

Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford by Linda Dowling. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell U P, 1994. xvi, 173 pp. ISBN 0-8024-3960-9, \$25.95.

This study is both quite a bit more and quite a bit less than its title might lead one to expect. In many ways it is a Foucauldian extended essay, covering a long period of time, reaching back into the 18th century and with intriguing implications for the present, not limited to the events and their significance for the ancient University of Oxford. Here one has a magisterial sweep, reinforced by wide erudition, and even a dedication from Plato in Greek from the *Symposium* itself, claiming, as part of the argument of the book, that creative works are much superior to "merely human propagation." On the other hand, the reader who might expect a study parallel to such well-known accounts as Sheldon Rothblatt's study of the revolution of the dons in Cambridge or in the volumes of the recent history of Oxford will be disappointed. Though a fascinating story is told through various references and footnotes, it is secondary to the grander sweep of the study, a perceptive commentary rather than a detailed account.

The book begins and closes with perhaps the most famous episode in the history of English homosexuality, the trials (in both senses) of Oscar Wilde in 1895, and his speech in defense of homosexual love as "pure," "perfect," and "intellectual," "such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare" (1). Dowling gives a powerful interpretation of Wilde's trial. Ordinarily, the events of 1895 are seen as a disaster for homosexuality, driving it underground, the fulfillment of the implications of the Labouchere amendment of 1885, the "renter's" or blackmailer's charter. At the conclusion of her study, however, Dowling points out that, according to Arthur Gilbert, contrary to what one might expect, there was no increase of prosecutions after the passing of the amendment and the Wilde trial.

The trial also served as a crucial moment in the making of the social identity of homosexuality; Wilde's speech was a modern discourse on the subject. The trial also made explicit what was barely suggested in the discussions of the young men at Oxford. But we must be careful not to exaggerate Victorian prudery. As Judith Walkowitz demonstrated in her study of the repeal of the contagious diseases acts, both Victorian ladies and the Victorian press were far more willing to be sexually explicit than one might have thought, far less delicate than the refined minds of Oxford. As Dowling concludes: "In this moment of March 1895 all the expanded scope [John Addington] Symonds had so cautiously, [Walter] Pater so covertly, and Wilde so carelessly endeavored to win for homoerotic imagination and experience would seemingly vanish overnight. Yet even as it vanished, the apparent mechanism of its repression--the Victorian state apparatus of police and courts and prisons--would simultaneously be operating, as Foucault has taught us to understand, as a steady incitement to speech, the prosecution of the 'love that dare not speak its name' impelling more people to speak more garrulously than ever