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978-0-521-03530-9 - Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations

John Stokes

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Oscar Wilde was a major influence on the culture of his time, and remains relevant today, as a model of wit and style, a sexual icon, and a moral example. In a sequence of detailed and imaginative chapters on Wilde and his times, John Stokes shows how in the 1880s and 1890s Wilde played a vital part in the development of modern culture, inspiring others to carry his ideas on into the twentieth century. Stokes offers studies of Wilde's place in the Romantic tradition, and of his relationships with such legendary figures of the *fin de siècle* as Aubrey Beardsley, Alfred Jarry, and Arthur Symons. And always, as part of the process of historical inquiry, Stokes considers those who came after: humanitarian disciples who kept Wilde's memory sacred, performers in his plays, actors who impersonated the man himself. *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations* explains why Wilde, a "material ghost," haunts us still.

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Lithograph poster for Léon LaRoche, printed in the United States for the Barnum and Bailey tour of France, 1902. Reproduced by permission of Ricky Jay.

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King's College London



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For Richard Ellmann

1918–1987

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Acknowledgments

My own involvement with Oscar Wilde began when I played the role of Gwendolen Fairfax, not accurately but with wonderful expression, in a school production in the mid-fifties. Like many of the men and women I write about in this book, I felt liberated by my contact with notoriety. In the early 1960s good fortune took me to Reading University. There I encountered Ian Fletcher, who knew more about the *fin de siècle* than anyone else alive. In the 1970s Ian and I ransacked libraries on both sides of the Atlantic for all traces of Wilde and compiled two long bibliographical essays.

In the 1980s I began to realize the paradox of Wilde's reputation. As his historical moment grows ever more distant he is increasingly recognized as an ally in all quarters. This is because he occupied a complicated historical space: the son of an Irish Republican who was at home with the Prince of Wales; a socialist Oxonian who embraced boulevard theater; a radical thinker accused of effeminacy as well as of feminism; a sometimes loving husband and a constantly devoted father who was deeply and proudly homosexual. His cultural permanence depends on his multiple personality – the double life not so much the alternative life as the mirroring life, because all lives involve love, fidelity, betrayal.

These days he's everywhere. As I write this, in the summer of 1994, three events take place in rapid succession. First it is announced that Wilde is to be commemorated in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. The Dean of Westminster counters any objections by insisting that he was "someone who is likely to be remembered a hundred years after his death and someone who is

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not a militant atheist... basically a religious man" (*Independent*, 21 July 1994). Meanwhile a group of theatrical admirers proposes a scheme to have a statue erected to his memory, perhaps in the Strand, and "Outrage", the gay rights association, continues to press for a pardon in time for the centenary of his arrest in 1995. It is precisely at this moment that the Perrier-Jouet company (which long ago benefited from product placement in *The Importance of Being Earnest*) opts for the advertising slogan, "When Oscar Wilde called for the Champagne waiter he was only after one thing."

"The evolution of man is slow," as Wilde was obliged to conclude in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*.

Over the years my researches have been greatly aided by the expertise and courtesy of library staff. Thanks to the British Library; the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California at Los Angeles; the London Library; the Miller Library, Colby College, Waterville, Maine; the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Texas; the Theatre Museum, London; Warwick University Library.

My final chapter, on Wilde in performance, involves special debts. I am much obliged to Joel Kaplan for supplying me with copies of the major reviews of recent productions. The picture of Wilde as member of the audience by Maurice Greiffenhagen first appeared as an illustration to George Moore's *Vain Fortune* in 1891. I owe its reproduction here to Russell Jackson who originally drew my attention to its existence.

Many other individuals have helped me along the way. Thanks to Karl Beckson, Carol Ann Duffy, Claude Féron, Sir Rupert Hart-Davis, Merlin Holland, Nicholas Horsfield, Tony Howard, Robert Langenfeld, Etenne Lymberry, Paul Raven, Anthony Reid, Ian Small, Julie Speedie, Kelsey Thornton, Doreen Vincent, Jeffrey Weeks, John Willett, Erika Wilson. And to Faith Evans.

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of Birmingham in April 1993, all the chapters have appeared previously. In every case I have expanded, sometimes greatly, and updated to take account of more recent research. I am grateful to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement* and to the editors of the following publications for permission to reprint material:

“*Some Gentle Criticisms of British Justice: J. H. Wilson’s Defence of Oscar Wilde*,” in *Journal of the Eighteen Nineties Society*, 12–13, 18–23.

“*Wilde at Bay: The Diaries of George Ives*,” in *English Literature in Transition*, 26, 175–86.

“*Arthur Symons’s ‘Romantic Movement’: Transitional Attitudes and the Victorian Precedent*,” in *English Literature in Transition*, 31, 133–50.

“*Beardsley/Jarry: The Art of Deformation*,” in *Mr. Aubrey Beardsley Reconsidered: Essays and An Annotated Secondary Bibliography*, ed. by Robert Langenfeld (UMI Research Press, 1989), pp. 55–69.

“*Dieppe: 1895*,” in *English Literature in Transition*, Special Series Number 4: *Essays and Poems in Memory of Ian Fletcher*, 11–23.

“*Wilde Interpretations*,” *Modern Drama*, 37, 156–74.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout:

Ellmann Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).

Letters *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* ed. by Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Hart-Davis, 1962).

Works *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994).

Unless otherwise stated all translations are my own.