

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-47987-5 - The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde

Edited by Peter Raby

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*The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde* is an essential introduction to one of the theatre's most important and enigmatic writers. Although a general overview, these newly commissioned essays also offer some of the latest thinking on the dramatist and his impact on the twentieth century.

Part one places Wilde's work within the cultural and historical context of his time and includes an opening essay by Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland. Further chapters also examine Wilde and the Victorians and his image as a dandy. Part two looks at Wilde's essential work as playwright and general writer, including his poetry, critiques and fiction, and provides detailed analyses of such key works as *Salome* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, among others. The third group of essays examines the themes and factors which shaped Wilde's work and includes Wilde and his view of the Victorian woman, Wilde's sexual identities and interpreting Wilde on stage.

The volume also contains a detailed chronology of Wilde's work, a guide to further reading and illustrations from important productions.

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THE CAMBRIDGE  
COMPANION TO  
OSCAR WILDE

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## CONTRIBUTORS

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**RICHARD ALLEN CAVE** is Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at Royal Holloway in the University of London. He has written extensively on Renaissance, nineteenth-century and modern theatre, and in particular on Anglo-Irish drama. He has edited Yeats's plays and his essays on drama for Penguin. As a director he has staged productions of plays by Lady Gregory, Yeats and Brian Friel, and is Joint Artistic Director of Border Crossings Theatre Company.

**LAWRENCE DANSON** is Professor of English at Princeton University. He is the author of *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (1997) and *Max Beerbohm and the Act of Writing* (1989), as well as books and essays on Shakespeare and Renaissance drama. He is preparing *Intentions* and *The*

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#### CONTRIBUTORS

*Portrait of Mr W. H.* for the forthcoming Oxford English Texts edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, and writing *Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama* for the Oxford Shakespeare Library.

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BOBBY FONG is Professor of English and Dean of the Faculty at Hamilton College (Clinton, New York). Author of essays on Wilde's poetry, he is textual editor of volume 4, *Poems and Poems in Prose* (co-edited with Karl Beckson) in the forthcoming Oxford edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

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MERLIN HOLLAND, Oscar Wilde's grandson, writes, lectures and broadcasts on all aspects of Wilde's life and works. For twenty-five years he has been in the unique position, through administering the remaining copyrights in Wilde's writings, of being in close touch with the latest academic research while also presenting his grandfather to a wider audience.

RUSSELL JACKSON is Deputy Director of the Shakespeare Institute, the University of Birmingham's graduate school of Shakespeare studies in Stratford-upon-Avon. His publications include *Victorian Theatre: A New Mermaid Sourcebook* (1989), and critical editions of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1980) and *An Ideal Husband* (1993). He is co-ordinating editor of *Theatre Notebook*, the journal of the Society for Theatre Research.

JOEL KAPLAN is Professor of Drama and Chair of the Department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham. He has recently edited *Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage* (1996), and is currently preparing new texts of Wilde's Society plays for the Oxford edition of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. He is co-author with Sheila Stowell of *Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* (1994) and *Wilde on Stage: A Cultural and Performance History* (forthcoming).

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and this was subsequently published as *Synge and the Irish Language* (1979, second edition 1993). Among his other books are *Men and Feminism in Modern Literature* (1985), *Idir Dha Chultur* (1993), and *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995). He has lectured on Irish topics in more than twenty countries and is a former Director of the Yeats International Summer School. He writes regularly in Irish newspapers. He is Professor of Anglo-Irish Literature and Drama at University College, Dublin.

**JERUSA MCCORMACK** lectures in the Department of Modern English and American Literature at University College, Dublin. She has written the definitive biography of the man said to be 'the original of Dorian' in *John Gray: Poet, Dandy and Priest* (1991) as well as producing an edition of his *Selected Prose* (1992). She has just completed a book about Wilde and Ireland.

**KERRY POWELL** is Professor of English and Director of Graduate Study at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. He is the author of *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (1990) and of *Gender and Theatre in the Victorian Period* (1997). His essays on Wilde have appeared in a wide range of journals, including a collection of essays on the Salome legend to be published by the University of Chicago Press in 1997.

**PETER RABY** is head of the Drama Department at Homerton College, Cambridge. He has written an introductory study of Wilde (1992) and edited Wilde's plays for the World's Classics series. He is the author of biographies of Harriet Smithson, Berlioz and Samuel Butler, and a study of Victorian scientific travellers, *Bright Paradise* (1996). His writing for the stage includes the book for a new musical of *The Three Musketeers*.

**JOHN STOKES** is Professor in the Department of English at King's College, London. He has written widely on the culture of the *fin de siècle* and is the author of *In the Nineties* (1989) and *Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles and Imitations* (1996).

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## PREFACE

Wilde has been the subject of increasing critical attention over the last decade. Most notable, perhaps, was the publication of Richard Ellmann's biography in 1987, which has itself come under scrutiny. Wilde's works for the theatre have been given a series of successful and sometimes innovative productions, so that his distinctive exploration of the stage has been widely experienced in all its breadth; and the performance dimension itself has been minutely discussed and analysed. His radical position as a critic has been re-evaluated. He has been identified as a key figure within gay criticism. He is now recognised as a highly professional writer, acutely aware of his readership at a variety of levels, and also one who deliberately and systematically explored the oral dimension. His position as an Irish writer gives him status in the context of postcolonial criticism. The centenary of his trial, and the approaching centenary of his death as we approach our own *fin de siècle*, gives him a special contemporary relevance. In defiance of what might seem critical overkill, Wilde, both as writer and individual, remains as elusive as ever.

What also needs to be recognised is that, throughout the inevitable variations on the academic index, Wilde has retained his interest for the wider reading and theatre-going public. Few writers have succeeded in so many forms: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, stories such as 'The Happy Prince' and 'The Selfish Giant', the high farce of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the scenario of Strauss's *Salome*, the tragic *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, are only five examples of Wilde's mastery of different genres.

This collection of essays is organised in three parts: the first aims to give some context, beginning with Merlin Holland's review of the variety of attempts to recreate a sense of Wilde himself. The second places the focus on Wilde's achievements in most of the major kinds of writing he practised. The third part contains essays which track him across those boundaries, and assess his impact on aspects of the culture and society which succeeded him. Inevitably, in a book of this length, there are omissions, which are

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perhaps the more inevitable when the subject's life and personality are so intricately entwined with his work, and when the subject experimented so widely. There is, for example, no explicit commentary on *De Profundis*, itself a good example of the elusive nature of a Wilde text: a 'private' letter from prison to Douglas which the authorities did not allow to be sent, apparently written for one person, later published in edited form with a title supplied by Ross, and only issued in a complete version sixty-five years later. But this extraordinary retrospective autobiography inevitably surfaces in a number of these chapters. Other texts, for example 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' or 'The Decay of Lying', are discussed in a number of essays. Wilde's work is full of self-reference, and the index to this book is a virtual adjunct to the table of contents. Choices have had to be made, and priority given to the public sphere of the theatre, where Wilde's major works were so prominent both at the height of his own career, and in the last decades of the twentieth century. As Wilde wrote, 'I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet ...' (CW 1017).

A book of this kind is heavily dependent on goodwill. I would like to thank all the contributors for their courtesy and patience, and for their easy co-operation. A special thanks to Joel Kaplan and Merlin Holland for generous assistance with the illustrations, to the commissioning editor at Cambridge University Press, Victoria Cooper, for her enthusiastic support and the occasional hint of steel in her discriminating comments and to Brian Ridgers and Alan Finch for their editorial assistance. As should be the case with Wilde, pleasure has dominated.

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## NOTE ON REFERENCES

The references placed within the text are as follows:

- CW* *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, introduction by Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins, 1994).
- E* Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987).
- L* Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.), *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Hart-Davis, 1962).

Any variations on this practice are explained in the endnotes to particular chapters, notably in John Stokes's essay on Wilde's journalism and in Russell Jackson's essay on *The Importance of Being Earnest*.



## CHRONOLOGY

- 1854     *16 October* Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde born at 21 Westland Road, Dublin, the second son of oculist and ear-surgeon Sir William Wilde, and Jane Francesca Elgee, Lady Wilde, who wrote under the name 'Speranza'.
- 1855     Family moves to 1 Merrion Square North.
- 1864–71   Attends Portora Royal School, Enniskillen.
- 1871–4   Undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin, where he wins many prizes, including the Berkeley Gold Medal for Greek.
- 1874     *October* Enters Magdalen College, Oxford, with a scholarship.
- 1875     *June* Travels in Italy with Mahaffy, Professor of Ancient History at Trinity College, Dublin.
- 1876     *19 April* Death of Sir William Wilde.
- 1877     *March–April* Travels in Greece and Italy with Mahaffy.
- 1878     *June* Wins Newdigate Prize with poem 'Ravenna'.  
*July* Completes his degree with a First in Greats.
- 1879     *Autumn* Takes rooms in London with Frank Miles.
- 1880     *August* Moves with Miles to Keats House, Tite Street, Chelsea.  
*September* Wilde's first play, *Vera; or the Nihilists*, is printed privately.
- 1881     *23 April* Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* – Bunthorne, the Fleshly Poet, is associated with Wilde.  
*June* *Poems* published.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 17 *December* *Vera*, scheduled for performance at the Adelphi Theatre, is withdrawn.
- 24 *December* Wilde sails to New York for a lecture tour arranged to coincide with the New York production of *Patience*.
- 1882 Carries out an extensive tour of the USA and Canada, lecturing principally on 'The English Renaissance' and 'Decorative Art in America'.
- 1883 *January–May* In Paris, where he completes his verse play *The Duchess of Padua*.  
*August–September* Visits New York for the first production of *Vera*.  
*September* Lectures in UK, an activity which continues sporadically for a year.  
 26 *November* Becomes engaged to Constance Lloyd.
- 1884 29 *May* Oscar Wilde and Constance Lloyd are married in London.
- 1885 1 *January* The Wildes move into 16 Tite Street, Chelsea.  
*May* 'The Truth of Masks' published in the *Nineteenth Century* as 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume'.  
 5 *June* First son, Cyril, is born.  
 Wilde begins to be active in journalism, writing both signed and unsigned articles, in periodicals such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Dramatic Review*.
- 1886 Meets Robert Ross.  
 5 *June* Younger son, Vyvyan, is born.
- 1887 Accepts the editorship of the *Woman's World*.
- 1888 *May* *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* is published, illustrated by Walter Crane and Jacomb Hood.
- 1889 *July* 'The Portrait of Mr W. H.' is published (in *Blackwood's Magazine*).
- 1890 *June* *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published (in *Lippincott's Magazine*).
- 1891 Meets Lord Alfred Douglas.  
*January* *The Duchess of Padua* – 'Guido Ferranti' – is produced in New York.  
*February* 'The Soul of Man under Socialism' is published in the *Fortnightly Review*.

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- April* The extended version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is published, the title-page and binding designed by Charles Ricketts.
- May* *Intentions* is published.
- July* *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime and Other Stories* is published.
- November* *A House of Pomegranates* is published, designed and decorated by Ricketts and Charles Shannon.
- November–December* Wilde visits Paris, where he writes *Salomé*.
- 1892     *20 February* *Lady Windermere's Fan* opens at the St James's Theatre, produced by George Alexander.
- June* *Salomé* is in rehearsal, with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, when it is banned by the Lord Chamberlain.
- August–September* Wilde works on *A Woman of No Importance* in Norfolk.
- 1893     *February* Publication of *Salomé* in French.
- 19 April* *A Woman of No Importance* opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, produced by Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree.
- November* *Lady Windermere's Fan* is published; Shannon designs the binding for this and subsequent comedies.
- 1894     *February* *Salome* published in English, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.
- June* Poem *The Sphinx* published, designed by Ricketts.
- May* Wilde visits Florence with Douglas.
- August–September* Writes *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Worthing, Sussex.
- October* *A Woman of No Importance* published.
- 1895     *3 January* *An Ideal Husband* opens at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, produced by Lewis Waller.
- January–February* Wilde travels to Algiers with Douglas, where he meets André Gide.
- 14 February* *The Importance of Being Earnest* opens at the St James's Theatre, produced by George Alexander.
- 28 February* Wilde finds the Marquess of Queensberry's card, 'To Oscar Wilde, posing [as a] Somdomite' [*sic*] at the Albemarle Club. He applies for a warrant for Queensberry's arrest, for publishing a libel.
- 5 April* Queensberry is acquitted, and Wilde is arrested.
- 26 April* The first trial opens. On 1 May, the jury disagree, and a new trial is ordered.
- 25 May* Wilde is convicted of indecency, and sentenced to two years' imprisonment with hard labour; imprisoned first at Newgate, and then in Pentonville. In July, he is transferred to Wandsworth, and in November, after being declared bankrupt, to Reading Gaol.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1896     3 *February*   Death of his mother, Lady Wilde.  
           11 *February*   *Salomé* is produced by Lugné-Poe at the Théâtre de  
                           l'Œuvre, Paris.  
           19 *February*   Constance visits Wilde in Reading Gaol, to break the news  
                           to him of his mother's death. It is their last meeting.
- 1897     *January–March*   Writes his long letter to Douglas, later published as *De*  
                           *Profundis*.  
           19 *May*       Wilde is released from prison. He crosses on the night ferry to  
                           Dieppe, and lives abroad – in France, Italy, Switzerland – until his death.  
           *May–September*   Lives mostly at Berneval-sur-Mer, near Dieppe.  
           *September*     Travels to Naples, where he meets Douglas.
- 1898     *February*   *The Ballad of Reading Goal* is published.  
           7 *April*     Death of Constance Wilde.
- 1899     *February*   *The Importance of Being Earnest* published.  
           *July*       *An Ideal Husband* published.
- 1900     30 *November*   After being received into the Roman Catholic Church,  
                           Wilde dies in the Hôtel d'Alsace, Paris.