classical (reception) studies, and does not engage explicitly with reception theory, which, particularly as formulated by the so-called 'Constanz school', has made such significant inroads into Classics over the last quarter of a century or so. Ross's considerable scholarly contribution comprises a thorough survey of Wilde's classical education and intellectual engagement with Hellenic antiquity, laying the groundwork for subsequent studies. Ross focuses on the Greek texts that featured most prominently in Wilde's intellectual formation and on the Wildean writings that were stimulated by them, including notes, poetry, journalism, criticism, fiction, and drama.

What makes Ross's carefully evidenced volume such an indispensable resource is its solid grounding in the archive and its attentiveness to original source material, often relatively inaccessible. Ross's accounts, analyses, and transcriptions of such primary evidence will prove invaluable for some time to come. Ross consults not only the editions of classical texts that Wilde used, but also, where possible, the author's own personally annotated copies, as well as his student notebooks and commonplace book. Ross's volume concludes with no fewer than seven appendices of extremely useful primary sources from

²⁹ Stanford (1984: 236).

³⁰ Jullian (1969: 44).

³¹ Evangelista (2009: ch. 4).

³² Nisbet (2013: chs 3–4).

³³ See Blanshard (2010) and Orrells (2011: ch. 4).

Wilde's years as a Classics undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin (1871–4) and Magdalen College, Oxford (1874–8). In addition to the TCD and Oxford syllabuses, Ross appends: some undated notes (now in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library) that Wilde made during his 1877 trip to Greece with his Trinity tutor John Mahaffy; Wilde's exercises in Greek tragic and comic verse composition from two notebooks he used while studying for the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek examination at Trinity in February 1874 (now in the Berg Collection and Clark Library, Los Angeles respectively); marginal annotations in his copy of J. E. T. Rogers's 1865 edition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (in the Eccles Collection, British Library); and his notes on Pre-Socratic and Platonic philosophy from a notebook probably kept in late 1872 or early 1873 (in the Clark Library).

One criticism that classicists have levelled at Ross's book is that it has nothing to say about their subject.³⁴ In a review of *OW&AG*, the Hellenist Simon Goldhill raises a 'large and vexing question': 'What [...] is the relation between Wilde's genius as a writer and his ordinariness as a classicist?'³⁵ Goldhill continues, 'it could [...] easily be argued that although the classicism is always there, the genius of Wilde emerges exactly and only when he transcends what he learned from his classical studies.'³⁶ In *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830–1960* (1998), Christopher Stray touches on Wilde's transcendence of the classical, which he locates within the context of the academic *agon* between the older gentlemanly schoolmaster tradition of language teaching and the newer professional professorial style of linguistic and literary scholarship in the later decades of the nineteenth century.³⁷ In conjunction with this internal philological scholarly feud, Stray discusses another contemporary, closely connected critical conflict in which the scholars of language and literature found themselves. The

³⁴ See Witzke (2014b: para. 11 of 11).

³⁵ Goldhill (2014: 185–6).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 186.

³⁷ Stray (1998: 217).

more traditional liberal humanistic and literary, text-based approaches to the study of classical culture faced challenges to its authority from the more modern scientifically based archaeological and material practice on the other.³⁸ In relation to this critical quarrel, Ross devotes a chapter in his book to contextualizing Wilde's interaction with Greek antiquity.³⁹

The tensions between the different scholarly and critical camps are not only played out in the work of Wilde but are also perceptible in the writing of his Oxford mentor and fellow classicist-turned-well-known-writer, Walter Pater. Ian Small has argued that the two men's writing represents a response to the changing nature of intellectual authority, and that their work develops from a position of subversion in Pater to one of outright reversal in Wilde.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the 'new philology' of the 1880s and the scholarly explorations of words, their etymologies and sounds, provided material that might have attracted the likes of Pater and Wilde, and might have opened up at Oxford 'an aestheticist line of production' that facilitated the transfer of allegiances 'from classical literature to a reformulated vernacular'.⁴¹ 'But', Stray writes, 'this route also led to the conception of a kind of transcendental subjectivity which lost contact with any ordinary idea of the classical.'⁴² In parallel, Wilde did initially welcome and support the archaeological science that gained ground in both academe and the public sphere in the 1870s. However, Ross identifies a watershed shift for Wilde *circa* 1886 as the author would lose interest in archaeological reconstruction (as would the public at large), reject its claim to historical truth, and adopt an anachronistic attitude towards ancient texts, reinventing his career as a

³⁸ See, for example, the discussion of the development of the Cambridge Classical Tripos in Stray (1998: 146–57).

³⁹ Ross (2013: ch. 3).

⁴⁰ Small (1991: 116–7, 123–8).

⁴¹ Stray (1998: 217). Dowling (1986) sees Pater as someone who seeks to integrate scholarship into literature and so render the writer's own language learned. The other contemporary Oxford student of the classics who drew on the history of language, classical and vernacular, to produce a new literary style was the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who read Classics at Balliol College from 1863 to 1867 and, as a Jesuit priest, was Professor of Greek at University College Dublin and Fellow in Classics of the Royal University of Ireland from 1884 until his death in 1889. On Hopkins and philology, see Plotkin (1989).

⁴² Stray (1998: 217–8).

prose stylist.⁴³ As Stray explains, the ‘aestheticist move’ of Pater, Wilde, and others can partly be viewed as a response to the relativization of value in the later Victorian period.⁴⁴ This is most obviously evident in the preoccupation of writers in the late nineteenth century with problems of narrative ‘point of view’, which denotes a perspectival and subjectivist idea of truth.⁴⁵ As we shall see later in this chapter, Pater subverts and Wilde contravenes the doctrine of Matthew Arnold, a leading poet and cultural critic during the second half of the nineteenth century, who held an objectivist view of criticism.

In his review of Ross’s book, Goldhill claims that Wilde’s ‘education was typical, as was his performance in it’.⁴⁶ Neither assertion is the whole truth pure and simple. In Wilde’s 1895 comic masterpiece, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the untruthful Oxonian Algernon Moncrieff memorably remarks, ‘The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!’ (14). The classicist Richard Jenkyns points out that Wilde’s ‘classical education had an unusual range’, as he studied Classics at both Trinity and Oxford.⁴⁷ Oxford’s school of *Literae Humaniores*, or ‘Greats’, has received much consideration in histories of classical studies or the University as well as in biographies of writers such as Pater and Wilde, but Ross’s attention to detail allows him to illuminate how precisely the generalist, humanistic style of the Oxford Classics course, and not the more ‘rigorous’, ‘pure’ (linguistic) scholarship of the Cambridge Classical Tripos, accorded with Wilde’s own thinking.⁴⁸ In addition, Ross points out that the playful combination of scholarship and wit that Linda Dowling identifies as characteristically Oxonian in *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994) was also embodied by the two young scholars who created such an impression on Wilde at Trinity, the Reverend John

⁴³ Ross (2013: 118–26).

⁴⁴ Stray (1998: 218).

⁴⁵ See Hönnighausen (1980).

⁴⁶ Goldhill (2014: 185).

⁴⁷ Jenkyns (2014: 509).

⁴⁸ Ross (2013: 34–40). See Hurst (2014: para. 2 of 6).

Pentland Mahaffy, the first Chair of Ancient History, and Robert Yelverton Tyrrell, the Chair of Latin.⁴⁹

Tyrrell and Mahaffy also respectively represented what the former called ‘The Old School of Classics and the New’, the title that he gave to his 1888 essay that was a very thinly veiled attack on his colleague. Whereas the maverick Mahaffy espoused the study of history, epigraphy, and topography, Tyrrell saw these subjects as no substitute for traditional grammar. Ross has charted the way in which Wilde’s own classical interests evolve over the course of his career from the German-inspired ‘total reconstruction’ of the Hellenic world as advocated by archaeologists and ancient historians towards one pessimistic about the value of recovering Greek life and that instead viewed the Greeks as a ‘stylistic resource’.⁵⁰ As Ross sensitively writes, ‘Circumstantial evidence [...] supports the notion of Wilde’s realignment with Tyrrell’s conception of antiquity as a stylistic resource, if rejection of the pole represented by one of his former tutors can be safely assumed to include embrace of that represented by the other.’⁵¹ ‘But’, Ross continues, ‘Wilde’s break with Mahaffy was caused by a number of factors, among which archaeology does not appear to have figured.’⁵² As we shall see, Wilde had a complicated relationship with Mahaffy and he would eventually and decisively part ways with his early mentor.

Even before he came under the tutelage of Mahaffy and Tyrrell at Trinity, Wilde, Ross highlights, enjoyed a ‘generally exceptional’ standard of teaching at Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, which he attended as a pupil from 1864 to 1871.⁵³ At the comparatively enlightened and progressive Portora, Wilde was spared some of the grammar grind as linguistic instruction was accompanied by historical supplementation—

⁴⁹ Ross (2013: 22–3, 34). See Hurst (2014: para. 2 of 6).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 127

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* 18.

something of a rarity at the time.⁵⁴ Although Wilde succeeded in winning a string of prizes and then an Exhibition to Trinity at Portora, Goldhill underscores that none of the masters or boys foresaw his future celebrity: ‘He never stood out,’ remarked one master.⁵⁵ Goldhill does not go on to mention that the schoolboy Wilde, according to an unnamed fellow pupil at Portora quoted in Harris’s biography, ‘startled everyone the last year at school in the classical medal examination, by walking easily away from us all in the *viva voce* of the Greek play (“The Agamemnon”).’⁵⁶ As I demonstrate in Chapter 3 of this thesis, Aeschylus’ tragedy would have an enduring influence on Wilde’s works throughout his life.

Goldhill downplays Wilde’s first-class results in examinations as well as his other prizes and distinctions at Trinity and Oxford. Wilde’s friend and first biographer Robert H. Sherard records that at Trinity the supposedly ‘average’ Wilde provoked surprise by coming to the fore, just as he had done at Portora.⁵⁷ In term examinations, he was twice ‘first of the first’ in a class that included a future Trinity Professor of Latin, Louis Claude Purser, who had beaten Wilde to the Gold Medal for Classics at Portora, and a future professor of archaeology at Cambridge, William Ridgeway. But Wilde did not do so well in the long examinations for a classical scholarship in his second year, finishing only fifth. An unnamed Trinity don who was a contemporary of Wilde at Portora and TCD is quoted by Harris as saying that although Wilde’s ranking was well regarded—Wilde still won one of the ten Foundation Scholarships that year⁵⁸—he was clearly not ‘the man for the δόλιχος (or long struggle), though first-rate for a short examination’.⁵⁹

Wilde’s first-class performances in the two sets of Public Examinations at Oxford ‘were regarded by his examiners as the most brilliant of their respective years [1876 and

⁵⁴ Ibid. 19–21.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Sherard (1906: 110).

⁵⁶ Harris (1918: 29).

⁵⁷ See Sherard (1906: 117).

⁵⁸ Ross (2013: 23–4).

⁵⁹ Quoted in Harris (1918: 40).

1878]’.⁶⁰ Goldhill emphasizes that Wilde and his friends were, supposedly, surprised by his success in his exams.⁶¹ This could not be said for Wilde in his First Public Examination, Honour Moderations (‘Mods’): regarding his *viva* he bragged to his friend and fellow Magdalen Classical Demy (Scholar) William (‘Bouncer’) Ward, ‘Of course I knew I had got a First, so swaggered horribly’ ([postmark 10 July 1876], *Complete Letters*, 20). It is true that Wilde wrote to Ward at the beginning of his final year that he was ‘reading hard for a Fourth in Greats [Second Public Examination]. (How are the mighty fallen!!)’ ([autumn 1877], *Complete Letters*, 61), and at the end that he could not ‘understand my First except for the essays which I was fairly good in. I got a very complimentary *viva voce*’ ([c. 24 July 1878], *Complete Letters*, 70). It is hardly straining the sense of these lines to suggest that Wilde had merely managed to moderate his swagger in the intervening two years and that his new-found modesty reinforced the studied pose of Aesthetic insouciance, Olympian serenity, and Athenian leisureliness that he laboured to cultivate while burning the candle at both ends.⁶²

Goldhill lands an easy blow by poking fun at Wilde’s undergraduate poetry but neglects to mention that he won the prestigious Newdigate Prize for English verse in his final year at Oxford for his poem named after Ravenna, a city that he had visited on his travels through Greece and Italy with Mahaffy in his third year.⁶³ Wilde was unsuccessful in his attempt to repeat his success in prose by submitting his first major essay, ‘The Rise of Historical Criticism [sc. Among the Ancients]’, for the Chancellor’s English Essay Prize of 1879 (which was not awarded that year) just after he went down.⁶⁴ Goldhill makes sure to mention, however, that Wilde failed to win a fellowship at Oxford.⁶⁵ But there is other

⁶⁰ Ross (2013: 38).

⁶¹ Goldhill (2014: 185, 186).

⁶² See Ellmann (1988: 42).

⁶³ Goldhill (2014: 184, 186).

⁶⁴ See Guy (2007: xix–xxii).

⁶⁵ Goldhill (2014: 185). An account of Wilde’s facetious behaviour at the examination for a Classics fellowship at Trinity, Oxford in 1879 was left by his fellow candidate Lewis Farnell, later an eminent Oxford classicist. See Ellmann (1988: 101).

evidence that could be amassed by a devil's advocate wishing to mount a convincing case against the canonization of Oscar of Oxford as patron saint of classicists. Although Wilde had achieved the highest marks in the examination for a Demyship (Scholarship) in Classics at Magdalen, in his first term he failed Responsions, the relatively easy preliminary pass/fail examination in classics with some mathematics.⁶⁶ In his second year, he failed Divinity Mods, which was based on the Greek Testament, and he was compelled to re-sit the test at the end of his course in order to take his degree.⁶⁷ Complacency and indifference respectively can be advanced to account for these rather inconsequential slip-ups. In his third year, Wilde entered for the Ireland Scholarship in 'classical learning and taste', only to lose out to 'reading men' who had done nothing but prepare for the examination.⁶⁸

Although Wilde told his Magdalen contemporary and friend David Hunter Blair that he did not want to be 'a dried-up Oxford don', but rather, prophetically, 'a poet, a writer, a dramatist [...] famous, and if not famous, notorious',⁶⁹ he admitted in a congratulatory missive to another Oxford contemporary, Herbert Warren, a classical scholar and the newly appointed President of Magdalen, 'I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly' ([c. 18 Oct. 1885], *Complete Letters*, 265). Goldhill might also have added to Wilde's 'CV of failures' his speculative application for an archaeological studentship in Athens to the Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford and a family friend of the Wildes, A. H. Sayce ([postmark] 28 May 1879, *Complete Letters*, 79), whose 1883 edition of Books I–III of Herodotus would be the explicit target of Tyrrell's 'The Old Classics and the New'. After leaving 'Parnassus for Piccadilly' and abandoning hopes of an academic career, Wilde was forced to style himself 'Professor of Aesthetics' while publicly lecturing and writing on art. Another application

⁶⁶ See Ellmann (1988: 42).

⁶⁷ Ibid. 62, 100.

⁶⁸ See Ellmann (1988: 66); Dowling (2001: xiv).

⁶⁹ Quoted in Hunter Blair (1939: 120–2).

of Wilde that came to nothing was for a school inspectorship (see *Complete Letters*, 280), perhaps in aspirational imitation of Matthew Arnold. In a letter to George Macmillan (22 Mar. 1879, *Complete Letters*, 78), a son of the publisher Alexander Macmillan who was made a partner in the family firm that same year and with whom Wilde had travelled through Greece in the company of Mahaffy, Wilde made a proposal (that also amounted to nothing) to produce a translation of selections from Herodotus and an edition of Euripides' *Hercules Furens* (*The Madness of Heracles*) or *Phoenissae* (*Phoenician Women*). George Macmillan had recently founded the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies along with Sayce and Mahaffy. The following year, Wilde joined Macmillan, Sayce, Mahaffy, Tyrrell, and others, to form the Council of the Hellenic Society for the first year, but then stood down, remaining a member until 1885.⁷⁰

'Typical' is hardly an adjective that does justice to Mahaffy and Tyrrell. Later in life, Wilde allegedly divulged to Harris the extent of Tyrrell's and especially Mahaffy's influence on his intellectual and artistic development:

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 not so 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. Tyrrell, too, was very kind to me—intensely sympathetic and crammed with knowledge. If he had known less he would have been a poet. Learning is a sad handicap.⁷¹

In this instance, Harris's report is partly supported by a letter that Wilde wrote to Mahaffy from the Haymarket at the height of his theatrical success:

My dear Mahaffy, I am so pleased you liked the play, and thank you for your charming letter, all the more flattering to me as it comes not merely from a man of high and distinguished culture, but from one to whom I owe so much personally, from my first and best teacher, from the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things. ([?Apr. 1893], *Complete Letters*, 561–2)⁷²

⁷⁰ See *Complete Letters*, 78 n. 4.

⁷¹ Quoted in Harris (1918: 41–2).

⁷² It is impossible to date Wilde's letter to Mahaffy with accuracy, but it seems more likely to have been written during the run of *A Woman of No Importance* (Apr.–Aug. 1893) than during that of *An Ideal Husband* (Jan.–Apr. 1895). See *Complete Letters*, 561 n. 2.

As the Hellenist Paul Cartledge writes, Wilde's reference to Mahaffy as 'the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things' takes on a tinge of ambiguity if we remember that, just before going up to Oxford, Wilde helped to correct the proofs for his Trinity tutor's forthcoming book, *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander*.⁷³ Mahaffy's pioneering research interest in Greek social history was untypical enough at a time when classical scholarship concentrated on the philological study of ancient texts. But there was an even more unconventional aspect to his interest in Greece that, if Wilde had not been made aware of it beforehand, would have been evident to him while undertaking this task for his former tutor. Unusually for contemporary scholars, Mahaffy had been unafraid to grasp the thorny issue of Greek homosexuality in his volume, which contained one of the first popular discussions of the issue in English.⁷⁴ Mahaffy's book was first published in 1874 and his preface acknowledged the help of his 'old pupil Mr. Oscar Wilde of Magdalen College, Oxford', who had 'made improvements and corrections all through the book'.⁷⁵ Whereas Wilde would deliver an apologia for 'Greek love' in the form of his famous 'Love that dare not speak its name' speech at the Old Bailey,⁷⁶ Mahaffy offered an apology for it in his book. By the second edition of his book, Mahaffy's acknowledgement of Hellenic homoeroticism was dropped, as was that of Wilde's assistance.

Mahaffy's edits to *Social Life* recall those that his exact contemporary Pater, another of Wilde's intellectual idols, made to his first and most famous book, originally titled *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and published in 1873. Although best remembered for his writings on Renaissance subjects, Pater was a Fellow in Classics at Brasenose College, Oxford, and his most important work can be said to be concerned with the classical tradition in its broadest sense.⁷⁷ Indeed, the essays in Pater's *Studies* do not form a

⁷³ Cartledge (1989: 11).

⁷⁴ See Blanshard (2018: 25–8).

⁷⁵ Mahaffy (1874: viii).

⁷⁶ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 201).

⁷⁷ See Martindale, Evangelista, and Prettejohn's recent edited collection, *Pater the Classicist* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), the first book to deal in detail with Pater's important, though often forgotten, contribution to the study of classical antiquity.

‘history’ in the usual sense of the word but rather attempt to define a sensibility, finding in some of the greatest paintings, sculptures, and poems of the Italian and French Renaissance, as well as in the career of the eighteenth-century German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann, a secret Hellenic tradition. That tradition, both the book’s admirers and attackers implicitly understood, embraced both homoeroticism and aestheticism. The critical reception and authorial revision of Pater’s and Mahaffy’s books uncannily foreshadow the controversial publication history of Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, whose eponymous painted study bears a paradoxically pagan Christian name with recognizably Hellenic and homoerotic undertones.⁷⁸ As well as classical homoeroticism and literary expurgation, Hellenic aestheticism is another aspect of Wilde that has traditionally been traced to Pater but can already be found in Mahaffy, who for Wilde represented ‘the artistic standpoint’.

The charismatic Mahaffy was certainly more of a flamboyant personality, society man-about-town, and *bon viveur* than the reserved and retiring Pater. Mrs Cheveley’s quip in Wilde’s other comedy of 1895, *An Ideal Husband*, that ‘[if] one could only teach the English how to talk, and the Irish how to listen, society here would be quite civilised’, could have been inspired by Pater and Mahaffy.⁷⁹ Like his favourites Wilde and Oliver St John Gogarty, Mahaffy was celebrated as a wit and conversationalist, and even authored a popular treatise in this area entitled *The Principles of the Art of Conversation* (1887). While aspiring to become Provost of Trinity, Mahaffy, on hearing that the incumbent was ill, is reported to have remarked, ‘Nothing trivial, I hope?’⁸⁰ The importance of such cutting commentary and a perverse sense of humour for the future author of *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (as *Earnest* is subtitled) can scarcely be overestimated. Wilde’s comment to W. B. Yeats that ‘We Irish are too poetical to be poets; we are a nation of

⁷⁸ On the classical and homosexual significance of Dorian Gray’s first name, see Cartledge (1989).

⁷⁹ Wilde (2013d), *Husband*, ed. Jackson, NM, 106.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971: 72).

brilliant failures, but we are the greatest talkers since the Greeks' bears the hallmark of his one-time Trinity tutor.⁸¹

Wilde had been acquainted with Mahaffy and his clever talk from childhood as his future mentor was a frequent attendee of the weekly Saturday afternoon gatherings held *chez* Wilde at No. 1 Merrion Square North by his mother. From about the mid-1860s, Wilde's mother encouraged her children to mingle with the guests.⁸² In London, conventional parents would have considered such precocious behaviour inconceivable, but 'the style of Dublin was more akin to that of literary Paris than the socially hierarchical Metropolis',⁸³ and Lady Wilde, though prosperous and middle-class, was no typical mother. Lady Jane Francesca Wilde (née Elgee) was a firebrand nationalist and poet who claimed literal, not just literary, descent from Dante Alighieri,⁸⁴ and had first come to public attention through the inflammatory anti-British verse that she published under her *nom de guerre* 'Speranza' ('Hope' in Italian). It must be remembered that Wilde was educated at home until he was ten, and the best of his early education took place at his parents' dinner table, where were to be found the great and the good of the Anglo-Irish world and further afield. As a child, Wilde was allowed to sit at the dinner table and listen but not contribute to the conversation.⁸⁵

Accounts of Speranza's *conversazione* (as she called it) bring to mind an obvious classical precedent—the Greek symposium, most memorably evoked by Plato; the table talk at Merrion Square was even described by the mistress of the house as 'Athenian converse with the best minds'.⁸⁶ Lady Wilde might well have been the first to inspire her son with a particular fondness for the Platonic dialogues and Aeschylean drama, which constituted, according to her, the ideal manual for those wishing to distinguish themselves

⁸¹ Quoted in Yeats (1926: 167).

⁸² Holland (1997: 19).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Ellmann (1988: 5); Holland (1997: 13).

⁸⁵ Holland (1997: 20).

⁸⁶ Lady Wilde, letter to John Hilson (16 Dec. 1869), University of Reading archives. Quoted in Wright (2009: 27).

in intellectual conversation.⁸⁷ Plato and Aeschylus were arguably the two most influential ancient authors for Wilde. The vital importance of Plato for Wilde's works and indeed life has long been discussed in detail.⁸⁸ Plato was the pet author of Benjamin Jowett, the reforming Regius Professor of Greek and the Master of Balliol College, Oxford, who reportedly declared, 'Aristotle is dead, Plato is alive,'⁸⁹ but Ross's book redresses the balance by revealing Aristotle to be a philosopher of some importance for Wilde as well.⁹⁰ Ellmann, however, remains the sole critic to have really recognized, albeit in passing, the significance of Aeschylus, more specifically his *Agamemnon*, for Wilde from boyhood: 'The *Agamemnon* stirred Wilde's sensibilities so that he never left off quoting from it.'⁹¹ As I discuss in Chapter 3 of this thesis, the *Agamemnon* and its unhappy heterosexual relations are juxtaposed with a Platonic pedagogical pederasty in Wilde's writings, as well as in a noteworthy twentieth-century dramatic work that engages closely with the Wildean legacy, namely, Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* (1948).

In his review of Ross's book, Goldhill asserts, 'it is telling, I fear, that however persuasive that argument of a tragic literary influence might seem, *Lady Windermere's Fan* or *An Ideal Husband* do not get any detailed consideration.'⁹² Goldhill's remark relates to Ross's reading of *Earnest* as a conscious inheritor of both the tragicomedy of Euripides and the New Comedy of Menander, especially in the motifs of the rediscovered male heir and the doubling of the romances. The classicist Serena Witzke extends this line of argument to include Wilde's reception of Roman as well as Greek New Comedy in all of Wilde's Society Plays.⁹³ Others, nevertheless, remain unconvinced. In contrast to Wilde's poetry, Jenkyns writes, 'It is harder to find Greece in Wilde's plays.'⁹⁴ Following Edith

⁸⁷ See Wright (2009: 48).

⁸⁸ See, for example, Dowling (1994); Endres (2018); Hill (2018); Bertman (2015); Puchner (2010: 82–91).

⁸⁹ Quoted in Abbott and Campbell (1897: 261).

⁹⁰ Ross (2013: 143–61).

⁹¹ Ellmann (1988: 21–2).

⁹² Goldhill (2014: 185).

⁹³ Witzke (2014a), (2018).

⁹⁴ Jenkyns (2014: 509).

Hall and Fiona Macintosh in *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660–1914* (2005), Ross sees Euripides' *Ion* as the Greek drama hiding behind *Earnest*,⁹⁵ while Witzke makes the case for Plautus' *Menaechmi* as a key classical model.⁹⁶ For Jenkyns, however, 'Shakespeare may seem sufficient as a source.'⁹⁷

As I intend to demonstrate, statements such as Goldhill's and Jenkyns's betray a rather superficial reading of Wilde's plays. Reading against the grain of Ross, Goldhill, Jenkyns, and Witzke, I aim to show that ancient Greek tragedy lurks in the most unlikely places of the Wildean oeuvre, including the so-called 'modern' comedies and 'stories for children'.⁹⁸ Notwithstanding their generic distinctions, classical comedy, Old as well as New, maintains a close, symbiotic relationship with its tragic counterpart. In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I argue that Wilde's first Society Play, *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), with its central themes of adultery and materialism, has a clear classical precursor in the *Agamemnon*. I suggest that Aeschylus' tragedy informs the ideas of homecoming, secrets, sacrifice, and family history repeating itself in Wilde's *Fan*. In *Fan*, the long-absent parent who returns is not the father but the mother, Mrs Erlynne, and this characteristically Wildean gender inversion allows the playwright to emphasize the mother–daughter relationship as well as the role of women more generally, just as the Athenian tragedians adapted ancient myths to represent the female perspective. The maternal–familial focus of *Fan* would be even more ironic if it were Wilde's own mother who introduced him to Aeschylus before he studied the *Agamemnon* formally at Portora.

It has been said that what Wilde did not borrow from his mother in creating his public persona he found in Mahaffy.⁹⁹ Mahaffy would appear to have acted as a sort of surrogate

⁹⁵ Hall and Macintosh (2005: 151); Ross (2013: 173–82).

⁹⁶ Witzke (2018).

⁹⁷ Jenkyns (2014: 509).

⁹⁸ Wilde told the American writer Amelie Rives Chanler that his first collection of fairy stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), was 'an attempt to mirror modern life in a form remote from reality—to deal with modern problems in a mode that is ideal and not imitative', and was 'written, not for children, but for childlike people from eighteen to eighty!' ([Jan. 1889], *Complete Letters*, 388).

⁹⁹ Skal (2016: 135).

father figure for Wilde. As Merlin Holland (Wilde's grandson) writes, 'one imagines there to have been a strong paternal–familial element in their relationship.'¹⁰⁰ Like Wilde's father Sir William, the eminent ear and eye surgeon, folklorist, and antiquarian, Mahaffy was a polymath. In his 'Epistola', Wilde seems to conflate the two men when he says that his father sent him to Oxford (*Complete Letters*, 732; *De Profundis*, 99; 165). Ellmann suggests that Mahaffy may have been primarily responsible for Wilde going to Oxford.¹⁰¹ Riley describes Wilde's relationship with Mahaffy as 'troubled, somewhat Oedipal'.¹⁰² As Goldhill points out, the lack of psychological depth in *OW&AG* is exemplified by Ross's failure to explore in any meaningful way the motivation behind Wilde's anonymous negative 1887 review of Mahaffy's *Greek Life and Thought from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.¹⁰³ The later agonistic, Oedipal attitude of the younger man towards the elder cries out for a Nietzschean and Freudian reading in the manner of Harold Bloom's seminal poetic theory in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). After Wilde's downfall, Mahaffy distanced himself from his former student, 'the one blot on my tutorship': 'We no longer speak of Mr Oscar Wilde.'¹⁰⁴ In later years, however, he modified his view, remembering that his one-time protégé was 'a delightful man to talk to on matters of scholarship, *his views were always so fresh and unconventional*' (my emphasis).¹⁰⁵

Wilde's letter in which he addresses Mahaffy as 'my first and best teacher' and 'the scholar who showed me how to love Greek things' takes on yet another possible layer of irony if it was written during the run of Wilde's second Society Play, *A Woman of No Importance*, in 1893. As I argue in Chapter 3 of this thesis, Wilde's *Woman* draws discernible inspiration from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to depict the Oedipal ties that bind

¹⁰⁰ Holland (1997: 28).

¹⁰¹ Ellmann (1988: 33).

¹⁰² Riley (2018a: 5).

¹⁰³ Goldhill (2014: 184).

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971: 87).

¹⁰⁵ Purser, letter to A. J. A. Symons. Quoted in Coakley (1994: 150).

the young hero, Gerald Arbuthnot, to his natural father, Lord Illingworth, and his mother, Mrs Arbuthnot. Given such an evident tragic lineage, it is surprising that *Woman* remains unmentioned in both Ross's book and in Goldhill's review. Initially, the quasi-Platonic pedagogical relationship between Lord Illingworth and young Arbuthnot threatens to tip over into pederasty and (unwitting) incest—two traditional motifs in the Labdacid dynastic myth. Sophocles and, consequently, Freud concentrate on the parricide and incest themes in their well-known treatments of the Oedipus myth, but, as the ethno-psychoanalytic critic George Devereux has shown, other Greek sources emphasize a homosexual element.¹⁰⁶ In other Greek sources, the family curse on the House of Laius comes as a punishment for the progenitor having abducted, raped, and caused the death of Chrysippus, the illegitimate son of Pelops, who was Laius' host as well as his collaborator in introducing pederasty into Greek culture.¹⁰⁷ The relationship between Gerald and Lord Illingworth in *Woman* is not, therefore, simply a sexual inversion of the relationship between Lady Windermere and Mrs Erlynne in *Fan*, or between Oedipus and Jocasta in Sophocles, but rather a reversion to other ancient sources for the Oedipus myth. The pre-Oedipal pederastic backstory strengthens the focus on fathers and sons in the Oedipus myth and Wilde's *Woman*.

Furthermore, in Chapter 3, I read in *Woman* refractions of Wilde's relationships with the parental figures in his own life. In Wilde's play, the aspiring diplomat Lord Illingworth plans to make his boy his private secretary and take him abroad to India and away from a heartbroken Mrs Arbuthnot. The worldly Oxonian philosopher and would-be Indian official Lord Illingworth is, I propose, the pattern product of Jowett's Greats. Unlike Gerald Arbuthnot, who, in the end, does not accept the proposals of his prospective employer and biological father, Wilde did take up offers of work and travel from his intellectual foster father Mahaffy. When Wilde came to correct the proofs of Mahaffy's *Social Life*, he had, according to Ellmann, already followed his mentor's advice to transfer

¹⁰⁶ Devereux (1995).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 27–8.

to Oxford, on the grounds that he could not be guaranteed a classical fellowship at TCD in competition with his old academic rival Purser.¹⁰⁸ At Oxford, Wilde claimed that he was ‘correcting’ the proofs of Mahaffy’s 1876 book *Rambles and Studies in Greece*, an account of his first trip to Greece in 1875 (‘To William Ward’, [6 Aug. 1876], in *Complete Letters*, 28). Wilde also accepted his former Trinity tutor’s invitation to tour Greece’s archaeological sites with him in 1877. Harris makes clear that Mahaffy’s extensive travels in Greece elevated him above the average armchair classicist in Wilde’s eyes. It should be remembered that, as a result of Mahaffy’s urgent invitation, ‘Wilde was one of few Victorian writers who actually visited Greece’.¹⁰⁹

In his narrative, Ross imaginatively combines biography, history of scholarship, literary criticism, and historical speculation, especially in the early chapters of his book where he details the various quarrels between the different classicist and archaeologist camps, as well as Wilde’s (presumably) disenchanting encounter with the ‘real’ rather than ‘textual’ Greece,¹¹⁰ and his complicated relationship with Mahaffy.¹¹¹ Ross refreshingly admits that much of the evidence with which he deals—those early fragmentary jottings in Wilde’s notebooks and marginalia in his classical texts—requires ‘imagination’ to give it ‘life’.¹¹² Whereas Ross’s book is more of an intellectual biography, this thesis tends towards psychobiography, weaving together Wilde’s literary works and episodes from his life. While Catherine Maxwell cautions that psychobiography ‘is most often a dubious critical tool for literary analysis’, she concedes that ‘sexual orientation in so far as it enters into and influences a poet’s myth-making about himself *as a poet* is a relevant concern’.¹¹³ Ross’s book marks an important departure from discussions of Wilde’s Hellenism focusing almost exclusively on its significance for his homosexuality, which dominated the

¹⁰⁸ Ellmann (1988: 33).

¹⁰⁹ Jenkyns (2014: 509).

¹¹⁰ Ross (2013: 43) takes the ‘liberty of assuming that Wilde’s responses to Greece can be plausibly if cautiously assimilated’ to those recorded by his travel companions Mahaffy and Macmillan.

¹¹¹ See Guy (2014: 541).

¹¹² Ross (2013: 6). See Guy (2014: 541).

¹¹³ Maxwell (2001: 190).

preceding two decades of Wildean and classical reception studies. To be sure, there is more to Wilde's love of Greek than 'Greek love', and it is true that the all-too-human interest in Wilde's sex life has threatened to overshadow his substantial artistic contribution.

Nevertheless, following Camille Paglia, I see art and sexuality as inextricably interlinked. In Paglia's sweeping and spellbinding scholarly epic, *Sexual Personae* (1990), modestly subtitled *Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, the author asservates, 'Man, the sexual conceptualizer and projector, has ruled art because art is his Apollonian response toward and away from woman.'¹¹⁴ In his biography of Wilde, Ellmann writes that '[h]omosexuality fired his mind' and that '[h]is new sexual direction liberated his art'.¹¹⁵ The career reinvention from archaeological reconstructor to prose stylist that Ross identifies for Wilde *c.* 1886 coincided with his homosexual awakening with his first male lover, the seventeen-year-old Robert ('Robbie') Ross, later his literary executor. Ellmann's biography was published in 1987, the year of his death, and was completed while its author was extremely ill. Whatever factual errors remain in Ellmann's book,¹¹⁶ I find his literary critical instincts to be, for the most part, spot-on. No other work of Wildean scholarship has had a greater influence on this thesis. Ellmann's biography coincided with the 'queer' turn in Wildean studies of the 1980s and 1990s, which thematized closets, masks, and performance in its theories of gender and sexuality. It is understandable that Ross would want to avoid a one-track-minded analysis such as Neil McKenna's reductively sexualized 2003 biography of Wilde. However, Ross's sober book does read as a sublimely male Apollonian mental swerve away from the chthonic female body.

¹¹⁴ Paglia (1991: 31).

¹¹⁵ Ellmann (1988: 265, 270).

¹¹⁶ See Horst Schroeder's *Additions and Corrections to Richard Ellmann's 'Oscar Wilde'* (2nd edn, 2002). It should be noted, however, that Schroeder has had his own work taken to task in *The Wildean* (see Murphy 2004). Hopefully, Matthew Sturgis's forthcoming biography will assist in setting the record straight.

This tendency to over-sexualize or de-sexualize Wilde can also be discerned in high-profile English productions of Wilde's *Salomé* and *Woman* in 2017, which conveniently coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalization of male homosexual acts in 1967. It is extraordinary that in a year in which black drag queens became a cliché of theatrical productions loudly and proudly celebrating this anniversary, including the Royal Shakespeare Company's overdeterminedly 'gender-fluid' production of *Salomé* in Stratford-upon-Avon,¹¹⁷ the production of Wilde's second Society Play at the Vaudeville Theatre in London dropped any hint of a possible homosexual motivation behind Lord Illingworth's unusual interest in a young man of a lower order, Gerald Arbuthnot, 'the young man who has a post in a bank' (*Woman*, 7) and has 'not been to Eton or Oxford like other chaps' (55). Dominic Rowan's completely de-gayed and straightened-out Lord Illingworth looked as if he would have been more at home flicking through *GQ* than leafing through the pages of the *Yellow Book*. Theatre critics who parroted the line that *Woman* is the weakest of Wilde's plays nevertheless praised its feminist credentials, seeing the production as gaining in relevance in light of the contemporaneous revelations of alleged sexual harassment and assault by the Hollywood movie mogul Harvey Weinstein.¹¹⁸ Of course, the more pressing relevance of alleged homosexual abuse in London theatre land, across the river at the Old Vic, went unmentioned.

Devereux links the latent passive homosexuality of the son and the violent aggression of the father in the myth of Hippolytus, which in many ways constitutes the inverse of that of Oedipus.¹¹⁹ In his interpretation of Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Devereux describes the eponymous protagonist as a 'self-destructive narcissist'¹²⁰ and an "'orphic" dandy'.¹²¹ I do not dismiss Devereux's analysis as merely 'the product of a 1960s and 1970s hysteria concerning the American Psychological Association's *de*-pathologization of

¹¹⁷ See Billington (2017); Cavendish (2017). See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

¹¹⁸ See Maxwell (2017); Taylor (2017).

¹¹⁹ See Devereux (1985: 73).

¹²⁰ Ibid. 86.

¹²¹ Ibid. 92.

homosexuality in 1973'.¹²² What interests me is that Devereux's descriptions are strikingly reminiscent of Wilde and his Dorian Gray. In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I argue that Ovid's Orpheus, whose Hippolytus-like, narcissistic, and self-destructive idealization and rejection of woman, as well as his embrace of boy-love, in Books X and XI of the *Metamorphoses*, mirrors Dorian Gray and Wilde himself. While Ross goes to great lengths to show how Wilde's reception of classical Greek culture was mediated through nineteenth-century scholarship and art, he is noticeably silent on the relationship between ancient Greece and Rome. The Romans saw their anxiety-ridden cultural rivalry with their Greek subjects in suitably agonistic and ironically imperialistic terms. In Horace's immortal and ironic words: *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artis | intulit agresti Latio* (*Epistles*, II. i. 156–7). The Victorians might have privileged Greece over Rome, as typified by Mahaffy,¹²³ but the Ovidian *Metamorphoses*, one of the highlights of Latin literature, would have been the most convenient classical source of Greek myth for Wilde; and Ross's omission of Rome and her key role in the mediation of ancient Greece to the modern Western world is serious. As Wilde himself reminds us in 'The Critic as Artist', the longest of the essays in his collection *Intentions* (1891), classical Athenian culture was transmitted to the West via Alexandria and, crucially, Rome.¹²⁴ In his part of an anonymous composite review of the entry on 'Greece' in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* for the *Athenaeum* in 1880, Wilde criticized the author, Richard Claverhouse Jebb, then Professor of Greek at the University of Glasgow, for including 'no allusion to the nature or value of the influence exercised by Greek literature on the literature of Rome and of modern times'.¹²⁵ The reorientation of the study of Wilde's classical reception to embrace his multi-faceted interaction with Rome as well as Greece is

¹²² Jenkins (2015: 56).

¹²³ See Ellmann (1988: 42).

¹²⁴ 'The Critic as Artist', in *Intentions*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, iv: *Criticism: 'Historical Criticism', 'Intentions', 'The Soul of Man'*, ed. Guy, OET (2007), 144.

¹²⁵ Wilde [anonymous], 'Greece', *Athenaeum* (4 Sept. 1880), 2758, 301–2. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vi: *Journalism*, i, ed. Stokes and Turner, OET (2013), 21–23, at 23.

one of the contributions of the recently published co-edited volume *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* (2018; *OW&CA*), which grew out of my research for this thesis.¹²⁶ The philhellene Roman Ovid as poet, storyteller, mythmaker, and playwright provides a clear classical parallel for Wilde. Ovid's use of Greek tragedy in his Latin epic provides a perfect example of a Hellenistic 'mixture of genres' (*Kreuzung der Gattungen*)—a classical literary critical concept that encapsulates Wilde's metamorphosis of Athenian tragic drama and Ovidian myth in such works as *Dorian Gray* and his fairy tales.¹²⁷

Ovid is also Wilde's tragic predecessor as a fallen and exiled epistolary poet. The *Metamorphoses* is populated with figures of the suffering artist, a type with which Wilde identified most explicitly in *De Profundis*. Wilde was heir to Ovid as well as the Romantics in seemingly making himself the subject of his art. Like Ovid, Wilde practically asks for a biographical reading of his works. However, Wilde the über-sophisticate rejected such a simplistic and reductive approach to his works and art in general. In a book review of a literary biography, a popular genre of the period that Wilde disliked, the critic imperiously pronounced, 'We sincerely hope that there will soon be an end to all biographies of this kind. They rob life of much of its dignity and its wonder, add to death itself a new terror, and make one wish that all art were anonymous.'¹²⁸ And yet Wilde was such a shameless self-promoter, and the most intimate details of his personal life became so sensationally public, that it is difficult to resist the temptation to read the author into his works.

Initially, finding a unifying theme or thread to tie together the disparate ideas in this thesis was a struggle. An obvious starting point seemed to be to focus on Wilde's reception of an ancient author, such as Euripides (as opposed to Plato and Aristotle). However, it

¹²⁶ Riley, Blanshard, and Manny (2018). The volume grew out of a colloquium that I co-organized with the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at Oxford on 11 July 2014. For the influence of ancient Rome on Wilde, see especially Endres (2018); Manny (2018); Smith (2018); Malik (2018); Witzke (2018).

¹²⁷ On *Kreuzung der Gattungen*, see Kroll (1924).

¹²⁸ Wilde, 'A Cheap Edition of a Great Man', *Pall Mall Gazette* (18 Apr. 1887), 5. Reprinted in *Journalism*, i, 146–9, at 8.

quickly became clear that Wilde's reception of Euripides could not be easily separated from his reception of Greek tragedy as a whole. Moreover, so much of the tragic colouring in Wilde's works seems to come from Ovid and Shakespeare—a salutary reminder of the methodological problems with separating Greece from Rome or Greece and Rome from the Renaissance when discussing the classical tradition in the nineteenth century. Likewise, it makes little sense to consider tragedy in Wilde in isolation from its more obvious opposite number, comedy. In the hope of finding a more all-encompassing concept on which to hang my wide-ranging material, I turned to nineteenth-century literary and artistic movements such as Aestheticism, Symbolism, and Decadence. Decadence as a concept appeared particularly promising for its applicability to both antiquity and the *fin de siècle*. References to the late, 'decadent' Athenians Euripides, Plato, and Menander as well as to the late Augustan *Metamorphoses* are plentiful in Wilde's writings. However, the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, who was caricatured in opposition to the decadent Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, rivals Plato for supremacy among Wilde's classical allusions. Eventually, what kept cropping up in my repeated readings of Wilde was not an abstract concept but a figure—what the Cambridge classical scholar Sir James George Frazer famously called in *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) the 'dying and reviving god', such as Adonis, Hyacinthus, Narcissus, and Dionysus. These dying and reviving gods reminded me that Christianity, for Frazer a remnant of pagan religion, is not an impersonal abstraction but is centred on the person of Jesus Christ, to whom Wilde, with characteristic humility, compares himself in *De Profundis*. I follow Maxwell, who in her study of 'the female sublime', *Bearing Blindness* (2001), discusses the feminization of the male poet through mythical figures such as Philomel(a) and Orpheus as well as an ancient author, Sappho.¹²⁹ In Chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis, Wilde is compared to classical authorial

¹²⁹ Maxwell (2001: ch. 1).

analogues such as the displaced and misunderstood Ovid and Euripides as well as to mythical figures such as Narcissus and Hippolytus.

Wilde's overweening personality as well as his extreme individualism goes some way to explaining why, unusually, he has inspired two recent studies in and around the area of classical reception, *OW&AG* and *OW&CA*. Full-length studies of individual modern authors remain rare in classical reception studies, which, understandably, tends to structure itself around ancient authors, or different periods, themes, and genres.¹³⁰ However, it is wrong to overemphasize the man at the expense of the work. Wilde was much more than merely a gifted self-marketer and pioneering manipulator of mass media. Ross's portrait of Wilde as a serious classical scholar is not concerned with his personal life in Oxford, but rather his intellectual life and how it was formed by his Greek studies. As Goldhill writes:

There is no hint of a Waugh-like nostalgia for a lost and decadent Oxford: this is an austere account that stresses the serious and coherence of Wilde's thinking, in a way that few students will recognize for their own internal lives except in their most pretentious or indeed earnest account of themselves.¹³¹

Whilst in his assessment of Wilde, Goldhill runs the risk of coming across as one of 'the smaller natures and meaner minds', to borrow the author's own words (*Complete Letters*, 730; *De Profundis*, 95; 163), he is right in his attempt to provide a corrective, however negative, to Ross's highly selective, cerebral study of Wilde.

Wilde's academic successes as a Classics student have long been acknowledged by his various biographers, but it was not until Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand's 1989 edition of Wilde's *Oxford Notebooks* that a sustained case was made for the importance of his classical education for his later career as a writer.¹³² For Smith and Helfand, the foundations of both Wilde's critical and creative works were laid in what they termed 'the

¹³⁰ *Pater the Classicist* (2017), edited by Martindale, Evangelista, and Prettejohn is another exception. See also *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, iv: 1790–1880 (2015), which does not deal with 'the afterlife of individual classical authors in the nineteenth century', but rather 'some leading Romantic and Victorian authors who brought together a multiplicity of sources and contexts in their complex, distinctive engagements with the past' (Vance and Wallace 2015a: 8).

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 185.

¹³² Smith and Helfand's *Oxford Notebooks* consists of Wilde's 'Commonplace Book' and 'Notebook' that he kept towards the end of his studies at Oxford (and now in the Clark Library).

reading and writing he did during and shortly after his years at Oxford'.¹³³ It was the neglect of this corpus of early material, they maintained, that had led to the Wildean oeuvre being systematically 'misunderstood and undervalued'.¹³⁴ In *Studying Oscar Wilde* (2006), Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small take Smith and Helfand to task, cautioning against 'using materials written at a very early stage in Wilde's career to explain what happened later on'.¹³⁵

Unlike Smith and Helfand, however, Ross approaches his primary evidence with due caution, conceding that its fragmentary and juvenile nature poses serious interpretive problems.¹³⁶ The difficulty, as Ross explains, lies in knowing whether, say, an underlining by Wilde denotes 'assent, disagreement, passages to return to later, puzzlement, surprise, or mechanical highlighting of points that might have been useful for an essay or exam'.¹³⁷ With reference to Wilde's personal copies of the two Series of John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873/6) (now in the Morgan Library, New York), Gideon Nisbet adds, 'Like that of students today, his underlining often appears miscellaneous; in some cases all we can say with confidence is that Wilde found the material striking or congenial.'¹³⁸ Goldhill observes that Wilde's annotations in his editions of classical texts are often copied-out remarks from published commentaries, and links this ostensible lack of scholarly originality with the derivativeness of his early poetry as judged by his contemporaries.¹³⁹

Wilde may have been a keen classicist as well as a sharp analytical thinker and social critic, but he always possessed that characteristic lightness of heart and touch for which he has been best known and loved (or loathed). Ross is not especially successful at conveying this levity. Witzke remarks that Ross leaves Wilde's signature wit and humour out of his

¹³³ Smith and Helfand (1989a: vii).

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Guy and Small (2006: 87).

¹³⁶ Guy (2014: 540).

¹³⁷ Ross (2013: 6).

¹³⁸ Nisbet (2018: 42).

¹³⁹ Goldhill (2014: 186).

engagement with the Greeks: the wit and humour that distinguish Wilde's writing, even the philosophical essays in *Intentions*, 'are lost in the morass of Victorian aesthetic philosophy'.¹⁴⁰ Ross may be 'over-educated', as Witzke aptly says of his book,¹⁴¹ but he makes up for it, perhaps, by being 'under-dressed'—he wears his learning lightly, as Guy writes.¹⁴² Ross's 'elegant' and 'witty' prose frequently manages to breathe life into material that in less deft hands would have made for a dry and dreary read indeed.¹⁴³ According to Witzke, Ross's 'intellectualizing analysis desiccates Wilde's prose and renders him another Arnold or Pater'.¹⁴⁴ The complexity and seriousness that much Wildean scholarship ascribes to its subject is difficult to reconcile with his perennially popular appeal. In this context, Guy contrasts the Wildean oeuvre with Pater's extended 'imaginary portrait', *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), his only completed full-length work of fiction, set in 166–77 AD in the Rome of the Antonines. As Guy explains, 'in the absence of much of a plot or any recognisable conventions of characterisation, that novel only makes sense to the modern reader in the light of a detailed historicism which brings to the fore its intricate intellectual engagement with the norms of late-nineteenth century academic scholarship.'¹⁴⁵ This accounts for the fact that Pater's novel is so seldom read today, unlike Wilde's Society Plays or his own one and only novel *Dorian Gray*, which can be read as a response to both *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and *Marius*. Despite being deeply influenced by Pater's sensational ideas and style, even Wilde lamented his elder's tendency to 'become somewhat laborious.'¹⁴⁶

The one downside to Ross's sterling archival work is that he does not appear to have had the space to apply his findings in desirable detail to Wilde's best-known work, his literary

¹⁴⁰ Witzke (2014b: para. 10 of 11).

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Guy (2014: 541).

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Witzke (2014b: para. 10 of 11).

¹⁴⁵ Guy (2014: 542).

¹⁴⁶ Wilde [anonymous], 'Mr. Pater's Imaginary Portraits', *Pall Mall Gazette* (11 June 1887), 2–3. Reprinted in *Journalism*, i, 178–80, at 180.

and dramatic writings, which are surely of greatest interest to the general reader. What is more, Ross's book ends abruptly, without even a conclusion, and gives little impression of what has been left out. This thesis aims to fill this gap by focusing on Wilde's most famous and enduringly popular works, which span the decade from his first collection of fairy tales, which was published in 1888. As we shall see in Chapter 3 of this thesis, the title story of *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* has its origins in the Cambridge Greek Play of 1885, Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (the concluding part of the *Oresteia* trilogy of which the *Agamemnon* is the first). The decade from 1885 to 1895 also takes in his novel and his best plays, ending with the Icarian high point of *Earnest* and Wilde's almost immediately ensuing crash-landing in the Queensberry libel trial.

Scholars in general seem more at home with the cerebral and highbrow Pater than the frivolous and popular Wilde. Ross's study is more the academic equivalent of *Marius* than *Dorian Gray* or *Earnest*: it is heavyweight and, at times, reads more like a reference work. It presumes knowledge of the twin subjects of its title. There is little in the way of contextual background, and more than a passing acquaintance with Victorian intellectual life is assumed. It is essential for classicist readers to consult first Jenkyns's *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank M. Turner's *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981) before embarking on Ross's intricate study with its erudite account of critical issues in nineteenth-century classical scholarship. It is tricky to strike the requisite balance when writing on (classical) reception: scholars of the receiving culture are often not conversant with the originating culture and vice versa.¹⁴⁷ Accessibility cuts both ways.

In Tom Stoppard's scrupulously researched play *The Invention of Love* (1997), the protagonist, the classical scholar, poet, and contemporary of Wilde A. E. Housman, looks back at death's door with as much melancholy as nostalgia on his personal life and on a lost Golden Age Oxford. However, *Invention* is heavy on classical allusions and

¹⁴⁷ See Witzke (2014b: para. 9 of 11).

contemporary references. In order to elucidate Stoppard's many historical and academic references, the programme for the 2001 New York production of *Invention* included no less than eight pages of supplementary notes, as if the play were itself a classical text.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Stoppard seems to side with the artistic Wilde over the scholarly Housman, or 'AEH' as he is called, in *Invention*. Housman the Latin textual critic and repressed homosexual is juxtaposed with Wilde, the artist and liberated Greek lover. At the end of the play, AEH admits that, in contrast with the table-talking Wilde, his life was 'marked by long silences', and Wilde rebukes him for his timidity.¹⁴⁹ Stoppard is probably thinking not only of Housman but also Pater, whose timidity Wilde privately criticized. Despite their affable social acquaintance, Wilde was unimpressed by Pater's diffident personal manner. When Wilde was informed of Pater's death, he reportedly remarked to the dandy and humourist Max Beerbohm, 'Was he ever alive?'¹⁵⁰ In his biography of Wilde, Hesketh Pearson unflatteringly compares Pater with his contemporary classicist Nietzsche when describing the Oxford don as 'one of those timid, old-maidish scholarly recluses who, fearing even the uncertainties of marriage, preach the gospel of living dangerously. In Germany he would have sung the glories of the sword and superman. In England he hinted at forbidden fruit.'¹⁵¹

The intellectual versus the emotional not only bedevils Wildean scholarship but is also the main theme of Stoppard's *Invention*. In Stoppard's play, AEH and Wilde embody the head/heart or Apollonian/Dionysian duality, a dichotomy one sees again and again in Wilde's own life. Mahaffy/Tyrrell and Wilde/Purser are variations on this duality. It is also a binary that appears in other receptions of Wilde that touch on his classicism. In Chapter 3 of this thesis, I discuss Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, in which Wilde is a ghostly, unspoken presence implicitly contrasted with the protagonist, the ailing, prematurely

¹⁴⁸ See Spencer [2001].

¹⁴⁹ Stoppard (1997), *Invention*, 98.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Ellmann (1988: 50).

¹⁵¹ Pearson (1946: 46).

retiring, repressed Oxonian classics schoolmaster Andrew Crocker-Harris ('the Crock'). The title of Rattigan's play refers to Robert Browning's ground-breaking 1877 translation of the *Agamemnon*, and Andrew's miserable married life mirrors the murderous adultery of the Aeschylean tragedy that he teaches so impersonally. Like Wilde, Rattigan had a privileged education in the classics and was hugely influenced by the *Agamemnon*, which he read at Harrow School. In Rattigan's *Browning*, the rigidly precise and archaicizing 'construe' of the Greek text by the Crock is contrasted with the fresh and imaginative 'collaboration' with Aeschylus by his pupil, Taplow, as well as the classics master's own 'very free', 'very beautiful' translation in his younger years.¹⁵²

Stoppard's *Invention* is similarly concerned with questions of value, legacy, and (im)mortality in art and scholarship.¹⁵³ We all die, but, to allude to Horace (*Odes*, III. xxx), what will we raise as our monument? In *Invention*, Wilde epitomizes the superiority and longevity of art over scholarship. Before he exits, he expresses puzzlement over AEH's unhappiness: 'You didn't mention your poems. How can you be unhappy when you know you wrote them? They are all that will still matter' (*Invention*, 100). Stoppard's Wilde privileges art as the artist's triumph over life, and it is art, not scholarship about art, that endures.¹⁵⁴ As G. K. Chesterton, in many ways the inverse of Wilde, self-deprecatingly declared in his book on Chaucer: 'What matters is not books on Chaucer, but Chaucer.'¹⁵⁵ While Housman spent more time on his critical edition of the Latin didactic poet Manilius, it is his collection of poems, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), that stands as his monument. Similarly, in Rattigan's *Browning*, the *Agamemnon*, or free translations and (implicitly) dramatic adaptations of it, outlast pedantic and literal linguistic renderings of it.

The cerebral Stoppard's implicit identification with Wilde over Housman is somewhat surprising and ironic. First, Stoppard was guided in his portrayal of Wilde by Ellmann's

¹⁵² Rattigan (1981), *Browning*, in *Plays: One: 'French Without Tears', 'The Winslow Boy', 'The Browning Version', 'Harlequinade'*, Methuen Drama World Classics, 195–6.

¹⁵³ Bloom (2003: 115).

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 134.

¹⁵⁵ Chesterton (1992: 153).

biography, which, as Bristow writes, has had a ‘phenomenal’ influence on ‘[p]ractically each and every subsequent representation of Wilde’s life and writings’.¹⁵⁶ Stoppard’s use of Wilde to elevate art over scholarship is also ironic because Wilde’s ‘Platonic’ dialogue ‘The Critic as Artist’ sets out to collapse the distinction between art and criticism, which was cherished by artists and critics alike, such as Whistler and Arnold. As we shall see later in this Introduction, Wilde’s essay, extending the ideas of Pater’s ‘Preface’ to *Studies*, opposes the Arnoldian objectivist view that meaning inheres in a work, having been put there by the artist, arguing instead that what matters is the subjective perception of the reader or critic. Reception, Martindale says, ‘involves [...] readers (including readers who are themselves creative artists) in a two-way process, backward as well as forward, in which the present and past are in dialogue with each other’.¹⁵⁷ Rattigan and Stoppard represent two strands of the reception of Wilde’s own classical reception. Rattigan’s is the homosexual and homosocial Platonic strand, as demonstrated by his classics master’s relationships with his young charge, his unintellectual wife, and his colleague who is also his wife’s lover. While Wilde’s engagement with Plato has tended to be reduced to erotics, Martin Puchner sees Wilde as an inheritor of a philosophical ‘dialogue-based dramaturgy’ who used Plato to create a new ‘drama of ideas’ and so was a precursor of modern playwrights such as Stoppard.¹⁵⁸ These two strands of Wildean classical reception, sexuality and philosophy, are closely related for Plato in the *Symposium*, but we find it more difficult to integrate them today. Just as I extend this thesis back to antiquity itself with the reception of Greece by Rome, so too do I take it beyond the point at which Ross ends his study, the publication of *De Profundis* in 1905.

This dialogue between the ancient and modern worlds is suggested by the title of Stoppard’s *Invention*, which simultaneously recalls Aristophanes’ aetiological myth about

¹⁵⁶ Bristow (2010: 49).

¹⁵⁷ Martindale (2007: 298).

¹⁵⁸ Puchner (2010: esp. ch. 3).

erōs in the Platonic *Symposium* and Michel Foucault's claim that (homo)sexuality was 'invented' in the late nineteenth century in *La volonté de savoir* (1976; tr. as *The Will to Knowledge*, 1978), the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, a foundational text of queer theory.¹⁵⁹ One late nineteenth-century term in the history of sexuality that is a key concept in this thesis is 'inversion'. In typically Wildean fashion, inversion had a *double entendre*. As well as being a term used by sexologists in the late nineteenth century to refer to homosexuals, 'invert' traditionally means to reverse. Wilde specialized in revealing truth by reversing or inverting received wisdom through his own signature brand of witty paradox. In his prison 'Epistola', Wilde writes, 'What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion' (*Complete Letters*, 730; *De Profundis*, 95; 163). As we shall see throughout this thesis, Wilde, when employing classical models and motifs in his works, frequently inverts or reverses the gender of characters, as well as other differentials such as age and social class.

Wilde's *Earnest* is set in an inverted, topsy-turvy, through-the-looking-glass world where nothing is what it seems. The eponymous pun, 'E(a)rnest', and the comical term 'Bunburyist', used to describe those who lead a double life, purportedly play on the word 'Uranist' or 'Uranian', which, like 'invert', was a late nineteenth-century term for a homosexual and derived from Pausanias' description of the Uranian or 'Heavenly' Aphrodite, that is, a higher, homoerotic form of love, in Plato's *Symposium*.¹⁶⁰ Wilde's fourth and final Society Play is paradoxically subtitled *A Trivial Comedy for Serious People*. As was already mentioned, Wilde partly inherited his perverse and rather queer sense of humour and line of thought from Mahaffy. Along with puns, Mahaffy espoused the epigram, which was originally a Greek literary form. 'It is the spectator and not life that art mirrors,' he is supposed to have said—a maxim, as we shall see, with resonance for

¹⁵⁹ See Foucault (1978: 43).

¹⁶⁰ On the sexual punning in *Earnest*, see Craft (1994: 134–5).

contemporary critical ideas of reception.¹⁶¹ Wilde allegedly appropriated this aphorism and many others of Mahaffy for himself. According to Wilde himself, the Oxford Classics course cultivated a paradoxical mode of thought. As Wilde claimed, in a congratulatory missive to Rennell Rodd, who had recently been awarded a Second in Lit. Hum.: ‘Greats is [...] the only sphere of thought where one can be, *simultaneously*, brilliant and unreasonable, speculative and well-informed, creative as well as critical, and write with all the passions of youth about the truths which belong to the august serenity of old age’ ([c. 4 Dec. 1880], *Complete Letters*, 102–3). Wilde’s Hegelian dialectics or Blakean/Jungian marriage of opposites—old and new, tragic and comic, male and female, gay and straight—would have been developed by bringing ancient and modern systems of thought into dialogue. Oxford Greats trained its students to see the past in active conversation with the present by prescribing modern as well as ancient philosophy as part of the second, longer part of the course.¹⁶²

Hall and Macintosh suggest that either A. W. Verrall’s edition of Euripides’ *Ion* or the Cambridge Greek Play performance of the same in 1890 might have inspired the famous ‘handbag’ recognition scene in *Earnest*.¹⁶³ Like the Greek tragedies discussed so far—Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Oedipus*, and Euripides’ *Hippolytus*—the *Ion* deals with difficulties posed by an absent natural father. Contrary to Joseph Loewenstein’s assertion that *Earnest* is informed by the *Oedipus Rex*, ‘the originary moment of New Comedy’,¹⁶⁴ Ross argues that the origin of New Comedy is not to be located in Sophoclean tragedy, but rather in Euripidean tragicomedy, of which the *Ion* is the most representative extant example.¹⁶⁵ The *Ion* is undoubtedly a key source for *Earnest*, but Ross apparently fails to appreciate that New Comedy unfolds from what Frye calls ‘a comic Oedipus

¹⁶¹ See Stanford and McDowell (1971: 80).

¹⁶² Ross (2013: 37).

¹⁶³ See Hall and Macintosh (2005: 151).

¹⁶⁴ Loewenstein (1985: 394).

¹⁶⁵ Ross (2013: 174–5).

situation'.¹⁶⁶ Oddly, neither Hall and Macintosh nor Ross points out the verbal similarity between 'Ion' and 'John'. At the end of *Earnest*, the title character finally finds out that his Christian names are in fact Ernest John. Wilde had turned to the Greek Testament story of a John, the Baptist, whom, following Flaubert, he calls by his Hebrew name, Iokanaan/Jokanaan, in his biblical drama *Salomé* (1893/4).

Set in Roman Judaea and originally written in French, Wilde's *Salomé* has not normally been considered in terms of the Greek tragic tradition. Despite being the only one of Wilde's major works to be explicitly located in classical antiquity, *Salomé* is conspicuous by its almost complete absence from Ross's book, where it is mentioned in passing only twice.¹⁶⁷ In the context of Wilde as translator [*sc.* of Greek], Ross suggests that the author wrote *Salomé* 'to avoid censorship by the Lord Chamberlain and to accommodate Sarah Bernhardt, who spoke no English'—notions readily refuted by Robert Ross's 'Preface' to the play in his first edition of Wilde's *Collected Works* (1908).¹⁶⁸ In an interview with a French daily criticizing the Philistine English Censor's prohibition of the London production of his biblical play in 1892, the emphatically Irish playwright, in a blatant attempt to butter up the local audience ahead of a supposed Parisian première, sang the praises of the French language, going so far as to declare: 'To me there are only two languages in the world: French and Greek.'¹⁶⁹

Ross's notable omission of *Salomé* may be partly the result of the play's Roman-ness, which was accentuated when the RSC's 2017 production was programmed alongside the company's Rome season. 'Ah! que je déteste les Romains! Ce sont des gens communs, et ils se donnent des airs de grands seigneurs!'¹⁷⁰ ('Ah! how I loathe the Romans! They are

¹⁶⁶ Frye (2010: 4).

¹⁶⁷ Ross (2013: 82, 158).

¹⁶⁸ Ross (2013: 82). Cf. Ross (1909b: ix).

¹⁶⁹ Maurice Sisley, 'La *Salomé* de M. Oscar Wilde', *Le Gaulois* (29 Jun. 1892), 1. Quoted in Mikhail (1979b: 190). On Wilde's French-influenced 'cosmopolitan classicism', see Evangelista (2018).

¹⁷⁰ *Salomé*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, v: *Plays*, i: 'The Duchess of Padua', 'Salomé: drame en un acte', 'Salome: Tragedy in One Act', ed. Donohue, OET (2013), 515.

rough and common, and they give themselves the airs of noble lords'¹⁷¹), exclaims Salomé as she flees the raucous feast like the Belgian Symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck's *Princesse Maleine*. Salomé describes the Roman guests as 'brutal and coarse, with their uncouth jargon' (*Salome*, 710; 'avec leur brutalité, leur lourdeur, leurs gros mots'; *Salomé*, 515). On one level, Wilde displayed a very Victorian preference for the more light and melodic language of Greek, which he allies with French, over the heavier and more militarily precise Latin tongue. The princess's words on her entrance can be also read through the lens of 'cultural imperialism and the suppression of national vernaculars'.¹⁷² The trends of postcolonial readings in both classical reception studies and Wildean studies at the turn of the millennium have yet to intersect in a sustained way.¹⁷³ Wilde's first play, the melodramatic tragedy *Vera; or, The Nihilists* (first performed in 1883), was set in contemporary Tsarist Russia but can be read in relation to the political situation in Ireland. Looking back on his childhood, Lord Berners (b. 1883), an aesthete for all seasons, wrote that the ordinary patriotic Englishman, who did not mingle in cosmopolitan society, harboured firm phobias about 'the three Rs, Russians, Radicals and Roman Catholics'.¹⁷⁴ Wilde, however, wrote to Marie Prescott, the actress who played Vera in New York, that his Promethean drama is 'a play not of politics but of passion' ([? July 1883], *Complete Letters*, 214), as is his *Salomé*, contrary to Yaël Farber's highly politicized rewriting, first performed in 2015 and recently produced at the National Theatre in London; Wilde referred to his *Salomé* as 'that tragic daughter of passion' ('To Campbell Dodgson', [postmark 23 Feb. 1893], in *Complete Letters*, 556). He also described his princess as 'a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon',¹⁷⁵ referring not only to the ecstatic Spanish post-Reformation Roman Catholic saint, but also to Flaubert's

¹⁷¹ *Salome*, tr. Douglas, in *Plays*, 710.

¹⁷² Wright (2009: 49).

¹⁷³ See, however, Wright (2009: 49) on the Roman Empire as a parallel for English rule in Ireland in Wilde's thought.

¹⁷⁴ Berners (1934: 53).

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in [Raymond and] Ricketts (1932: 51–2).

Carthaginian virgin priestess of the veiled moon goddess Tanit in his 1862 historical novel set shortly after the First Punic War against pre-Imperial Rome in the third century BC.¹⁷⁶ In *Salomé*, Rome rule can ironically be read as English dominion in Ireland. *Salomé* is the climax of the conflict between pagan Greece and Catholic Rome in Wilde's life and work, which was evident from his Oxford days of ritualistic experimentation and poetry writing.¹⁷⁷ The Roman Church is Christian but also pagan, as its 'No Popery' Protestant detractors insisted. The Western Church's official language is Latin but it also uses Greek in its liturgy, which Wilde, following the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, saw as a modern remnant of ancient tragedy:

[T]he supreme office of the Church [is] the playing of the tragedy without the shedding of blood: the mystical presentation, by means of dialogue and costume and gesture even, of the Passion of her Lord; and it is always a source of pleasure and awe to me to remember that the ultimate survival of the Greek chorus, lost elsewhere to art, is to be found in the servitor answering the priest at Mass. (*De Profundis*, 112; 175; cf. *Complete Letters*, 743)¹⁷⁸

The Catholic Church, whose theology was conceived in the Hellenized eastern Mediterranean, partly preserved Graeco-Roman civilization. In 'The Critic as Artist', Wilde writes that 'the Greek spirit' expired in theology in Alexandria, to which Rome looked for her models rather than Athens (*Criticism*, 144). *Salomé* is set at the margins of the Hellenized Roman world and relegated to passing references in Ross's book, but it lies at the core of my vision of Wilde's reception of classical antiquity.

Goldhill pronounces that 'the shocking *Salomé* [*sic*], now seen almost only in Richard Strauss' white-hot operatic nastiness, is, however biblical, scarcely a demonstration of Greek values and form'.¹⁷⁹ In this thesis, I demonstrate, on the contrary, that *Salomé*'s Hellenic inheritance is an embarrassment of riches. Gilbert Highet points out that Strauss emphasized the grotesqueness of the disputing Jews in his operatic version of *Salomé*,¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁶ On Wilde's *Salomé* and Flaubert's *Salammbô*, see Dierkes-Thrun (2011: 26–30).

¹⁷⁷ See Hanson (1997: ch. 4).

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Mallarmé (1945), *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean-Aubry and Mondor, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 393.

¹⁷⁹ Goldhill (2014: 185).

¹⁸⁰ Highet (1949: 455).

and describes Wilde's biblical play as a dramatization of 'an oriental story from the fringes of the Greek world, in a style of classical restraint'.¹⁸¹ It is surprising, to say the least, that Goldhill, who has written extensively on Strauss' *Elektra* (1909),¹⁸² ignores the Straussian operas' implicit comparison between the House of Herod and that of Atreus. While Strauss's librettist for *Elektra*, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, adapted his 1903 drama of the same name, which was based on Sophocles' tragedy, Salomé's long soliloquy to the head of Iokanaan at the end of Wilde's play recalls that of Electra to the head of Aegisthus in Euripides' tragedy. However, as Ellmann notes: 'Wilde had Aeschylus in mind as much as the Bible' and 'In the tenebrous happenings of *Salome* there are vestiges of the house of Atreus. A sense of doom pervades the play. Iokanaan is like Cassandra, and Salome has some traits of Clytemnestra.'¹⁸³ If anything, Ellmann underestimates the importance of the *Agamemnon* for *Salomé*, as my discussion in Chapter 3 demonstrates. The incest theme in *Salomé*, as represented by Hérode's marriage to Hérodiad, the former wife of his brother whom he has had put to death, and his lust for his stepdaughter, relates Wilde's biblical drama to both Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

It is, however, Euripides' *Bacchae* that lies most closely to the dark heart of *Salomé*. Following the classicist Charles Segal, I see the *Bacchae* as the *fin-de-siècle* tragedy *par excellence*.¹⁸⁴ Like Wilde and his *Salomé*, Euripides and his *Bacchae* teeter at the turn of two centuries. Euripides' highly paracomical tragedy is paradoxically presided over by an Oriental yet Greek god, the gender-b(1)ending liberator of women, who blurs the borders between Hellenic and barbarian, male and female. *Salomé* likewise dissolves lines between Victorian classicism and Decadent modernism, West and East, masculine and feminine, tragedy and comedy, and poetry and prose. In Wilde's Dionysian drama, all these dichotomies—a characteristic of the ancient Greek mind-set—are inverted, turned inside

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 526.

¹⁸² See esp. Goldhill (2002: ch. 3).

¹⁸³ Ellmann (1988: 326).

¹⁸⁴ Segal (1982: 216).

out and upside down. Wilde's abortive *Salomé* looks like the odd play out alongside his hugely successful Society Comedies, but it would be more accurate to say that *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a stray successful comedy among three failed or frustrated tragedies. *Fan* and *Salomé* were both written in 1891, the same year in which Wilde's melodramatic Renaissance revenge tragedy, *The Duchess of Padua*, was finally first performed in New York as *Guido Ferranti*. Wilde had completed *The Duchess* in 1883, the same year in which his first play, *Vera*, another tragic melodrama, received its unenthusiastic première in New York.

Wilde tried in vain to persuade the actor–manager Henry Irving to produce *The Duchess* in London. George Alexander took over the management of the St James's Theatre from Irving in late 1890 and approached Wilde for a play. Although he professed to like *The Duchess*, he decided that the scenery would cost too much, and asked for a play on a modern subject instead.¹⁸⁵ The result was *Fan*, which its author described as 'one of those modern drawing-room plays with pink lampshades'.¹⁸⁶ In a long letter from Paris to the American actress Mary Anderson that accompanied the manuscript of *The Duchess*, Wilde, inspired by Victor Hugo's *Préface* to his determinedly anti-classical *Cromwell* (1827), argued for a drama of the comic and the grotesque and stressed the modernity of the antique: 'the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form,' writes Wilde (23 Mar. 1883, *Complete Letters*, 197). As John Stokes explains, 'modernity here seems to have two inflections. One is political and Hugolian, the modernity of urban poverty [...]. The other kind of modernity is philosophical and Paterian: a modern way of thinking that understands historical development as an evolutionary yet dialectical process.'¹⁸⁷ This Paterian idea of a two-way street between antiquity and modernity maps neatly onto contemporary notions of reception. Unlike ideas of tradition, for example, from

¹⁸⁵ Ellmann (1988: 314).

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Hyde (1988: 2).

¹⁸⁷ Stokes (2005: 146–7).

the Latin *tradere*, which suggests a handing down of material from the past to the present, reception, to reiterate Martindale's words, 'operates with a different temporality, [...] a two-way process, backward as well as forward, in which the present and past are in dialogue with each other'.¹⁸⁸ 'Modernity', like 'beauty', is an indexical term. As Baudelaire says: 'Pour que toute *modernité* soit digne de devenir antiquité, il faut que la beauté mystérieuse que la vie humaine met involontairement en ait été extraite'¹⁸⁹ ('For any "modernity" to be worthy of one day taking its place as antiquity, it is necessary for the mysterious beauty which human life accidentally puts into it to be distilled from it').¹⁹⁰ Wilde was modern in his day; one day nineteenth-century literature will belong to 'antiquity'. In Oxford, I once heard a parish priest of St Aloysius' Catholic Church preach, 'We do not know whether history will look back on us today as the early church.'¹⁹¹

III

Along with *Salomé*, the other major Wildean work that best exhibits the opposition between Graeco-Roman paganism and Judaeo-Christianity is *Dorian Gray*, which can be read as the culmination of a long dialogue between Pater and Wilde. In his privileging of 'the Hellenic ideal' over 'the maladies of mediævalism',¹⁹² the orphaned Dorian Gray's Platonic surrogate father, Lord Henry Wotton, sounds not only like Pater and Wilde himself but also, as Ellis Hanson notes,¹⁹³ like the epigrammatic Mahaffy. It was Mahaffy who invited Wilde to Greece partly in order to prevent his planned pilgrimage to Rome and potential conversion to Catholicism by diverting him 'from Popery to Paganism'.¹⁹⁴ It is a

¹⁸⁸ Martindale (2007: 298).

¹⁸⁹ Baudelaire (1976), *Œuvres complètes*, ii, ed. Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 695.

¹⁹⁰ Tr. Carrier (1996: 73).

¹⁹¹ Wilde heard Cardinal Manning preach at the dedication of St Aloysius' on 23 November 1875. During Wilde's years at Oxford, Gerald Manley Hopkins was an assistant priest there.

¹⁹² *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, iii: 'The Picture of Dorian Gray': *The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Bristow, OET (2005), 21; 183. Where applicable, I refer throughout to both the 1890 and 1891 texts of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* in Bristow's OET edition.

¹⁹³ Hanson (1997: 258).

¹⁹⁴ Mahaffy, letter to his wife (2 Apr. 1877). Quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971: 41).

critical commonplace that although Wilde was an important thinker, he was not an original one, and that he merely popularized without strongly modifying the ideas of his various varsity mentors. However, Denis Donoghue points out in his biography that Pater himself, who ‘was not learned in the history of art or in any of the subjects he took up—Greek myths, English poetry, Greek philosophy’, was not an original *thinker* either: ‘virtually every idea he expressed can be traced to a source in English, French, or German writers. He is a force in the criticism of these subjects because he devised a distinctive style of writing about them: the Pateresque, a new color in the palette.’¹⁹⁵ Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* repeatedly recalls not only *Studies* but also the critical source whom Pater himself continually conjures up, namely, Arnold.

In his 1869 collection of essays, *Culture and Anarchy*, the recently deceased national institution Matthew Arnold had famously paired Hellenism and Hebraism, the ‘two points of influence [between which] moves our world’.¹⁹⁶ Just as for both Baudelaire and Pater antiquity and modernity have no meaning apart from one another, Arnold’s twinned terms ‘Hellenism’ and ‘Hebraism’ are locked into a reciprocal, mutually informing relationship. While Hebraism and Hellenism constitute a conventional dichotomy, conveniently encapsulating a number of polarities, including Jew and Greek, monotheism and paganism, religion and reason, faith and scepticism, sacred and secular, and tradition and innovation, Arnold uses them to denote both a dual historical heritage and two complementary principles. Arnold defines the Hellenic, or ‘critical’, spirit as the ideal ‘To get rid of one’s ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty’ (*Culture and Anarchy*, 130). This spirit he juxtaposes with the contemporary Puritan conscience epitomized by Hebraism. Arnold’s dialectics of Hellenism and Hebraism, and his thinly disguised critical allegiance to the former, animates Pater’s

¹⁹⁵ Donoghue (1995: 139).

¹⁹⁶ Arnold, ‘Hebraism and Hellenism’, in *‘Culture and Anarchy’ and Other Writings*, ed. Collini, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (1993), 126.

account of the creative conflict between the cultures of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For Arnold, Pater, and Wilde, the Renaissance represents the victory of Hellenism over the repressive regime of medieval Christianity. This concept of the Renaissance is framed in opposition to the idealization of the Middle Ages by Ruskin, who is the unspoken antagonist in Pater's book.¹⁹⁷

While Arnold, Pater, and Wilde all sided with the Hellenic or critical spirit—the ability ‘to see things as they are’, that is to say, without religious restraint or political bias—Pater radically revised and Wilde rejected outright the Arnoldian dogma that the object of criticism is ‘to see the object as in itself it really is’.¹⁹⁸ Although Pater begins his ‘Preface’ to *Studies* by restating the famous Arnoldian definition of criticism, he immediately proceeds to modify Arnold's meaning:

‘To see the object as in itself it really is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever; and in æsthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realise it distinctly [...]. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? [...] [T]he picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book [...] are valuable for their virtues, as we say in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, unique, impression of pleasure.¹⁹⁹

For Pater, ‘one's own impression’ is paramount. The critic Roger Kimball alleges that Pater ‘slyly inverts’ Arnold's meaning.²⁰⁰ In T. S. Eliot's 1930 essay ‘Arnold and Pater’, a *locus classicus* for modernism's attack on Victorian Aestheticism, the mature poet and critic is too preoccupied with what he sees moralistically as the insidious unseating of religion by aesthetics to ask why Pater quotes or drastically qualifies the Arnoldian definition.²⁰¹ Moreover, Eliot reduces Wilde to the level of an errant disciple whose deviations from the Paterian line are due to misinterpretation. Wendell V. Harris, conversely, argues that ‘Pater was being neither wilful nor capricious in amending

¹⁹⁷ See Evangelista (2015: 645).

¹⁹⁸ Arnold, ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’, in *Culture and Anarchy*, 26.

¹⁹⁹ Pater, ‘Preface’, in *Studies*, ed. Beaumont, Oxford World's Classics (2010), 3–4.

²⁰⁰ Kimball (1995).

²⁰¹ Eliot (1930).

Arnold's doctrine', but was, rather, merely making explicit what Arnold had already implied in, for instance, his series of public lectures, 'On Translating Homer', which he gave as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1860.

In his second lecture on translating Homer, Arnold compares a translation, F. W. Newman's eccentric 1856 rendering of the *Iliad*, with the original by comparing the *effects* of both, as opposed to each work 'in itself'.²⁰² What is more, Arnold has already urged in his first lecture that the effect of the translation on modern readers cannot be compared with that of the *Iliad* on its original ancient Greek hearers, which is impossible to know.²⁰³ As a result, the correct comparison is between the effect of the original and that of the translation on the modern scholar.²⁰⁴ As Harris explains, 'This is an admission that the same work (object) produces different effects in different ages, and one is further than ever from knowing how to come at the work as in itself it really is.'²⁰⁵ All Pater is doing in his Preface, therefore, is simply acknowledging and accepting the implications of Arnold's position: 'All finally we have as an object of contemplation is the effect, the impression.'²⁰⁶

Whereas Pater's reiterates the Arnoldian definition of criticism in order to revise it, Wilde goes one step further by referencing it only to reverse it in 'The Critic as Artist'. While Arnold is more highly regarded today as a critic than as a poet, in Wilde's essay, which was published in book form in the same year as his novel and is structured as a Platonic dialogue, the author's spokesman, a character named Gilbert, pays a gracious tribute to Arnold's poetry before flatly dismissing his critical theory:

ERNEST I seem to have heard another theory of Criticism.

GILBERT Yes: it has been said by one whose gracious memory we all revere, and the music of whose pipes once lured Proserpina from her Sicilian fields, and made those white feet stir, and not in vain, the Cumnor cowslips, that the proper aim of Criticism is to see the object as in itself it really is. But this is a very serious error, and takes no cognizance of Criticism's most perfect

²⁰² Arnold (1861: 30–64).

²⁰³ Ibid. 3.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 3–4.

²⁰⁵ Harris (1971: 736).

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 738.

form, which is in its essence purely subjective, and seeks to reveal its own secret and not the secret of another. (*Criticism*, 155–6)

Wilde/Gilbert has already said that the critic's sole goal is 'to chronicle his own impressions' (155).

In short, Wilde robustly rejects the Arnoldian assumption that the critic's aim is to see (and describe, and presumably elucidate and evaluate) the work in front of him. For Wilde, it is impossible to see anything as it 'really' is. We cannot see the object—be it a poem or a painting—as its creator saw it, hence we need not be concerned with the artist's intentions (157; *Intentions* is the title that Wilde gave to the essay collection including 'The Critic as Artist'). Following the implications of Arnold's first lecture on translating Homer, Wilde argues that we cannot see the work as its own age saw it—art does not reflect the age, but rather the creative power of the individual (143–4). Whereas Arnold pointed out that the modern critic can never know the effect of the *Iliad* on its original ancient audience, Wilde goes even further by saying that we cannot even necessarily see an object as we saw it the day before (158), evoking Pater's epigraphic use of Plato quoting Socrates quoting Heraclitus' philosophy of flux to open his controversial 'Conclusion' to *Studies*.²⁰⁷

Critics such as Arnold assumed that a poem or painting and its meaning were fixed and external, and expected the educated and qualified reader or viewer, that is, the critic, to offer an objective account that would assist less perceptive or cultivated readers or viewers. They assumed that the work of art was stable, possessing a meaning with which the author had invested it, and that we all, perhaps with the aid of a critic, have the potential to perceive and comprehend this meaning. But Wilde tells us in 'The Critic as Artist' that meaning is as much, or rather more in the eye of the beholder than it is in the creator or in the thing beheld. He refers to well-known purple passages by Ruskin on the landscape painter J. M. W. Turner and by Pater on Leonardo da Vinci's portrait the *Mona Lisa*, whose subject 'is older than the rocks among which she sits' (*Criticism*, 156; cf.

²⁰⁷ On Wilde's use of Heraclitus' philosophy of flux, see Hext (2018).

Studies, 70). Wilde's references to Ruskin and Pater will remind at least some of his readers that they turn to critics such as these, whatever their points of disagreement, for something other than an accurate or purely objective description of an artwork. As Algernon tells his manservant, Lane, on his entrance at the beginning of *Earnest*, 'I don't play accurately—anyone can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression' (5).

Wilde goes on to say in his essay that if Leonardo could have read Pater's words, he probably would have said that he had 'contemplated none of these things, but had concerned himself simply with certain arrangements of lines and masses, and with new and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green' (*Criticism*, 157). Wilde/Gilbert continues:

And it is for this very reason that the criticism which I have quoted is criticism of the highest kind. It does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. (157)

Wilde's proclamation that the purple prose in which Ruskin treats Turner or Pater describes *La Gioconda* has its value completely in its own artistic perfection without reference to accuracy leads to the clear reversal of Arnold's critical theory:

ERNEST The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not; that is your theory, I believe?
GILBERT Yes, that is my theory. To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. (159)

Criticism, according to Wilde, 'treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation' (157), and 'the highest criticism really is [...] the criticism of one's soul' (154).

Wilde closely engages with Arnold in another of the essays in *Intentions*, 'The Decay of Lying'. Wilde, through his mouthpiece, Vivian (Wilde's second son was called Vyvyan; Vivian's interlocutor bears the name of his first son, Cyril), draws on Arnold's delineation of the Hellenic/critical spirit:

Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present,

people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them.²⁰⁸

While such terms as ‘influence’ and ‘effect’ imply passivity on the part of the reader or writer being influenced or affected, ‘reception’, by contrast, at least as conceived by the Constanz school of criticism, involves (Martindale again), ‘the *active* participation of readers’.²⁰⁹ Although reception, despite the work of Jauss, Iser, and others, is still commonly believed to imply passivity, Martindale points out that it did not carry such connotations for Pater, for whom it rather entailed ‘positive receptivity in aesthetic experience, that patient and passionate concentration on the object of attention’—what Pater and Wilde sometimes termed ‘seeing’.²¹⁰ ‘That is one reason’, Martindale remarks, ‘why we need artists from the past as well as the present, to help us *see*.’²¹¹

In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater shows his protagonist undergoing a ‘life of realized consciousness in the present’ that amounts to an ‘aesthetic’ education—‘an education partly negative, as ascertaining the true limits of man’s capacities, but for the most part positive, and directed especially to the expansion and refinement of the power of reception; of those powers, above all, which are immediately relative to fleeting phenomena, the powers of emotion and sense’.²¹² As Martindale comments, Pater’s ‘power of reception’ probably refers to the title of Kant’s Third Critique, *The Critique of the Power (Kraft) of Judgement*: ‘with both Kant and Pater we are dealing with something important that the mind does, or can do, a faculty of cognition, an *active* principle.’²¹³ For both Kant and Pater, aesthetic judgement requires a balance to be struck between passivity and activity, of attentiveness to the object and awareness of self. As James I. Porter points out, the ambiguity of Pater’s ‘active passivity’ is suggested later in Pater’s novel when his

²⁰⁸ Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’, in *Intentions*, in *Criticism*, 95.

²⁰⁹ Martindale (2007: 298).

²¹⁰ Martindale (2013: 173).

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Pater (1986), *Marius*, ed. Small, *The World’s Classics*, 84–5.

²¹³ Martindale (2013: 174).

protagonist's 'seemingly active powers of apprehension' are later revealed to be 'in fact, but susceptibilities to influence' (*Marius*, 179).²¹⁴

Wilde's criticism of Pater's *Marius* in his 'Epistola' seems to suggest that he is overly passive: as a result of his effort to 'reconcile the artistic life with the life of religion', Pater had made his protagonist 'little more than a spectator: an ideal spectator' (*Complete Letters*, 740; *De Profundis*, 109; 173)—a criticism that recalls Wilde's reproach of Pater's personal timidity. In one of his letters to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, Wilde described his Lord Henry Wotton as 'an excellent corrective of the tedious ideal shadowed forth in the semi-theological novels of our age' (26 June [1890], *Complete Letters*, 429), probably a not so thinly veiled jibe at Pater's *Marius*. But, while arguing that his *Dorian Gray* has a moral, 'All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment,' Wilde writes that 'Lord Henry seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it' (430). As I suggest in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the moral of *Dorian Gray* owes much to Tyrrell's ideas about the *Bacchae* in his 1871 edition of the tragedy. Furthermore, Lord Henry, whom Wilde characterizes as a self-destructive 'spectator of life', shares certain similarities with Euripides' Pentheus, who initially rebuffs the new foreign religion and represses his Dionysian instincts but ultimately learns that he cannot watch from the side-lines.

Dionysus' destruction of Pentheus is also evoked by the orphan Dorian's Oedipal murder of his metaphorical maker, the artist Basil Hallward—a literal and symbolic 'death of the author'. In 'The Death of the Author' (1967), Roland Barthes famously transfers agency away from the Author to the reader.²¹⁵ The transition from an older to a newer interpretive mind-set, which views the reader rather than the author as the producer of meaning, could be seen as a shift from a passive to an active process. The interpretive interplay between author, text, and reader is embodied from the beginning of Wilde's

²¹⁴ Porter (2017: 158 and 162 n. 12).

²¹⁵ Barthes (1967).

novel by the Platonic love triangle of the artist, Basil, the subject, Dorian, and the viewer, Lord Henry. As Queensberry and his counsel Carson insinuated in the libel case, dynamics of activity and passivity in literary hermeneutics slide all too easily into erotics. The ‘bad influence’ (*Dorian Gray*, 20; 182) that the anti-Socratic Lord Henry and his ‘yellow book’ (102; 274) apparently have on the protagonist suggested the allegedly immoral influence of Wilde and his Decadent novel on ‘Bosie’ Douglas as well as recalling the supposedly corrosive effect of Pater and his ‘golden book’²¹⁶ on the young up at Oxford. Mahaffy’s purported epigram, ‘It is the spectator and not life that art mirrors,’ ended up in Wilde’s apologetic ‘Preface’ to the book edition of his novel (*Dorian Gray*, 168), and, as we shall see in the next chapter, similarly aphoristic variations on this theme appear not only in the story proper but also in the author’s correspondence with the press and his cross-examinations in court. In a fittingly Wildean ironic reversal, I continually undermine this idea in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis by suggesting that Wilde’s self-consciously narcissistic art does indeed hold up a mirror to his life. Unlike French post-structuralists, I do not believe that a literary work can or should be divorced from its creator. ‘Is there anything *more* affected, aggressive, and relentlessly concrete than a Parisian intellectual behind his/her turgid text,’ asserts the shamelessly intrusive Paglia.²¹⁷

As well as the maverick Mahaffy, Wilde’s innovative-sounding critical notions call to mind the wider contemporary classical scholarly community and the debates within it. The differences between Arnold’s and Wilde’s critical standpoints and the underlying cultural and ideological tensions that they represented can be compared with the opposition between the progressive professorial promoters of professional research and science on the one hand and the conservative guardians of collegiate teaching and the text on the other. These divisions are respectively personified by the *agon*, for example, between Jowett and his erstwhile ally, Mark Pattison, the Rector of Lincoln College, and denoted by the

²¹⁶ Wilde, quoted in Ellmann (1988: 46).

²¹⁷ Paglia (1991: 34).

conflicting emblems of the pen and the spade.²¹⁸ Stray eloquently describes the threat posed by archaeological science to older humanistic assumptions about meaning in aptly rhetorical and transcendental language:

Archaeology stuck a spade into the earth and uncovered the past in the present. It took the classical out of a world of eternal value and located it firmly in time. By offering physical artefacts as evidence in the present, it bypassed the aesthetic and moral communion with the permanent messages of the ancients so valued by the humanists.²¹⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, Max Müller's and Frazer's relativistic theories of comparative religion had emerged against the backdrop of the German biblical criticism advanced by the liberalizing Jowett as well as the atheistic philosophy of Nietzsche. This thesis is centred on the figure or person of the dying god, but it also deals with an abstraction, the death of meaning as a stable and immutable entity, divinely ordained by the author of the universe rather than all too humanly invented by a mortal mind.

Along with the *agon* and inversion, the third main structuring concept of this thesis is mystery. Like Pater's Marius or his own Dorian, Wilde sampled many faiths and philosophies during his life, and held back from entering the Church of Rome (but was eventually received *in extremis*). In his study of Wilde's fairy tales, Jarlath Killeen proposes that the author, like his father and Yeats, adopted a Gnostic stance in relation to his readers, 'whereby knowledge is transmitted from the initiated to acolytes through codes and symbols' that 'operated in some mysterious and magical fashion on the human mind'.²²⁰ As well as Wilde's lifelong attraction to the symbolism and mystery of the Roman Church, his initiation into the Freemason Apollo Lodge at Oxford is relevant to this religious and ritualistic context, as is his wife's membership of spiritualist and Theosophical groups. The place of acolytes in the late nineteenth-century Decadent homosexual imagination is revealed by the popularity of the pederastic pairing of priest and server, which became a cliché of Uranian literature, a century before the clerical sex

²¹⁸ See Stray (1998: 151).

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Killeen (2007: 11).

abuse crisis in the Catholic Church came to public light.²²¹ The most notorious example was John Francis Bloxam's outrageous and poisonous story, 'The Priest and the Acolyte', which appeared in the sole 1894 issue of the Oxford Uranian student publication that he edited, the *Chameleon* (which included Douglas' (in)famous Platonic sonnet 'Two Loves'), and was falsely attributed to Wilde in the Queensberry libel trial (see *Trial*, 41, 61, 68–73, 77, 248, 255–6).

Within this context of literary and religious coding and symbolizing, it would be useful to consider Foucault's *locus classicus* for the late nineteenth-century codification of homosexuality, in which he discusses the discursive shift 'from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul'.²²² Paradoxically, the homosexual's inner self was 'written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away'—an image that conjures up Dorian Gray, fixated on the lines and wrinkles that manifest as if by magic on his sequestered, uncannily altering portrait. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick theorized Foucault's idea of the 'secret that always gave itself away' in her canonical work of queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). In relation to *Dorian Gray* and by extension *De Profundis* and the plays, Sedgwick discusses how Wilde's concept of the male body developed from tensions between classical and Christian traditions, and how the Orientalism in his novel popularized a kind of consumer culture that facilitated mutual recognition for gays in Europe.²²³ To illustrate Sedgwick's ideas, we might consider Dorian's frequenting of Mass, the 'daily sacrifice, more awful really than all the sacrifices of the antique world', with 'the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize' (*Dorian Gray*, 110). The Mass, as we have seen, was for Wilde the sole surviving vestige of Greek tragedy, but it is worth remembering that Christianity in its early years in the Roman

²²¹ See Hanson (1997: 297–311).

²²² Foucault (1978: 43).

²²³ Sedgwick (1990: ch. 3).

Empire was regarded as just one more Eastern mystery religion, and that many nineteenth-century lovers of the classics such as Shelley viewed it as Oriental and barbarous in opposition to European Graeco-Roman paganism.²²⁴ To receive not only applies to aesthetics or sex, but also to liturgy. As Hanson illuminates, the language that Wilde uses to describe his protagonist's attendance at the mystery of the Mass is shot through with images of gay sex—Dorian 'loved to kneel down', the priest's vestment is 'stiff', the tabernacle is unveiled, the monstrance containing the Body of Christ is raised aloft (110–11; 280).²²⁵

A well-known example of a symbolic *fin-de-siècle* 'open secret' is the green carnation, which was an emblem of the Parisian Uranian subculture that Wilde and his young male acolytes wore as buttonholes to the 1892 London première of *Fan*.²²⁶ Green is a colour with multiple meanings, suggesting Decadence, queerness, Frenchness, and Irishness, as well as evoking ancient Roman effeminacy. In the first English medical textbook on homosexuality, Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (originally published in German in 1896; English translation, co-authored with the Oxonian Uranian classicist John Addington Symonds, published in 1897), it is observed:

[I]nverts exhibit a preference for green garments. In Rome *cinædi* were for this reason called *galbanati*. Chevalier remarks that some years ago a band of pederasts at Paris wore green cravats as a badge.²²⁷

Cinaedi are the butt of Juvenal's jibes in his second *Satire*, which the classicist Amy Richlin cites, along with other primary literature, to challenge Foucault's idea of (homo)sexuality as a late nineteenth-century construction. Richlin argues that what we call a 'homosexual' today was in ancient Rome a *cinaedus* or *mollis* ('softy'), a 'male penetrated by choice', characterized by a comparable 'social identity and social burden',

²²⁴ See Highet (1949: 453–69).

²²⁵ Hanson (1997: 249).

²²⁶ See Gagnier (1986: 164).

²²⁷ Ellis (1901: 177).

and as a member of a subculture surrounded by ‘homophobia’.²²⁸ She notes, ‘On the level of the stereotype, certain attributes and styles recur throughout the period as identifying the *mollis* man: lispng speech; putting the hand on the hip, or, more commonly, scratching the head with one finger; use of makeup; depilation; and wearing certain colors, especially light green and sky blue.’²²⁹ These stereotypes sound not only relevant to late Victorian London or *fin-de-siècle* Paris but to us today and so seem to give the impression that sexuality is not exclusively socially constructed and historically contingent. In relation, for instance, to colour in antiquity, we have already seen Wilde, perhaps ironically, refer to da Vinci’s ‘new and curious colour-harmonies of blue and green’.

As we shall see in the next chapter, badges and emblems of sexual identity play their part in the prologue of Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* (*Women at the Thesmophoria*), where Euripides’ unnamed relative claims to have trouble identifying the sex of the transvestite tragic poet Agathon, who is surrounded by both male and female theatrical props and accessories. Wilde (was) identified with Agathon, notably in the pseudonymous undergraduate parodic play *Aristophanes at Oxford: O. W.*, written by ‘Y. T. O.’ and published in 1894, the same year as the publication of Robert Hitchens’s novel, *The Green Carnation*, which parodied the open secret of Wilde’s relationship with Douglas. As Thomas Prasch writes, these and the intensifying number of other Wildean parodies of 1894 suggest that the homosexual ‘panic’ that Sedgwick identifies with the public humiliation of the Wilde trials was already in operation before the author’s arrest.²³⁰

²²⁸ Richlin (1993: 530).

²²⁹ Ibid. 542.

²³⁰ Prasch (2012: 247). See Sedgwick (1985: 94–5, 216–7).

Oscar Agonistes: ‘MR OSCAR WILDE’S BAD CASE’

Prologue

Wilde’s famous Platonic apologia for ‘the Love that dare not speak its name’ is the most popular point of discussion from the Wilde trials in terms of classical reception. In this chapter, I explore the *agon* between the homoerotic aestheticism epitomized by Wilde and its conservative heteronormative opposition represented by Queensberry. The alliances made between these two factions and ancient authors will provide the lens for the discussion: Euripides and Plato are enlisted on the side of homoerotic aestheticism; and Aristophanes is here allied with Queensberry’s heteronormative conservatism.

Wilde’s Platonism has traditionally been treated in the context of scholarly philosophical study at Oxford after the mid-nineteenth-century curriculum reforms, and the resulting b(l)ooming Uranian literary subculture. I take the discussion beyond the cloisters into the bright, very recently installed electric lights of the West End theatre world. Wilde has frequently been identified with Gilbert and Sullivan’s poet–Aesthete Bunthorne in the comic opera *Patience* (1881), who nurtures ‘an attachment *à la* Plato’¹ and was associated with Swinburnian Euripidean New Hellenism from the operetta’s first night. The librettist W. S. Gilbert has been considered to belong to the Aristophanic tradition of musical comedy, and *Patience* in turn informed the first revival of Aristophanes at Oxford, the highly successful 1892 University Dramatic Society production of *Frogs*. Both these ancient and modern musical comedies provided inspiration for two plays in which Wilde appears as a comic Euripidean caricature in the Aristophanic vein, Tom Stoppard’s *The Invention of Love* (1997) and a pseudonymous undergraduate parody, Y. T. O.’s

¹ Gilbert and Sullivan (2014), *Patience*, 18.

Aristophanes at Oxford: O. W. (1894), which also draws on Aristophanes’

Thesmophoriazusae and *Clouds*.

I propose *Thesmophoriazusae* and *Clouds* as well as the Euripidean tragedy that closely engages with the former comedy, the *Bacchae*, as revealing lenses through which to read Wilde’s defence of his art and writings in the Queensberry libel trial, his correspondence with the press, his ‘Preface’ to the 1891 book edition of *Dorian Gray*, and elsewhere. Wilde inverts the traditional power dynamic of reading by transferring agency away from the creator to the (hypo)critical *lecteur* in a way that prefigures contemporary thinking about literary reception.

I. From ‘Greek Love’ to ‘Gross Indecency’

In June 1894, the pugnacious Queensberry had attempted to settle his score with Wilde by appearing unannounced at the author’s house in Tite Street, Chelsea, accompanied by a prize-fighter, and threatening to thrash Wilde if he ever saw him again in a public restaurant with Douglas. When Wilde asked ‘the screaming, scarlet Marquis’ (as he used to call him) whether he was accusing him and his son of ‘improper conduct’, Queensberry answered, ‘I don’t say you are it, but you look it and pose it, which is just as bad.’ The marquess had had to be barred from the premises, but not before the man of the house had delivered his famous rejoinder, ‘I don’t know what the Queensberry rules are, but the Oscar Wilde rule is to shoot at sight.’² Two decades ago at Oxford, the undergraduate Wilde had also shown himself to be more than just a dreamy and effete ‘fleshly poet’ or ‘aesthetic sham’, à la W. S. Gilbert’s Reginald Bunthorne (identified as Wilde, Whistler, and Pater, *inter alios*) in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience* (3, 17), which opened at London’s Opera Comique on 23 April 1881 before transferring to the Savoy Theatre on 10 October. Wilde had furnished his accommodation at Magdalen College in the Aesthetic

² Quoted in Pearson (1946: 272–3); (1979: 235–6). Cf. Holland (2003a: xvii, xviii–xix).

style, subsequently parodied in *Patience* and, more pointedly, in the equally satirical magazine *Punch* (1880). The student–Aesthete had spent his allowance filling his rooms with ‘Pre-Raphaelite lilies’ and ‘exquisite objects’, including ‘Tanagra statuettes brought back from Greece, Greek rugs’, as well as the blue china that he (in)famously found ‘harder and harder every day to live up to’.³ Sir Frank Benson, the star of the groundbreaking Balliol *Agamemnon* of 1880 (the first Oxbridge Greek play) and subsequent actor–manager, recalled the spectacle of Wilde making short work of members of the Junior Common Room at Magdalen who had tried to smash his prized furniture: ‘So far from being a flabby aesthete, there was only one man in the college, and he rowed seven in the Varsity Eight, who had the ghost of a chance in a tussle with Wilde.’⁴ E. H. Mikhail concludes the heroic tale: ‘The party ended at dawn with the athletes sitting at Oscar’s feet listening to his stories, like the animals enchanted by the music of Orpheus.’⁵

On the triumphant opening night of Wilde’s *pièce de résistance*, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (St Valentine’s Day, 1895) at the St James’s Theatre, exactly a fortnight after the première of *An Ideal Husband* at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, Queensberry had failed to gain access to the St James’s and denounce the playwright publicly from the stage. The marquess had been stopped at the door bearing a bouquet not of flowers but rotten vegetables—perhaps inspired by Bunthorne’s Act I recitative and solo (‘Am I alone and unobserved’) in *Patience*, where the poet–Aesthete confesses to a ‘vegetable love’:

Then a sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion must excite your languid spleen,
 An attachment *à la* Plato for a bashful young potato, or a not-too-French French bean!
 Though the Philistines may jostle, you will rank as an apostle in the high aesthetic band,
 If you walk down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your mediaeval hand.
 And every one will say,
 As you walk your flowery way,
 ‘If he’s content with a vegetable love which would certainly not suit *me*,
 Why, what a most particularly pure young man this pure young man must be!’ (*Patience*, 18)

³ See Ellmann (1988: 43, 84).

⁴ Benson (1979: 27).

⁵ Mikhail (1979a: xx).

Gilbert mocks the Aesthetic movement's nostalgic longing for the past ('the very dull old days'; 18). However, Aesthetic revivalist tastes are not restricted to archaic poetic diction or vintage self-adornment. The exquisites' interest in history is not exclusively academic, as is insinuated. 'An attachment *à la* Plato' appears to have originally been an oblique allusion to the Aesthetes' sexlessness, their 'vegetable love', as opposed to the 'red meat' of carnal heterosexual relations. The subtitle of the Savoy opera, *Bunthorne's Bride*, turns out to be something of a smokescreen, since, in the end, 'Nobody', and not the eponymous village milkmaid Patience, will be Bunthorne's bride. What is more, Bunthorne is unique among the male characters of the operetta in winding up without a bride. The poseur poet is compelled to turn for consolation to his lily, the same affectation he has earlier admitted adopting only out of a 'morbid love of admiration' (18). Nevertheless, although Gilbert links Aestheticism with asexuality, Carolyn Williams writes that 'by the late 1880s, a popular association of *Patience* with male homosexuality had emerged', whilst the identification of Bunthorne with Wilde had become fixed.⁶ Knowing in hindsight that less than fifteen years separate the première of the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera and the Wilde trials, Bunthorne's exclusion from the pageant of multiple marriages at the end of *Patience* strikes an unsettling note: in retrospect, it is difficult not to see the poet's differentiation in a punitive (lime)light, as his Aestheticism seems to go hand in hand with a sexuality that was becoming increasingly identifiable and troublesome in this period.⁷

⁶ Williams (2011: 170–1).

⁷ Bunthorne sounds like a not-too-distant relation of Bunbury, Algernon's invented 'imaginary permanent invalid' friend in *Earnest* (14). In supposed retaliation for Gilbert's caricature of him in *Patience*, Wilde has his two young 'Bunburying' dandies in *Earnest* 'whistle some dreadful popular air from a British opera' (80). While Bunthorne is a confirmed bachelor, Jack and Algy are 'confirmed and secret' Bunburyists (*Earnest*, 13). Alan Sinfield (1994: 34) has argued against an anal reading of Bunbury—bun, he points out, 'does not mean "buttock" in English slang dictionaries before 1984'. Nevertheless, the eponymous pun 'Earnest/Ernest' is also believed to pun on 'Uranian' or 'Uranist', which, as we shall see above, is derived from Plato's *Symposium*, via the works of the German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.

Nicholas Freeman's nifty detective work has revealed that there was a classicist called Sir Edward Bunbury, also a Whig MP during the 1840s and an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, whose obituary appeared a few days before the Queensberry trial in the *Athenaeum*. If 'bunburying' was a homosexual euphemism in *Earnest*, as some maintain, then the death of Bunbury before the opening of the libel case was a potentially ominous sign that may have given the superstitious Wilde cause to pause. See Freeman (2011: 96). As Ellmann (1988: 360–1) suggests, the playwright's preoccupation with dire portents may have been partly inspired by Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

The popular re-identification of Aestheticism with male homoeroticism coincides with the scholarly realignment of ‘Platonic love’ with male homosexuality by Plato’s ‘Uranian’ promoters at Oxford, in particular Pater at Brasenose and John Addington Symonds (formerly) of Magdalen, two of Wilde’s intellectual idols as an undergraduate, as well as his forerunners in terms of (homo)sexual indiscretions.⁸ As part of the mid-century reforms to the Oxford Greats course, substantial portions of Plato were added to the syllabus due to the efforts of campaigners for change, chief among whom was Jowett at Balliol, the standard-bearer for Platonism in Britain.⁹ Although it was a running joke that Jowett’s ‘Broad Church’ Anglicanism owed more to Plato than the Bible, his liberalism, as the introductory essays to his canonical translations of the Platonic dialogues make clear, did not extend to sexual ethics,¹⁰ in marked contrast to his student and collaborator Symonds, an early, under-the-radar advocate of homosexual law reform.

An unforeseen consequence of Plato’s Oxonian apotheosis was the flowering of a ‘Uranian’ literary subculture, named after the Platonic Pausanias’ Aphrodite Ourania (‘Heavenly Aphrodite’), the goddess of ‘celestial’, male homosexual love (see Pl., *Symposium*, 180d, 181c). Modern life at Oxford began to reflect ancient literature, as élite, exclusive groups of educated men exchanged learned classical allusions on homoerotic themes while dining, drinking, and carousing in convivial sympotic settings.¹¹ The ‘New Hellenism’ of Pater, Symonds, and their successors such as Wilde encouraged a heightened homoerotic awareness and an increased homosexual visibility that repeatedly erupted in open controversies and scandals, spilling out of the cloisters and onto the gardens of Oxford from the tail end of the 1870s (when Wilde went down), as Dowling has demonstrated and Stoppard has dramatized in *The Invention of Love* (1997).¹²

⁸ See Dowling (1994: 91, 100–2); Blanshard (2010: 146).

⁹ Blanshard (2010: 143–4).

¹⁰ Ibid. 144.

¹¹ Ibid. 145–6.

¹² Dowling (1994: 104–54).

Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, the title of which alludes to Aristophanes' aetiological encomium of the love-god Eros in Plato's *Symposium*, represents the historical emergence of the homosexual in the late nineteenth century by opposing Wilde with his fellow classicist and poet A. E. Housman, the play's protagonist. Act One of Stoppard's play opens with a seventy-seven-year-old Housman, or 'AEH' as he is referred to, waiting to cross the River Styx as Charon, the mythical ferryman of the dead, approaches. Charon has instructions to pick up '[a] poet and a scholar'; AEH informs him that he is both.¹³ Charon, however, awaits another passenger, despite Housman's assurances that no other passenger will show up, certain that he is both the poet and scholar in question. At the end of the play, Wilde arrives in Hades, vindicating the boatman of the Underworld.

Looking back at Housman's youth, the first act of Stoppard's agonistically structured drama takes place for the most part in Golden Age Oxford, when both Wilde and Housman were up—a period of internecine strife between the Aesthetes and the 'hairshirts', the neo-pagans and the neo-Christians, who represent respectively the revived ethics of classical antiquity and the new nineteenth-century moral orthodoxy. As Rattigan could only imply about his classics master, Andrew Crocker-Harris, in *The Browning Version* (1948), Housman's life is painfully divided as a result of the Victorian institutional cognitive dissonance in relation to 'Greek love', which is openly discussed but only legitimized as part of a good classical education. While Housman leads a conventional public life as a classical textual scholar, in private he is a poet and a closeted homosexual. Although Wilde does not physically figure in the first act of *Invention*, he is, fittingly, talked about. At one point, a chorus of croquet-playing dons, including Jowett, Pater, and Ruskin, gossip about the new student (17–8). Stoppard thus dramatizes Wilde's gradual public emergence, as well as that of the homosexual in general.

¹³ Stoppard (1997), *Invention*, 4.

Wilde emerges more fully in the second half of *Invention* as a foil for Housman. Whereas Housman is reticent, private, and in the closet, Wilde is outspoken, public, and ‘out’. Housman sublimates his sexual desires in his poetry and classical scholarship, in contrast to Wilde, who flaunts his sexuality by flamboyantly living out the ardent gospel of Pater’s Aesthetic movement. While Housman looks to the past in his poetry and scholarship, Wilde looks to the future, conscious of his position at the crossroads of historical change at the turn of the century. Stoppard, assuming the authorial persona of *De Profundis*, has his Wilde declare, ‘I lived at the turning point of the world when everything was waking up new—the New Drama, the New Novel, New Journalism, New Hedonism, New Paganism, even the New Woman’ (*Invention*, 99–100).

Modernity—historical, aesthetic, technological—is represented in *Invention* by the production of *Patience* at the Savoy Theatre, the first of its kind in the world to be lit entirely by electric light. The Savoy Opera features in the second act of Stoppard’s drama as a play-within-a play, attended by Housman together with Moses (‘Mo’) Jackson, the friend for whom the protagonist bears a ‘Love that dare not speak its name’. Jackson, a practical, manly man, an athlete, and an engineer, acts as another foil for Housman. In *Invention*, the actor playing Wilde doubles up as Bunthorne, who appears in the snippet of *Patience* singing a snatch of the poet–Aesthete’s patter song. Waiting for the train after the performance, Housman and Jackson share their humorously polarized responses:

JACKSON Wasn’t it magnificent? A landmark, Hous!

HOUSMAN I thought it was ... quite jolly ...

JACKSON Quite jolly? It was a watershed! D’Oyly Carte has made the theatre *modern*.

HOUSMAN (*surprised*) You mean Gilbert and Sullivan?

JACKSON What? No. No, the *theatre*. [...] The first theatre lit entirely by electricity! [...] D’Oyly Carte’s new Savoy is a triumph.

HOUSMAN ... You’re the only London theatre critic worthy of the name. ‘The new electrified Savoy is a triumph. The contemptible flickering gaslit St James’s [...] the murky malodorous Haymarket [...].’

JACKSON But it was exciting, wasn’t it, Hous? Every age thinks it’s the modern age, but this one really is. Electricity is going to change everything. Everything! (55–6)

Stoppard uses light symbolically to contrast Wilde, who sheds a new, brighter light on sexuality, with Housman, who wants to keep his hidden under a bushel. Despite this rather

obvious symbolism, Jackson's outlook on light is amusingly functional. While Jackson's narrowly utilitarian perspective is initially meant to be naïvely endearing, it takes a negative turn when Jackson rejects Housman and disparagingly asks, in relation to Wilde, 'what's he ever *done*?' (59), sounding remarkably like the heartless philistine characters of Wilde's fairy tales. In his narrow-minded, anti-Aesthetic, and homophobic attitude, Stoppard's Jackson corresponds to the equally sporty Queensberry. Housman and Wilde, then, are aligned as well as juxtaposed. Jackson is more explicitly linked in *Invention* with Labouchere, the pragmatic, middlebrow politician and legislator. Jealously reacting to D'Oyly Carte's promotion of Wilde in America, Labouchere echoes Jackson: 'Oscar himself has never *done* anything' (61).

Stoppard's use of Wilde and/as Bunthorne in *Invention* not only recalls *Patience* but also the comedy of Aristophanes, as well as Aristophanes' late Victorian imitators, champions, and spiritual descendants, among whom could be counted Gilbert. Wilde appears as a character in *Aristophanes at Oxford: O. W.*, a comic, classically inspired play in blank verse, published in 1894 under the *nom de plume* 'Y. T. O.' The initials Y. T. O. stood for the last letters in the surnames of the play's three undergraduate authors, Leopold Amery, Francis Hirst, and Henry Cruso. As Edith Hall has observed, *Aristophanes at Oxford* takes bits and pieces from several Aristophanic comedies, with *Frogs* and *Clouds* being the most in evidence.¹⁴

In '[t]he rambling plot'¹⁵ of this 'rollicking undergraduate romp',¹⁶ a pair of Oxford students happen upon Socrates, Aristotle, and Thucydides, who have recently run away from Hades, during a punting expedition on the River Cherwell. The students do not appreciate being badgered by the 'Greats' while at play and so 'devise some noble plan | To rid us of these god-forsaken ancients'.¹⁷ Eventually, the students hail the highly

¹⁴ Hall (2007: 90 n. 87).

¹⁵ Kingston (2007: 121).

¹⁶ Prash (2012: 464).

¹⁷ Y. T. O. ([1894]), *Aristophanes*, 11.

anticipated arrival of their saviour and prospective co-conspirator, ‘Maecenas redivivus! Mark the pose, | The great green tie, and Oriental state!’ (*Aristophanes*, 18). ‘O. W.’ makes a spectacular, show-stopping, all-singing, all-smoking entrance that simultaneously imitates Agathon’s monody in *Thesmophoriazusae* and the parody of Euripidean monody and Dionysus’ rowing scene in *Frogs*,¹⁸ as well as Enobarbus’ description of Cleopatra’s barge on the River Cydnus in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* (II. II. 197–225). O. W. is envisaged ‘*in a canoe*’, described by the character himself as a ‘fairy skiff’, which is ‘*illuminated by the spirit-lamp hung in the bows*’ (18)—the first of many digs at the *Spirit Lamp*, the Uranian Oxford student publication edited by Douglas, which was succeeded by Bloxam’s *Chameleon* and to which Wilde contributed.¹⁹ Wilde is ‘*reclining on cushions, smoking a gold-tipped cigarette and occasionally idly paddling; and sings*’ (18).

Suitably enough, given its rowing-related scenario, the undergraduate send-up of Wilde was originally written as a standard piece of ‘light literature’ for Eights Week (*Aristophanes*, vi), also known as Summer Eights, the main intercollegiate regatta in the University calendar.²⁰ So, instead of a dramatic festival, a series of rowing races provided the competitive context for this classical mock-up. At the end of Stoppard’s *Invention*, Wilde makes his long-awaited appearance in person to be ferried across the Styx by Charon. The river that flows through Stoppard’s play connects Hades to the Oxford of Housman’s youth, and the Cherwell is similarly connected to the Styx in *Aristophanes*. While the common source for the two plays is undoubtedly Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, the parallel is striking.

In *Aristophanes*, O. W. is associated in a number of ways with the Agathon of the *Thesmophoriazusae*—a parallel that is highly pertinent for a variety of reasons. Wilde could also be said to have encouraged a comparison between himself and the tragic poet,

¹⁸ Hall (2007: 90 n. 87).

¹⁹ For other references to the *Spirit Lamp*, see *Aristophanes*, 36, 40, 64, 71–2.

²⁰ Nevertheless, ‘There is no record of *Aristophanes at Oxford* ever being performed’ (Kingston 2007: 121).

whom he seems to have seen as something of a kindred youthfully flowery *fin-de-siècle* spirit. In his part of the anonymous composite 1880 review for the *Athenaeum* of the entry for ‘Greece’ that R. C. Jebb had contributed to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Wilde took the then Glasgow Professor Greek to task for omitting not only Menander, whose New Comedy is an ancestor of Wilde’s Society Comedy,²¹ but also Agathon, ‘whose play of “The Flower” formed a remarkable era in the development of the Greek drama, and whose picture as the æsthetic poet of the Periclean age is handed down to us in such brilliant colours by both Plato and Aristophanes’ (*Journalism*, i, 22). Wilde would have been familiar with the lost tragedian and his reputation through his reading of Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* and Plato, whose *Symposium* is set *chez* Agathon, who may have just won the *grand prix* for his intriguingly titled play *The Flower* (*Anthos* or *Antheus*) at the City Dionysia.²² In addition, Wilde would have come across Agathon through his study of the standard editions of dramatic fragments by Nauck, Meineke, and others.²³

In *Invention*, Stoppard’s Wilde self-aggrandizingly associates himself with the New This, That, or The Other, and in the *Thesmophoriazusae* Aristophanes’ Agathon embodies the Euripidean New Music. As Thomas Prasch has written, the recovery of Euripides by Aesthetes such as Pater and Wilde coincided with the New Hellenist revival of Plato.²⁴ To the encroaching homoeroticism of Platonic New Hellenism, Prasch has argued that ‘recourse to the more conservative comedy of Aristophanes provided a natural riposte’.²⁵ Prasch’s claim relates to *Aristophanes at Oxford*. In the prologue of *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon is the butt of a constant stream of sodomy jokes put into the mouths of Euripides and his relative. In their preface to *Aristophanes*, Y. T. O. pointedly mention that Wilde attracts crowds of adoring young and beautiful male acolytes. Although their freedom to offend was more circumscribed than their model’s, the authors of *Aristophanes* clarify

²¹ On Wilde and Menander, see Ross (2013); Witzke (2013), (2014a).

²² Zeitlin (1996: 372).

²³ Wright (2016: 89).

²⁴ Prasch (2012: 467).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

their failure to make their satirical target's personal acquaintance with a somewhat Aristophanic piece of innuendo, which makes a link between Hellenism and homoeroticism through a classical allusion: the authors explain that they have never 'seen anything more of him than a distant back-view, and even that obscured by a throng of admiring Adonises' (vi).

Just as Bunthorne's 'vegetable love' is signalled by his lily, the sexual identities of O. W. in *Aristophanes* and Agathon in *Thesmophoriazusae* are constituted through props as well as colour. The references to O. W.'s 'Oriental state' and his 'gold-tipped cigarette' recall Sedgwick's ideas about 'Wilde's gay-affirming and gay-occluding orientalism' in *Dorian Gray*, which with its 'commodity-based orientalism' and its entanglement in the opium traffic discourse 'accomplished for its period the performative work of enabling a European community of gay mutual recognition and self-constitution'.²⁶ Parker has compared Agathon's song in the *Thesmophoriazusae* to a fragment in ionics, attributed to Sappho (*PLF* 140), concerning the Oriental cult of Adonis.²⁷ Euripides' relative claims to be confused by Agathon's disorienting array of both male and female accessories, and so is supposedly unable to discern the tragic poet's sexual identity. Among this androgynous assortment of accoutrements, the cross-dressed Agathon appears to be wearing a saffron-coloured gown (*krokōtos*; *Ar., Thesm.*, 138), a woman's most attractive garment, usually reserved for special occasions such as religious festivals and possibly associated with prostitutes and their divine patroness, Aphrodite.²⁸ The yellow-coloured dress thus contributes to the depiction of the house of Agathon as a harlot's house. In the preface to their play, Y. T. O. profess 'an honest dislike for *Dorian Gray*, *Salome*, the *Yellow Book*, and the whole of the erotic, lack-a-daisical, opium-cigarette literature of the day' (vi).

Yellow was the colour of the cover of not only the notorious 1890s London literary

²⁶ Sedgwick (1990: 173). Prash (2012: 467) notes that Y. T. O.'s depiction of O. W. corresponds to Sedgwick's contention that male homosexuality at this time was being conflated into an image of the decadent aristocrat associated with the Gothic. See Sedgwick (1985: 94–5, 216–7).

²⁷ Parker (1997: 403).

²⁸ See McClure (1999: 224).

periodical but also of French Decadent novels.²⁹ As we shall see later in this chapter, Lord Henry Wotton's 'poisonous' book that Dorian alleges has had such a malign influence on him is also yellow and recalls the corrupting effect that Pater's 'golden book', *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, supposedly had on the youth up at Oxford.³⁰ As was already discussed in the Introduction, the colours blue and green have historically been associated with homosexuality. As Stokes writes, colour was of integral importance to the aesthetic that Wilde and others adopted from Gautier and the Romantics: 'Not only did the late nineteenth century think a lot about colour, it actually thought *through* colour.'³¹ Although green is significant, it is not unique: yellow and, as we shall see in Chapter 3, purple assumed special significance in the 1890s.

Prasch could just as easily have illustrated the idea of Aristophanes as a classical model for embattled late Victorian male sexual conservatives with *Patience*. After all, Gilbert has deservedly been called the 'English Aristophanes' or the 'mid-Victorian Aristophanes'.³² Gilbert's association of food and sex in Bunthorne's 'vegetable love' is as old as Old Comedy. The name and character of the titular *Patience* evokes the eponymous female personification of Aristophanes' *Peace* and her equally beautiful companions, *Festival* and *Harvest*; both Gilbert's comic opera and the Aristophanic comedy end with marriage celebrations involving these female figures. Gilbert's Aesthetic Maidens call to mind Aristophanes' Chorus of eponymous *Cloud-Maidens*. A translation of one of the *Cloud-Maidens'* choral odes was Wilde's first published work, which appeared in 1875, while the budding poet was an Oxford undergraduate, in the Trinity College Dublin classical miscellany *Kottabos* (named after the game played at ancient Greek symposia)—a

²⁹ When Wilde was arrested at the Cadogan Hotel in London on 5 April 1895, he was reported to have been taken away, 'YELLOW BOOK UNDER HIS ARM'. The public assumed the 'yellow book' in question to be the *Yellow Book* quarterly, but one (evidently apocryphal) legend had it that the volume was 'actually' the naughty 1896 French novel *Aphrodite*, tellingly subtitled '*mœurs antiques*' ('ancient morals'), by Pierre Louÿs, to whom Wilde had dedicated the original, 1893 French-language edition of *Salomé*. See Hyde (1962: 154 n. 1).

³⁰ Wilde, quoted in Ellmann (1988: 46).

³¹ Stokes (2005: 147).

³² Sichel (1970); Hamilton (1970).

rendering that was described as ‘not at all bad’ by no less than the textual critic Housman.³³

The relationship between Aristophanes and Gilbert has worked both ways. *Patience* evidently inspired the highly successful 1892 Oxford University Dramatic Society production of *Frogs*, the first Aristophanic revival at the University. The ‘Euripides’ in the OUDS *Frogs* was apparently played in the Aesthetic mould: the *Athenaeum* commented that ‘the whole bearing of Euripides [...] revived the fading memory of Bunthorne’, while *Temple Bar* described the tragic poet as a ‘lily-loving æsthete’.³⁴ Colour also played a part in the representation of the comedy’s *agon* between the two tragedians, which is said to have opposed a ‘refined, effeminate latter-day Euripides’ in pink and green and an ‘antique, massive, virile Æschylus’ in grey and brown.³⁵ The *Academy* also picked up on the juxtaposition between the ‘rugged vigour of Aeschylus and the mincing refinement of Euripides’.³⁶ Aristophanes’ own poetic preference is made clear when he has his protagonist, Dionysus, the god of theatre, who is judging the tragic contest, bring back Aeschylus instead of Euripides (as he had originally intended) from Hades at the close of the comedy. As well as Aristophanes himself, the elder, archaic Aristophanic Aeschylus provides an obvious classical role model for Queensberry against the younger, self-consciously New, smart-alec Euripidean Wilde.

Queensberry, at last, declared his war of (written) words on Wilde by leaving his offensive visiting card at the Albemarle Club four days after *Earnest*’s first night. When the marquess handed his ‘hideous’ message to the hall porter at the Albemarle (‘To Robert Ross’, [28 Feb. 1895], in *Complete Letters*, 634), Wilde had two hit shows playing to packed houses in the West End. Wilde was at the peak of his creative powers and public celebrity when he took the self-destructive decision to sue Queensberry for libel. While

³³ ‘To A. W. Pollard’ (25 Oct. 1890), in *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, i, ed. Burnett (2007), 67.

³⁴ Quoted in Wrigley (2007: 147).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Wilde had no trouble physically defending himself in his London home or in his Oxford rooms, the celebrated conversationalist must have felt more at ease in the Old Bailey courtroom, dealing in his stock-in-trade: words, especially the spoken word. Wilde was not only the talk of the town but could also talk for the town. The playwright treated the libel trial as a theatrical performance, a showcase for his rapier wit and flamboyant persona. A veteran journalist, he certainly knew what would make good copy for the assembled press corps and, consequently, notched up an impressive number of column inches.

Wilde's classical studies in his native Ireland and adoptive England would have prepared him well for his (cross-)examinations in court: Athenian drama, the Platonic dialogues, and the law-court speeches of the orators—all agonistic, oral texts—were cornerstones of the Oxford Greats course. Wilde complained to his friend and fellow Classical Demy William ('Bouncer') Ward, who had left Oxford in 1876 (two years before Wilde), 'there is no *intellectual friction to rouse me up to talk or think*, as I used when with you' ([week ending 3 Mar. 1877], *Complete Letters*, 40). Modern Freudian and post-Freudian commentators have viewed Wilde's conversation as a form of aggression, dominating the dining rooms of London, or of seduction, making love to listeners rather than sexual partners.³⁷ Conversational competitiveness and seductiveness are, of course, put on dazzling display in the Platonic *Symposium*.

Plato's *Symposium* takes place *apud Agathonem*, but it is the Aristophanic not the Platonic tragic playwright who provides a more intriguing parallel for Wilde and his oral talents. Wilde's oral fixation manifested itself not only in his penchants for talking, dining, and smoking, but also in a predilection for fellatio,³⁸ and Aristophanes associates Agathon's rhetorical facility with oral sex in the *Thesmophoriazusae* (57). Laura McClure comments that Agathon's 'avoidance of any type of obscenity' marks him out as

³⁷ Dowling (2001: xv).

³⁸ McKenna (2003: 249).

effeminate in the context of Aristophanic comedy.³⁹ Ross speculates that obscenity might have been an aspect of Aristophanes' comedy that offended Wilde's temperament.⁴⁰ As is clear from his *Society Comedies*, Wilde was more at home with the mannered New Comedy of Menander and his descendants than with the Old Comedy of Aristophanes. Most of the obscure words that Wilde copied down in his Greek comic fragments notebooks were not sexual or scatological in nature but were, instead, related to that other, closely connected, category of bodily appetites and functions in comedy, namely, food.⁴¹ Pearson, reports that Wilde was repelled by the 'excremental terminology' of the Irish writer George Moore,⁴² and Douglas recalled that he never heard Wilde utter 'a coarse or indelicate allusion' and that when they 'were in the society of men who were apt to [...] indulge in Rabelaisian conversation Wilde was eagerly careful to turn or suppress the talk'.⁴³ Wilde's Oxford friend, David ('Dunsky') Hunter Blair, stressed that there was nothing indecorous about Wilde's conversation or action.⁴⁴ At any rate, in the drama of Wilde's life, the foul-mouthed, homophobic Aristophanic male was represented by Queensberry.

Although Queensberry would probably have preferred to fight a duel, the marquess was able, through his private detectives, his 'plea of justification', and his defence counsel Edward Carson, ultimately to beat Wilde at his own game in the libel trial. For a day, Wilde was in his element holding court and holding forth on his life and art, but fatally allowed himself to be lulled into a false sense of security and was then caught stunningly off guard. Wilde did his best to sidestep Carson's increasingly personal line of questioning with his nimble, fleet-footed wit. The epigram, Greek in origin, was Wilde's calling card and the building block of his speech. S. I. Salamensky writes with appropriate paradox,

³⁹ McClure (1999: 226).

⁴⁰ Ross (2013: 175).

⁴¹ See Ross (2013: 175).

⁴² Pearson (1946: 162).

⁴³ Douglas (1914: 88–9).

⁴⁴ Hunter Blair (1939: 121).

‘Chatty repartee seems further from Wilde’s classical background than his poetry or essays or his biblical tragedy *Salomé*, yet in some sense it may be the closest.’⁴⁵ When asked by Carson about the young servant Walter Grainger at Douglas’s lodgings in Oxford, ‘Did you ever kiss him?’, Wilde unthinkingly replied, ‘Oh, no, never in my life; he was a peculiarly plain boy.’⁴⁶ Wilde had hoisted himself by his own petard. Wilde, having lost his footing, never fully recovered his balance. On the advice of his counsel, he withdrew from the prosecution the following day. Even high-minded, impassioned Platonic apologies could not save him from prison.

Wilde, who died five years after the trials in 1900, has often been considered as a Janus-like cultural figure, living in one century but looking to the next. However, Wilde’s famous, euphonious defence of the ‘Love that dare not speak its name’ in the first of his two trials against the Crown after the abortive libel action shows that while one foot was stepping forwards, the other was firmly rooted in the past, including the ancient past:

‘The love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. [...] It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the ‘Love that dare not speak its name’, and on account of it I am placed where I am now. It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it. It is intellectual.⁴⁷

The divisiveness of the defendant’s speech was, according to Hyde’s account, indicated by ‘a spontaneous outburst of applause from the public gallery, mingled with some hisses’.⁴⁸

As Dowling writes, ‘Wilde’s evocation of Plato and Greek philosophy signals not some unproblematic triumph of modernity over the past’, but rather a moment in which the new, or contemporary, or modern is born through some transmutation of the old, or ancient, or archaic.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Salamensky (2012: 108).

⁴⁶ *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Holland (2003), 207.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 201).

⁴⁸ Hyde (1962: 201).

⁴⁹ Dowling (1994: 4).

While the undergraduate writing to Symonds that everyone in Oxford was penning *apologiai hyper paiderastias* ('defences of pederasty') might have been (only slightly) exaggerating,⁵⁰ the claim reveals that the blow Wilde struck, however tentatively, for sexual liberty in the face of societal conformity was not that of an idiosyncratic individual. Wilde's oration was, rather, located within a larger modern Oxonian Uranian milieu, as well as an ancient Greek Platonic context. The immortal euphemism 'the Love that dare not speak its name' refers to Douglas's poem 'Two Loves', which Wilde had been asked about and which Douglas had contributed to the one and only issue of his Uranian Oxford student publication the *Chameleon* (1892), the successor to the *Spirit Lamp*: "I am true Love, I fill | The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame." | Then sighing said the other: "Have thy will; | I am the Love that dare not speak its name."⁵¹ Douglas' 'Two Loves' recalls, in addition to Shakespeare's Sonnet 144 ('Two loves I have of comfort and despair'), the Platonic Pausanias' opposition between Aphrodite Ourania, heavenly patroness of spiritual and intellectual pederastic *ēros*, and her earthy equivalent, Aphrodite Pandemos ('Aphrodite of All the People' or 'Common Aphrodite'), who presides over physical, heterosexual satisfaction and procreation (see Pl., *Symp.*, 180d–1c).

Wilde might have protested that the 'Love' under examination was 'deep', 'spiritual', 'pure', 'perfect', 'beautiful', 'fine', 'noble', and 'intellectual', but the soiled hotel bed linen that was almost literally washed in public attested to the embarrassingly problematic embodiment of Platonic erotic idealism.⁵² Wilde's brief encounters with 'rough trade' were hardly the stuff of the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus*, and the author was convicted for violating a legal code that could have been copied out of Plato's *Laws*. Although the first trial of Wilde ended in a hung jury, the second judged that 'Greek love' was in fact 'gross indecency'. And yet, Wilde, exiled in Paris after his release from Reading Gaol,

⁵⁰ See Blanshard (2010: 146).

⁵¹ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 200).

⁵² See the evidence given by Jane Cotter, a chambermaid at the Savoy hotel, during the first trial of Wilde (Hyde 1962: 216).

unrepentantly wrote to his first homosexual lover and ‘devoted friend’, Robert Ross, ‘a poet in prison for loving boys loves boys. To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that Uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble—more noble than other forms’ ([? 18 Feb. 1898], *Complete Letters*, 1019).

The dissonance between the sublime Wildean Platonic voice and the earthy Queensberry Aristophanic one can be heard in Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys* (2004). The pederastic pedagogue Hector is about to launch into a clichéd Platonic apologia for groping his young male charges’ genitals, ‘The transmission of knowledge is itself an erotic act. In the Renaissance ...’, but the straitlaced, unenlightened philistine Headmaster cuts him off mid-defence with a torrent of obscenity and homophobic abuse: ‘Fuck the Renaissance. And fuck literature and Plato and Michaelangelo and Oscar Wilde and all the other shrunken violets you people line up.’⁵³ Hector’s self-contradictory confession to the more sympathetic Mrs Lintott epitomizes the Wildean paradox and the pitfalls of putting pure Platonic love into hands-on practice: ‘I didn’t actually do anything. It was a laying-on of hands, I don’t deny that, but more in benediction than gratification or anything else’ (*History Boys*, 95). While the ardent ephēbophile appears to be making an attempt to bridge the Platonic gap between sacred and profane love and to resolve Wilde’s great inner conflict between pagan Greece and Catholic Rome, even the more open-minded schoolmistress rather crudely admits that her colleague’s justification ‘is the most colossal balls. [...] A grope is a grope. It is not the Annunciation’ (95).

In *Patience*, the stanza of Bunthorne’s patter song celebrating ‘an attachment à la Plato’ dwells at such length on the ‘pure’ nature of those who eschew relations with women that it gives the impression that the poet doth protest too much. As Howard Booth points out, ‘The repeated stress on the purity of the love—and in metrical terms stresses abound here—suggests that it is in fact anything but “pure”.’⁵⁴ At Trinity, Wilde, already

⁵³ Bennett (2004), *History Boys*, 53.

⁵⁴ Booth (2013: 235).

‘fashioning the aesthete’s persona he would perfect at Oxford’,⁵⁵ held in contempt most of his contemporaries and their preoccupations with sport and (the weaker) sex: ‘If they had any souls’, he scoffed, ‘they diverted them with coarse *amours* among barmaids and women of the streets.’⁵⁶ Wilde’s words evoke the Vulgar Venus of Plato’s Pausanias. However, the supposedly heavenly, ‘pure’, and ‘spiritual’ love of the Aesthetes could be just as ‘coarse’, crudely physical, and ‘flesh(l)y’ in London. In *Patience*, Dowling argues, Gilbert alludes to homosexual promiscuity and prostitution in Bunthorne’s line about walking ‘down Piccadilly with a poppy or a lily in your mediaeval hand’—Piccadilly, along with Leicester Square, being the main cruising ground in London, a precinct of profane love.⁵⁷

The first-night reviewer of *Patience* for *The Times* was convinced that Gilbert’s Bunthorne was based on the poet Algernon Swinburne, another poster boy for the New Hellenism.⁵⁸ In the ‘Commonplace Book’ that he kept at Oxford, apparently while preparing for Greats, Wilde compares Swinburne to Euripides, commenting that the tragedian ‘was criticised by the conservatives of his own day as much as Swinburne is by the Philistines of ours, [and] is there attacked for [his] laxity and extravagance’.⁵⁹ A decade before the D’Oyly Carte comic opera, Swinburne had led the Pre-Raphaelites’ counter-attack against the moralistic criticism of their work by Robert Buchanan in his article (under the *nom de guerre* ‘Thomas Maitland’) and subsequently expanded pamphlet, ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’ (1871/2). Sir Henry Lytton, who played Bunthorne multiple times between 1895 and 1934, was, however, similarly insistent that the character was modelled on Whistler, whose libel action against Ruskin possibly inspired Gilbert’s send-up of the jealousy of the artistic world.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Wright (2009: 102).

⁵⁶ Quoted in Lewis (2005: 4).

⁵⁷ Dowling (1994: 132 and n. 29).

⁵⁸ See Gilbert (2015: 720 n. 1).

⁵⁹ Wilde (1989), *Oxford Notebooks*, ed. Smith and Helfand, 113 [23]. The number in square brackets refers to the page number in Wilde’s *Commonplace Book*.

⁶⁰ Gilbert and Sullivan (2016: 360, *ad* 273–96).

Although it is highly likely that Gilbert based Bunthorne on both Swinburne and Whistler (and others, including, perhaps, Pater), it has been widely assumed that it was Wilde who ranked ‘as an apostle in the high aesthetic band’. Wilde’s friend, the ‘Professional Beauty’ Lillie Langtry, nicknamed ‘The Jersey Lily’ after her island birthplace, records in her diary that the perennially hard-up poet used to purchase a single ‘Jersey lily’ (*Amaryllis belladonna*) at Covent Garden and carry it through Piccadilly to bring to her.⁶¹ Langtry thus christened Wilde the ‘Apostle of the Lily’. Frederick Roden writes, ‘The lily was not simply a sign of “dandiacal excess.”’⁶² Throughout Western Christian art, it has also represented the Virgin Mary and, by extension, Roman Catholicism. It is, therefore, an example of the Aesthete’s ‘queer appropriation of religious symbol’.⁶³ Wilde’s welcoming of Sarah Bernhardt on her arrival in England in May 1879 by strewing a bouquet of lilies at her feet is often seen as an instance of his cultish devotion to a dramatic diva. La Bernhardt had crossed the Channel to make her London theatrical début as the titular heroine of Racine’s *Phèdre*, which draws on Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. Wilde witnessed her performance at the Gaiety Theatre on 2 June and dedicated a sonnet to her, printed in the *World* on 11 June and later entitled ‘Phèdre’ when published in his *Poems*, which appeared exactly two months after the première of *Patience* in 1881. Wilde’s welcoming of the ‘love-sick Phaedra’ (*Criticism*, 133) with the floral emblem of the Virgin Mary exemplifies the Aphrodite/Artemis duality, which is in many ways a variant of the Aphrodite Pandemos/Ourania duality.

The Aphrodite/Artemis duality is embodied by Aristophanes’ Agathon in the *Thesmophoriazusae*. Euripides’ relative begins his response to Agathon’s song by invoking the Genetyllides (*Thesm.*, 130), female divinities associated with both Aphrodite

⁶¹ Langtry (1979: 261). Regarding this anecdote, Wilde himself told a New York reporter, ‘To have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph’ (quoted in Morris 2013: 18). Reflecting on his myth-making in prison, the author wrote, ‘I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me’ (*De Profundis*, 95; *Complete Letters*, 729).

⁶² Roden (2002: 84).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

and Artemis.⁶⁴ The transvestite tragedian sings a choral ode, ostensibly of Trojan maidens (102), who invoke the virginal goddess Artemis (114–5)—a song that is seemingly at variance with Agathon’s persistent characterization, prior to his entrance onstage in drag, as a promiscuous passive homosexual. Nevertheless, Agathon’s song, which sexually excites Euripides’ relative (130–3), has been described as ‘an aphrodisiac’.⁶⁵ Agathon is also aligned with Aphrodite through his purported profession as a prostitute, his self-presentation, as suggested by the mirror (140), an emblem of the goddess, which he holds, and his convincingly feminine sexual attractiveness (204–5). In addition, Aphrodite is invoked by Euripides’ relation when he sniffs the saffron-coloured dress Agathon lends him (254). Moreover, the tragic poet is compared by Euripides’ kinsman to the sexually deviant Phaedra (153), whom Aphrodite exploits in the extant Euripidean tragedy to wreak a terrible vengeance on the queen’s celibate stepson Hippolytus, a devotee of Artemis. As we shall see, the mirror that the tragic playwright Agathon possesses is a pertinent symbol for the metaphorical mirror that the comic playwright Aristophanes holds up to the spectators throughout the *Thesmophoriazusae*, allowing the audience to see itself reflected back in a way that is recognizably Wildean.

II. ‘The First Undergraduate to Visit Olympia’: The Plaintiff’s Progress

Lord Arthur was a good deal puzzled at the technical terms used in both books, and had begun to regret that he had not paid more attention to his classics at Oxford.⁶⁶

Wilde, ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ (1891)

LADY BRACKNELL Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian. (*Earnest*, 90)

Wilde has been hailed as ‘perhaps the best educated in classics of all the major figures in the Anglo-Irish literary tradition’ by none other than W. B. Stanford, who (along with E.

⁶⁴ Sommerstein (1994: *ad loc.*); McClure (1999: 223 and n. 77).

⁶⁵ See Taaffe (1993: 82).

⁶⁶ Wilde, ‘Lord Arthur’, in *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories*, in *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Sloan, OWC (2010), 17.

R. Dodds) was probably the greatest Irish classicist of the century after Wilde.⁶⁷ One of Wilde's biographers, Philippe Jullian, even went so far as to describe his subject as 'the best Hellenist of his generation'.⁶⁸ As we have already seen, classical antiquity received not undue attention during the Wilde trials. Wilde's classical learning became something of a bone of contention in court as both sides exploited it to bolster their arguments. As Alastair Blanshard observes, 'For Wilde, reference to Hellenism explained the wholesomeness of his conduct; for his opponents it was a signifier of his depravity.'⁶⁹ In his memoir, *Son of Oscar Wilde* (1954), Wilde's younger son, Vyvyan Holland (the old family name that Wilde's wife and sons assumed in the aftermath of the scandal) writes that, around the time his father died, he was prevented, presumably by his guardian, from keeping up Greek at Stonyhurst College, despite being a prize-winner in classics: 'I suspect that the fact that my father was such an outstanding Greek scholar may have had something to do with my being made to abandon that language.'⁷⁰ While the reasoning behind this decision might have been innocuous enough (if Holland had continued to excel at Greek, it might have raised suspicions about his true identity), it is difficult to shake off the sense that Wilde's Hellenism was being held responsible for his undoing.

In the Queensberry libel trial, Wilde's counsel, Sir Edward Clarke QC, MP, one of England's foremost barristers at the time, used his client's classical proficiency, the product of a privileged education, to establish the plaintiff's respectability. Clarke opened the proceedings for the prosecution at the Old Bailey on 3 April by giving an account of Wilde's undergraduate career, first at Trinity, where he 'greatly distinguished himself—greatly distinguished himself for classical knowledge and earned some conspicuous rewards which are given to students at that brilliant university' (*Trial*, 28). Clarke's oratorical paean might also have been an attempt to curry favour with the judge hearing the

⁶⁷ Stanford (1984: 236).

⁶⁸ Jullian (1969: 44).

⁶⁹ Blanshard (2010: 94).

⁷⁰ Holland (1999: 161).

case, Richard Collins, who was, like Wilde, an Irishman and a former Trinity Classical Scholar.⁷¹ When Clarke examined Wilde later on, he spelled out in full the ‘conspicuous rewards’ his client had collected at Trinity, before proceeding to the plaintiff’s progress at Oxford:

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.

CLARKE And obtained the Newdigate Prize for English Verse.

WILDE Yes. (*Trial*, 45)

Having been awarded a Royal Scholarship from Portora to Trinity in 1871, and having been made a Queen’s Scholar that same year, Wilde was elected to a Foundation Scholarship in 1873.⁷² In 1874, he capped his two years at Trinity by winning the Bishop Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek, the ‘blue riband of Greek literary studies’,⁷³ and a Classical Demyship to Magdalen. The Gold Medal for Greek would serve a grimly utilitarian purpose in Wilde’s later life—a pawn ticket for it was discovered among his possessions after his death in Paris.⁷⁴

Wilde would write from Reading Gaol, ‘the two great turning-points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison’ (*De Profundis*, 165; cf. 99; *Complete Letters*, 732). At Magdalen, Wilde continued to ratchet up notches on the classical *cursus honorum*. Wilde achieved the coveted distinction of a Double First in Greats: his First in ‘Honour Moderations’ (‘Mods’), covering Greek and Latin language and literature, in 1876 was followed by another two years later in ‘Greats’, the name also

⁷¹ See *Trial*, 302 n. 62.

⁷² *Ibid.* 303 n. 65.

⁷³ Stanford (1984: 236).

⁷⁴ Holland (1997: 30).

given to the second, slightly longer part of the Oxford classics course, focusing on philosophy (ancient and modern) and ancient history.

In his last year at Oxford, while ‘reading hard for a Fourth in Greats’ (‘To William Ward’, [Autumn 1877], in *Complete Letters*, 61), Wilde also found the time to enter and win the University poetry prize, the Newdigate, the ‘blue ribbon of the Varsity’, as Wilde himself called it (‘To the Rev. Matthew Russell SJ’, [? Sept. 1878], in *Complete Letters*, 71). As Wilde (70) himself explained, the set topic for the Newdigate ‘used to be necessarily taken from some *classical* subject, either Greek or Latin, and generally a work of art’ (author’s emphasis) but could now ‘be taken from any country or time’. By an extraordinary coincidence, the subject for 1878 was ‘Ravenna’, and Wilde submitted his composition, replete with classical allusions, exactly a year to the day after he had entered the walls of the northern Italian city in the company of his former Trinity tutor Mahaffy. Wilde returned late for the new term and, as a result, 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.’⁷⁵ Fortunately, this first brush with the authorities and experience of exile did not preclude him from being garlanded with the double laurels of a First in Greats and the Newdigate Prize. When Lady Wilde learned of her son’s literary triumph, she sent him a laudatory letter addressed ‘To the Olympic Victor’.⁷⁶ In Wilde’s own words to William Ward, the dons were ““astonied” beyond words—the Bad Boy doing so well in the end!’ ([c. 24 July 1878], *Complete Letters*, 70).

A decade before the Queensberry libel trial, Wilde admitted in a congratulatory missive to his Oxford contemporary Herbert Warren, a classical scholar and the newly appointed President of Magdalen, ‘I often think with some regret of my Oxford days and wish I had not left Parnassus for Piccadilly’ ([c. 18 Oct. 1885], *Complete Letters*, 265). Wilde had traded the dreaming spires of Oxford for the gilded streets of London, the sheltered life of

⁷⁵ Quoted in [Raymond and] Ricketts (1932: 35).

⁷⁶ Quoted in Ellmann (1988: 93).

a classical scholar for the highly publicized career of a commercially successful playwright, in the service of his ‘two great gods, “Money and Ambition”’ (‘To William Ward’, [week ending 3 Mar. 1877], in *Complete Letters*, 39). In ‘midnight conversations’ at Magdalen, Wilde, ‘always the protagonist’, had reportedly responded to an enquiry as to what he was going to do with his life: ‘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, notorious.’⁷⁷ As Wilde’s grandson, Merlin Holland points out, ‘It was an unfortunate premonition. He achieved it all and in exactly that order.’⁷⁸

III. ‘A Very Curious Construction’: The ‘Hyacinthus’ Letter

After detailing his client’s academic achievements, Wilde’s counsel Clarke described the plaintiff’s literary accomplishments and family life. To pre-empt and neutralize a possible line of attack by Queensberry’s counsel Carson, Clarke brought up Wilde’s letters to Douglas that had been stolen at one stage and used to blackmail the writer on several occasions (see *Trial*, 31–4).⁷⁹ This picaresque episode evokes the sort of scenario envisaged by the experienced Recorder of London who dubbed the Labouchère Amendment ‘the Blackmailer’s Charter’ when the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed.⁸⁰ Early in 1893, Douglas, while up at Oxford preparing for Greats,⁸¹ had given a cast-off suit of clothes to an unemployed clerk whom he had befriended by the name of Alfred Wood. He had, however, carelessly overlooked that they had left some letters from Wilde in the pockets. Wood, together with two professional blackmailers, William Allen

⁷⁷ Quoted in Hunter Blair (1939: 120–2).

⁷⁸ Holland (1997: 42).

⁷⁹ For Wilde’s version of these events, see Clarke’s examination of Wilde at the Queensberry trial (*Trial*, 51–5) and Wilde’s narrative in his prison ‘Epistola’ (*De Profundis*, 59 and comm. *ad loc.*; *Complete Letters*, 702). For other accounts of this affair, each with its own, slightly varying slant on the events, see Hyde (1962: 66–9); Ellmann (1988: 367).

⁸⁰ Quoted in Hyde (1962: 12).

⁸¹ Douglas did not take his final examinations in June 1893—another issue for which Queensberry blamed Wilde (Sloan 2003: 24).

and Robert Cliburn (both witnesses for the defence at the Queensberry trial), proceeded to exploit these epistles as means of extorting money from the author.

The blackmailers made copies of the more seemingly compromising letters, and one such copy was sent to the actor–manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who was rehearsing *A Woman of No Importance* at the Haymarket.⁸² Tree handed back the copy of the letter to the playwright. Wood later extorted more money in exchange for letters from Wilde to Douglas. The original of the copied letter sent to Tree was not among these, and later Allen attempted to blackmail the author again. Wilde, however, refused to part with more money, and his original letter was eventually returned to him.

The letter in question, supposedly the most suggestive, was read out in court by

Clarke:

My Own Boy, Your sonnet is quite lovely, and it is a marvel that those red rose-leaf lips of yours should have been made no less for music of song than for madness of kisses. Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry. *I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days.* ('To Lord Alfred Douglas', [? Jan. 1893], in *Complete Letters*, 544; *Trial*, 33; my emphasis)

Wilde signed off, 'Always, with undying love, yours, Oscar.' Clarke had obviously assumed that Carson would have been aware of the letter, but, as Merlin Holland's edition of the libel trial transcript makes clear, Queensberry's counsel had not been aware of it at all (*Trial*, 262). Clarke had shot himself and his client in the foot. In a condemnatory lemmatic commentary on the letter during his opening speech for the defence, Edward Carson, QC, MP, also a Trinity classicist, glossed (over) the ancient mythological allusion, informing the court that the phrase referenced 'a classical relation between Hyacinthus and Apollo, which it is not necessary to repeat' (268).

Aside from their similar backgrounds, Wilde and Carson had little in common. The exact contemporaries were undergraduates together at Trinity, where, Wilde later

⁸² Tree had acted alongside Wilde's wife, Constance, and other members of their set in one of the so-called London 'Greek' plays of the 1880s, the Dublin poet Dr John Todhunter's *Helena in Troas*, produced by E. W. Godwin at Hengler's Circus on 17 May 1886. See Hall and Macintosh (2005: 462–3); Ross (2013: 116–7).

reminisced, they used to amble about arm in arm, or with arms around each other's shoulders, in the manner of schoolboys.⁸³ When he learned that their paths were to cross again at the Old Bailey, Wilde reputedly remarked that 'old Ned Carson' would undoubtedly 'perform his task with the added bitterness of an old friend'.⁸⁴ Carson, unsurprisingly, denied that he and Wilde had ever been friends, declaring, on the contrary, that he had not been fond of his fellow Dubliner's 'flippant approach to life'. Hyde writes in his account of the Wilde trials that Carson's 'path was destined to cross Oscar Wilde's with tragic effect at the most dramatic moment in the latter's career'.⁸⁵

As well as the *agon* between effeminate Euripidean/Platonic aestheticism and its reactionary Aristophanic backlash, the second cultural conflict that I wish to discuss in this chapter in relation to Wilde and Queensberry is one that concerns opposing perspectives on the correct or 'proper' way of reading and interpreting literary texts—a difference of position that corresponds in many aspects to the critical distinction today between reception and tradition outlined in the Introduction. The way in which Queensberry and Carson read and interpreted Wilde's writings could be characterized as conservative and conventional when compared with Wilde's more subversive and revisionist strategy. Wilde's stance can be summed up by the sentiments that we saw Gilbert voice in 'The Critic as Artist' in the previous chapter:

criticism of the highest kind [...] does not confine itself—let us at least suppose so for the moment—to discovering the real intention of the artist and accepting that as final. And in this it is right, for the meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it, as it was in his soul who wrought it. (*Criticism*, 157)

In his prison 'Epistola', the letter Wilde hoped would eventually vindicate him, the author gives the impression that his so-called 'Hyacinthus' epistle to Douglas was chiefly to blame for his conviction, and provides his ostensible addressee with an alternative reading of the events surrounding it:

⁸³ Ellmann (1988: 25).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 414.

⁸⁵ Hyde (1962: 20).

Society is thrilled with the absurd rumours that I have had to pay a huge sum of money for having written an infamous letter to you: this forms the basis of your father's worst attack: I produce the original letter myself in Court to show what it really is: it is denounced by your father's Counsel as a revolting and insidious attempt to corrupt innocence: ultimately it forms part of a criminal charge: the Crown takes it up: the Judge sums up on it with little learning and much morality: I go to prison for it at last. This is the result of writing you a charming letter. (*De Profundis*, 59; *Complete Letters*, 702)

When Wilde's counsel had finished reading out the 'Hyacinthus' letter, Clarke elicited laughter from the court, including the author himself, with his comment that 'the words of that letter appear extravagant to those in the habit of writing commercial correspondence or those ordinary letters which the necessities of life force upon one every day' (*Trial*, 33). It became clear that Clarke had begun with his client's academic accomplishments and literary attainments 'to give the jury pause over the vast cultural gulf that separated them from Wilde, and to call into question the Court's ability to interpret "works of art"'.⁸⁶

When questioned by his own counsel, Wilde reported the remark of his blackmailer Allen that '[a] very curious construction could be put upon that letter' (*Trial*, 53). The 'curious construction' that Allen said could be put on Wilde's 'Hyacinthus' letter recalls the 'certain construction' that the villainess of *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs Cheveley, puts on the letter that her enemy from her schooldays, Lady Chiltern, sends to Lord Goring, the friend of Lady Chiltern's husband, Sir Robert, and the play's unlikely dandy hero.⁸⁷ In the third act of Wilde's play, Lord Goring receives a letter, written on pink paper, from Lady Chiltern asking for his help. When the conniving Mrs Cheveley and Lord Goring confront each other, she offers him the incriminating letter of Sir Robert, which she has been using to blackmail the politician, in return for his hand in marriage—an offer her old flame rebuffs. When Lord Goring obtains Sir Robert's letter by other means and burns it, Mrs Cheveley pinches Lady Chiltern's pink note, which she vengefully plans to send to Sir Robert, misconstrued as a compromising love letter. In the final act, Lord Goring informs

⁸⁶ Foldy (1997: 3).

⁸⁷ Wilde (2013d), *Husband*, ed. Jackson, NM, 125.

Lady Chiltern that Sir Robert's incriminating letter has been destroyed but that Mrs Cheveley has stolen her letter and intends to use it to destroy her marriage:

LORD GORING Yesterday evening you wrote me a very beautiful, womanly letter, asking me for my help. You wrote to me as one of your oldest friends, one of your husband's oldest friends. Mrs Cheveley stole that letter from my rooms.

LADY CHILTERN Well, what use is it to her? Why should she not have it?

LORD GORING (*rising*) Lady Chiltern, I will be quite frank with you. Mrs Cheveley puts a certain construction on that letter and proposes to send it to your husband.

LADY CHILTERN But what construction could she put on it? ... Oh! Not that! Not that! If I in—in trouble, and wanting your help, trusting you, propose to come to you ... that you may advise me ... assist me ... Oh! Are there women so horrible as that ... ? (*Husband*, 125)

Wilde, the supreme man of letters, gives a masterclass on how a text can be open to multiple levels of meaning, allowing the reader or the listener to read between the lines and fill in the gaps. Sir Robert subsequently enters while reading Lady Chiltern's letter, but, as the note does not have the name of the addressee on it, he assumes it is meant for him, and reads it as a letter of forgiveness and reconciliation.

To his blackmailer Allen's veiled threat that 'a very curious construction' could be put on the 'Hyacinthus' letter, Wilde replied, 'Art is rarely intelligible to the criminal classes' (*Trial*, 53). According to the author himself, after Allen had claimed that a man had promised him sixty pounds for the letter, an unruffled Wilde responded:

If you take my advice you will go to that man and sell my letter to him for sixty pounds. [...] I myself have never received so large a sum for any prose work of that very small length, but I am glad to find that there is someone in England who considers that a letter of mine is worth sixty pounds. (*Ibid.*)

The public gallery lapped it up. Wilde then allegedly notified his extortioner that the 'letter which is a prose poem will shortly be published in sonnet form in a delightful magazine and I will send you a copy,' to, once again, the amusement of those in attendance (53–4).

The Hyacinthus epistle duly appeared in the *Spirit Lamp*, Douglas's Uranian Oxford undergraduate publication, on 4 May 1893 in French as 'Sonnet. A letter written in prose poetry by M. Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance'—namely, Pierre Louÿs, to whom Wilde had dedicated the French-language edition of *Salomé*, which had come out in the February of that year. The 'poet of no

importance' would gain a higher literary profile the following year with his *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, a collection of erotic, Sapphic prose poems purporting to be a translation of a Greek manuscript discovered in a tomb.

In his prison 'Epistola', Wilde complains, in relation to his 'Hyacinthus' letter, that 'every construction but the right one is put on it', recalling Allen's and Mrs Cheveley's threats of blackmail (*De Profundis*, 59; *Complete Letters*, 702). The author persists in his defence of the 'Hyacinthus' letter, invoking Plato and Shakespeare, as in his 'Love that dare not speak its name' speech:

You send me a very nice poem of the undergraduate school of verse for my approval: I reply by a letter of fantastic literary conceits: I compare you to Hylas, or Hyacinth, Jonquil or Narcisse or some one whom the great God of Poetry favoured, and honoured with his love. The letter is like a passage from one of Shakespeare's sonnets transposed to a minor key. It can be understood only by those who have read the *Symposium* of Plato, or caught the spirit of a certain grave mood made beautiful for us in Greek marbles. It was, let me say frankly, the sort of letter I would, in a happy if wilful moment, have written to any graceful young man of either University who had sent me a poem of his own making, certain that he would have sufficient wit, or culture, to interpret it rightly with its fantastic phrases. (*De Profundis*, 59; *Complete Letters*, 702)

As Daniel Orrells observes, 'Tantalizingly, Wilde never tells his readers the letter's correct interpretation.'⁸⁸

Whereas Clarke and Wilde sought to shine a literary light on the 'Hyacinthus' letter, Carson and Allen tried to put a sexual spin on the epistle. While Wilde described his epistle as a 'charming', 'fantastic' letter and a poem in prose, his enemies saw it as 'infamous', 'revolting', 'insidious', and corrupting, exploiting it as evidence that Wilde and Douglas were engaging in illegal activity. A similar cultural clash to that between Wilde's and his opponents' interpretations of the 'Hyacinthus' letter and the 'Love that dare not speak its name' can be found in E. M. Foster's novel *Maurice*, written and set in the Edwardian era but published posthumously in 1971. The prudish Dean Cornwallis, supposedly a caricature of Jowett, instructs a student in his translation class at Cambridge, 'Omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks.'⁸⁹ As was the case with Jowett

⁸⁸ Orrells (2011: 208).

⁸⁹ Forster (2005), *Maurice*, Penguin Classics, 42.

and Carson, Cornwallis, by drawing a veil over supposedly inappropriate material, succeeds in underlining rather than discounting the offending subject matter. Alone together after the class, Clive Durham complains to his increasingly intimate friend, the eponymous protagonist Maurice Hall, about the dean's expurgatory practice in an ironically cautious, qualified, stilted, and circumlocutory turn of phrase, 'I regard it as a point of pure scholarship. The Greeks, or most of them, were that way inclined, and to omit it is to omit the mainstay of Athenian society. [...] You've read the *Symposium*?' (*Maurice*, 42).

As we shall see, Wilde's comeback to his blackmailers that '[a]rt is rarely intelligible to the criminal classes' has its origin in the controversy surrounding the initial publication of *Dorian Gray* in magazine form three years previously in 1890.

IV. *Dorian Gray*: 'A Bad Influence'?

Before revealing his trump card—the evidence that had been unearthed by Queensberry's private detectives—Carson cross-examined Wilde about *Dorian Gray*. The opposing reading practices of Wilde and the defence reflected a conflict between two contemporary discursive shifts. Wilde's defence of his art exemplified the critical shift away from the author as the creator of meaning that inheres in a work to the reader. Queensberry's and Carson's defence, on the other hand, represented the shift in episteme from externalized, individual acts of sodomy, of which the homosexual was the 'subject', to an inner, consistent sexual identity.⁹⁰ Moreover, the late nineteenth-century homosexual was himself a site of conflict and contradiction. As Foucault famously phrases it, although his physiology was possibly 'mysterious', his anatomy was 'indiscreet'.⁹¹ Although

⁹⁰ Foucault (1978: 43).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

homosexuality became ‘a kind of interior androgyny’, it was ‘written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away’.⁹²

In his plea of justification, entered on 30 March, Queensberry had denounced *Dorian Gray* as an ‘immoral and obscene work in the form of a narrative [...] designed and intended [...] and [...] understood by the readers [...] to describe the relations intimacies and passions of certain persons of sodomitical and unnatural habits tastes and practices’ (*Trial*, 290). In his cross-examination of Wilde, Carson read aloud several lengthy passages from his novel in its original magazine form. *Dorian Gray* had first appeared as a thirteen-chapter story in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* of Philadelphia in 1890, the year before its publication in a revised and expanded twenty-chapter single volume—what Carson persistently referred to as the ‘purged’ edition, despite Wilde’s protests (*Trial*, 78, 86, 219, 261).

All but one of the passages that Carson read out contained speeches by the painter of Dorian Gray’s eponymous picture, Basil Hallward. The first passage from *Dorian Gray* that Carson read to support the defendant’s claims that the plaintiff’s p(r)ose was ‘sodomitical’ came from the opening conversation of Wilde’s novel. Basil tells his friend Lord Henry Wotton that ‘every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who, on the coloured canvas, reveals himself’ (*Trial*, 84; *Dorian Gray*, 7; 172). Wilde would later write to Douglas, ‘You knew what my art was to me, the great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world’ (*De Profundis*, 69; cf. *Complete Letters*, 709). Nevertheless, it is difficult to extrapolate a straightforward, uncomplicated identification between Wilde and Hallward, as is clear from the opening conversation, in which the painter explains to Lord Henry why he will not exhibit his portrait of Dorian Gray:

⁹² Ibid.

‘I have put into it all the extraordinary romance, of which, of course, I have never dared to speak to him. He knows nothing about it. He will never know anything about it. But the world might guess it; and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope. There is too much of myself in the thing, Harry—too much of myself!’

‘Poets are not so scrupulous as you are. They know how useful passion is for publication. Nowadays a broken heart will run to many editions.’

‘I hate them for it. An artist should create beautiful things, but should put nothing of his own life into them. We live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography. We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. If I live, I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray.’

‘I think you are wrong, Basil, but I won't argue with you. It is only the intellectually lost who ever argue.’ (13–4; cf. 177–8)

Although Wilde would continue to refer to himself as a poet long after he had exchanged verse for Paterian prose poetry, the author told a young admirer of his novel that, of its three main characters, he identified most with the artist: ‘[*Dorian Gray*] contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps’ (‘To Ralph Payne’,⁹³ [postmark 12 Feb. 1894], in *Complete Letters*, 585). Wilde’s dramatization of his divided self through the three central characters of his highly theatrical, dialogue-heavy novel recalls the ‘three-actor rule’ in ancient Greek plays as well as Plato’s theory of the tripartite soul developed in Book IV of the *Republic*, a set text for Greats.⁹⁴ In the opening conversation of *Dorian Gray*, Basil recounts to Lord Henry his terrifying, fateful first encounter with the eponymous protagonist in strongly tragic language (e.g., ‘terror’, ‘terrible crisis’, ‘Fate’, ‘exquisite sorrows’, ‘I grew afraid’, ‘inevitable’, ‘destined’; *Trial*, 85–6; *Dorian Gray*, 8–9; cf. 173–4).

One of the key issues raised by Carson in his case for the defence was that of influence, both personal and literary. The defence conceived of influence, in life as in literature, and literary interpretation as primarily passive processes, with all the sexual and, more specifically, ‘sodomitical’ connotations of that adjective. According to this viewpoint, the active and seductive author with indecent intentions is able, through immoral literary material, to exercise power over vulnerable and impressionable readers susceptible to

⁹³ On Ralph Payne, see Fitzsimons (2015: 349–50 n. 67).

⁹⁴ Ross (2013: 198).

unnatural inclinations. Wilde, however, perversely privileged the reader over the author in the interpretive power relationship by rejecting the ideas that literature can be (im)moral, that it can influence its readers, and that it reveals its author or creator. The writer argued instead that literary interpretation reflects the reader or critic. The alternative Wildean approach, which envisages an active role for the reader rather than the author in the making of meaning, could, therefore, be considered as something of a late nineteenth-century equivalent to the more recent theories of reception in literary criticism that have sought to replace traditional ideas of literary influence.

In the first extract from Wilde's novel that Carson read out in court, Basil tells Lord Henry, 'I did not want any external influence in my life' (*Trial*, 85; *Dorian Gray*, 8; cf. 173). Carson then asked Wilde whether the 'description of the feeling of one man towards a youth just grown up was a proper or an improper feeling' (*Trial*, 85). The author answered rather Platonically that it was 'the most perfect description possible of what an artist would feel on meeting a beautiful personality that he felt some way was necessary to his art and life'. Wilde subsequently clarified what he meant by 'personality': 'the peculiar effect on this artist, this spectre, this appearance of Dorian Gray produced' (86).

The second passage from *Dorian Gray* that Carson read out was the painter's declaration of adoration to his subject: 'from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly' (*Trial*, 87; *Dorian Gray*, 90; cf. 264). Basil's confession to Dorian gave Carson cause to ask Wilde, 'Do you mean to say that that passage describes a natural feeling of one man toward another?' (*Trial*, 87). Wilde explained that it described 'the influence produced on an artist by a beautiful personality'.

The third passage from Wilde's novel that Carson read out was the detailed description of the 'poisonous' yellow book Lord Henry sends to Dorian and, to use the cross-examiner's term, its 'effect' on him (*Trial*, 94–6; *Dorian Gray*, 102–5; cf. 274–6). '[Y]ou poisoned me with a book', Dorian insists to Lord Henry in the last chapter of the magazine

version, ‘promise me that you will never lend that book to anyone. It does harm’ (*Dorian Gray*, 160; cf. 352). At this point, a dozen or so lines spoken by Lord Henry were added to the 1891 book edition, almost half of which brush off the notion that art affects human action: ‘As for being poisoned by a book,’ replies Lord Henry, ‘there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile’ (352).

The fourth and final passage from Wilde’s novel that Carson read out was the confrontation between the painter and his subject. Basil reproves Dorian for the terrible rumours regarding his ‘infamous’ reputation that are rife in London society. Why is your friendship so fateful to young men?, the portraitist reproaches the protagonist (*Trial*, 102; *Dorian Gray*, 129; cf. 293). The artist elaborates on his friend’s young male fatalities as follows:

There was that wretched boy in the Guards who committed suicide. You were his great friend. There was Sir Henry Ashton, who had to leave England with a tarnished name. You and he were inseparable. What about Adrian Singleton, and his dreadful end? What about Lord Kent’s only son, and his career? I met his father yesterday in St James’s Street. He seemed broken with shame and sorrow. What about the young Duke of Perth? What sort of life has he got now? What gentleman would associate with him? (*Trial*, 102; cf. *Dorian Gray*, 129; 293)

In the book edition, Wilde added another paragraph to this passage where Dorian provides Basil with explanations for each of the scandals surrounding the young men mentioned, none of which involves homosexuality (*Dorian Gray*, 293–4). Carson then asked Wilde whether the passage from the magazine version was suggestive of sodomy:

WILDE The passage you have read describes Dorian Gray as a man of very corrupt influence. There is no statement about what the nature of his bad influence was, nor do I think there is such a thing as a bad influence in the world.

CARSON Nor do you think what?

WILDE Nor do I think that, except in fiction; I think such an idea as a bad influence is rather a question for fiction than actual life.

CARSON Did you say you thought there was no such thing as bad influence in the world?

WILDE I don’t think there is any influence, good or bad, from one person over another. I don’t think so. (*Trial*, 102)

Perhaps unhelpfully, Wilde’s attitude reinforced the defence’s depiction of him as a Lord Henry figure, as the author’s answers restated his character’s ideas of influence at the

outset of his novel. In response to Basil Hallward's charge that Lord Henry 'has a very bad influence over all his friends' (*Dorian Gray*, 20; 182), Lord Henry tells Dorian:

There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray. All influence is immoral,—immoral from the scientific point of view. [...] Because to influence a person is to give him one's own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. *He becomes an echo of some one else's music*, an actor of a part that has not been written for him. (20; cf. 183; my emphasis)

Lord Henry's little speech on influence is highly ironic as it is framed by an allusion to the myth of Echo and Narcissus, which has its *locus classicus* in that great poem of echoes, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which, as we shall see in the next chapter, is a key classical source for *Dorian Gray*.

Wilde had already rejected reductive, 'sodomitical' and biographical readings of *Dorian Gray* prior to the libel trial. Before reading out the four extended passages from the *Lippincott's* version of the novel, Carson quoted from a letter Wilde had sent to the editor of the *Scots Observer* in response to an unsigned negative review printed in the conservative periodical at the time of *Dorian Gray's* original publication. Carson also quoted from the hostile notice: Wilde's story dealt 'with matters only fitted for the Criminal Investigation Department or a hearing *in camera*' and had been written 'for none but outlawed noblemen and perverted telegraph-boys' (*Trial*, 77).⁹⁵ The reviewer's remarks were a thinly veiled allusion to a scandal called the Cleveland Street Affair, which had broken in the press the previous year. The police had discovered that the local post office was effectively functioning as a male homosexual brothel, where upper-class clients had been paying young lower-class men for sexual favours. One of the scandal's chief protagonists, Lord Arthur Somerset, who would go on to contribute to the *Spirit Lamp*, was forced to flee England, eventually finding refuge in Florence, never to return to his homeland again. While there is no evidence that Wilde himself ever patronized 19

⁹⁵ 'Reviews and Magazines', *Scots Observer* (5 July 1890), 4, 181. Quoted in Mason (1912: 76); Beckson (1970: 75).

Cleveland Street, the reviewer for the *Scots Observer* insinuated that the aristocratic (anti-)hero of his novel visited establishments not unlike the one frequented by the fallen lord.

In his lengthy reply to the *Scots Observer*, Wilde told the editor, the imperialist poet W. E. Henley, that the reviewer of *Dorian Gray* (possibly Henley's assistant Charles Whibley) had committed 'the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter' ('To the Editor of the *Scots Observer*', 9 July 1890, in *Complete Letters*, 439). Wilde explained that he had made a deliberate decision 'to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption' and '[t]o keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful' (*Trial*, 78; *Complete Letters*, 439). As a result, 'Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them' (*ibid.*). As Joseph Bristow writes, 'Wilde ingeniously argued that such indeterminacy ensured that his readers had to play an *active* role in construing what Dorian Gray's sins might be.'⁹⁶ Wilde's innovative, inverted critical ideas mirrored their equivalent in the sexual realm, namely, that the sexuality of the homosexual subject became, to quote Foucault, 'the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely *active* principle'.⁹⁷

Wilde's ideas in his letter to the *Scots Observer* would re-emerge in his additions to *Dorian Gray* for its book edition. In response to Dorian Gray's complaint about the malign influence that he believes Lord Henry's 'poisonous' book has had on him, Lord Henry pithily replies, 'The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame' (*Dorian Gray*, 352). In Wilde's 'Preface' to the book edition, which was first published in the liberal-minded *Fortnightly Review*, edited by Frank Harris, the author similarly proposes that the critic does not so much objectively evaluate as reveal himself: 'The highest as the lowest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography. Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. [...] It is the

⁹⁶ Bristow (2006: xxiv; my emphasis).

⁹⁷ Foucault (1978: 43; my emphasis).

spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors' (167–8). For Wilde, Ruth Robbins writes, 'the responsibility for meaning was finally to be located with the recipient rather than the originator'.⁹⁸ As was the case with Lord Henry's extra epigram, Wilde's apologetic, aphoristic Preface to the standalone volume implicitly answers the accusations of immorality made against the magazine version and anticipates the arguments Wilde would make in the witness box. Wilde's disarming aphorisms played on the instabilities in the structure of what Sedgwick calls an 'erotic/erotophobic project', that is, 'the project of paranoia. In the ultimate phrase of knowingness, "It takes one to know one."' ⁹⁹ As Lee Edelman comments, 'Interpretive access to the code that renders homosexuality legible may thus carry with it the stigma of too intimate a relation to the code and the machinery of its production.'¹⁰⁰ The overly savvy reader of homosexual signs is potentially placed in the uncomfortable position, as Sedgwick terms it, 'of fearful, projective mirroring recognition'.¹⁰¹

As was already mentioned in the Introduction, Mahaffy is purported to have originated the line that art mirrors the spectator rather than life, but similar sentiments can be found in classical literature: Euripides' *Bacchae* and Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusaie* and *Clouds* all have something to say on this theme.

Notwithstanding Wilde's comments on the 'vague' and 'indeterminate' nature of the moral corruption in his novel, we *do*, in fact, know what some of Dorian Gray's sins are. Neil Bartlett records the litany of sins of which the protagonist is proved guilty: 'adultery, debauchery, lechery, greed, vanity, murder, and opium addiction,' adding, 'Only one of his vices is hidden, only one sin cannot be named.'¹⁰² Dorian's Byronic 'odyssey of experience'¹⁰³ through the urban underworld of East End opium dens in the book edition

⁹⁸ Robbins (1995: 139).

⁹⁹ Sedgwick (1986: 107).

¹⁰⁰ Edelman (1994: 7).

¹⁰¹ Sedgwick (1986: 107).

¹⁰² Bartlett (1988: 93–4). One could add cruelty, blackmail, and hypocrisy to Bartlett's list.

¹⁰³ See Dawson (2004: 67).

evokes Orpheus' descent into the Underworld.¹⁰⁴ As an anti-Orpheus figure, Dorian, unable to tame the animal impulses raging inside him (136–7; 300), repeatedly stabs his picture's painter, Basil, on whose cadaver he has the scientist Alan Campbell carry out a kind of chemical *sparagmos* in order to eliminate any evidence of its existence. In a case of ring composition, Dorian will use the same knife at the melodramatic finale to stab his portrait, and, as a result, slay himself, recalling the beginning, when Basil threatens to tear up the canvas with a palette knife. At the end, Dorian, who has tried to 'buy oblivion' (324) in the opium dens, is unidentifiable apart from his tokens of recognition—his rings.

Dorian's murder of Basil is an act with obvious Oedipal overtones. The young orphan has been objectified as a passive plaything by the older artist, his Platonic spiritual guardian and mentor, as suggested by Basil's surname, Hallward. The younger man murders the elder by repeatedly penetrating him with a suggestively phallic knife and having him chemically castrated. Dorian is the subject not only of Basil's picture but also of Wilde's novel. If Basil Hallward is what Wilde thinks he is, then the death of the artist could be seen as a symbolic 'death of the author', a usurpation of authorial authority. After all, as Wilde himself quipped to the English artist Will Rothenstein, who had commented on the resemblance between his drama *Salomé* and Flaubert's *conte* 'Hérodias' (1877), 'Remember, *dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père* [in literature you must always kill your father].'¹⁰⁵

Terence Dawson points out the similarity between Dorian's murder of Basil and Bacchus' destruction of Pentheus, as referenced at the beginning of Book IV (22–3) of the *Metamorphoses*.¹⁰⁶ As I argue in Chapter 4 of this thesis, Wilde alludes to the Bacchic/Dionysiac dimension of *Dorian Gray* in one of his letters defending his novel to

¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Dorian discovers his first love, the Shakespearean actress Sibyl Vane, in a vulgar little theatre by wandering 'eastward' and losing his way in a 'labyrinth of grimy streets' (39; 211). Dorian ultimately breaks his promise 'to bring [Sibyl] out' of the East End to the West End (45; 217), just as Orpheus fails to bring back Eurydice from the land of the dead to the land of the living. On *Dorian Gray* and the Orpheus myth, see Ch. 2 in this thesis.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Ellmann (1988: 354–5).

¹⁰⁶ Dawson (2004: 100).

the *St James's Gazette*. Wilde's letter was replying to an unsigned negative review of *Dorian Gray*, published under the heading 'A Study in Puppydom' on 24 June 1890 and penned by the journalist and biographer Samuel Henry Jeyes.¹⁰⁷ Jeyes had declared that he would not be discussing the content of Wilde's novel because he had no desire to 'advertise the developments of an esoteric prurience'.¹⁰⁸ Wilde's correspondence with the conservative newspaper centred on whether *Dorian Gray* imparts a moral of some kind, whether there is some lesson to be learned. Wilde's novel, especially in its original, thirteen-chapter version, hurtles towards a conclusion that makes it resemble a classical tragedy. To use Dorian's own words on the suicide of his first love, the actress Sibyl Vane, Wilde's novel 'has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy' (253; cf. 77). In his letter, Wilde stated the moral of his story: 'All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment' ('To the Editor of the *St James's Gazette*', 26 June [1890], in *Complete Letters*, 430). The author insisted, 'Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy' (430–1). Wilde countered his critic's charge of 'esoteric prurience' with equally mystical language ('revealed'). Wilde's opposition between the prurient and the healthy-minded evokes the central *agon* between Pentheus and Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

In his 1871 edition of the Euripidean tragedy, Wilde's Trinity tutor Tyrrell, writes that 'just as in the *Bacchae*, Pentheus suffers under the vengeance of the god [Dionysus] whose prerogatives he refuses to enjoy, [...] so in the *Hippolytus*, a play written nearly thirty years before, Hippolytus shows the same contumacy to Aphrodite and suffers a similar punishment'.¹⁰⁹ When Pentheus has been brought under Dionysus' spell, the god tells him: τὰς δὲ πρὶν φρένας | οὐκ εἶχεσ ὑγιεῖς, νῦν δ' ἔχεις οἴας σε δεῖ ('You were not healthy in

¹⁰⁷ On the Platonic resonances of Jeyes's derogatory references to the three main characters of *Dorian Gray* as 'puppies', see Hill (2018: 236).

¹⁰⁸ Jeyes, 'A Study in Puppydom' (24 June 1890), *St James's Gazette*. Quoted in Mason (1912: 28).

¹⁰⁹ Tyrrell (1871: xvi–xvii).

mind before. Now you are—exactly right’;¹¹⁰ Eur., *Ba.*, 947–8). As we have already seen, Euripides himself was, for Aesthetes such as Wilde, a classical model of a decadent writer attacked by Philistines in his own day. In Wilde’s Oxford essay, ‘The Rise of Historical Criticism’, Pentheus is described as ‘a sort of modern Philistine’.¹¹¹ Previously, Pentheus has been interrogating Dionysus (disguised as one of his priests), his questions revealing both his scepticism of and fascination with the god’s rites, in which the women of the Thebes are participating. Dionysus’ answers keep his meaning hidden, only hinting at the reality Pentheus cannot see. Dionysus persuades Pentheus to spy on the women while dressed as a maenad (female follower of the god). When Pentheus has been dressed up, he thinks he sees two suns in the sky and has begun to see through Dionysus’ mortal disguise (918–22). Dionysus tells the altered Pentheus: *vōv δ’ ὀρᾷς ἅ χρῆ σ’ ὀρᾷν* (‘now you see things as you ought’; 924). Wilde’s rejoinder to the (hypo)critical *lecteur* that ‘[e]ach man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray’ not only suggests the Ovidian Narcissus but also the prurient, puritanical Euripidean Pentheus.

These themes of (in)sight, puritanical prurience, and gender trouble are also palpable in Wilde’s *Salomé*, which, as I demonstrate in more detail in Chapter 4, also engages closely with Euripides’ *Bacchae*. One critic of the 2017 RSC production of *Salomé* thought that the eponymous protagonist being played by a young man obscured the theme of extreme female vengeance.¹¹² However, *Salomé*’s ultimate source, the *Bacchae*, is stage-managed by Dionysus, the meltingly androgynous patron deity of a theatre in which men played the female parts—as we shall see in Chapter 4, gender is but one of many binaries with which Wilde’s drama and Euripides’ tragedy play. When the RSC put on its recent ‘gender-fluid’ production of Wilde’s play, it was not only underlining what is obvious from Wilde’s transgressive, bejewelled language,¹¹³ but it was also following in a long tradition of both

¹¹⁰ *The Bacchae*, in *Three Plays of Euripides: ‘Alcestis’, ‘Medea’, ‘The Bacchae’*, Roche (1974).

¹¹¹ Wilde, *Historical Criticism*, in *Criticism*, 22.

¹¹² Cavendish (2017).

¹¹³ See Billington (2017).

scholarship and performance that sees *Salomé* as a vehicle through which the playwright can give voice to his veiled homosexual desire. This line of *Salomé* criticism was inaugurated by Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* in 1970,¹¹⁴ two years before Sale initiated a tendency to treat Euripides' Pentheus as sexually repressed, afraid of castration, or a transvestite.¹¹⁵ Ritual transvestism was replaced with gay sex in Richard Schechner's adaptation of the *Bacchae*, *Dionysus in 69* (1968).¹¹⁶ The dancer and choreographer Lindsay Kemp starred as Salomé in an all-male 1977 production of Wilde's play at the Roundhouse in London that recalled 'the dismemberment of Dionysus' and depicted Iokanaan as a 'Dionysian Master of the Revels'.¹¹⁷ In Ken Russell's film *Salomé's Last Dance* (1987), Wilde is treated to a private performance of his banned biblical play in a male brothel and is implicitly paralleled with Salomé, played by a boyish prostitute, whose love object, Iokanaan, is played by Douglas. The author is arrested after his heroine has been put to death.¹¹⁸

The historical Douglas testified at the time of the 1918 libel trial instigated by Maud Allan, the Canadian-American dancer who had sought to stage a private performance of Wilde's play, that *Salomé* was a 'perverted' and 'sodomitic' play'.¹¹⁹ Distancing himself from his past and his role as translator of Wilde's play, the reformed Catholic Douglas affirmed: 'those sort of people always refer to revolting things under pretty names. They try to disguise the horribleness of the action by giving it such names; they say beautiful, classic, and so on.'¹²⁰ Douglas's questioner was the MP Noel Pemberton Billing, 'a latterday Pentheus',¹²¹ who had been brought to court by Allan who, although most famous for her appearances as Salomé, was fêted as the foremost exponent of the ecstatic and

¹¹⁴ Millett (2000: 153).

¹¹⁵ Sale (1972).

¹¹⁶ On *Dionysus in 69*, see Jenkins (2015: 61–8).

¹¹⁷ On the 1977 Roundhouse production of *Salomé*, see Tydeman and Price (1996: 98–105).

¹¹⁸ On *Salomé's Last Dance*, see Tydeman and Price (1996: 171–3).

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Hoare (1998: 152).

¹²⁰ Ibid. 154.

¹²¹ Macintosh (2010a: 197).

highly eroticized Greek dancing of the Edwardian era that made her into a modern-day maenad. Billing had attacked Allan in an article entitled ‘The Cult of the Clitoris’, and her *Vision of Salome* was said to promote a cult among transvestites.¹²² In his testimony to the court, Douglas, Philip Hoare comments, ‘was discerning an underground group of perverse activists [...]. Such notions had been encouraged by Wilde when he told his devotees to wear green carnations as a “masonic” sign of their cult’.¹²³

Along with the *Bacchae*, another Greek play that combines cross-examination, cross-dressing, and cultish initiation is Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*, to which Euripides’ tragedy paracomically alludes. The *agon* between Pentheus and Dionysus in the *Bacchae* plays on the encounter between ‘Euripides’ himself and his relative, on the one hand, and Agathon, on the other, in Aristophanes’ comedy. The *Thesmophoriazusae* and, ultimately, the *Bacchae* also allude to Aeschylus’ lost *Edoni*, which dealt with the Thracian king Lycurgus’ rejection of Dionysus. In Aristophanes’ comedy, Euripides’ elderly relative jokingly quotes a question that the Aeschylean Lycurgus asks the androgynous-looking Dionysus when addressing the youthful Agathon: καί σ’, ὦ νεανίσχ’, ἤτις εἶ, κατ’ Αἰσχύλου | ἐκ τῆς Λυκούργειας ἐρέσθαι βούλομαι (‘And you, young lad, I want to ask you, à la Aeschylus’ *Lycurgeia*, what kind of female you are; *Thesm.*, 134–5).¹²⁴ This unusually explicit tragic reference has obvious thematic relevance for the Aristophanic scene: the effete tragedian Agathon assumes the role of Dionysus, an appropriate divine analogue as the god associated with theatre, transvestism, and transformation.

Thus far, we have been encouraged see Agathon’s cross-dressing antics as a means of pursuing sex with men. However, in an artistic apologia, Agathon explains to Euripides’ relative that he is a ‘transvestite for art’s sake’ (146–52, 154–6):¹²⁵

ὦ πρέσβυ πρέσβυ, τοῦ φθόνου μὲν τὸν ψόγον

¹²² Hall and Macintosh (2005: 553).

¹²³ Hoare (1998: 153–4).

¹²⁴ Aristophanes, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, in *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, tr. Henderson, Loeb Classical Library (2000).

¹²⁵ Senelick (2000: 49).

ἤκουσα, τὴν δ' ἄλγησιν οὐ παρεσχόμην·
 ἐγὼ δὲ τὴν ἐσθῆθ' ἅμα <τῆ> γνώμη φορῶ.
 χρὴ γὰρ ποιητὴν ἄνδρα πρὸς τὰ δράματα
 ἅ δεῖ ποιεῖν, πρὸς ταῦτα τοὺς τρόπους ἔχειν.
 αὐτίκα γυναικεῖ' ἦν ποιῆ τις δράματα,
 μετουσίαν δεῖ τῶν τρόπων τὸ σῶμ' ἔχειν. [...]
 ἀνδρεῖα δ' ἦν ποιῆ τις, ἐν τῷ σώματι
 ἕωσθ' ὑπάρχον τοῦθ'. ἅ δ' οὐ κεκτήμεθα,
 μίμησις ἤδη ταῦτα συνθηρεύεται.

Old man, old man, I heard your envious mockery, yet felt no pain thereat. I coordinate my clothing with my thoughts. To be a poet, a man must suit his behaviour to the requirement of his plays. If, say, he's writing plays about women, his body must partake of women's behaviour. [...] If one writes about men, that element of the body is at hand. But qualities we do not have must be sought by mimicry.

Matthew Wright remarks on the 'uncanny similarity' of Agathon, especially the Aristophanic incarnation, to Wilde, including 'his insistence on the close connection between Art and Life, his concern with beauty, his flamboyant behaviour and sexuality, and his epigrammatic and witty mode of discourse.'¹²⁶ Giulia Sissa cautions that the *Thesmophoriazusae* 'does not tell us what Aristophanes thought of Agathon, but what a regular guy [...] could think about him': 'Aristophanes exhibits to the Athenian people a tableau of crude binary thinking.'¹²⁷ While Agathon's possession of a mirror (140) might initially suggest that he is the one who is narcissistic, it is actually Euripides' relative or the average Athenian spectator who is reflected in Agathon's and Aristophanes' art. As Frances Muecke writes, '[Agathon's] Effeminacy is in the eyes of the vulgar beholder.'¹²⁸ Like Euripides' Pentheus, the tragedian's relative in the *Thesmophoriazusae* shows himself to be all too ready and willing to don the feminine garb that he was so quick to deride in order to gain access to the women's rites.

Another Aristophanic comedy that disparages Euripides, parodies mystical initiation, and refers to the hypocrisy and perversity of the spectator is *Clouds*. In *Clouds*, Socrates, who is associated with the decadent Euripides and shares several key characteristics with the tragedian as caricatured later in *Frogs*, makes entrance into his educational

¹²⁶ Wright (2016: 89).

¹²⁷ Sissa (2012: 55).

¹²⁸ Muecke (1982: 53).

establishment analogous to initiation into a mystery religion complete with initiation rites (Ar., *Nub.*, 140). In the *agon* on education, arranged by Socrates to demonstrate how to defend the indefensible, the subversive Weaker Argument, who represents the new antinomian principles of the philosophers, defends a life of pleasure, including sex of the most degrading kind. He uses the Socratic method to get the upper hand of his serious-minded Stronger opponent, who stands for old-fashioned, traditional values and has some unreconstructed attitudes and troubling sexual tendencies. A quick survey of the audience in order to resolve the debate reveals that anyone who is anyone is a ‘bugger’ (lit. ‘wide-arsed’, *euruprōktos*; see *Nub.*, 1090ff.; also used by Euripides’ relative to describe Agathon at *Thesm.*, 200), that is, someone who has been schooled by weaker arguments.

As has already been mentioned, the undergraduate parody *Aristophanes at Oxford* appropriates the *Thesmophoriazousae* and *Clouds* to poke fun at the Euripidean Wilde. However, in an ironic inversion, Socrates proves to be the Euripidean O. W.’s chief antagonist. Having taken offence at his not-so-Socratic drunken harassment by Socrates, which parodies Dorian’s corruption by Lord Henry, O. W. colludes with his undergraduate companions to kill off the ancients, as Thucydides subsequently ‘solemnly’ relates in words that recall the *Odyssey* and have more than a hint of sexual suggestion:

They made a goodly feast and bade us share it
And when o’ercome by weariness we slept,
They treacherously tried to murder us! [...] ¹²⁹

By pulling our tent about our aged ears!
By inverting our punt upon our down-pulled tent!
By heaping earth upon our punt and tent!
By seating Oscar upon Socrates! (68)

This assassination attempt, however, proves unsuccessful, and, in a reversal of Socrates’ own predicament in Plato’s *Apology*, the philosopher acts as one of O. W.’s accusers in his mock trial of sorts. O. W. denies the murder charge in words that do not so much reference Socrates’ defence speech as Diotima’s speech in the Platonic *Symposium*, as well as

¹²⁹ Cf. Hom., *Od.*, vi. 1–2.

Agathon's aesthetic apologia in the *Thesmophoriazusae*, the Preface to *Dorian Gray*, and Salomé's avowals to Iokanaan:

I am an artist in the beautiful;
 αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν [*sic*] is my heraldry.
 All art is useless, therefore so am I—
 For all such desperate deeds. Besides my friend,
 You are not beautiful, I would not touch you,
 You have not golden hair and violet eyes;
 But you are hideous and horrible. (72)

After O. W. has delivered his defence, Aristotle absolves him of 'the charge of want of ethics' on account of his stories for children, such as 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Selfish Giant' (1888), two tales which, for all their undertones of Platonic pedagogical pederasty, have unambiguously Christian endings.

However, the chorus, made up of 'Ladies and Undergraduates, various philosophers, Lewis Carroll, a blood, & c., & c.' (viii), introduce another charge against O. W.: 'Well, Mr Wilde, as you are plainly guilty, | In spite of your aesthetic protestations | ... | Your doctrines are corrupt' (173–4). The corrupt doctrines O. W. has been propounding have taken the form of 'epigrams and paradoxes', the type that have peppered the Prefaces of *Dorian Gray* and his plays (70–4). In the end, Wilde's clever inversions are turned against the author himself—'The gunner blown to bits by his own Maxim!' (75):

SOCRATES Then, Mr. Wilde, the cup of principle,
 You say the wise man tastes, the foolish drains;
 Are you then often the worse for principle?
 O. W. No, but I meant by that—
 SOCRATES Meanings are useless
 'The meaningless reflects the natural!'
 O. W. A saying to my heart! Where did you find it?
 SOCRATES In the exordium to your latest play. (*O. collapses*) (74)

The irony of the Socratic situation in which O. W. now finds himself is not lost on the fictional Wilde: 'O Socrates! Be merciful! Remember | You did a little line in that ['epigrams and paradoxes'] yourself' (75). With that, a swooning O. W. is delivered to the boatman Charon to be conveyed across the River Styx. Just as it can be difficult to resist the temptation of reading *Dorian Gray* and its main characters retrospectively through the

distorting lens of Wilde's tragic life and trials, so too is it all too easy to see *Aristophanes* as being imbued with poignancy in light of the events of less than a year later.

‘Some One Else’s Music’: Ovid’s Orpheus in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

*To reveal art and conceal the artist is art’s aim.*¹

Wilde, ‘The Preface’, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

ars adeo latet arte sua.

Such art his art concealed.²

Ovid, ‘Pygmalion’, *Metamorphoses*, x. 252

Prologue

As we saw in the previous chapter, Wilde defended his controversial novel with such aphorisms as: ‘It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,’ and, ‘Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray.’ In this chapter, I invert Wilde and suggest that his art can also hold up a mirror to the artist’s life. Wilde’s apologetic epigrams evoke the myth of Narcissus, the canonical literary version of which is found in Book III of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Wilde has been likened in passing by classicists to Ovid, and Dorian Gray has been compared in depth by Wildean scholars to the Narcissus of the *Metamorphoses*. In this chapter, I fuse these two separate critical strands and find in the Ovidian Orpheus another archetypal artist who epitomizes Dorian Gray’s (and Wilde’s) problematic relations with both sexes. While Dorian Gray reflects the full range of mythic Orphic roles, including poet–musician, prophet–priest, and psychopomp, he most closely corresponds to the Ovidian Orpheus in the erotic metamorphosis that he implicitly experiences. In Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus, after irrevocably losing his newlywed wife Eurydice, rebuffs women in favour of young boys for his sexual fulfilment, and rhapsodizes on pederastic and gynophobic themes for the remainder of the book. While Wilde’s novel has

¹ *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, iii: ‘*The Picture of Dorian Gray*’: *The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Bristow, OET (2005), 167. Cf. Wilde (ibid. 91; 265; the painter Basil Hallward is speaking): ‘It often seems to me that art conceals the artist far more completely than it ever reveals him.’ Where applicable, I refer throughout to both the 1890 and 1891 texts of *Dorian Gray* in Bristow’s 2005 OET edition.

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Melville, OWC (1986).

often been discussed in relation to the Foucauldian late-nineteenth century shift in (homo)sexual identification, I argue that Ovid's Orpheus provides a classical prototype as an inventor of homosexuality for not only Dorian Gray but also his literary creator.

The most famous subject of the Ovidian Orpheus' inset song is Pygmalion, the sculptor who rejects flesh-and-blood women and carves an idealized ivory girl. Both Orpheus and his Pygmalion have traditionally been linked with the myth of Admetus and Alcestis, as canonized in the tragedy by Euripides. These classical myths were incorporated into Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, which in turn also had an as yet unexplored influence on Wilde's novel.

I. *Ars Longa, Vita Brevis: The Death of the Author*

Along with the Faust legend, the story of Narcissus has conventionally been considered the most important mythological source for Wilde's sole novel.³ In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the comparison of the eponymous protagonist to Narcissus is an explicit leitmotif. When Dorian Gray's picture has started to change—presumably at its subject's suicide-inducing cruelty to the suggestively named actress Sibyl Vane—the narrator says of its study: 'Once, in boyish mockery of Narcissus, he had kissed, or feigned to kiss, those painted lips that now smiled so cruelly at him' (82; 257).

The Narcissus myth has its literary *locus classicus* in the third book of that great hexameter poem on change and transformation, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Nevertheless, Wilde's one and only novel has traditionally been read as a footnote to Plato, rather than Ovid, in the context of its classical background.⁴ Platonic readings and interpretations of the Narcissus myth are implied by Wilde's own critical writings, as collected in the volume *Intentions* (published in the same year as the book version of *Dorian Gray*, 1891), and his

³ On *Dorian Gray* and the Narcissus story, see Keefe (1973); Ballesteros González (1994); Dawson (2004).

⁴ See, however, Dawson (2004: ch. 2), where *Dorian Gray* is read through several Ovidian myths, including, in addition to the Narcissus and Echo myth, those of Iacchus (the young Bacchus), Apollo and Marsyas, Artemis and Actaeon, and Venus and Adonis.

correspondence, specifically letters to Douglas where the beautiful ‘Bosie’ is compared to a flower.⁵

Parallels between Wilde and Ovid have primarily been drawn in passing by Ovidian (as opposed to Wildean) scholars.⁶ These rather parenthetical comparisons have tended to touch on the writers’ similar lives and literary styles, as well as their analogous ideas on life and art(ifice), while ignoring their shared Ovidian mythical subject matter.⁷ The lack of a sustained and comprehensive Ovid–Wilde comparison is surprising given the widespread study of Ovidian receptions in recent decades,⁸ notwithstanding the Victorian aversion to the poet Naso: ‘It was’, after all, ‘only in the nineteenth century—a century which we are not accustomed to regard as an *arbiter elegantiarum*—that Ovid’s prestige fell as low as it stands today,’ proclaimed Hermann Fränkel in 1945.⁹

Whereas the Platonic dialogues dominated the Oxford Greats syllabus from the mid-nineteenth century,¹⁰ reflecting the twin Victorian rediscovery of Plato and the Renaissance, Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* were conspicuous only by their absence from the Mods curriculum during Wilde’s undergraduate years at the University in the 1870s.¹¹

⁵ See Ballesteros González (1994: 2), who points out the proximity of Ovid’s Narcissus story and its reflexive androgyny to the myth of sexual aetiology in Aristophanes’ encomium to Eros in Plato’s *Symposium*. In ‘The Critic as Artist’, Gilbert alludes to Wilde’s own ‘small green bronze figure of Narcissus’ on the mantelpiece in Tite Street (see Ellmann 1988: 242) in his attempt to seduce his interlocutor Ernest away from critical discussion: ‘The pallid figures on the tapestry are smiling at us, and the heavy eyelids of my bronze Narcissus are folded in sleep’ (*Criticism*, 136).

In his prison ‘Epistola’, Wilde writes that the letter in which he compares Bosie to ‘Hylas, or Hyacinth, or Jonquil or Narcisse [...] can be understood only by those who have read the *Symposium* of Plato’ (*Complete Letters*, 702; *De Profundis*: 59). See *Complete Letters*, 544, for the (in)famous ‘Hyacinthus’ letter, so called because it alludes to the myth of Apollo and Hyacinthus, which, like the Narcissus myth, deals with frustrated homoerotic desire and a dying beautiful boy turned into a flower. Once again, Ovid’s account of the Apollo and Hyacinthus tale in his *Metamorphoses* (x. 162–219) has become the canonical textual version. See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

⁶ See, for example, Wilkinson (1955: 119, 294, 302, 320); Rudd (1976: 2); Bishop (2003a: xi–xii); Claassen (2008: 79, 199, 214).

⁷ See, however, Perkins and Davis-Henry (2007: xx).

⁸ To cite but a few major publications on this subject in English, see Martindale (1988); Brown (1999); Keith and Rupp (2007); Miller and Newlands (2014).

⁹ Fränkel (1945: 2). Cf. Vance’s characterization of Ovid as an *arbiter elegantiae* (Vance 1988: 215).

¹⁰ Jenkyns (1980: 228).

¹¹ Wilde, however, did read some Ovid at TCD. Wright (2009: 62) records that in Wilde’s copy of his Trinity tutor Tyrrell’s 1871 edition of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, ‘Wilde has jotted down some sums in which he appears to calculate the relatively small amount of money he has spent, or is about to spend,’ on volumes of Ovid and Horace as well as other Euripidean texts. Wilde’s copy of Tyrrell’s edition is dated on the title page by its owner ‘Trinity [i.e. summer term] 1872’, Wilde’s second term at TCD (academic years corresponded to calendar years). The Ovidian set book for Junior Freshmen (first-year students) taking the Classical Honor

Seeing as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is, arguably, only surpassed by Virgil's *Aeneid* when it comes to the impact of Latin poetry on Western culture, the reforms to Literae Humaniores of the earlier nineteenth century represented, as Richard Jenkyns remarks, a break with a classical tradition that stretched not only as far back as the Renaissance but also the Middle Ages.¹² While Ovid might not have been as visible as his great rival Virgil in the Victorian period as he had been in earlier eras, he continued to form part of every schoolboy's common knowledge and to serve as a universal starting point for the study of Latin poetry.¹³ Regarding classical mythology, 'we learn from Ovid and Lemprière,' to quote Lord Byron's tongue-in-cheek running commentary on Orpheus.¹⁴ Byron was effectively speaking for his age, and Thomas Wright reports that Wilde's father, Sir William, had a copy of the Revd John Lemprière's indispensable *Bibliotheca Classica (Classical Dictionary*; first published, 1788) in his library.¹⁵ As Lemprière's own meticulously listed references make clear, there were many other available ancient authorities on mythological matters, Greek as well as Roman. Although the Victorians (Wilde included) generally privileged the revitalized Hellenic over the Latin, Ovid, through his elegiac poem on the Roman calendar, the *Fasti*, as well as his *Metamorphoses*, remained the most important, not to mention handiest, ancient source of information on Graeco-Roman myth and legend.¹⁶

Even though Ovid maintained his status as the primary ancient (re)source for mythological material in the Victorian period, the man and the myths drifted apart in the popular imagination. Norman Vance writes of the 'nineteenth-century disintegration of

Examinations that term was the *Epistolæ Heroïdum (Letters of Heroines)*, or *Heroïdes (Heroines)*; Candidates for Honors were also expected to translate passages from unprescribed works of the set authors (see *Dublin University Calendar 1872*: 47). On the Trinity 1872 classics honor examination paper, the opening lines of Ovid's *Tristia (Sorrows)* were set for translation (see *Dublin Examination Papers 1873*: 130). In an uncanny coincidence, Ovid was examined (and presumably taught) at TCD that term by a Mr Gray, who, alas, is unlikely to have inspired the narcissistic protagonist of Wilde's novel.

¹² Jenkyns (1997: 519).

¹³ Vance (1988: 215); Vance (2015: 51).

¹⁴ 'Hints from Horace' (l. 623), in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, i, ed. McGann, OET (1980), 312.

¹⁵ Wright (2009: 48).

¹⁶ Vance (1988: 215–6); Vance (2015: 51–2).

Ovid' as a whole: 'Ovid the rake, the sophisticated tactician of love's siege-warfare, tended to be separated from Ovid the highly convenient if barely acknowledged source of decorative and sometimes disturbing myths and legends, not to mention Ovid the witty and elegant maker of verses.' 'Needless to say', Vance continues, 'this development blunted sensitivity to the actual poetry.'¹⁷ The critical violence that the Victorians committed against Ovid calls to mind the *sparagmos* carried out by the Ciconian women of Thrace on Ovid's Orpheus, the poet's poet, at the beginning of Book XI of the *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus' head and lyre, separated from the minstrel's dismembered body, still continue to make mournful music together—a memorably morbid metaphor for the survival of art after the 'death of the author'. The figure of the mutilated Orpheus is also an apt symbolic reference point for Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, which is haunted by images of the divided self as well as the death of the author, and structured around the dichotomies of art and life, soul and body.

It is only through supernatural feats of strength that the Thracian women separate the author from his work, and even then they do not quite succeed. Ovid and Wilde practically invite an author-centred approach to their work through persistent self-presentation. Ovid's exile poetry, which reads as a classical model for Wilde's prison 'Epistola', created the familiar figure of 'lonely aesthete fallen among the Philistines'.¹⁸ In the epistolary elegies of his *Tristia* (ii. 207), Ovid puts his fall from grace down to *carmen et error*—an explanation that has historically been taken at face value. Since the 'poem' has normally been understood to mean Ovid's subversive seduction manual, the *Ars Amatoria*, the enigmatic 'error' became, perhaps inevitably, a source of medieval speculation about the poet's allegedly illicit sex life until the nineteenth century at least.¹⁹

¹⁷ Vance (1988: 216).

¹⁸ Vance (1988: 217).

¹⁹ See Thibault (1964: 38–54).

As we have already seen, Wilde (was) identified in different ways with the three main characters of *Dorian Gray*, but the painter Basil Hallward was, to use his own words, what he thought he was (*Complete Letters*, 585). While the beautiful, reflective Narcissus has been a prototype for painters from the Renaissance,²⁰ the Orpheus of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as a poet within a poem, holds a special paradigmatic significance for authors. Wilde's *Dorian Gray* performs (or perverts) the full range of mythic Orphic roles, including poet–musician, prophet–priest, and psychopomp.²¹ What is most striking about Ovid's Orpheus is his sharp shift from grieving heterosexual lover to misogynist and pederast. In Book X of Ovid's poem, Orpheus experiences an erotic metamorphosis: after the irrevocable loss of his newlywed wife Eurydice, he rejects women in favour of young boys for his sexual fulfilment. Orpheus' pederasty and gynophobia are narcissistically mirrored in the twin subjects of his inset song, which makes up the remainder of Ovid's book. I argue that the Ovidian Orpheus, who moves between the upper world and the Underworld and between the heterosexual and homosexual realms, is an archetypal guide for not only *Dorian Gray*, but for Wilde himself.

II. 'From Tragic lover [...] to Trivial Pederast'

At the beginning of Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus twice loses his new bride Eurydice to the Underworld (one can imagine Lady Bracknell's pitiless response). Ovid describes the behaviour of the bereaved bard who, stunned by his bride's double death, sits grieving on the bank of the River Styx for seven days (*Met.*, x. 73–85):

septem tamen ille diebus
squalidus in ripa Cereris sine munere sedit. [...]

²⁰ See Baskins (1993: 25–33).

²¹ As far as I am aware, Alexander Moudrov (2005) is the only critic to have read *Dorian Gray* 'as a long-awaited response to the myth of Orpheus, the foundational myth of Western creation' (61). In his film *Orphée* (1950), Jean Cocteau, who was profoundly influenced by Wilde, also mediates the myths of Orpheus and *Dorian Gray* (as well as Narcissus) by imagining the poet's entrance into the Underworld through a mirror.

tertius aequoreis inclusum Piscibus annum
 finierat Titan, omnemque refugerat Orpheus
 femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,
 siue fidem dederat. multas tamen ardor habebat
 iungere se uati; multae doluere repulsae.
 ille etiam Thracum populis fuit auctor amorem
 in teneros transferre mares citraque iuuentam
 aetatis breue uer et primos carpere flores.

Seven days he sat there on the bank in filthy rags and with no taste of food. [...] Three times had the sun finished the year and come to watery Pisces; and Orpheus had shunned all love of womankind, whether because of his ill success in love, or whether he had given his troth once for all. Still, many women felt a passion for the bard; many grieved for their love repulsed. He set the example for the people of Thrace of giving his love to tender boys and enjoying the springtime and first flower of their youth.²²

Ovid's immediate source for the Orpheus story was Virgil's *Georgics*, at the end of the fourth and final book. Rather than viewing the Orpheus episode in the *Metamorphoses* as evidence of Ovid's belated inadequacy, the failure of the 'Silver' Latin poet to live up to his 'Golden' prototype, critics such as John Makowski have read the Ovidian narrative as a parody or send-up of its Virgilian predecessor.²³ Ovid deviates markedly from Virgil by slashing Orpheus' mourning period for Eurydice from the seven months in the *Georgics* (*septem [...] menses; Georg., iv. 507*) to a much less epic seven days (*septem [...] diebus; Met., x. 73*).²⁴

In Wilde's novel, Dorian Gray's grieving period for his former fiancée Sibyl Vane lasts even less. Dorian's outbursts of grief at his bride-to-be's reported death by suicide are cut off by the messenger, Lord Henry, who glibly remarks to his friend: 'It is very tragic, of course, but [...] Dorian, you mustn't let this thing get on your nerves' (76; cf. 252). Lord Henry advises Dorian not to play the grieving tragic lover:

'You said to me that Sibyl Vane represented to you all the heroines of romance,—that she was Desdemona one night, and Ophelia the other; that *if she died as Juliet, she came to life as Imogen.*'

'*She will never come to life again now,*' murmured the lad, burying his face in his hands.

'*No, she will never come to life. She has played her last part. But you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through*

²² Ovid: *'Metamorphoses'*, Books IX–XV, tr. Miller, rev. Goold, Loeb (1916). In what follows, I use Miller's Loeb translation.

²³ Makowski (1996).

²⁴ Ibid. 28–9.

Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy. The moment she touched actual life, she marred it, and it marred her, and so she passed away. Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. Cry out against Heaven because the daughter of Brabantio died. But don't waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are.' (80; cf. 255–6; my emphasis)

Whereas Dorian comments that Sibyl's suicide 'has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy' (253; cf. 77), Lord Henry urges his friend to regard the Shakespearean tragedienne's self-destruction, not as an example of high classical grandeur, but as a specimen of post-classical, late Renaissance decadence, 'as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy'. Nevertheless, after Lord Henry has left, Dorian evokes Virgil's high seriousness when wondering whether Sibyl 'cursed him, as she died' (82; 257), alluding to the fourth book of the *Aeneid* where the dying suicide Dido calls down curses on the deserting Aeneas. Like the legendary Carthaginian queen, Sibyl (whose name carries a notably Virgilian undertone) is shrugged off as mere collateral damage on her lover's voyage of self-discovery and self-realization.

By ingesting poison, Sibyl seems even more in death a poor man's Juliet, whom the actress plays on the fateful nights when Dorian first lays eyes on her and becomes infatuated, and when he abandons her after her uncharacteristically awful performance and so drives her to commit suicide. On the latter, ill-starred night as Juliet, Sibyl's voice, though 'exquisite', 'took away all the life from the verse' (59; 239).²⁵ The excuse Sibyl gives an unmoved Dorian for her sub-par performance is that she can no longer make-believe since she has experienced true love in real life.²⁶ Sibyl's *modus moriendi* clumsily

²⁵ When relating how he came to fall in love with the actress, Dorian tells Lord Henry that he will never forget his voice and Sibyl's (41; 213). At the beginning of the novel, the Orpheus-like Lord Henry, with his 'low, musical voice' (21; 183) and hands that 'moved, as he spoke, like music' (24; 185), casts his spell on the impressionable Dorian, the 'young Adonis' who from the outset is simultaneously associated with nature and depicted as an inanimate object, 'made of ivory and rose-leaves' (4; cf. 170). The protagonist is prompted to muse that words have 'a subtle magic' and seem 'to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute' (22; 184).

²⁶ As Hill (2018: 247) and Endres (2018: 258) point out, there are strong Platonic overtones to Sibyl's 'Lady of Shalott' speech, in which she declares to Dorian that she 'knew nothing but shadows' (62; 242). The actress's monologue also evokes the ghost of Eurydice. 'Shadow', in Greek *skia* and in Latin *umbra*, was used by ancient authors, including Ovid, for the shades of the dead and Eurydice's sad existence in the Underworld (see e.g. *Met.*, x. 48), as well as the reflected image of Narcissus (see e.g. *Met.*, iii. 417). See Vinge (1967: 12). Wilde also uses 'shadow' when referring to Dorian's painted double (see e.g. *Dorian Gray*, 28; 189).

conflates the self-inflicted deaths, both real and simulated, of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers; Romeo and Juliet's double suicide in the tomb as well as Juliet's fake 'death' and actual death ultimately derive—among other classical sources—from Eurydice's 'double/twin death', to use Ovid's phrase (*gemina nece*; *Met.*, x. 64).²⁷ Like Eurydice, the now literally lifeless Sibyl will never be revived even figuratively in the form of the romantic heroines whom she used to bring alive onstage every night.

Although the haste with which Dorian and Sibyl become engaged is almost indecent, it suitably mimics the breakneck speed of Romeo and Juliet's whirlwind romance. Dorian himself admits the engagement is 'sudden' (52; 233), a description echoed by Juliet's speech in the balcony scene—'It is too rash, too unadvised, too sudden'—which, ironically, Sibyl delivers as if it 'conveyed no meaning to her' (60; cf. 240).²⁸ While we witness how swiftly and superficially Dorian falls in and out of love with Sibyl, it is disconcerting to watch him go from writing her a long repentant love letter to feeling no grief or guilt for her suicide—at no point do we see him, to use Lord Henry's words, 'plunged in remorse and tearing [his] nice hair' (74; cf. 251).²⁹ The effect of Dorian's abruptly cut-short bereavement is chilling and unsettling, not comically or humorously incongruous, as in the case of the Ovidian Orpheus' drastically condensed mourning period; Basil, in many ways the moral compass of Wilde's novel, is horrified that Dorian does not grieve for Sibyl, but instead accompanies Lord Henry to the Opera.

²⁷ To paraphrase the journalist and comic playwright Robert B. Brough, whatever questions may be raised about his 'classic erudition', an awareness of the relationship between the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is evident in his 1852 classical burlesque *Orpheus and Eurydice; or, The Wandering Minstrel*. At the end of that play, Orpheus takes Eurydice away from Pluto qua Victorian paterfamilias-cum-Lord Capulet, and the piece concludes with a comedic twist on the last lines of *Romeo and Juliet*: 'never was a story of more glee | Than this of Orpheus and Eurydice' (quoted in Miles 1999: 134).

Other classical models for the deaths of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet are the double suicide at the tomb of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe (*Met.*, iv. 55–166) and the mistaken demises of Xenophon of Ephesus' Anthia and Habrocomes in his *Ephesiaca*. See Hager (1999: 33–46).

²⁸ Cf. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, II. i. 118. Shakespeare references and quotations in this chapter are from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Barnet (1972).

²⁹ Kostas Boyiopoulos (2018: 148, 156) notes Ovid's story of Iphis and Anaxarete (*Met.*, xiv. 698–764) as a classical model for the combination of suicide and emotional indifference in Wilde's works. In a characteristically Wildean sexual inversion, the aristocratic Dorian corresponds to the proud princess, while Sibyl the jobbing actress plays the part of the lowly shepherd.

In the *Metamorphoses*, not only does Orpheus mourn Eurydice for seven days (noteworthy for the wrong reasons), but within two years has also given up women altogether (x. 78–80). Ovid provides two alternative motivations for Orpheus' rejection of women in a disjunctive *seu ... siue* construction (80–1). Both explanations advanced have to do with Orpheus' marriage to Eurydice: is it his ill luck [in love] (*male*) or his exclusive devotion (*fidem*) to his dead wife? William Anderson argues that these lines summon 'the spectre of an egoistic husband who literally blames his wife for dying, even though he has been the cause, and then decides that marriage isn't worth the trouble'.³⁰ Alison Sharrock likewise writes, 'It was by [Orpheus'] own fault that he lost Eurydice [...] yet his misogynistic reaction is implied accusation of his wife.'³¹ By blaming his wife for dying, Orpheus is mythically linked with Admetus, who in Euripides' *Alcestis* (202, 250, 275, 386, 391) attains peak irony by accusing of betrayal and abandonment the wife who has agreed to die in his place.

Dorian Gray also indulges in a spot of 'blaming the victim' in Wilde's novel. When Dorian perceives the first signs of change in his portrait, apparently revealing his recent cruelty to Sibyl, he mentally justifies his brutal behaviour to the actress:

Cruelty! Had he been cruel? It was the girl's fault, not his. [...] [S]he had disappointed him. She had been shallow and unworthy. [...] He remembered with what callousness he had watched her. [...] But he had suffered also. During the three terrible hours that the play had lasted, he had lived centuries of pain, æon upon æon of torture. His life was well worth hers. She had marred him for a moment, if he had wounded her for an age. Besides, women were better suited to bear sorrow than men. (67; 246)

Dorian soon resolves, however, to return to Sibyl and make amends by marrying her.

When Dorian finds out about Sibyl's suicide from Lord Henry, he reverts to playing the blame game: 'She had no right to kill herself. It was selfish of her' (76; 253). Meanwhile, Lord Henry finds 'an exquisite pleasure in playing on the lad's unconscious egotism' (77–8; 253–4).

When Lord Henry has left, Dorian reflects on his first, ill-fated love affair:

³⁰ Anderson (1982: 44).

³¹ Sharrock (1991: 179).

Poor Sibyl! what a romance it had all been! She had often mimicked death on the stage, and at last Death himself had touched her, and brought her with him. [...] [S]he had died for love of him, and love would always be a sacrament to him now. She had atoned for everything, by the sacrifice she had made of her life. He would not think any more of what she had made him go through, that horrible night at the theatre. When he thought of her, it would be as a wonderful tragic figure to show Love had been a great reality. (82; cf. 257)

This passage in Wilde's novel practically paraphrases or summarizes Euripides' 'romantic tragedy' *Alcestis*.³² In Euripides' play, Death (Thanatos) personified arrives to take away the homonymous heroine, who has volunteered to die for her husband Admetus; Alcestis' spouse has been rewarded with a reprieve from his fated early death for his benevolent treatment of the god Apollo, who had been condemned to serve for a time the mere mortal Admetus in atonement for a transgression against Zeus. In contrast to the selflessness of Alcestis' heroic sacrifice, what the solipsistic Admetus finds most notable in his wife's unusually highly public, onstage death is, as Wesley Smith comments, his own suffering.³³

Euripides' *Alcestis* is not a play that straightforwardly conforms to traditional generic expectations of tragedy and may more helpfully be classified as a 'romantic tragicomedy', along the lines of several Shakespeare plays. Indeed, as Isobel Hurst notes, the *Alcestis* has a Shakespearean 'analogue' in *The Winter's Tale*.³⁴ Admetus' selfishness in letting his wife die in his stead to avail of Apollo's reprieve is refracted through Leontes' cruelty to his wife, whom he publicly accuses of adultery with his childhood friend Polixenes and condemns indirectly to death, despite the testimony of Apollo's oracle. Unlike Admetus, Leontes immediately recognizes his own responsibility when his wife appears to die, and intensifies his self-reproach when her death is reported. So too does Dorian Gray acknowledge his culpability when news of his would-be wife's suicide reaches him: "So I have murdered Sibyl Vane," said Dorian Gray, half to himself—"murdered her as surely as

³² Wilde had very favourably reviewed a University production of the *Alcestis* at Oxford starring the classicist Jane Harrison for the *Court and Society Review* in May 1887 (see 'The "Alcestis" at Oxford', in *Journalism*, i, 173–5).

³³ Smith (1960: 131).

³⁴ See Macintosh (2001: 282–3); Hurst (2018: 131). Wilde reviewed a production of *The Winter's Tale* at the Lyceum, also for the *Court and Society Review* in 1887 (see above, n. 32). See "'The Winter's Tale" at the Lyceum', in *Journalism*, i, 184–6.

if I had cut her little throat with a knife” (76, 252). This time Dorian conjures up other (Euripidean) tragic sacrificial heroines—the virgins Iphigenia at Aulis and Polyxena at Troy ruthlessly slaughtered on the altar of male realization.³⁵

Although Dorian feels ‘infinite regret’ (67, 246) for his callousness to Sibyl in the aftermath of their scene backstage, he allows Lord Henry to convince him not to wallow in feelings of guilt for her suicide. Dorian’s lack of contrition contrasts with Claudius’ troubled conscience in *Hamlet*, which Dorian himself refers to in his first, effusive description of Sibyl, who, as the suicidal, grief-stricken Ophelia, ‘has been mad, and has come into the presence of a guilty king, and given him rue to wear and bitter herbs to taste of’ (41; 213). Sibyl’s feigned madness as Ophelia is echoed by the repeated description of Dorian’s infatuation with the actress as ‘mad’ (45, 47, 49; 217, 218, 219). Wilde thus inverts Shakespeare’s mirroring of the actor-like Hamlet’s madness, whether actual or affected, and his narcissistic withdrawal after the loss of his father with Ophelia’s all too real madness at the loss of her father. Dorian’s eventual rejection of Sibyl takes its place in a long line of classical and Shakespearean literary rejections, including, not only Orpheus’ rejection of (the Thracian) women, or Narcissus’ of Echo, or, as we shall see, Pygmalion’s of the Propoetides in the *Metamorphoses*, but also Aeneas’ of Dido, Hamlet’s of Ophelia, Othello’s of Desdemona, Lear’s of Cordelia, Leontes’ of Hermione, Hippolytus’ of Phaedra, as well as John the Baptist’s of Salomé, as represented in Wilde’s own biblical drama (which references Christ’s rejection of Mary Magdalene’s touch in the *Noli me tangere* scene).³⁶

Even though Ovid does not give a single, simple explanation for Orpheus’ rejection of women, he clearly relates it to the bard’s embrace of boy-love. Not only is Orpheus the primordial poet and the institutor of the mysteries that bear his name, but he is also the

³⁵ As Nicole Loraux (1987: 49–61) has shown, the tragic Iphigenia and Polyxena die not only as sacrificial victims but also as women: the neck is where women are most vulnerable to violence in tragedy.

³⁶ On the relationship between Euripides’ *Hippolytus* and Wilde’s *Salomé*, see Ch. 4 in this thesis. For the *Noli me tangere* scene, see John 20: 17.

‘author’ (*auctor*; *Met.*, x. 83) of Greek, or at least Thracian, love.³⁷ The paradoxically pagan Christian name of Wilde’s Dorian Gray intimates that he too is a (homo)sexual innovator. Much ado is made about Dorian’s name from the beginning of Wilde’s novel. Like ‘Basil’ and ‘Sibyl’, ‘Dorian’ is of Greek origin but, unlike the familiar forenames of the artist and the actress, is found for the first time in the Anglo-American world in his eponymous novel.³⁸ More intriguingly, ‘Dorian’ carries connotations of Hellenic homoeroticism. As Paul Cartledge has pointed out, an aetiological tradition in the classical scholarship of the nineteenth century posited that *paiderastia* was introduced by the Dorians and was a peculiarly Dorian Greek practice.³⁹

Wilde, of course, was well acquainted with the scholarly discourse surrounding Greek homosexuality from his time at Trinity under the tutelage of Mahaffy, whose first edition of *Social Life in Greece from Homer to Menander* (1874), which credits Wilde with ‘improvements and corrections all through the book’, contains one of the first popular discussions of the subject in the English language.⁴⁰ Moreover, Wilde greatly admired the ‘Uranian’ John Addington Symonds’s *Studies of the Greek Poets*, the First Series (1873) of which contained a paean to ‘Doric chivalry’, disappointingly left unannotated in Wilde’s personal copy.⁴¹ Dorian Gray’s Hellenizing name thus functions as a coded reference to (the equally euphemistic) ‘Greek love’. The homosexual ‘discovery’ implied in the name of the Wildean Dorian connects him with the Ovidian Orpheus and what Jennifer Ingleheart calls—alluding to Foucault and Dover—‘the invention of (Thracian) homosexuality’.⁴²

Within two years, synopsised in just over ten lines, Ovid’s Orpheus degenerates, to quote Makowski, ‘from tragic lover of Eurydice to trivial pederast’.⁴³ In less than twenty-

³⁷ On the multiple, including meta-literary, meanings of the Latin word *auctor*, see Ingleheart (2015a: 58–9).

³⁸ Cartledge (1989: 8–9).

³⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

⁴⁰ See Blanshard (2018: 21).

⁴¹ See Nisbet (2018: 50).

⁴² Ingleheart (2015a: 56–73).

⁴³ Makowski (1996: 29).

four hours, Dorian Gray undergoes many more metamorphoses: he begins as a devoted lover, then, within a few pages, becomes a disillusioned one, then an unforgiving critic, a cruel deserter, a reformed lover, a contrite penitent, (very briefly) a bereft lover, and then finally a heartless hedonist. Hurst demonstrates the indebtedness of Wilde's Society Plays to tragicomic elements in Graeco-Roman and Shakespearean drama as well as contemporary Victorian literature.⁴⁴ But *Dorian Gray's* mixed mode owes more to Ovid, and Lord Henry's (and Wilde's) propensity for wit, irony, and parody in the novel, and especially in the Sibyl Vane affair, is utterly Ovidian. E. J. Kenney could have been talking about the author of *Dorian Gray* when, in relation to the Marsyas episode in the *Metamorphoses*, he writes:

The tone of Ovid's exploration is ironical: he views human life as a tragicomedy. His humor is not infrequently black, sometimes [...] macabre. His attitude is that of the detached observer, recording with sympathy, rather than sharing with empathy, the emotions of his characters as he documents what the soul of man is capable of enduring when subjected to ultimate breaking strain.⁴⁵

For Bernard Shaw, Wilde embodied the artistic culture of the eighteenth century,⁴⁶ which had an affinity with Ovid's 'highly developed sense of the (often uncomfortable) proximity' of tragedy and comedy and pathos and bathos.⁴⁷ Vance rightly writes that one of the difficulties discerning the presence of Ovid in the nineteenth century is his mediation through intervening art and literature—Shakespeare being a case in point.⁴⁸ However, Wilde's novel does display a perceptible 'Ovidianism', what John Fyler defines as 'an attentiveness not only to the literal surface of Ovid's poetry but to his characteristic wit and ironic tone, to his manner as well as his matter'.⁴⁹ The unmistakable and irrepressible Ovidian voice, equally erudite and playful, can clearly be heard in Wilde's games with gender as well as genre in *Dorian Gray*.

⁴⁴ See Hurst (2018).

⁴⁵ Kenney (2009: 152).

⁴⁶ Shaw, 'Oskar Wilde', tr. Trebitsch, *Neue Freie Presse* (23 Apr. 1905), 38. Quoted in Mayer (2010: 203).

⁴⁷ Hopkins (2012: 198).

⁴⁸ Vance (1988: 215).

⁴⁹ Fyler (2009: 412).

III. From Beautiful Boys to Lustful Girls

When Lord Henry Wotton has left after conveying the news of Sibyl Vane's death, Dorian Gray alone considers his altered picture and decides that—in addition to '[e]ternal youth'—he will have 'infinite passion, pleasures subtle and secret, wild joys and wilder sins', while the portrait will bear the consequences of his 'shame' (82; 257). To both the Victorian and today's reader, some of these unstipulated passions, pleasures, joys, sins, and shame plainly imply homoeroticism. In Book X of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus transfers his amatory attention away from women to young males after his ill luck in love with Eurydice, and Richard Dellamora has remarked that '[a]fter the failure of this romance [with Sibyl], Dorian's erotic direction becomes more decidedly homosexual'.⁵⁰

In one passage from the original, unexpurgated 1890 magazine version of Wilde's novel that the Marquess of Queensberry's counsel, Edward Carson, read aloud at the Old Bailey to support his client's 'plea of justification', Basil Hallward reproves Dorian for the terrible rumours regarding his 'infamous' reputation that are rife in London society. 'Why is your friendship so fateful to young men?', the portraitist reproaches the protagonist (*Dorian Gray*, 129; cf. 293; cf. *Trial*, 102).⁵¹ In the 1891 book edition of his novel, Wilde added another paragraph to this passage where Dorian provides Basil with explanations for each of the scandals surrounding the young men mentioned, none of which suggests homosexuality. In the magazine version of *Dorian Gray*, the confrontation between artist and subject occurs on 'the eve of [Dorian's] thirty-second birthday' (126), and Wilde tellingly modified the date to 'the eve of his thirty-eighth birthday' in the book edition (291). Wilde himself had turned thirty-two in late 1886, and it was around this time that he is said to have met his first homosexual partner, Robert ('Robbie') Ross, his future

⁵⁰ Dellamora (1988: 30).

⁵¹ See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

‘devoted friend’ as well as literary executor, who was then seventeen years old—the same age as Sibyl, Dorian’s first love, in Wilde’s novel.⁵²

Dorian’s ‘homosexual turn’ following Sibyl’s demise is not the first apparent erotic reorientation that occurs in Wilde’s novel. Not long after the palpably homoerotic opening, Dorian confounds expectations by announcing to Lord Henry that he has formed a romantic attachment—to a girl, that is, Sibyl; Basil at least is taken aback and fails to conceal his disapproval. I identify this plot twist and initial seeming sexual redirection as an echo of the ancient Greek *rite de passage* where a beloved boy outgrows his phase in life and progresses from being a passive *erōmenos* to an active adult *erastēs* in a heterosexual relationship.⁵³ This socio-sexual development is reflected in the myth—notably recounted by Wilde’s beloved Theocritus (*Idyll XIII*)—of Hylas, the favourite *pais* of Heracles who is lost to his older lover forever when he is pulled down into a pool of water by enamoured nymphs.⁵⁴ The myth of Heracles and Hylas shares certain similarities with that of their fellow Argonaut Orpheus and Eurydice. While Orpheus more closely resembles Heracles as the bereft (boy-)lover, and Eurydice, therefore, corresponds to Hylas as the beloved lost to the depths below, the bard and the young water-bearer are linked in classical literature as they both meet an aquatic end at the hands of sexually rapacious females, and both echo as they go on their watery way.⁵⁵

To classify Dorian’s romantic interest in Sibyl as a clear-cut, categorical sexuality change is simplistic and misleading, and the same goes for his dubious relationships with young males after Sibyl’s demise. While Dorian first sets eyes on Sibyl when she is playing Juliet, and subsequently witnesses her seemingly endless capacity for Ovidian

⁵² See Ellmann (1988: 260–1).

⁵³ See Hunter (1999: 262).

⁵⁴ For Wilde’s love of Theocritus, see Ellmann (1988: 103–4). In an American ‘Confession Album’ filled out by Wilde in 1877, the Oxford Greats candidate gave the father of the Western pastoral tradition as one of his favourite poets (along with Euripides, Keats, and himself). See Holland (1997: 44).

⁵⁵ Cf. the Ovidian myths of Narcissus and Echo, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, as well as the mytho-historical legend of (H)adrian and Antinoüs—a sub-genre of Graeco-Roman myth and legend liberally alluded to in *Dorian Gray*.

metamorphosis into Shakespearean heroines, it is as Rosalind dressed as the shepherd-boy Ganymede—‘Jove’s own page’⁵⁶—in *As You Like It*, that the actress elicits the strongest expressions of desire, and extracts a marriage proposal, from her admirer: ‘When she came on in her boy’s dress she was perfectly wonderful. [...] She has never seemed to me more exquisite,’ an excited Dorian exclaims, wasting little time in telling Lord Henry and Basil about his and Sibyl’s supposedly secret engagement (53; cf. 233). Ganymede is the first subject of Orpheus’ inset song in Book X of the *Metamorphoses* and one of the ‘boys beloved by gods’ (*pueros ... | dilectos superis*; 152–3) of whom the bard announces his intention to sing. Orpheus’ song has a dual theme: the legendary minstrel will also sing of ‘maidens inflamed by unnatural love and paying the penalty of their lust’ (*inconcessisque puellas | ignibus attonitas meruisse libidine poenam*; 153–4). As Mario DiGangi has shown, the connection between misogyny and male homoeroticism in the tales of Orpheus, Ganymede, and Hylas furnished Renaissance writers with a mythic framework for exploring the conflict between male homoerotic desire and chaste marital heterosexuality, as exemplified by Shakespeare in ‘Ovidian’ comedies such as *As You Like It*.⁵⁷

Wilde appears to have been driven in a homosexual direction by a combination of his initial encounter with his first male lover Robbie Ross, that ‘Canadian Ganymede’ as Simon Callow calls him,⁵⁸ and his abhorrence at his wife’s unambiguously female childbearing body. Wilde is alleged to have told (the admittedly unreliable) Frank Harris that Mrs Wilde’s first pregnancy so drastically altered her previously slender figure that it put an abrupt end to any attraction he felt for her at the outset of their marriage:

When I married, my wife was a beautiful girl, white and slim as a lily, with dancing eyes and gay rippling laughter like music. In a year or so the flower-like grace had all vanished; she became heavy, shapeless, deformed; she dragged herself about the house in uncouth misery with drawn blotched face and hideous body, sick at heart because of our love. It was dreadful. [...] Oh, nature is disgusting; it takes beauty and defiles it: it defaces the ivory-white body we have adored, with the vile cicatrices of maternity: it befouls the altar of the soul.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, I. iii. 123.

⁵⁷ DiGangi (1997: 29–63).

⁵⁸ Callow (2013: 54).

⁵⁹ Harris (1918: 486).

One reason why Wilde's supposed speech in Harris's biography has a ring of authenticity to it is that it replicates the language, especially the floral imagery, Wilde used to describe Constance in his correspondence,⁶⁰ as well as Dorian and Sibyl in his novel. At the *fin de siècle*, Wilde himself personified flowery Aesthetic effete-ness, and his writings are full of connections between flowers and physical beauty, in particular ephemeral boyish beauty, by means of classical homoerotic myths, such as those in the *Metamorphoses*. In *Dorian Gray*, horticultural and botanical settings charged with sexual desire abound from the Edenic garden of Adonis adjoining Basil's art studio at the beginning to the theatrical scenes of the 'forest of Arden' and the 'orchard in Verona' (54; 234) that form the backdrops to the Shakespearean productions starring Sibyl.

W. B. Yeats recounted that Wilde once declared, 'with his slow, carefully modulated cadence', 'Give me *The Winter's Tale*, "Daffodils that come before the swallow dare" but not *King Lear*. What is *King Lear* but poor life staggering in the fog?'⁶¹ The line Wilde quoted from *The Winter's Tale* is from the classical catalogue of flowers spoken by the sixteen-year-old Perdita, who has been raised a 'shepherd's daughter'⁶² but is actually, as her name implies, the 'lost' child of Hermione and Leontes. Like the eponymous protagonists of Euripides' *Ion* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the exiled Perdita eventually discovers her true lineage through the tokens that accompanied her when she was exposed as a baby.⁶³ At the end of Shakespeare's play, Perdita is taken to see (what is supposedly) a statue of her dead mother Hermione. When Leontes attempts to kiss the uncannily lifelike figure, Hermione's ally Paulina tells him to 'forebear! | The

⁶⁰ See Wilde's letter to Lillie Langtry in which he announces his engagement. Wilde compares his future wife Constance to a flower, describing her as 'a grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair which make her flower-like head droop like a flower, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen to her' ([c. 22 Jan. 1884], *Complete Letters*, 224).

⁶¹ Yeats (1979: 144–5). Cf. Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, IV. iv. 118–9.

⁶² Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, IV. i. 27.

⁶³ Cf. Hurst (2018: 131–2). On recognition tokens in New Comedy, see Witzke (2018: 332).

ruddiness upon her lip is wet; | You'll mar it if you kiss it; stain your own | With oily painting. Shall I draw the curtain?' (*Winter's Tale*, V. iii. 80–3).

Wilde echoes Paulina's words in his descriptions of not only Dorian Gray's picture but also the painting of Dorian's late mother, Lady Margaret Devereux. So, for instance, when Dorian first finds his picture altered after his scene backstage with Sibyl: 'it was watching him, with its beautiful marred face and its cruel smile' (68; 246). Dorian draws a screen in front of the portrait and later drapes a 'purple-and-gold pall' (118; 286) in front as a curtain, which he dramatically draws back when about to murder Basil. At another point in the book edition, which gives us more of Dorian's backstory, the protagonist ponders his lineage, contemplating the family portraits on his mother's side. One of the ancestral *personae* in the gallery is his unruly young mother herself, who is fittingly depicted posing as a female follower of Bacchus *à la* Emma Hamilton (Lord Nelson's mistress and George Romney's muse):

And his mother with her Lady Hamilton face, and her moist wine-dashed lips—he knew what he had got from her. He had got from her his beauty, and his passion for the beauty of others. She laughed at him in her loose Bacchante dress. There were vine leaves in her hair. The purple spilled from the cup she was holding. The carnations of the painting had withered, but the eyes were still wonderful in their depth and brilliancy of colour. They seemed to follow him wherever he went. (289)⁶⁴

When Paulina asks for music to awaken Hermione and bids her statue 'be stone no more' (*Wint. T.*, V. iii. 98–9), Shakespeare pays an elegant and economical homage to his ancient literary ancestors. In Euripides' *Alcestis* (357–62), Admetus ironically wishes for Orpheus' gift of song so he can bring his wife back from the dead. Shakespeare's Hermione calls to mind by her name the psychopomp Hermes as well as Heracles, who in the *Alcestis* succeeds where Orpheus failed by bringing back the dead woman. Hermione also brings to mind the statue with which Admetus, in yet another ill-advised brainwave, explicitly intends to replace Alcestis (348–52).

⁶⁴ Rather than one of Romney's own works, Wilde's description of Dorian's painted mother evokes a portrait of Hamilton by the French artist Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun, in which the subject is depicted as either a Bacchante or, perhaps more specifically, Ariadne on Naxos. See Kennedy (2016).

Ovid, more famously, combines these motifs from the *Alcestis* in the tale of the Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion, the centrepiece of Orpheus' song in Book X of the *Metamorphoses*.⁶⁵ While the widowed Orpheus recites a song that narcissistically reflects his own misogynistic or gynophobic response to female sexuality as well as his pioneering pederasty, the celibate Pygmalion carves an idealized ivory woman out of contempt for the depraved Propoetides, who, for denying Venus' divinity, are made the first prostitutes by the irate goddess and, in the end, are literally petrified. The dismay expressed by Harris's Wilde at the defilement of his wife's 'ivory-white' form by 'nature' reiterates Pygmalion's *horror feminae*: the artisan is 'disgusted with the faults which in such full measure nature had given the female mind' (*offensus uitii quae plurima menti | femineae natura dedit*; *Met.*, x. 244–5). Whereas Venus grants Pygmalion his heart's desire by bringing his statue to life, at the beginning of Book XI the Apollonian Orpheus (*uatis Apollinei*; *Met.*, xi. 8) is finally defeated by the sexually frustrated Dionysian women of Thrace (*Bacchei ululatus*; 17) and in the Underworld is reunited with the wife whom he had been unable to bring back to the land of the living.

The picture of Dorian Gray, hidden behind a literal screen, serves as a metaphorical screen, an Apollonian mask, for the Dionysian painting of his wild and wayward mother as Bacchante. By marrying secretly beneath her station, Lady Devereux has lost her moral lustre in the eyes of society, represented by her ruthless father Lord Kelso. Sarah Kofman has argued psychoanalytically that, rather than mourn her loss, Dorian rescues his mother from the ravages of decay and death and salvages the beauty bequeathed by her and preserved by her portrait, making her over in his own image and transposing his, and his

⁶⁵ Bate (1993: 239) cites Ovid's 'Pygmalion' as the source of the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale*: 'Despite the resemblances between *The Winter's Tale* and *Alcestis*, [...] it cannot be proved that Shakespeare knew any of the plays of Euripides.' However, Bate (1994: 79) seems to suggest that the 'ultimate "source"' for Hermione's supposed resurrection is the *Alcestis* myth (to which he relates other 'classical myths of temporary death and rebirth', including Orpheus bringing back Eurydice from the Underworld), conceding that 'Shakespeare could have known a Latin translation of Euripides' play'. Dewar-Watson (2009) argues that George Buchanan's 1539 Latin translation of the *Alcestis* provides a missing link between *The Winter's Tale* and Euripides. On the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* and the Ovidian Pygmalion and Orpheus, see Hardie (2002: 193–206); Burrow (2013: 126–8).

mother's, blemishes onto his own eponymous picture.⁶⁶ By his devotion to his pagan mother's memory and his defiance of the puritanical code personified by the hated grandfather figure, the orphaned Dorian resembles the Dionysus of Euripides' *Bacchae*, who in that play's prologue lays out his plan to wreak vengeance on the House of Cadmus for sullyng the reputation of his mother Semele and for refusing to recognize his divinity.⁶⁷ Via Wilde, the unnervingly smiling *persona* of the actor playing Dionysus in the *Bacchae* finds its comic conclusion in the metaphorical fencing mask of, to use Paglia's phrase, that 'androgynous of manners',⁶⁸ Louis Mazzini, the devilish half-Italian Edwardian dandy played by the gay thespian Dennis Price in the classic Ealing black comedy, *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), a film that consciously and continually engages with the Wildean legacy.⁶⁹ Mazzini is a cold-blooded killer in the style of Wilde's Dorian Gray and Lord Arthur Savile who, in order to avenge his dead mother's honour, bumps off the members of the aristocratic D'Ascoyne family on his merry way to the Dukedom of Chalfont, superbly maintaining his *sangfroid* throughout, but ironically finds himself imprisoned and condemned to death on trumped-up charges—a fate that he may or may not elude at the film's ambiguous end.

Wilde's Dorian Gray appears to play out the part not only of Dionysus but also of the callous patriarch Kelso—as well as Orpheus, Admetus, Leontes, and Pygmalion—in his treatment of Sibyl, who, like Dorian, has a mother with a shady sexual history and is portrayed as an ivory Galatea statue.⁷⁰ Dorian shares several characteristics with not only

⁶⁶ Kofman (1999: 45–8).

⁶⁷ I cannot help wondering whether Wilde is making a connection between Dorian as an Orpheus figure and his status as an orphan. The name 'Orpheus', which derives from the Greek adjective *orphanos*, meaning 'fatherless', 'orphan', alludes to an abandonment, a deprivation of a loved one. See Friert (1991: 46). Unlike Orpheus, who mourning Eurydice becomes the archetypal griever, Dorian does not lament his loss of Sibyl, but, like the mythical bard, he is separated from both his love and his body.

⁶⁸ Paglia (1991: 534).

⁶⁹ See Newton (2003).

⁷⁰ 'Galatea' is the name commonly given to Pygmalion's animated ivory statue, even if it does not originate with Ovid or any other ancient source. See Law (1932). Reinhold (1971: 318) credits Rousseau's monodrama *Pygmalion* (first performed in Lyons in 1770 and in Paris in 1775) with popularizing the name Galatea for the statue. W. S. Gilbert's comedy *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1871) was responsible for the strong association of the name with the statue in Anglophone countries (ibid. 319). On the importance of the sculptural 'Galatea-aesthetic' for actresses in the later nineteenth century, see Marshall (1998).

Euripides' Dionysus but also his Hippolytus.⁷¹ George Devereux, who tellingly describes Hippolytus as a 'self-destructive narcissist'⁷² and an "'orphic" dandy',⁷³ analyses the Euripidean hero's relationship with his father, Theseus, in a way that sheds light on Dorian's relationship with his hated father figure, Kelso:

Boy children, hag-ridden by their panicky dread of the erotic-hostile impulses mobilized by their oedipal conflicts, sometimes shy away from their normal ('developmental neurosis') oedipal conflict by restructuring it into a so-called 'reverse Oedipus'. In such cases the boy identifies himself with his father and develops latent (passive) homosexual impulses toward the father.⁷⁴

Hippolytus' latent homosexuality 'is perfectly congruent with Hippolytus' hatred for his father',⁷⁵ and, according to Devereux, this hatred bounds back on himself; his murderous impulses become self-directed—an idea that, as we shall see, has a resonance for the protagonist of Wilde's novel. Thus Hippolytus' homosexual longing and aggression manifest themselves in his death-wish: he desires to return to a time before his Amazon mother's fall from grace to 'sluttishness'.⁷⁶

Writing on misogyny in Wilde's works, Victoria White has argued that 'while Wilde's conscious self may have been in favour of women's advancement, it is clear that he also feared it; his women are either lily-like virgins, whores or honorary men, who invert all the convention of their roles'.⁷⁷ There is 'just one kind of woman who has no place in Wilde's cosmology, and that is a mature, sexually active, reproductive woman'.⁷⁸ White explains Wilde's feelings of repulsion towards his wife's pregnant figure in psychoanalytic terms. Wilde's troubled marital relationship with Mrs Wilde might have been an extension of his Oedipal struggle with his mother, the overbearing Lady Wilde:

While he waged the great Freudian war for his mother, he did not win it. He remained her child, and could not take on the mantle of her potential lover, and the lover of other women. Just as a

⁷¹ I discuss Euripides' *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus* in relation to Wilde's *Salomé* in Ch. 4.

⁷² Devereux (1985: 86).

⁷³ *Ibid.* 92.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 73.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 75.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ White (1998: 160).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

child fears his mother's reproductive body, in case he may be again engulfed by it perhaps, so Wilde feared the reproductive bodies of young women.⁷⁹

Ovid's Eurydice initially dies on her wedding day at the beginning of Book X of the *Metamorphoses*, presumably before her marriage to Orpheus has a chance to be consummated: Eurydice is described as newlywed (*nupta [...] nova*, *Met.*, x. 8–9) when she is lethally bitten by a snake. While Dorian and Sibyl share a backstage kiss on the night of their engagement in Wilde's novel, it is not described in any detail: 'I can't describe to you what I felt at that moment,' Dorian tells Basil and Lord Henry (53; 234). There is not the slightest suggestion that their short-lived love affair is ever consummated, unlike that of Romeo and Juliet. It is only in Albert Lewin's 1945 MGM movie version of Wilde's novel that Sibyl becomes a 'fallen woman'. Here, in an early, Academy-Award-nominated performance by Angela Lansbury, Sibyl fails a virtue test that Dorian has been talked into setting her by Lord Henry. When Sibyl, about to leave Dorian's town house, turns back, Orpheus-like, at the last minute to stay the night, she seals her fate—Lewin cuts to the next scene where the following morning Dorian writes to Sibyl that she has been false to the ideal he had formed of her.⁸⁰ While it is implied that nothing happens between Dorian and Sibyl in Lewin's discrete feature, in Glenn Jordan's 1973 ABC telefilm adaptation the two lovers clearly spend the night together after Sibyl unwittingly fails the test.

Dorian Gray's good looks and personal charm raise the possibility that he too may enjoy the happy ending of a typical literary orphan such as Shakespeare's Perdita or any of the numerous orphaned characters in Victorian novels. A potential, pastorally idyllic happy ending is hinted at towards the end of Wilde's novel when Lord Henry compares Dorian to Florizel, son of Polixenes and paramour of Perdita, who initially knows him disguised

⁷⁹ Ibid. 160–1. For the alternative perspective, Wilde as feminist, see Caine (2013).

⁸⁰ Whereas in Lewin's film it is Sibyl who looks back, with fatal results for herself, in Wilde's novel Dorian's rejection of Sibyl 'is', Moudrov (2005: 66) writes, 'as deadly as the consequence of Orpheus' look back': Dorian tells Sibyl, 'I loved you because you were wonderful, because you had genius and intellect, because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave *shape and substance to the shadows of art*. [...] What are you without your art? Nothing' (*Dorian Gray*, 63; cf. 243; my emphasis).

(again) as a shepherd, under the alias ‘Doricles’, a Grecian pseudonym resonant of *la jeunesse dorée*. Lord Henry describes Dorian as a ‘faithless Florizel’ (155; 347) for ‘sparing’ a young village girl, Hetty Merton. Dorian’s picture, however, reveals his first ‘good action’ (154, 156; 346, 347) to be merely ‘vanity’, ‘curiosity’, and ‘hypocrisy’ (162; 356). In response, Dorian stabs his picture and, as a result, slays himself. His weapon of self-destruction is the same knife he used when, as a Dionysian figure or an anti-Orpheus unable to tame ‘[t]he mad passions of a hunted animal [that] stirred within him’ (136–7; 300), he killed his portrait’s painter, Basil, on whose corpse Dorian has had the scientist Alan Campbell carry out a kind of chemical *sparagmos* in order to eliminate any evidence of its existence.⁸¹

Before self-destructing, Dorian had narrowly escaped a near-death experience in the book edition of the novel. James Vane, Sibyl’s brother and avenging angel, had come close to shooting his sister’s *de facto* killer, who had been identified by another of his victims, a female bar fly, now rebuffed by the man who ruined her. Wilde’s own ‘suicide’, however, could be said to be even more perfectly Orphic than the ‘false ending’ of his novel or the subsequent self-destruction of its protagonist. In *Salomé*, Wilde relocates the maenadic dismemberment of Orpheus to a biblical context, in which the princess, having danced for her stepfather, clinches her reward, the severed head of the prophet who has spurned her, at the climax of the tragedy⁸²—a scene immortalized in illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, based on Gustave Moreau’s painting *Orphée* (1865), for the 1894 English-language edition of Wilde’s French drama.⁸³ In the immediate aftermath of Wilde’s conviction for ‘gross indecency’, legend has it that ‘the prostitutes danced round the streets of the Old Bailey,

⁸¹ Dawson (2004: 100) compares Dorian’s murder of Basil with Bacchus’ destruction of Pentheus, as referenced at the beginning of Book IV (22–3) of the *Metamorphoses*. *Sparagmoi* bookend Wilde’s novel. At the beginning, Dorian stops Basil before he can ‘rip up’ (31; 191) the strife-producing portrait with a palette knife. At the end, Dorian’s cadaver is unidentifiable save for his recognition tokens, his rings.

⁸² Cf. Eynat-Confino (1994: 130–2).

⁸³ The French Symbolist writer and dandy par excellence Jean Lorrain had identified Sarah Bernhardt, Wilde’s original *Salomé*, with Moreau’s *Orphée* and his celebrated *Salomé* paintings (1876) in an article in *L’Événement* (7 Nov. 1887): ‘Yes, the enigmatic Sarah is certainly the daughter of Gustave Moreau, the sister of Muses carrying decapitated heads, of Orpheus and of slim and bloody Salomes.’ Quoted in Bernheimer (2002: 214 n. 34).

celebrating the triumph of heterosexuality’—the rent boys being their rivals in trade.⁸⁴ As

John Gardiner vividly envisages, the scene of Wilde’s sentencing and last words at the Central Criminal Court provided Wilde with his own metaphorical Orphic *sparagmos*:

The charge was two years’ imprisonment with hard labour. Wilde was seen to sway slightly, ‘his face suffused with horror’. ‘And I?’, he mumbled faintly, ‘May I say nothing, my lord?’⁸⁵ The verdict spread like wildfire and was greeted with savage exhilaration. As if for a moment transformed into Furies,⁸⁶ prostitutes were seen to dance in the street.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Mortimer (2003: xiii).

⁸⁵ Ingleheart (2015a: 73 n. 55) notes that Wilde’s alleged ‘last words’ from the dock on his conviction, ‘May I say nothing, my lord?’, is the title given to a 1998 collection of poetry by Gregory Woods that opens with a poem entitled ‘Orpheus to the Men of Thrace’. Ovid’s Orpheus, Ingleheart writes, ‘is open to readings that cast him as a homosexual martyr, an Oscar Wilde *ante diem*, whose downfall is cast by his own art (that is, his songs praising boy-love and denigrating the love of women) as well as his sexuality’.

⁸⁶ In his canonical 1632 translation of the *Metamorphoses*, George Sandys calls the Ciconian women ‘Furies’ (see e.g. xi. 498).

⁸⁷ Gardiner (2002: 205).

The Nightingale and the Swallow: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and the Reception of Wilde

A thing is not necessarily true because a man dies for it.¹
 Wilde, 'The Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889)

Le mystère de l'amour est plus grand que le mystère de la mort.²
 The mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death.³
 Wilde, *Salomé*, tr. Douglas (1893/4)

Prologue

Of 'The Nightingale and the Rose' in *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, Wilde wrote:

I like to fancy that there may be many meanings in the tale, for in writing it, and the others, I did not start with an idea and clothe it in form, but began with a form and strove to make it beautiful enough to have many secrets, and many answers ('To Thomas Hutchinson', [13 July 1888], in *Complete Letters*, 354).

Killeen notes that Wilde's 'Nightingale' is indebted to the Greek myth of Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which continues the Orphic/Dionysian and Ovidian 'suffering artist' theme of the previous chapter.⁴ This chapter also continues to explore the mediation of Greek tragedy via Ovid because there is an even more significant source than the *Metamorphoses* for Wilde's tale, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

The Philomela myth is alluded to in the lyric interchange between Cassandra and the Chorus (Aesch., *Ag.*, 1144–5), which Wilde translated for the Trinity classical miscellany *Kottabos* in 1877. In the *Agamemnon*, Philomela is represented, not by a nightingale, but a swallow; whilst it is her sister, Procne, who is the swallow in the *Metamorphoses*. In Aeschylus' tragedy, Cassandra is compared to both birds, the swallow by Clytemnestra and the nightingale by the Chorus. A swallow and a nightingale are main characters in the first two tales of *The Happy Prince*, the titular tale and 'Nightingale' respectively. While

¹ Wilde, 'Portrait', in *Short Stories*, ed. Sloan, OWC (2010), 123.

² *Salomé*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, v: *Plays*, i: 'The Duchess of Padua', 'Salomé: drame en un acte', 'Salome: Tragedy in One Act', ed. Donohue, OET (2013), 561.

³ Wilde, *Salome*, tr. Douglas, in *Plays*, 730.

⁴ Killeen (2007: 44–8).

Killeen mentions the points of divergence between Wilde's *Nightingale* and Ovid's *Philomela*, the Wildean bird only differs from the Ovidian princess in as much as she corresponds to Aeschylus' *Cassandra*.⁵

Unlike Ovid, Aeschylus was very much in vogue in the nineteenth century, and the production of the *Agamemnon* at Balliol in 1880, with which Wilde claimed close association, was the first Oxbridge Greek Play and, as Hall and Macintosh discuss, the first performance of a Greek tragedy in the original to receive serious critical consideration since the Renaissance.⁶ Wilde originally told and wrote down the story that he would later title 'The Happy Prince' when he was a guest at the 1885 Cambridge production of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. Ross charts Wilde's shift in attitude to antiquity from one of archaeological reconstruction to one of stylistic resourcefulness.⁷ Contemporary ideas of staging Greek tragedy, as exhibited by the Balliol *Agamemnon*, as well as the so-called London 'Greek' plays of the 1880s, clearly informed Wilde's setting for *Salomé*. The *Agamemnon*'s themes of materialism versus simplicity and infidelity are explored in Wilde's 'Nightingale' and 'Prince'; and, as I will demonstrate, they are also examined, more surprisingly, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, in ways that echo Aeschylus' tragedy.

Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* inverts *Fan* by focusing on a father-son relationship as opposed to a mother-daughter one, or rather reverts to the *Agamemnon* by having the father as the long-absent parent. Whereas *Agamemnon* brings back his concubine *Cassandra* from Troy, Lord Illingworth plans to take his prospective private secretary, his natural son Gerald, abroad to India and away from his mother, Mrs Arbuthnot, with whom Gerald has a relationship that is almost Oedipal in its intensity due to his illegitimacy. Mrs Arbuthnot, a 'fallen woman' in (largely self-imposed) exile resembles not only a Sophoclean *pharmakos* (scapegoat) but also Clytemnestra, the mother mourning her child Iphigenia, sacrificed by the father; and she has good reason to be

⁵ Killeen (2007: 44–5).

⁶ Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453).

⁷ Ross (2013: 118–26).

worried. There has already been a hinted threat of corruption as Wilde reverts to other, non-Sophoclean, including Aeschylean, versions of the Labdacid dynastic myth that emphasize a pederastic element rather than parricide or incest. Although Gerald and Mrs Arbuthnot eventually unite against Lord Illingworth, an early typescript of *Woman* reveals that Wilde originally had a more open-ended, Oresteian conclusion in mind.

Finally, this chapter discusses Terence Rattigan's 1948 play *The Browning Version*, the title of which refers to Robert Browning's innovative 1877 translation of the *Agamemnon*. Rattigan's play not only closely engages with Aeschylus' tragedy, but also alludes to Wilde's fairy tales and *Fan*. Rattigan's protagonist, the repressed, ailing Oxonian classicist and Sophoclean *pharmakos* Andrew Crocker-Harris ('the Crock'), is not only implicitly compared with the cuckold Agamemnon, but is also tacitly contrasted with Wilde, the liberated Greek lover, just as Stoppard's Housman is in *The Invention of Love*. Instead of questioning sexual double standards as Wilde's Society Plays do, Rattigan's *Browning* follows the fairy tales in setting up an opposition between a deeper Platonic pedagogical pederasty and the unhappy heterosexual marital relations of the *Agamemnon*—an opposition that has a resonance for Wilde's own personal life.

I. Wilde's Nightingale and Ovid's Philomela

Wilde's fascination with Orpheus and other Orphic figures is evident from his works that precede *Dorian Gray*. A case in point is 'The Nightingale and the Rose', the second story in his first collection of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). In this tale, the titular Nightingale overhears a young Student complaining that his beloved will not dance with him at the Prince's ball the following night, unless he brings her red roses, which he is unable to provide: "there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break."⁸ The

⁸ Wilde, 'Nightingale', in *The Happy Prince*, in *Short Stories*, 79.

Nightingale visits all the Rose-trees in the Student's garden, and the one growing beneath the Student's window tells her how to procure, or rather produce, the desired red rose:

'If you want a red rose,' said the Tree, 'you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine.' ('Nightingale', 81)

Valuing Love over Life and her own bird heart less than the human one of the Student, the Nightingale performs the terrible sacrificial ritual, impaling herself on the Rose-tree's thorn.

The figure of Orpheus lies at the heart of Wilde's tale since the Nightingale's soundtrack to her own self-sacrifice, the story's centrepiece, has the power to charm nature itself:

All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. [...]

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea. (82–3)

One of Orpheus' most famous characteristics is, of course, his ability to enchant with his music not only all living things but also inanimate objects, such as stones. Wilde's description of nature's spellbound reaction to the Nightingale's song reads like an aestheticized elaboration on the summary of Orpheus' musical skill in Lemprière's invaluable *Classical Dictionary* (first published, 1788), which could be found in the library of Wilde's father, Sir William:

He received a lyre from Apollo, or, according to some, Mercury, upon which he played with such a masterly hand that even the most rapid rivers ceased to flow, the savage beasts of the forest forgot their wildness, and the mountains came to listen to his song. All nature seemed charmed and animated, and the nymphs were his constant companions.⁹

⁹ Lemprière (1844: s.v. 'Orpheus'). See Wright (2009: 48) for the classics-related volumes in Sir William Wilde's library. Another mythical magical musician who was given a lyre by Hermes/Mercury and could make stones move was Amphion. Whereas Wilde's Nightingale 'must build [a red rose] out of music by moonlight', Amphion, along with his twin brother Zethus, is supposed to have built the walls of Thebes to the accompaniment of his lyre. See *Short Stories*, 240 n. 81; *OCD*, s.v. 'Amphion'.

As well as the myth of Orpheus himself, the Orphic myth of the sisters Philomela and Procne is a central classical source for Wilde's 'Nightingale', as Killeen has discussed.¹⁰ The Philomela and Procne myth has its *locus classicus* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (vi. 412–674). At the end of the Ovidian telling, Philomela is changed into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow. The programmatic importance of this myth for *The Happy Prince* is indicated by the order of Wilde's collection, which places 'Nightingale' immediately after the title tale, where it is a swallow who stars alongside the eponymous Happy Prince. The Philomela and Procne episode in Book VI of the *Metamorphoses* anticipates and mirrors in many ways that of Orpheus in Books X and XI. Aside from their shared Thracian settings, a number of narrative threads tie the two episodes together. The death of Orpheus, who is torn to pieces by the sexually frustrated Ciconian women in their Bacchic frenzy, is pre-empted by the violation and mutilation of Philomela by her brother-in-law, the Thracian king Tereus, and by the dismemberment of Tereus' and Procne's son, Itys, by the maenadic Procne and Philomela. The raped and mangled Philomela's resourceful recourse to art, and a highly meta-literary medium at that, *textiles*,¹¹ defines the Athenian princess as a suffering artist and surrogate author figure, comparable to Orpheus, as well as Ovid himself. The tongue-less Philomela's transformation into a nightingale implies that she will continually sing a lament, just as the birds weep for Orpheus, whose 'lifeless tongue' (*lingua [...] exanimis*; Ov., *Met.*, xi. 53) in his decapitated head continues to make mournful music with his disembodied lyre.

Indeed, Ovid himself makes the link between the two mythical artists explicit when Philomela, in an impassioned set-piece speech, threatens Tereus with her intention to tell the story of her rape (*Met.*, vi. 546–8):

si siluis clausa tenebor,
implebo siluas et conscia saxa movebo.

¹⁰ Killeen (2007: 44–8).

¹¹ The pun is also present in Ovid's Latin. As Segal (1994: 264–5) puts it, 'Behind Philomela's weaving [*purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis* ('she weaves purple marks upon the white threads'); *Met.*, vi. 577] is Ovid's own web of words (*textus*)' [my emphasis].

audiet haec aether et si deus ullus in illo est.
 If I am kept shut up in these woods, I will fill the woods with my story and
 move the very rocks to pity. The air of heaven shall hear it, and, if there is any
 god in heaven, he shall hear it too.¹²

It is bitterly ironic that Philomela's threat to 'move the very rocks to pity' (*conscia saxa movebo*) results in her Orphic mutilation at the hands of Tereus, who cuts out her tongue to prevent her from revealing his crime.¹³ Wilde's Nightingale, on the other hand, entrances the elements of the natural world with the sound that she makes at the same time as she willingly submits to having her breast penetrated by the Rose-tree's thorn, committing a kind of *auto-sparagmos*.

In Wilde's tale, the Nightingale's fabrication of the rose by singing while voluntarily pressing against the Tree's thorn mirrors not only Philomela's violation by Tereus but also Philomela's subsequent enforced creation in silence of her tell-all tapestry in Ovid's poem. Ovid's Philomela suggests the possibility of even a god in heaven hearing her story. The first named natural element to hear the initial and last bursts of the Wildean Nightingale's self-sacrificial song is the anthropomorphic 'cold crystal/white Moon', which, as we shall see in the next chapter, is represented in *Salomé* as a pagan goddess and identified with the Judaeian princess.

II. Wilde's *Salomé*, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and 'Greek' Plays in Late 19th-Century Britain

The myth of Procne and Philomela is also alluded to in the choral passage in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* that supplied the material for one of the three verse translations of Greek dramatic choral passages that Wilde as an Oxford undergraduate submitted to the TCD classical miscellany *Kottabos*.¹⁴ The following year, Wilde's brother William ('Willie') would have a poem on the subject of *Salomé* printed in the same publication.¹⁵ The

¹² Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Books 1–8, tr. Miller, rev. Goold, Loeb (1916).

¹³ Papaioannou (2005: 135).

¹⁴ For Wilde's translation of a choral ode from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, see Ch. 1 in this thesis.

¹⁵ For Willie Wilde's poem 'Salome', see Wilde (2015b: 99).

passage of the *Agamemnon* that Wilde translated was a portion of the lyric interchange between Cassandra and the Chorus of Argive Elders, who compare the Trojan princess to the mythical nightingale, in this case the mourning mother Procne. (The barbarian Cassandra has already been compared by Clytemnestra to the swallow, that is, the tongueless Philomela, earlier in Aeschylus' play.)

Even earlier, Wilde had displayed a penchant for the *Agamemnon* as a pupil at Portora. At the Enniskillen establishment, Wilde's burgeoning bibliomania began to make itself evident, and, as Merlin Holland tells us, he prized above all a large paper copy of Aeschylus' play, which he numbered among his possessions for years afterwards, until it had to be sold off to pay his debts at the time of the trials.¹⁶ Wilde might have been taught by a Portora master, J. F. Davies, who published an edition of Aeschylus' tragedy with a translation and commentary in 1868 (by which time Davies had left the school).¹⁷ Wilde probably at the very least used Davies's edition of the *Agamemnon*. In his standard schools and universities edition of Aeschylus' tragedies, F. A. Paley commended Davies's translation in his commentary on the same passage that Wilde translated for *Kottabos*.¹⁸ In Harris's biography of Wilde, an unnamed fellow pupil at Portora reminisces: 'We thought him a fair scholar but nothing extraordinary. However, he startled everyone the last year at school in the classical medal examination, by walking easily away from us all in the *viva voce* of the Greek play ("The Agamemnon").'¹⁹

If Ovid and his *Metamorphoses* were outmoded in the Victorian period, one ancient author whose work was very much in vogue in the nineteenth century was Aeschylus, and in particular his *Agamemnon*. When Wilde was at Oxford, Aeschylus' tragedy had breached the British public's consciousness through several widely read translations, the

¹⁶ Holland (1997: 25). According to Holland's father and Wilde's second son, Vyvyan Holland, 'hooligans' stole everything they could get their hands on from Wilde's study during his imprisonment and his family's exile, while the brokers turned a blind eye. Most of the wall space in Wilde's study was taken up with bookshelves full of 'copies of the Greek and Latin classics, French literature and presentation copies of the works of contemporary authors' (Holland 1999: 41–2).

¹⁷ Ellmann (1988: 21); Ross (2013: 18).

¹⁸ Ross (2013: 18).

¹⁹ Harris (1918: 29).

most noteworthy of which was Robert Browning's controversial offering, published a few months after Wilde's rendering of a choral passage from the play appeared in *Kottabos* in 1877. By the time of the trailblazing production of the *Agamemnon* in Greek at Jowett's Balliol on 3 June 1880, the number of translations of the *Agamemnon* into English on its own (as opposed to Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy as a whole) had risen to twenty-eight, several of which were still in print.²⁰ Both Wilde and Browning were in the audience for the pioneering Oxford undergraduate production of the *Agamemnon*.²¹ The 1880 Balliol *Agamemnon* entered the record books for becoming the first production of a Greek tragedy in the original language to receive serious critical scrutiny since the Renaissance.²² Wilde claimed more than one connection with the highly praised Balliol production, telling a New York reporter that he had not only proposed the project to its spearhead, the future actor-manager Frank Benson who played Clytemnestra, but also assigned the roles and designed the costumes and scenery—contributions not corroborated by Benson's memoirs.²³

In fact, the scenery for the 1880 Balliol *Agamemnon* used a drawing by Edward Burne-Jones, and the costumes for the production were designed by the University Slade Professor of Fine Art, William Blake Richmond.²⁴ Wilde might not have been the designer for the Balliol *Agamemnon*, but he did evince an active and conspicuous interest in dress and the decorative arts, which were as important to his Aesthetic mission as literature and fine art. On his 1882 American tour, Wilde began to lecture on 'The House Beautiful', and it was while lecturing on the same subject in Dublin in 1883 that he struck up a courtship with his soon-to-be-wife, Constance Lloyd. The year after their marriage in 1884, the

²⁰ Walton (2006: ch. 3). Ebook

²¹ According to the chronology of Page (1991: 14), Wilde attended the *Agamemnon* at Balliol on 3 June 1880. Wilde attended the last of the Oxford production's three London performances in December of that year (see Wilde 2001: 323 n. 61).

²² Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453); Macintosh (2005: 157).

²³ Benson (1930); Ellmann (1988: 101); Hall and Macintosh (2005: 452–3); Macintosh (2005: 157); Ross (2013: 111). Wilde did, however, host some members of the cast of the 1880 Balliol *Agamemnon* at his house in Tite Street and invited others to meet 'Clytaemnestra', 'Cassandra', and 'some of the "Argive Elders"' ('To Minnie Simpson', [20 Dec. 1880]; 'To Clement Scott', [20 Dec. 1880], in *Complete Letters*, 104).

²⁴ Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453); Macintosh (2005: 157).

Wilde moved into their house in Tite Street, Chelsea, which was designed by Edward William Godwin, the progressive architect and designer–producer who was the guiding light for many of the London ‘Greek’ plays in the 1880s.²⁵

Rather than being an “archaeologizing production” *tout court*,²⁶ one positive review of the 1880 Balliol *Agamemnon* reported that the set and costumes were suggestive of antiquity and ‘that is sufficient’.²⁷ The stage space for the performance was also suggestive of antiquity in that it was divided in two to separate the actors and the chorus, in accordance with the contemporary scholarly consensus until the 1890s, as was the case with the iconic ‘Mendelssohn *Antigone*’ at Covent Garden in 1845.²⁸ The beliefs that ancient Greek drama was originally performed in two separate spaces and that modern productions should not be overly ‘archaeological’ clearly informed the physical setting of *Salomé* (published in French, 1893; published in English, 1894), as indicated by Wilde’s own stage directions in French at the beginning of his play:

(SCENE. *Une grande terrasse dans le palais d’HERODE donnant sur la salle de festin. Des SOLDATS sont accoudés sur le balcon. A droite il y a un énorme escalier. A gauche, au fond, une ancienne citerne entourée d’un mur de bronze vert. Clair de lune*) (*Salomé*, 509)

(SCENE. *A great terrace in the Palace of HEROD, set above the banqueting-hall. Some SOLDIERS are leaning over the balcony. To the right there is a gigantic staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze. The moon is shining very brightly.*) (*Salome*, 707; adapted)

Richard Cave describes Wilde’s stage design for *Salomé* as ‘remarkably clean in its aesthetics lines and wholly uncluttered with period detail’, ‘bare’, and ‘a symbolist setting for a symbolist play’.²⁹ The eponymous protagonist of *Salomé* may have been described as ‘an oriental Hedda Gabbler’ by the influential drama critic and Ibsen proponent William Archer,³⁰ but the restrained and understated set for Wilde’s biblical tragedy bears little resemblance to the cramped drawing-room conditions of contemporary Ibsenian domestic

²⁵ On Godwin and the London ‘Greek’ plays of the 1880s, see Stokes (1972: 31–68); Hall and Macintosh (2005: 462–87); Ross (2013: 111–18).

²⁶ Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453); Macintosh (2005: 157).

²⁷ *Cambridge Review* (9 Feb. 1881), quoted in Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453); Macintosh (2005: 157).

²⁸ Hall and Macintosh (2005: 453); Macintosh (2005: 157).

²⁹ Cave (1994: 40).

³⁰ Archer, review of *Salomé*, ‘Mr. Oscar Wilde’s New Play’, in *Black and White*, 5 (11 May 1893), 290. Reprinted in Beckson (1970: 141–2, at 142).

dramas with their claustrophobia-inducing clutter. *Salomé*'s stage design also has little in common with the spectacular settings of Victorian historical plays with their sumptuous décor, such as those starring the original Wildean *Salomé* Sarah Bernhardt.³¹

Salomé's stage plan instead reflects the vision of E. W. Godwin, the architect and theatrical designer who was an interior decorator and close friend to Wilde. The Wildes' 'House Beautiful' in Tite Street exemplified the ideas of the British Arts and Crafts Movement, which protested against the clutter clogging up Victorian homes and favoured greater simplicity in overall design. As Wilde himself had often commanded, 'Have nothing in your house that is not useful or beautiful.'³² Godwin founded The Costume Society in 1881 for the promotion of historical accuracy in stage costume design and also argued for architectural accuracy in the production of plays with historical settings. Although the archaeological theatre productions in the 1880s were often associated by reviewers with the historical paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Godwin stressed that he was not calling for a purely historicist or exhaustive approach to design: 'I wish it to be clearly understood that I am not advocating the reproduction in dramatic representation of every old feature which we may exhume in the course of our researches. The poet has a license.'³³

Wilde's minimalist aesthetic in his stage design for *Salomé* has appealed to theatre practitioners with anti-realist sympathies, who have responded in radically divergent ways, at one end of the spectrum dispensing completely with props. At the beginning of his directorial career, the twenty-nine-year-old Max Reinhardt, although trained in a robustly realist theatrical tradition as an actor, represented the extravagant luxury of Hérode's court in literal terms by loading the stage with elaborate props and drapes in his 1902–4 Berlin productions.³⁴ At the opposite end of the extreme, Steven Berkoff's acclaimed productions,

³¹ See Falzon (2003: 213).

³² 'The House Beautiful', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, Collins Classics (2003), 914.

³³ Quoted in Ross (2013: 112).

³⁴ Tydeman and Price (1996: 107). On the Reinhardt productions, see Tydeman and Price (1996: 31–40).

which originated at Dublin's Gate Theatre in 1988,³⁵ left the performance space almost entirely empty, except for one long dining table *à la* da Vinci's *The Last Supper* for the banquet guests/chorus members onstage; everything else was mimed in the style of Berkoff's mentor Jacques Lecoq, including, notably, the head of Iokanaan (John the Baptist) on the 'silver shield' (729; 'bouclier d'argent'; 559).

As William Tydeman and Steven Price put it *à propos* Berkoff as Hérode lighting an invisible cigarette, the miming of props created the impression that 'the character literally embodied the materialist world he inhabited'.³⁶ Berkoff himself explained his creative choice to strip *Salomé* down to her bare essentials thusly: 'So much was the perfume and tapestry in the language that I decided that the stage should be bare and allow the words to bounce off the hard surfaces without being softened or cushioned by "carpets and ivory tables and the tables of jasper"'.³⁷ While some of Wilde's stage directions in *Salomé* could be described as detailed or florid and could, therefore, be presumed to imply an elaborate, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink-style production, the overall impression of the playwright's theatrical design is one of simplicity in set and props. Berkoff assumed this austerity in design and pushed it to its extreme, not merely to sidestep cleverly the inevitable pitfalls of an overly ornate staging, but also to bring the bejewelled prose-poetry of Wilde's text into starker relief—a recognition that the play's lavishness is, for the most part, linguistically rather than physically constructed. As we shall see in the next section, this stylistic tension between materialism and minimalism is played out thematically not only in the *Agamemnon* but also in the more obvious source for Wilde's biblical drama, the Gospel of Mark.

³⁵ On the Berkoff productions, see Tydeman and Price (1996: 105–12).

³⁶ Tydeman and Price (1996: 108).

³⁷ Interview with Steven Berkoff, in Berkoff (2000).

III. Materialism vs Frugality, Infidelity, Eros and Thanatos

The tension between extravagance and minimalism in Wilde's *Salomé* harks back to the conflict between luxury and simplicity in the *Agamemnon*, and to the opposition between prodigality and frugality in the New Testament. By combining the *Agamemnon* and the Salomé story from the Gospel of Mark,³⁸ Wilde is merely picking up on Mark's own use of the Aeschylean tragedy. Theatregoing Greeks would have readily recognized in Christ's entry into Jerusalem and into the Temple (Mark 11: 7–11) the welcoming home of Agamemnon on his return to Argos from victory at Troy.³⁹ Like a biblical preacher, Aeschylus' Chorus of Argive Elders warns that it is easier to practise virtue in the grimy houses of the poor; virtue is incompatible with 'gold-besprinkled stations' (χρυσόπαστα δ' ἔδεθλα; *Ag.*, 773–80).⁴⁰ The ancestral curse on the House of Atreus is linked, in some obscure way (among others), with the wealth that the royal family had accumulated and which Clytemnestra displays immoderately by carpeting the palace entrance in purple. The House of Wilde also exemplified a tension between Hellenic restraint and Eastern exoticism, and was so completely different from any other Victorian residence that it was considered in its time 'bizarre and vaguely sinful'.⁴¹

The décor in Wilde's Turkish/North African-style smoking room probably provided the basis for the beginning of *Dorian Gray*, which has Lord Henry Wotton sitting and smoking on a divan. Wilde's prison 'Epistola' suggests that the Oriental luxury of his novel was partly inspired by the *Agamemnon*: the author alludes to the iconic crimson carpet in the tragedy when referring to 'the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold

³⁸ Of course it is not Salomé's story at all in the Gospel of Mark (6: 21–9), but John the Baptist's—the dancer remains unnamed, merely referred to as the daughter of Herodias. In Mark's Gospel, it is Herodias who manipulates her daughter to ask Herod for the Baptist's head. Herodias contrives the execution of John as he has spoken out against her marriage to Herod. In Wilde's drama, it is the dancer herself who conceives the beheading, having been rebuffed by the prophet. By putting female vengeance at the centre of his drama, Wilde is following in the footsteps of the Greek tragedians, who frequently adapted myths to put the focus on women's experience and perspective.

³⁹ LaVerdiere (1999: 148).

⁴⁰ *The 'Agamemnon' of Aeschylus*, tr. Browning (1877). All translations of *Agamemnon* in this chapter are from the Browning version. Those unable to understand Browning's English can always refer to the corresponding Greek from the Oxford Classical Texts edition by Murray (1937; 2nd edn, 1955).

⁴¹ Quoted in Bentley (1983: 59).

cloth of *Dorian Gray*' (*Complete Letters*, 740; cf. *De Profundis*, 172).⁴² In the famous 'carpet scene' of the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra persuades her returning husband to enter the palace on a path of purple tapestries, even going so far as to throw herself to the ground and perform a *salaam*, in the menial manner of the Persian king's courtiers that so repelled the Greeks. Just as Aeschylus' tragedy, though set in Bronze Age Argos, exploits the tension between Attic simplicity and Eastern excess for dramatic effect, so too does Wilde's drama contrast Jewish austerity not only with Oriental luxury but also, ironically, with Hellenic sensuality. In *Salomé*, Hérode solemnly swears to give his stepdaughter whatever she wants, 'even unto the half of my kingdom' (723–4; 'la moitié de mon royaume'; 545, 547, 550), so that she will dance for him, and, after she has danced the 'dance of the seven veils' (725; 'la danse des sept voiles'; 549) and demanded the head of Iokanaan on a silver charger, the tetrarch furiously tries to get the princess to accept jewels and other treasures as her reward instead.

In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra reminds the eponymous protagonist that Priam, the King of Troy, would in his position have happily walked on the purple carpet. Despite his professed misgivings, Agamemnon allows his footwear to be removed, and walks like a god or tyrant. Wilde's *Salomé*, who is persistently portrayed as a goddess, cedes to Herod's insistent demands to dance, has her slaves take off her sandals (547; 724), and 'dances on blood' (724; 'dans le sang'; 548)—the blood spilt on the ground by the suicide Young Syrian, in which Hérode slipped on entering. By getting Agamemnon to play the part of a barbarian autocrat in the presence of the Argive Elders, Clytemnestra is possibly attempting to make a statement about the king and to add political legitimacy to his death—to present it as a political assassination.⁴³ In his *Jewish Antiquities* (xviii. 116–9), Josephus gives us an insight into John the Baptist's death that the Gospels omit: Herod saw

⁴² On *De Profundis* and the *Agamemnon*, see Introduction in this thesis.

⁴³ Hall (2010: 215).

a political, revolutionary danger in the preacher.⁴⁴ In Wilde's drama, Hérode, who realizes too late the error of swearing by his gods (550; 726), speaks of Iokanaan's beheading as a hubristic act 'against an unknown God' (730; 'contre un Dieu inconnu'; 561). Josephus reports that the Jews believed that the destruction of Herod's army by Aretas the Nabatean was an act of divine vengeance for his murder of John.

In the *Agamemnon*, the crimson carpet alludes, among other things, to the bloodshed of the Trojan War, beginning with the blood of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's own daughter Iphigenia, who is sacrificed at Aulis by command of her father in order to obtain favourable winds for the Greek fleet. The blood-red carpet also foreshadows the net in which Clytemnestra will trap and kill Agamemnon. The purple thread that runs through *Dorian Gray* is even more apparent in *Salomé*. Salomé likens Iokanaan's eyes to 'black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry' (713; 'des trous noirs laissés par des flambeaux sur une tapisserie de Tyr'; 520–1). When Hérode is attempting to entice Salomé to dance with the promise of half of his kingdom, the tetrarch's garland suddenly starts to burn his forehead, recalling Creon and his daughter in Euripides' *Medea*. Having pulled the wreath off, Hérode self-consciously comments:

Comme ils sont rouges ces pétales! On dirait des taches de sang sur la nappe. Cela ne fait rien. Il ne faut pas trouver des symboles dans chaque chose qu'on voit. Cela rend la vie impossible. Il serait mieux de dire que les taches de sang sont aussi belles que les pétales de rose. Il serait beaucoup mieux de dire cela ... Mais ne parlons pas de cela. (545–6)

How red those petals are! They are like stains of blood on the cloth. That does not matter. It is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees. It makes life too full of terrors. It were better to say that stains of blood are as lovely as rose-petals. It were better far to say that. (724)

Try as he might to ignore the signs, Hérode recognizes that Salomé dancing on the ground that is stained with the blood of the young captain of his guard, in which he has already slipped, is 'an evil omen' (724; 'un très mauvais présage'; 548), which as it transpires, predicts the spilling of Iokanaan's blood at the end of the drama. In Charles Ricketts's designs for *Salomé*, Hérode and Hérodiad were to be dressed in blood-red or purple

⁴⁴ See Massyngbaerde Ford (2010: 50–1).

(*Salomé*, 508).⁴⁵ Commenting on the aesthetic qualities of *Salomé*, Polina Dimova fails to take into account the *Agamemnon*: ‘though the Biblical account is sparse on sensuous detail, Wilde’s play, together with the vast iconographic and literary Salome tradition, elaborates on the sensory gaps.’⁴⁶ The centrality of the *Agamemnon* to Wilde’s thinking on tragedy is revealed by a remark the author made to an unidentified correspondent, ‘Personally I like comedy to be intensely modern, and like my tragedy to walk in purple and to be remote’ ([c. 1894], *Complete Letters*, 626).

Salomé’s 1893 French-language edition was bound in what Wilde liked to describe as ‘Tyrian purple’ wrappers, with lettering of ‘fading’ or ‘tired silver’. The combination of purple and silver was also supposed to appear in the proposed stage production, for which the stage designer Graham Robertson suggested a violet sky.⁴⁷ As Nicholas Frankel explains, the ‘highly unusual, purple paper wrapper, with its silver modern-face lettering’ establishes the edition by the French publisher Librairie de l’Art Indépendant ‘as a symbolist book with synaesthetic aspirations, fundamentally in accord with symbolist color theory’.⁴⁸ Wilde evidently admired the French edition of his play. Frankel writes, ‘Of the total print-run of 600 copies, no less than one hundred were held back from sale, most of which may be presumed to be presentation copies.’⁴⁹ Wilde sent copies of his purple-bound book beautiful to a number of friends and literary acquaintances, calling attention to its signature colour. For example, the playwright writes to the critic, author, and future librarian to the House of Lords Edmund Gosse from Babbacombe Cliff:

The charming house in which I am staying contains many Burne-Joneses but not one Blue Book! So I send this to your club, along with the play. But I have no fear but that *Salomé* will find her way to that delightful library you have let us know of, and if she be not too Tyrian in her raiment be suffered to abide there for a season’ ([Date of receipt 23 Feb. 1893], *Complete Letters*, 553).

⁴⁵ See Dimova (2016: 25).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Navarre (2011: 83).

⁴⁸ Frankel (2000: 56).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Wilde tells the author and iconographer Campbell Dodgson, ‘we must talk of purple things and drink of purple wine’ ([postmark 23 Feb. 1893], 555). Moreover, the playwright highlights the complementarity of purple and gold, which recalls ‘the purple thread [that] runs through the gold cloth of *Dorian Gray*’: ‘Bosie is very gilt-haired and I have bound *Salomé* in purple to suit him. That tragic daughter of passion appeared on Thursday last, and is now dancing for the head of the English public’ (555–6). Wilde informs the novelist Frances (‘Frankie’) Forbes-Robertson, ‘I am consoling myself by reading *Salomé*, that terrible coloured little tragedy I once in some strange mood wrote. A copy in Tyrian purple and tired silver is on its way to you’ ([c. Feb. 1893], *Complete Letters*, 555).⁵⁰ As well as blood, the colour purple is associated with religion and royalty. The colours of *Salomé*’s binding befitted Wilde’s ‘Byzantine’ play,⁵¹ as silver uncials were placed on purple vellum in Byzantine gospel books, for example, the Codex Purpureas Beratinus, which contains the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew—the two Gospels which record the ‘Salomé’ story.⁵² The people of Jerusalem paved the royal and messianic way of Jesus as Lord and Son of David with simple cloaks of ordinary pilgrims as well as fronds and vegetation from nearby fields, and not rich garments or broideries of Roman or Persian imperial purple. However, the Church of Rome, appropriating the trappings of Empire, would make papal purple central to its colour scheme.

The purple thread of the *Agamemnon* also runs through Wilde’s ‘Nightingale’. The red rose that the Nightingale fabricates is stained with her own heart’s-blood. As we have already seen, the Nightingale’s red rose evokes Philomela’s web, on which is woven ‘purple signs’ (*purpureasque notas*; *Ov., Met.*, vi. 577). Just as the crimson carpet of the *Agamemnon* simultaneously symbolizes bloodshed past and impending, so too do the purple marks on Philomela’s tapestry suggest the violence that has been perpetrated by

⁵⁰ Wilde tells Bernard Shaw, ‘Salomé presents herself to you in purple raiment’ ([postmark 23 Feb. 1893], *Complete Letters*, 554).

⁵¹ Wilde, quoted in Jullian (1969: 257). On the ‘Byzantine’ nature of Wilde’s *Salomé*, which, as I argue, reverses the medieval Euripidean cento, the *Christus Patiens*, see Ch. 4 in this thesis.

⁵² Navarre (2011: 83 and 86 n. 8).

Tereus on the princess and look forward to Procne and Philomela's slaughter of Tereus and Procne's son Itys, who is portrayed as a very small and innocent child, like Iphigenia in the *Agamemnon*. The red rose that Wilde's Nightingale literally pours her heart's-blood into is destined for the Student's love, the daughter of the Professor. When the Student rushes to the Professor's house to bring the red rose to his daughter, he finds her 'sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog [...] lying at her feet' (83). The occupation of the Professor's daughter picks up the thread not only of Philomela but also of the Iliadic Helen, who is first found in her bedchamber at Troy

weaving a great web,
 a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles
 of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians,
 struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god.⁵³
 [ἡ δὲ] μέγαν ἱστὸν ὕφαινε,
 δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους
 Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
 οὓς ἔθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρηος παλαμάων. (Hom., *Il.*, iii. 125–8)

In Book III of the *Iliad*, as Gilbert tells Ernest in Wilde's 'The Critic as Artist', 'the swan-like daughter of Leda comes out on the battlements, and looks down at the tide of war' (*Criticism*, 149–50). In John Addington Symonds's chapter 'The Women of Homer' in the Second Series of his *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1876), to which Wilde responded in an unfinished and undated draft of (what seems to be) a review essay, Helen is characterized as an ancient *belle dame sans merci*: 'She is not touched by the passion she inspires, or by the wreck of empires ruined in her cause.'⁵⁴ Spinning and weaving are typically womanly activities in Homer and are most notably associated with Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Like Helen before her marriage to Menelaus, Penelope is beset by numerous suitors in her husband's absence. But unlike Helen, who succumbed to Paris during her husband's much shorter absence, Penelope succeeds in fending off her suitors. In the

⁵³ *The 'Iliad' of Homer*, tr. Lattimore (1951).

⁵⁴ Symonds (1879: 73). The manuscript of Wilde's response to Symonds's chapter has also been titled 'The Women of Homer' and has been published in a 2008 edition by Thomas Wright and Donald Mead. On Wilde's 'The Women of Homer' as a response to Symonds's chapter, see Nisbet (2018: 38, 45, 50–3).

Odyssey (xxiv. 192–202), the shade of Agamemnon favourably compares Penelope to Helen’s sister Clytemnestra in relation to marital fidelity.⁵⁵

Unfortunately for Wilde’s Student, the Professor’s daughter has other suitors. When he presents her with the red rose she requested, ‘you will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love it,’ she rejects it because ‘the Chamberlain’s nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers’ (83). The Student reproaches the Professor’s daughter for her ingratitude and throws the rose into the street, where it falls into the gutter and is run over by a cart wheel. The girl tartly retorts, ‘who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don’t believe you have even got silver buckles on your shoes as the Chamberlain’s nephew has’ (84). In her own perverted, warped way, Wilde’s Salomé is, by comparison, the epitome of the romantic heroine, rejecting material wealth for love. In this respect, the Wildean Salomé resembles the Tarpeia of the Latin elegist Propertius, who is motivated to betray Rome’s citadel for love and not jewels. Helen Zagona points out the proximity of Salomé’s extraordinary *modus moriendi*—the princess is crushed to death beneath the shields of the tetrarch’s soliders—to that of the legendary traitress Tarpeia, the maiden who gets her comeuppance for betraying Rome’s citadel by being buried beneath the shields of the enemy Sabine soldiers.⁵⁶ However, Zagona narrowly misses the mark, as she references the version of the legend where Tarpeia conspires with the Sabines in exchange for “what they wore on their left arms”, by which the gold-digging girl meant their bracelets.⁵⁷ That it is Hérode who gives the order for the execution of his stepdaughter, ‘her mother’s child’ (728; ‘la fille de sa mère’; 557), to appease ‘an unknown god’ (730; ‘un Dieu inconnu’; 561) roots Salomé’s death within the context of the *Agamemnon*.

⁵⁵ Just as Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra is more the agent of her husband’s downfall than her Homeric counterpart, who is merely following Aegisthus’ lead, Wilde’s Salomé contrives John the Baptist’s beheading, and not her mother, as in the Gospel of Mark.

⁵⁶ Zagona (1960: 128 n. 31).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

In classical myths of ‘original sin’, materialism and seduction are repeatedly connected. The golden necklace given to Amphiaraus’ wife Eriphyle by Polynices in the Theban Cycle has a symbolic equivalent in the golden lamb that Agamemnon’s mother Aerope gave to her husband Atreus’ brother and rival for the Mycenaean throne Thyestes. Thyestes’ adultery with Aerope anticipates that of his son Aegisthus with Clytemnestra and is recalled in the *Agamemnon*. The ‘original sin’ that caused the Trojan War was Paris’ abduction of Helen, the classic *archē kakōn* (‘origin of troubles’) of antiquity. In his Decadent bible, *À Rebours* (1884), Joris-Karl Huysmans writes that Moreau’s painted Salomé, as viewed by Des Esseintes, is a ‘monstrous Beast’, ‘like the Helen of ancient myth’, ‘bedecked [...] with precious stones and purple robes’, resembling the Whore of Babylon.⁵⁸ Jullian observes that Wilde’s Salomé and his Sphinx from the 1894 poem of the same name ‘have Moreau’s jewels and palaces’, as well as ‘the bored caprices of Helen who lets her brocade trail in the blood of handsome young men’.⁵⁹

Having been rebuffed by his love, Wilde’s aggrieved Student decides not to believe in true love anymore and returns to Philosophy. Wilde has the Professor’s daughter sitting in the doorway of her father’s house with her little dog at her feet. In Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the Sphinx, the monstrous hybrid with the head of a woman and the body of a lion who guarded the way to the city of Thebes, is referred to by the eponymous protagonist as ‘the riddle-singing bitch’ (ῥαψωδὸς κόων; 391). For all his book learning, Wilde’s Student is unable to solve ‘the mystery of Love’ (80) and the enigma of woman.

Wilde’s depiction of the Professor’s daughter also recalls the descriptions of Helen and Clytemnestra as dogs in Homer and Aeschylus.⁶⁰ In the *Agamemnon* (606–8), Clytemnestra ironically expresses the wish that her husband find the wife in his palace to be a faithful watchdog of the house, friendly to him and hostile to ill-wishers. There is a suggestion of Clytemnestra as a guard dog and a pet in the Chorus’ warning against

⁵⁸ Huysmans (1959), *Against Nature*, tr. Baldick, Penguin Classics, ch. 5.

⁵⁹ Jullian (1969: 252).

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the dog motif in the *Agamemnon*, see Raeburn and Thomas (2011: lxvi–lxviii).

sycophants who ‘fawn’ (σαίνειν, used primarily of dogs; 798), which attends Agamemnon’s arrival. The full extent of the dangers posed by Clytemnestra the bitch is only brought out explicitly by Cassandra (1228–33). In *De Profundis*, Ellmann writes, Wilde portrays himself as the fabled man, described in the choral ode just before Agamemnon’s entrance, who had kept as a pet a lion cub that grew up to wreak havoc on his household, killing its sheep, by the will of the gods (*Ag.*, 717–36).⁶¹ The Argive Elders are referring to Helen in Troy, who is a classical model for the gilt-haired, pet-named ‘Bosie’ Douglas, the agent of Nemesis for the House of Wilde. The dog imagery of the *Agamemnon* occurs on several occasions in the context of the sacrifice theme, which will be discussed at the end of this chapter. The fabled lion who represents Helen is depicted as a priest of Ate (the personification of destruction) whose sacrificial victims are the slaughtered flocks who stand for the Trojans.

In the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is also portrayed as an animal sacrificial victim who can be compared with Helen, Clytemnestra, and the riddling Sphinx. As we have already seen, the passage from Aeschylus’ tragedy that Wilde translated for TCD’s *Kottabos* was part of the lyric exchange between Cassandra and the Chorus. Regarding the Cassandra of the *Agamemnon*, Rush Rehm writes that ‘[t]he movement and music accompanying her song could suggest, alternately, a marriage hymn and funereal dirge, perhaps echoing the recreation of Helen’s arrival at Troy in the second stasimon’.⁶² To the same issue of *Kottabos* in which Wilde’s translation of the Cassandra scene appeared, the Oxford undergraduate contributed a poem, ‘Δηξιθυμον Ἔρωτος Ἄνθος’ (‘The Rose of Love, And with a Rose’s Thorns’). The title of Wilde’s poem comes from the Chorus’ description of Helen in Aeschylus’ tragedy as ‘Love’s spirit-biting flower’ (*Ag.*, 720), and anticipates the imagery of ‘The Nightingale and the Rose’.⁶³

⁶¹ Ellmann (1988: 482).

⁶² Rehm (1992: 86).

⁶³ When revised for the first edition of Wilde’s *Poems* (1881), the poem was divided into two, ‘La Bella Donna della mia Mente’ and ‘Chanson’ (see *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*; i: *Poems and Poems in Prose*, ed. Fong and Beckson, OET (2000), 224–5).

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz demonstrates that Greek tragedy continually conflates *eros* with the pathos of female characters.⁶⁴ *Eros* and female pathos are also intertwined in the self-sacrifice of Wilde's Nightingale, who, as she presses her breast against the Rose-tree's thorn, sings of 'the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl', 'the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid' (82), and, finally, 'the Love that is perfected by Death, [...] the Love that dies not in the tomb' (83). As the red rose is being formed, its colour is compared at one point to 'the flush in the face of the bridegroom when he kisses the lips of the bride' (82). The link between love and death and weddings and funerals is famously found in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, which Wilde evokes not only in the Sibyl Vane affair in *Dorian Gray*, but also in his five-act blank-verse Jacobean tragedy-meets-Victorian melodrama *The Duchess of Padua*.⁶⁵ In the final act of Wilde's *Duchess*, the heroine Beatrice visits the cell of her beloved, the protagonist Guido, who has been wrongly imprisoned for her murder of her husband. Wilde inverts the ending of *Romeo and Juliet* by having the hero wake to find that the heroine has drunk all the poison and stab himself with her dagger. The Christic 'Love that is perfected by Death, [...] the Love that dies not in the tomb' of which Wilde's Nightingale sings is twisted at the climax of *Salomé* when the head of the prisoner Iokanaan is brought forth from the cistern for the princess's perverse, necrophilic/cannibalistic pleasure. Instead of singing a wedding song, Aeschylus' bride-like Cassandra, about to go to her death with Agamemnon, recalls Thyestes' adultery with the wife of Atreus (*Ag.*, 1192–3) and infants served up for their father's meal (1095–8; cf. 1217–22)—a reference to the cannibal feast prepared for Thyestes by his brother. The adultery and cannibalism of the House of Atreus are mythically associated in the *Agamemnon* with the same themes in the story of Procne and Philomela.

⁶⁴ Rabinowitz (1992).

⁶⁵ Wilde wrote *The Duchess* also indirectly evokes the House of Atreus through its use of classic Renaissance revenge tragedy stock scenes that originated in Aeschylus' *Choephoroe* and Sophocles' *Electra*. Joseph Donohue (2013a: 34) discusses *The Duchess* in the context of one of his favourite nineteenth-century plays, Swinburne's dramatic poem *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), which was 'on a classical subject' and 'explored themes of love and pain and bitterness, framed by a harsh, Aeschylean moral law and its tragic consequences'.

As well as the *Agamemnon*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Gospels, Wilde probably had Sophocles' eponymous *Antigone* in mind when writing on love and death. Sealed within a cavern, a so-called bridal chamber of Hades (Soph., *Ant.*, 1205), the maiden hangs herself with her veil, her skin stained with Haemon's blood. Rabinowitz comments, 'The veil evokes the virgin about to be married, the blood the blood of defloration.'⁶⁶ Wilde's only really substantial underlining in his copy of the First Series of Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873) concerns Sophocles' heroine. The text that Wilde underlines is: 'This conception of hereditary destiny seems to be strongly illustrated by many plays. Orestes, Oedipus, Antigone are unable to escape their doom.'⁶⁷ Wilde interjects with his corrective marginalia: 'Wrong about Antigone. She goes deliberately to meet death.' Towards the end of *Dorian Gray*, the protagonist tells Lord Henry Wotton, 'You would sacrifice anybody, Harry, for the sake of an epigram,' to which the answer, 'The world goes to the altar of its own accord' (342). Nisbet stresses the significance of Wilde's marginal emendation of Symonds's text: 'Wilde's critical engagement with the substance and style of Symonds's argument begins here, on an issue on which he clearly feels strongly.'⁶⁸ Sophocles' *Antigone* and Aeschylus' *Iphigenia* are two key classical models of willing virginal sacrificial victims for several of Wilde's characters, including his *Nightingale*, Sibyl Vane in *Dorian Gray*,⁶⁹ Iokanaan in *Salomé*, and, as we shall see, the Swallow in 'The Happy Prince'.

Wilde's *Nightingale* bears not only a resemblance to Cassandra, but also certain characteristics of Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*. The singing *Nightingale* is a performer, as is Clytemnestra, the actor and rhetorician, playing the part of dutiful and subordinate consort. Like the Wildean *Nightingale*, Clytemnestra is almost orgasmic in performing an act of sacrifice, in her case the murder of her husband (*Ag.*, 1380–92). Rabinowitz writes, 'If in the rhetoric of the *Antigone* death is made marriage, in the rhetoric of Clytemnestra

⁶⁶ Rabinowitz (1992: 40). See also Loraux (1987: ch. 1, 'The Rope and the Sword', 1–30).

⁶⁷ Symonds (1873: 190). See Nisbet (2018: 43).

⁶⁸ Nisbet (2018: 43).

⁶⁹ On Sibyl Vane as a Euripidean sacrificial victim, see Ch. 2 in this thesis.

murder is made erotic.’⁷⁰ Clytemnestra is almost equally lascivious in her jealousy of her husband’s mistress, Cassandra. Although Agamemnon professes reluctance to trample on luxurious tapestries, the king reveals his tendency to parade his worldly possessions by imprudently showing off his war spoil, the daughter of Priam.

While a sexual relationship with a war captive was not illicit, even for a married man, death awaits all men in Greek tragedy who inconsiderately bring their concubines into the marital home rather than keeping them at a judicious distance from their wives.⁷¹ To quote Mrs Erlynne’s words to Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, ‘manners before morals!’⁷² Wilde plays on this unwritten tragic ‘rule’ in his first comedy of manners, which he wrote amid three failed or unrealized tragedies: two from the early 1880s, *Vera; or, The Nihilists* and *The Duchess*, and *Salomé*. In the first of Wilde’s four commercially successful Society Comedies, Lord Windermere offends his wife by inviting the allegedly ‘infamous’ woman (*Fan*, 22), Mrs Erlynne, into the family home. Lady Windermere threatens to insult the ‘other woman’: ‘If that woman crosses my threshold, I shall strike her across the face’ (27), declares the young wife and mother, whose weapon of choice is the titular ‘fatal’ fan (71) given to her by her husband that day for turning twenty-one. Tragedy lay around the corner for Wilde himself when his increasingly reckless sexual behaviour began to draw the suspicions of even his supposedly naïve and trusting wife Constance, who, according to her brother Otho, Ellmann writes, ‘suspected her husband’s reorientation only once, and that was not until 1895, when she came back to the house

⁷⁰ Rabinowitz (1992: 42).

⁷¹ See Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, where Heracles brings back Iole to the family home as another ‘wife’ (*damar*; 428), thus angering his actual wife Deianira. See also Euripides’ *Andromache*, where Neoptolemus infuriates his young wife, Hermione, by installing the eponymous heroine in the marital home. As Orestes remarks to Hermione, ‘That’s a bad thing—for a man to live with two women’ (κακόν γ’ ἔλεξας, δίσσο’ ἔν’ ἄνδρ’ ἔχειν λέχη; Eur., *Andr.*, 909; tr. Vellacott 1972). In the prosecution speech *Against Neaera* (lix. 22), inaccurately attributed to Demosthenes, the orator Apollodorus praises Lysias for not putting his girlfriends up at his own house, out of respect for his wife and mother.

⁷² Wilde (1999), *Fan*, ed. Small, NM, 76. Ross (2013: 151) writes that Mrs Erlynne’s *bon mot* encapsulates Aristotle’s theory of *hexis* (a state created by consciously acquiring habits) in his *Ethics* (ii. 1–2), which gives precedence to ethical form over ethical content: ‘Seem what you would be,’ as opposed to the Socratic injunction, ‘Be what you would seem.’

unexpectedly'.⁷³ After her humiliating, speechless confrontation with Mrs Erlynne at her birthday ball, Lady Windermere confides in her admirer and would-be lover, Lord Darlington, 'I did not ask her. He insisted on her coming—against my entreaties—against my commands. Oh! the house is tainted for me!' (41).

The most financially lucrative of any of Wilde's works during his own lifetime, *Fan* is, like *Salomé* and the *Agamemnon*, preoccupied with material wealth and possessions, which are invested with a symbolic power. Whereas Lady Windermere's husband has presented her with a simple, unassuming fan, Lord Darlington tells her that *he* 'would have covered the whole street in front of [her] house with flowers for [her] to walk on' (7). Regenia Gagnier revealingly describes this act of covering the street as 'carpeting'.⁷⁴ Just as Hérode in *Salomé* instructs his attendants to lay carpets on his entrance (716; 529), before he slips in blood, at the beginning of *Fan* the heroine is informed by her butler that '[t]he men want to know if they are to put the carpets on the terrace for to-night' (10). Lord Darlington's 'carpet' of flowers for Lady Windermere to walk on evokes not only Clytemnestra's purple tapestries for Agamemnon but also Wilde's carpet of lilies for La Bernhardt on her arrival in England with the Comédie-Française to make her London début as Racine's Phèdre in May 1879. Bernhardt herself records the event in her memoirs:

One of my comrades who was just near, and with whom I was not a favourite, said to me in a spiteful tone:

'They'll make you a carpet of flowers soon.'

'Here is one!' exclaimed a young man, throwing an armful of lilies on the ground in front of me.

I stopped short, rather confused, not daring to walk on these white flowers, but the crowd pressing on behind compelled me to advance, and the poor lilies had to be trodden under foot.'⁷⁵

The 'young man' in question being, of course, Wilde. Lord Darlington's fanciful carpet of flowers for Lady Windermere sounds absurdly extravagant when compared to the less ostentatious gift from her husband on her birthday. The heroine's birthday is no ordinary one—it is her twenty-first, her coming of age, which as a cultural and legal rite of passage

⁷³ Otho Holland (Lloyd), letter to Arthur Ransome (28 Feb. 1912), cited in Ellmann (1988: 262).

⁷⁴ Gagnier (1986: 119).

⁷⁵ Bernhardt (1907: 297).

signifies the inheritance of property. Lady Windermere's simple fan is tainted with filthy lucre—its transfer among the different characters reflects the transfer of money in the play.⁷⁶ Lord Windermere's unpretentious present to his wife is contrasted with 'the monstrous sums of money' he squanders on 'that woman' (as Mrs Erlynne is continually called)—clandestine instalments to the tune of £600, £700, and £400 (*Fan*, 22). At Lady Windermere's coming-of-age birthday ball, the blackmailing Mrs Erlynne requests from Lord Windermere a 'handsome' settlement of £2,500 annually as 'an additional attraction' (47–8) for the man she intends to marry, Lord Augustus, who ends up carrying Mrs Erlynne, the financial burden of being bound to her, and Lady Windermere's fan 'out of England' (88). The box-office earnings of *Fan* enabled Wilde to fund his lavish lifestyle of reckless extravagance with Douglas, which bore more than a passing resemblance to the world of his first Society Comedy, with its 'mad' infatuations (22), 'shameful' passions (26), name-engraved gifts, extortioners, 'fatal' letters (52), and wronged wives. As we shall see later in this chapter, Wilde's *Fan* is alluded to in a work that refers to the *Agamemnon* and deals with similar themes of materialism and marital infidelity—Rattigan's *The Browning Version*.

IV. Wilde's Fairy Tales and the *Agamemnon*

As has already been mentioned, the passage of the *Agamemnon* that Wilde translated for *Kottabos* was a portion of the lyric *amoibaion* (exchange) between Cassandra and the Chorus of Argive Elders, who compare the Trojan princess to the mythical nightingale (*Ag.*, 1140–9):

XOΠOΣ Thy prophecies are but a lying tale,
 For cruel gods have brought thee to this state,
 And of thyself, and thine own wretched fate,
 Sing you this song, and these unhallow'd lays,
 Like the brown bird of grief insatiate
 Crying for sorrow of its dreary days;

⁷⁶ Gagnier (1986: 119).

Crying for Itys, Itys, in the vale—
The nightingale! The nightingale!

ΚΑΣΑΝΔΡΑ Yet I would that to me they had given
The fate of that singer so clear,
Fleet wings to fly up into heaven,
Away from all mourning and fear;
For ruin and slaughter await me—the cleaving
with sword and with spear.⁷⁷

Χο. φρενομανής τις εἶ θεοφόρητος, ἀμ-
φι δ' αὐτᾶς θροεῖς
νόμον ἄνομον, οἷά τις ξουθὰ
ἀκόρετος βοᾶς, φεῦ, φιλοίκοις φρεσὶν
Ἴτυν Ἴτυν στένουσ' ἀμφιθαλῆ κακοῖς
ἀηδῶν βίον.

Κα. ἰὼ ἰὼ λιγείας μόρον ἀηδόνοσ·
πτεροφόρον γάρ οἱ περὶ δέμας βάλλοντο
θεοὶ γλυκύν τ' ἀγῶνα κλαυμάτων ἄτερ·
ἐμοὶ δὲ μίμνει σχισμὸς ἀμφήκει δορί.

The Chorus compares Cassandra's dochmiac singing to the song of the nightingale. The association between the nightingale and singing has an etymological aetiology, as the Greek word for 'nightingale' (*aēdōn*) derives from the verb 'to sing' (*aeidein*).⁷⁸ While the classic Ovidian version of the myth has Philomela changed into a nightingale and Procne into a swallow, in Aeschylus the sisters' transformations are reversed. The nightingale mentioned by the Chorus represents the metamorphosed Procne lamenting her son Itys.⁷⁹

Although Procne as *mater dolorosa* resembles not Cassandra but Clytemnestra, grieving for her beloved child slaughtered as a sacrificial victim, Iphigenia, there are points of comparison between the nightingale and the Trojan princess, as Jeni Williams elaborates:

The play as a whole testifies to the truth of Cassandra's vision of the tragic future—just as the nightingale sings of past tragedy—and thus Cassandra, like the nightingale, speaks a truth which is accessible only to the spectator who stands outside the momentary linear unfolding of the plot. Simultaneously the pathos is heightened by an irreconcilable confrontation—itsself within the confines of artificial form—of the abstractions of art with the pain of experience—as Cassandra pointedly compares her agonies, so clearly echoing those of the myth, with the thoughtless existence of a real bird.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ 'A Fragment from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus', in *Poems*, 30.

⁷⁸ Hall (2002a: 7–8).

⁷⁹ Procne's and Tereus' son lends his name to Wilde's long poem 'The Burden of Itys', one of the poet's own personal favourites, which recalls his 1877 tour of Greece and Italy during his penultimate year at Oxford, and displays his preference for Greek paganism (over Roman Catholicism). Wilde, nevertheless, still follows Ovid and other Latin authors in having Philomela rather than Procne transformed into a nightingale. See *Poems*, 253.

⁸⁰ Williams (1997: 26).

At the start of Wilde's 'Nightingale', the eponymous protagonist similarly draws a distinction between her own 'abstractions of art' and the Student's 'pain of experience'. Thinking she has finally found in the Student the true lover of whom she has so often sung, the Nightingale speaks of her revelatory recognition in terms that touch on not only the discrepancy between artistic abstraction and real-life experience but also the paradox of tragic pleasure: "Here indeed, is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers: what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing" (79). Whereas Aeschylus' Cassandra 'pointedly compares her agonies, so clearly echoing those of the myth, with the thoughtless existence of a real bird', Wilde's Nightingale compares the Student's agony in his garden with her own bird existence. The Nightingale realizes that her newly acquired understanding of Love will entail much suffering, to allude to the proverbial Aeschylean phrase from the *Agamemnon*, traditionally translated in the nineteenth century as 'learning through suffering' (πάθει μάθος; 177): "Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," cried the Nightingale, "and Life is very dear to all. [...] Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?" (81). While the Student seeks to insulate himself from further figurative heartbreak by returning to the academic study of philosophical thought at the end of the story, the Nightingale experiences the feelings behind her artistic expression by embracing literal heartbreak.

Wilde's Nightingale initially reacts to the Student's loud complaints that open the story with silent contemplation. The Nightingale, who 'understood the secret of the Student's sorrow', sits in silence in the oak-tree and thinks about 'the mystery of Love' (80). The Nightingale's appreciation of the Student is not, however, reciprocated. Just as the Chorus of Elders in the *Agamemnon* fail to comprehend the nightingale-like Cassandra, so too does the learned young Student not understand what the Nightingale says to him:

‘Be happy,’ cried the Nightingale, ‘be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with my own heart’s-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though he is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame-coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense.’

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books. (81)

The limits of the Student’s (book) learning are in evidence here. Whereas the nocturnal Nightingale ‘understood the secret of the Student’s sorrow’, the Student, even though ‘all the secrets of philosophy’ are his, ‘could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books’. This acolyte of Apollonian enlightenment is left in the dark when it comes to ‘the mystery of Love’, ‘for Love is wiser than Philosophy’.

Literae Humaniores, which is what the Student appears to be reading, was meant to be the other side of the coin to the other major field of study at Oxford, that is, *res divinae*, or theology. While Lit. Hum. was concerned with human learning, Lit. Div. dealt with learning that came from God. Although the Apollonian Student is allied with Olympian loftiness, ‘he only knew the things that are written *down*’ (my emphasis). Although the Nightingale is associated in her chthonic Dionysian guise with the Underworld, she is naturally a creature of the air. That the Student ‘only knew the things that are written down’ is obviously supposed to be viewed as a negative trait (as ‘he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him’). In the Ovidian Philomela episode, however, the Thracian Tereus is unable to read what is written down, namely, the ‘marks’ (*notas*; *Met.*, vi. 577) that make up Philomela’s woven message, which is understood by the Athenian Procne.⁸¹ The tyrant’s illiteracy is but one more damning indictment of his savage, uncivilised character.

In ‘Nightingale’, Wilde juxtaposes the Student’s critical response to the last song the Nightingale sings before her self-sacrifice with nature’s positive appreciation:

⁸¹ In Sophocles’ fragmentary *Tereus*, Philomela also uses writing as well as images to tell her story (Dobrov 1993: 222).

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of the little Nightingale, who had built her nest in his branches.

‘Sing me one last song,’ he whispered; ‘I shall feel very lonely when you are gone.’

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.

When she had finished her song the Student got up, and pulled a notebook and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

‘She has form,’ he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove—‘that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good!’ (82)

Whereas Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* moves from a lyric mode to speech, Wilde’s

Nightingale goes from speaking to singing. However, the Chorus of Elders and the young

Student in both cases remain none the wiser. The Student’s appraisal of the Nightingale’s

song recall the commonplace Victorian criticisms of Ovid (and other ‘lesser’ Latin poets)

as artificial, insincere, and trivial. The only time that Latin is mentioned in the story is

when the Student, upon discovering under his window the red rose made by the

Nightingale, declares, ‘It is so beautiful that I am sure that it has a long Latin name’ (83).

Although the Student identifies the rose as unique, like a true Victorian he immediately

subjects it to scientific classification. While Lit. Hum. in its early days encompassed the

study of natural sciences, the Latin of horticultural nomenclature is a far cry from the

language of Latin love poetry. The Student’s utilitarianism, as evident in his comment that

the Nightingale’s song does not ‘do any practical good’, is echoed at the end of the story

by his statement that Love ‘is not half as useful as Logic [...] it is quite unpractical, and [...]

in this age to be practical is everything’ (84).

The Student’s failure to understand and appreciate the Nightingale’s speech and song

anticipates his failure to recognize the Nightingale’s self-sacrifice, as well as both his

beloved’s and his own rejection of the rose, the product of that sacrifice. Whereas the

Nightingale overhears the Student’s cries at the start of the story and identifies him as the

true lover of whom she has so often sung, the Student falls asleep before the Nightingale

carries out her act of creative self-sacrifice and overlooks her ‘lying dead in the long grass,

with the thorn in her heart’ when leaning down to pluck the rose (83). When the

Professor's daughter spurns the rose, the Student angrily discards it, decides to abandon Love for Philosophy, and returns to his room to read his dusty books.

While in the *Agamemnon* the nightingale of which Cassandra sings represents Procne, the Trojan princess more closely resembles Philomela.⁸² Philomela had been raped by Tereus, and Cassandra, already seduced by Apollo and coerced into becoming Agamemnon's concubine, is also sexually victimized. In addition to their bodies, Philomela's and Cassandra's voices have been ravaged. Whereas Philomela's physical violation by Tereus extends to having her tongue excised to stop her from speaking out, Cassandra has been breathed on and cursed by Apollo with never having her truthful prophetic statements believed (*Ag.*, 1202–12).⁸³ The title of Sophocles' lost *Tereus* (between 468 and 414 BC) seems to suggest a focus on the Thracian king, but we know that the play did at least feature Philomela as a *dramatis persona*, albeit probably *muta*. In David Fitzpatrick's reconstruction of this fragmentary Sophoclean tragedy, the Thracian king arrives on stage with the mute Philomela, either lying about her or, more likely, having disguised her as a male servant while claiming she is dead (fr. 585 [C]).⁸⁴ From her entrance onstage in the *Agamemnon* accompanying the Mycenaean king as his sex slave, Cassandra is also a *kophon prosopon* for almost three hundred lines.

The last twenty to thirty or so of these three hundred lines focus directly on Cassandra's refusal to speak. That Aeschylus draws so much attention to Cassandra's denial of speech is unsurprising, seeing as her silence is unparalleled in surviving Athenian drama. In opposition to the silent Trojan princess, Clytemnestra, mistress manipulator of words, exploits her verbal powers in order to prevail upon her sexual rival to follow her inside the

⁸² Rehm (1992: 85) seems to confuse Procne and Philomela when he states that '[c]omparing Cassandra to Procne is apt, for she is raped by Apollo, forced to "marry" Agamemnon'. While the sisters' metamorphoses, as they appear in earlier Greek sources, are swapped in Ovid, their prior experiences are not switched, unlike in certain Latin writers who have Tereus marry Philomela and lust after Procne instead (see Conington 1858: *ad Virg., Ecl.*, vi. 78). One way in which Aeschylus' Cassandra could be said to recall Procne is in her deceitful denial of children to her lover, in her case Apollo—a deceptive act that moves him to take revenge on her (*Ag.*, 1208–12).

⁸³ According to a tradition reported by Servius (*ad Virg., Aen.*, ii. 247), Apollo spits into Cassandra's mouth to render her divinations unbelievable.

⁸⁴ Fitzpatrick (2007: 41).

palace on the pretext of participating in a celebratory animal sacrifice she has prepared to welcome her husband home. Cassandra, however, resolutely refuses to respond and remains silent. For the first and only time in Aeschylus' play, Clytemnestra rhetorical fireworks fail to control the dramatic action, and it is only when the Argive queen gives up and retreats into the royal residence that Cassandra breaks her silence.⁸⁵

Clytemnestra herself implicitly compares Cassandra to Philomela when she contrasts herself with the hitherto speechless Trojan princess while attempting to lure her out of Agamemnon's chariot and into the palace: ἀλλ' εἴπερ ἐστὶ μὴ χελιδόνος δίκην | ἀγνώτα φωνὴν βάρβαρον κεκτημένη, | ἔσω φρενῶν λέγουσα πείθω νιν λόγῳ ('Why, if she is not, in the swallow's fashion, | An unknown and barbaric voice possessed of, | I, with speech—speaking in mind's scope—persuade her'; 1050–2). Here the Greek queen characterizes herself in contradistinction to the Trojan princess through language. Even before Cassandra has uttered a single syllable, Clytemnestra describes her rival as possibly possessing a voice that is 'unknown' (*agnōta*) and 'barbaric' (*barbaron*). The adjective *barbaros* ('barbarian') applies, first and foremost, to anyone who does not speak Greek. Although the ultimate derivation of the word *barbaros* is shrouded in mystery, the peculiarity of its phonetic structure within the context of the Greek language has led to speculation since antiquity that it was originally simply a case of reduplicative onomatopoeia, denoting the funny, nonsensical sound (*bar-bar*) of foreign speech to Greek ears: a barbarian is someone who goes around saying '*bar-bar*' instead of using intelligible words.⁸⁶ Conversely, the concept of 'speaking Greek' (*hellēnizein*), as opposed to 'speaking barbarian' (*barbarizein*), is synonymous with clear and articulate communication.⁸⁷ Hence the Greek Clytemnestra, supremely confident in her powers of

⁸⁵ Rehm (1992: 84). Macintosh (2005: 142) has suggested that the silence of the Cassandra scene might have had a special significance for the Symbolists, who 'stroved to capture the hidden recesses of the mind and privileged silence as an expressive rather than embarrassingly implausible theatrical device'.

⁸⁶ See Liddell and Scott, s.v. ΒΑΡΒΑΡΟΣ.

⁸⁷ Vassilaki (2007: 1120).

speech and persuasion, primarily contrasts herself with the unspeaking Trojan Cassandra in linguistic terms.

The swallow is the creature whose sound is most commonly compared to barbarian speech in Greek literature, partly because, as in the *Agamemnon*, it brings to mind the mythical Philomela with her tongue cut out.⁸⁸ The swallow is a fitting symbol for both the speechless Philomela and the silent Cassandra presumably because it seems reluctant to sing like other birds. As well as bearing a resemblance to the lamenting nightingale, the singing Cassandra recalls Philomela as a swallow, since the Trojan princess sings an incoherent and unintelligible melody, which, despite being in Greek, is all barbarian to the confused Argive Chorus, who cannot comprehend its meaning. As Rehm comments, ‘Aeschylus exploits both aspects of Cassandra’s persona, the lyrical and the inarticulate, finding an appropriate mythical paradigm to elicit the audience’s double sympathy.’⁸⁹ When Cassandra moves from a lyric mode to speech, her utterances shift from obscurity to clarity, and, consequently, the Chorus comprehend her words. Wilde’s Nightingale goes from speaking to singing, but the young Student, unlike the Elders of Aeschylus’ play, remains none the wiser as to the bird’s self-sacrifice.

Nicostratus the Middle Comic poet, regarded by Apollodorus as the youngest son of Aristophanes,⁹⁰ observes that if talking quickly all the time were a sign of cleverness, then swallows would be much cleverer than men.⁹¹ This is certainly true of Wilde’s rather comic Swallow in ‘The Happy Prince’. Wilde would have been familiar with Nicostratus’ words from his study of the fragments of the Greek comic poets, as collected by J. A. F. A. Meineke in his *Fragmenta Graecorum Comicoorum* (1839–57), for his examination for the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek at Trinity. At the start of ‘Prince’, we are told that the reason why the Swallow has stayed behind, while his friends have gone away to Egypt, is that ‘he was in love with the most beautiful Reed’. The Swallow, ‘who liked to come to the

⁸⁸ Tuplin (1999: 50).

⁸⁹ Rehm (1992: 86).

⁹⁰ See Edmonds (1959: 29).

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 41.

point at once’, asks the Reed, ‘Shall I love you?’ His fellow Swallows disapprove of his summer-long courtship: “‘It is a ridiculous attachment,’” twittered the other Swallows, “she has no money, and far too many relations.”” When the other Swallows fly away in the autumn, the Swallow feels lonely and begins to get bored of the Reed, partly on the basis that ‘[s]he has no conversation’.⁹² In the *Agamemnon*, the eloquent Clytemnestra gives up on her sexual rival, the silent, swallow-like Cassandra, and goes back inside the royal house. In ‘Prince’, however, the loquacious Egypt-bound Swallow abandons his prospective wife, the Reed, due to her lack of verbal responsiveness.

Having left his lady love, the Swallow takes up with the statue of the Happy Prince, whom the bird regales at regular interval with aestheticized descriptions of Egypt and its ancient civilization, presumably reflecting his experience of the land. Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra also displays knowledge of Egyptian culture. She learnedly alludes to ancient Egyptian poetry in her speech in praise of Agamemnon (*Ag.*, 896–901), which paraphrases an Egyptian hymn to the King of the Middle Kingdom.⁹³ Clytemnestra is also recalled in ‘Prince’ by the Reed. The Reed, while verbally inexpressive, gives the impression of communicating through movement. She seemingly bows and shakes her head in response to the Swallow, and, to the love bird’s annoyance, appears to be ‘a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind’: ‘whenever the wind blew,’ we are told, ‘the Reed made the most graceful curtsies’ (72). Like the verbally imposing, Egyptomaniac Swallow, the coquettish Reed calls to mind the adulterous Clytemnestra performing a *salaam* for her husband.

The *Agamemnon* may have a king as its eponymous protagonist and an all-male chorus of city elders, but its two female characters, the queen and the captive princess, dominate the drama. The non-violent confrontation between the two women is one of the most powerful moments not only in Aeschylus’ play but in extant Greek tragedy. That the two

⁹² Wilde, ‘Prince’, in *The Happy Prince*, in *Short Stories*, 71–2.

⁹³ See Hall (1989: 206).

female roles would have originally been played by male actors merely proves Paglia's provocation that '[f]eminism, coveting social power, is blind to women's cosmic sexual power'.⁹⁴ The only moment in the whole of Wilde that approaches the dramatic power of this Aeschylean *coup de théâtre* comes in *Fan*, when the regal, sweet-talking Mrs Erlynne arrives at the Puritanical Lady Windermere's birthday dance. When the name of the woman whom everyone has been waiting for is announced, the stage direction reads: 'LADY WINDERMERE *starts*. MRS ERLYNNE *enters, very beautifully dressed and very dignified*. LADY WINDERMERE *clutches at her fan, then lets it drop on the floor. She bows coldly to MRS ERLYNNE, who bows to her sweetly in turn, and sails into the room*' (35–6). Mrs Erlynne subsequently confides in her supposed lover Lord Windermere, 'I am afraid of the women. You must introduce me to some of them. The men I can always manage,' before turning her attention to the man she is actually after, Lord Augustus (36). The evocative moment of non-verbal communication between Lady Windermere and Mrs Erlynne sticks out like a sore thumb in the midst of all the 'clever' talk (21), scandal talking/remarking (18), and chatter that have been non-stop since the curtain has gone up on the drawing-room drama. In 'Prince', similarly, the Reed's reserved, uncommunicative bowing is contrasted with the Swallow's overfamiliar and mindless twittering.

The figure of the reed features significantly in the homoerotic poems of the 'Calamus' cluster in the third edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1860). In a youthful display of what Swinburne would lampoon as 'Whitmania',⁹⁵ Wilde compared the American poet to Aeschylus in an oral examination for Mods at Oxford⁹⁶—an association he borrowed from his treasured *Studies of the Greek Poets* by J. A. Symonds. The Greek myth of Calamus, which has its *locus classicus* in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* (late fourth or early

⁹⁴ Paglia (1992: 52).

⁹⁵ 'Whitmania', *Fortnightly Review*, 48 (Aug. 1887), 170–6. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, v, ed. Gosse and Wise (1926), 307–18.

⁹⁶ Wilde, 'To William Ward', (postmark 10 July 1876), in *Complete Letters*, 20. Cf. Ellmann (1988: 62); Ross (2013: 37). For Mods, if candidates offered two of the four Greek dramatists, one had to be either Aeschylus or Sophocles (indicating the inferior status of Euripides and Aristophanes). Regarding Aeschylus, the *Oresteia*, or any four of his plays including the *Agamemnon*, were prescribed, indicating the primacy of the first tragedy in the Oresteian trilogy. See Ross (2013: 197).

fifth century AD), contains two conventional classical mythical homoerotic motifs: drowning and transformation into a plant. The myth of Calamus and his beloved Carpus is told in a consolation speech that Eros delivers to Dionysus on the death of his boyfriend Ampelus (Nonn., *Dion.*, xi. 369–481). The god of love relates how Carpus is drowned in the Meander river while the two youths were competing in a swimming contest. In his agony, Calamus allowed himself to drown as well and subsequently became a water reed. Unlike the silent Wildean Reed, the rustling Nonnian reed was said to be sighing in lamentation. Swinburne called his fellow poet and critic Symonds and his associates ‘Calamites’,⁹⁷ echoing the term ‘catamite’, which is derived from the Latinized form of ‘Ganymede’. ‘Catamite’ had a double usage in antiquity: the term could be used to refer to a pubescent boy who was the intimate companion of a young man, usually in a pederastic relationship, or to a grown man as a derogatory descriptor.⁹⁸ In its modern usage, ‘catamite’ has designated the passive or receptive boy partner in a homosexual coupling.

Despite the reed’s classical homoerotic mythopoetic background, Wilde’s Reed in ‘Prince’ is clearly characterized as female. When the Happy Prince asks the Swallow to help quench the thirst of a feverish little boy, the bird responds rather ambiguously, ‘I don’t think I like boys’ (73). Whereas the other Swallows dismiss the bird’s relationship with the Reed as ‘a ridiculous attachment’ (71), Whitman wrote about the ‘adhesive’, manly love between comrades in his ‘Calamus’ poems. Like Douglas’s Platonic/Shakespearean sonnet, Wilde’s story depicts ‘Two Loves’. By moving on from his seasonal, superficial courtship with his lady Reed to his equally brief but deeper relationship with the Happy Prince, the Swallow undergoes the usual ancient Greek sexual *rite de passage* in reverse: the bird goes from being a heterosexual lover to a boy beloved. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Dorian Gray more closely follows ancient erotic protocol by progressing from being the passive beloved boy of his friends Lord Henry

⁹⁷ See Woods (1992: 130).

⁹⁸ Williams (2010: 52–5, 75).

Wotton and Basil Hallward to being the active admirer and lover of the even younger and sexually ambivalent Sibyl Vane, and later, as is insinuated, he becomes the seducer and corruptor of various young men. The eternal youth of the literally gilded Prince, like the agelessness of the golden-named and golden-haired *Dorian*, disrupts the standard age difference between pederastic partners. What marks both the Happy Prince and *Dorian Gray* out as the *erastēs* in their respective relationships with young males is their wisdom, insight, and experience, as well as the role of (anti-)Socratic mentor they consequently assume. However, whereas the relations between the young men of *Dorian Gray* were viewed as excessively sensual and ‘sodomitical’, the relationship between the Prince and the Swallow in Wilde’s story is, as John-Charles Duffy observes, more purely Platonic, ‘patently non-sexual’, and ‘spiritually transforming’.⁹⁹ The disillusioned young Student of ‘Nightingale’ gives up on Love after his rejection by the Professor’s daughter and gives himself over to the secluded, solipsistic study of abstract Philosophy, which he protests is ‘useful’ and ‘practical’. Pure, Platonic love, then as now, is easier said than done. As indicated by titles such as *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde’s Society Comedies seek to expose the pitfalls and impossibility of rigid moral absolutes. *Fan* was subtitled *A Play About a Good Woman*, which initially appears to refer to the Puritanical Lady Windermere but ends up applying to the redeemed, if not exactly reformed, Mrs Erlynne. Lady Windermere has the final say: ‘you’re marrying a very good woman!’, she tells Lord Augustus (89).

Like Sibyl Vane, the Reed in ‘Prince’, though identified as female, bears notably boyish attributes, specifically the ‘slender waist’ (71) that initially catches the eye of the Swallow. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, Wilde himself was originally attracted to the ephemeral ephebic beauty of his wife Constance, who, he informed Lillie Langtry, was a ‘grave, slight, violet-eyed little Artemis, with great coils of heavy brown hair that make her flower-like head droop like a flower, and wonderful ivory hands which draw music from the piano so sweet that the birds stop singing to listen to her’ ([c. Jan. 1884],

⁹⁹ Duffy (2001: 331).

Complete Letters, 224).¹⁰⁰ Wilde also allegedly told Frank Harris that his wife was ‘slim as a lily’ before pregnancy stole her ‘flower-like grace’.¹⁰¹ As Gary Schmidgall writes, it is difficult to resist reading the romance of the Swallow and the Reed through the relationship of Wilde and his wife.¹⁰²

The Reed in ‘Prince’ also resembles Constance Wilde in other respects. A month after his letter to Langtry, Wilde described his fiancée to the American sculptor Waldo Story as ‘very grave, and mystical’ ([postmark 22 Jan. 1884], *Complete Letters*, 225), adjectives that suggest her apparently silent and taciturn disposition. Harris portrayed Mrs Wilde as something of an inept and bumbling hostess who inevitably suffered by comparison with her witty husband, and some of Wilde’s friends and admirers noted that his wife did not laugh at his jokes.¹⁰³ Wilde himself would increasingly become uncomfortably comparable to his Swallow, who shows himself to be narcissistic, self-absorbed, and absent as a (heterosexual) lover. In his self-important assessment of his prospective bride, the Swallow declares in relation to the Reed, ‘I admit that she is domestic,’ he continued, ‘but I love travelling, and my wife, consequently, should love travelling also’ (72). Wilde’s disillusionment with the marital state can also be heard in the self-pitying laments of the embittered Student in ‘Nightingale’ who (re)turns to his books and ‘Philosophy’—another variation on Aesop’s fox and his ‘sour grapes’.

Ellmann observes that ‘Prince’ deals with the relationship of an ‘older, taller lover with a younger, smaller beloved’.¹⁰⁴ The story thus reflects Wilde’s first reported homosexual partnership, with the seductive, boyish seventeen-year-old Robert Ross. However, a year before he met Ross in 1886, Wilde had begun to explore the society of younger men. As we have seen, the 1880 Balliol *Agamemnon* inaugurated the tradition of university Greek plays in Greek. It was such a play, an 1885 Cambridge performance of the *Eumenides* (the

¹⁰⁰ See Ch. 2 in this thesis.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Harris (1918: 446).

¹⁰² Schmidgall (1994: 155).

¹⁰³ However, as Bentley (1983: 54) points out, Mrs Wilde had probably heard her husband’s jokes so often that they no longer amused her!

¹⁰⁴ Ellmann (1988: 253).

third part of the *Oresteia*), that provided Wilde with the occasion to tell (what he would later title) ‘The Happy Prince’ for the first recorded time to a group of undergraduates, by the suggestively Socratic name of ‘cicadas’, who had invited the famed conversationalist to attend the production as their common guest.¹⁰⁵ The individual who had initiated Wilde’s invitation to the 1885 Cambridge *Eumenides* was the ‘cicada’ and Peterhouse undergraduate Harry Marillier, who as a Bluecoat schoolboy had brought Wilde his morning coffee at his bachelor quarters in Salisbury Street in exchange for tutoring in Greek.¹⁰⁶ Wilde’s tale was so well received by the Cambridge students that he wrote it down when he returned to his room. Thus began Wilde’s most productive creative period, which would last until a decade later when he was sent to prison, where he was denied paper, pen, and ink until an enlightened chairman of the Prison Commissioners heard his plea and intervened on his behalf.

In ‘Prince’, the summer-long courtship between the twittering Swallow and the conversation-less, coquettish Reed evokes and inverts the prolonged confrontation between the articulate, adulterous Clytemnestra and her sexual rival, the silent, swallow-like Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*. The Wildean Swallow grows tired of his lady love and moves on from his seasonal, superficial flirtation to an equally brief but more enduring and deeper relationship with his mentor in self-sacrificial love, the surprisingly speaking statue of the Happy Prince. The talkative Swallow’s transfer of affection from the silent female to the dialogic male recalls Wilde’s own life at the time of his fairy tale’s composition. As we shall see in the next section, the homoerotic flight from the female to the dialogic male is also evident in Wilde’s second Society Comedy, *A Woman of No Importance*, which inverts *Fan* and reverts to the *Agamemnon* by having a father as the long-absent parent in the play.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 251–3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 105.

V. *A Woman of No Importance: From the Female to the Dialogic Male*

The flight away from the female to the dialogic male in ‘Prince’ also comprises the theme of Wilde’s *Woman*. In an inversion of Wilde’s *Fan*—or a reversion to the *Agamemnon*—the long-absent parent is the father rather than the mother. In *Woman*, the unknowing child is also male rather than female, making the focus, for the opening act at least, a father–son relationship, which seems at first to be figurative but then turns out to be literal. Although Lord Illingworth has been the absent parent, he is introduced and associated with the young hero, Gerald, before his mother, Mrs Arbuthnot, whose absence is felt and referred to in the first act. The appearance of the title character, Mrs Arbuthnot is, like Mrs Erlynne’s, tantalizingly delayed as, in common with her maternal counterpart in *Fan*, she lies paradoxically at the centre of the plot but on the margins of society. When she eventually arrives, Lord Illingworth realizes that Gerald’s mother is his one-time mistress who bore his illegitimate child. However self-imposed her exile may be, Mrs Arbuthnot in her liminal social position as a ‘fallen woman’ resembles the figure of the *pharmakos*, the sacrificial scapegoat of a Greek city or community, as embodied by the literal outcast Oedipus in Sophocles;¹⁰⁷ something similar could be said of the ostracized Mrs Erlynne.

In the *Agamemnon*, the king’s *nostos* or homecoming from Troy is welcomed by Clytemnestra for the wrong reasons and is, as a result, short-lived. In *Fan*, Mrs Erlynne makes an initially unwelcome (re)entrance into her daughter’s life before leaving again as abruptly at the end. In Aeschylus’ tragedy, Agamemnon brings back from Troy a concubine, to the added displeasure of his already aggrieved wife. In *Woman*, Lord Illingworth plans to take his boy abroad to India and away from the heartbroken Mrs Arbuthnot. Lord Illingworth has proposed to make Gerald his private secretary. In the end, Gerald does not take up the offer of work and travel from his father and prospective

¹⁰⁷ On the title character of Wilde’s *Woman* as a tragic scapegoat and her Oedipal relationship with her son, see Day (2016: 129–33).

employer, opting instead to stay with his mother and her symbolic double, his would-be wife, the orphaned American heiress Hester Worsley.

I read in *Woman* refractions of Wilde's relationships with the parental figures in his own life. Unlike Gerald Arbuthnot, Wilde took up the offers of his surrogate father Mahaffy to proofread his books.¹⁰⁸ At Oxford, Wilde accepted his former Trinity tutor's invitation to visit Greece with him in 1877. Mahaffy's motivation for taking Wilde on a tour of Greece was in part to prevent his planned pilgrimage to Rome and to divert him 'from Popery to Paganism'.¹⁰⁹ Lord Illingworth is a smooth-talking Decadent aristocrat and anti-Socratic mentor in the mould of Lord Henry in *Dorian Gray*, many of whose epigrams are put into his mouth in the play. In his privileging of 'the Hellenic ideal' over 'the maladies of mediævalism' (*Dorian Gray*, 21; 183), Lord Henry sounds not only like Pater and Wilde himself but also, as Hanson notes, like the epigrammatic Mahaffy.¹¹⁰

Lord Illingworth is also, I suggest, the pattern product of Jowett's Greats. Gerald tells his mother that 'Lord Illingworth is awfully clever [...]. There is nothing Lord Illingworth doesn't know,' and contrasts himself with his prospective employer for having 'not been to Eton or Oxford' (*Woman*, 55). Lord Illingworth sets himself up as a philosopher (67–9, 109) and a worldly one at that. Before he makes his first appearance, we learn that he is an aspiring diplomat (9–10), and later that he plans to set out with Gerald at the end of the month to India (79). Greats was designed by the likes of Jowett to prepare its students for life in the Indian as well as British Civil Service.¹¹¹ When Gerald argues with his mother over whether he should go out to India, he says admiringly that 'Lord Illingworth is a successful man. He is a fashionable man. He is a man who lives in the world and for it' (84)—in other words, just the kind of man with whom Jowett liked to associate and through whom he hoped to rule the world.

¹⁰⁸ See Introduction in this thesis.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971: 41).

¹¹⁰ Hanson (1997: 258).

¹¹¹ Orrells (2011: 97–8).

Mrs Arnbutnot is right to be worried about her son leaving for India with Lord Illingworth. Whereas the East is associated with decadent effeminacy in the *Agamemnon*, Pashmina Murthy writes in relation to the British Raj that ‘the sexual pleasures and excesses that the tropics promised forebode the destruction of British manhood’.¹¹² The Bloomsbury writer Lytton Strachey described Lord Illingworth as ‘a wicked lord, staying in a country house, who has made up his mind to bugger one of the other guests—a handsome young man of twenty’.¹¹³ Strachey continues his crude, campy plot summary of Wilde’s play as follows:

The handsome young man is delighted; when his mother enters, sees his Lordship and recognises him as having copulated with him twenty years before, the result of which was—the handsome young man. She appeals to Lord [Illingworth] not to bugger his own son. He replies that that is an additional reason for doing it! (oh! he’s a *very* wicked Lord!)

Strachey reads Wilde’s play as something of a queer, modern comic reimagining of Aristotle’s exemplary ancient tragedy, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Of course, the classical Oedipus myth already has a pederastic element, one with an Aeschylean connection to boot: Oedipus’ father Laius founds, discovers, or invents pederasty by seducing or abducting and raping Pelops’ son, Chrysippus—a myth probably dramatized in Euripides’ fragmentary *Chrysippus* as well, perhaps, in Aeschylus’ lost *Laius*.¹¹⁴ The curse that Pelops consequently calls down on Laius was adduced by the Greeks to explain, variously, the subsequent ravages of the Sphinx, the later plague on Thebes, or the fate of Laius to be killed by his own son.¹¹⁵

More importantly for Wilde’s comedy, Pelops’ curse on Laius, according to Devereux, ‘shows that the Greeks somehow linked Oedipus with Chrysippus’,¹¹⁶ who are conflated in the character of Gerald in *Woman*. Some versions of the episode in which Oedipus slays Laius even represent the situation not as a crossroads skirmish but rather as a

¹¹² Murthy (2009: 227).

¹¹³ Quoted in Holroyd (1971: 357 n.)

¹¹⁴ See Kovacs (2009: 367).

¹¹⁵ Devereux (1995: 218).

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

‘homosexually motivated encounter’, resulting from a love triangle that pitted father against son for access to Chrysippus.¹¹⁷ Wilde’s young Gerald Arbuthnot only learns his true identity at the end of the penultimate act of *Woman* when he finds that the older man who supposedly wants to sodomize him, Lord Illingworth, has ‘insulted’ his love interest (87), Hester (16). In an Oedipal fit of anger, Gerald goes to kill Lord Illingworth but Mrs Arbuthnot exclaims, ‘Stop, Gerald, stop! He is your own father!’ (88)

Hester in *Woman* is clearly an example of Jowett’s Platonic sexual ‘transposition’. In the Introduction to his translation of the *Phaedrus*, Jowett famously writes, ‘In this, and in other discussions about love, what Plato says about the loves of men must be transferred to the loves of women before we can attach any serious meaning to his words. Had he lived in our times, he would have made the transposition himself.’¹¹⁸ Stoppard sends up this repressive Victorian reading of the Socratic dialogues when he has his Jowett declare, ‘In my translation of the *Phaedrus* it required all my ingenuity to phrase his depiction of pederastia into the affectionate regard as exists between an Englishman and his wife. Plato would have made the transposition himself if he had had the good fortune to be a Balliol man’ (*Invention*, 23). In Wilde’s comedy, Hester is Gerald’s mirror image, just as Sibyl Vane is Dorian Gray’s. The American Puritan immediately admires the simplicity and sincerity of the young bank clerk, who has been brought up by his biblically named mother Rachel to ‘believe in religion’ (97).

In the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the mysterious Theban plague with which the play opens is the result not of the pederastic rape perpetrated by Laius, but of the protagonist’s act of parricide, and as this causal relationship does not occur elsewhere, it is possible that Sophocles came up with it. While incest has been by far the aspect of the Oedipus myth that has most resonated with modern readers, most famously Freud, Sophocles’ concentration on the incestuous rather than pederastic strand is not common to all Greeks,

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 219.

¹¹⁸ Jowett (1892), *The Dialogues of Plato*, i, 406.

many of whom ‘bring in the incest with Jocasta more or less as an afterthought, e.g., as the link which couples the tragedy of Laius with the later fate of Oedipus’.¹¹⁹ In *Woman*, Wilde couples the incest of the Oedipus myth with its pederasty by making Lord Illingworth Gerald’s father.

The rather Oedipal relationship between Gerald and his possessive, overprotective, and smothering mother is also ripe for a Freudian reading. In Wilde’s comedy, leaving his mother means for Gerald—to use Lord Illingworth’s own words in his man-to-man conversation with (whom he knows to be) his son—transcending the ‘tyranny’ of women, ‘the worst form of tyranny the world has ever known. The tyranny of the weak over the strong. [...] [T]he only tyranny that lasts’ (69). At the comedy’s conclusion, Gerald is symbolically subsumed into the shelter of the maternal womb in a sort of Oedipal regression, as the young man, his mother, and his fiancée form a conjoined, quasi-incestuous *ménage à trois* as ‘[t]hey move towards the door leading into garden with their arms round each other’s waists’ (112). Hester is as much the shadow of Gerald’s mother as she is his own mirror image. Although Wilde held back from joining Holy Mother Church until the end of his life, he made a symbolic swerve away from Mahaffy by visiting the Eternal City on his way home from Greece. There is something of the Lady Wilde about Mrs Arbuthnot, who plays the *mater dolorosa* with her widow’s weeds, assumed name, fabricated family history, and extravagant lyricism. Riley describes Wilde’s relationship with Mahaffy as ‘troubled, somewhat Oedipal’.¹²⁰ It was Mahaffy’s High Tory anti-nationalism that ultimately alienated Wilde,¹²¹ who was very much his mother’s son.

Although Mrs Arbuthnot, Gerald, and Hester unite against Lord Illingworth at the end of *Woman*, an early typescript reveals that Wilde originally had a more open-ended, more Oresteian finale in mind, which was used in the 2017 production at the Vaudeville in

¹¹⁹ Devereux (1995: 220).

¹²⁰ Riley (2018a: 5).

¹²¹ For the differences in political outlook between Mahaffy and Wilde, see Blanshard (2018: 24–5) on Wilde’s anonymous negative review of Mahaffy’s *Greek Life and Thought from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* (1887).

London. At the climax of *Fan*, Mrs Erlynne takes the fall for her daughter in order to save her from committing the same mistake that she herself made almost twenty years ago. The ideas of sacrifice and family history repeating itself hark back to the tragedy of Agamemnon, whose slaughter by Clytemnestra is apparently motivated in part by his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia (see *Ag.*, 1414–8) and whose death, it is signalled in the concluding lines of Aeschylus' play (1667), will be avenged by his returning son, Orestes. At the end of *Woman*, Lord Illingworth responds to having his proposal of marriage to Mrs Arbuthnot rejected by referring to her and their son as 'one's mistress and one's—' (111). In the early, alternative ending, Lord Illingworth reacts to Mrs Arbuthnot's glove slap by declaring: 'some day your son may call you by a worse name. He has my blood in his veins as well as yours.'¹²² As we shall see in the last section of this chapter, Wilde's opposition between Platonic pedagogical pederasty and strife-ridden Aeschylean male-female relations is also present in the work of one of his formemost successors in the twentieth century.

VI. Wilde and Aeschylus in Rattigan's *The Browning Version*

In Rattigan's 1948 one-act play *The Browning Version*, the title of which refers to Browning's verse translation of the *Agamemnon*, the playwright follows Wilde's fairy tales in using Aeschylean tragedy to contrast heterosexual marital infidelity with a more profound Platonic pedagogical pederastic loyalty. Like Wilde, Rattigan was inestimably inspired by the *Agamemnon* while at school, and subsequently said that reading Aeschylus' tragedy in translation at Harrow made him want to become a playwright.¹²³ As in Wilde's works, there is often a strongly autobiographical, underlying homosexual element in Rattigan's plays.¹²⁴ The protagonist in Rattigan's play, the unpopular martinet of a classics

¹²² See Powell (2013: 139).

¹²³ Palaima (2002: 200).

¹²⁴ On Rattigan's (homo)sexuality and its relation to his work, see Darlow (2010).

master Andrew Crocker-Harris, the ‘Himmler of the lower fifth’,¹²⁵ is believed to have been modelled on one of Rattigan’s classics teachers at Harrow, J. W. Coke Norris.¹²⁶ John Taplow, the pupil who takes pity on ‘the Crock’ and gives him a thoughtfully inscribed copy of Browning’s eponymous translation of the *Agamemnon* as a small going-away gift, is believed to represent the young Rattigan.¹²⁷

Although the adult Rattigan was certainly a practising homosexual, his hopelessly repressed schoolmaster in *Browning* can also be read more broadly as every gay man living in less liberated times, including the playwright himself. As in Stoppard’s *Invention*, Wilde is an absent presence in *Browning*, suggesting the road not taken by Crocker-Harris, just as he represents the life that Housman did not lead in Stoppard’s play. The character of Crocker-Harris has had a special significance and resonance for gay actors, especially in the early reception history of Rattigan’s play:¹²⁸ Eric Portman created the role on the London stage in 1948; Maurice Evans played the part on Broadway the following year; and John Gielgud, with whom in mind Rattigan had originally written *Browning*,¹²⁹ played the Crock on BBC Radio in 1957 and made his American television début in the role in 1957. However, Michael Redgrave made the role his own in the definitive 1951 film version, written by Rattigan himself and directed by Anthony Asquith, who was also probably a homosexual of the closeted kind.¹³⁰ A son of the former Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, the director, like Douglas, was educated at Winchester, and read Greats at Balliol, following in the footsteps of his father and three of his brothers.¹³¹ At Oxford, Asquith was a member of the Aesthetes, whose opposing faction was the Athletes,¹³² calling to mind the

¹²⁵ Rattigan, *Browning*, in *Plays: One: ‘French Without Tears’, ‘The Winslow Boy’, ‘The Browning Version’, ‘Harlequinade’*, Methuen Drama World Classics (1981), 206, 208.

¹²⁶ Palaima (2002: 200).

¹²⁷ Although Rattigan himself was never taught by Coke-Norris and never gave him a gift, he drew from his experience with another master at Harrow, on whom he had developed a schoolboy crush, as the inspiration for Taplow’s present to Crocker-Harris (Palaima 2002: 200).

¹²⁸ Bourne (2016: 100).

¹²⁹ O’Connor (2016: 201).

¹³⁰ Bourne (2016: 11–3).

¹³¹ Minney (1973: 37).

¹³² Bourne (2016: 10).

University experiences of Wilde and Housman, as dramatized in Stoppard's *Invention*.¹³³

Asquith also collaborated with Redgrave on the iconic screen production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, released the year after their film adaptation of *Browning*. The secret other lives of both Gielgud, who, like Wilde, was arrested and charged with homosexual offences, and the married, theatrical-dynasty-siring Redgrave have informed the critical reception of their performances in the leading roles of *Browning* and *Earnest*, a play based around double identities.¹³⁴

Even though *Earnest* and *Browning*, as well as Rattigan's other best-known works *French Without Tears* and *The Deep Blue Sea*, revolve around heterosexual relationships and marriage, they are ripe for homosexual readings. The paradigmatic work in this regard is *Brief Encounter* (1945), the film by David Lean based on the one-act play *Still Life* (1936) by Noël Coward. As Tom Ryall explains, the gay appeal of *Brief Encounter* lies in 'the film's mixture of intensity and restraint, and its analysis of a romance doomed in a climate of social and moral disapproval'.¹³⁵ Schmidgall likewise reads Wilde's 'Prince' as 'a miniature, and moving, celebration of the Love that dare not speak its name [...] a melancholy evocation of gay experience in a frosty, inclement, threatening society'.¹³⁶ Coward's screenplay for *Brief Encounter* places the action during the winter of 1938–9.¹³⁷ In the episode that ends with the two main characters admitting their love for each other, the heroine–narrator Laura mentally monologizes to her loving but dull husband Fred in a voice-over, 'Do you know, I believe we should all behave quite differently if we lived in a warm, sunny climate all the time. We shouldn't be so withdrawn and shy and difficult' (294). In one memorable sequence, Laura stares dreamily out of a train window into the darkness and sees herself and her lover in various romantic and exotic locations (all with a homosexual history or resonance), before having her reveries interrupted and walking

¹³³ See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

¹³⁴ See Bourne (2006: 39–40), (2016: 13, 100); Howes (2006: 63); Morley (2002: 94).

¹³⁵ Ryall (2005: 164).

¹³⁶ Schmidgall (1994: 156).

¹³⁷ *Brief Encounter*, in Noël Coward Screenplays: 'In Which We Serve', 'Brief Encounter', 'The Astonished Heart', ed. Barry Day, The Coward Collection (2015), 222.

home ‘as usual—quite soberly and without wings—without any wings at all’ (306–8), as if she were a migratory bird such as Wilde’s Swallow in her euphoric, escapist elation and wanderlust.

Rattigan’s *Browning* is set in an unspecified public school in the South of England, run with a ruthless and cold-blooded WASPish corporate efficiency. The tactless headmaster, Dr Frobisher, informs the retiring, incapacitated classics master Andrew Crocker-Harris that his application for a pension has been rejected by the school governors, even though an exception was made to the rules five years earlier when a popular master, Buller, had sustained an injury playing rugby against the school (199). In order to work up to a suitable climax at the end-of-year prize-giving, the unctuous Frobisher asks the ‘positively disliked’ (207) classics master to make his farewell speech to the boys before another popular, ‘considerably junior’ colleague, the cricketer Fletcher (201). The condescending headmaster’s unflattering comparison of Andrew with Buller and Fletcher replays the *agon* between the humanities and sport embodied by Wilde and the Marquess of Queensberry, and by Housman and Moses Jackson in *Invention*. In *Browning*, Andrew is also unfavourably compared with his wife’s lover, the science master Frank Hunter, ‘a rugged young man [...] wrapped in all the self-confidence of the popular master’, who gives tips to the Crock’s pupil Taplow, who is practising his golf swing with one of the classics master’s walking-sticks at the beginning of the play (181–2).

The agonistic environment of the public school in Rattigan’s play is stressed by the importance placed on the school’s performance on the rugby and cricket pitch (199, 201), and on its masters’ academic accolades (198), as well as by the social competitiveness among the schoolmasters’ wives and the housemasters’ wives (190, 204). The confrontation between the Platonically philosophizing pederast Hector and the short-fused Headmaster in Bennett’s *The History Boys* ironically recalls the maddeningly polite and quintessentially English conversation between the sexually repressed Crocker-Harris and the headmaster in Rattigan’s play, as well as the more colourful and combative clashes

between Wilde and Queensberry, which, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, recapitulated the ancient *agon* between Euripides/Socrates and Aristophanes.

Like *Browning*, Wilde's fairy tales are peopled with insensitive, unfeeling, and self-centred figures who personify a crude and cruel industrial utilitarianism. In Rattigan's play, the classics master protagonist is being forced into early retirement by his increasing ill health. Although Andrew's medical condition concerns his heart, Rattigan never reveals his protagonist's precise complaint, just as Wilde kept the 'atmosphere of moral corruption' surrounding Dorian Gray 'vague and indeterminate and wonderful', as the author explained to the editor of the *Scots Observer* (*Complete Letters*, 439).¹³⁸ At the end of *Dorian Gray*, the dead protagonist is found on the floor of the old schoolroom 'with a knife in his heart' (164; 357). The idea of homosexuality as a pathology was assumed in the contemporary critical discourse surrounding *Dorian Gray* at the time of its original, controversial publication in 1890, as evidenced by the anonymous negative review in the *Scots Observer*, which reduced Wilde's novel to 'medico-legal' interest.¹³⁹ At the end of *Fan*, the 'bad woman' Mrs Erlynne announces that she is going 'to live abroad again': 'The English climate doesn't suit me. My—heart is affected here, and that I don't like' (75). The night before, the 'fallen' Mrs Erlynne took the fall for Lady Windermere by allowing herself to be discovered in Lord Darlington's rooms by the men of the drama, thus enabling her daughter to slip away and avoid scandal. As a result of this self-sacrificial act of love, the absent mother's hitherto hardened heart has been 'affected', as are those of the Happy Prince and the Nightingale in Wilde's fairy tales.

Rattigan's Crocker-Harris speculates that the reason for his pupils no longer laughing at him is '[n]ot a sickness of the body, but a sickness of the soul' (*Browning*, 208). The sickly classics master not only conforms to the Rattigan type of the wounded or impotent (older) male hero, but also corresponds to the *pharmakos* or scapegoat in Greek tragedy,

¹³⁸ See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

¹³⁹ Unsigned review of *Dorian Gray*, *Scots Observer* (5 July 1890), reprinted in Beckson (1970: 75). See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

especially Sophoclean tragedy: the contaminated cripple who must be expelled from the community.¹⁴⁰ Throughout *Browning*, Rattigan plays on the etymological link between the Greek words *pharmakos*, scapegoat, and *pharmakon*, a drug or remedy, just as Wilde does in his 1887 story ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’. The enfeebled Andrew could be said to represent Rattigan not only as a necessarily repressed homosexual but also as an increasingly unfashionable playwright, who came to be seen as a sort of ‘sick man’ of British theatre and typical of its general malaise.

Andrew teaches Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* as ‘just a lot of Greek words strung together and fifty lines if you get them wrong’ (183). The classics master’s punitive, passionless, pedantic, and narrowly philological manner drains the dramatic, rhetorical, and emotional power from the Greek tragedy, which belongs to a genre that, in Hall’s memorable phrase, portrays ‘suffering under the sun’, that is, in the bright Mediterranean light of an open-air theatre.¹⁴¹ The infectious enthusiasm of the schoolboy Taplow, the playwright’s cipher, for the ‘rather more lurid aspects’ of Aeschylean dramaturgy in a one-on-one extra Greek lesson elicits the Crock’s Miss Prism-like confession of his own ‘very free’ translation of the *Agamemnon* in earlier, younger and happier days (195–6). Taplow plays Wilde’s chirpy and chatty Swallow to Andrew’s disillusioned Student taking refuge in his dusty books. Commenting on the scene in the 1951 screen version of Rattigan’s play, Stephen Glynn writes that ‘the exchange’s shot and counter-shot editing intimates a growing bond inevitably smothered in more public situations’.¹⁴² Like the manuscript of Miss Prism’s three-volume novel, Andrew believes his literary work to be ‘lost—like so many other things. Lost for good’ (196)—a fitting fate for a translation of an ancient work. In the screen adaptation, Andrew finds his translation while clearing out his classroom, just as Miss Prism’s hand-bag and the ‘lost child’ she placed in it are restored to her at the end of *Earnest*.

¹⁴⁰ See Bertolini (2016: 103).

¹⁴¹ Hall (2010).

¹⁴² Glynn (2016: 73).

The emotional self-repression of the classics master in *Browning* is ironic considering that his subject comprises not only the torrid, elemental passions of Greek tragedy but also unselfconsciously homoerotic content. The 1951 film version makes a surprisingly direct reference to classical homoeroticism when the headmaster jokingly refers to the science master Hunter's subject as a 'perverted branch of learning'—a jest to which the scientist responds by citing 'certain perverted passages of the Greek Anthology'.¹⁴³ This display of arcane classical knowledge on the part of Hunter is even more surprising seeing as the science master seems to function as a sort of foil for Crocker-Harris. Hunter later appears to be only vaguely aware of such a canonical work as the *Agamemnon* (cf. *Browning*, 183) and shows himself to be as red-blooded a heterosexual as it is possible to be in an English public school by carrying on an 'intrigue' with Crocker-Harris's younger wife Millie (cf. 218).

While Italy and Greece proved to be havens for English homosexuals from the nineteenth century, their ancient literatures provided a homoerotic mental outlet for the mind-travelling classically educated gay man. It was a bitter irony for the English homophile male classicist that the foundational aspect of ancient Greek life with which he so intensely identified, that is, same-sex desire, was so flatly denied by contemporary British society, which was in many other ways openly philhellenic. Symonds movingly described the terrible dilemma facing the homosexually inclined student of the classics. At almost the midway mark between the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act and the 1895 Wilde trials, Symonds wrote Jowett a lengthy and troubled letter, in which he questioned the wisdom of elevating Plato's Socratic dialogues, with their impassioned celebrations of

¹⁴³ Nisbet (2013: 218) writes:

Oscar the poet, preaching Greek love from the witness stand, was to exercise a dramatic influence on how Greek epigram was subsequently received. Given the author's carefully crafted persona as the sharp-eyed scrivener of social foibles and comic misunderstandings, it is perversely fitting that his shadow loomed over the Anthology of the early twentieth century only because the receiving culture had put two and two together and made five. Wilde made a show of his endorsement of all things *Greek*—and he was famed for his facility in *epigram*.

male-male love, to their privileged position as the most important educational texts for young English schoolboys and male undergraduates:

Put yourself in the place of someone to whom the aspect of Greek life (which you ignore) is personally and intensely interesting, who reads his Plato as you would wish him to read the Bible—i.e. with a vivid conviction that what he reads is the life record of a masterful creative man-determining race, and the monument of a world-important epoch.

Can you pretend that a sympathetically constituted nature of the sort in question will desire nothing from the panegyric of pederastic love in the *Phaedrus*, from the personal grace of *Charmides*, from the mingled realism and rapture of the *Symposium*? What you call a figure of speech, is heaven in hell to him—maddening, because it is stimulating to the imagination; wholly out of accord with the world he has to live in; too deeply in accord with his own impossible desires.¹⁴⁴

Although Symonds does not simply repeat the age-old accusation of Socrates as corruptor of youth, he does propose that exposing the homoerotically oriented young to the Platonic dialogues is akin to pouring paraffin on the flames of their forbidden desires. While pederasty was a cornerstone of ancient Greece's superlative civilization, classical expressions of same-sex desire, Symonds suggests, place the modern homosexual on a collision course with contemporary society, possibly leading to conviction and imprisonment. In *Invention*, Stoppard's Jowett sends up these sentiments: 'A Platonic enthusiasm as far as Plato was concerned meant an enthusiasm of the kind that would empty the public schools and fill the prisons where it is not nipped in the bud' (23). While Symonds's concerns were centred on the young male students, they were also applicable to the men who taught them. Having older males teach younger males pederastic literature *en masse* in a territory openly hostile to homosexuality was a recipe for private tragedy as well as public disaster.

In *Browning*, the classics master delivers a Platonic discourse on 'Two kinds of love. Hers and mine', which gets to the heart of his unhappy marriage to his adulterous wife Millie. Andrew tells Frank, his colleague and his wife's lover:

Both of us needing from the other something that would make life supportable for us, and neither of us able to give it. Two kinds of love. Hers and mine. Worlds apart, as I know now, though when

¹⁴⁴ *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds: A Critical Edition*, ed. Regis, Genders and Sexualities in History (2016), 154.

I married her I didn't think they were incompatible. In those days I hadn't thought that her kind of love—the love she requires and which I was unable to give her—was so important that its absence would drive out the other kind of love—the kind of love that I require and which I thought, in my folly, was by far the greater part of love. I may have been, you see, Hunter, a brilliant classical scholar, but I was woefully ignorant of the facts of life. I know better now, of course. I know that in both of us, the love that we should have borne each other has turned to bitter hatred. That's all the problem is. Not a very unusual one, I venture to think—nor nearly as tragic as you seem to imagine. Merely the problem of an unsatisfied wife and a henpecked husband. You'll find it all over the world. It is usually, I believe, a subject for farce. (220–1)

The classics master's speech calls to mind not only Plato's *Symposium* but also Douglas's sonnet 'Two Loves'. Andrew's weighty circumlocutory phrasing, such as 'the love that we should have borne each other', evokes the euphemistic 'Love that dare not speak its name'. The headmaster has earlier described Andrew as a 'brilliant classical scholar' and alluded to the string of prizes he won at Oxford (*Browning*, 198). The parallel with Wilde is made clearer in the 1951 screen version as we are told that Crocker-Harris received a Double First and won the Newdigate.

The ailing Andrew's previous, heroic intellectual achievements have not prevented his present tragic predicament. Sophocles' swollen-footed Oedipus has solved the riddle of the Sphinx, but, like the Agamemnon of the *Iliad*, the Theban king has caused a plague associated with Apollo. In order to discover the cause of the plague, Oedipus solves the mystery of Laius' murder and must live with the consequences. As Andrew has revealed to Frank before his Platonic speech, the classics master has been aware of the science master's affair with his wife since it first began, but has done nothing about it (218–9)—he is a willing cuckold. The classics master's description of his marriage as that of 'an unsatisfied wife and a henpecked husband' of course calls to mind the *Agamemnon*. The Crocker-Harris' type of marriage is 'found all over the world', but the nature of their relationship means that its universality is more farcical than 'tragic'. Andrew's repetition of the clause 'I know [...] now' in his speech conjures up *pathei mathos* ('learning through suffering'), the proverbial phrase from the *Agamemnon* (177)

Andrew's incompatibility with his shallow and self-centred wife is intellectual as well as physical and emotional. The Crocker-Harris' marriage recalls the courtship between the

Swallow and the Reed in ‘Prince’, which was undoubtedly informed by Wilde’s relationship with his wife, as the uncommunicative Constance, for all her evident attractions and accomplishments, ‘was hardly literary and was intellectually incapable of sharing her husband’s life’.¹⁴⁵ However, there is also a generically misogynistic undercurrent to the Swallow’s criticisms of the Reed, whom the bird accuses of being ‘a coquette, for she is always flirting with the wind’, and of ‘selfishness’ (‘Prince’, 72).

Although Rattigan’s adulterous Millie Crocker-Harris plays Clytemnestra to her husband’s Agamemnon and her lover’s Aegisthus, she has none of the curious attractiveness, fascination, or other redeeming qualities of Aeschylus’ transgressive Argive queen, or Wilde’s subversive female characters. Mrs Crocker-Harris has been called ‘the only true villain Terence Rattigan ever allowed himself to create’.¹⁴⁶ She was for Rattigan ‘an unmitigated bitch’,¹⁴⁷ suggesting not only Clytemnestra, but also Helen, the Sphinx, and the Professor’s daughter in ‘Nightingale’. Rattigan’s unqualified condemnation of Millie is surprising. Before launching into his Platonic speech on ‘Two kinds of love. Hers and mine’, Andrew points out to Frank that his wife ‘is really quite as much to be pitied as I’ (222).

The relationship between the moping Andrew and the beautiful, unfaithful Millie also resembles the other unhappy Mycenaean marriage, that of Menelaus and Helen. In the 1951 screen version of Rattigan’s play, the blackboard in the classics master’s classroom bears a quasi-epigraphical quotation from the *Agamemnon* (414–9), which refers to Helen’s desertion of Menelaus:

πόθῳ δ’ ὑπερποντίας
 φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνασσειν.
 εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
 ἔχθεται χάρις ἀνδρί·
 ὀμμάτων δ’ ἐν ἀχηνίας
 ἔρρει πᾶσ’ Ἀφροδίτα.

¹⁴⁵ Martin (1979: 76).

¹⁴⁶ Wansell (1995: 175).

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Wansell (1995: 175).

And, through desire of one across the main,
 A ghost will seem within the house to reign.
 And hateful to the husband is the grace
 Of well-shaped statues: from—in place of eyes
 Those blanks—all Aphrodite dies.

The image of a blank-eyed, shapely statue also figures in Wilde's 'Prince': the Prince asks the Swallow to pluck out the two sapphires he has for eyes and give them to the poor. In Aeschylus' play, the empty eyes of the statues in Menelaus' palace are associated with the absent Helen and the death of desire. In Wilde's story, however, the blind Prince inspires the Swallow to grow in self-sacrificial love: 'I will stay with you always,' insists the bird (76). Whereas the Greek Menelaus fights a duel with the Trojan Paris for Helen's return in Book III of the *Iliad*, the classics master in *Browning* adopts a laissez-faire attitude to his wife's extra-marital affair with the science master.

Like the Professor's daughter in Wilde's 'Nightingale', the classics master's wife in *Browning* is materialistic and sadistic. When Millie hears that Andrew's application for a pension has been turned down by the school governors, she is only concerned with the financial ramifications for herself and not with her husband's wounded pride, which she compounds by mentioning that she had given the headmaster the go-ahead the previous week to ask him to give his farewell speech before his younger colleague, Fletcher (201). Millie cynically attributes Taplow's gift of a copy of the Browning version of the *Agamemnon* to his desire to obtain his 'remove' to the Science fifth (and so escape classics and the Crock), offering her theory deliberately to wound her affected husband (214). When Rattigan's play was revived at the King's Head Theatre in Islington in 1976, the playwright had wanted to add a Wildean first-act curtain with Millie admitting she has burned her husband's translation of the *Agamemnon*,¹⁴⁸ just as Ibsen's Hedda Gabbler burns Eilert Løvborg's manuscript. Løvborg's manuscript, like Miss Prism's, is a surrogate child. Like Euripides' Medea, Hedda destroys two children: the child of Tesman (another ineffectual male played by Michael Redgrave, on the BBC in 1962) she is carrying in her

¹⁴⁸ O'Connor (2016: 200).

womb when she commits suicide, and Løvborg's text, on which she commits a tragic *sparagmos* by burning it in a fit of jealous passion. Unlike Clytemnestra's swift and efficient dispatching of Agamemnon, Millie's murder of Andrew is a long-drawn-out affair, 'a slow, agonizing torture of the heart'.¹⁴⁹ When Frank finds out from Andrew that Millie informed her husband of their extra-marital affair when it first began, the science master actually warns the classics master that his wife is 'out to kill you' (220). 'My dear Hunter, if that was indeed her purpose, you should know by now that she fulfilled it long ago,' replies the battle-scarred Andrew.

At the end of Rattigan's play, Frank sees Millie for what she is and offers his friendship to Andrew. John A. Bertolini comments that 'in Rattigan's world, when men become frustrated or even hostile over the limitations of women as lovers or friends, they turn to other men for reliability and intimacy. Such relationships offer an alternative to failed heterosexual unions'.¹⁵⁰ As Mary Beard understatedly writes, *Browning* 'is not exactly a feminist play'.¹⁵¹ Compare the end of the actual *Agamemnon*, in which the lone Clytemnestra declares that she is ready to fight singlehandedly against any one of the twelve angry men of the Chorus of Argive Elders, who are trying to drive the regicidal queen into exile. When the Chorus subsequently almost join battle against Aegisthus' bodyguards, the queen tells all the men to calm down, and announces that she and Aegisthus are now officially the joint rulers. Clytemnestra's triumph is complete.

In Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, Lord Goring heroically rescues his friend Sir Robert and the latter's imperilled marriage from the machinations of the former's erstwhile lover, Mrs Cheveley, who then tries to frame the relationship between Goring and Sir Robert's wife Lady Chiltern as more than close friendship. In a sharp divergence from the other fallen women of Wilde's comedies, Mrs Erlynne in *Fan* and Mrs Arbuthnot in *Woman*, Mrs Cheveley is a melodramatic villainess through and through, remaining unredeemed in the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 194.

¹⁵⁰ Bertolini (2016: 105).

¹⁵¹ Beard, 'Do Classics Have a Future?', *New York Review of Books* (12 Jan. 2012), reprinted in Beard (2013: 1–14, at 2).

eyes of society and the audience at the play's end. As Mrs Cheveley herself remarks to Lord Goring, 'How you men stand up for each other!'. 'How you women war against each other!', counters her interlocutor, alluding to the enmity between Mrs Cheveley and Lady Chiltern that has existed since their schooldays.¹⁵² By contrast, at the end of Wilde's immediately preceding comedy, *Woman*, Mrs Arbuthnot, her rather effete son Gerald, and his would-be bride Hester mount a united front against the deserting lover and father, the 'very wicked' and 'thoroughly bad man' Lord Illingworth (14–5, 27). In the transition between the third and fourth acts of *Earnest*, the young women and men pair off according to their gender in a battle of the sexes that is only resolved when the women ironically acknowledge the men's superior manly virtues (83). However, the sexual harmony is almost instantaneously broken up by the unexpected entrance of the rather androgynous Lady Bracknell. In the Asquith film version of *Browning*, Andrew and Frank exchange addresses with their backs turned on a visibly fuming but impotent Millie in a way that recalls Jack and Gwendolen exchanging address while Algernon has/should have his back turned at the end of the first act of *Earnest*.

In *Fan*, we never get to see how the men of the drama deal with Mrs Erlynne after she reveals herself in Lord Darlington's rooms at the close of Act III. At the climax of *Salomé*, however, Hérode assumes the condemnatory voice of the beheaded gynophobe Iokanaan, railing against Salomé to her mother Hérodiad, and finally has his Soldiers crush the princess to death with their shields onstage, just as at the finale of Propertius' elegy on Tarpeia, 'males, Jupiter, Tatius, the narrator, [...] all heap up condemnation in deed or word no less overwhelming than the arms of the Sabines'.¹⁵³ In 'Prince', the male Swallow abandons the apparently flirtatious female Reed and takes up with the eponymous male statue.

¹⁵² Wilde (2013d), *Husband*, ed. Jackson, NM, 107–8.

¹⁵³ Hutchinson (2006: 118).

In *Browning*, Frank's fitting offer of male friendship to Andrew after his Platonic speech is but one of several Wildean-esque gifts. The series of gifts in the play runs parallel to Andrew's series of trials and humiliations. At the beginning, we learn that Millie has given Frank a cigarette case, a gift with recognizably Wildean resonances. Silver, inscribed cigarette cases were Wilde's luxury gift of choice to rent boys during the early 1890s. At the beginning of *Earnest*, the eponymous protagonist desperately tries to explain away his engraved cigarette case, which threatens to give away its owner's rather Aesopic 'double life' as Ernest in town and Jack in the country. The partial inscription that Algernon reads out, 'From little Cecily with her fondest love' (11), initially suggests that the cigarette case is a present from a love interest. Ernest/Jack claims that the Cecily in question is his old aunt, and not, as is the case, his young ward, who is 'excessively pretty' and 'only just eighteen' (34), for fear of arousing Algy's interest. While *Earnest* was enjoying its first run at the St James's Theatre, the playwright's own gifts of engraved silver cigarette cases comprised some of the prosecution's most damning evidence in the Wilde trials at the Old Bailey. Witnesses for the prosecution such as Charles Parker and the unfortunately named Ernest Scarfe testified that the cigarette cases were given in exchange for sex: 'In court, Wilde's joke was thus outed.'¹⁵⁴

As I have already alluded, Lady Windermere's eponymous fan, a birthday present from her supposedly straying husband, has her Christian name, Margaret, engraved on it. Like Jack's cigarette case, Lady Windermere's lightweight fan is transferred among different characters, as if it were one of Wilde's boys being passed around the playwright's circle of intimates. The fan becomes a symbol for love so easily given and then given away. In *Browning*, Millie readily believes that Frank, the latest in a string of lovers she has apparently importuned, might give her gift of a cigarette case away to another woman, just as he might trade her in for someone else. Millie's fears have some foundation as Frank has already forgotten the Crocker-Harrises's offer of a seat in the grandstand at Lord's and

¹⁵⁴ Ruff (2013). Ebook.

gone off to the box with one of the housemasters' wives (190)—a seat that the Crocker-Harrises had to sell off (192). If Wilde is an implicit parallel for Andrew in Rattigan's play, then Millie, unlike Wilde's patient, long-suffering wife Constance, acts out Lord Darlington's imaginary instance of the wife who 'consoles' herself due to her husband deficiencies (*Fan*, 10, 21), as the 'good woman' Lady Windermere almost does. Rattigan explicitly calls to mind Wilde's comedy when Millie tells her husband's replacement Gilbert and his wife that she and Crocker-Harris also met in the Lake District, on a walking tour (as in the case of the eponymous classicist and his wife in James Hilton 1934 novella *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*): Millie 'swanks' by mentioning that she was staying with her uncle, Sir William Bartop, who had taken a house, 'quite a mansion [...] really', near Windermere (208).

Millie's expensive gifts to Frank contrasts with Taplow's inexpensive eponymous gift to Andrew, the Browning version of the *Agamemnon*. While Taplow admits that the copy of the translation 'was only second-hand' and 'wasn't very much', Andrew sees the gift as an example of the widow's mite: 'You shouldn't have spent your pocket money this way' (211). Millie depreciates Taplow's gift, describing it as 'a few bobs' worth of 'appeasement' (214) and a 'five-bob' present (215). Lord Windermere's unpretentious present to his wife in Wilde's comedy is contrasted with 'the monstrous sums of money' he squanders on his alleged lover Mrs Erlynne. As I have already suggested, *Fan* seems to call to mind the *Agamemnon* in several instances. Like Aeschylus' tragedy, Wilde's comedy is structured around the dichotomy between moderation and excess. Lord Windermere's modest gift of a fan to his wife contrasts with Lord Darlington's hypothetical, extravagant 'carpet' of flowers for her—shades of Clytemnestra's purple carpet for Agamemnon?

Taplow has carefully inscribed his gift with a line from Aeschylus' tragedy in Greek, τὸν κρατοῦντα μαλθακῶς θεὸς πρόσωθεν εὐμενῶς προσδέκεται (*Ag.*, 950–1), which the classics master 'roughly' translates as 'God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle

master' (212). The line is one of the last spoken by Agamemnon to Clytemnestra before she brings him inside to kill him. The line is obviously applicable to Andrew, who is being destroyed in an adulterous marriage by his toxic wife. Although Aeschylus meant by the word 'master' a military conqueror and not a schoolteacher, the Crock is a martinet, 'the Himmler of the lower fifth'. The headmaster had earlier tried to sweet-talk Crocker-Harris by mentioning his 'heroic battle for so long and against such odds with the soul-destroying lower fifth' (198). Taplow has selected the line to comment on the classics master. Andrew is so moved by Taplow's inscription that he sheds tears, presumably out of tragic recognition: the Crock has not been a gentle schoolmaster, and God has not looked graciously on him. 'Master' can also mean husband, as in the biblical 'lord and master'. Andrew cries over his abject failure as a husband as well as a teacher.

Andrew also undoubtedly cries at Taplow's thoughtfully inscribed gift because he is moved by a lone, unexpected display of kindness. The schoolboy's affectionate inscription evokes Wilde's engraved messages to his 'boys' and those of his dramatic characters to their loved ones. Taplow's Christian name, John, also calls to mind the Jack Worthing of *Earnest* as well as the disciple whom Jesus loved. In *Earnest*, the eponymous protagonist's love interest Gwendolen tells her crestfallen admirer, 'Jack is a notorious domesticity for John! And I pity any woman who is married to a man called John' (23). At Oxford, Wilde had been the disciple of John Ruskin, who had had a 'white marriage', which had been annulled on grounds of non-consummation, with Effie Gray, who went on to marry his special friend and protégé, the pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais. When sending his old Oxford mentor a copy of *The Happy Prince*, Wilde wrote to Ruskin, 'There is in you something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear, and the blind to see' ([June 1888], *Complete Letters*, 349). As Ellmann observes, Wilde's description of Ruskin recalls another prophet named John whom the playwright would present as the 'untouchable'

Iokanaan in *Salomé*.¹⁵⁵ Rattigan's use of the name John for a character who presents an alternative to unhappy heterosexual relations in the form of male-male intellectual and spiritual mentorship is thus highly ironic. In a symbolic sense, Taplow's fondly inscribed gift also ends the cycle of homophobic hatred initiated by Queensberry's 'hideous' calling card bearing the infamous (mis)inscription 'Oscar Wilde posing sodomite'.

Taplow's giving of the Browning version marks the turning point and redemptive moment in Rattigan's play. At the beginning, the schoolboy had been dispatched by Mrs Crocker-Harris to the chemist to fetch her husband's heart medicine. By running errands and melting his (school)master's frozen, metallic heart, Taplow recalls the gift-bearing birds of Wilde's fairy tales. It is the Swallow's continual readiness to engage in conversation with the talking statue of the Happy Prince, and to listen to and carry out his directives that eventually results in his willing self-sacrifice and silencing, symbolised by a kiss of death:

But at last he [the Swallow] knew that he was going to die. He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. 'Good-bye, dear Prince!' he murmured, 'will you let me kiss your hand?'

'I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.'

'It is not to Egypt that I am going,' said the Swallow. 'I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?'

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two. ('Prince', 77-8)

Like Wilde's Swallow, Aeschylus' Cassandra eventually recognizes that she is going to die, and gives voice to this realization. While the Swallow can only deduce that his demise is imminent, Cassandra, who possesses prophetic powers, is able to mentally apprehend her impending doom. Just as the no-longer-gilded youth of a Prince in Wilde's story does not grasp the full import of the Swallow's ambivalent farewell, the Chorus of Elders in Aeschylus' play do not comprehend at first the meaning of Cassandra's ambiguous and allusive utterances, even though her initial outburst becomes articulate Greek.

¹⁵⁵ Ellmann (1988: 50).

Wilde's Swallow explains to his beloved young Apollo-like Prince that he is on his way to 'the House of Death'. Aeschylus' Cassandra asks Apollo, her 'destroyer' (ἀπόλλων; 1081, 1086), what house he has brought her to (1087). The Elders, however, answer that it is the house of the sons of Atreus. Cassandra disagrees, describing it as a veritable slaughterhouse (ἀνδροσφαγεῖον; 1092). While silent, Cassandra appeared to pay no heed to Clytemnestra's commands and attempts to persuade her to go inside the palace and partake in the purported animal sacrifice. However, when alone onstage apart from the Chorus, the Trojan prophetess is compelled by an inner vision. She subsequently reveals her intention to 'suffer, submit to dying' (τλήσομαι τὸ καθανεῖν; 1290) to the Chorus, who liken her to a sacrificial animal being divinely led to the slaughter (1297–98). Unlike the sacrificial animal in Wilde's 'Nightingale', who decides to follow through on the Rose-Tree's instructions by singing as she pierces herself with the Tree's thorn, Cassandra declares that she does not 'cry [...] "ah"—as bird at bush' (οὔτοι δυσοίζω θάμνον ὡς ὄρνις; 1316). However, while this sacrificial victim is resigned to her destiny, she will not go quietly: she 'will go,—even in the household wailing | My fate and Agamemnon's' (ἀλλ' εἴμι κὰν δόμοισι κωκύσουσ' ἐμὴν | Ἀγαμέμνονός τε μοῖραν; 1313–14) and delays her inevitable death by making one last lament, her own dirge for herself (1322–23). At the bidding of the Oak-tree, Wilde's bird also sings one last song before going to her death ('Nightingale', 82).

Killeen asserts that the self-immolation of Wilde's Nightingale and the rejection of the rose by the Student and the Professor's daughter in Wilde's story 'appears to repeat rather than interrupt the cycle of violence' in the Philomela myth.¹⁵⁶ Aeschylus' Cassandra is a key mediating figure between Philomela and the eponymous protagonist of 'Nightingale' since the Wildean Nightingale only departs from the Philomela paradigm to the extent that Cassandra does. In the Ovidian Philomela episode, Philomela obviously does not consent to Tereus' corporeal violation and mutilation of her, and at the end she flees her imminent

¹⁵⁶ Killeen (2007: 44).

dismemberment at his hands. She does, however, assist Procne in her slaughtering of Itys. In the *Agamemnon*, Cassandra announces that she ‘will suffer, submit to dying’ (1289). She prays that ‘on an opportune blow chancing, | Without a struggle,—blood the calm death bringing | In easy outflow, —I this eye may close up!’ (ἐπέυχομαι δὲ καιρίας τυχεῖν, | ὡς ἀσφάδαστος, αἱμάτων εὐθνησίμως | ἀπορρυέντων, ὄμμα συμβάλω τόδε; 1291–93). In Wilde’s story, the rose is stained red with blood from the Nightingale’s heart and at the bird’s death ‘a film came over her eyes’ (83). The Chorus in Aeschylus’ play are amazed at Cassandra’s resolve and describe her heading to her death at the altar in animal terms: she is ‘like to | A god-led steer’ (θεηλάτου βοὸς δίκην; 1297–98). Cassandra, however, rejects any comparison to a bird (1316–17).

The sacrificial imagery in the Cassandra scene connects the Trojan princess with Iphigenia, whose death at Aulis plays a prominent part in the drama’s *parodos*. Agamemnon’s and Clytemnestra’s daughter, given the epithet ἀταύρωτος (lit. ‘unbullied’), possibly a technical cultic term for a sacrificial heifer, used to sing ‘with pure voice’ (ἀγνῶ [...] αὐδῶ) paeans at her father’s feasts (243–47).¹⁵⁷ At her sacrifice, however, the mouth of the Mycenaean princess is muzzled to impede her from making a noise that would bring down a familial curse: στόματος τε καλλιπρῶ- | ρου φυλακῶ κατασχεῖν | φθόγγον ἄραϊον οἴκοις, | βία χαλινῶν τ’ ἀωαύδω μένει (‘and the fair mouth’s guard | And frontage hold, — press hard | utterance a curse against the House [of Agamemnon] | By dint of bit—violence bridling speech’; 235–38). A sacrificial victim had to be seen to go to death willingly; any act or sound indicating reluctance or resistance would invalidate the sacrifice—and in the case of a human victim such as Iphigenia would constitute murder. Clytemnestra tells the Chorus that Cassandra does not know how to hear the bridle (1067), and the Trojan priestess sings inauspicious lamentations to Apollo instead the customary paeans to the deity (1074–75, 1078–79). Rehm might be talking about Wilde and his singing Nightingale when he writes: ‘Through poetic image and situation, the death of Cassandra reduplicates

¹⁵⁷ Sommerstein (2008: *ad loc.*).

the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the blood of innocent women fertilizing the ground for new acts of bloodshed.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Rehm (1992: 87).

Eros Bound and Unbound: Euripidean Tragedy in Salomé

In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst, the last is a real tragedy!¹

Lady Windermere's Fan

One half of the world does not believe in God and the other half does not believe in me.²

Wilde, *In Conversation*

Prologue

Goldhill asserts that although Wilde's preference for Euripides over Sophocles 'puts him at odds with the mainstream of critical and cultural judgement [...] in this he follows rather weakly his early mentor Mahaffy'.³ In this chapter, it becomes apparent that, in relation to *Salomé* at least, it is Wilde's Trinity tutor Tyrrell, his Oxford mentor Pater, and Nietzsche who are of greater importance than Mahaffy in shaping his thinking.

Guy and Small criticize Smith and Helfand for 'using materials written at a very early stage in Wilde's career to explain what happened later on'.⁴ However, as this chapter demonstrates, Wilde's juvenile jottings in his Oxford Commonplace Book reveal that the Greats candidate was already engaged with the ideas that would structure his biblical Symbolist drama. In one entry, the young Wilde displays his keen interest in Euripides as well as his literary *Nachleben* from antiquity onwards. He notes that the Greek tragedian 'was to the age of Menander the model and the delight[:] more than this, Euripides witnessed to nature in the stilted rhetoric of the Roman stage, in the studied pomp of the French Court: He fed the youth of Racine'.⁵ Another entry, entitled 'The Bacchae of

¹ Wilde (1999), *Fan*, ed. Small, NM, 66.

² Quoted in Stuart Merrill, 'Some Unpublished Recollections of Oscar Wilde', tr. and partially ed. H. Montgomery Hyde, *Adam International Review*, 241–3 (1954), 10–2. Reprinted in Mikhail (1979b: 468–72, at 469).

³ Goldhill (2014: 186).

⁴ Guy and Small (2006: 87).

⁵ Wilde (1989), *Oxford Notebooks*, ed. Smith and Helfand, 132 [130]. The number in square brackets refers to the page number in Wilde's Commonplace Book.

Euripides', shows that Wilde was aware of that tragedy's afterlife in the Hellenized Roman world of the first century BC and early second century AD through Plutarch's *Life of Crassus*, as well as in the Byzantine period through the Euripidean cento *Christus Patiens*—both key texts in the transmission history of the *Bacchae*. All these periods and moments in Euripides' reception history can be shown to have informed Wilde's most Euripidean work, *Salomé*. My method in this chapter is, given its themes, fittingly cruciform: I trace the influence of Euripidean tragedy on Wilde's *Salomé* both synchronically and diachronically.

The first half of the chapter looks at *Salomé*'s reception of the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus* synchronically. Ross, who argues that 'Tyrrell's eclipse has been unwarranted' in studies of Wilde,⁶ discusses the Trinity don's 1871 edition of the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*. He does not, however, relate it to *Salomé*, the Wildean work that most closely interacts with the two Euripidean tragedies.⁷ A decade after Mahaffy's short monograph on Euripides for Macmillan was published, Pater twinned the two tragedies in 'The Bacchanals of Euripides' and 'Hippolytus Veiled: A Study from Euripides' for *Macmillan's Magazine* in May and August 1889. Both Tyrrell's edition and Pater's essay on the *Bacchae* refer to the *Christus Patiens*, and two of the Euripidean tragedies that the medieval cento most plunders are the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*. Although I demonstrate here that Wilde's *Salomé* reverses the Christianizing process of the cento and returns the *Bacchae* to its pagan roots, I note the similarities between the playwright's 'turn to the Bible' in the exile of prison,⁸ when his biblical drama was first put on in Paris, and Euripides' supposed recantation of his atheistic beliefs and his return to religious orthodoxy in his self-imposed exile in Macedon, where the *Bacchae* was first produced posthumously. In the *Bacchae*, the sympathies of the spectators arguably shift over the course of the tragedy from

⁶ Ross (2013: 22).

⁷ Ibid. 184–7.

⁸ Tate (2012: 598).

Dionysus to Pentheus—an artistic complexity that had to be simplified in the *Christus Patiens* with its monolithic Christian message. In *Salomé*, Wilde undoes this Christianizing process of simplification completely by dispersing the traits and roles of both the Euripidean god and king among the four main characters of his biblical play—Salomé, Iokanaan, Hérode, and Hérodiad.

In the cosmopolitan Hellenized eastern Mediterranean world of *Salomé*, the minor characters of different ethnicities discuss their diverse creeds, one of which is the paradoxical idea that the gods are dead. This, of course, echoes the audacious atheistic declaration of Nietzsche that ‘God is dead’, as well as the German philosopher’s idea in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) that tragedy died at the hands of Euripides, who inaugurated a decadent ‘Alexandrian’ age. As we have already seen, Wilde writes in ‘The Critic as Artist’ that the ‘self-conscious’ city of Alexandria, where ‘the Greek spirit [...] ultimately expired in scepticism and theology’ (*Criticism*, 144), was dedicated to ‘art-criticism’ (140), which, for the author, is subjectivist and perspectivist by nature.

In the second half of the chapter, I move from discussing the death of god(s) to Wilde’s depiction of the three deaths in *Salomé*, which correspond to the drama’s tripartite structure, as symbolized by the shifting colour of the moon. The religious relativism is reflected by the oscillation in Wilde’s use of source material, from Euripides to his literary descendants Seneca and Racine. The results are a narcissistic projectionism and solipsistic subjectivism that meet with fatal official condemnation.

I. *Salomé* and Tyrrell, Pater, and Nietzsche

Even though traces of each of the three great Greek tragedians can be detected in *Salomé*, it is Euripides who is most present in the background, as William Saunders asserts in a review of Wilde’s play from 1922:

Salomé might as easily have been a tragedy of Euripides as an essay in histrionic creation by the greatest dramatic epigrammatist of the nineteenth century. The tragedy is essentially Greek in character, and after making the necessary allowances for the differences in periods, purely Euripidean in style.⁹

Alex Falzon and Kostas Boyiopoulos have discussed the significance for *Salomé* of Euripides' *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus* respectively.¹⁰ It is no coincidence that the only two Wildean scholars to have appreciated the extent of Wilde's engagement with ancient tragedy in his biblical drama come not from the Anglosphere but from the two countries where the classical past is most immediately present, namely, Italy and Greece. Anglo-American scholars of Wilde have, on the whole, shown scant interest in *Salomé*'s ancient ancestry. Robert Ross's Preface to *Salomé* in his first edition of Wilde's *Collected Works* (1908) typifies the Anglophone critical tendency to focus on Wilde's contemporary Continental influences, while making routine reference to the Bible—apparently the play's only ancient source worthy of attention.¹¹ This critical trend can be traced to the caricature of 'Oscar Wilde at Work [sc. on *Salomé*]' by the illustrator of the 1894 English-language edition of Wilde's French play, Aubrey Beardsley. The artist depicts the rather self-satisfied-looking playwright 'seated like an over-grown schoolboy at a desk, working on his manuscript surrounded by cribs',¹² including—in addition to a French dictionary, *French Verbs at a Glance*, and *Ahn's First [French] Course*, as well as a copy of (Flaubert's) *Trois Contes* and volumes of Gautier and Swinburne—an edition of Josephus¹³ and, with more than a hint of irony, a hefty 'Family Bible'. Perhaps if *Salomé* had been banned from the British stage for its incest theme—which clearly connected it with not only Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* but also Shelley's *The Cenci* (1819)—rather than its

⁹ Review of *Salomé* (Sept. 1922), *Drama*, quoted in Wilde (2003b: 380).

¹⁰ Falzon (2003); Boyiopoulos (2018). Boyiopoulos' chapter is the only one in the edited collection *OW&CA* to concentrate on *Salomé*.

¹¹ Ross (1909b: x).

¹² Calloway (1998: 70–1).

¹³ Salome was mentioned as a stepdaughter of Herod Antipas in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (XVIII. v. 4). Unlike the New Testament, Josephus makes no connection between Herod's stepdaughter and John the Baptist.

scriptural subject matter, there would now be a greater awareness of the drama's classical inheritance.¹⁴

In a discussion of the 1871 edition of the *Bacchae* by Wilde's Trinity tutor Tyrrell, who reads Euripides' penultimate play through his earlier tragedy *Hippolytus*, Iain Ross notes the similarity between Tyrrell's comparison of the two plays and that of a later Irish editor of the *Bacchae*, E. R. Dodds.¹⁵ But Ross does not mention the evident links between these two Euripidean tragedies and Wilde's *Salomé*.¹⁶ Tyrrell writes that 'just as in the *Bacchae*, Pentheus suffers under the vengeance of the god [Dionysus] whose prerogatives he refuses to enjoy, [...] so in the *Hippolytus*, a play written nearly thirty years before, Hippolytus shows the same contumacy to Aphrodite and suffers a similar punishment'.¹⁷ Dodds likewise concluded in his edition (1944; rev. 1960) that the "moral" of the *Hippolytus* is that sex is a thing about which you cannot afford to make mistakes, so the "moral" of the *Bacchae* is that we ignore at our peril the demand of the human spirit for Dionysiac experience'.¹⁸ These scholarly comparisons of the two Euripidean works recall *Salomé*, which is similarly structured around the extremes of indulgence and abstinence, as personified in the central conflict between the lascivious princess and the puritanical

¹⁴ *The Cenci* is also linked to the *Oedipus Rex* through the theme of parricide. Both plays were inextricably connected in the campaign to abolish theatre censorship in Britain (Macintosh 1997: 295–6). Along with Swinburne's equally unperformable, 'Aeschylean' *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), *The Cenci* was Wilde's favourite nineteenth-century play (Donohue 2013a: 34), and Wilde attended and reviewed the Shelley Society's private production at the Grand Theatre, Islington in 1886 (see Wilde, 'The Cenci', *Dramatic Review*, 3, 15 May 1886, 151, reprinted in *Journalism*, i, 77–8).

¹⁵ See Tyrrell (1871: esp. xvi–xvii, xviii, xxi). Wilde's copy of Tyrrell's edition of the *Bacchae* has survived and forms part of the Eccles Bequest at the British Library. As Wright (2009: 62) reports, 'Wilde covered every available blank space of his Euripides and, in the process, damaged the spine and knocked its corners.' On the title page, Wilde dated his copy to 'Trinity, 1872' (ibid), his second term at TCD, and he was examined on the work that same term, with the questions making specific reference to the edition and emendations by Tyrrell, who had himself lectured on the text (see *Dublin Examination Papers* 1873: 129). See Ross (2013: 184–5).

¹⁶ A comparison of Tyrrell's and Dodds's editions, Ross (2013: 185) writes, 'reveals that Dodds, who was associated with the modernist poets and who built on the anthropological turn of the early twentieth century to insist on the irrationalism of the Greeks, had to suppress Tyrrell's edition in order to maintain his fiction of wrong-headed Victorian scholars imposing upon Euripides their preconceptions of Greek rationalism, a typically nineteenth-century error that he, Dodds, knowing better through his reading of Freud and Frazer, now had to undo'.

¹⁷ Tyrrell (1871: xvi–xvii).

¹⁸ Dodds (1960: xlv). Quoted in Ross (2013: 254–5 n. 362).

prophet. They also have a marked resonance for *Dorian Gray* and its author's own

assessment of it:

[I]t is a story with a moral. And the moral is this: All excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its own punishment. The painter, Basil Hallward, worshipping physical beauty far too much, [...] dies by the hand of one in whose soul he has created a monstrous and absurd vanity. Dorian Gray, having led a life of mere sensation and pleasure, tries to kill conscience, and at that moment kills himself. Lord Henry seeks to be merely the spectator of life. He finds that those who reject the battle are more deeply wounded than those who take part in it. Yes; there is a terrible moral in *Dorian Gray*—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy. ('To the Editor of the *St James's Gazette*', 26 June [1890], in *Complete Letters*, 430–1)¹⁹

In Wilde's letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, as in his other press correspondence, as well as his Preface to the book edition of *Dorian Gray* and his court appearances, the author defends his novel with characteristic Decadent disdain against the accusation of immorality from the Philistine critic.²⁰ Wilde (and the Aesthetic movement as a whole) found a classical model of decadence in Euripides, who was attacked by ancients and moderns alike, from Aristophanes and Aristotle to the Schlegel brothers and Nietzsche.²¹ In his Oxford 'Commonplace Book', which contains numerous references to Euripides, the young Wilde comments that the tragedian 'was criticised by the conservatives of his own day as much as Swinburne is by the Philistines of ours, [and] is there attacked for [his] laxity and extravagance'.²²

Premiered posthumously after 406 BC, Euripides' *Bacchae* is the *fin-de-siècle* tragedy par excellence in its (arguable) 'self-awareness of a literary form that was now nearing the end of its creative life'.²³ Wilde asserts that *Dorian Gray* does have a moral, albeit not in a

¹⁹ For other Euripidean echoes in *Dorian Gray*, see Ch. 2 in this thesis.

²⁰ See Ch. 1 in this thesis.

²¹ Prasch (2012: 467–8); Henrichs (1986).

²² Wilde (1989), *Oxford Notebooks*, ed. Smith and Helfand, 113 [23]. The number in square brackets refers to the page number in Wilde's Commonplace Book.

²³ Segal (1982: 216). Segal was the first to discuss the *Bacchae* at length in terms of metatheatre, its self-conscious theatricality. Since then, the metatragic or metatheatrical dimension of Euripides' play has been widely acknowledged and encountered little in the way of effective refutation. Of course, any argument against viewing the *Bacchae* metatheatrically tells us nothing about Wilde's own personal perception of Euripides' play and its potentially self-referential or ludic elements. After all, Shaw once called Wilde 'our only thorough playwright', who 'plays with everything: with wit, with philosophy, with drama, with actors and audience, with the whole theatre' (G.B.S., review of *An Ideal Husband*, *Saturday Review*, 12 Jan. 1895, lxxix, 44–5, reprinted in Shaw 1932: 9–12; Beckson 1970: 176–8).

narrowly or reductively didactic sense, as Dodds would imply in relation to the *Bacchae* over half a century later. Wilde's opposition between the prurient and the healthy-minded, which he frames in quasi-religious language ('revealed'), evokes the central *agon* in the *Bacchae* between Pentheus and Dionysus. Pentheus, King of Thebes, claims that the women of the city who have left their homes for the woods of Mount Cithaeron to participate in ecstatic rites to the god Dionysus have done so as a pretext to tryst in private with men. However, Dionysus, in the guise of his own priest, dissuades Pentheus from setting out with a military force, and prevails upon him to go dressed as a maenad and spy on the Bacchic rites (with the expectation of witnessing the women's sexual activities). When Pentheus has been brought under Dionysus' spell, the god tells him, 'You were not healthy in mind before. Now you are—exactly right'²⁴ (τὰς δὲ πρὶν φρένας | οὐκ εἶχες ὑγιεῖς, νῦν δ' ἔχεις οἴασι σε δεῖ; Eur., *Ba.*, 947–8). Like Wilde's lackadaisical, if somewhat perverted, Lord Henry Wotton, Euripides' obsessive, voyeuristic Pentheus epitomizes 'the spectator of life [...] who reject[s] the battle' and 'is more deeply wounded than those who take part in it'.²⁵ In Wilde's Oxford essay 'The Rise of Historical Criticism', Pentheus is described as 'a sort of modern Philistine' (*Criticism*, 22).

In Wilde's *Commonplace Book*, which he kept towards the end of his studies at Oxford, the Greats candidate noted down the following thought: 'Mankind has been continually entering the prisons of Puritanism, Philistinism, Sensualism, Fanaticism, and turning the

²⁴ Tr. Roche (1974).

²⁵ Gomel (2004: 81) writes that *Dorian Gray's* three main characters, Basil, Dorian, and Lord Henry, represent the positions of artist, model, and audience respectively. Lord Henry is the only 'audience' of Dorian's portrait and his bid for the *objet d'art* reflects a fetishistic desire for it as 'a token of sexual possession' (ibid. 82). In this context, one could also cite Lord Henry's twenty-six or twenty-seven photographs of Dorian that Lady Wotton 'nervously' mentions (*Dorian Gray*, 35–6; cf. 208). Lord Henry 'is as curious about the hidden painting as he is about Dorian's hidden life, which mirrors his own' (Gomel 2004: 82). Unlike Euripides' Pentheus, Lord Henry 'alone emerges from the involvement with the picture emotionally marked but physically unscathed' (ibid.).

In the *Bacchae* (829), when Pentheus has betrayed a desire to spy on the women, Dionysus refers to him as a prospective *theatēs*, a 'viewer' or 'spectator', significantly the same term for a member of a theatrical audience. Although Seaford (1996: *ad loc.*) concedes that the Greek word can mean a spectator in the theatre, he contends that in this scene of Euripides' play its meaning is primarily related to ritual, not drama. In support of this ritualistic reading, Seaford (ibid.) points to another Euripidean play (and in many ways the *Bacchae's* companion piece), the *Ion* (301), where *theatēs* is used in an explicitly ritual context.

key on its own spirit' (*Oxford Notebooks*, 110 [14]). Not only do the young Wilde's jottings uncannily anticipate his press correspondence on the *Dorian Gray* controversy over a decade later, but they also have an uncomfortable relevance for Euripides' wrongheaded Pentheus, who impiously attempts to keep Dionysus under literal lock and key. Wilde, however, was conscious of the moral complexity at the core of the *Bacchae*. In *Salomé*, the princess's sensualism is matched by the prophet's fanaticism—Euripides' tragedy is not a straightforward struggle between right and wrong or good and evil.

As we have seen in Chapter 2, Wilde resembles the Orphic Iokanaan in his fear of, and flight from, the female, but, as we shall see in this chapter, the author also identifies with the maenadic Salomé, whose dogged pursuit of her out-of-bounds love-object results in death and destruction all around. The biblical prophet of *Salomé* is prefigured by the nondescript 'prophet' whom Lord Henry mentions towards the end of the book edition of *Dorian Gray* (350). Strolling by Marble Arch one Sabbath, Lord Henry comes across 'a little crowd of shabby-looking people listening to some vulgar street-preacher'. As Lord Henry passes, the preacher hollers the question, 'what does it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' With his inimitable insouciance and urbanity, Lord Henry remarks:

It struck me as being rather dramatic. London is very rich in curious effects of that kind. A wet Sunday, an uncouth Christian in a mackintosh, a ring of sickly white faces under a broken roof of dripping umbrellas, and a wonderful phrase flung into the air by shrill hysterical lips.

Wilde's sympathy, in this instance, clearly lies with the cosmopolitan *flâneur* and not with the frankly ridiculous proto-Iokanaan. And yet, the Wildean table-talker and the crude park preacher are also two sides of the same coin rather than polar opposites.

Since the 1960s, theatrical productions of the *Bacchae* in Britain have tended to twist the elusive tragedy into a simplistic put-down of puritan restraint. Euripides irrefutably shows, through the rigid, neurotic Pentheus, the pitfalls of repressing the ecstatic instinct. But it is equally true to say that the tragedian portrays Dionysus as a steely cruel, merciless, and

vindictive deity who exacts an extreme vengeance on those who deny his divinity. In the extant text at the end of Euripides' tragedy, the sufferings of the royal family are described with the language of *deinos*, emphasizing the terrible nature of the divine justice dispensed by Dionysus (with Zeus' approval; see *Ba.*, 1349).²⁶ The three daughters of Cadmus will undergo an *algos deinon* ('terrible suffering'; 1260), while the whole family has come to a *deinon kakon* ('terrible evil'; 1352), as all its members are entering exile. This torment has been brought on the family *deinōs* ('terribly'; 1373) by Dionysus, who, despite his divinity, suffered *deina* ('terrible things'; 1376) at the hands of the House of Cadmus. The *Bacchae* depicts a bipartite Dionysiac *deinon*, consisting of awe and terror, as represented by the chorus of Lydian women and the shadow chorus of Theban women. Pentheus does not perceive the complexity of Dionysiac *deinon* and is thus compelled to encounter the side of the god's *deinon* that is genuinely terrible and terrifying.²⁷

In his letter to the editor of the *St James's Gazette*, Wilde describes the moral of *Dorian Gray* as 'terrible', an adjective that echoes throughout his novel and *Salomé*, in particular the English translation by Douglas. Wilde's Iokanaan never allows us to forget that Euripides' Dionysus, as his chilling prologue makes clear, has come to teach Thebes a lesson and has deliberately driven its women mad (*Ba.*, 32–40), and that he has no answer to the final accusation of vindictiveness (1346–51). One of the Soldiers in *Salomé* reports that the prophet of the desert 'was very terrible to look upon' (*Salome*, 709; *Salomé*, 513). The princess tells us that he is still 'terrible', and that 'his eyes above all [...] are terrible' (713; 'les yeux surtout [...] sont terribles'; 520). The prophet says 'terrible things' (710; 'des choses monstrueuses'; 516) about Salomé's mother, Hérodiade. According to Hérode, 'God has put into his mouth terrible words' (727; 'Dieu a mis dans sa bouche des mots

²⁶ The Greek adjective *deinos*, derived from the noun *deos* ('fear'), is an untranslatable word, meaning—in addition to 'terrible'—'strange', 'clever', 'dreadful', 'awful', and 'wonderful', in the sense of awe-inspiring, full of wonder, something that surpasses, or violates, the norm. Sophocles famously uses the adjective to open his 'Ode to Man' chorus in *Antigone* (332–3): πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδέν ἄν- | θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει ('Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man'; tr. Jebb 1912).

²⁷ See Visvardi (2015: 180, 213–6, 218–20, 223–5, 227, 230, 232–7).

terribles'; 554). The God of the Jews is Himself 'terrible. He breaketh in pieces the strong and the weak as men break corn in a mortar' (719; '[Dieu] est terrible. Il brise les faibles et les forts comme on brise le blé dans un mortier'; 535). The head of Iokanaan that Salomé demands is 'a terrible thing, an awful thing' (726; 'C'est horrible, c'est épouvantable'; 551), declares her stepfather.

Binary divisions have also been a feature of the scholarship on *Salomé*. The polarisation of apparent opposites was a structural characteristic of the ancient Greek worldview, and this is reflected in *Salomé*'s binary divides, such as Hellene versus Hebrew or Hellenic versus Oriental. James Campbell divides the visual and aural elements of Wilde's biblical drama between its Hellenistic and Judeo-Christian contexts respectively: 'the specularity of the text is linked to the Hellenistic elements within it, which is to say its systematic representation of the multicultural Hellenistic world in the microcosm of the Herodian court', while '[t]he auditory element' is connected with 'the Judeo-Christian characters: the enumerated Jews and Nazarenes, and above all, Jokanaan'.²⁸ Hight describes *Salomé* as a dramatization of 'an oriental story from the fringes of the Greek world, in a style of classical restraint',²⁹ adding that 'the disputing Jews are grotesque (Strauss emphasized their grotesqueness when he added music to the play), St. John the Baptist an appalling figure like a Hindu ascetic, and the atmosphere of the entire play perverse, oriental, and evil'.³⁰ Saunders draws a distinction with respect to *Salomé*'s characters, which are 'Greek in spirit and pagan in effect'.³¹ The oppositions that structure *Salomé* find obvious parallels in the polarities that define the *Bacchae* and *Hippolytus*, such as Greek versus barbarian/non-Greek.

²⁸ Campbell (2015: ch. 4). Ebook.

²⁹ Hight (1949: 156).

³⁰ Ibid. 455.

³¹ Quoted in Wilde (2003b: 380). Saunders (ibid) clarifies: '[T]here is a vast difference between pure Hellenic paganism on the one hand, and moral obliquity on the other, and to suggest that the one term connotes the other, or *vice versa*, is indeed merely to attempt the reconciliation of opposites one with another, and the comparison of things that are absolutely unlike.'

Heavily ‘Orientalizing’ readings of *Salomé* owe much to Beardsley’s drawings for the English-language version of Wilde’s play; Beardsley developed a style that he himself dubbed ‘mystico-Oriental’.³² Wilde’s own words reveal that Beardsley’s images went further East than his text: the author told Ricketts that Beardsley’s drawings were ‘all too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine’.³³ Wilde’s description of his biblical play as ‘Byzantine’ is telling. In an entry in Wilde’s *Commonplace Book* entitled ‘The Bacchae of Euripides’, the Oxford undergraduate displays an awareness of the Byzantine *Christos Paschōn/Christus Patiens* (*The Passion of Christ*), a self-styled *Tragoedia Christiana* of uncertain date and authorship. Tyrrell derisively describes the *Christus Patiens* as ‘a wretchedly stupid drama, falsely attributed to Gregory Nazianzenus [329–89 AD], giving an account of the circumstances leading up to the Passion of Christ; [...] and [that] consists of a *cento* of verses taken chiefly from the Bacchae, Rhesus, and Troades’.³⁴ For the purposes of this chapter, it is worth noting that the other Euripidean tragedy that the medieval *cento* most plunders is the *Hippolytus*.³⁵ The young Wilde sees the Byzantine tragedy as a point in the *Bacchae*’s history as a symbol of the struggle between East and West:

[W]hen the actor substituted the head of Crassus for the head of Pentheus in the tragedy of the Bacchae, the material triumph of Orientalism and the sovereignty of the Parthians began: and transformed into the *Christus patiens* [*sic*] this play formed another link between East and West—and symbolized another triumph of Orientalism the Religion of Christ. (*Oxford Notebooks*, 132 [131])

In the *Bacchae*, Euripides dramatizes the young Dionysus on his triumphant way from East to West. The god appears to Pentheus in human form as a ‘foreigner/stranger’ (*xenos*; *Ba.*, 233, 247, 353, 453, 642, 800, 1059). While the Athenian poet represents the Dionysiac religion as Asian, alien, and ‘Other’, Dionysus is a Greek god whose Orientalization was

³² Letter to F. H. Evans (c. June 1893), in *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. Maas, Duncan, and Good (1970), 50.

³³ Quoted in Jullian (1969: 257).

³⁴ Tyrrell (1871: xiv). Other possible composers of the *Christus Patiens* include court intellectuals in the twelfth century.

³⁵ See Bryant Davies (2007).

partly due to syncreticism with authentic Eastern divinities such as Sabazius.³⁶ As was already mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, nineteenth-century lovers of the classics such as Shelley emphasized that Jesus and his followers were Jews, and viewed Christianity as part of an Asiatic tradition in opposition to a European tradition of Graeco-Roman paganism. Hence Wilde's reference to the religion represented by the Byzantine *Christus Patiens* as a 'triumph of Orientalism' and his characterization of John the Baptist in *Salomé* as Iokanaan the Hinduized holy man.³⁷

Wilde alludes in his *Commonplace Book* to the last chapter of the biographer Plutarch's *Life of Crassus* (xxxiii). The defeated Roman general endured the added humiliation of having his body mutilated, and his head cut off and sent to the Parthian king. By an unfortunate (and questionable) coincidence, the head's arrival at the barbarian court overlapped with a staging of the *Bacchae*. The resourceful tragic actor Jason of Tralles took off his Pentheus costume, seized the military trophy, and, assuming the role of the Theban king's maddened mother Agave, used it as a prop in the theatrical production in progress. The lines recited by Jason as Agave have been employed to reconstruct the lacunose ending of Euripides' text.³⁸ So too has the *Christus Patiens*, as its author appropriated Agave's lament over her immolated son for that of the Mater Dolorosa over her crucified son.³⁹ When his own biblical play was refused a licence by the Lord Chamberlain, Wilde compared his stage version of the Salomé/John the Baptist story to artistic representations of the crucified Christ and the Virgin Mary:

The Painter is allowed to take his subjects where he chooses. He can go to the great Hebrew, and Hebrew-Greek literature of the Bible and can paint Salomé dancing, or Christ on the cross, or the Virgin with her child. [...] The sculptor is equally free. He can carve St. John the Baptist in his camel hair, and fashion the Madonna or Christ in bronze or in marble as he wills.⁴⁰

³⁶ The almost definite appearance of Dionysus' name in Linear B has given the lie to the mythic (and resulting academic) fiction of a blow-in Eastern deity arriving in Greece after the 'Dark Ages'. Dionysus does not seem to have become synonymous with the East in the Greek mind until the sixth century. See Hall (2002b: 147).

³⁷ Hight (1949: 437–65).

³⁸ Seaford (1996: ad 1169–71).

³⁹ Ibid. ad 1329–30.

⁴⁰ 'The Censure and *Salomé*', *Pall Mall Budget* (30 June 1892), 947. Quoted in Mikhail (1979b: 187).

Fragments of the *Bacchae* feature in a Wildean parable published in Frank Harris's collection of short stories *Unpath'd Waters* (1913). 'The Irony of Chance', subtitled 'After O. W.' and dated September 1901, is narrated by Jack, who is reading Greats at Oxford. Jack's interest in a recently discovered portion of Euripides' tragedy, a palimpsest, prompts his Balliol contemporary Mortimer, a student of chemistry, to hypothesize about the possible scientific counterpart of a palimpsest: 'Fancy if, in time to come, we were able to read such a palimpsest, and print off for you photographs of Plato and Sophocles from some rock of Colonus.'⁴¹ A palimpsest is, indeed, an apposite critical symbol for *Salomé*—Joseph Donohue writes of a 'broad palimpsest of meanings' lying behind Wilde's play.⁴² *Salomé* reads as if it were written over multiple texts, including the *Bacchae* and the *Christus Patiens*, the vestiges of which are still visible.

The fragmentation and defilement of Crassus' body by the Parthians at the end of Plutarch's biography is dubiously well-matched to the abuse of Pentheus by Agave at the end of Euripides' tragedy. The 'material triumph of Orientalism', as the young Wilde called it, in the first century BC is played out at the barbarian court against the backdrop of fifth-century Athenian tragedy, an acme of Western civilization. In the self-consciously theatrical final scene of his biography of Crassus, Plutarch, writing as a proud Greek though compliant Roman subject, stresses the reach of Greek culture, representing Thebes, Athens, and Macedon, the site of Euripides' self-imposed exile and composition of the *Bacchae*. Crassus, who had ordered the crucifixion of all of Spartacus' remaining troops after their defeat in southern Italy, received his tragically ironic comeuppance at the hands of Rome's enemies deep in Asia. The association of slave revolts with Dionysiac phenomena goes back to at least the Bacchanalian conspiracies of the second century BC, as recounted by the great historian of Rome, Livy (xxxix. xli. 6–7). In the passage from Plutarch, the *Bacchae*, which includes among its cast an actor from a town in Asia Minor,

⁴¹ Harris (1913: 63). See Stokes (1996: 28–9).

⁴² Donohue (2013b: 428).

is but one of the many Greek works being performed during the festivities for a royal marriage between the houses of Hyrodes of Parthia and Artavasdes of Armenia in the ancient Armenian capital Artaxata. Plutarch presents the barbarian court as no cultural backwater, emphasizing that the two Eastern rulers were philhellenes: the Parthian king spoke Greek and knew Greek literature, while the Armenian monarch even composed literary works in Greek, including tragedies. Well-read in Greek literature, they saw the severed head of the Roman commander-in-chief as symbolically equivalent to that of the Theban king.

In Euripides' play, which pits West against East, the Theban Pentheus is subjected to the Lydian Dionysus, and instead of taking up arms against the Bacchae, the king encroaches on the Bacchantes' celebration of their god and is subsequently beheaded and dismembered. The head of Crassus decapitated by the Parthians is not simply a convenient theatrical stand-in for the severed head of Pentheus. Crassus is a military figurehead of Rome and his literal head, a substitute for the head of the Greek king who is overcome by Eastern forces, is a strong, dramatic symbol of the decisive dethroning of Western power. Threatened with being subsumed under Roman rule, the Parthians' victory could be considered, to quote Page duBois, 'a deferred and displaced vengeance for the crucifixion of Spartacus' warriors'.⁴³ The slave revolts in the south of Italy had been consistently associated with the Bacchanalia, perhaps because both events promised to dissolve distinctions, such as that between slave and freeman. The Parthians, who, like Spartacus, come from the margins of the Roman world, are the 'empire's foes striking back' against the epicentre.⁴⁴ Plutarch's use of the *Bacchae* in his *Life of Crassus* is a case of 'Athenian tragedy given a weird afterlife in the Hellenized, anti-Roman world of post-Alexandrian Asia'.⁴⁵ This description perfectly encapsulates Wilde's biblical drama.

⁴³ DuBois (2010: 30).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 28.

Euripides composed the *Bacchae* near the end of his life on the fringes of the Greek world at the court of the Macedonian king Archelaus in Pella. Seeing as the tragedian's track record at the City Dionysia was less starry than Sophocles',⁴⁶ it has been speculated that the unappreciated and underrated Euripides was too avant-garde for Athens and so the alleged recluse retired north to Macedon. There, so the story goes, Euripides encountered the ecstatic Bacchic religion that was all the rage. Until the mid- to late nineteenth century, the *Bacchae* was thought to be evidence of a death-bed conversion of sorts on Euripides' part, a 'Palinode' in which the hitherto sceptical playwright recanted his 'advanced' (i.e. atheistic) beliefs.⁴⁷ Wilde's own tutors and mentors held opposing views on the subject. Tyrrell wrote in his edition that the tragedy was not 'a reaction to orthodoxy',⁴⁸ as Euripides' attitude to the gods in the *Bacchae* is no different from his much earlier *Hippolytus*.⁴⁹ However, Tyrrell's 1892 edition of the *Bacchae* reprinted as a preface Pater's 'The Bacchanals of Euripides', which appeared in *Macmillan's Magazine* in May 1889 and was followed by his 'Hippolytus Veiled: A Study from Euripides' in the same publication three months later. In his essay, Pater presented the *Bacchae* as a return to orthodoxy after a lifetime of scepticism. According to Robert and Janice Keefe, Pater himself experienced a kind of death-bed conversion, as his 1893 essay 'Apollo in Picardy' represented 'a stunning recantation by an artist nearing death' of the Apollonianism that had superseded the Dionysianism of his earlier essays.⁵⁰

In 1895, Pater's 'The Bacchanals of Euripides' and 'Apollo in Picardy' were reprinted respectively in the posthumous collections *Greek Studies* and *Miscellaneous Studies*, which were two of the books that Wilde had sent to him in prison, in the September and

⁴⁶ Euripides only won first prize at the City Dionysia on five occasions (once posthumously for the trilogy including the *Bacchae*) compared with Sophocles' twenty top placings. Euripides is also known to have placed third (and last), whereas Sophocles never finished lower than second. See Ringer (2016: 2).

⁴⁷ Tyrrell (1871: xvi).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* xvi–xxii.

⁵⁰ Keefe and Keefe (1988: 142). Billie Inman has attacked the Keefes for opposing Apollo and Dionysus in Pater's work. Pater, Inman (1989: 541) argues, presents Dionysus and Apollo as 'brothers, [...] both "embodiments" of opposing tendencies, constructive and destructive, rational and irrational'.

December of that year.⁵¹ As Ross suggests, Wilde would have been able to forget his Tyrrell's rebuttal of Euripides' supposed recantation and 'identify imaginatively with the playwright, far from the clever talk of his home city, submitting at last to Dionysos'.⁵² Wilde, who had flirted with the Church of Rome from his undergraduate days, converted or reverted to Catholicism on his actual death bed in Paris, although there is doubt as to whether he was completely *compos mentis* when receiving the last rites. From the start of his prison sentence, Wilde only had access to religious books such as the Bible, a prayer book, and a hymn book (See *De Profundis*, 332). The Christmas before Wilde began his prison 'Epistola' to Douglas (written between January and March 1897), he managed to get his hands on the New Testament in Greek, which he had studied alongside classical texts for Mods at Oxford and for knowledge of which he had won the Carpenter Prize at Portora in 1870. Wilde related his daily ritual to Douglas:

Of late I have been studying with diligence the four prose poems about Christ. At Christmas I managed to get hold of a Greek Testament, and every morning, after I had cleaned my cell and polished my tins, I read a little of the Gospels, a dozen verses taken by chance anywhere. It is a delightful way of opening the day. [...] When one returns to the Greek; it is like going into a garden of lilies out of some narrow and dark house. (*De Profundis*, 118; 180; *Complete Letters*, 748)

Wilde's emphasis on the Gospels in *De Profundis* is the culmination of a fascination with Scripture that spans his oeuvre. Andrew Tate strikes the right balance when he writes that it would be too simplistic to argue that Wilde the 'fallen aesthete was only concerned with the sensuous, imaginative escape that a New Testament offered him from the reality of prison life'.⁵³ Nor should Wilde's biblical turn be exploited as evidence that 'liberated artists must eventually recant their freedom in favor of orthodoxy'. While Wilde could sing Christ's praises in prison, he was no Iokanaan: 'Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at' (*De Profundis*, 95, 168; *Complete Letters*, 732). During his exile in Reading Gaol, Wilde's biblical drama was

⁵¹ Donoghue (1994: 108).

⁵² Ross (2013: 187).

⁵³ Tate (2012: 597–8).

fittingly performed for the first time on 11 February 1896 by Lugné Poe's Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris, whither the playwright would retire in self-imposed exile after his release from prison. Wilde had ironically already threatened to go into permanent exile in Paris when *Salomé* had been refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain.

As has already been mentioned, *Salomé* reflects the interpretive complexity of the *Bacchae*, which hardly offers unqualified praise of Dionysus and, arguably, shifts the spectators' sympathies between the god and Pentheus over the course of the tragedy. The *Christus Patiens*, conversely, has a much more monolithic and less ambivalent message, and so to prevent any possibility of conflicted loyalties among its audience, the two roles of priest-god and sacrificial victim, represented in the *Bacchae* by Dionysus and Pentheus respectively, are conflated in the person of Christ. This conflation is, of course, already present in the New Testament, but was given a new lease of life in Wilde's Oxford when Pater, drawing on the subversive new science of comparative mythology advanced in Britain by his University colleague Max Müller, controversially connected Dionysus with Christ in his essay 'A Study of Dionysus', which was originally published in 1876, two years before 'The Bacchanals of Euripides' was written,⁵⁴ and would open *Greek Studies*, to which 'The Bacchanals' would provide the coda. Pater paired his essay on Dionysus with his essay on Demeter ('The Myth of Demeter and Persephone'), seeing the two gods, of wine and corn respectively, as pagan, pre-Christian precedent for Christ and his mourning mother, as well as the symbolism of Holy Communion.⁵⁵

Wilde's *Salomé* is saturated with Dionysian imagery, in particular, references to wine, prefiguring the spilling of Iokanaan's blood at the drama's climax. Iokanaan is both prophet and victim, but Salomé, Hérode, and Hérodiad also embody aspects of both Dionysus and Pentheus, complicating matters. Iokanaan resembles Pentheus in his sacrificial death and its recurrent foreshadowing. In addition, Iokanaan has in common

⁵⁴ See Østermark-Johansen (2017: 184).

⁵⁵ See Evangelista (2009: 41).

with Pentheus a Puritanical attitude to pleasure. The celibate prophet's rejection of Salomé and his condemnation of her 'incestuous' mother (520, 527; 712, 715) recall Euripides' Hippolytus, the devotee of Artemis who repudiates his stepmother Phaedra, stricken by Aphrodite. Iokanaan shares his Orphic fear of unfettered female sexuality with Pentheus: the prophet's lurid, practically pornographic pronouncements against Hérodiad's purported promiscuity are probably more reflective of his own prurient imaginings, as are Pentheus' expressed beliefs about what the women of the city are getting up to on Mt Cithaeron. However, Hérodiad the Philistine also plays Pentheus to the pious Hérode's Cadmus, or Sophocles' sceptical Jocasta to the superstitious Oedipus, making a link between the different generations of the mythical House of Thebes.⁵⁶ Just as Jocasta depreciates the prophetic proficiency of Tiresias but puts her faith in the oracle that Laius received and prays to Apollo,⁵⁷ Hérodiad, though clearly disturbed by Iokanaan's accusations of her incestuous 'abominations', dismisses the prisoner's prophetic utterances as drunken ravings:

HERODIAS Je ne crois pas aux présages. Il parle comme un homme ivre.

HERODE Peut-être qu'il est ivre du vin de Dieu!

HERODIAS Quel vin est-ce, le vin de Dieu! De quelles vignes vient-il? Dans quel pressoir peut-on le trouver? (541)

HERODIAS I do not believe in omens. He speaks like a drunken man.

HEROD It may be he is drunk with the wine of God.

⁵⁶ In her curious combination of hubristic impiety and religious observance, Sophocles' Jocasta can be compared with his and Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. On the more 'daimon-like', cosmic impiety of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra versus the more human equivalent of Sophocles' Jocasta, see Radasanu (2010: 35–49). Wilde's Hérodiad resembles the Clytemnestra of the *Agamemnon* in that she is committing adultery by taking up with a close relation of her husband, whom she has killed. Wilde intensifies this identification when Hérodiad's husband has her daughter killed at the end of *Salomé*. See Ch. 3 in this thesis.

⁵⁷ Is Wilde's opposition of Iokanaan (spelled elsewhere as Jokanaan) and the Jocasta-like Hérodiad a case of word play and inversion? Such linguistic game playing is characteristically Euripidean. As Wilde himself notes in 'Historical Criticism':

In the *Bacchae* of Euripides there is an extremely interesting passage in which the immoral stories of the Greek mythology are accounted for on the principle of that misunderstanding of words and metaphors to which modern science has given the name of a disease of language.

In answer to the impious rationalism of Pentheus—a sort of modern Philistine—Teiresias, who may be termed the Max Müller of the Theban cycle, points out that the story of Dionysus being enclosed in Zeus' thigh really arose from the linguistic confusion between μηρός ['thigh'] and ὄμηρος ['hostage'] (*Criticism*, 22).

See also Ch. 2 in this thesis, where I argue that the orphaned Dorian Gray embodies the different etymological cognates of the name 'Orpheus'.

HERODIAS What wine is that, the wine of God? From what vineyards is it gathered? In what wine-press may one find it? (721)

As Stokes has written, Wilde saw himself as something of a ‘secular prophet’, and miracles abound in his own ‘works’.⁵⁸ In *Salomé*, we hear the report of Christ’s first miracle, the transformation of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana, which recalls the messenger speech in the *Bacchae* relating the miraculous occurrences on Cithaeron:

LE PREMIER NAZAREEN [Le Messie] est venu, et il fait des miracles partout.

HERODIAS Oh! oh! les miracles. Je ne crois pas aux miracles. J’en ai vu trop. (*Au PAGE*) Mon éventail!

LE PREMIER NAZAREEN Cet homme fait des véritables miracles. Ainsi, à l’occasion d’un mariage qui a eu lieu dans une petite ville de Galilée, une ville assez importante, il a changé de l’eau en vin. Des personnes qui étaient là me l’ont dit. Aussi il a guéri deux lépreux qui étaient assis devant la porte de Capharnaüm, seulement en les touchant.

LE SECOND NAZAREEN Non, c’étaient deux aveugles qu’il a guéris à Capharnaüm.

LE PREMIER NAZAREEN Non, c’étaient deux lépreux. Mais il a guéri des aveugles aussi, et on l’a vu sur une montagne parlant avec des anges.

UN SADUCEEN Les anges n’existent pas.

UN PHARISIEN Les anges existent, mais je ne crois pas que cet homme leur ait parlé.

LE PREMIER NAZAREEN Il a été vu par une foule de personnes, parlant avec des anges.

UN SADUCEEN Pas avec des anges.

HERODIAS Comme ils m’agacent ces hommes! Ils sont bêtes! Ils sont tout à fait bêtes. (*Au PAGE*)

Eh! bien, mon éventail. (*Le PAGE lui donne l’éventail*) Vous avez l’air de rêver. Il ne faut pas rêver. Les rêveurs sont des malades. (*Elle frappe le PAGE avec son éventail*) (536–7)

FIRST NAZARENE [Messias] hath come, and everywhere He worketh miracles!

HERODIAS Ho! ho! miracles! I do not believe in miracles. I have seen too many. [*To the PAGE*] My fan.

FIRST NAZARENE This Man worketh true miracles. Thus, at a marriage which took place in a little town of Galilee, a town of some importance, He changed water into wine. Certain persons who were present related it to me. Also He healed two lepers that were seated before the Gate of Capernaum simply by touching them.

SECOND NAZARENE Nay; it was two blind men that He healed at Capernaum.

FIRST NAZARENE Nay; they were lepers. But He hath healed blind people also, and He was seen on a mountain talking with angels.

A SADDUCEE Angels do not exist.

A PHARISEE Angels exist, but I do not believe that this Man has talked with them.

FIRST NAZARENE He was seen by a great multitude of people talking with angels.

HERODIAS How these men weary me! They are ridiculous! They are altogether ridiculous! (*To the PAGE*) Well! my fan? (*The PAGE gives her the fan*) You have a dreamer’s look. You must not dream. It is only sick people who dream. (*She strikes the PAGE with her fan*) (719–20)

In addition to the miracle at Cana, the other miracles of Christ mentioned here correspond in the *Bacchae* to the rejuvenation of the aged Cadmus and Tiresias, while the ‘angels’ on the mountain have their equivalent in Euripides’ eponymous Bacchantes on Cithaeron.

⁵⁸ Stokes (1996: 23–38).

Euripidean agnosticism, ambiguity, and continually shifting viewpoint are present from the beginning of Wilde's biblical drama, when the minor characters of different ethnicities discourse on their theological differences:

- LE NUBIEN Les dieux de mon pays aiment beaucoup le sang. Deux fois par an nous leur sacrifions des jeunes hommes et des vierges: cinquante jeunes hommes et cent vierges. Mais il semble que nous ne leur donnons jamais assez, car ils sont très durs envers nous.
- LE CAPPADOCIEN Dans mon pays, il n'y a pas de dieux à présent, les Romains les ont chassé. Il y en a qui disent qu'ils se sont réfugiés dans les montagnes, mais je ne le crois pas. Moi, j'ai passé trois nuits sur les montagnes les cherchant partout. Je ne les ai pas trouvés. Enfin je les ai appelés par leurs noms et ils n'ont pas paru. Je pense qu'ils sont morts.
- PREMIER SOLDAT Les Juifs adorent un Dieu qu'on ne peut pas voir.
- LE CAPPADOCIEN Je ne peux pas comprendre cela.
- PREMIER SOLDAT Enfin, ils me croient qu'aux choses qu'on ne peut pas voir.
- LE CAPPADOCIEN Cela me semble absolument ridicule. (511–2)
- THE NUBIAN The gods of my country are very fond of blood. Twice in the year we sacrifice to them young men and maidens; fifty young men and a hundred maidens. But I am afraid that we never give them quite enough, for they are very harsh to us.
- THE CAPPADOCIAN In my country there are no gods left. The Romans have driven them out. There are some who say that they have hidden themselves in the mountains, but I do not believe it. Three nights I have been on the mountains seeking them everywhere. I did not find them. And at last I called them by their names, and they did not come. I think they are dead.
- FIRST SOLDIER The Jews worship a God that you cannot see.
- THE CAPPADOCIAN I cannot understand that.
- FIRST SOLDIER In fact, they believe only in things that you cannot see.
- THE CAPPADOCIAN That seems to me altogether ridiculous. (708)

The Cappadocian's arresting paradox of dead gods of course recalls Nietzsche's audacious declaration that 'God is dead', first in *The Gay Science* (1882; §§108, 125, 343) and then in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–91). An echo of this paradoxical idea can be heard in Nietzsche's *Jugendwerk, The Birth of Tragedy* (1872; §11):

Greek tragedy perished differently from all the other, older sister-arts: it died by suicide, as the result of an irresolvable conflict, which is to say tragically. [...] When Greek tragedy died, [...] there arose a vast emptiness which was felt deeply everywhere; just as Greek sailors from the time of Tiberius once heard, on a lonely island, the devastating cry, 'the great God Pan is dead' so a call now rang like the painful sound of mourning throughout the Hellenic world: 'Tragedy is dead! And with it we have lost poetry itself!'⁵⁹

In this passage, Nietzsche alludes to Plutarch's 'On the Decline of Oracles' (*De defectu oraculorum*) in his *Moralia* (V. xxix. 17). According to Plutarch, when Tiberius was Emperor, passengers on a ship sailing along the west coast of Greece heard a voice

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *'The Birth of Tragedy' and Other Writings*, ed. Geuss and Speirs, tr. Speirs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (1999), 54–5.

shouting from the islands of Paxi that Pan, the goat-god of the wild, shepherds, and flocks, was dead. In the Christian tradition, the ‘death’ of Pan heralds the advent of theology and the victory of Christianity over pagan religions. In *Salomé*, the voice of Iokanaan announces the coming of Christ, crying out from the cistern, ‘Il est venu, le Seigneur! Il est venu le fils de l’Homme. Les centaures se sont cachés dans les rivières, et les sirènes ont quitté les rivières et couchent sous les feuilles dans les forêts’ (515; ‘Behold! the Lord hath come. The Son of Man is at hand. The centaurs have hidden themselves in the rivers, and the nymphs have left the rivers, and are lying beneath the leaves in the forests’; 710).

At the end of the previous section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proclaims that tragedy died at the ‘violent’ hands of Euripides (§10). According to Nietzsche (§§11–4), Euripides and his co-conspirator Socrates undercut the ‘tragic’ period of Aeschylus (and, to a lesser extent, of Sophocles) and inaugurated the ‘Alexandrian’ age—the beginning of a long decline into decadence. In his *Exhortation to the Greeks* (ii. 32), the Church Father Clement of Alexandria refers to the first *Hymn* of Callimachus, the paradigmatic Alexandrian scholar-poet, who reports the Cretans’ claim to have the tomb of Zeus on their island (see Call., *Hymn*, i. 6–9). While Callimachus regarded the Cretans’ claim as a manifestation of the islanders’ impiety and stereotypically untruthful character, Clement saw it as a sign of disillusionment concerning the Olympian gods. As we have already seen in the Introduction to this thesis, Wilde, in ‘The Critic as Artist’, writes that ‘the critical spirit’ of Alexandria, where ‘the Greek spirit became most self-conscious, and indeed ultimately expired in scepticism and theology’ (*Criticism*, 144). In this passage, Wilde emphasizes that Alexandria, not Athens, supplied Rome, and hence later European civilization, with her art forms and models.

In his notorious best-selling novel *Hypatia* (1852/3), Charles Kingsley uses the theological differences in the Alexandria of the early fifth century to comment on the religious controversies of his own day, as signalled by his book’s subtitle, *New Foes with an Old Face*. A stage adaptation of Kingsley’s *Hypatia* by G. Stuart Ogilvie opened at the

Haymarket in January 1893, the first ‘toga play’ to be produced at the theatre during the tenure of Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Tree would star as Lord Illingworth in Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* three months later and had acted alongside his own wife and Wilde’s in the Dublin-born poet Dr John Todhunter’s *Helena in Troas* at Hengler’s Circus in 1886. The relationship of Wilde’s *Salomé* to Kingsley’s *Hypatia* is clear. The titular heroine of Kingsley’s novel is the beautiful Neoplatonist philosopher. She converts a young monk Philammon from a desert monastery who has planned to denounce her philosophy but instead falls in love with her. After the failed bid for imperial power by Hypatia’s betrothed, the Roman general Orestes, she is pursued naked into a church and torn to pieces by a Christian mob. Philammon returns to his Christian faith and retires to the desert. In the end, Alexandria, divided by theological disputes, falls to the Moslems.

The primary targets of Kingsley’s thinly veiled criticisms were John Henry Newman and the Tractarians of the Oxford Movement, who were identified with celibacy, intellectualism, and aristocratic exclusivity. In his novel, Kingsley opposes a plain, simple proto-Protestant Christianity, which was democratic and popular, with Neoplatonism, which was aristocratic and elitist, and with a monasticism characterized by hysteria and fanaticism. The politically motivated ecclesiastical establishment of Alexandria, especially Bishop Cyril, is a cipher for Cardinal Wiseman, who led the re-establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales. Kingsley’s two heroes, Philammon and the Jew Raphael Aben-Ezra, a pupil of Hypatia, convert to the author’s preferred form of Christianity. Kingsley also includes in his story a group of Goths who, albeit heathen, epitomize ‘Teutonic vigour and virility and indicate that the future lies with the hardy, manly North rather than the effete and decadent East’.⁶⁰ One critic remarked that Kingsley’s Goths were reminiscent of the Cambridge University boat crew,⁶¹ calling to mind the *agon* between the Aesthetes and the Athletes in the Oxford of Anthony Asquith

⁶⁰ Richards (2009: 171).

⁶¹ See Richards (2009: 171).

or that between the Aesthetes and the hairshirts in the Oxford of Housman, as dramatized in Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*.⁶² Wilde was linked through Roman and Byzantine decadence with the eroticism implied in Wiseman's turning of 'weaker' heads and the 'Romish' ritualistic transvestism of the Tractarian Movement by Max Nordau, who in his *Entartung* (1892; tr. as *Degeneration*, 1895) contrasted the louche mysticism and sensuousness of Catholicism with the respectable restraint of Protestantism.⁶³

In the remainder of this chapter, I look at Wilde's representation of the three deaths in *Salomé* in reverse order of occurrence, and reveal their debt to Euripidean drama.

II. The Death of Salomé

Despite Wilde's remark that Beardsley's *Salomé* designs out-Orientalized his script, the artist's response to the play also brings out its classical and Hellenic elements in greater relief. Whereas his Preface to Wilde's play made no mention of its author's possible ancient sources, apart from Scripture,⁶⁴ Robert Ross's almost exactly contemporary biography of Beardsley (1909) had no trouble crediting the artist's study of Greek vase painting at the British Museum (inspired by an essay of Beardsley's friend, the art critic D. S. McColl) with the 'fresh impetus' to his *Salomé* illustrations.⁶⁵ Other contemporaries of Wilde were also immediately struck by the unmistakable Greekness of *Salomé*.

Saunders's critical contention that Wilde's drama is 'Greek in conception and character'

⁶² See Chs 1 and 3 in this thesis.

⁶³ See O'Malley (2006: 118).

⁶⁴ Ross (1909b: x).

⁶⁵ Ross (1909a: 45). The McColl essay that Ross obliquely alludes to may or may not refer to *Greek Vase Painting* (1893), a large folio volume containing line-block reproductions of various masterpieces, written by Jane Harrison and assisted by McColl. See Walker (1949: 15); Calloway (1998: 52–3). Walker (1949: 15) adds, 'The solid blacks of the Yellow Book period and the clear outline without background of the Lysistrata and Lucian drawings are evidently inspired by Greek art.' Beardsley's creative engagements with the classics spans his entire short-lived career, from his twenty-five comic sketches for Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid* (c. 1886) to the eight erotic drawings for Leonard Smithers's planned edition of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (published privately in 1896), which he executed from his sick bed in Epsom. See Bell (2000: esp. 56 n. 13, 130, 158). Beardsley would have been sensible to the classical character of Wilde's *Salomé* as, Ross (ibid. 21) records, '[h]e read Greek and Latin authors in translations, and often astonished scholars by his acute appreciation of their matter'.

echoes the parodic Wildean paradox of Max Beerbohm, who wrote to the author and aesthete Reginald ('Reggie') Turner that *Salomé* '[i]n construction [...] is very like a Greek play [...] yet in conception so modern that its publication in any century would seem premature'.⁶⁶ Beerbohm's good-naturedly tongue-in-cheek description dates to the original French-language edition of *Salomé* in 1893, when the play was subtitled *drame en un acte*—the subtitle for the 1894 English translation, *Tragedy in One Act*, more clearly points to the play's classicism.⁶⁷ In a memoir written in 1917, the American author and aesthete Edgar Saltus recalled that, on hearing Wilde read *Salomé* in manuscript form, he

experienced that sense of sacred terror which his friends, the Greeks, knew so well. For this thing could have been conceived only by genius wedded to insanity and, at the end, when the tetrarch, rising and bundling his robes about him, cries: 'Kill that woman!' the mysterious divinity whom the poet may have evoked, deigned perhaps to visit me. For, as I applauded, I shuddered, and told him that I had.

Indifferently he nodded and, assimilating Hugo with superb unconcern, threw out: 'It is only the shudder that counts!'⁶⁸

Wilde's striking stage direction at the end of his drama indicates that, at Hérode's command, '[t]he SOLDIERS *rush forward and crush beneath their shields SALOME*' (731; '*Les SOLDATS s'élancent et écrasent sous leurs boucliers SALOMÉ*'; 563). As Helen Zagona comments, 'The final touch is distinctly Wilde's, for in no other literary treatment does the dancer pay for her satisfaction at the hands of Herod.'⁶⁹ Just as Wilde's *Salomé* glories in the features of the decapitated head of Iokanaan before being buried beneath the Soldiers' shields at the bidding of Hérode, at the end of Seneca's *Phaedra* the heroine turns to Hippolytus' mangled corpse and cries, 'Ah me, where has your beauty fled, and your eyes,

⁶⁶ Beerbohm, letter to Reginald Turner (25 Feb. 1893), in *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. Hart-Davis (1964), 32. Quoted in Beckson (1970: 134); Wilde (2015b: 116).

⁶⁷ Donohue (2013b: 431, 433).

⁶⁸ Saltus (1917: 20). Quoted in Beckson (1970: 132). Saltus' recollection of Wilde reading *Salomé* recalls Wilde's even more explicitly Aristotelian account of how he 'felt pity and terror, as though the play had been Greek'—the play being Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in its first English staging at London's Vaudeville Theatre in the spring of 1891 ('To the Earl of Lytton', [? May 1891], in *Complete Letters*, 480). Saltus' reference to Hugo alludes to a letter from him to Baudelaire (6 Oct. 1859): 'Vous créez un frisson nouveau'. See *Salomé*, 657.

⁶⁹ Zagona (1960: 128).

my stars?' (*heu me, quo tuus fugit decor | oculique nostrum sidus?*; Sen., *Ph.*, 1173–4).⁷⁰

After she falls on her sword and dies like a good Roman Stoic, Theseus points to her corpse and orders, 'As for her, may earth crush her after burial, and soil lie heavy on that unnatural being' (*istam terra defossam premat, | gravisque tellus impio capiti incubet*; 1279–80).

I suggest that Salomé's extraordinary execution also evokes that of Racine's eponymous *Athalie*. Although *Athalie* takes its subject from the Hebrew Scriptures, more specifically the Second Book of Kings, and not from Greek mythology or history, like so many French neoclassical tragedies, it has been claimed that Racine's biblical drama is more like a Greek tragedy than any other play of the modern era.⁷¹ The religious context of *Athalie* suggests the supposed religious origins of Greek tragedy. As is the case with his 'secular' tragedies such as *Phèdre*, Racine's 'sacred' plays, *Esther* and *Athalie*, deploy a dramatic action in the Aristotelian mould that aims to arouse pity and fear.⁷² Wilde favourably cited *Athalie* in an interview with a French daily criticizing the Censor's prohibition of the London production of his own biblical drama in 1892—the same interview in which, as we saw in the Introduction, he declared that 'there are only two languages in the world: French and Greek'.⁷³ Instead of having the Judaeen queen's tragic demise happen completely offstage, to be related in a messenger speech after the fact, Racine had the doors of the backdrop swing open to reveal the inner Sanctuary of Solomon's Temple, enabling the audience to actually see the dénouement of the drama, where *Athalie* is surrounded on all sides by armed Levites, who take her away to put her to the sword, at the bidding of Joad, the high priest. The performed ending of *Athalie* had an enduring evolutionary impact on eighteenth-century playwriting and theatrical practice, resulting in what Cécile Dudouyt

⁷⁰ Seneca, *Phaedra*, in 'Hercules', 'Trojan Women', 'Phoenician Women', 'Medea', 'Phaedra', tr. Fitch, Loeb (2002).

⁷¹ See Eve (1924: xvii).

⁷² See Hawcroft (2011: 272).

⁷³ Maurice Sisley, 'La Salomé de M. Oscar Wilde', *Le Gaulois* (29 Jun. 1892), 1. Quoted in Mikhail (1979b: 190).

refers to as ‘efforts to introduce more action on stage, and to provide more spectacular illusions in keeping with what ancient tragedies were perceived to have provided to Athenian audiences’.⁷⁴

Although the innovative death of the Wildean Salomé has classical and neo-classical antecedents, Greek tragedy tends to avoid showing death onstage, and murder and acts of physical violence always occur offstage.⁷⁵ ‘I hate Greek drama, when everything happens offstage,’ quips screenwriter Julian Fellowes’s recognizably Wildean Dowager Countess Violet in the television series *Downton Abbey*, played by Dame Maggie Smith (a Lady Bracknell Emerita).⁷⁶ Violet’s line in *Downton* cleverly inverts, in a very Wildean way, a sentiment expressed by Gwendolen Fairfax, the daughter of the Dowager’s *Earnest* predecessor, Lady Bracknell. Fellowes’s Dowager Countess is reacting with relief to the news that her granddaughter Lady Mary will not be running into her erstwhile suitor cousin Matthew on the train back to Downton. Wilde’s overexcited Gwendolen rather suggestively exclaims at the climax of his comedy, ‘This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last,’⁷⁷ in response to the sound of her betrothed Jack rummaging around overhead (in reality, in the wings) for the all-important identifying handbag—a send-up of unseen tragic *sparagmos* and murder as well as their parodic counterparts in New Comedy, offstage rape and childbirth.

By putting the word ‘suspense’ into Gwendolen’s mouth at the climactic moment of *Earnest*, Wilde calls to mind the Aristotelian concept of ‘fear’ (*phobos*).⁷⁸ The ‘terrible’ suspense that Gwendolen endures but also implicitly enjoys would appear to be a paradoxical admixture of pleasure and pain, reminiscent of the relationship between tragic

⁷⁴ Dudouyt (2016: 240).

⁷⁵ Aristotle defines tragic suffering (*pathos*) as ‘a destructive or painful action, e.g. deaths in full view, agonies, woundings etc.’ (πρᾶξις φθαρτικὴ ἢ ὀδυνηρά, οἷον οἷ τε ἐν τῷ φανερῷ θάνατοι καὶ αἱ περιωδονίαι καὶ τρώσεις καὶ ὅσα τοιαῦτα; *Poetics*, 1452b11–3; tr. Janko 1987). However, ‘in full view’ (ἐν τῷ φανερῷ) does not, as has been assumed, refer to the stage. See Janko (1987: 97).

⁷⁶ Fellowes (2013: 20). On Maggie Smith’s 1993 West End performance as Lady Bracknell, see Stokes (1996: 167–70, 171, 178).

⁷⁷ Wilde (2015a), *Earnest*, ed. Jackson, NM, 97.

⁷⁸ Hiltunen (2002: 11).

pleasure and fear in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In his *Poetics* (1453b10–4), Aristotle posits that the 'proper pleasure' (*oikeia hēdonē*) produced by tragedy consists of 'pity' (*eleos*) as well as fear. According to Aristotle, it is the audience, not the fictional character, who must experience fear if a tragedy is to be successful. In Aristotle's exemplary tragic play, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the eponymous protagonist does not feel fear or pity over his plight, but, rather, it is the audience watching the unfolding of the drama of his life who experience these emotions. In *Earnest*, Wilde collapses this Aristotelian distinction as Gwendolen's climactic outburst demonstrates that a *dramatis persona* can also act as an onstage spectator of a play-within-a-play.⁷⁹ In this regard, Wilde resembles not Sophocles but Euripides. In his *Commonplace Book*, Wilde wrote down a quotation from Euripides' *Hecuba*: 'Stand off and view my sorrow as a painter might' (*Oxford Notebooks*, 137 [154]; cf. Eur., *Hec.*, 807–8: οἴκτιρον ἡμᾶς, ὡς γραφεύς τ' ἀποσταθεῖς | ἰδοῦ με κἀνάθησον οἷ' ἔχω κακά). As well as creating an image fit for *Dorian Gray*, Hecuba's appeal to Agamemnon to view her sympathetically in a kind of artistic perspective, like a painter contemplating a subject, arguably calls attention to the Trojan queen as a character standing before the spectators, (in some cases literally) her judges, in the Theatre of Dionysus.⁸⁰ Whether or not Hecuba's invitation is an example of Euripidean metatheatre by interartistic analogy, it does demonstrate what the young Wilde terms the tragedian's 'morbid analyzing faculty' (*Oxford Notebooks*, *ibid.*).⁸¹

Wilde also plays in *Salomé*, as in *Earnest*, with the classical tragic convention of not depicting death, murder, or violence in full view of the spectators. Before ascending the

⁷⁹ Wilde also inverts Aristotelian poetic theory in his fairy tale 'The Nightingale and the Rose', where pleasure is felt by the performer, i.e. the Nightingale, not the audience, i.e. the young Student. Of course, it is really the Nightingale who is the audience of the Student, who tragically performs his heartache and wallows in (self-)pity.

⁸⁰ As Ringer (2016: 123) argues, such a metatheatrical reading 'makes perfect sense since this scene, like the "trial" of the final scene, is an *agon* within the larger *agon* of the tragic competition'. Murray (1914: *ad loc.*) even appends *brabeus* ('judge', 'adjudicator') as an emendation to *grapheus* ('painter') in line 807. Greek tragedy does not use explicitly metatheatrical figures of speech, as in Renaissance drama (e.g. 'All the world's a stage'; Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, II. vii. 138), perhaps out of a desire to avoid anachronism in the representation of a Bronze Age world when theatre had not yet been invented. See Hall (2000: xxii).

⁸¹ See Boyiopoulos (2018: 154).

staircase to deliver Salomé's death sentence as a quasi-*deus ex machina*, Hérode, fearing that 'some terrible thing will befall' (730; 'il va arriver un malheur'; 562), orders the light to be put out, *à la Othello* and *Macbeth*: 'Manassé, Issachar, Ozias, éteignez les flambeaux. Je ne veux pas regarder les choses. Je ne veux pas que les choses me regardent. Eteignez les flambeaux. Cachez la lune! Cachez les étoiles! Cachons-nous dans notre palais, Hérodiad' (562; 'Manasseh, Issachar, Ozias, put out the torches. I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars! Let us hide ourselves in our palace, Herodias'; 730). Accordingly, '*The stage becomes quite dark*' (730; '*La scène devient tout à fait sombre*'; 562), precipitating an unusually protracted blackout: '*Les ESCLAVES éteignent les flambeaux. Les étoiles disparaissent. Un grand nuage noir passe à travers la lune et la cache complètement* (562; '*The SLAVES put out the torches. The stars disappear. A great cloud crosses the moon and conceals it completely*'; 730). That the tetrarch seemingly makes the moon and the stars disappear (as if he held dominion over them) prior to climbing the staircase heightens Hérode's characterization as a 'god of the machine'. Just before the tetrarch dispenses the princess's death sentence, a ray of light escapes from behind the cloud covering the moon and sheds light once more on Salomé holding the head of Iokanaan: '*Un rayon de lune tombe sur SALOMÉ et l'éclaire*' (562; '*A ray of moonlight falls on SALOME and illumines her*'; 731).

It is surely no mere coincidence or stylistic flourish that immediately after Salomé and the head of the prophet are newly illuminated by moonlight, Hérode condemns his stepdaughter to death. Hérode's scopophilia, his pleasure in looking at Salomé from earlier on in the play, has been replaced by the end with feelings of foreboding and repulsion at the sight of his stepdaughter orgasmically embracing the disembodied head of Iokanaan. Unlike Gwendolen, for whom 'terrible' suspense is so indistinguishable from pleasure that she wills it to be prolonged, Hérode's erotic arousal has been entirely extinguished, if not by sexual jealousy, then by fear (of God): 'I begin to be afraid' (730; 'Je commence à avoir peur'; 562), the tetrarch admits to his wife at the end, having previously protested, in

response to her taunts, that he was not afraid of the prophet (534; 718).⁸² Wilde carefully stage-manages the finale of his play to rebuild the tension following the climax of Iokanaan's execution and Salomé's long monologue to the prophet's head. Although the action of the play has been dogged by ominous signs and statements, Wilde's literary and pictorial Salomé inheritance gives no hint of what is to come. Just as the audience may begin to wonder whether the play will end with a whimper rather than a bang, the tetrarch turns around, sees the moonlit Salomé still clutching the severed head, and cries out, presumably in a spontaneous, unpremeditated outburst, 'Tuez cette femme!' (563; 'Kill that woman!'; 731).

Boyiopoulos compares Salomé's defilement of Iokanaan's decapitated head to the hubristic mistreatment of Polynices' dead body in Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁸³ However, there are closer Euripidean parallels. By having the head of Christ's disciple cut off, the tetrarch's stepdaughter succeeds in carrying out what the tyrannical Pentheus merely threatens to have done to Dionysus disguised as his own disciple in the *Bacchae* (241). It is, of course, Pentheus who will be decapitated by his maenadic mother. Wilde's euphoric dancer triumphantly gripping and cradling her grisly reward, while her disgusted stepfather looks on in dread and her delighted mother revels in approval, calls to mind the ironically fragmentary ending of Euripides' tragedy: Agave, still foaming at the mouth, proudly presents Pentheus' dismembered head as a hunting trophy (*Ba.*, 1238–9) to her horrified father, the patriarch Cadmus; having recovered her senses and recognized her son's head for what it is, the queen mother of Thebes, we are informed or can infer, lovingly fondles her own flesh and blood in her arms.⁸⁴ Perhaps the maddened Agave already strokes her son's head as if it were the head of the wild animal she believes it to be. When Pentheus has made his final exit to Mt Cithaeron, the chorus of Lydian Bacchae foresee that the king

⁸² Hérodias' taunting of Hérode over his fear of Iokanaan recalls Oedipus' goading of the prophet Tiresias as well as Jocasta's attempts to dismiss and calm her husband's fears of Apollo's prophecy and his own curse in Sophocles' tragedy.

⁸³ Boyiopoulos (2018: 158).

⁸⁴ Unfortunately, there is an extensive lacuna in the text at this point. But see Harsh (1941: 61 and n. 7).

will be mistaken by the Theban maenads for a beast or a monster, specifically, the offspring of a lioness or a Libyan Gorgon (988–90), a mythical foreshadowing of his mother in the next scene. As Segal expounds, a mythical foil to Pentheus is Perseus, ‘defender of his mother, slayer of the Gorgon, the snaky-headed imago of the Evil Mother, and winner of bride and kingdom’.⁸⁵ As Beardsley’s illustrations ‘The Climax’ and ‘The Dancer’s Reward’ make explicit, the victorious Salomé fixing the head of the snake-haired and serpent-tongued Iokanaan (560; 524–5; 714; 729) on the ‘*silver shield*’ (729; ‘*bouclier d’argent*’; 559) with her Gorgonic stare is a nightmarish sexual inversion of Cellini’s brazen *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (1545).⁸⁶

Just as Agave arrives bearing the severed head of Pentheus,⁸⁷ so too does Orestes enter bringing back the head of Clytemnestra’s husband Aegisthus in Euripides’ *Electra*; and there are indeed striking echoes of the Euripidean *Electra* in Wilde’s *Salomé* as well.⁸⁸

Whereas Agave embraces and laments her son’s head and each of his other body parts in

⁸⁵ Segal (1982: 167).

⁸⁶ The reference to the Gorgons in the *Bacchae*, of course, harks back to Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* with its similarly chthonic Erinyes, who are also associated with madness, motherhood, murder, and vengeance.

⁸⁷ Agave enters with Pentheus’ head either in her arms or impaled on top of her *thyrsus* (Bacchic staff made from a stalk of giant fennel), which is mentioned in the messenger speech (*Ba.* 1139–41) but not in the extant fragments of the final scene. See Dodds (1960: *ad* 1141). Both of these possible poses are incorporated in Wilde’s extraordinary stage direction at the climax of his drama: ‘*Un grand bras noir, le bras du BOURREAU, sort de la citerne apportant sur un bouclier d’argent la tête d’IOKANAAN. SALOMÉ la saisit*’ (559; ‘*A huge black arm, the arm of the EXECUTIONER, comes forth from the cistern, bearing on a silver shield the head of IOKANAAN. SALOME seizes it*’; 729). The two different poses are also reflected in the Beardsley illustrations. In ‘The Climax’, Salomé, ‘uncannily soaring in the haze of her ecstasy, as if levitated by the intensity of her pleasure’ (Çamak 2014: 184), holds up with her hands the disembodied head of Iokanaan, which is dripping a vertical flow of blood that swirls at the end, matching the erect and curved stems of the plants at the bottom of the picture. In ‘The Dancer’s Reward’, the princess reaches out for the prophet’s head, which is placed on the shield, held up by a hirsute and abnormally long, trunk-like black arm.

⁸⁸ It is not clear in Euripides’ *Electra* whether Orestes has cut off Aegisthus’ head from the rest of his corpse. In Euripides’ *Heracles*, the homonymous hero threatens to cut off Eurystheus’ head and throw it to the dogs (567–8), and the Messenger reports the maddened protagonist’s intention to bring the tyrant’s head back to Thebes (939). Pentheus being mistaken for a Gorgon by the maenads before having his head torn off by his frenzied mother in the *Bacchae* (990) recalls the Gorgon-like mad Heracles smiting his son’s head in the *Heracles* (990). The Lydian *Bacchae*’s foreshadowing of Pentheus being mistaken for the offspring of a Gorgon by the maenadic Theban women also evokes the prophetic description of Heracles’ incipient madness by Madness (‘Lyssa’ in Greek) herself personified, the ‘Gorgon of the night’ (*Nuktos Gorgōn*; Eur., *Her.*, 883), whose Gorgonic attributes coincide with those of the protagonist (see 868). The *Heracles* was, let us remember, one of the Euripidean plays (the other being the *Phoenissae*) that Wilde offered to edit for Macmillan after leaving Oxford (‘To George Macmillan’, 22 Mar. 1879, in *Complete Letters*, 78). For other Euripidean examples of the association between decapitation of an enemy and hubristic behaviour, see the *Rhesus* (219–20, 258–60, 585–6, 817–8), a tragedy traditionally attributed to Euripides that rewrites the tenth book of the *Iliad*, the so-called Doloneia or ‘killing of Dolon’. See Papadopoulou (2005: 40–1). The *Rhesus*, it should be remembered, is, along with the *Bacchae*, a major source-text of the *Christus Patiens*.

turn,⁸⁹ Euripides' Electra addresses to the head of her mother's husband a long and elaborate speech of abuse (Eur., *El.*, 907–56). Euripides' Electra, trapped in a sexless marriage to a peasant farmer (43–6, 50–1, 255–61), seems just as much motivated by sexual frustration (as by filial devotion) to seek revenge. Wilde's Salomé flees the claustrophobic banquet and her stepfather's unwanted attentions (514–5; 709–10), but is rebuffed by the wild, celibate prophet, who flies from her advances. Both Agave and Electra are simultaneously evoked by the lengthy love–hate soliloquy that Salomé delivers to Iokanaan's head (559–62; 729–31).

In *Salomé*, the princess stands steadfastly by her demand for the prophet's head in the face of her God-fearing stepfather's pious entreaties (553–4; 727), and she remains oblivious to the tetrarch's moralistic censure as she exults over her prize (561–2; 730). At first, Euripides' Electra flaunts her and Orestes' success (880–9), but she soon ceases her celebration. Even though Orestes invites his sister to abuse Aegisthus' head however she pleases (895–9), and although she longs to chastize it with the valour of her tongue, Electra professes shame (*aischynomai*; 900). Orestes reminds her that they now have nothing to fear (*phobou*; 901), but Electra is afraid that someone may react with *phthonos* (902; 'ill-will', 'malice', 'spite'). As David Konstan writes, 'her sense of shame is not independent of what others may think.'⁹⁰ Orestes assures Electra that no one will blame her, yet she shows herself wary of a town given to censuring them (903–4). In complete contrast to Wilde's brazen, unswerving, and naval-gazing Salomé, Euripides' morally scrupulous Electra wavers and has to have her own personal doubts pertaining to others dispelled by someone else. Unlike Agave, who needs to be made see by Cadmus that she has been mistreating her own son's head, Electra has to be talked out of her qualms about abusing the head of her arch enemy by Orestes. When Electra finally does begin her abusive address to the head of her father's hated killer, she does so hesitantly, despite, she says,

⁸⁹ See Tyrrell (1892: *ad* 1330); Dodds (1960: *ad* 1300, 1329); Seaford (1996: *ad* 1300–1).

⁹⁰ Konstan (2006: 303 n. 45).

repeatedly practising in the early hours of the morning what she would say to his face, if she ever came to be freed from her former fears (909–1).⁹¹

Euripides' *Electra* greets the news of Aegisthus' death as a light dawning (866–7). On her first entrance in the Euripidean play, *Electra* had invoked night (Eur., *El.*, 54), in contrast to her Sophoclean counterpart's invocation of light as her opening words (Soph., *El.*, 86).⁹² Like Euripides' *Electra*, as well as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroe*, and Sophocles' *Electra*, *Salomé* begins at night, but, like the (pseudo-) Euripidean *Rhesus* (one of the main sources for the *Christus Patiens*), stays there throughout. Although *Salomé* takes place at night, the stage is illuminated by the moon for most of the drama. Wilde's stage directions at the start of the play call for '*Claire de lune*' (509), which Douglas rather over emphatically translates as '*The moon is shining very brightly*' (707), when simply '*Moonlight*' would have sufficed.⁹³ As early as the second line of his play, Wilde highlights the presence of the moon, which is pointed to by Hérodias' Page: 'Regardez la lune. La lune a l'air très étrange' (509; 'Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems!'; 707). The Page and the Young Syrian continue to converse about the moon, speculating metaphorically about its meaning and significance. The action of *Salomé* commences by moonlight, which continues almost to the end, though the moon's colour and appearance, as perceived by the characters, changes markedly, and more than once, over the course of the drama. In his analysis of *Salomé*'s composition, Peter Raby identifies a three-part structure based around the three phases of the moon:

The play is organised through a prelude, or introduction, followed by three major episodes: the first encounter between *Salomé* and Jokanaan, in the phase of the white moon, marked by the death of the young Syrian; the central episode, the phase of the red moon, which moves towards the crucial actions of the dance of the seven veils and the beheading of Jokanaan; and the swift and terrible conclusion, when the black cloud conceals the moon, and *Salomé* is crushed to death beneath the soldiers' shields. The tripartite pattern indicated by the three deaths and the three colours of the moon forms the prevailing rhythm of the play.⁹⁴

⁹¹ O'Brien (1964: 21).

⁹² See Finglass (2007: 122).

⁹³ Donohue (2013b: 457).

⁹⁴ Raby (1988: 106).

From the outset of Wilde's drama, the pale Salomé mirrors the moon in the night sky and so resembles a beacon of light, like that awaited by the Watchman at the beginning of the *Agamemnon*.⁹⁵ Wilde borrows from Maeterlinck the symbolism of the moon, pallor, and the colour white more generally, denoting innocence and death.⁹⁶ However, Wilde simultaneously alludes to ancient antecedents. The moon in Greek mythology is the traditional symbol of the divine virginal huntress Artemis, to whom the sworn celibate Hippolytus is devoted in the surviving tragedy by Euripides that bears his name. The ghostly paleness of Wilde's Salomé recalls the deathly pallor of Maeterlinck's Princess Maleine, as well as the stalking spectre of Hamlet Senior. Depicted as 'pale' ('pâle') and 'troubled' ('ennuyée') by the choric minor characters in Wilde's drama, the Judaeian princess resembles the lovesick Phaedra, whose changed complexion (δέμας ἀλλόχροον; Eur., *Hipp.*, 175) is described by the Chorus of women of Trozen. The lunar goddess Artemis and the off-colour Trozenian queen Phaedra are both suggested in *Salomé* by the moon, which is said to look like a princess wearing a veil of yellow ('voile jaune'), the calling colour of jaundiced literary Decadence.

In the first phase of *Salomé*, the pale, beacon-like princess provides a source of (moon)light. At the beginning of the second episode, Wilde's stage becomes brighter when Hérode asks for actual torches to be lit on his entrance (529; 716). and will be plunged into darkness at the end when the tetrarch orders all the lights to be put out before extinguishing the moon-illuminated Salomé. As in the *Bacchae*, light is linked in *Salomé* with (in)sight and epiphany, as well as sanity/derangement and divine punishment.⁹⁷ As for the God-fearing Hérode, darkness is associated with shame and punishment for the god-denying Pentheus (*Ba.*, 486, 457–9, 510).⁹⁸ Whereas Cadmus is able to treat Agave's Dionysian trance by

⁹⁵ At the beginning of *Salomé*, Wilde employs the classical technique of *teichoskopia* ('watching from the wall') in a way that evokes the openings of the *Agamemnon* and the *Oresteia*'s descendant, *Hamlet* (see Kohl 1989: 181).

⁹⁶ See Dierkes-Thrun (2011: 61).

⁹⁷ See Thumiger (2007: 116–7 and n. 60).

⁹⁸ See Scott (1975: 343–5).

getting her to look at the realm of Apollo, that is, the sky (1267), Salomé is beyond therapy.

III. The Deaths of Iokanaan and the Young Syrian

While the spotlight Salomé is the only figure fully visible onstage when she is crushed to death, Iokanaan is the only character who cannot be seen when he is beheaded in the bowels of the cistern. The sole, notable exception in the latter instance is the previously ever-present Executioner, who stays onstage throughout like a Damoclean sword. When the Executioner goes down into the cistern, the princess grows impatient when she does not hear anything. When she does hear something, she assumes that the Executioner has dropped his sword through cowardice. Salomé eagerly anticipating the execution of Iokanaan evokes Cassandra wildly envisioning Agamemnon's murder in Aeschylus' tragedy, as well as Sophocles' eponymous Electra outside the palace shouting encouragement to Orestes, who is inside killing Clytemnestra. However, whereas in Aeschylus' play the king's offstage death-cries resolve the uncertainties of the Argive Elders, Iokanaan fails to cry out, to the princess's increasing impatience and perverse displeasure. A foot-stamping Salomé orders that

soldiers be sent. (*She sees the PAGE OF HERODIAS and addresses him*) Come hither. Thou wert the friend of him who is dead, wert thou not? Well, I tell thee, there are not dead men enough. Go to the soldiers and bid them go down and bring me the thing I ask, the thing the Tetrarch has promised me, the thing that is mine. (*The PAGE recoils. She turns to the SOLDIERS*) Hither, ye soldiers. Get ye down into this cistern and bring me the head of this man. (*The SOLDIERS recoil*) Tetrarch, Tetrarch, command your soldiers that they bring me the head of Iokanaan. (729; adapted) [Il faut] envoyer des soldats. (*Elle voit le PAGE D'HERODIAS et s'adresse à lui*) Viens ici. Tu as été l'ami de celui qui est mort, n'est-ce pas! Eh bien, il n'y a pas eu assez de morts. Dites aux soldats qu'ils descendent et m'apportent ce que je demande, ce que le tétrarque m'a promis, ce que m'appartient. (*Le PAGE recule. Elle s'adresse aux SOLDATS*) Venez ici, soldats. Descendez dans cette citerne, et apportez-moi la tête de cet homme. (*Les SOLDATS reculent*) Tétrarque, tétrarque, commandez à vos soldats de m'apporter la tête d'Iokanaan. (558–9)

'There are not dead men enough.' As if Salomé, Euripidean in her self-consciousness, were directing the *Oresteia* or *Hamlet*! The dead friend of Hérodias' Page whom Salomé mentions is the Young Syrian, Narraboth, the captain of the guard, who slays himself in

full view for unrequited love of Salomé earlier on in the play. Wilde thus completes a full circle of dramatic death depictions by showing Narraboth's suicide onstage for everyone to see, by having Iokanaan's decapitation occur out of sight in the cistern, and by having Salomé's execution take place somewhere between the two in semi-darkness. Even though the Young Syrian '*falls between SALOME and IOKANAAN*' (715; '*tombe entre SALOMÉ et IOKANAAN*'; 526), and even though Hérodiad's Page performs (what Beardsley called) 'a Platonic Lament' over his dead friend,⁹⁹ and even though one of the Soldiers verbally points out to the princess that the captain has just killed himself, neither Salomé nor Iokanaan gives any indication of having noticed Narraboth's interposing corpse, while the princess continues to obsessively declare her desire for the prophet, who is as unreceptive to her overtures as she has been oblivious to the young captain's dire warnings. Just as Salomé is deaf to Narraboth's warnings not to look at Iokanaan, so too is the Young Syrian heedless of those of Hérodiad's Page not to look at the princess. Salomé and Narraboth are both Phaedra figures in that their individual infatuations are rebuffed with frigid indifference. Although Phaedra confronts Hippolytus directly in Seneca's *Phaedra* and Racine's *Phèdre*, the Young Syrian may as well be acting out Euripides' extant play for all the attention Salomé appears to pay him.

In Euripides' surviving *Hippolytus*, the eponymous protagonist and Phaedra never meet onstage. It is the queen's confidante, the Nurse, who, unknown to Phaedra, reveals her mistress's secret passion to Hippolytus. This is very different from the major scene in Racine's *Phèdre* (II. 5) in which the heroine goes to Hippolyte herself and finally confesses her love. An entr'acte performance of Act II of Racine's tragedy was the centerpiece of the Comédie-Française programme when Sarah Bernhardt made her sensational London début at the Gaiety Theatre on 2 June 1879, with Wilde in attendance. Bernhardt's *Phèdre* prompted Wilde to compose a sonnet in honour of 'The Divine Sarah',

⁹⁹ On Beardsley's 'A Platonic Lament', see Snodgrass (1995: 280–2).

published in the *World* on 11 June, in which the admiring poet portrays the famed French actress in a variety of classical poses. Patricia Flanagan Behrendt writes that Wilde's Duchess of Padua, Beatrice Gesso, 'like Racine's Phaedra, is a creature dominated by passion',¹⁰⁰ and Stokes notes that Wilde's Bernhardtian *Duchess* 'even repeats words and phrases' from his sonnet inspired by Bernhardt's Phèdre.¹⁰¹ In a letter to Mary Anderson, for whom Wilde wrote *The Duchess*, the playwright promised the American actress the 'glory of a Rachel' ([early Sept. 1882], *Complete Letters*, 178–9), referring to Élisabeth Rachel Félix, the great French tragedienne of the generation before Bernhardt who was considered to have been the ideal interpreter of Phèdre until 'La Divine Sarah' made the rôle her own. Wilde's *The Duchess* was eventually performed in New York in 1891 under the title of *Guido Ferranti*. As the change of title indicates, Wilde sharply shifts the play's perspective and the audience's sympathies between the heroine and hero multiple times over the course of his melodramatic tragedy.

As Lene Østermark-Johansen writes in relation to the Hippolytus/Phaedra plays of Euripides, Seneca, and Racine with their varying titles and classical sources, 'emphasis oscillates between male and female, wife and stepson, desire and chastity', and '[t]he status of the individual changes: in Greek drama the individual is subordinate to a divine machinery of the gods: Aphrodite versus Artemis [...]. Later texts become studies of desire, remorse and noble sacrifice', and so on.¹⁰² The Alexandrian-Euripidean religious relativism of Wilde's *Salomé* is complemented by its oscillation in source material. These fluctuations contribute to creating an atmosphere of unmoored and free-floating subjectivity, which, as we shall see later in this chapter, is reflected by the narcissistic perspectivism and projectionism of the characters in their widely differing views of the drama's central symbol, the moon, which, like Dorian Gray's portrait, continually changes.

¹⁰⁰ Behrendt (1991: 91).

¹⁰¹ Stokes (2005: 146).

¹⁰² Østermark-Johansen (2014: 48).

The extreme subjective desires of Salomé, as well as Hérode, ultimately result in the princess's condemnation and destruction by the authoritarian tetrarch.

In Seneca's *Phaedra*, the heroine also confesses her lust to Hippolytus face-to-face. By ignoring Hérodiad's Page's warnings to practise *custodia oculorum*, the young captain recalls the Senecan Phaedra disobeying her Nurse, who, like a Stoic philosopher, preaches restraint and continence. Euripides is believed to have presented a brazen and forward Phaedra making propositions in person in another, presumably earlier, play, now lost, the *Hippolytus Calyptomenos* (*Hippolytus Veiling/Hiding Himself*), which inspired Pater's 'Hippolytus Veiled' and was so called because the protagonist was apparently so appalled by his stepmother's scandalous advances that he covered his face in shame.¹⁰³

Whilst in Seneca's tragedy Hippolytus is on the point of killing Phaedra with his sword before relenting, it is Phèdre who attempts to have Racine's gallicized, gentlemanly Hippolyte stab her with his weapon. In addition, it is only the Senecan Phaedra throws herself upon a sword onstage—Euripides' heroine hangs herself offstage and Racine's says that she has taken poison rather than fall on a sword because she wanted to tell Thésée the truth, and then expires onstage. When Wilde's Hérode learns that the captain of the guard has killed himself, he remarks: 'Je pensais qu'il n'y avait que les philosophes romains qui se tuaient' (530; 'I had thought it was but the Roman philosophers who slew themselves'; 716). The young Roman Tigellinus informs the tetrarch that '[t]he Stoics are people of no cultivation. They are ridiculous people. [...] Everybody at Rome laughs at them. The Emperor has written a satire against them. It is recited everywhere' (717; 'les Stoïciens [...] sont des gens très grossiers. Enfin ce sont des gens très ridicules. [...] On rit beaucoup d'eux à Rome. L'empereur a fait un poème satirique contre eux. On le récite partout'; 530–1). Wilde is possibly alluding in these lines to Seneca, who was a Stoic philosopher as well

¹⁰³ On Euripides' *Hippolytus Calyptomenos* and Pater's 'Hippolytus Veiled', see Østermark-Johansen (2014: 47–8), (2017: 185).

as a dramatist, and a member of the court of the Emperor Nero, who had literary pretensions and forced his tutor Seneca to commit suicide.¹⁰⁴

In his ‘Platonic Lament’ over the Young Syrian, the Page of Hérodiad remembers that his friend ‘had much joy to gaze at himself in the river’ (716; ‘il aimait beaucoup à se regarder dans la rivière’; 528). At the beginning of drama, Narraboth had commented that the princess ‘is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver’ (707; ‘[Elle] ressemble au reflet d’une rose blanche dans un miroir d’argent’; 510) and ‘is like a narcissus trembling in the wind’ (709; ‘[Elle] est comme un narcisse agité du vent’; 514). As Falzon has noted, Wilde’s *Salomé* closely echoes the emphasis on seeing and the specularity of the *Bacchae*.¹⁰⁵ Narcissus and Dionysus are associated with each other in the Rosicrucian tradition. In Rosicrucian lore, the young Dionysus falls from Olympus when he falls in love with the reflection of his own image in the skies, holds out his arms to it, and finds himself within reach of the Titans who kill him. Thus the story of the god’s initial fall mirrors Narcissus longing for his own reflection.¹⁰⁶ Dionysus is also linked with the narcissus flower through Persephone, who in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (5–14) is fatally attracted to the beautiful bloom and, like the young god, falls into Hades. The myths of Narcissus and Dionysus conform to Frazer’s account of an ancient taboo, namely, that it was thought unlucky to look at one’s reflection in the water because one might lose one’s soul and die.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, Hérode in *Salomé* advises: ‘Il ne faut regarder que dans le miroirs. Car les miroirs ne nous montrent que des masques’ (552; ‘Only in mirrors is it well to look, for mirrors do but show us masks’; 727). *Dorian Gray*’s protagonist ‘never knew [...] that somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces, and still water’ (105).

¹⁰⁴ Wilde (2015b: 65, n.)

¹⁰⁵ Falzon (2003: 215–6).

¹⁰⁶ Schuré (1960: 284).

¹⁰⁷ Frazer (1993: 102).

In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra's self-regard and preoccupation with *eukleia* ('honour', 'good reputation') is manifested in her memorable image of Time's mirror (428–30):

κακούς δὲ θνητῶν ἐξέφην', ὅταν τύχη,
 προθεῖς κάτοπτρον ὥστε παρθένῳ νέᾳ
 χρόνος· παρ' οἷσι μήποτ' ὀφθείην ἐγὼ.
 To every false man, that hour comes apace
 When Time holds up a mirror to his face,
 And girl-like, marvelling, there he stares to see
 How foul his heart! Be it not so with me!¹⁰⁸

Phaedra's image of Time's mirror anticipates the picture of Dorian Gray, 'the most magical of mirrors' (*Dorian Gray*, 83; 258), reflecting its subject's degenerating soul. As an object essential to female *kosmesis* (adornment), mirrors are intimately associated with women's lives in antiquity and were an established emblem of Aphrodite. In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon's mirror (140) signals his effeminacy, in contrast to his male sword—a combination of gendered characteristics that is also found in Wilde's Narraboth. Agathon's mirror contributes to his portrayal as a seductive Aphrodite- or deviant Euripidean Phaedra-figure.¹⁰⁹ The effete, narcissistic Dorian Gray possesses 'an oval glass framed in ivory Cupids' that has been given to him by that admirer of his physical beauty, Lord Henry (66; 245). In Beardsley's 'The Dancer's Reward', Salomé gazes at the head of Iokanaan on the silver shield—in ancient times mirrors were made of polished metal; the heads of the princess and the prophet with their similarly serpentine tresses are represented as almost androgynous, Medusa-like mirror-images of one another. Whereas Euripides' Phaedra is concerned with *aiskhunē* (as is the Euripidean Electra) and *eukleia*, which depend on the perceptions of others, Wilde's Salomé is completely solipsistic and self-referential. There is also some ancient evidence that mirrors were thought to be essentially feminine because of their connection to the moon, who is consistently a goddess, and

¹⁰⁸ *Hippolytus*, tr. Murray, in Gilbert Murray's *Euripides* (2005).

¹⁰⁹ On Aristophanes' Agathon as Aphrodite and Euripides' Phaedra, see Ch. 1 in this thesis.

hence monthly natural female rhythms.¹¹⁰ All these elements are present in *Salomé*, which is defined by its symbolism of the moon and bloodshed.¹¹¹

The emotional imperviousness of Wilde's dancer to the Young Syrian's self-destruction in *Salomé* evokes the Sibyl Vane affair in *Dorian Gray*, as well as the endings of two of his fairy tales, 'The Nightingale and the Rose' from *The Happy Prince* and 'The Birthday of the Infanta' from *A House of Pomegranates* (1891).¹¹² In 'Nightingale', the Student remains ignorant of the literal heartache and self-sacrifice that the singing Nightingale has had to endure in order to create his coveted red rose, which is subsequently dismissed as worthless by the Student's love, the Professor's daughter, who is also unaware of what the rose has cost to produce. At the end of 'The Birthday of the Infanta', the 'Black' Spanish princess responds with a cold-blooded decree to the news that the dancing hunchbacked dwarf who performed for her has died of a broken heart: 'For the future let those who come to play with me have no hearts.'¹¹³ In *Dorian Gray*, the effete aristocratic (anti-)hero feels divinely, or inhumanly, sublime indifference to the suicide of his first love and would-be wife, the actress Sibyl Vane. There are at least three classical models of feminine indifference to death and suffering that clearly influenced Wilde: the Cypriot princess Anaxarete in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,¹¹⁴ the Homeric godlike Helen of the *Iliad*,¹¹⁵ and Euripides' goddess Artemis in his *Hippolytus*.

In his essay on *Salomé* and the *Hippolytus*, Boyiopoulos relates Salomé's disregard for the Narraboth's distress and self-destruction to Anaxarete's indifference to Iphis' suffering and self-inflicted death in Ovid.¹¹⁶ But there is, again, a clear Euripidean analogue as well, and one that is this time closer to home. Euripides' Artemis, the chaste goddess of the

¹¹⁰ See Rimell (2006: 59).

¹¹¹ See Høgåsen-Hallesby (2016: 145).

¹¹² Cf. Boyiopoulos (2018: 153).

¹¹³ Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', in *A House of Pomegranates*, in *Short Stories*, 170.

¹¹⁴ On the relationship between Ovid's Iphis and Anaxarete story (*Met.*, xiv. 698–764) and the failed romance of Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Sibyl Vane, see Ch. 2 in this thesis.

¹¹⁵ On the influence of the Homeric Helen on Wilde's characterization of the Professor's daughter in 'Nightingale', see Ch. 3 in this thesis.

¹¹⁶ Boyiopoulos (2018: 148–56).

moon, appears at the end of the *Hippolytus* coolly distant from, and literally invisible to, her soon-to-be former favourite, the title character, who is in his death throes. Although Artemis agrees that Hippolytus' plight is wretched and expresses sorrow for his fate, the goddess cannot alter it, nor, as a divinity, may she even weep for him. Artemis agrees with Hippolytus that the goddess of love Cypris is solely to blame for his misfortune, absolves him, and offers him consolation prizes in the form of a retaliatory attack on Aphrodite's favourite Adonis and his own religious cult at Trozen. Nevertheless, Artemis ultimately seems self-interested and lacking in the self-sacrificial devotion that Hippolytus displayed towards her—her comforts are very cold indeed, and she leaves him to endure an agonizing death in order to avoid the accompanying *miasma* (pollution). The dying Hippolytus, like a jilted lover, bitterly comments on the ease with which Artemis abandons their long association (1441).

Before taking her leave, however, Artemis insists on a reconciliation between Hippolytus and his father Theseus, whom she has already rebuked for the rash curse that has caused his son's demise. Artemis thus ensures that the two men, broken both in spirit and body, give and receive comfort—Theseus acknowledges his son's piety while Hippolytus forgives his father before expiring. In contrast to the profound depths of the interpersonal, reciprocal love between father and son on display at the close of Euripides' play, divine love, to judge from Artemis' attitude to her dying devotee, seems, in the final calculation, painfully superficial and one-sided, and ironically impermanent and evanescent. The pagan goddesses of Euripides' play, hot-headed yet ice-cold, personified yet impersonal, imposing yet limited, could not be more different from the all-powerful yet compassionate God-made-man of the Christian tradition, the incarnation of everlasting, self-giving Love for the salvation of ungrateful and sinful mankind.

Salomé identifies the moon as a sexually virtuous and modest goddess in Wilde's drama, and the virgin princess is herself ironically associated with it, as the other *dramatis*

personae repeatedly project her traits and characteristics onto it. The moon is described by

Hérode as if it were a Bacchante:

La lune a l'air très étrange ce soir. N'est-ce pas que la lune a l'air très étrange? On dirait une femme hystérique, une femme hystérique qui va cherchant des amants partout. Elle est nue aussi. Elle est toute nue. Les nuages cherchent à la vêtir, mais elle ne veut pas. Elle chancelle à travers les nuages comme une femme ivre ... Je suis sûr qu'elle cherche des amants ... N'est-ce pas qu'elle chancelle comme une femme ivre? Elle ressemble à une femme hystérique, n'est-ce pas? (529)

The moon has a strange look to-night. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the cloud like a drunken woman. ... I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not? (716)

Salomé implicitly compares herself to the moon at an earlier point in the play: 'Elle est froide et chaste, la lune ... Je suis sûre qu'elle est vierge. Elle a la beauté d'une vierge ...

Oui, elle est vierge. Elle ne s'est jamais souillée. Elle ne s'est jamais donnée aux hommes, comme les autres Déesses' (515; '[The moon] is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin.

She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses'; 710). Of course, this supposed

celibacy is ironically contradicted by Hérode's allusion to the myth of Endymion, the

beloved of the lunar goddess Selene, who, like Salomé, is also looking for lovers. After the

Young Syrian's suicide, the Page of Hérodiad ironically laments: 'Je savais bien que la

lune cherchait un mort, mais je ne savais pas que c'était lui qu'elle cherchait. Ah! pourquoi ne l'ai-je pas caché de la lune? Si je l'avais caché dans une caverne elle ne l'aurait pas vu'

(527; 'Well, I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing but I knew not that it was he

whom she sought. Ah! Why did I not hide him from the moon? If I had hidden him in a

cavern she would not have seen him'; 715). The irony here works on two levels: first, on a

mythological level—it was a cavern where Selene discovered the sleeping Endymion—

and, secondly, on a dramatic level—the Page is still ignorant of whom the moon is actually

seeking, as it is Iokanaan's head that will be the 'dead thing' demanded by Salomé. The

Endymion theme in Wilde's *Salomé* is embodied by Billy Wilder's Bernhardt-esque-aging,

Wildean-cigarette-smoking silent-screen goddess Norma Desmond, the wannabe Salomé

who hides and destroys a younger man in her cavernous, palatial mansion on Sunset Boulevard.¹¹⁷

Wilde's *Salomé*, however, makes Euripides' rather aloof maiden goddess Artemis look like Mary, the mournful Virgin Mother of God. The single-minded Judaeen ice maiden gives no hint whatsoever of registering the Young Syrian's suicide until towards the end of Wilde's drama. Unlike Artemis, who at least offers Hippolytus some compensation, however ineffective in the face of his horrifically violent and undeserved death, Salomé does not need, and doubtlessly never intended, to keep the trivial promises she made Narraboth prior to his self-destruction. However, in common with Artemis, not to mention Cypris, the proud and vindictive princess wreaks her revenge on Iokanaan, the dying god figure in Wilde's drama and the equivalent of Adonis and Hippolytus in Euripides' tragedy. At the climax of Wilde's drama, Salomé comes into uncomfortably close contact with Iokanaan's corpse, clinching, caressing, and kissing his decapitated head, whereas Artemis departs at the end of Euripides' tragedy to escape contamination. At the close of *Salomé*, Hérode bids a hasty retreat up the staircase, fearing the wrath of a God. Aligning himself with Iokanaan by assuming the prophet's condemnatory voice, the tetrarch administers divine justice. While Euripides' *Hippolytus* concludes with loving male reconciliation, Wilde's drama ends with the patriarchal punishment of female transgression—the brief Platonic lament of Hérodiad's Page over the perforated body of the Young Syrian is an early imposition, which, like the captain's corpse, gets in the way of Salomé and Iokanaan.

Owen Dudley Edwards has insightfully analysed as a 'Hippolytus complex' Wilde's relationship with his parents:

The father and mother are both heroic, but the father is heterosexually promiscuous both before and after marriage, with widely bruited results. The son responds by distaste at the prospect of his own repetition of his father's gallantries, especially when to do so would seem to dishonour his mother. It is a sufficiently frequent pattern in homosexual men, but also in evangelicals, enthusiasts,

¹¹⁷ On Wilde's *Salomé* and Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), see Brown (2004).

votaries of some kind. It induces a degree of special devotion to virgins (such as Artemis, or Athena, or Mary the mother of Jesus [...]). The sexual preference, if any, is not the most important part of the story, although it may become the most notorious. Nor is the Hippolytus figure hostile to his father: he may be very proud of him, as was Hippolytus of Theseus, and as was Oscar of Sir William. But on certain things father and son find communication difficult, sometimes fatally so.¹¹⁸

Much of the same could be said for ‘Bosie’ and the cursing Queensberry. In Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, which was published pseudonymously under the poet’s cell number in 1898, just before his wife’s death in May of that year, the imprisoned narrator alternates between relating the execution by hanging of a particular fellow prisoner, who was convicted of cutting his wife’s throat with a razor, and proclaiming more generally that ‘each man kills the thing he loves’. As Riley has suggested, Wilde’s *Ballad* evokes Euripides’ *Heracles*, where the protagonist murders his own children and their mother Megara in a fit of frenzy.¹¹⁹ The haunting, unrelenting refrain of Wilde’s *Ballad* rings true not only for Heracles, Theseus, and the poet himself, but also for Queensberry and Douglas, as the latter would himself remark in his 1938 book, unrepentantly titled *Without Apology*:

The thought which has only recently occurred to me is a terrible one. Did my father really love me all the time, as I certainly loved him before he turned against me, and was he only doing what Oscar says in his great Ballad all men always do, killing the thing he loved? Didn’t we all three, Wilde, my father, and I, do it, more or less?¹²⁰

Each man kills the thing he loves, and each woman, if we can take anything away from the work that Wilde and Douglas collaborated on: both Salomé and Hérode do just that.

¹¹⁸ Dudley Edwards (1997: 52).

¹¹⁹ Riley (2018b).

¹²⁰ Douglas (1938: 253).

Conclusion: Afterwords

In this Conclusion, I bring together several points that emerged across chapters and that could provide the basis of future research on Wilde's reception of the classical world. The gaps in the scholarship on Wilde's classicism have their origins, ironically, in three developments of the second half of the nineteenth century relating to the professionalization and specialization of the universities: (1) the advance of the research and science agenda in Classics that promoted scholarly linguistic study and archaeology; (2) the proliferation of departmental disciplines, in particular those of language and literature divided along national lines; and (3) the secularization of faculties, entry to which had previously been determined by religious affiliation.

The degree for which Wilde chose to read at Oxford was and is still called *Literae Humaniores*. While it concentrated on Greek and Latin language and literature, it was designed, as its name suggests, to produce 'Humanists rather than mere Classicists'.¹ Wilde studied modern as well as ancient philosophy as part of Greats, that is, the second half of the course. Wilde's first major essay, 'The Rise of Historical Criticism', which he unsuccessfully submitted for the Chancellor's English Essay Prize just after going down from Oxford, reveals that he received, according to Smith, 'the equivalent of a contemporary postgraduate education' in not only classical and modern philosophy but also 'history, sociology, literature, religion, political economy, philology, anthropology, linguistics, and natural science'.² The old nineteenth-century German style of universal scholarship is dead. In *Classics Transformed* (1998), Stray is brilliant at bringing out the paradox that the opening up of Classics to such fields as archaeological science contributed to the division and narrowing of the subject into sub-disciplines.

¹ Smith (2004: 144).

² Holland (1997: 35).

The partitioning and contraction of Classics were compounded at the end of the nineteenth century by the emergence of modern history, English studies, and modern languages as discrete departmental disciplines.³ G. Wilson Knight could comment by the 1970s, ‘It is easier to communicate with spirits than for one university department to communicate with another.’⁴ Specialization, it could be argued, has committed a *sparagmos* on the great corpus of knowledge. The dismembered humanities departments are not so much Mount Parnassus as Mount Cithaeron, with art, literature, and music scattered far afield, like the limbs of the pitiable Pentheus. The goal of comprehensive knowledge, as assumed by German antique scholarship, has been deemed unrealistic. Resistance today to the widening of Classics by pointing to the decline of traditional philological skills makes little sense when we learn that Wilde was encouraged in his own day to draw analogies between ancient and modern authors: one of his oral examinations for Mods included a discussion of Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Walt Whitman, and Aristotle’s *Poetics* (‘To William Ward’, [postmark 10 July 1876], in *Complete Letters*, 20).

Wilde frequently alludes to multiple periods and traditions simultaneously—Celtic, Continental, and Judaeo-Christian, as well as classical. As Wilde himself modestly puts it in his prison ‘Epistola’, ‘I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram’ (*De Profundis*, 95; cf. *Complete Letters*, 729) I view this combination of concision and erudition as characteristically Hellenistic, in the Mahaffian sense of the late Classical period of the fourth century BC and later with the culture of the city of Alexandria. Ross writes that Wilde’s 1894 poem *The Sphinx*, ‘constructed around rhyming glosses [...], can be seen as a self-conscious attempt to imitate the practice of the late poets of Alexandria, who treated poetry as an arena for the display of arcane erudition’.⁵ Although the nationalist Wilde could not agree with the unionist Mahaffy that the

³ See Knights (1978: 196).

⁴ Knight (1971: 31).

⁵ Ross (2013: 133).

ethnically diverse Hellenistic kingdoms provided a positive blueprint for empire,⁶ he followed his one-time Trinity tutor in privileging the culture of the Greek ‘decadence’, as Symonds termed it, of Alexander, Plato, Aristotle, and Euripides.⁷

In Chapter 4 of this thesis, I have discussed *Salomé* as an epitome of Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘Alexandrian’ Euripides in *The Birth of Tragedy*. I also view Wilde throughout as a Callimachean scholar–poet, *poeta doctus*, as is evidenced by his Euripidean wordplay, in particular relating to his characters’ names, which are allusive in the Alexandrian style rather than broadly humorous in the Dickensian one. I say Euripidean because in ‘Historical Criticism’ Wilde writes that Tiresias, ‘the Max Müller of the Theban cycle’, explains in the *Bacchae* that ‘the story of Dionysus being enclosed in Zeus’ thigh really arose from the linguistic confusion between μηρός [thigh] and ὄμηρος [hostage]’ (*Criticism*, 22). As I have noted in Chapter 2, Wilde inscribes the ancient idea of *nomen omen* (name = omen) into the *Sprachname* of his novel’s protagonist, which implies that he is a modern Foucauldian inventor of homosexuality, like the ancient Dorians,⁸ Orpheus, and Laius. Dorian’s Orphic nature is fitting for the bereft orphan that he is.⁹ The Dorians’ cousins, the Ionians, were believed to be named after Ion, and Euripides’ eponymous tragedy lies behind Wilde’s *Earnest*, the title of which puns on ‘Urning’/‘Uranist’/‘Uranian’.¹⁰ At the end of *Earnest*, the ‘Bunburyist’ title character, who is ‘Ernest in town and Jack in the country’ (12–3), finally finds out that his Christian names are in fact Ernest John. Neither Hall and Macintosh nor Ross points out the obvious verbal similarity between ‘Ion’ and ‘John’.

⁶ See Wilde [anonymous] (1887), ‘Mr. Mahaffy’s New Book’, *Pall Mall Gazette* (9 Nov.), 3. Reprinted in *Journalism*, ii, 12–5. On Wilde’s negative review of Mahaffy’s *Greek Life and Thought from Alexander to the Roman Conquest* (1887), see Blanshard (2018: 25).

⁷ Ross (2013: 128)

⁸ On the Hellenic and homoerotic significance of Dorian Gray’s first name, see Cartledge (1989).

⁹ On the etymological connections between the name ‘Orpheus’ and the Greek *orphanos*, as well as other classical cognates, see Cavarero (2000: 104).

¹⁰ On the punning on ‘Urning’/‘Uranian’ in *Earnest*, see Craft (1994: 134–5).

Wilde had turned to the Greek Testament story of a John, the Baptist, whom, following Flaubert, he calls by his Hebrew name, Iokanaan/Jokanaan, in *Salomé*. In *Earnest*, the eponymous protagonist is teasingly interrogated about his name by Algernon at the beginning of the play. He then discusses his ‘divine name’ (*Earnest*, 23) in an engagement interview/business meeting with Gwendolen. In *Salomé*, the princess and Hérode discuss with minor characters the identity of the prophet Iokanaan, whose name was anglicized by Robert Ross as ‘Jokanaan’ with an initial ‘J’ in his 1906 revision of Douglas’s English translation of 1894.¹¹ ‘Qui est Élie?’ (‘Who is Elias?’), the tetrarch’s daughter innocently inquires, in response to the Second Soldier’s comment that there are some who say Iokanaan is really the ancient prophet of that name (*Salomé*, 517; *Salome*, 711). I observe similar Euripidean word games in the name of Salomé herself, who bears a marked resemblance to a number of classical literary figures, from Theocritus’ sorceress, Simaetha, in his second *Idyll* to Flaubert’s Salammbô, the Carthaginian virgin priestess of the veiled moon goddess Tanit,¹² as well as ancient female divinities such as the Greek moon goddess Selene and the Asian mother goddess Cybele.

The year after he unsuccessfully submitted his essay for the Chancellor’s English Essay Prize, Wilde wrote part of an anonymous composite review for the *Athenaeum* of Jebb’s entry on ‘Greece’ in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. He criticized his fellow Irish-born Hellenist for treating Theocritus as ‘a purely pastoral poet’ (*Journalism*, i, 23). As a result, Wilde wrote, Jebb had overlooked Theocritus’ second *Idyll*, the *Pharmaceutria* (‘The Sorceress’), which ‘for fiery colour and splendid concentration of passion is only equalled by the “Attis” of Catullus in the whole range of ancient literature’. Another Irish classicist, Dodds, described Wilde’s critique of Jebb as ‘an early example of the romantic reaction against the orthodox Victorian assumption that the hallmark of all the best Greco-Roman

¹¹ See Price (2013: 329).

¹² On Wilde’s *Salomé* and Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, see Dierkes-Thrun (2011: 26–30).

literature was its serenity and balance'.¹³ The editor of the *Bacchae* and the author of *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) was instrumental in redressing the balance between these opposing perceptions of classical literature in the twentieth century, but it was a process that had already begun in earnest during the previous century, when the Apollonian 'sweetness and light' of Arnold had been challenged by the darker, Dionysian conception of Pater.¹⁴

In an American 'Confession Album' that Wilde filled out in 1877, the Oxford Greats candidate gave Theocritus as his favourite poet, along with Euripides, Keats, and himself.¹⁵ Tyrrell reminisced that Wilde had been 'an ardent admirer' of Theocritus.¹⁶ Mahaffy reckoned in *Greek Life and Thought*, which Wilde negatively reviewed anonymously for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1887, that 'there was no more thorough child of his age' than Theocritus.¹⁷ Theocritus, like Wilde, 'attempted everything',¹⁸ generically speaking—'his method', Ross remarks, 'was a form of miniaturism'.¹⁹ In his 'Epistola', Wilde declares, 'I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age' (*De Profundis*, 94, cf. 170; *Complete Letters*, 729). '[D]rama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue', lists Wilde, talking up his versatile literary talent (*De Profundis*, 95; *Complete Letters*, 729).

I propose that Wilde's *Salomé* and his dramatic fragment 'La Sainte Courtisane; or, The Woman Covered with Jewels' (1894) are inspired not only by Euripidean tragedy, nineteenth-century 'closet dramas' such as Shelley's *The Cenci* and Swinburne's dramatic poem, *Atalanta in Calydon*,²⁰ and French and Belgian Symbolist drama. They are also indebted to Theocritus' mimetic poetry and, ultimately, his Sicilian countryman, Sophron,

¹³ Dodds, letter to Ellmann. Quoted in Ellmann (1988: 103).

¹⁴ See Evangelista (2009: ch. 1).

¹⁵ See Holland (1997: 44).

¹⁶ Tyrrell (1908: xxvi).

¹⁷ Mahaffy (1887: 279).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Ross (2013: 133).

²⁰ See Wilde, 'To the Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*' (19 Feb. [1892]), in *Complete Letters*, 519.

the late fifth-century author of mimes written in a rhythmical Doric prose that impressed Plato, who likely made the mimes known to the wider Hellenic community and drew on them to develop his philosophical dialogues.²¹ The emphasis on character rather than plot in Sophron's dramatic skits and the fact that he wrote separate mimes for male and female characters are consistent with *Salomé* and 'La Sainte Courtisane' with their simple scenarios and thematic sexual difference. According to the scholiasts, Sophron specifically influenced Theocritus' *Pharmaceutria* and his fifteenth *Idyll*, *Adoniazusae* ('Women Who Attend the Adonis Festival'), in which two talkative Sicilian Alexandrian matrons pay a visit to the festival of Adonis.²²

In Wilde's fragmentary 'La Sainte Courtisane', the Alexandrian *hetaera* Myrrhina arrives in the Egyptian Thebaid, not 'to weep for Adonis', as one of the choric minor characters supposes, but to seek 'the beautiful young hermit who will not look on the face of woman', the cavern-dwelling Honorius, who proclaims 'the love of God'.²³ In his review of Jebb's *Encyclopædia Britannica* entry on Greece, Wilde criticizes the author for not referring to the 'remarkable Sicilian influence' on Athenian comedy. This criticism comes in the same sentence in which he laments that Jebb makes no allusion to either Menander or Agathon, the 'Athenian tragic writer, the contemporary and friend of Euripides [...] [who] occasionally wrote pieces with fictitious names (a transition towards the new comedy), one of which was called the *Flower*, and was probably therefore, neither seriously affecting nor terrible, but in the style of the *Idyll*' (Lemprière, quoted in *Journalism*, i, 225). As Ross writes, 'Agathon's style was indebted to the school of Gorgias of Leontini in Sicily, who practised an elaborate epideictic rhetoric dependent on antithesis.'²⁴ Wright speculates:

Of course this sort of comparison, however tempting or suggestive, is potentially dangerous or anachronistic. Nevertheless, I cannot help wondering how far Agathon—as mediated through

²¹ Gutzwiller (2007: 87, 126).

²² *Ibid.* 87.

²³ *La Sainte Courtisane*, in Wilde (1988a), *The Complete Plays*, Methuen World Classics, 599–600, 604.

²⁴ Ross (2013: 60).

Aristophanic comedy and the fragments—may have influenced Wilde’s own work and mannerisms. Is this a unique example of the modern reception of a lost tragedian?²⁵

I submit that Agathon is an ideal classical figure for thinking about Wilde in terms of genre as well as gender.

Building on Ross’s book, and consistent with current thinking on classical reception, I have extended the range of my research back to reception in antiquity itself and beyond Ross’s end-point, the 1905 publication of *De Profundis*, to the reception of Wildean classicism in the century after Wilde. The city of Alexandria—both decidedly and disappointingly post-classical—serves as a synecdoche for this Janus-like approach. In ‘The Critic as Artist’, Wilde argues that criticism ‘treats the work of art simply as a starting-point for a new creation’ (*Criticism*, 157), and writes that Alexandria ‘devoted itself so largely to art-criticism’ (30), that is, of earlier Athenian culture, that it became responsible, not for an untouched or unmodified transmission of classical Greek art and literature, but, rather, for the creation of the canonical models and forms that came down to the modern Western world through Rome. Inverting Wilde, I say that artists as well as critics or academics make the canon. One of the unexpected and most rewarding aspects of this research has been uncovering an extraordinarily large range of not only nineteenth-century but also post-Wildean literary and artistic material that touches, directly or indirectly, on Wilde’s classicism in widely differing and surprising ways. This material has included Edwardian novels (*Maurice*), Victorian comic operas (*Patience*), turn-of-the-millennium plays (*The Invention of Love*), mid-twentieth-century films (*Sunset Boulevard*), and even television shows from this decade (*Downton Abbey*). Some of these, such as Stoppard’s play, I discuss in detail throughout, while I acknowledge the inspiration provided by others in passing or in a footnote. There is certainly potential for this line of inquiry to be developed into a more sustained study in the style of Robert Tanitch’s book, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen* (1999), or Bristow’s edited volume, *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture*

²⁵ Wright (2016: 90).

(2008). The usual methodological questions of reception will apply. How conscious (*Orphée*) or unconscious (*Sunset*) is this reception of Wilde's classicism? How 'worthy' (*Invention*) or trivial (*Downton*) is it? How do these works relate to each other? (Stoppard clearly knew Rattigan, and Bennett probably appropriated both.) To what extent might they interlink and constitute what Jauss conceptualizes as a 'chain' of receptions?²⁶

Wilde is in many ways an ideal case study for classical reception: he was a classicist by training, a Renaissance man in the extended Paterian sense, and a thoroughly modern man of his own day and ours. Wilde's associations with classical antiquity, the Renaissance, Romanticism, and his profound resonances into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries signal his status as a prophet of Graeco-Roman paganism. Wilde might have identified with Alexandrian self-conscious belatedness and decadence, but 'modernity', like 'antiquity', is, as both Baudelaire and Pater knew, an indexical term. As 'a new type', 'the dandy-scholar', to quote Ross's conception,²⁷ he not only points to the past, both aristocratic and classical, but has also become himself a 'classic', to whom our own post-classical, turn-of-the-millennium era looks as a father of modernism, artistic as well as sexual, and as an archetype of style, individualism, authenticity, and sensuality. However, Wilde left nothing to chance—his reception was certainly not a primarily passive process. 'I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me,' he declares (*De Profundis*, 95; *Complete Letters*, 729), striking a balance between author ('awoke') and audience ('created'). The French writer André Maurois described Wilde as: 'un grand poète au sens le plus complet du mot, c'est-à-dire un créateur de mythes' ('a great poet in the complete sense of the word, that is to say, a creator of myths').²⁸ It is this mythic aspect of Wilde, largely ignored by scholars of classical reception, that I seek to bring to the surface.

²⁶ Jauss (1982: 19).

²⁷ Ross (2013: 5).

²⁸ Quoted in Rose (2015: xi).

Ross and Ellmann identify significant shifts for Wilde in the mid-to-late 1880s, from archaeological reconstructionist to stylistic anachronist and from practising heterosexual to homosexual respectively.²⁹ It is also possible to discern another shift in terms of his writing, from poetry, journalism, and criticism to storytelling, and his use of mythological material. While Wilde's fairy tales have traditionally been treated within their Celtic, Christian, and contemporary Romantic contexts, I have made the case in Chapter 3 for reading the first two stories from *The Happy Prince*, the title tale and 'The Nightingale and the Rose', through the myth of Philomela and Procne, as represented in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As I emphasize in this Conclusion, Wilde usually alludes to several traditions simultaneously in his works and so creates the impression of multiple meanings. One cannot account for Wilde's almost universal worldwide popularity solely with *Earnest*, the wit and wordplay of which are almost inevitably lost in translation. Dorian Gray is Wilde's most famous and enduring character, and his eponymous novel originated in the rejection by *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* of Wilde's fairy story 'The Fisherman and His Soul', which also takes a Greek pagan attitude to beauty and a tragic view of destiny. Wilde's conflation of the Greek myth of Tithonus and the Celtic legend of Oisín in *Tír na nÓg* ('Land of Youth') in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* reflects and prefigures the comparison by Celtic scholars and the Revivalist Irish playwrights of, for example, the Irish mythological hero Cú Chulainn to the Greek heroes Heracles and Achilles.³⁰

Wilde made his life as well as his work mythic. Wilde's superstitious streak was not only an idiosyncratic characteristic informed by Irish peasant culture and folklore, but it was also, Ellmann writes, inspired by Aeschylus' enigmatic and doom-laded *Agamemnon*.³¹ Like his fictional Oxonian classicist and ironically tragic *pharmakos* Lord

²⁹ Ross (2013: 118–26); Ellmann (1988: 265).

³⁰ On Dorian and Tithonus, see Pearsall (2008: ch. 6). On Dorian and Oisín, see Coakley (1994: 204). On the comparison of Greek and Celtic mythical models in the Irish Literary Revival, see Macintosh (1994).

³¹ Ellmann (1988: 360).

Arthur Savile, Wilde had his palm read. In 1893, he was told by the Irish occultist Count Louis Hamon ('Cheiro') that while his left hand predicted brilliant success, his right augured impending ruin: 'The left hand is the hand of a king but the right that of a king who will send himself into exile.'³² While Ellmann attributed Wilde's reaction (he left the party at once) to the word 'king', and therefore Agamemnon, in his post-prison asylum on the Continent, Wilde, the former Athenian philosopher, dramatist, and pederast, resembled Oedipus, the tragic scapegoat who has brought his downfall on himself. Knox remarks, 'Indeed, after prison, Oscar Wilde no longer existed—his very name was as forbidden by polite society as that of Hippolytus by Phaedra.'³³ Like the 'bad' Roman emperors who so informed his ideas about decadence and influenced his thoughts about ancient morality,³⁴ the Neronian Wilde was subjected to the ignominy of *damnatio memoriae*—at the time of his arrest and trial, his name was removed from the theatre placards for *An Ideal Husband* and *Earnest*,³⁵ and was later painted over on the honours board at Portora.³⁶ Mahaffy said, 'We no longer talk of Mr Oscar Wilde.'³⁷ As David Rose writes, Wilde had become an Odyssean *Outis* ('No Man').³⁸

But Robert Graves described Wilde as 'Oscar, the wily man' in recognition of his Odysseus-like qualities.³⁹ The lines of Wilde's prison 'Epistola' that I have been quoting in this Conclusion come from a famous passage that is concerned with the author's tragedy and reception. On the one hand, Wilde's letter to his lover has been seen as his most autobiographical work, the one in which he leaves aside his literary mask, his *persona*, to speak directly to Douglas. Wilde seems to reverse his previous paradoxical philosophy of masks in 'The Critic as Artist', 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give

³² Ellmann (1988: 360); Holland (1997: 127).

³³ Knox (2015: 100).

³⁴ See Malik (2018).

³⁵ Ellmann (1988: 430).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 25.

³⁷ Quoted in Stanford and McDowell (1971: 87).

³⁸ Rose (2015: xi).

³⁹ Quoted in Rose (2015: xi).

him a mask, and he will tell you the truth' (*Criticism*, 185). In his 'Epistola', he repeatedly tells Douglas that 'the supreme vice is shallowness' (*De Profundis*, 38, 70, 99, 101; 150, 166, 167; *Complete Letters*, 685, 710, 733, 734). 'Pain,' he writes, 'unlike pleasure, wears no mask' (*De Profundis*, 105, 170; cf. *Complete Letters*, 737). As Giles Whiteley explains, 'Thus joy is little more than a kind of "illusion", a phantasm or simulacrum (understood here pejoratively) preventing true Platonic or Hegelian self-consciousness.'⁴⁰ But, as I have noted in the Introduction to this thesis, critics have also read *De Profundis* as a dramatic soliloquy, which has tragic resonances reminiscent of the *Agamemnon*,⁴¹ or of Euripides' *Heracles*, as does *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.⁴² In *From the Depths*, Wilde writes, 'The gods had given me almost everything,' but, 'Tired of being on the heights, I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensation' (*De Profundis*, 95; 162–3; cf. *Complete Letters*, 729–30). Although Wilde appears to ask his ostensible addressee to see him and accept him with his face unmasked, he does not occupy this lowly position of powerlessness and vulnerability for very long. As Guy and Small comment on his 'I summed up all existence' passage: 'Wilde's summation of his life here does not seem to be addressed only to Douglas; it feels more as if Wilde is self-consciously fashioning a version of his life for posterity, and perhaps attempting to control the shape of subsequent narratives about him.'⁴³ Ellmann writes that Wilde 'created himself at Oxford',⁴⁴ and it was a process of creation and construction that he continued afterwards and that continues with this thesis, as well as the critics and artists cited within it.

Barthes objects to the tyrannical authority imposed on textual criticism by the composite construction of the Author (whom he capitalizes to indicate that the figure in question is more than just the person who does the writing). He distrusts the biographical approach to literary interpretation, in which information on the life of an author is employed to explain

⁴⁰ Whiteley (2015: 291).

⁴¹ Ellmann (1988: 360–1).

⁴² Riley (2018b).

⁴³ Guy and Small (2006: 57).

⁴⁴ Ellmann (1988: 95).

a text.⁴⁵ However, as Robbins argues, ‘that “authority” can only be derived when there is a general agreement about the meaning of the author’:

The facts may not change, but their interpretation does with the passage of time and changing attitudes. Even at the moment of disgrace, in May 1895, we must beware of the re-creating of a homogenous audience all baying for Wilde’s blood. Interpretations in this case can only ever be partial and temporary—which is what helps to keep this author alive.⁴⁶

The shifting sands of Wilde’s reception are epitomized by Stoppard’s *Invention*, in which ‘Wilde’ assumes the self-conscious, self-congratulatory aspect of his authorial persona in *De Profundis*:

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 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 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. (*Invention*, 99–100)

While Wilde is believed to take off his mask in *De Profundis*, he puts different ones on in his ‘Platonic’ dialogues, ‘The Critic as Artist’ and ‘The Decay of Lying’, which are collected with his essay ‘The Truth of Masks’ in *Intentions*. In his combination of dialogue and drama, Wilde has been seen as both an heir of Plato and a forebear of Stoppard in terms of a Platonic ‘drama of ideas’.⁴⁷ This Platonic drama of ideas provides a perfect case study for reception as it underlines what Martindale describes as ‘the dynamic and dialogic character of reading’.⁴⁸ Stoppard’s play represents a dialogue between modernity and antiquity and between the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries. His ‘Wilde’ not only dialogues with his ‘Housman’, but also answers Wilde’s prison letter with the hindsight of a hundred years—*Invention* was first produced in 1997, a century after *De Profundis* was written. However, the dialogues in *Invention* are synchronic as well as diachronic, as indicated by the widely differing attitudes of the characters to not only Wilde but also to

⁴⁵ Barthes (1997: 143).

⁴⁶ Robbins (1996: 111).

⁴⁷ Puchner (2010).

⁴⁸ Martindale (2007: 300).

the word, as well as the idea of, homosexuality. While scholars of Wildean classical reception have recently sought to move away from the Socratic dialogues and the emphasis on (homo)erotics, Stoppard's Platonic drama of ideas highlights the dangers of divorcing the emotional from the intellectual, and reveals the close relationship between philosophy and theatre, performance and sexuality, and the reception of Wilde and the reception of homosexuality.

The social, cultural, and temporal contingencies of Wilde's reception are no more apparent than in a comparison of Stoppard's *Invention* and Y. T. O.'s parody *Aristophanes at Oxford: O. W.*, which I have discussed in Chapter 1. Both texts draw from the same ancient and modern traditions of musical comedy, in particular Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, and both portray Wilde as a comic Aristophanic cameo. However, whereas *Aristophanes*, which was published on the eve of the Wilde trials in 1894, strikes an ominous note, *Invention* has the hindsight of one hundred years after Wilde's release from prison and the 'invention' of (homo)sexuality. Y. T. O.'s disparaging depiction of 'O. W.' as an Agathon figure answering accusations with an 'art for art's sake' apologia would prove to be eerily prescient, but Stoppard's Wilde 'proves' how prophetic the author's own assessment of his contribution to art and culture was in *De Profundis*, or, rather, how successfully he managed to control his reception.⁴⁹ The reception of Wilde (and, consequently, Aristophanes) has performed a 360-degree turn. In a complete reversal, Wilde is now revered, even by serious, 'straight' playwrights such as Stoppard, for the very things for which he was reviled, namely, artistic and sexual individuality and freedom of expression. The survival of the High Priest of Aestheticism reveals that Christianity never did in fact defeat paganism.

⁴⁹ Or does it? Stoppard emphasizes Wilde as a progressive sexual liberator. In his biography of Wilde, Joseph Pearce (2000: xiii) argues:

The irony of the present situation is that Wilde is remembered far more for his private life than for his art. It is not a state of affairs which would have pleased him. In fact, it would have horrified him. He would have seen it as the last and worst insult to his battered reputation. For Wilde, art was always Art and it was by this alone that he desired to be judged, both by his peers and posterity.

Paglia, who repeatedly points out the continuities between pagan and Catholic culture, suggests that Victorian- and High Protestant-influenced classical scholarship has overemphasized the tragic character of Hellenic civilization at the expense of the comic.⁵⁰ For the Wilde of Reading Prison, joy itself had been nothing other than a tragic mask: ‘I thought life was going to be a brilliant comedy, [...] I found it to be a revolting and repellent tragedy’ (*De Profundis*, 64; *Complete Letters*, 705). Stokes writes, however, that it is wrong to force Wilde’s life into a classically tragic pattern. Although his greatest moment of triumph immediately preceded his precipitous social downfall, *Earnest* (like Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) ‘has led an independent life quite apart from the dire misfortune of its author’.⁵¹ As well as being endlessly revived on stage and adapted for film and audio, it lives on in the contemporary plays that it has inspired, such as Stoppard’s *Travesties* (1974) and Mark Ravenhill’s *Handbag* (1998).

Wilde perennially appeals to artists for his consummate literary auteur-ishness. There is also a discernible line of queer homage, but not all the authors of my receptions of Wildean classicism are homosexual, nor are all the works deferential or gay-friendly. *Patience* and *Aristophanes at Oxford*, as well as Aristophanes himself, and Juvenal, demonstrate that comedy and satire are historically at home with homophobia and anti-effeminacy. However, the queer or decadent response has time and again been not so much to fight back as to re-appropriate and re-evaluate. Unlike Whistler’s wit, which was invariably turned against someone or something, Wilde’s had a more fanciful dimension, a good-natured absurdity. In the first volume of his foundational queer text, *History of Sexuality*, Foucault discusses the idea of reclaimed sexual designations as a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by

⁵⁰ Paglia (1991: 6).

⁵¹ Stokes (2014).

which it was medically disqualified'.⁵² In Mahaffy's *Social Life in Greece*, for which Wilde corrected the proofs and which contained one of the first popular English discussions of Greek homosexuality, the Trinity don pre-emptively rebuffed the objection that passionate attachments between men in Greece were 'unnatural' by arguing that 'all civilization was unnatural, that its very existence presupposed the creation of new instincts, the suppression of old, and that many of the best features in all gentle life were best because they were unnatural'.⁵³ 'Queer' theory grew out the reclamation of the former insult as a badge of honour from the late 1980s.

In the *Thesmophoriazusae*, Agathon refuses, for the most part, to lower himself to the level of Euripides' impudent relative. Euripides answered the *Thesmophoriazusae* with the *Bacchae*—Pentheus' military might and bluster are no match for Dionysus' irresistible charisma and mystery. Wilde was mockingly associated with the effete Agathon in *Aristophanes at Oxford*, but Wilde had already implicitly made the identification himself in his review of Jebb's *Encyclopædia Britannica* article. Prash notes that the characteristically conservative and reactionary Aristophanes was sometimes embraced by the Aesthetic New Hellenists for subversive ends, giving as an example Beardsley's explicitly pornographic illustrations for Smithers's edition of *Lysistrata*.⁵⁴ To this Aesthetic tradition of Aristophanic appropriations could be added a comedy by that Wildean acolyte and wittily subversive prose stylist Ronald F(a)irbank, *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920), which Hanson has described as 'a queer version of *Lysistrata*'.⁵⁵ The title of Firbank's play obviously suggests Wilde's Vera Sabouroff, and Wilde and Douglas make cameo appearances in the guise of the dandies Lord Orkish and Reggie Quintus, who are surrounded by an air of genteel notoriety rather than showered with sexualized insults as they would be in Aristophanes. In antiquity, the *Lysistrata* had the alternative title

⁵² Foucault (1978: 101).

⁵³ Mahaffy (1874: 308).

⁵⁴ Prash (2012: 467).

⁵⁵ Hanson (1997: 357).

Adoniazusae (compare Theocritus' *Idyll*), and Wilde's Alexandrian courtesan Myrrhina parodies the famous conjugal seduction by her Aristophanic namesake, as well as Mary Magdalene's anointing of Christ (see John 12: 3), in her tempting of the anchorite Honorius: 'I will smear your body with myrrh and pour spikenard on your hair. I will clothe you in hyacinth and pour honey in your mouth' (604). Wilde, like Agathon, can help us think about the relationship between comedy and tragedy, Old Comedy and New Comedy, and genre and sexual identity.

The urbane, witty, sublimated, gay English scholarly style was epitomized in twentieth-century Classics by Maurice Bowra.⁵⁶ One of the tragedies of Rattigan's classics master Andrew Crocker-Harris is his failure to live up the legacy of gay Oxonian scholastic wit. Though he tries to conceal his physical and emotional pain behind agonizingly unfunny Latinate wordplay (*Browning*, 185–6, 201), he reveals flashes of razor-sharp wit: when the young Millie Crocker-Harris tries to make her lover Frank Hunter jealous by saying that she found a particular social companion 'quite charming', her husband biting retorts, 'A charming *old* gentleman' (192; my emphasis). In his tragic 'I know better now' speech to Frank, Andrew reveals that his married life is the stuff not of classical drama but of popular farce. He tells his newly minted successor, Gilbert (a very Wildean name), that he initially 'tried very hard to communicate to the boys some of [his] own joy in the great literature of the past' by turning himself into a kind of class clown—'you can teach more things by laughter than by earnestness' (207). But comedy turned to tragedy when his pupils stopped finding him a joke due, not to 'a sickness of the body, but a sickness of the soul' (208). While Rattigan's play explicitly ends with 'an anti-climax' (224), an atonement of sorts, the Crock would have to wait for the film adaptation of Rattigan's play for a more climactic, comic conclusion to his tragedy. Just as Stray and Goldhill have suggested that Wilde subjectively transcended the classical,⁵⁷ so too does Rattigan's

⁵⁶ See Mitchell (2009).

⁵⁷ Stray (1998: 217); Godhill (2014: 186).

protagonist transcend his ‘gilded and classical epigrams’ to deliver, not a Platonic apologia, but an apology from the heart.

While I have brought the study of Wilde’s classical reception up to the present, I have also extended it back to the ancient world itself. I hope to have demonstrated the folly of focusing on Greece without looking at Rome, thanks to whose language ‘culture lived at all’ (*Criticism*, 144). In Chapters 2 and 3, I have shown how a self-consciously belated, blackly tragicomic Ovid mediates not only his fellow Roman hexameter poet Virgil but also Euripides and Aeschylus. My work on Ovid and Wilde can be located within wider trends of not only the queering of Ovid, ‘the most heterosexual’ and ‘homophobic’ of Roman poets,⁵⁸ but also the reorienting from Greece to Rome of the direction of Wildean classical reception studies,⁵⁹ as well as of the study of modern receptions of ancient sexuality,⁶⁰ and even of the classical reception of famously philhellenic nineteenth-century writers.⁶¹

The notebooks that Wilde kept during his Oxford degree show how widely read he was in not only classical literature and philosophy but also both English and European literature. Ovid, whose star was in the descent during the nineteenth century, was transmitted through Shakespeare in the Victorian period, as evidenced in Chapter 2 of this thesis, which discusses *Dorian Gray*’s reception of Pygmalion and his author Orpheus via that most ‘Greek’ of Shakespeare’s plays, *The Winter’s Tale*. I have also alluded in passing to the similarity between the rejections of woman by the narcissistic, Hamlet-like Dorian and by Hippolytus. Kohl mentions that the setting and beginning of Wilde’s *Salomé* evoke the opening *teichoskopia* of *Hamlet* and Maeterlinck’s *La Princesse Maleine*, but neglects

⁵⁸ Zajko (2009) argues for a queer reading of the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis in the *Metamorphoses*.

⁵⁹ See Endres (2018); Smith (2018); Malik (2018); Witzke (2018). On Ovid’s heterosexuality and ‘homophobia’, see Makowski (1996: 29–32).

⁶⁰ See Ingleheart (2015b). On Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ hermaphrodite third sex and Ovid’s Hermaphroditus, see Matzner (2015).

⁶¹ See the recent APGRD ‘Byron the Latinist’ conference in Oxford (12 Dec. 2017).

to include the Shakespearean play's obvious ancient ancestor, the *Agamemnon*.⁶² Isobel Murray notes that Hérode and Hérodiades resemble Shakespeare's guilty couples Claudius and Gertrude and the Macbeths,⁶³ while I ally the murderous and incestuous Judaeen royal husband and wife with Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and Oedipus and Jocasta. Sylvan Barnet describes Salomé as a *femme fatale* 'somewhat in the mode of Medea, Lady Macbeth, and Phaedra'.⁶⁴ As Hall and Macintosh write, one of the 'types of subject-matter intimately related to the reception of Greek tragedy' that merit further attention is Shakespearean drama, which appears 'to have been conceptually paired with specific Greek heroes and plots', such as Hamlet and Orestes.⁶⁵ More recently, Macintosh argues that, whereas at the beginning of the nineteenth century it was the points of difference rather than similarity between Greek tragedy and Shakespeare that concerned Schlegel and his contemporaries, during the course of the century the gaps between the ancient tragedians and the modern playwright contract.⁶⁶ The extent of Shakespeare's knowledge of Greek has been an ongoing point of debate in classical reception studies,⁶⁷ while Seneca has traditionally been assumed to be his primary and most accessible classical tragic source.⁶⁸ However, Tanya Pollard has recently argued against long-held assumptions about the ignorance of Greek texts in early modern England. The most popular Greek plays of this period were not those with male protagonists such as Sophocles' *Oedipus*, but tragedies by Euripides that deal with bereaved mothers and sacrificial victim daughters, especially Hecuba and Iphigenia.⁶⁹ In the nineteenth century, these same Euripidean women replaced Seneca in his 'monstrous' Schlegel mould as begetters of gothic and melodramatic offspring in the popular theatres.⁷⁰ In Chapters 2 and 3, I have noted the

⁶² Kohl (1989: 181).

⁶³ Murray (1989: 614).

⁶⁴ Barnet (2004). Ebook.

⁶⁵ Hall and Macintosh (2005: xxi).

⁶⁶ Macintosh (2015).

⁶⁷ See Martindale and Taylor (2004a: 1, 3, 4, 10).

⁶⁸ See Peyré (2004).

⁶⁹ Pollard (2017).

⁷⁰ Macintosh (2015: 299).

similarity between Wilde's Greek-named melodramatic Shakespearean actress in *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl Vane, and Euripidean sacrificial female victims such as Iphigenia in Aulis and the Trojan Polyxena, and have also commented that the executed Salomé plays Iphigenia to her mother Hérodiás' Clytemnestra.

Macintosh contends that Sophocles and Shakespeare 'are conjoined as honorary Victorians' in performance, specifically at the moment when the Shakespearean actress Helen Faucit takes on the role of Antigone. The Shakespearean parts that made Faucit famous, Juliet, Hermione, Miranda, and Rosalind,⁷¹ are all evoked in Wilde's novel through its protagonist's first love. His Salomé embodies not so much the youthful idealism of Antigone, Juliet, or Miranda in the way that Sibyl clearly does, as a Decadent *jusq'au-boutisme*. However, the Judaeen princess also defies a king and pays for her ironically sacrilegious defiance with her life. Boyiopoulos compares Salomé's necrophilic embrace of the head of Iokanaan to the hubristic abuse of the corpse of Polynices.⁷² Barnet speculates that, at the end of Wilde's biblical play, Hérode can be seen as 'a broken man, a minor tragic figure' and 'a sort of Creon, to Salome's Antigone'.⁷³ In Chapter 3, I have suggested that the yoking of Eros and Thanatos in *Antigone* and *Romeo and Juliet* is personified by Wilde's melodramatic Duchess of Padua and foolishly idealistic, self-sacrificial fairy-tale Nightingale.

Wilde's interest in *Antigone* was undoubtedly mediated through Hegel, who in his *Phänomenologie* famously turns to Sophocles' heroine, who must choose between the equally valid claims of personal religious conscience and public civil law, as the model for ethical life. Although Sophocles' tragedy is not mentioned by name in his Oxford essay 'Historical Criticism', Wilde may well be thinking of Antigone's dilemma while summarizing the entire Hegelian narrative, 'the Law of Beauty, the opposition of conduct

⁷¹ Ibid. 307.

⁷² Boyiopoulos (2018: 158).

⁷³ Barnet (2004). Ebook.

to culture' (*Criticism*, 61). Jowett was the person through whom Hegel came to Oxford, and the translator of Plato saw a fundamental affinity between the ancient and modern philosophers.⁷⁴ While this thesis has examined the pervasive presence of Euripides and Aeschylus in Wilde's works, Sophocles should not be brushed aside lightly. Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*,⁷⁵ his Oedipal Dorian Gray, and his fairy tales with their foundling and parentless child protagonists, suggest that Ross is perhaps too quick to set up an and/or scenario between Sophocles' exemplary Aristotelian tragedy and the *Ion* as the inspiration for *Earnest*.⁷⁶ Similarly, it is somewhat premature to opine, as does Jenkyns, that Wilde's comic masterpiece probably owes more to Shakespearean than classical New Comedy.⁷⁷

Donohue's recent doorstop of an edition of Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua* and *Salomé* may be currently the largest in the Oxford English Texts series of Wilde's *Complete Works*, but it is far from comprehensive, remaining disappointingly conventional in the limits of its study. Donohue shows little interest in Wilde's educational background, referring vaguely to his 'Oxford degree' (*Salomé*, 333) or 'certain bodies and structures of knowledge and understanding familiar to him, [...] from as early as his Trinity College Dublin and Oxford days, or even from his years at Portora Royal School' (564). Donohue is mistaken to assume that the titling of the original, 1893 French-language *Salomé* as a 'drame', as opposed to a 'tragedy' in its 1894 English translation, marks the categorical departure of Wilde's play from Racinian classicism.⁷⁸ Studies of Wilde's classical reception seem reluctant to step outside not only the nineteenth century but also the British Isles, although Evangelista ventures to Paris, where Wilde found in *fin-de-siècle* France a Symbolist interest in the culture of Hellenistic Alexandria and late antiquity that created

⁷⁴ On Jowett, Hegel, and Plato, see Mander (2011: 30–1).

⁷⁵ On the title character of Wilde's *Woman* as a tragic scapegoat and her Oedipal relationship with her son, see Day (2016: 129–33).

⁷⁶ Ross (2013: 174–5).

⁷⁷ Jenkyns (2014: 509).

⁷⁸ Donohue (2013b: 431–33).

connections between modern and ancient cosmopolitanism.⁷⁹ In Chapter 4 of this thesis, I have extended Boyiopoulos' argument for the influence of Euripides' *Hippolytus* plays and Seneca's *Phaedra* on Wilde's *Salomé* to Racine's *Phèdre*.⁸⁰ I am struck by how much Wilde's biblical drama draws on Racine, even at the level of French vocabulary. In an interview with a French daily criticizing the Philistine English Censor's prohibition of the London production of his biblical play in 1892, the emphatically Irish playwright, in a blatant attempt to butter up the local audience ahead of a supposed Parisian première, sang the praises of the French language, going so far as to declare: 'To me there are only two languages in the world: French and Greek.'⁸¹ Looking back on Bernhardt's sensational London début in her signature rôle as Racine's *Phèdre* at the Gaiety Theatre in 1879, Wilde had reminisced in the *Woman's World* (Jan. 1888), which he edited: 'For my part own part, I must confess that it was not until I heard Sarah Bernhardt in *Phèdre* that I absolutely realised the sweetness of the music of Racine.'⁸² The unity of musicality and psychology in Wilde's *Salomé* that so obviously attracted Strauss via Hedwig Lachmann's German translation is utterly Racinian.

Wilde's employment of the Hippolytus–Phaedra myth spans his entire dramatic oeuvre, from his early tragic melodrama *The Duchess*, to his late fragmentary and planned plays, including 'La Sainte Courtisane', 'The Cardinal of Avignon', 'Ahab and Isabel(le)'.⁸³ These unrealized projects give a very different impression of the author of *Earnest*. Kohl compares Wilde's 'The Cardinal of Avignon' in subject matter and plot construction to 'Racine's tragedies, with their depiction of guilty passion and the destruction of young love'.⁸⁴ He also points out the similarity between the long final scene of 'The Cardinal', in

⁷⁹ Evangelista (2018).

⁸⁰ Boyiopoulos (2018).

⁸¹ Maurice Sisley, 'La *Salomé* de M. Oscar Wilde', *Le Gaulois* (29 Jun. 1892), 1. Quoted in Mikhail (1979b: 190).

⁸² Wilde, 'Literary and Other Notes by the Editor', *Woman's World*, 1/3 (Jan. 1888), 132–6. Reprinted in *Journalism*, ii, 41–51, at 42.

⁸³ On Wilde's planned and fragmentary works, see Kohl (1989: ch. 10).

⁸⁴ Kohl (1989: 313).

which the cardinal reveals himself to be the young man's father, and Act III of *Woman*, at the end of which Mrs Arbuthnot reveals that Lord Illingworth is her son Gerald's father. John M. Clum writes that Mrs Arbuthnot's 'grand, sentimental statements' in *Woman* make her sound 'like Racine's Phèdre trapped in a Victorian drawing room'.⁸⁵ Mrs Arbuthnot's Christian name, Rachel, may evoke not only the biblical mourning mother (see Matthew 2: 18, cf. Jeremiah 31: 15), but also Élisabeth Rachel Félix, the great French tragedienne of the generation before Bernhardt. Mademoiselle Rachel was considered to have been the ideal interpreter of Racine's Phèdre until 'La Divine Sarah' made the rôle her own.⁸⁶

Devereux describes Hippolytus as a 'reverse Oedipus'.⁸⁷ *Phèdre* may be Racine's most famous and celebrated work, but Mitchell Greenberg has shown that it is the Oedipus myth that the French dramatist uses to achieve his emotional power in his tragedies.⁸⁸ I would advance the argument of Euripides' *Ion* as a key source for *Earnest* by proposing as an important mediating text Racine's *chef-d'oeuvre*, his scriptural play *Athalie* (*Athaliah*), which, like the *Ion*, also concerns an Oedipal foundling and temple orphan, Joas (Joash). As well as informing *Earnest*, *Athalie* served as a model for Wilde's French biblical drama, as I have suggested in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Like *Salomé*, the religious context, Aristotelian structure, and chorality of *Athalie* recall Athenian tragedy.⁸⁹ Wilde favourably cited *Athalie* in the same French interview in which he slammed the Censor's ban of his biblical play. The *Ion* has long been identified as a significant classical source for *Athalie*.⁹⁰ A common point of comparison between the two plays has been the scenes in which the queen questions the temple orphan about his antecedents, while each is unaware of their real blood relationship. In *Athalie*, the queen questions in a quasi-catechetical style

⁸⁵ Clum (2012: 34–5).

⁸⁶ See Stokes (2005: ch. 2).

⁸⁷ Devereux (1985: 86).

⁸⁸ Greenberg (2010).

⁸⁹ See Hawcroft (2011: 272).

⁹⁰ On the relationship between Euripides' *Ion* and Racine's *Athalie*, see Phillippo (2003: 81–8).

the mysterious child in the Temple whom she has seen murder her in a recurring dream. Although the boy tells Athalie that his name is Éliacin (Eliazin), he is later revealed to her as Joas, her sole surviving grandson and the rightful ruler of the Israelites. This dual identity of Joas (Joash)/Éliacin (Eliazin) recalls that of John ('Jack')/Ernest in *Earnest* and that of Iokanaan (Jokanaan)/Élie (Elias) in *Salomé*, which I have already mentioned above as an example of Wilde's Euripidean or Alexandrian wordplay. After his teasing cross-examination about his name by Algernon and his ironic discussion of it in his audience with Gwendolen, the eponymous protagonist of *Earnest* is interrogated about his parents in an interview with his prospective mother-in-law (and, as it later transpires, his aunt) Lady Bracknell, who, to quote Susanna Phillippo on Athalie, 'is no Creusa'.⁹¹

As well as the similarities between the Euripidean and Racinian tragedies, Phillippo discusses their significant points of difference.⁹² I propose that Racine's divergences from his Euripidean source material in *Athalie* are reflected by those of Wilde in *Earnest*. Aspects of Creusa's role in the *Ion* are divided between Racine's Athalie and Josabet, the aunt of Joas, whom she rescued, and the wife of the high priest Joad. Wilde divides aspects of both Creusa/Athalie and Josabet between his Lady Bracknell, Jack's aunt, and Miss Prism, the love interest of the rector Canon Chasuble who mislaid Jack. Athalie and Lady Bracknell are given Creusa's role in the questioning scene, although both begin and end with more antagonistic intent. The tender voice of Creusa is given to Josabet in Racine's tragedy, although Athalie does express gentler feelings towards Joas, who does not reciprocate them and diverts his filial affections solely to his foster family, Josabet and her husband. In *Earnest*, the voice of emotion is given to Miss Prism, when she tries to explain to Lady Bracknell where the child that she lost is. When Jack discovers that Lady Bracknell is his aunt at the end, he does not react in the same, ironically overfamiliar way to her as he just did when he mistakenly believed Miss Prism to be his long-lost mother.

⁹¹ Phillippo (2003: 86).

⁹² Ibid. 86–7.

In addition to the pairing of Shakespeare with the Greeks, Hall and Macintosh note that ‘certain biblical narratives were always traditionally compared both popularly and academically with specific Greek tragedies’, such as ‘the temple foundling Josiah with Euripides’ *Ion*’.⁹³ In Wilde’s day, all candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts at Oxford had to pass Divinity Moderations in order to qualify. The set texts for the divinity test were from the New Testament in Greek. While Wilde had lost out on the Gold Medal for Classics to Purser in his last year at Portora, he won the Carpenter Prize for achieving the highest mark in an examination on the Greek Testament.⁹⁴ Wilde was compelled to continue his studies in the Greek Testament at Oxford, with notoriously humorous results.⁹⁵ Although the epigram was originally a classical Greek form, the early version did not aim at humour or surprise—essential elements of the modern Wildean version. However, a source of arresting paradoxes can be found in the New Testament: ‘For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it’ (Matthew 16: 25; King James Version), ‘the last shall be first, and the first last’ (Matt. 20: 16).

Whatever impression Wilde gave to his divinity examiner, the Revd Spooner, of his ignorance of St Paul, he clearly made it to the end of the New Testament as the protagonist of his novel is not only an Ovidian Narcissus but also a Pauline idolatrous ‘Greek martyr’ (*Dorian Gray*, 20; 182).⁹⁶ As we have already seen, the implicit comparison of Joas to Ion in Racine’s *Athalie* is possibly present behind Wilde’s *Earnest*. Not only is Rachel Arbuthnot characterized in Wilde’s *Woman* as a Scripture-citing mother bitterly weeping for her child and refusing to be comforted, but she also resembles the great nineteenth-century French tragedienne of the generation before Bernhardt as Phèdre lamenting over her proud stepson and cruel fate. In Chapter 3, I have discussed how Wilde’s combination

⁹³ Hall and Macintosh (2005: xxi).

⁹⁴ Wright (2009: 60).

⁹⁵ On Wilde’s farcical divinity *viva* with the Reverend William Spooner of spoonerism fame, see Ellmann (1988: 62).

⁹⁶ On the Pauline imagery, in particular mirror imagery, in *Dorian Gray*, see Kreitzer (1999: ch. 2).

of Aeschylus and the Bible in *Salomé* mirrors Mark's own use of the *Agamemnon* in his Gospel. In Chapter 4, I have argued that Wilde's 'Byzantine' passion play reverses the composition of the medieval Euripidean cento, the *Christus Patiens*, returning the Christianizing text to its ancient pagan origins in the *Bacchae*. Myth critics of the deep learning and expansive vision of a Northrop Frye would have had no difficulty in hearing these old songs being sung anew.

After Oxford, the next time that Wilde regularly studied Scripture was during the other great turning-point of his life, his imprisonment, throughout which he led a monk-like existence in his cell. While Ross locates Wilde in the great scholarly tradition of the Library of Alexandria, Stanford is also right to place him in the context of the conflict 'between Greek paganism and Latin Christianity in [...] heart and mind' and so in the apostolic line of the early Irish monks,⁹⁷ the saints and scholars who played a crucial role in preserving classical pagan culture and learning during the so-called 'Dark Ages' and so 'saved civilization', to borrow Thomas Cahill's phrase.⁹⁸ The pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon argued that humans were wrong to believe that the gods were created in their own likeness (B15), but in his 'Epistola' Wilde makes Christ over into his own image as a Platonic aesthete who, like the bilingual Irish peasants, even spoke Greek (*De Profundis*, 118; 180; *Complete Letters*, 748–9). In relation to Christ's life, he writes: 'For "pity and terror" there is nothing in the entire cycle of Greek tragedy to touch it' (*De Profundis*, 111; 174; cf. *Complete Letters*, 742). He described his Passion, as re-presented by the Catholic Mass, as the last surviving vestige of Greek tragedy, and his life as an 'idyll' (*De Profundis*, 112; 175; *Complete Letters*, 743). But Frye reminds us that the Bible is in form a comedy, not a tragedy.⁹⁹ In addition to Wilde's planned play 'Ahab and Isabel', which, to judge from his prose poem 'Jezebel',¹⁰⁰ would have been another

⁹⁷ Stanford (1984: 232).

⁹⁸ Cahill (1995).

⁹⁹ Frye and Macpherson (2004: 22).

¹⁰⁰ See Holland (1999: 261–4).

combination of the *Hippolytus* and the *Bacchae* à la *Salomé* and was also apparently intended as star vehicle for Bernhardt,¹⁰¹ he intended to write another work that he called the ‘Epic of the Cross’, ‘the Iliad of Christianity, which shall live for all time’.¹⁰² These are not the words of a writer who would have rested on his artistic laurels, repeating *ad nauseum* the winning formula of improbable modern farces of manners.

‘Hebraism’ is not merely an Arnoldian critical tool of cultural analysis but one of the two major springs of Western civilization, which classicists and classical reception scholars have largely neglected.¹⁰³ The study of the relationship between Graeco-Roman antiquity and Judaeo-Christianity has been kept alive, not by professional academic classicists, but by the liberal humanist tradition of school and collegiate teaching or by Christian writing.¹⁰⁴ Wilde thought of Christ as a Greek speaker, and classicists would be advised to learn Aramaic, the common tongue of the Near East for most of its history and without which it is impossible to understand fully a huge portion of the ancient world. Wilde’s literary Whore of Babylon, *Salomé*, is set in the Hellenized eastern Mediterranean, which gave birth to the theology of the Catholic Church. The Church partly transmitted Graeco-Roman philosophy, rhetoric, and oratory, which heavily influenced Western educational and legal systems. This thesis leaves the confines of the university and the late nineteenth-century drawing room, and takes in the law court, the theatre, and the church—Magdalen College and Tite Street must meet the Old Bailey, the St James’s Theatre, and the Brompton Oratory. The depressing presentism to classical reception studies, which are predominantly post-Enlightenment and secular in scope, needs to be balanced with the sweep of many earlier studies of the classical tradition, which has tended in the past to pay due attention to the Judaeo-Christian inheritance.

¹⁰¹ Rose (2015: 411).

¹⁰² Quoted in Kernahan (1917: 316).

¹⁰³ As a counterexample, see Leonard (2012).

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Taylor (2007); Bilezikian (2010); Brant (2004); Oakeshott (2015).

The nineteenth-century secularization of university faculties represented by Pater is a welcome process if it allows us to analyse literature and art without moralizing and dogma. However, secularization is limiting when it strips the spiritual dimension from art. Wilde wrote to Ruskin, who taught at Oxford with an evangelical zeal and was asked by the Wildes to be godfather to their second son Vyvyan: ‘There is in you something of prophet, of priest, and of poet, and to you the gods gave eloquence such as they have given to none other, so that your message might come to us with the fire of passion, and the marvel of music, making the deaf to hear, and the blind to see’ (*Complete Letters*, 349).¹⁰⁵ Pater may have used his undergraduate years to shed his Christian faith, and may have been unimpressive as a lecturer and a personality, but in ‘A Study of Dionysus’ he probably implicitly identified himself with the misunderstood outsider god, persecuted for his new religion of ecstasy, who transcends the forces of reaction.¹⁰⁶ André Gide writes that Wilde at the start of the 1890s was compared to ‘an Asiatic Bacchus’ or Apollo.¹⁰⁷ Stokes discusses how Wilde deliberately styled himself as a ‘secular prophet’ who performed miracles in his own oral ‘works’.¹⁰⁸ Just as the Irish missionary monks of old brought Christianity to England, so too did Wilde seek to liberate the English from Victorian Puritanism and bourgeois materialism with a pagan Catholic-inflected aestheticism.

Although secularization drove an ever-widening wedge between Anglo-American higher education and Protestantism, word-centred Protestant thinking lingered in the philological fundamentalism of Classics and in the New Criticism of English. Metaphysical and psychological perspectives seem to be completely missing from contemporary debates on hot-button issues of sexual identity, in particular so-called ‘toxic’ masculinity and the transgender phenomenon. As I write, the best-selling classics-related books in the Anglo-American world are Emily Wilson’s 2017 path-breaking translation of

¹⁰⁵ On Ruskin as Vyvyan Wilde’s prospective godfather, see Holland (1999: 37).

¹⁰⁶ See Dellamora (1990: ch. 9).

¹⁰⁷ Gide (1949: 1).

¹⁰⁸ Stokes (1996: 24).

the *Odyssey*, which underlines the sexual and social inequalities of the Homeric world, and Mary Beard's slim feminist manifesto of the same year, *Women & Power*, in which the author traces contemporary misogyny and female disempowerment to ancient Greece and Rome, beginning from Telemachus' silencing of Penelope in the same epic. Almost three decades earlier, Paglia wrote, 'the male orientation of Greek culture was inseparable from its genius. Athens became great not despite but because of its misogyny.'¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, she makes an instructive distinction between the male, social realm and the female, metaphysical realm:

Trying to remake the future, feminism cut itself off from sexual history. It discarded and suppressed the sexual myths of literature, art, and religion. Those myths show the turbulence, the mysteries and passions of sex. In mythology we see men's sexual anxiety, their fear of women's dominance. [...] Feminism, coveting social power, is blind to woman's cosmic sexual power.¹¹⁰

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I have drawn on White's equally salutary distinction between Wilde's conscious and unconscious selves.¹¹¹ Wilde's conscious self is the unthreatening 'gay best friend' supporter of women's education and liberation through his career-changing editorship of the *Woman's World*, for which he commissioned articles on classical subjects, including by Jane Harrison on Greek vases depicting Sappho.¹¹² Wilde followed Mahaffy, Symonds, and Pater, who '[b]y questioning that there was just one way to imagine the Greeks which was somehow "natural", moral, and conventionally manly, [...] [had] opened up classical reception to performative, fluid, and multi-faceted approaches which appealed to women',¹¹³ and inspired the next generation of independent women writers, including Harrison.¹¹⁴ Yopie Prins, drawing on Sedgwick, considers the influence of Pater's Greek essays on women writers in terms of a 'queer tutelage' or an 'avunculate'.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Paglia (1991: 100).

¹¹⁰ Paglia (1992: 52).

¹¹¹ White (1998: 160).

¹¹² See Ross (2013: 98).

¹¹³ Wallace (2015: 271).

¹¹⁴ See Prins (1999); Evangelista (2009).

¹¹⁵ Prins (1999: 47). See also Prins (2017: 208).

This thesis, however, has been more concerned with Wilde's unconscious self. In Chapter 2, through White's psychoanalytic theory that Wilde's reported disgust at his wife's pregnant body reflected his fear of being engulfed by his overpowering mother,¹¹⁶ I have read *Dorian Gray* and its protagonist's relationship to Sibyl Vane and his dead mother in terms of Ovid's myths of Orpheus and his Pygmalion, their relationship to Euripides' *Alcestis*, the *Bacchae*, and the *Hippolytus*, and their reception in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Through the Ovidian Orpheus' abrupt transfer of erotic affections from women to boys, Wilde reads Dorian's and his own homosexual shift. I have also noted Devereux's suggestively Wildean description of Hippolytus as a 'self-destructive narcissist' and 'orphanic dandy',¹¹⁷ who possesses a death-wish to return to the time before his Amazon mother's original sin. For Devereux, whereas Hippolytus has latent passive homosexual impulses towards his father Theseus, Oedipus' passive homosexual characteristics were aroused by his father Laius' aggressive and homoerotic impulses towards him.¹¹⁸ In Chapter 3, I have viewed *Woman* as a diversion to non-Sophoclean classical sources of the Labdacid dynastic myth that stress the pederastic family history, as well as a refraction of Wilde's relationships with his own parental figures, both familial and intellectual. In Chapter 4, in relation to *Salomé*, I have cited Dudley Edwards's theory of Wilde's 'Hippolytus complex', in which the male homosexual or 'enthusiast' idealizes the mother and sets himself up in opposition to his sexually promiscuous father.¹¹⁹ Colin Still comments, 'The critic of imaginative art is essentially an interpreter of dreams.'¹²⁰ Freud is clearly as important as Foucault in any analysis of Wilde.

The revived late Victorian medicalization of sexual identity, the pervasive narcissistic search for one's exact place on the spectrum of gender, and the re-solidification of the male-female binary have implications for how we read Wilde's works today. In this thesis,

¹¹⁶ White (1998: 160–1).

¹¹⁷ Devereux (1985: 92).

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 73.

¹¹⁹ Dudley Edwards (1997: 52).

¹²⁰ Still (1936: 13).

art, sexuality, and religion are all intimately interrelated. The world history of sexuality reveals that art and literature have been used by sexually alienated or shamanistic third-gender types as a means to explore painful inner conflicts. Sebastian Matzner discusses how the pioneering German Uranian writer Karl Heinrich Ulrichs uses Greek and Latin literature ‘to theorize sexuality and simultaneously interprets literature—its contents, authors, and readers—through the prism of his own sexological theory’.¹²¹ Matzner hypothesizes that the sexually struggling Ulrichs would have found a classical literary precedent for his ideas of Uranianism, which he believed was symptomatic of an innate femaleness and a naturally occurring hermaphroditism, in the myth of Hermaphroditus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.¹²² In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I have related readings of *Salomé* in scholarship and performance as ‘Wilde in drag’, so to speak, to the playwright’s reception of Euripides’ *Bacchae* and, ultimately, Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae* with their references to ritual and theatrical transvestism.

In *Into the Demon Universe* (1974), Christopher S. Nassaar argues that the lunar symbolism of Wilde’s *Salomé* evokes the goddess Cybele, the Great Mother (*Magna Mater*), whose cult originated in Asia Minor and spread throughout the Roman Empire, and ‘whose sterile sex impulse is directed toward the subjugation and castration of the male’.¹²³ The vampiric Salomé, who is continually compared to the moon, destroys and devours both the Young Syrian and Iokanaan. Catullus’ extraordinary *Attis* (poem LXIII), which, as we have already seen, Wilde prized ‘for fiery colour and splendid concentration of passion’ along with Theocritus’ moon-invoking *Pharmaceutria*, tells of the Greek adolescent who castrates himself in a frenzy of devotion to Cybele, only to repent of his act. The same questions can be asked of Wilde’s *Salomé* as of Catullus’ *Attis*: is it (semi-

¹²¹ Matzner (2015: 203).

¹²² Ibid. 205–8.

¹²³ Nassaar (1974: 84). Kohl (1989: 185) disagrees with Nassaar: ‘The idea that Salome should have wanted the Baptist to be castrated seems a little unlikely in the light of her sensual longings. [...] [I]n folklore the various phases of the moon have always been associated with coming and going, and life and death in the sublunar world, and so the reference to Cybele seems if anything a little gratuitous.’

)autobiographical or an impersonal display of literary virtuosity? Does it glamorize or repudiate? These and other ambiguities arise from both authors' Hellenic inheritance, the binary mindset that juxtaposes civilization and barbarity, male and female, power and servility, reason and madness.¹²⁴ Wilde's rejection of Mahaffy's highly politicized reading of the cosmopolitan, imperial Hellenistic world, and his own political identification with the free, autonomous city states of the Classical age while privileging decadent Alexandrian culture, ultimately forced him into the uncomfortable and contradictory position of espousing a vision of Hellenism that esteemed ethnic purity and expelled the barbarian 'other'—a tension that would remain palpable throughout the author's life and work.¹²⁵

The acts of artistic creation and interpretation are often conceived in Romantic terms as a struggle between an oppressive Father God and a Promethean dissident. In her reading of *Earnest*, Sedgwick issues her queer rallying cry to 'Forget the Name of the Father'.¹²⁶ In relation to Wilde's pagan biblical play, Nassaar writes:

Cybele is the only true divinity, the light of the world, and she reveals herself to all who wish to see. Christ never appears in the play, and, ironically, it is Salome who fulfills Iokanaan's ambiguous prophecies. It is through her, not through Christ, that the true God revealed Himself—or rather Herself—on earth in biblical times; and it is she, not Christ, whom Wilde presents as the incarnate God. "Behold the time is come!" cries Iokanaan a few minutes before Salome's dance. "That which I foretold has come to pass. The day that I spake of is at hand."¹²⁷

However, the Great Mother's disciple is her son and lover, the dying god, to whom Frazer tacitly compared Jesus. The Christian doctrine of death and resurrection is, Frazer implied, a remnant of pagan mystery religion: 'The type, created by Greek artists, of the sorrowful goddess with her dying lover in her arms, resembles and may have been the model of the

¹²⁴ On Catullus' *Attis*, see Kolson Hurley (2004: 86).

¹²⁵ See Ross (2013: 131–3); Blanshard (2018: 25). In this context, it is worth considering the situation across the English Channel, where Symbolist writers, who looked towards the culture of Hellenistic Alexandria and late antiquity as classical models of cosmopolitanism, came into conflict with the nationalist sentiments of the *École romane*, 'for which France's classical heritage became a reason to exclude foreign influences and connections' (Evangelista 2018: 227).

¹²⁶ Sedgwick (1993: 59).

¹²⁷ Nassaar (1974: 85).

Pietà of Christian art.’¹²⁸ As we have already seen in Chapter 4, Pater obliquely made the analogy in his twinned essays on Dionysus and Demeter. In his ‘The Bacchanals of Euripides’, which was twinned with his ‘Hippolytus Veiled’, Pater referred to the *Christus Patiens*, which tore apart the *Bacchae* and the *Hippolytus* in order to depict Christ’s Passion. Wilde was aware of the Euripidean cento from Tyrrell’s edition of the *Bacchae*, which the Trinity scholar read through the earlier *Hippolytus*. These mother-and-son pairings represent both a flight from and towards the all-powerful, all-encompassing creative female life force. A gay man is as likely to identify/be identified with the deviant Phaedra, as exemplified by Aristophanes’ Agathon (see *Thesm.*, 153), as he is with the homosexual Hippolytus of Devereux or Robinson Jeffers’ *The Cretan Woman* (1954). Wilde likely saw himself in both the tragically transgressive Salomé and the Orphic gynophobic Iokanaan.

The religious and ritualistic ambiguities between monotheism and polytheism, activity and passivity, and resistance and identification, encapsulate the processes and problems of reading and reception. As with a green carnation, there may be no meaning or too much, or meaning may be inaccessible or ineffable, but this does not excuse us from the search. However, in order to comprehend a work of art and its creator, and as reception studies reminds us, it is essential to look not just outside but also inside, at the reader as well.

¹²⁸ Frazer (1993: 354).

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