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Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Education

The Oxford Classical Curriculum

Leanne Grech

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Leanne Grech
Sunshine West, VIC, Australia

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Dedicated to Annie Grech

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Greek Forms and Gothic Cloisters

When Oscar Wilde was in his third year at Oxford, in 1877, he completed a personal questionnaire in a Confessions Album.[1] Contributors were asked to list their ambitions, favourite artists, and authors and to note the character traits they most admired in themselves and others. When responding to the question, "What is your aim in life?" Wilde wrote that he wanted to achieve "Success: fame or even notoriety."[2] By the time the trials for gross indecency took place in 1895, he had experienced a sudden and traumatic shift between these two forms of success. Wilde's achievements as an author were eclipsed by the trials, which exposed his sexual relationships with young men and resulted in a two-year prison sentence. This historically significant turn of events has led many scholars to concentrate on the literature that Wilde produced in the 1890s. This book, however, emphasizes that Wilde began his career as a promising young classicist and that his public profile began to take shape while he was at Oxford.

When commenting on Wilde's academic history, Linda Dowling reminds us: "Wilde would have been famous beyond Oxford for his Newdigate and his Double First. As it was, his First was widely known to have been the best of his year."[3] Dowling's study, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994), has been most influential in establishing the significance of Wilde's background as a student of the Classics. In recent years, the collective efforts to publish and analyse archival material from Wilde's undergraduate years has meant that we

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know much more about the literature and philosophical theories that he studied at Oxford. We also have the advantage of referring to Wilde's letters, notebooks, and early essays to learn more about this important period in his intellectual life.

Wilde's identity as a classically trained intellectual has gained more attention as scholars have started to focus on Wilde's reception of Classical literature. While this area of scholarship is gaining momentum, so far, Iain Ross's *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece* (2013) is the only comprehensive study which considers the influential teachers and texts that Wilde encountered while studying at Trinity College and Magdalen College.[4] Ross's study has done much to strengthen our view of Wilde as a classical scholar, but so far most of the research on this subject has arisen from a handful of articles and book chapters which look to Classicism as another way to contextualize Wilde's sexual politics.[5] The present book offers a different approach, one that is anchored the history surrounding Classical studies at Oxford and Wilde's conceptualization of aestheticism as an alternative style of education.

Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Education charts the development of Wilde's aesthetic philosophy, beginning with his undergraduate writing, and ending with his prison letter, which was addressed to his lover, Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas. My study adopts a narrative approach that outlines the path that Wilde took to become a career-aesthete after he completed his studies at Magdalen College, Oxford. The history of Wilde's connection to Oxford is introduced with reference to earlier texts, such as his Oxford letters (1876–1877), travel poetry (1877–1879), and American lectures (1882). My focus on Oxford Classicism also delivers a new approach to interpreting Wilde's well-known literary works, including "The Critic as Artist" (1890, revised 1891 and 1894), *The Soul of Man* (1891), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, revised 1891), and Wilde's prison letter (composed between late 1896 and early 1897). In framing Wilde as a classically trained intellectual, I argue that Wilde's literature and aesthetic theory speaks to the consumer public and encourages them to create an intellectual life for themselves via the Aesthetic Movement. The expression "aesthetic education" relates to Wilde's vision of aestheticism as a self-directed learning process or a mode of self-culture, which is motivated by a desire to recognize beauty, in all of its variegated forms, and to derive pleasure from aesthetic appreciation.[6] Of course, this style of learning could only extend to those who had a disposable income and the leisure time to make art an integral part of their everyday life.

The aim of this study is to show that Wilde used the culture of the Aesthetic Movement to maintain an intellectual relationship with Oxford. As a promoter of aestheticism, Wilde invited his audience to view the home as an intellectual domain where they could recreate the world of the university. Consumers could capture some of Oxford's medieval aesthetic by decorating their homes with arts and crafts style furnishings that were inspired by medieval designs. Moreover, the dialogic structure of "The Critic as Artist" and the exchanges that take place between the characters in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* both recreate the intimacy of the college tutorial. These works also serve as a reminder that Plato's philosophy could be approached through a reading of Wilde's aesthetic literature.

1 Oscar Wilde and Oxford

Initially, Oscar Wilde moved to Oxford because he intended to pursue a career as a Classical scholar and believed that having a degree from Oxford would improve his chances of gaining a fellowship. Before beginning his studies in England, he received an elite Classical education in Ireland. He was introduced to Classical studies at Portora Royal School, Enniskillen, where he developed a talent for composing "deft and mellifluous oral translations from Thucydides, Plato and Virgil" and won an award for his translation of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*.[7] In his late teens, he continued his studies at Trinity College Dublin for three years, after being awarded a scholarship (1871–1874). During his time at Trinity, Wilde began to explore his interest in Roman Catholicism and befriended his ancient history tutor, Reverend John Pentland Mahaffy. Mahaffy was struck by Wilde's "aptitude for, and keen delight in, Hellenic studies," and became Wilde's earliest academic mentor.[8] Likewise, Wilde admired Mahaffy enough to maintain contact with him while he was at Oxford and even joined him on trips to Italy and Greece.

In 1874, Wilde left Trinity before completing his degree because he had secured another scholarship (known as a demyship) at Magdalen College. By the time that Wilde was nearing the completion of his second degree in 1878, his plans for the future were much more uncertain. His father, Sir William Wilde, had died in 1876, leaving the family in debt, and as final exams were looming, Wilde feared that he was nearing the awful prospect of "leaving Oxford and doing some horrid work to earn bread."[9] But Wilde set this fear aside after winning the Newdigate

English Verse Prize for *Ravenna* (1878) and achieving his First in Literæ Humaniores (or "Greats") in close succession. Literæ Humaniores was the official name of the examination in Classical studies, but it was commonly referred to as "Greats" because the literary component of the exam focused on "the best authors from humane literature."[10] Despite Wilde's impressive academic achievements, he was not offered a fellowship at Magdalen—and we can only speculate as to why a fellowship eluded him.

Wilde's closest friends sensed that his attitude towards academic work was rather ambivalent. In his memoir, *In Victorian Days* (1939), Sir David Hunter-Blair recalls a conversation that took place while he and Wilde were together at Magdalen. A close mutual friend named William Ward asked Wilde to describe his plans for the future; Wilde answered: "God knows … I won't be a dried-up Oxford don, anyhow. I'll be a poet, a writer, a dramatist. Somehow or other I'll be famous, and if not famous, I'll be notorious."[11] This strangely prophetic comment indicates that Wilde was aware that the work of a don was far from glamorous. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, tutors at Oxford colleges were responsible for coaching their students to perform well under exam conditions, and the demands of teaching left them with little time for writing and independent research. Oxford dons spent most of their professional life correcting translations, reading texts with their students, and questioning their tutees on their interpretations, as well as preparing their own commentaries on the sources that were studied for the Moderations and Greats exams.[12] Wilde's response to Ward is in keeping with the sentiments that he expressed in the Confessions Album. When speaking among his friends, Wilde claimed that he would choose a life in the public eye over an academic position. Of course, he was much more cautious in practice and only gravitated towards London after discovering that academic positions were scarce.

Before leaving Oxford, Wilde applied for a fellowship at Trinity College and made inquiries about commencing an archaeology studentship in Athens. It was at this time that he began to work on academic pieces of writing. Wilde corresponded with the publisher, George Macmillan, and mentioned that he was interested in translating selections from Herodotus.[13] He also offered to edit a translation of one of Euripides's plays, "either the *Mad Hercules* or the *Phoenissae*: plays with which [he was] well acquainted."[14] Macmillan was receptive to this idea,

but, as far as we know, Wilde did not deliver any of his translations or commentaries.[15] Around the same time, Wilde produced an essay on "Historical Criticism" for the Chancellor's English Essay prize in 1879. The judges decided not to award any prizes and the essay remained buried in the archives for over a century, until Phillip E. Smith and Michael S. Helfand mentioned this work in their Introduction to *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks* (1989).[16] More recently, the essay has been published alongside Wilde's critical essays in volume IV of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.[17]

When it seemed as though the doors to the academy had closed on him, Wilde relocated to London and created new opportunities for himself as a celebrity aesthete. Although he left Oxford, he continued to mention this inspiring place in his personal and published writing. John Dougill has observed that Wilde is one of many former students who retrospectively idealized Oxford as "a cloistered utopia, a student paradise, or an Athenian city-state."[18] This imagery is most apparent in Frank Harris's account of Wilde's impressions of Oxford in *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* (1916). Harris is not the most reliable biographer, yet he touches on some key ideas that are central to Wilde's literary representation of Oxford:

> I was the happiest man in the world when I entered Magdalen for the first time. Oxford—the mere word to me is full of an inexpressible, an incommunicable charm. Oxford—the home of lost causes and impossible ideals; Matthew Arnold's Oxford—with its dreaming spires and grey colleges, set in velvet lawns and hidden away among the trees, and about it the beautiful fields, all starred with cowslips and fritillaries where the quiet river winds its way to London and the sea. … Oxford was paradise to me. My very soul seemed to expand within me to peace and joy. Oxford—the enchanted valley, holding in its flowerlet cup all the idealism of the middle ages. Oxford is the capital of romance, Frank; in its own way as memorable as Athens, and to me it was even more entrancing.[19]

Harris's reconstructed Wildean dialogue responds to the intellectual culture and the beautiful scenery that is contained within and around the historic walls of the colleges. Even now, students and visitors who tour the colleges are impressed by the manicured lawns and gardens that surround the medieval cloisters. Magdalen College is still bordered by a serene tree-lined walk that winds its way alongside the River Cherwell.

The medieval heritage of the university fuses with its history as the seat of Classical learning in England, and, as Harris suggests, Wilde referred to Oxford and Athens interchangeably. We can notice a similar pattern in a letter that Wilde wrote to a Cambridge student named Henry C. Marillier in 1885.[20] In this letter, he briefly reflected on his student days: "I remember bright young faces, and grey misty quadrangles, Greek forms passing through Gothic cloisters, life playing among ruins, and, what I love best in the world, Poetry and Paradox dancing together!"[21] In this image of Oxford, the university students morph into bright, white Classical sculptures, set against the backdrop of the grey Gothic architecture. Oxford is both English and Greek: an ancient institution that remains forever young. Oxford might be called the "capital of romance," not only for the beauty of its landscape but also because the teachers of Wilde's era aspired to recreate the dialogue exchange of an Athenian symposium with their students: the bright, sculpturesque youths who lived, learned, and played together amid the cloisters. We should not forget that the colleges at Oxford were exclusively male communities for students of Wilde's generation. The first residential hall for women (Lady Margaret Hall) opened in 1878; the year that Wilde completed his degree.

Oxford is also imbued with nostalgia because the university symbolizes the period before Wilde inhabited the commercial world of London, where he established himself as a professional writer. As an aesthetic theorist, critic, and fiction writer, Wilde had to contend with a highly competitive and fractured literary marketplace.[22] Although he critiqued the bourgeois consumer public in his writing (both anonymous and signed), he needed to accommodate the tastes and interests of this audience to promote his brand of aestheticism. If we turn to Harris's biography once more, we see that another part of Oxford's charm was its isolation from the "sordid" industrial world, where graduates would go to enter a profession and earn a living:

> In Oxford, as in Athens, the realities of sordid life were kept at a distance. No one seemed to know anything about money or care anything about it. Everywhere the aristocratic feeling; one must have money, but must not bother about it. And all the appurtenances of life were perfect: the food, the wine, the cigarettes; the common needs of life became artistic symbols, our clothes even won meaning and significance. I almost reformed fashion and made modern dress aesthetically beautiful; a second greater reformation, Frank.[23]

The reference to the aristocratic atmosphere of the university is pertinent, as the exclusivity of Classical studies helped to ensure that powerful leadership roles would remain within the hands of the ruling class.[24] Stefano Evangelista highlights some of the ideological implications of a Classical education when he states that "Greek became the language not only of the intellectual, but of the social and political elites, for whom a classics degree (typically from Oxford) was the first step into a career in Parliament, in the Civil Service, or in the Church—that is, in some of the major institutions of the Empire."[25] Following the 1850 Royal Commission into the financial and operational management of the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, reformers and philanthropists invested in making Oxford more accessible to international students and local students with lower incomes. But, for the most part, Oxford continued to operate as an elite institution which afforded students the chance to establish ties with young aristocrats and future statesmen. Wilde did not seek out a career in politics. Nor did he entertain thoughts of joining the clergy. At one point, however, Wilde applied to become an Inspector of Schools, and he called on the assistance of political contacts that he knew from Oxford (see Chapter 4). He also used his Oxford credentials to substantiate his popular identity as a discriminating consumer and a champion of aesthetic reform.

2 The Oxford Classical Curriculum

The rise of Hellenic studies at Oxford contributed to the broader cultural movement known as the English Hellenic revival. Roman literature and history had dominated the curriculum from the Renaissance to the Regency era, but this changed at the turn of the nineteenth century. The study of Greek language and literature emerged as a new exciting discipline in England, and this development was reflected in the Literæ Humaniores exam, which was first introduced in 1800. Originally, this exam tested students' ability to translate Classical sources and their knowledge of religion. In 1807, the scope of the exam was broadened to include philosophical texts on rhetoric, logic, moral philosophy, alongside mathematics and physics.[26]

In the early days, language skills were essential for success in Literæ Humaniores because students were expected to pass an oral examination (known as a viva voce) that involved translating Classical texts on the spot, in front of examiners and an audience of students.[27] It was

necessary to ensure that students had a rudimentary grasp of the subject matter before they were subjected to the public viva, and so, in 1808, the Responsions exam was introduced. Responsions was a preliminary viva that (in L. W. B. Brockliss's words) "tested a candidate on at least two works of Greek and Latin, the rudiments of logic, and Euclid's *Elements*."[28] The Responsions exam could be taken during the first year of study or early in the second year. For students of Wilde's generation, Responsions functioned more like an unofficial entrance exam. It could be taken before commencing the Arts degree, or within the first term of residence, and was used to confirm that new students had mastered enough Greek, Latin, and mathematics at school, before they began their studies in earnest.

As student numbers began to increase, it became impossible for the university to continue with the time consuming, not to mention stressful, process of running individual oral examinations. Written exam papers were introduced in 1825, but standardized exam papers for Literæ Humaniores were issued in 1831.[29] From this point on, essay writing became integral to the exam system and the study of philosophy gained much more importance at Oxford. It was around this time (following the 1830 Exam Statute) that Greek and Roman history were added to the curriculum. This was a significant change because the study of history created an opportunity for students to draw on the work of contemporary historians to inform their interpretation of Classical sources. The combination of ancient and modern texts was to become a defining feature of Greats, especially as philosophy began to dominate the curriculum in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Students' academic performance was largely determined through written exam papers, but they still had to complete a viva. In 1830, the viva had transformed into a religious exam, known as Divinity (or "Divvers"), and, until 1883, it was conducted in front of an audience, much like the early Greats exam.[30] In order to pass this exam, students needed to demonstrate their knowledge of the Thirty-Nine Articles, biblical history, and make use of quotes from the scriptures.[31] Although Oxford was no longer operating as a religious institution by the end of the nineteenth century, Arts students were not allowed to graduate unless they had passed Divinity.[32]

When Wilde took the Divinity exam in 1876, he failed spectacularly. It started off badly because he had confused the dates of his exams and had to be summoned from bed by the Clerk of Schools.[33] When he met

with the examiner, W. H. Spooner, he offered a nonchalant apology: "You must excuse me. I have no experience of these pass examinations."[34] This response suggests that Wilde was a proud honours student who probably viewed the exam as a waste of time. Honours students had to manage much heavier reading loads than pass students, who were assessed with shorter question and answer based exams. The other main difference was that honours students had their results published and ranked in classes ranging from first, second, third, and fourth, whereas "pass men" obtained either a pass or fail on their exams.

Spooner was not impressed with Wilde's candour, and as a punishment, he ordered him to copy Chapter 27 from the Acts of the Apostles.[35] To his surprise, Wilde happily took to the task and continued copying the text when he was instructed to stop. When Spooner quizzed him about this behaviour, Wilde explained that he was so engrossed in the story of Paul's shipwreck that he wanted to find out whether Paul had survived. The joke did not end there. Wilde followed up with a cheeky remark: "[D]o you know, Mr Spooner, he was saved; and when I found that he was saved, I thought of coming to tell you."[36] Spooner was not impressed and failed Wilde for his antics.

The Classical curriculum underwent one more major change in 1850, when Moderations ("Mods.") was established as a precursor to Greats. Moderations focused on composition in Greek and Latin, rhetoric, logic, and mathematics. Mathematics remained as an optional subject, but, as Richard Jenkyns has pointed out, "the core of it was the study of literary texts, principally the poets and orators."[37] Moderations was taken towards the end of the second year, but it was generally regarded as an introductory exam, compared to Greats. Students who opted for the pass exam were tested on one Greek and one Latin author, but for honours students like Wilde, the reading load increased fourfold.[38] A compulsory reading list was introduced in 1872, which meant that honours students needed to concentrate on reading Homer, Virgil, Demosthenes, and Cicero's speeches.[39] A further adjustment was made in 1886, when it was decided that students should also know about the stylistic features and literary history associated with the set texts.[40]

The range of Greek literature had expanded considerably by the time that Wilde was preparing for Mods. He was examined in 1876 and had the option of studying Classical drama (Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles), comedy (Aristophanes), lyric poetry (Pindar), pastoral poetry (Theocritus), philosophy (Plato), or historical writing (Thucydides), but

no Roman authors were included on the list.[41] Wilde wrote a paper on the history of Greek drama (in which he referred to Aristotle's *Poetics*), and he also produced a paper on Logic.[42] We know more about Wilde's viva because he described it in a letter to his friend Ward. When Wilde was questioned about Homer's *Odyssey* in the exam, he spoke about "epic poetry in general, *dogs*, and women."[43] Afterwards, when the topic of Aeschylus's plays was raised, Wilde and his examiner shared an enjoyable conversation about "Shakespeare, Walt Whitman and the *Poetics*."[44] From Wilde's account, we can see that the Moderations exam gave students the licence to approach Ancient Greek literature as part of the broader corpus of Western poetry. The result was that Aeschylus and Aristotle could be grouped together with Shakespeare and Whitman. This type of discourse, however, was in keeping with the style of analysis that was expected of students in Greats.

By all accounts, Greats was the most rigorous part of the Oxford Classical curriculum and it was undertaken in the third or fourth year of study. This final series of exams mainly focused on history and philosophy; however, Greats also included a language component which involved commenting on the philological features of an ancient literary work. Richard Jenkyns suggests that Greats can be summed up as a history of ideas based on "the reading and analysis of classical texts that were acknowledged to be masterpieces."[45] It aimed to provide students with a broad knowledge of ancient thought and Classical civilization. This generalist programme of study was considered to be a valuable character-building exercise that provided young men with the moral and intellectual make-up to serve their society and succeed in any profession.[46] Greats remained compulsory until 1864, although the old system of mandatory Classical education was still maintained through the Moderations exam.[47] From 1850 onwards, students had to pass Moderations in order to obtain their Arts degree, and this ensured that they spent their first year studying Classics, whether they wanted to continue with Greats or not.[48]

Both Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics* were the core Classical texts studied in philosophy, but these sources were supplemented with a wide range of modern authors that included Enlightenment philosophers from England and Germany, as well as nineteenth-century economists, political theorists, and some scientific writers. The emphasis on Plato and Aristotle is evident in the Philosophy Notebook that Wilde used as he was studying for Greats, between 1876 and 1877. The most

mentioned source in the notebook is Aristotle's *Ethics*, and, according to Simon Reader, this source "forms the background against which Wilde compares other philosophies, in particular those of Plato and Francis Bacon."[49] The Philosophy Notebook also features Wilde's responses to the ideas of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume, among many others.[50] The combination of ancient and modern sources invited students to reflect on contemporary political and social issues through the lens of Classical studies. In some cases, the exam questions overtly reflected the contemporary focus of Greats. For example, the exam paper for 1870 (Trinity term) instructed students to comment on the ways in which "Plato's Republic anticipate[d] the problems of modern society."[51]

Ancient history was studied along similar lines, using historical writers from antiquity (Thucydides was a key source) alongside modern histories of Ancient Greece and Rome. Students needed to write one paper on a period from Greek history and another on a period from Roman history, and, despite the new advances in archaeology and epigraphy, the study of ancient history was still anchored in literary evidence.[52] But, by 1878, which is the year that Wilde was examined in Greats, it was possible for students to mention ancient artefacts in their history paper.[53]

Unfortunately, Wilde does not say very much about his final exams in his letters. In most of the correspondence that survives from this period, we see Wilde's replies to congratulatory messages about his First. We know that Wilde was preparing to write on the *Ethics* and the *Republic* because he asked for Ward's notes on these two texts (see Chapter 4). This request is not surprising, given that Plato and Aristotle were the pillars of the Greats curriculum. Interestingly, Wilde provided an evocative description of Greats when he wrote to James Rennell Rodd (who was another Oxford friend), in 1880.[54] Rodd had just won the Newdigate poetry prize and this achievement prompted Wilde to remember Greats as "the only sphere of thought where one can be, *simultaneously*, brilliant and unreasonable, speculative and well-informed, creative as well as critical, and write with all the passion of youth about the truths which belong to the august serenity of old age."[55] In a light-hearted way, Wilde encapsulated the student's desire to sound "brilliant" and "well-informed" on the written exams. He did not care to mention the immense volume of reading and years of preparation that were needed to achieve this end. Added to this was the "speculative," "creative" knack for finding plausible parallels between Ancient Greece and Rome and Britain's age of industrial and imperial expansion.

When commenting on Wilde's letter, Dowling recognizes the signs of the "Oxford temper": a phrase that Wilde would later use to denote the type of intellect that was acquired through Greats.[56] For Dowling, the "Oxford temper" is characterized by the ability to hold opposing points of view and to play with ideas in an "insouciant, apparently effortless" manner.[57] Yet, the influence of Oxford is often downplayed in Wilde scholarship, possibly because (as William F. Shuter states) "the qualities that Wilde admired in Greats resemble so closely the qualities he cultivated in his own critical prose."[58] In *Oscar Wilde's Aesthetic Education*, I hope to make this intellectual exchange more visible through an in-depth study that links Wilde's aestheticism with the legacy of the Oxford Classical curriculum.

3 Wilde Scholarship and the Classics

Since the 1990s, scholars have started to consider the role that Classical studies have played in Victorian literature and culture. Dowling's research on the reformers and writers who were involved in shaping the Greats curriculum has been most influential in positioning Wilde as an intellectual who fits within the milieu of Victorian Oxford. Dowling's study acknowledges the role that Benjamin Jowett, the Regius Professor of Greek, played in paving the way for the English Platonic revival. The mid-century reforms to the Greats exam heralded a shift towards a secularized Classical curriculum and radically increased the level of personal interaction between tutors and students. Dowling argues that this transition inspired a positive homosexual discourse that emerged in the writing of Oxford intellectuals such as Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, and Wilde. She identifies Wilde as an author who appropriates the imperialist, socially regenerative ideology of Greats in order "to justify male love in ideal or transcendental terms: [as] the 'spiritual procreancy' associated specifically with Plato's *Symposium* and more generally with Ancient Greece itself."[59] On the one hand, my book builds on Dowling's research by addressing Benjamin Jowett's connection with the Indian Civil Service (ICS), as well as exploring the rhetoric of empire that Wilde deploys in works like "The Critic as Artist" and *The Soul of Man*. On the other hand, my reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Wilde's prison letter challenges Dowling's argument, as I believe that Wilde evokes this positive discourse to undermine the Victorian construct of *eros* (or Platonic love) as a "noble" and "intellectual" friendship.[60]

Dowling's research has generated a new wave of scholarship which focuses on the correlation between Victorian Classicism and Wilde's sexual politics. By comparison, Evangelista positions Wilde's aestheticism in relation to other homosexual and lesbian authors of the Victorian era, including Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, and Michael Field (the professional name of the co-authors Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper). In particular, Evangelista recognizes the influence that Pater's and Symonds's respective works of aesthetic scholarship had on Wilde.[61] Their writings provided Wilde with examples of ways to discuss male homoeroticism in a legitimate manner, through pioneering scholarship on Ancient Greek culture and Classical aesthetics. According to Evangelista, Wilde drew on Classical and contemporary literary sources to create a language of homosexual desire that he filtered through a coded aesthetic discourse. I would add that such claims can be extended to include Jowett's role as a popular commentator and translator of Plato's dialogues. My analysis of Jowett's introduction to *The Symposium* will show that Jowett contributed to the positive homoerotic discourse that Dowling and Evangelista have noted.

Our knowledge of Wilde's engagement with contemporary debates relating to archaeology and Classical scholarship has been greatly enhanced through Ross's research in *Oscar Wilde and Ancient Greece*. Ross draws on archival sources (including manuscripts, notes, annotated books, and reading lists) relating to the curriculum at Trinity and Magdalen to provide a historical overview of the books and ideas that Wilde was exposed to as an undergraduate. Ross also addresses Wilde's attempts to pursue and support archaeological research in the 1870s. He argues that Wilde helped to popularize this emerging science through his journalistic work, although it seemed to "[threaten] the romantic, humanist, text-based Hellenism to which he claimed allegiance" as a student of the Classics.[62] In Wilde's critical prose, however, the attention shifts from archaeology towards the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato. Interestingly, Ross's study of "The Critic as Artist," *The Soul of Man*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* emphasizes "Wilde's indebtedness to Aristotle" because he believes that the link with Plato has been adequately covered by Evangelista and Dowling.[63] I disagree with Ross on this point, as my book offers a different overview of Wilde's literary career and acknowledges the ways in which Wilde's relationship with Oxford and Plato's philosophy changed as he continued to modify his ideas about aesthetic theory and practice.

A further notable area of research relates to the process of gender formation that was instilled at English public schools and universities. Daniel Orrells's *Classical Culture and Modern Masculinity* (2011) is a significant work which examines the reception of Plato's dialogues in literature that was produced by classically educated men in England and Germany, between 1750 and 1930. Orrells's research encompasses a broader cultural-historical framework, as he maps the evolution of German historicist scholarship. In addition to Dowling's work, this study offers a good basis for understanding the trajectory of Jowett's academic history, given that Jowett began his career as a historicist theologian and was instrumental in promoting the rise of historicist scholarship at Oxford. The English and German styles of theorizing masculinity and sexuality have led Orrells to question whether the modern terms "homosexual" and "heterosexual" should be applied to writers like Wilde. Orrells departs from the approaches that Dowling and Evangelista have adopted, as he is critical of the objective to "[uncover] a continuous history of covert, secretive (even subversive), homosexual identification with antiquity."[64] Instead, Orrells proposes "that Greek pederastic pedagogy permitted many sorts of men to admire and reproduce in various modes that highly intense form of education."[65] He draws attention to the symbolic licence that is attached to the ambiguous, classicized language that Wilde employs when referring to male-male relations, as an author, and in his court testimony.

I have chosen to blend these approaches when addressing Wilde's sexual politics. I prefer to adopt terms that relate to Platonic *eros* when discussing male desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and also when analysing Wilde's relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas (a much younger Scottish aristocrat and poet who was also educated at Oxford). In many cases, I use the expressions "male love," "male-male desire," or "intellectual friendship," rather than homosexual. Orrells is right to question this terminology, and my vocabulary reinforces the idea that Wilde was responding to Oxford culture and the language of Plato to describe relationships that we retrospectively identify as homosexual. Bearing that in mind, I agree with Dowling's and Evangelista's opinion that Wilde is an author who manipulates the language of aestheticism to express and portray male-male desire in coded terms. There are points when I refer to Basil Hallward as a homosexual figure, as my study of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is influenced by the notion of the homosexual gaze. While I am contributing to an established queer discourse, my study invites

scholars and readers to move beyond the traditional impulse to interpret Hellenism as a code for homosexuality. Wilde was also inspired by the religious culture that was fostered among the student community at Oxford, and he was keenly aware of the political advantages of receiving an elite Classical education. His writing also responds to the modernization of the university, as it implies that the world of the academy could not satisfy the aesthete's longing to learn (at his own pace, and on his own terms) from the contemplation of beautiful objects.

4 Chapter Outlines

The chapters that follow investigate how Wilde's aestheticism responds to different cultural formations that relate to Greats and the world of Victorian Oxford. A considerable amount of research has been generated about Wilde's work as a writer of aesthetic fiction and criticism, but his identity as a poet, public lecturer, and media celebrity in the 1870s and 1880s has received much less critical attention. My analysis opens with these earlier sources because Wilde used his media exposure to present himself as a poet and an Oxford intellectual. Most of his early poems were first published in periodicals from Ireland, England, and America. In 1882, he gained even more exposure through the newspaper coverage of his North American lecture tour. Although these are ephemeral texts, they have been included in this study to contextualize the evolution of Wilde's distinctive style of aestheticism. The poems and lectures introduce key ideas that Wilde would revisit and develop in his later writings. The utopian aesthetics of "The Critic as Artist" and *The Soul of Man* emerge in the American lectures and interviews. Likewise, the aestheticization of Christ, which features in both *The Soul of Man* and Wilde's prison letter, is anticipated in poems which position Christ as a literary figure.

Chapter 2 begins with a study of the letters and travel poems that Wilde produced while he was a student at Magdalen.[66] These texts reflect the prolonged spiritual crisis that he underwent as he considered the possibility of converting to Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic culture at Oxford is historically linked with the Tractarian Movement, which was religious movement that contributed to the revival of Catholic worship in England. In the 1820s, the Tractarians used their roles as fellows to facilitate more personal interaction with their students, and they also reinforced the tutor's duty as a spiritual

teacher. After addressing Wilde's Oxford letters, my analysis moves to a selection of poems that mention specific sites that Wilde visited in Greece and Rome in 1877. Wilde's travel poetry evokes the mythic and cultural heritage of Greece as a counterpoint to the aesthetic tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. The Greek landscape elicits wistful elegies to the Greek gods, tragic poets, and the mythical personae who haunt the ancient ruins and natural scenery. At this stage, Wilde's aestheticism was chiefly grounded in an exploration of spiritual concerns and the appreciation of Catholic ritual.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the transitional period following Wilde's graduation from Oxford. It was in London that Wilde gained recognition as an aesthete, and his fame was established through popular caricatures that circulated in the press and on stage. Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *Patience*; *or Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), was the most successful parody of the Aesthetic Movement, as personified by two self-admiring poets named Reginald Bunthorne and Algernon Grosvenor. The characterization of both Bunthorne and Grosvenor was partly inspired by Wilde's aestheticism. In 1882, Wilde spent ten months travelling across North America and Canada as a touring lecturer. He was invited to lecture on the English Aesthetic Movement to cross-promote the American production of *Patience*.[67]

This chapter integrates material from Kevin O'Brien's 1982 reconstruction of "The Decorative Arts" and "The House Beautiful" lectures, Hofer and Scharnhorst's 2010 collection of Wilde's interviews, and the lecture notes that were first published in 1908.[68] As part of his lecturing contract, Wilde was expected to wear an aesthetic costume that would remind people of Bunthorne. The costume design for the New York production of *Patience* also strengthened the resemblance between Wilde and Bunthorne. The association with Bunthorne created some problems for Wilde because Bunthorne merely assumes the identity of an aesthete in order to impress women. I will discuss some images and newspaper reports about Wilde's clothing to evaluate the implications of the visual parallel between Wilde and Bunthorne. Taken together, these sources reveal that Wilde used the medium of fashion to communicate the design philosophy of craftsmen and theorists associated with the Aesthetic and Decorative Arts Movements.

The literary component of Chapter 3 draws on the published interviews and lectures to explore Wilde's efforts to promote aesthetic consumption to middle-class audiences. While on tour, Wilde began to speak

of the social and personal benefits of introducing aesthetic decoration into the home. He also advertised his connection to Oxford and made a point of mentioning that his philosophy was strongly influenced by his encounters with the art critic John Ruskin. The 1882 tour also presented Wilde with an opportunity to define himself as an intellectual in his own right. Contrary to Ruskin, Wilde was conscious of the important role that consumers played in ensuring the survival of traditional forms of craftsmanship. The mission to promote aesthetic production and consumption also led Wilde to make suggestions about practical ways to expose children to the arts and crafts at home and in schools.

Chapter 4 addresses the conflicting representations of Oxford that arise in Wilde's critical dialogue, "The Critic as Artist," and in his essay, *The Soul of Man* (which was originally titled "The Soul of Man under Socialism").[69] "The Critic as Artist" is structured as a critical dialogue between two aesthetes named Gilbert and Ernest. The work featured in the July and September 1890 issues of the *Nineteenth Century* before it was revised and re-issued in *Intentions* (1891): a volume that included four critical works by Wilde. *The Soul of Man* is political essay that parodies contemporary debates between individualist and socialist writers. The essay featured in the *Fortnightly Review*, in February 1891; at the time, the journal was edited by Wilde's friend and future biographer, Harris (mentioned above). *The Soul of Man* was privately published on 30 May 1895—five days after Wilde was convicted of gross indecency.

Wilde fondly remembered Oxford as the place where young men had the freedom to contemplate. The university, however, was not immune to the influences of professionalization and imperialism. This aspect of Oxford's history is addressed through my account of Jowett's involvement in reforming the Greats syllabus in the 1850s. During this period, Plato was officially included in the Classical curriculum and the study of ancient history and philosophy gained prominence at Oxford. These changes were designed to provide students with a strong philosophical education that would prepare them for leadership roles in government administration. Jowett also influenced the development of the first recruitment exam for the ICS. His recommendations to the ICS created a bias in the system, which ensured that classically educated English men would be favoured over Indian applicants.

My analysis focuses on the use of imperialist rhetoric in "The Critic as Artist" and *The Soul of Man*, as both of these works question whether England is truly a civilized nation. Importantly, I will draw attention

to the ways that Wilde's cultural critique corresponds with the model of leadership that was promoted through the Greats curriculum. By the 1890s, Wilde's views on education had drastically changed. He rejected the notion of practical education, and his representation of Oxford accentuated the conflict between professional work and the aesthete's devotion to beauty, a conflict that is raised in the playful dialogue between Gilbert and Ernest in "The Critic as Artist." This part of my discussion points to the instances where Wilde uses his knowledge of the Classics and Oxford culture to promote the aesthetic lifestyle.

Chapter 5 extends the history of the Platonic revival by examining Wilde's representation of male friendships in the revised edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[70] Wilde's aesthetic novel focuses on the life of a young aristocrat named Dorian Gray and his relationship with a supernatural portrait that enables him to retain his youthful appearance. The portrait becomes a shameful double that Dorian keeps hidden in the attic of his London home. The themes of secrecy and shame are explored in relation to the portrait, which develops hideous features that reflect Dorian's actual age, as well as the moral and spiritual corruption that result from his hedonistic lifestyle. My analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores the tension between homosexual desire and the Victorian construct of Platonic love (or *eros*). The love dialogues in the *Symposium* reflect the Athenian cultural practice known as *paiderastia* ("the love of boys"), which was a relationship involving a mature adult man and an adolescent youth. The *erastes* (lover)—an elder, socially experienced man—assumed the responsibility of teaching the boy how to be a wise and virtuous man, and in return, the *eromenos* (beloved) would gratify his lover with sexual acts. Although the paiderastic relationship served an educational and sexual function, Victorian Classical scholars tended to emphasize the intellectual and spiritual nature of Plato's discourse on male-male love. This interpretation was popularized in the 1870s through the work of Jowett and Pater.

My discussion addresses the extent to which Wilde's novel is influenced by Jowett's translation of Plato's *Symposium* (the revised 1875 edition) and Pater's biographical essay on the German art historian, Winckelmann (1867), which was later included in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). But, I argue that Wilde goes a step further than Jowett and Pater, as his portrayal of Platonic love dramatizes the potential for failure. When I turn to an analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I focus exclusively on the dialogue interaction between Basil