

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 spectaculars 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 eclecticism of the Renaissance attitude to ancient texts.

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Abbreviations

- Artist as Critic* R. Ellmann (ed.), *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, New York: Vintage, 1970
- CL M. Holland and R. Hart-Davis (eds), *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, London: Fourth Estate, 2000
- CW, I B. Fong and K. Beckson (eds), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, I, Poems and Poems in Prose*, Oxford University Press, 2000
- CW, II I. Small (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, II, De Profundis and 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis'*, Oxford University Press, 2005
- CW, III J. Bristow (ed.), *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde, III, The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oxford University Press, 2005
- DNB *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* – consulted online: <http://www.oxforddnb.com>
- Earnest* O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, ed. R. Jackson, London: A. & C. Black, 1980
- Hellenism* O. Wilde, *Hellenism*, Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1979
- Intentions* O. Wilde, *Intentions*, ed. R. Ross, London: Methuen, 1908
- Lady Windermere's Fan* O. Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, ed. I. Small, London: A. & C. Black, 1999
- Lord Arthur* O. Wilde, *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Prose Pieces*, ed. R. Ross, London: Methuen, 1908
- Miscellanies* O. Wilde, *Miscellanies*, ed. R. Ross, London: Methuen, 1908
- Reviews* O. Wilde, *Reviews*, ed. R. Ross, London: Methuen, 1908
- Two Society Comedies* O. Wilde, *Two Society Comedies*, ed. I. Small and R. Jackson, London: Ernest Benn, 1983

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 subscripts has been preserved.

Greek names have not been Latinised, but neither have they been literally transcribed: hence 'Aischylos' rather than 'Aischulos' or 'Aeschylus', 'Thukydidēs' rather than 'Thoukudidēs' or 'Thucydides'. (See Chapter 2.3.2 for the origins of the practice.)

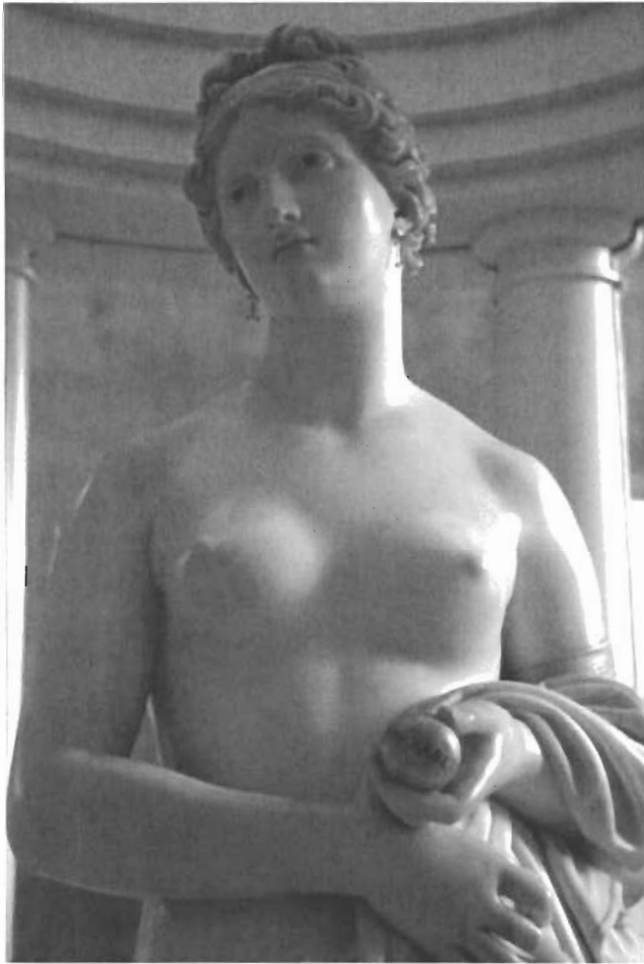


Fig. 1. John Gibson, Tinted Venus, 1851–56, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

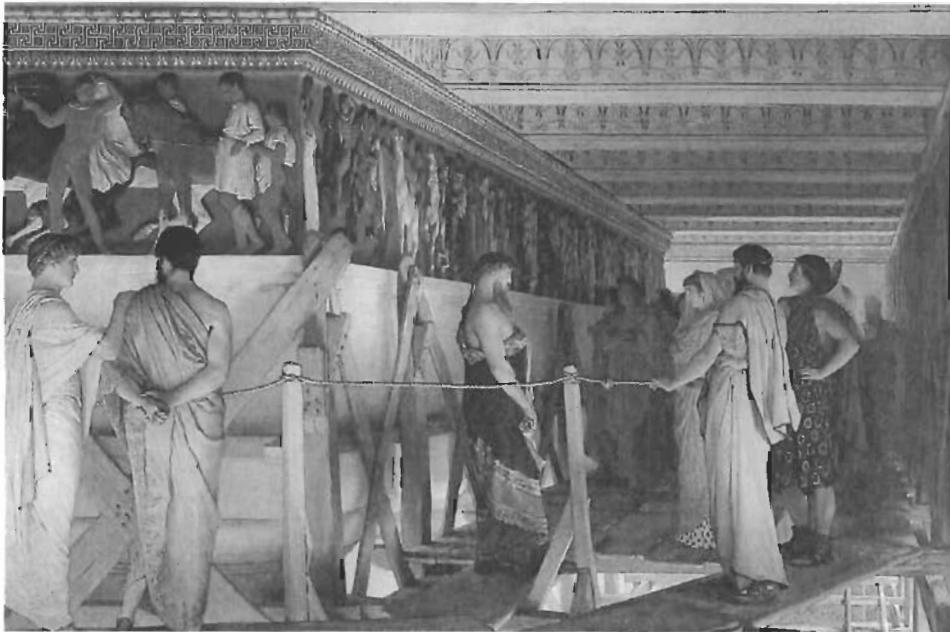


Fig. 2. Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Pheidias Showing the Parthenon Frieze to his Friends, 1868–69, Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery



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

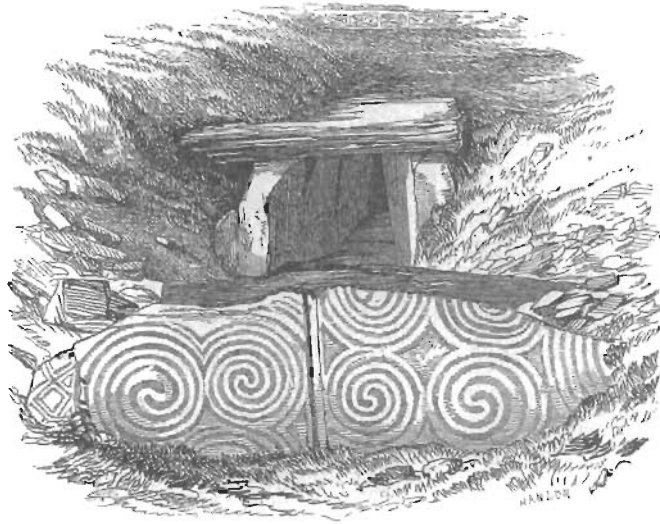


Fig. 5. Illustration of entrance to Newgrange from W.R. Wilde, 1849, 192

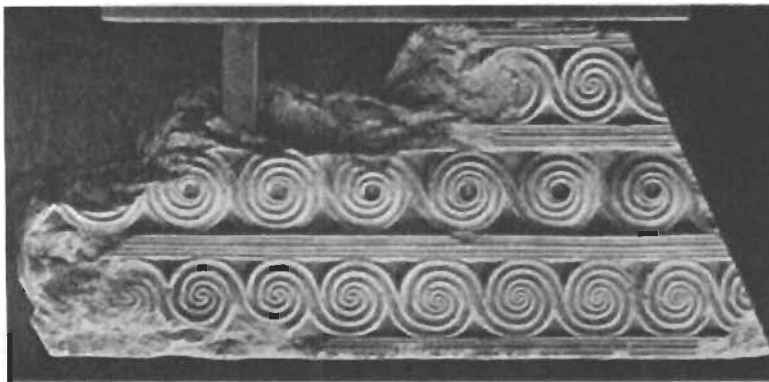


Fig. 6. Fragment of the façade of the entrance to the Treasury of Atreus. See H. Schliemann, *Mycenae: A Narrative of Researches and Discoveries at Mycenae and Tiryns*, London: John Murray, 1878, 91–98, for illustrations of similar Mycenaean decoration



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

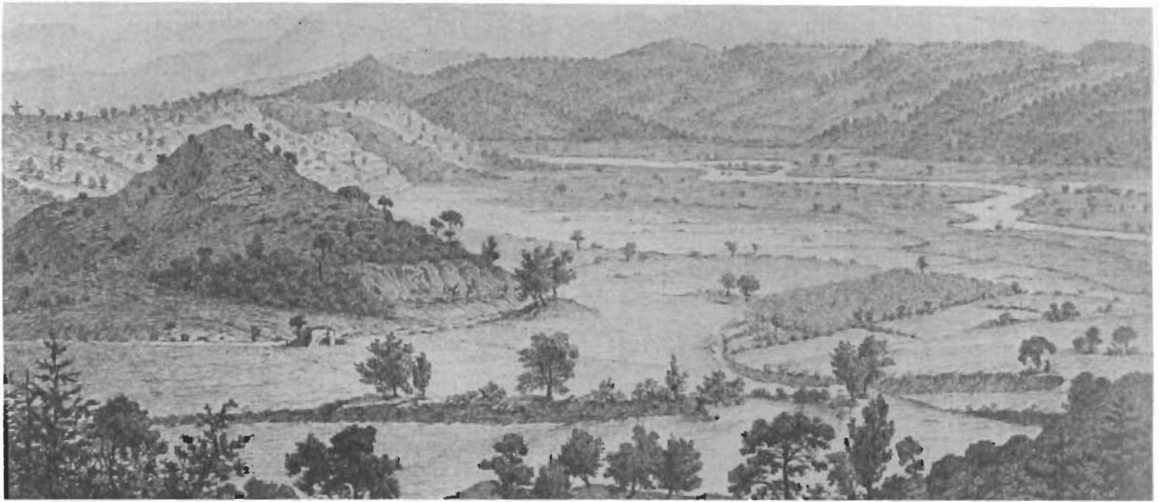
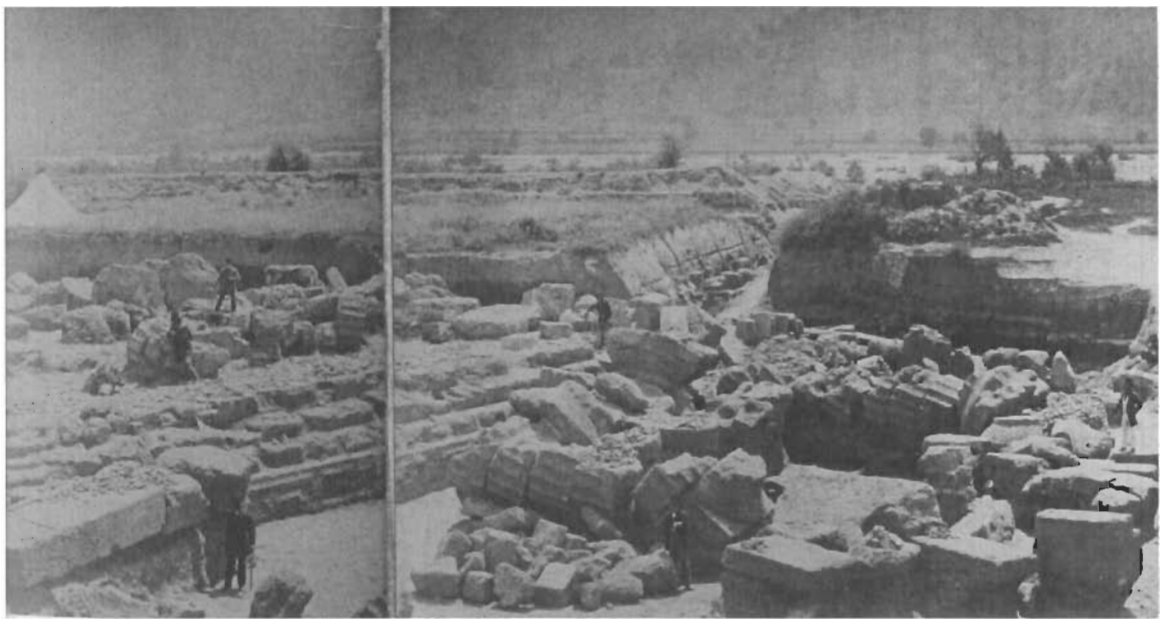


Fig. 9. Olympia prior to the beginning of the excavations in 1875



Fig. 10. Olympia in 1875, just after excavations began, with aesthetically damaging trench visible from left to right



Figs 11 and 12. The 'exceedingly ugly' excavations at Olympia in 1877, as seen by Mahaffy and party, with the depth of the trenches visible. Heraion (top); Temple of Zeus (bottom)

(Figs 9–12 taken from P. Valavanis, Games and Sanctuaries in Ancient Greece, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004, 44, 46, 54, 70–71)

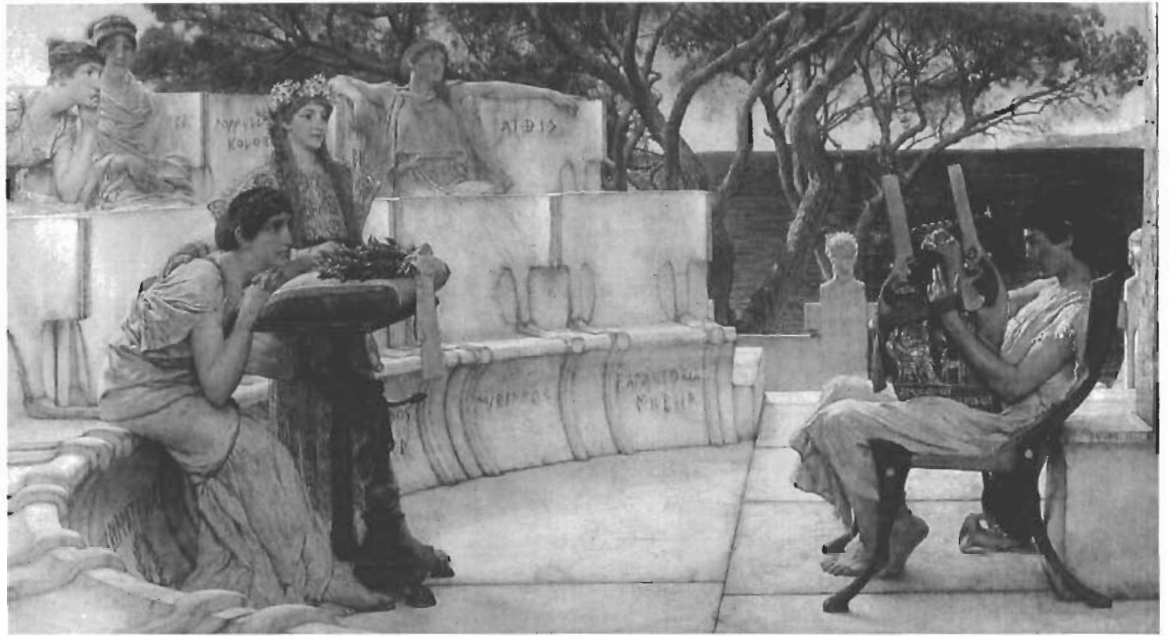


Fig. 13. Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, 1881, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore



Fig. 14. Ellen Terry in *The Cup*. Illustrated London News, 5 February 1881, 124

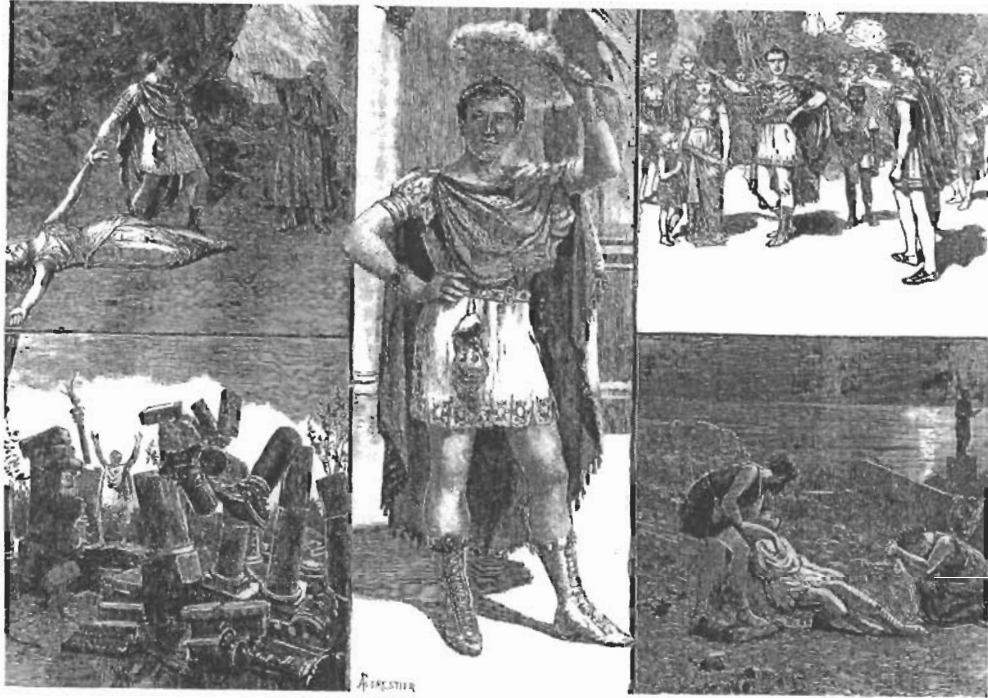


Fig. 15. *Scenes from Claudian*. Illustrated London News, 15 December 1883, 573

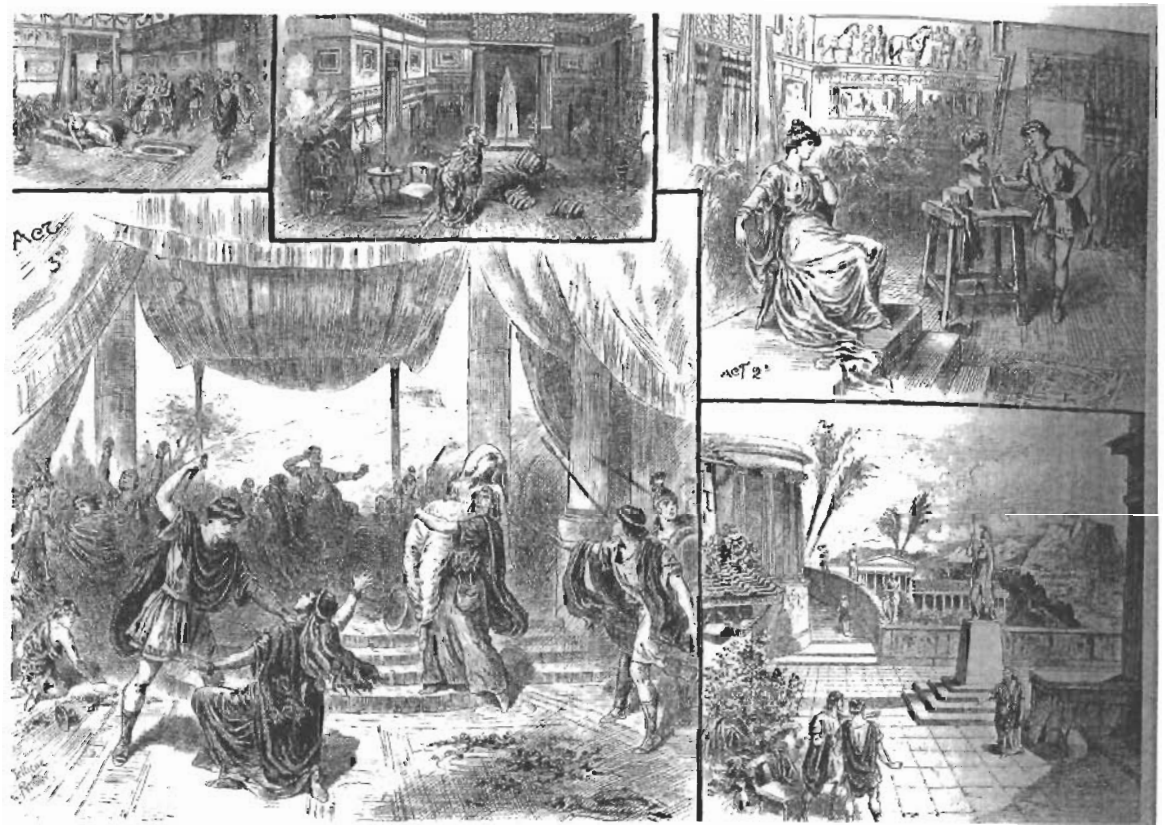


Fig. 16. *Scenes from Clito*. Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 15 May 1886, 262–63

