

Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Education: The Oxford Classical Curriculum by Leanne Grech. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. xi, 273 pp. + 5 b/w illus. ISBN 978-3-030-14373-2. \$104.00.

"I have put all my genius in my life," Oscar Wilde once quipped to French writer André Gide; "I have only put my talent into my art." Wilde certainly had a facility for language, and produced, in his short life, some exceptional works of literature. He is arguably at his best as a dramatist: *An Ideal Husband* (1895) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) represent high-points in Victorian English comedy. His French play, *Salome* (1891), is more than just a scene-stealing vehicle for would-be Sarah Bernhardts. Wilde's literary talents flourish primarily in genres of fiction: his purple prose translates well as whimsy in his lovely children's stories; his decadent flourishes enhance the gothic dread in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He had a particular genius for repackaging prevalent aesthetic theories into witty epigrams with a time-delayed sting. His essays are composed with flair and humour, but without much philosophical originality. As a poet, he is, at best, average.

While many of Wilde's texts showcase his literary brilliance, Wilde's written *oeuvre* is almost always eclipsed by his biography. The story of an intelligent man who, at the very height of his social and professional success, meets his downfall through a sexual transgression, which, ironically, he himself brings into the public eye, sounds more like a Victorian rewrite of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* than true history. (Wilde's *Earnest* is in fact a partial rewrite of *Oedipus*: a cheeky mysterious birth, surprising revelations about parentage, etc.) In the twenty-first century, Wilde endures as a queer martyr. Kissing his grave in the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris became a popular pilgrimage from the 1990s onward, until the resultant lipstick marks did so much damage to the monument that it was encased in glass in 2011. It is on account of the "genius" of his life that critical analyses of his "art" so often run the risk of biographical fallacy. Critics often seem more interested in mining Wilde's texts for insight into the man than in commenting on the actual works. Ironically, this biographical focus often does not serve to contextualize Wilde's writing into broader frameworks; instead, as Simon Goldhill cautions, it results in treating Wilde as an "isolated phenomenon."

Many of these Wilde admirers do him a disservice in doggedly trying to make him stand apart from his aesthetic peers. Instead of being disassociated from his cultural *milieu*, in an attempt to make him seem more extraordinary, Wilde's contribution to and engagement with late nineteenth-century concerns should be examined alongside those of literary and artistic contemporaries – even if these broader analyses somewhat overshadow his hyperbolized excellence. Wilde himself, after all, maintained that "an artist is not an isolated