The New Hellenism: Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece

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ABSTRACT
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I examine Wilde’s Hellenism in terms of the specific texts, editions and institutions through which he encountered ancient Greece. The late-nineteenth-century professionalisation of classical scholarship and the rise of the new science of archaeology from the 1870s onwards endangered the status of antiquity as a textual source of ideal fictions rather than a material object of positivist study. The major theme of my thesis is Wilde’s relationship with archaeology and his efforts to preserve Greece as an imaginative resource and a model for right conduct.

From his childhood Wilde had accompanied his father Sir William Wilde on digs around Ireland. Sir William’s ethnological interests led him to posit a common racial origin for Celts and Greeks; thus, for Wilde, to read a Greek text was to intuit native affinity. Chapters 1–3 trace his education, his travels in Greece, his involvement with the founding of the Hellenic Society, and his defence of the archaeologically accurate stage spectacles of the 1880s, arguing that in his close association with supporters of archaeology such as J.P. Mahaffy and George Macmillan Wilde exemplifies the new kind of Hellenist opposed by Benjamin Jowett and R.C. Jebb.

Chapter 4 makes a case for Wilde’s final repudiation of archaeology and his return to the textual remains of Greek antiquity, present as an intertextual resource in his mature works. Thus I examine the role of Aristotle’s Ethics in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ and of Platonism in the critical dialogues, The Picture of Dorian Gray and ‘The Portrait of Mr W.H.’ I present The Importance of Being Earnest as a self-conscious exercise in the New Comedy of Menander, concluding that Wilde ultimately returned to the anachronistic eclecticim of the Renaissance attitude to ancient texts.
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Abbreviations

**Artist as Critic**

**CL**

**CW, I**

**CW, II**

**CW, III**

**DNB**

**Earnest**

**Hellenism**

**Intentions**

**Lady Windermere's Fan**

**Lord Arthur**

**Miscellanies**

**Reviews**

**Two Society Comedies**
Note on Transliteration

All Greek words are given in the Roman alphabet (of the long vowels only omegas and etas are indicated, with a circumflex), except (1) when they are embedded in a quotation, in which case the method of the author quoted is preserved and (2) in transcriptions of MS material. In the second case Wilde’s cavalier way with breathings, accents and iota subscript has been preserved.

Greek names have not been Latinised, but neither have they been literally transcribed: hence ‘Aischylus’ rather than ‘Aischulas’ or ‘Aeschylus’, ‘Thukydides’ rather than ‘Thoukudidês’ or ‘Thucydides’. (See Chapter 2.3.2 for the origins of the practice.)
Fig. 1. John Gibson, Tinted Venus, 1851–56, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Fig. 2. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Pheidias Showing the Parthenon Frieze to his Friends, 1868–69, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery
Fig. 3. The entrance to Newgrange in the nineteenth century

Fig. 4. The entrance to the Treasury of Atreus at the time of Schliemann’s excavations
Fig. 5. Illustration of entrance to Newgrange from W.R. Wilde, 1849, 192

Fig. 6. Fragment of the façade of the entrance to the Treasury of Atreus. See H. Schliemann, Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns, London: John Murray, 1878, 91–98, for illustrations of similar Mycenaean decoration.
Fig. 7. "Swords of the leaf shape" (900 to 500 BCE according to the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, where they are now displayed), illustrations from W.R. Wilde, 1861, 444, 442, and an example of a classical Greek sword.

Fig. 8. Illustration of Hag's Castle on Lough Mask, from a drawing by 'Master Wilde'; W.R. Wilde, 1867, 261.
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Fig. 10. Olympia in 1875, just after excavations began, with aesthetically damaging trench visible from left to right
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(Figs 9-12 taken from P. Valavanis, Games and Sanctuaries in Ancient Greece, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004, 44, 46, 54, 70-71)
Fig. 13. Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, Sappho and Alcaeus, 1881, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore

Fig. 14. Ellen Terry in The Cup, Illustrated London News, 5 February 1883, 124
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