Wildean Influences, Legacies, or Neo-Victorian Afterlives? Review of Annette M. Magid (ed.), *Wilde's Wiles*: *Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century*

Nadine Boehm-Schnitker
(Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

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This 2013 collection of essays, edited by Annette M. Magid, offers some promising studies of neo-Victorian interest. With its witty alliteration in the title, *Wilde's Wiles* not only plays on Oscar Wilde's vibrant rhetoric and personality, but also on the potential plethora of perspectives required to catch at least aspects of this versatile writer. Each of the edition's three parts, 'Aesthetic Approaches', 'Friends and Family' and 'Performance and Pedagogy', contains contributions with a potentially neo-Victorian focus. In the first part, both Paul L. Fortunato's '"Well-Dressed Women Do": Embracing the Irrational in Wilde's Consumer Aesthetic' and Kirby Joris's study on biofiction, titled 'From Wilde to Oscar: A Study in Person in Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), C. Robert Holloway's *The Unauthorized Letters of Oscar Wilde* (1997) and Merlin Holland's *Coffee with Oscar Wilde* (2007)', cover neo-Victorian concerns. The former addresses the possibility of considering Wilde as an early advocate of consumer capitalism, self-culture and a postmodernist turn to commodities' sign value, whereas the latter deals with the tendency in biofiction to cut big personalities down to size and render them almost tangible by accessing their private lives. In the second part, Margaret S. Kennedy's 'Wilde's Cosmopolitanism: The Importance of Being Worldly' provides some insights into the aesthete's proto-theories of transculturality

while in the final part, Pierpaolo Martino's article, as per its titular emphasis, deals with '*The Wilde Legacy*: Performing Wilde's Paradigm in the Twenty-First Century', which directly addresses neo-Victorianism's exploration of today's self-conscious cultural appropriation and commodification of the Victorian past. In his study of 'Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and the Queer Space of the Book', Frederick D. King explores a form of reader response criticism which might be transferrable to neo-Victorian approaches situated in gender and queer studies. Arguably, from a neo-Victorian point of view, these latter two articles, particularly Martino's, constitute the most relevant, and, in my view, the most convincing contributions of the collection. *Wilde's Wiles* presents itself as a collection of essays in the truest generic sense (despite the fact that the book is repeatedly called a monograph, see, e.g., pp. x and xii), and is directed, for the most part, at the general reader with an interest in *fin-de-siècle* literature and culture, rather than at the Wilde specialist or neo-Victorianist.

Annette M. Magid's preface provides a concise overview of the provenience and scope of the essay collection. The editor brings together papers delivered at the Northeast Modern Language Association's conventions in 2010 and in 2011. The overall aim is to "more completely understand Wilde as a person, as a writer, and as a profound influence in aesthetics, culture, writing and theater", which, the editor admits, spans "a broad spectrum" (p. x). I would argue that it is too broad a spectrum, since the collection cannot always provide sufficient context to cover these large historical periods and the diversity of genres. Apart from Oscar Wilde, other writers such as H.G. Wells, Wilde's "Friends and Family", and even "twentieth-century identity politics" are taken into consideration (p. xii). The breadth of scope sometimes threatens to jeopardise "the in-depth study of the remarkable and often underappreciated Oscar Wilde" (p. xii).

The collection's subtitle – "*Studies of the Influences on Oscar Wilde and His Enduring Influences in the Twenty-First Century*" – perfectly reflects the huge historical objective, spanning, as it does, the culturally complex era of the *fin de siècle* as well as phenomena of influence past and present. Announcing analyses of the influence by *and* on a cultural giant such as Oscar Wilde, the title certainly indicates a daunting task, one which comprises both late nineteenth-century contexts – for example, aestheticism and the *l'art pour l'art* movement, the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as Victorian forms of criticism from Ruskin via Arnold to Pater, dandyism, sexology and changes in the sex-gender system, legal discourses etc. – and current

adaptations, appropriations and legacies in the twenty-first century. In the face of such a large context, the contributions mainly opt for exemplarity and highlight a selection of interesting aspects. Methodologically, the term 'influence' is a rather an unusual choice to explore phenomena of cultural history and cultural legacy as it was widely replaced by the concept of intertextuality. Yet while intertextuality, intermediality, or discourse analysis might have been suitable approaches for some of the contributions, the unity of the collection is established by more strongly empirically oriented, text-based and historical approaches, for which the notion of influence is more easily adaptable than those associated with structuralist and post-structuralist theories.

In Part I, Paul L. Fortunato's opening contribution on women's dress, irrationality and consumption argues that, in both his essays and plays, Wilde puts forth a consumer aesthetics which *embraces* commercialism rather than rejecting it. While this contribution is interesting regarding its alignment of Wilde's aestheticism with consumer culture, it contains too many generalisations and simplifications to be fully convincing. Implicitly circling around the concept of the 'prosumer', the argument might have profited from John Fiske's concept of popular culture articulated in *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989), which revisions ways of consuming as practices of resistance and active identity politics.

Part I continues with Kirby Joris's chapter on various Wildean biofictions which provides an overview of an interesting selection of texts covering a postmodernist fictional journal, a novel of letters and a fictionalised interview. The aim is to "examine how these three works of fiction primarily attempt to picture and capture the man and his relationships to himself, the world and others" (p. 21). Concluding that the current interest in Wildean biofictions is sparked by "a longing to learn about the imaginative genius at work – albeit indirectly, but undoubtedly, ultimately to meet the man in person" (p. 33), the paper becomes rather speculative, as it does not specify which target audiences can in fact be characterised by such desires. The argument that a decidedly Romanticist author function – "the imaginative genius" – should fuel the aestheticist's continuing appeal for today's audiences is quite intriguing, but would have benefitted from a clearer cultural contextualisation.

Part I concludes with Loretta Clayton's 'The Aesthete and His Audience: Oscar Wilde in the 1880s'. Establishing a clear thesis, the paper

argues that "Wilde cultivated an audience of women, and that the discourse of aestheticism – particularly as articulated by Wilde – found a special appeal in an audience of Victorian women both in England and America" (p. 35). From an historical point of view, the essay explores Wilde's lecture tour to America and his engagement for women, for example through his editorship (1887-1889) of *The Woman's World*. While the study might have more thoroughly explored the culturally specific negotiations of gender roles in Britain and America, this is the most persuasive contribution to part I.

Part II on 'Friends and Family' is spearheaded by Sema Ege's 'Oscar Wilde, the Aesthete: H.G. Wells, the "Scientist" and "The Rediscovery of the Unique"'. The essay opens up a binary between aestheticism and science and then goes on to construct similarities and overlaps between the two. However, these similarities are not sufficiently contextualised and are presented in a language which does not contribute to the clarity of the general argument. This essay is further challenged by its tendency to uncritically conflate Wilde's and Wells' characters with the authors themselves.

Margaret S. Kennedy's following contribution on 'Wilde's Cosmopolitanism' draws on definitions of cosmopolitanism by the Stoics around Zeno and by Immanuel Kant, as well as by Homi Bhabha and others. The author analyses Wilde's critical writings and his social comedies to reveal the ethical impact of cosmopolitanism and to illustrate that Wilde is indeed a "very moral-minded artist" (p. 91). The essay offers many perceptive insights into Wilde's plays and their negotiations of cosmopolitanism and intends to expand the concept "in terms of its political implications, to make the leap beyond art, to the world" (p. 94). However, the essay incorporates a methodological problem, functionalising texts which belong to particular genres, fictional or critical, as incentives to legitimise real-world interventions, using it as "advice" in the face of "universal problems, such as climate change" (p. 112) and as inspiration for teaching literature with an ethical bent. Generally, however, the article provides food for thought regarding Wilde's possible continuing impact on current political and ethical attitudes.

Part II concludes with the editor's essay on 'Wily William: A Study of William Robert Wills Wilde'. This is an historical study of Oscar Wilde's father, a successful ophthalmologist and surgeon with an impressively eventful biography. It is certainly interesting and fitting to include Wilde's

parents as a major influence on him in the part entitled 'Friends and Family', but the notion of influence advocated in the essay proves to be rather brittle. It is for example conceived in terms of similarities and replicated behavioural patterns between Oscar Wilde and his father, as in: "William was quite outspoken about what he knew. Oscar too was quite outspoken, a behavior that was seemingly inherited" (p. 124). While the essay yields insight into nineteenth-century medical achievements and Wilde's parents' careers, views and lives, it cannot fully elucidate their concrete influences on Wilde and his work.

Part III opens with the article of greatest neo-Victorian interest, even though the author does not draw on neo-Victorian theory for his analysis. Investigating the surge of cultural products featuring Wilde in the 1990s with a particular focus on appropriations of Wildean self-fashioning, Pierpaolo Martino analyses image constructions by performers in the music business such as David Bowie and Morrissey, in art and literature such as Andy Warhol and Truman Capote, and in film, concentrating in particular on Stephen Fry's performance in *Wilde* (1997). Starting from the premise that "[i]n order to understand Wilde's contemporary iconic status, […] it is necessary to analyse the man in his time or rather the many men, the many roles played by Wilde in his lifetime" (p. 142), Martino elegantly combines an analysis of Wildean performances and current constructions of star iconicity. Situating himself in fields of research defined by scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Sinfield and Joseph Bristow, to name but a few, he convincingly straddles different cultural contexts as well as different media, and illuminates the manifold adaptations and appropriations of Wilde's legacy in today's culture industry.

Frederick D. King provides the theoretically most complex study of the volume by situating Wilde's *Salome* within queer studies. King explores "how, within the context of the book, Wilde's play alongside Beardsley's drawings queers the experience of reading" and concludes that "*Salome* generates a queer space that facilitates queer agencies through an orgasmic gratification of subjectivity generated by the reader's material and imaginative consumption of the book" (p. 177). The author performs a convincing reading of Wilde's symbolist play and enriches this reading not only by adding a reader-response perspective, but also by including an analysis both of the drama's illustrations in the *Bodley Head* edition and of the very materiality of the book. Yet the differentiations between these

levels of analysis could have been introduced and defined more clearly. Applying Aaron Betsky's study on *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Sex Desire* (1997) to "the malleable construction of the book as a social space in the material world" with the liberatory aim to challenge heteronormative prescriptions of sexuality (p. 160), the notions of 'materiality' and 'space' sometimes become rather fuzzy (particularly as the architectural model does not seamlessly translate into 'spaces' evoked by reading). The argument for a queer space of reading is nevertheless persuasive – even though the author himself has to admit that "[t]he truth of its queerness is subjective, perceived only within the moment of reading as an act of discursive sexuality" (p. 172). Regarding its generally liberatory impetus, however, the essay left me wondering whether the author unwittingly introduces some form of a 'homonormative' justification of objectification when he argues that "[e]ach individual's expression of desire silences their object's agency indicating that, within the boundaries of the book's queer space, the queer subject has the power to silence the gaze of heteronormative sexual discourse" (p. 165). Despite how the queer space of reading remains mercurial and transitory, the analysis of gaze structures in Wilde's *Salome* and of the reader's vicarious experience in interacting with the materiality of the book present a thought-provoking application of reader response criticism and queer studies to Wilde's work; so too do King's imaginative evocations of Beardsley's illustrations and the textually constructed queer space allowing for readers' agency.

While the previous two contributions of Part III covered aspects of performance studies, the final two contributions are devoted to pedagogy. In '"No more Delightful Spirit": Unlikely Connections with Oscar Wilde', Anastasia G. Pease describes her encounters with Wilde's biography and his works during her childhood in the former Soviet Union and the impact of her personal experiences on her teaching practices after the fall of the Berlin wall. Focusing mainly on Wilde's fairy tales, Pease illustrates the ways in which Wilde's texts have been "abridged or altered" in Russian translations to be compatible with anti-capitalist policies (p. 180), and articulates her surprise at Wilde's popularity in Russia, especially after gaining access to his full biography and the full body of his text during her studies in the USA. Focusing on personal experience, Pease can grant the reader a fascinating insight into the complex politics of textual translation within different political contexts.

Heather A. Evans essay '"Is He Not Solid Gold?": Sacrifice, Soldiers, and Fairy Tales at the Royal Military College of Canada' deals with the pedagogical application of Wilde's fairy tale 'The Happy Prince' in the education of young cadets. With this focus, Evans explores a rather unusual angle of Wilde's contemporary impact, concentrating on his importance for the ethical education of soldiers. Illustrating her teaching experiences and the range of responses to Wilde's tale, she provides a fervent plea for the introduction of cadets to literature and the humanities more widely, as literary study schools their capability to address complex ethical questions and to cope with tensions in meaning construction. Regarding 'The Happy Prince', this entails questions such as the following: "Does the Prince have the right to request help from the Swallow at the cost of the bird's life? At what point did the bird know enough about his role to provide informed consent to support the Prince's mission?" (p. 204). While literature is thus functionalised to illustrate ethical questions, to promote a civilisatory mission, or to elicit a self-reflexive attitude to the soldiers' relation to their socio-political role, I felt barred from succumbing to the literary scholar's reflex to deplore this. For what Evans's insightful discussion of Wilde's continuing 'influence' on the twenty-first century so arrestingly illustrates is nothing less than the breadth of literature's impact and its crucial contribution to a pedagogical emphasis on critical thinking.

In summary, *Wilde's Wiles* brings together thought-provoking studies on Wilde's texts, performances and life styles, interesting descriptions of biographical backgrounds and cultural appropriations, as well as discussions of Wilde's enduring relevance in personal histories and pedagogical contexts. For a readership in the fields of literary, cultural and neo-Victorian studies, the essays on Wildean performances in Part III prove particularly innovative. However, praise for the ambitious breadth of topics covered is mitigated by formal and methodological inaccuracies of some of the essays. A more thorough editing process would certainly have made *Wilde's Wiles* a more enjoyable read and would have let the well-researched, innovative and interesting contributions shine all the more brightly.