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How Oscar Wilde read John Addington Symonds's 'Studies of the Greek Poets'

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How Wilde read John Addington Symonds's *Studies of the Greek Poets*

1. Introduction

As a student at Oxford (1874-8), and already something of a classical prodigy from his studies in Dublin, the young Oscar Wilde was often seen (and took care to *be* seen) clutching a fashionable new publication that influentially promoted the study of ancient authors from a literary-critical and comparative perspective: *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873/6), published in two Series by the Uranian man of letters, John Addington Symonds (and henceforth referred to for concision's sake as *Studies*). This much at least is tolerably well known among *aficionados* of Wilde. But what exactly was in it for him? How might it have shaped his ideas and intellectual growth, as a nascent man of letters and a classicist *manqué*? This chapter aims to gauge how *Studies* informed Wilde's understanding of classical literature as a living resource, and how his increasingly confident critical engagement with the views expressed by Symonds gave him the raw materials for his own self-consciously dissident self-fashioning as an ambitious young author and critic in a culturally 'late' age.

The principal sources are threefold:

1. Two notebooks kept by Wilde as a student at Oxford and now held in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library of UCLA. I refer to them through the modern edition with commentary by Philip E. Smith II and Michael S. Helfand (1989). The Oxford notebooks contain numerous citations from Symonds's work.
2. Wilde's personal copies of the two Series of *Studies*, bought hot off the press on their first publication. Both volumes contain extensive underlining, marginal emphasis, and marginal

comment by Wilde himself. This and the following source (3) are held at the Morgan Research Library of New York.[1]

3. An unfinished and undated draft of a review essay, or something of that kind, in which Wilde responds to 'The Women of Homer', the fourth Study of Symonds's Second Series (1886), then newly published. The manuscript, which bears the title 'The Women of Homer', benefits from a modern edition by Thomas Wright and Donald Mead, with a good introduction and notes. To avoid confusion with Symonds's identically titled Study, I refer to Wilde's draft from now on under the abbreviated title 'Women'.

The chapter's aim is to bring these various sources into dialogue, giving an account of the kinds of annotation practised by Wilde in his copies of *Studies* to help gauge, in a preliminary way, how this precocious student studied and responded to Symonds's celebrated text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 'my' Wilde identifies a future direction for his own self-fashioning in Symonds's stylishly written literary portrait of Euripides as the jaded, humane voice of Athens in decline. However, it is demonstrably not the case that Wilde straightforwardly concentrated his attention on authors represented by Symonds as expressing the decadence of their age: witness (e.g.) his failure to engage with Symonds on the epigrammatists. Instead, and insofar as one may judge from the marginalia — which are often frustratingly lacunose — the literary, philosophical, and social interests of the undergraduate Wilde ranged widely, anticipating the expansive concerns of the mature man of letters. So extensive are these manuscript addenda, and so varied in type, that they cry out for a scholarly edition; there is a rich vein to be tapped here, but more thorough studies must await a solid footing. Such a desideratum is of course far beyond the scope of the present chapter; I would only wish to advise its ideal editor that even the clearest of marginal annotations is far from self-explanatory, as we shall see.

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[1] I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the staff of the Morgan, and especially John Vincler, who gave generously of his time and expertise.

2. Introducing *Studies*

Studies was a bestseller in its time, and a staple of classical criticism for schoolboys and general readers well into the inter-War era; nowadays it is obscure even to professional classicists. Its gestation and publication history were complex. The first edition consisted of two 'Series' of essays — the first (1873) beginning life as an eclectic set of lectures to the boys of Clifton College, Bristol (Symonds lived locally, had a good friend on staff, and had a crush on one of its sixth-formers). The Second Series (1876) filled in some of the gaps. Together, and with a certain amount of hopping back and forth,[2] they ended up constituting a more or less comprehensive survey of Greek poetry from its beginnings right through to the Roman age (and in the case of the Greek Anthology even a little further), with a little of what we would not call reception study thrown in for good measure.

Studies was the first handbook to make Greek literature accessible and interesting to a large, non-specialist public, and as such it was influential. It only covered poets, to be sure, but poetry was what people most wanted to read. Before Jebb, Livingstone, or Mackail, the public got its ancient Greece from *Studies* — and also *after* them, because *Studies* did its job extraordinarily well, combining plentiful detail with lively if at times far-fetched evocations of period and scene (Symonds also enjoyed great success as a travel writer). The masterstroke was twofold: to subject Greek classics to literary appreciation as if they were literary authors in a living tradition (not just texts to be parsed or used as models for composition exercises), *and* to place those same authors in

[2] The Prefatory Note to the Second Series (Symonds 1876: v) instructs the reader, 'Those who wish to read both series of Studies of Greek Poets together will find the order of the chapters to be as follows: — 1. The Periods of Greek Literature; 2. Mythology; 3. Achilles…'. Wilde dutifully annotated the tables of contents of each volume with handwritten numerals so that he could (re-)read them in the newly prescribed sequence.

a landscape and a cultural milieu. On and off, and going through three distinct editions along the way, it was in print for the better part of sixty years, from 1873 right through to 1929.

By then, and in part because its author's lush prose style had fallen so far out of fashion,[3] *Studies* had acquired a thick patina of quaintness; the world had forgotten (insofar as much of it had ever really noticed) that in its day the work had been scandalous in certain circles, initially in Symonds's own Oxford University milieu but later further afield. Though his major works on classical literature and the Italian Renaissance (the big books that made him a household name in his own time) have fallen into obscurity, Symonds is still quite well known among historians of sexuality (classicists included) in the context of gay rights and gay histories, where his two little pamphlets, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), have been enshrined as foundational documents of subculture.[4] In some ways this is fully justified — *Greek Ethics* was the first known attempt to publish in English about male same-sex desire in what we would now call a more or less sensible way, or indeed practically at all. But Symonds only ever printed ten copies, eventually, and then sat on them for years before getting them bound, and then obsessively tracked each and every copy throughout its or rather his life.[5] He always knew who had them and made sure no-one inappropriate got to sneak a look. *Modern Ethics* was a blockbuster by comparison — a whole 100 copies, and then rather more once the pirates got hold of it — but for obvious reasons the treatises had to stay under the radar. In the meantime, and with minimal tweaking, the other half of the essay that eventually became *A Problem in Greek Ethics* went mass-market — or as mass-

[3] Booth 2000.

[4] On the *Problem* treatises see e.g. Kemp 2000; Dowling 1994: 129-32.

[5] Nisbet 2013: 123-7.

market as it could, at 10s6d in 1873 — as 'The Genius of Greek Art', the *tour de force* concluding essay of the critically acclaimed bestseller, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, First Series.[6]

3. *Studies* and Symonds's influence on Wilde

> 'We are never free from the consciousness of a long past.'
>
> — p.352 of Second Series, as underlined by Wilde[7]

When Wilde came up to Oxford in 1874, the first Series of *Studies* was quite the local *cause célèbre*,[8] and the young Oscar seems to have made a point of being seen carrying it around. Even without their scandalous local press and consequent shock value, these were nice books to pose with — they are handsome objects, making a neat matching set in their Greek-key bindings — but Wilde was not merely flaunting: he admired Symonds as a prose stylist and took him seriously as an interpreter of Greek literary culture. It is no surprise that the Oxford notebooks contain many quotations from *Studies*, which may be tracked through the indices to Smith and Helfand (1989). Perhaps around this time he was even entertaining visions of being 'the next John Addington Symonds' — we know he excelled as a classicist (as his monument in Père Lachaise proudly attests) and if his annotations are any guide, his breadth of reading seems to have matched

[6] Nisbet 2013: 127-8.

[7] There is also marginal emphasis (a curved mark) and in the top margin of that page, he has added, 'very good'. References to pagination beginning 'p.' are to the First and Second Series of *Studies* in their first editions of 1873 and 1876, as annotated by Wilde.

[8] Dowling 1994: 89-94.

Symonds's own.[9] Wilde soon ended up on familiar terms with the man as well as the books — in 1879, only a year after he graduated, they were both on the Council of the newly founded Hellenic Society, and they corresponded on friendly terms in later years, sending each other hand-inscribed copies of pet literary projects.[10] He remained a devoted fan of Symonds's *oeuvre* right through his life (in Reading Gaol, Symonds on Dante was his comfort reading).

Studies in particular made a deep and lasting impression. When Wilde visited Greece with his old tutor John Mahaffy in 1877, it was Symonds's Greece he experienced, part Bay of Naples (a known sex-tourism destination for gay Britons) and part literary fantasia. Symonds himself hardly knew the real Greece at all — the title of his *Sketches in Italy and Greece* (1874) belies the fact that he only called in at Athens, for a week (at most), with a day trip to Eleusis, and found it all full of 'pure Light' and 'serenity' (all the clichés he had come primed to experience) but also horribly smelly.[11] Symonds, though, was a fantastic evoker of landscapes and ambience whether or not he had been there — as previously remarked he was much in demand as a travel writer — and *Studies* creates a vivid impression of the kinds of scenography against which the works of Sappho and Sophocles *ought* to have played out; and Wilde buys the package: his accounts of the trip are infused with imagery straight of out Symonds's book.[12] We know, too, that Symonds's homoerotically tinged position on Greek art exercised a lasting influence; Wilde's most enduringly famous character —

[9] Breadth *and* depth: he annotated his copy of the *Bacchae* to death, cramming so much, so far into the inner page margins that he broke the spine (Prasch 2012: 469).

[10] Wright and Mead 2008: 95 n.1.

[11] 'It is worth while to be nibbled all over by cockroaches at night in rolling pitching Gk steamers & to endure the appalling stench of an Athenian Inn for impressions of such sublimity as this.' Letter to Henry Dakyns, Corfu, May 12th 1873: Schueller and Peters (eds.) 1968.ii: 299.

[12] Ross 2013: 41-2.

Dorian Gray — echoes Symonds's dreamy personification of the 'Genius of Greek Art' made flesh.[13]

This much, at least, we may say uncontroversially and without recourse to the more arcane archival evidence; but what can the marginalia and the manuscript add to our picture of how *Studies* worked upon the young Wilde, and vice versa? The main body of this chapter falls into two parts. In the first (Sections 4-5), I give a preliminary account of the kinds of annotation found throughout the two Series, in what kinds of context they are found, and what we may (with appropriate caution) deduce from them. In the second (Section 6), I narrow my focus to Wilde's 'Women' as an extant exemplar of how the aspiring younger writer grappled with his literary idol, both in the margins and off-piste.

4. Wilde's annotations: an overview and an example

To begin with, a caveat. There is no sure way to date Wilde's marginalia, singly or as a body; he was a keen re-reader and could well have dipped in and out of the volumes over some years, conceivably adding further annotations as he did so. However, the reasonable presumption is that he will have added most of them on his first reading of each *Study*. As we will see below, his use of particular forms of annotation (in particular, underlining combined with question marks or marginal comment) changes noticeably between the First and Second Series. A plausible picture emerges of a

[13] Nisbet 2013: 213.

young scholar (and perhaps also a would-be translator)[14] who is quickly growing confident in his own capability and judgement.

Wilde was a consistently neat annotator, and most of his written marginalia are easily read despite his small hand. His copious non-verbal annotations are of several kinds. I note the following types of marginal mark, which I list in descending order of frequency:

- Vertical lines, placing emphasis on one or (usually) more lines of text;
- Question marks, indicating points of contention. These appear all but exclusively in the Second Series. They are sometimes back-to-front. Very occasionally an exclamation point is used instead;
- Double vertical lines, used occasionally for extra emphasis;
- Arrows, pointing to particular lines.

There are also miscellaneous marks, used only occasionally. These include: swooshes and ticks; diagonal strokes; and horizontal strokes. In the second series they are joined by small cups (u) and curves, and by a (usually) small ‘x’, which highlights a point in the argument rather than indicating disagreement with it. Wilde’s arsenal of non-verbal annotations is extensive, then, and the meaning of individual signs is not always obvious even when (as with ‘x’) we might expect it to be. Perhaps all we can say of the obscurer marks is that they connote *some* kind of emphasis, though perhaps not always the *same* kind (they may not all be stable in meaning).

Wilde is relatively restrained in his underlining, perhaps not wishing to spoil the appearance of the text (I count fifty-nine instances in the two Series, which together comprise well over 800 pages).

[14] Shortly after finishing at Oxford, Wilde came close to being commissioned to translate his old tutor Mahaffy’s favourite play, the *Heracles*, for Macmillan: Prasch 2012: 469. Cf. Ross (p.000), on Wilde’s ambition to translate Herodotus.

Like that of students today, his underlining often appears miscellaneous; in some cases all we can say with confidence is that Wilde found the material striking or congenial. There is a great deal of underlining regarding Euripides, for instance: we shall turn to Wilde on Euripides in the next section.

Two further and particular uses may be noted. One, consistent but occasional and of minor interest only, is to highlight subheadings in the front matter of an individual *Study*, clearly with a view to identifying sections on which to concentrate his reading. The extant examples suggest a decidedly more strategic and prioritised reading of the Second Series than of the First.[15] The second and much more pervasive use of underlining is to identify matter in the text with which Wilde wishes to take issue. This is the characteristic function in the Second Series, in which all but one of Wilde's thirty-three '?'s cluster and in which the majority of his underlining occurs. Often the underlining is accompanied by a written annotation. The practice is already evident in the First Series, but only on a small handful of occasions and implying trivial criticism, as for example at pp.129 and 324, where Wilde has spotted a discrepancy in how Symonds quotes a line of Ben Jonson.[16]

The only really substantial intervention through underlining in the First Series sets the template for what will become frequent practice in the Second. It concerns the character of Antigone in Sophocles. Here is Symonds's text (p.190), as underlined by Wilde:

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[15] First Series, p.184; Second Series, p. 40, 152, 303. At p.ix of the First Series, a diagonal marginal stroke is used to highlight a further heading, 'Chapter 8: Aristophanes'.

[16] I find only a handful of other such instances in the First Series where Wilde believes he has identified a minor inaccuracy (p.271, p.288, p.323) or implicitly queries the felicity of a translation (p.224).

> This conception of hereditary destiny seems to be strongly illustrated by many plays. Orestes, Oedipus, <u>Antigone are unable</u> to escape their doom.

To which the marginalia retort:

> Wrong about Antigone. She goes deliberately to meet death. With … death of .... she .... ………[17]

Wilde's critical engagement with the substance and style of Symonds's argument begins here, on an issue on which he clearly feels strongly; more typically, though, his use of underlining in the First Series is deferential to the author's genius.[18]

Three years later, the Second Series bears noticeably more marginal annotations than the First. Wilde is working it harder, and his responses are much more critically engaged. He is still clearly a fan: many of his marginalia read simply 'Good' or 'Very good', and he is eager to soak up ideas and content congenial to his own nascent self-fashioning. One can wish he had been a bit more particular as to what *made* these particular bits 'good', and good for what; but the marginalia are not composed with future Wilde scholars in mind, and I imagine he often did not yet know himself what use (if any) he might make of his finds, merely noting that they *were* worth hanging onto – they would come in handy sooner or later.

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[17] I particularly regret that even with a magnifying glass, kindly lent by the library staff, I was unable to decipher this crucial marginalium in full.

[18] E.g. at p.193, where several key terms are underlined, a marginal note reads 'good'.

Knowledge of the future man makes it near-impossible for us to avoid reading in premonitions which add value to our account of how the young Wilde might have experienced the text. Notably, he homes in on the division between Uranian and Pandemic eros, material that he will recycle many years later in court, placed meaningfully close in Symonds's treatment to a Pater-inspired evocation of beauteous Hellenism under siege from the rule-bound Hebraism of the masses.[19] This too, though, shows a more active and confident engagement with Symonds — the text is now no mere influence, but a resource to be pressed into service in the present day. Elsewhere he is more skeptical, and confidently challenges Symonds on numerous points, beginning by taking a side in the contemporary scholarly spat over how Greek names ought to be Englished.[20] Symonds's foolish suggestion that Sophocles' three Theban plays are best experienced in story order rather than by date of composition is 'quite wrong', a position Wilde had already adopted in some unpublished notes of 1874 or thereabouts but now expressed more emphatically.[21] His '?'s (and occasional '!'s) and laconic marginalia maintain their dialogue with the underlining, and gleefully point out wonky translations, minor mistakes, and misplaced emphases; indeed, they do so more often and more

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[19] p.35; cf. p.63 (Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*), p.129 (Pindar and Plato on the superiority of boy-love), and p.140, on philosophical *erastai* and *erōmenoi*. Hellenism versus the herd: p.40, heavily annotated. 'The Hebraistic culture we receive in childhood' as an unnatural constraint: p.422.

[20] p.3. Wilde's own practice in transliteration was hardly consistent: Ross 2013: 88-90.

[21] As reported by Ross 2013: 31.

acerbically than before.[22] But they also gently pooh-pooh the wilder flourishes of the author's style (p.42, 171), and poke fun at occasional euphemism.[23]

The more substantial marginalia confirm this impression of increased critical confidence. The *Study* on Hesiod may serve as an example. Wilde begins with an approving 'x' (p.108, Hesiod's congeniality to critics of modernity) but the '?'s thereafter come thick and fast. Hesiod, 'the titular president of <u>a rival school of poets</u> localised near Mount Helicon in Boeotia' (p.109)? Wilde is highly skeptical: Symonds's presumption of a parallel posthumous 'school' of Homer in the eastern Aegean is already a leap too far in his reckoning. 'Born at <u>Ascra</u> in Boeotia'? (p.110). This is simply wrong, he thinks; '<u>Orchomenos</u>' is underlined at the foot of the same page, probably his preferred theory. 'By verse and diction the Hesiodic poems are not dissimilar from the Homeric' (p.111)? Wilde will have none of it. *Works and Days* and *Theogony* may be called the work of Hesiod, 'but only in the same sense and with the same reservation' (p.111) as Symonds would stipulate in ascribing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Homer, viz, that the historic Homer is the mere animating spirit of a compositional tradition? Here as elsewhere in the chapter (pp.112, 122), Wilde's '?'s speak volumes. He has a firm opinion on epic (who knew?) and is confident he is Symonds's master, on this topic if not others. He has read more deeply in some places than had Symonds:

[22] E.g. at p.237 he takes Symonds down a peg or two for misremembering the fateful meeting between Oedipus and his father at the place where three roads meet ('and one of the servants struck him'): 'but did not Laius himself strike?'.

[23] Translations: pp.64, 198, 204, 276-7, 283, 290, 297, 341 — 'bad', p.355; excesses of style: pp.189, 229, 248; euphemism: p.343, 'cooks, parasites, and <u>fishwives</u>, the *demi-monde* of Athens'.

> [Hesiod's invective against women in the *Theogony* and remarks on choosing a wife in *Works and Days*] prove that he regarded them as a necessary deduction from the happiness of life…' (p.129)

A marginal 'x' (unusually used so) cues what is at best a qualified concession of the point:

> 'Perhaps so: but the Greeks attributed to Hesiod a panegyric on women. Ἤοιαι'

5. The annotations and Wilde's interests

> 'By Plato we are taught how dignified and humane the Greeks could be, by Aristophanes how versatile and human they were.'
>
> — p.275 of First Series, as underlined by Wilde

Where, at the time(s) of annotation, did the young Wilde's principal interests lie? His investment in the Homeric and Hesiodic Questions may already run contrary to some commonly held expectations; what other surprises may lurk in the marginalia? I focus my attention here on the First Series, which is the less heavily annotated and in which some authors are hardly touched at all, throwing into starker relief those who do attract Wilde's attention. Its Introduction aside, the early part of the First Series is neglected: nothing at all on Empedocles (Ch.2) or the 'satirical' (iambic) authors (Ch.4); effectively nothing on the gnomic (Ch.3) and lyric poets (Ch.5); nothing on Pindar (Ch.6).[24] Homer and Hesiod are important cultural totems and worth taking sides over, but archaic verse holds not the slightest evident interest.

[24] Ch.3: a single marginal emphasis (p.76) to a remark on Plato and Aristotle; Ch.5: the Ben Jonson quote mentioned earlier (p.129).

Only with the seventh chapter, ‘Greek Tragedy and Euripides’, does Wilde once again start attaching weight to aspects of Symonds’s text, beginning with ’Wrong about Antigone…’ (p.190). Symonds is not wrong, though, about Aeschylus on blood-guilt (p.191) or the workings of Nemesis (‘very good’, p.192; ‘good’, p.193). But it is Symonds’s Euripides himself who most fascinates. *Studies* carefully modulates the then-prevailing image of Euripides as the embodiment of a dramatic art in decline, granting the cultural lateness of his Athens, but glossing it as a golden opportunity for a playwright of real insight and significant innovation. Wilde had already been turned on to Euripides by one of his tutors at Trinity College Dublin, John Mahaffy, and enthusiastically took on board this new notion of cultural decadence as the seedbed of outrageous talent.[25] The annotations here come thick and fast, and it would be perverse to refuse to imagine the young Wilde finding here part of the inspiration (or at the very least, some striking confirmation of notions already in embryo) for his subsequent persona as an author and dramatist:

> 'more interested in the creation of plots and situations than in the exhibition of the truly tragic ethos ἦθος’ (198, underlined)

[25] On Mahaffy’s as yet unfashionable taste for Euripides, see Ross 2013: 32. Twenty years later, his *Studies in Greek Civilisation* (1896) was to assert the dramatist’s worth to the public at large. In the Oxford notebook (p.28 = Smith and Helfand (eds.) 1989: 159) Wilde noted, in Winckelmanian vein, that ‘the same <spirit of exclusive> attention to form which makes Euripides often prefer, like ~~Algernon~~ Swinburne, music to meanings, and melody to morality, which gave to the late Greek statues that refined effeminacy, and over-strained gracefulness of attitude, was felt in History.’ The phrase marked < > is Wilde’s intralinear insertion; he is straining for musicality himself. This material was to resurface in the essay he submitted for the Chancellor’s Prize, ‘The Rise of Historical Criticism’.

> 'It is obvious that a very peculiar audience was thus formed for [Euripides] — an audience greedy of intellectual subtleties, of pathetic situations, of splendid oratory, of clever reasoning — an audience more appreciative of the striking than [the true]' (200-1, marginal emphasis)

> 'Euripides was the mouthpiece of Athenian decline. For this reason, because he so exactly expressed the feelings and opinion of his time' (p.201, underlining)

> 'The fault of his style consisted in a too exclusive attention to the parts.' (p.206, faint [erased?] marginal emphasis)

> 'It may sound paradoxical now to assert that it was a merit in him rather than a defect to have sacrificed the unity of art to the development of subordinate beauties.' (p.207, underlined)

Symonds poetically notes how the third generations of artists in a tradition, once the Aeschyluses and Sophocleses have had their day, must innovate and diversify or die: they 'are obliged to go afield for striking situations, to force sentiment and pathos, to subordinate the harmony of the whole to the melody of its parts' (p.208); and Wilde adds in the border, 'very good'. He adds marginal emphasis too to the start of the immediately following paragraph, on how frequently one finds 'this law of sequence' played out within an artform or genre — each moves 'from the austere, through the perfect, *to the merely elegant*' (my emphasis). Wilde has taken note and perhaps found his own path to distinction. On the following page, he doubly emphasises (marginal vertical line plus underlining) a striking formulation: 'It is thus, as it were, that, like projectiles, arts describe their parabolas and end.' The belated artist shines all the more brightly for being out of time, like a

sculptor whose interest in narrative art ‘has been supplanted by enthusiasm for mere forms of beauty’:

> 'Finally, like Praxiteles, [Euripides] carves single statues of eminent beauty’ (p.210, marginal emphasis)

This Euripides clearly made a huge impression on Wilde, and a sense of Euripidean lateness was to become central to his creative project. The college notebooks also reveal a very keen interest in how the playwrightinfluencedEuropean dramatic and poetic traditions, developing out of Symonds’s pioneering effort in what we would now call classical reception study (the essay ‘Ancient and Modern Tragedy’, ch.9 in the First Series):

> Euripides witnessed to life in the stilted rhetoric of the Roman stage, in the studied pomp of the French Court: he fed the youth of Racine and of Voltaire… and we who Toil in the heated quarries of modern life may perhaps — or is it only a fancy — gain some freedom of soul from his genius who was the great Humanist of Hellas, the cor cordium of antiquity[.][26]

However, Wilde can never have had in mind to *become* Euripides, or not exclusively so.[27] Athenian tragedy had been so limited in its emotional range, though powerful within it, and Euripides himself had struggled in vain against it:

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[26] Commonplace-book p.130 = Smith and Helfand (eds.) 1989: 132. Symonds 1873: 201 had called Euripides ‘the darling of posterity’.

[27] ‘Euripides perhaps of all the Greeks had the most share of the modern vague spiritualistic tendency — the tendency of Werther, and René and Faust — the morbid analyzing faculty’: Wilde’s Oxford commonplace-book p.154 = Smith and Helfand (eds.) 1989: 137.

> ‘[the whole] form, in fact, of Greek dramatic art, rendered a transition from the heroic to the romantic tragedy impossible’ (p198, marginal emphasis)

What other authors might Wilde have considered adding to the mix? The very next chapter (Ch.8) is on Aristophanes, whose relation to developmental arcs of rise, peak, and decline is expressed by Symonds very differently:

> 'He did not write in the sarcastic, cynical old age of his nation or his era.’ (p.235, marginal emphasis)[28]

Symonds’s Aristophanes, as marked up by Wilde, is a master of topsy-turvy farce (p.234); a Rabelaisian celebrant of humanity’s fertile animal nature (pp.239-40, cf. p.245), unsullied by any sense of Hebraic sin or morbidity (p.241, cf. p.244):

> 'Of all the Greeks, essentially a nude nation, he is the most naked’ (p.237, marginal emphasis)

This Aristophanes is quintessentially Greek (and described in pointedly similar terms to Symonds’s homoerotically nude ‘Genius of the Greeks’ in the controversial Study that closes the First Series, ‘The Genius of Greek Art’); quintessentially pagan. To attempt to paint him a moral instructor, as had some well-meaning German scholars, was to do his ‘high-spirited muse’ as serious a disservice as (with Grote) to dismiss him as an ‘indecent parasite’ (pp.256-7). Good art does not preach, any

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[28] And cf. p.267’s marginal annotation (‘good’) to Symonds’s 'Aristophanes has this advantage — that something of the mythopoetic power still survived in Greece’.

more than it panders, and this is where Victorian modernity had left an opening for the right kind of neo-Aristophanic talent:

> Alas, that from the modern world should have evanesced all appreciation of Art that is not obviously useful, palpably didactic!' (p.258, marginal emphasis)

The sentiment picked out here by Wilde was to become a touchstone of his authorial philosophy: we may compare the provocative manifesto of 'L'Envoi':

> Now, … this recognition of the primary importance of the sensuous element in art, this love of art for art's sake, is the point in which we of the younger school have made a departure from the teaching of Mr. Ruskin, — a departure definite and different and decisive… it was he who by the magic of his presence and the music of his lips taught us at Oxford that enthusiasm for beauty which is the secret of Hellenism… [but] we are no longer with him; for the keystone to his aesthetic system is ethical, always. He would judge a picture by the amount of noble moral ideas it expresses… [29]

Wilde's interest in Aristophanes is scholarly as well as inspirational. He notes Symonds's remarks on Aristophanes's fragmentary rivals, Cratinus and Eupolis (p.248), and will later pay careful attention to the chapter on them in the Second Series. And he is alert to factual errors: to the careless remark, 'Yet Menander is scarcely more to us than a name' (p.248), he objects: 'Over 2000 lines by Menander remain! Gross .... Cf. Menander vol. iii'.[30] Very clearly, Wilde's interest in the New Comedy of Menander had already been piqued: three years later, reading Symonds's shortish treatment of him in the Second Series, he will add a marginal tick to the approving remark

[29] Ross (ed.) 1908.xiv: 31-2.
[30] In August Meineke's *Fragmenta Comicorum Graecorum* (5 vols, 1839-57). On Wilde's Menander, see Ross 2013: 176-82.

that it was Menander's 'truly original genius' that 'carried the comic art to its perfection', and it is all too tempting to read into the following emphasised dictum the seed of *The Importance of Being Earnest*[31] and so much more:

> 'while Homer invested the profound truths of passion and action with heroic dignity, Menander drew a no less faithful picture of human life together with the accidents of civilised and social circumstance.' (p.353)

Was Aristophanic comedy, then, the foundation of Wilde's decadent romanticism — with Menander's fragments as its capstone, adding the sophistication required by an age of decorous decline?[32] Only in a secondary sense; principally the impetus lies in Symonds's peculiar emphases in the area of characterisation, which are echoed elsewhere in *Studies* if never quite as insistently as here. It is unsurprising to find the same viewpoint expressed through the Second Series' Euripides, where Wilde will appreciatively note Symonds's observation that the tragedian makes his villains good rhetoricians, whose arguments are every bit as persuasive as his heroes' (p.281); more surprising perhaps to find it in the same volume's chapter on Aeschylus, who contrary to the prevailing Victorian view is no theologian or consistent ethicist (p.166, marginal 'Good') and the quality of whose drama, Symonds tells us, rests upon morally uninstructive characterisation:

[31] As argued by Witzke elsewhere in this volume.

[32] I note in particular Wilde's marginal emphasis to Symonds's praise of Menander at p.348 of the Second Series: 'His adequacy to the spirit of his own age can only be paralleled by that which we observe in Sophocles.' In the same volume (p.223) he identifies with Symonds's emphasis on the formalist perfection rather than the morality of Sophoclean tragedy: 'proportion of parts, self-restraint, and moderation'.

> 'It is easy to render an account of characters that have first been thought out as ethical specimens and then provided with a suitable exterior. It is very difficult to dissect those which started into being by an act of intuitive invention... They are, in fact, living creatures, and not puppets of the poet's brain.' (pp.169-70: marginal emphasis; 'Very good')

The mature Wilde — the ironic essayist, writer of amoral fictions, and playwright of 'the accidents of civilised and social circumstance' — was assuredly no puppet of Symonds's memorable ancient character-sketches, but his versatile genius definitely fed on and found its instincts confirmed in the dramatists of *Studies*. A study of the annotations of the First Series finds a keen young classicist whose interests are already coming into focus (to the exclusion of archaic verse) and identifying inspirational classical models (Euripides, Aristophanes) whose approaches to literary art, as glossed by Symonds, he will work into his own literary persona. He also singles out at least one overarching concern that will be important in his later self-representation as an artist and as a persecuted homosexual — Symonds's Hellenism, conceived like that of Pater in terms of art for art's sake, and hemmed in by the Hebraism of subservience to law and tradition (pp.20, 35, 191-2).

However, we should conclude this brief account of the annotations to the First Series by noting a further type of omission. Contrary to what many readers might expect, Wilde does not always comment upon or emphasise the aspects of Symonds's text in which gay subtext is close to the surface. To be sure, there are marginal emphases in the concluding essay, 'The Genius of Greek Art' — Wilde enjoys the homoerotic colouring when Symonds evokes artistically semi-draped Hellenic youth (pp.406-7), notes that Hebraism is the enemy of pagan joy (p.422), and picks up on the tactically promising distinction between Pandemic and Uranian (Heavenly) Eros (p.409) — but this essay was in any case already attracting much attention locally; Wilde would not have wished to be left behind.

On p.413 of the same essay there is a marginal tick beside ‘the Idylls of Theocritus, and the dedicatory epigrams of the Greek anthology’, which would seem to suggest familiarity with these genres (certainly Wilde had Theocritus at his fingertips).[33] Nonetheless, the two essays on them — directly preceding ‘The Genius of Greek Art’ — did not hold much interest for Wilde. This is surprising. Hellenistic pastoral was an alibi for same-sex desire in the late nineteenth century, but Wilde’s annotations to ‘The Idyllists’ are relatively sparse — and by no means subcultural: he does not mark up Symonds’s risky encomium of ‘Doric chivalry’ (pp.238-9) at all.[34] The chapter on the Greek Anthology, where Symonds boldly implies the moral equivalence of gay and straight desire, is effectively passed over in silence.[35]

More obvious in the First Series is the keen interest he takes in issues of female characterisation (Antigone), and with that in mind we may now turn to the essay that most actively engaged his critical faculties: ‘The Women of Homer’, from Symonds’s Second Series (pp.72-106).

6. ‘The Women of Homer’ and Wilde’s ‘Women’

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[33] Theocritean and Platonic quotations are compared (in Greek) at commonplace-book p.150 = Smith and Helfand (eds.) 1989: 136; cf. the comparison of a Euripidean passage to Theocritus at p.167 = Smith and Helfand (eds.) 1989: 140. At p.86, Symonds’s mention of Theocritus’ epithalamium for Helen receives marginal emphasis — clearly Wilde knew it.

[34] ‘Theocritus’ as password into subculture: Jenkyns 1980: 290-1.

[35] Only one annotation (p.385), and this on Kant rather than the Anthology proper. The Anthology contains an entire book (Book 12) of pederastic verse. On Symonds’s gay Meleager, and the backlash against him, see Nisbet 2013.

> '[Men struggle and die] even for a phantom — for the shadow of their desire, the which remains secluded in some unapproachable, far, sacred land.'
>
> — Second Series p.74, marginal emphasis: lost Helen, or gay eros?

The manuscript in which Wilde reflects on Symonds's 'The Women of Homer' is written in his clear hand in black ink, with occasional pencil corrections. It gives the impression of having been composed quickly and never returned to (Wilde left gaps, sometimes because he had not yet found the right word or phrase, but sometimes paragraph-sized).[36] This fits with what is known of the circumstances under which it was written. A concluding page has been lost: the text breaks off in mid-flow ('But let us not dream away our', p.45 foot).[37] The draft begins with the main female characters of the *Odyssey* before concluding with the *Iliad*'s Helen.[38]

The modern editors, Wright and Mead (2008), whose pagination I follow, correctly observe that 'Women' bears direct relation to Wilde's marginalia to 'The Women of Homer' (indeed, they venture several supplements to the manuscript text on this basis).[39] There are three verbal

[36] E.g. on p.1 'Rare as the ……….' (with 'long-tubed lily' later added); 'too delicate to touch, like the bloom …………' ('on the white convolvulus', ditto). (Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 19: 'Wilde not only echoes the author of *Studies*, he also attempts to out-Symonds Symonds for richness of word-music and poetic extravagance.') There are significant lacunae on p.4 (10cm), p.5, p.18 (6cm), and p.31, and a never-resolved paragraph transition on p.8.

[37] On how it may have continued, see Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 61.

[38] Pp.35-9 tell the story of Nausicaa; 39-40, Circe; 40-3, Calypso; 43-5, Penelope. Helen: pp.48-57.

[39] At 2008: 51 (x2), 53, and 55, filling several gaps. This is bold, but fair play: whether or not Wilde might in time have got around to copying in these passages, they were on his mind as he composed.

interjections into the margins of ‘The Women of Homer’, and it is worth seeing how these reactions against Symonds feed into Wilde’s own, in-progress ‘Women’.

The first reaction is to Symonds’ characterisation of Helen as an ancient *belle dame sans merci* (‘She is not touched by the passion she inspires, or by the wreck of empires ruined in her cause’). The marginal Wilde retorts: ‘But what of about Helena of Isocrates?’ (p.73, foot of page; marginal emphasis to relevant line). In ‘Women’, he expands upon the objection:

> Mr Symonds’ essay on Helen is marked with great beauty of thought and language; but, very strangely he has omitted all mention of the beautiful panegyric on Helen written four hundred years before Christ by Isocrates the Athenian…[40]

Four pages on Isocrates’ *Helen* follow, remedying Symonds’s oversight.

The second, again on Helen, is in the margins of p.83 in Wilde’s copy of the Second Series, where Symonds comments on Hecuba’s speech against Helen in *Trojan Women*, ‘which we may take to be a <u>fair statement</u> of [Euripides’] own conception of her character’. Wilde follows up his underlining with an indignant ‘Oh! What of the Helena?’. The MS of ‘Women’ confirms that it is Euripides’ play he has in mind:

> It would be foolish to take as Mr Symonds does, the party speech of Hecuba in the ‘Troades’ as a fair statement of the poet’s own conception of [Helen’s] character in the face of the

[40] Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 48.

> eloquent defence that follows from her own lips in the same play, or the very pathetic and affecting picture he draws of her in the 'Helena.'[41]

A couple of pages later in Wilde's reading of 'The Women of Homer' (p.85, a passage marked up in Wilde's marginalia), he had found Symonds charging Euripides with heedless inconsistency for presenting several quite different versions of Helen's story and personality; for his own part, though, Symonds still wished to maintain that the dramatist's 'true feeling about Helen' could be divined from Hecuba's speech and/or Electra's tirade in her eponymous play (p.84, citing lines 1062ff of Euripides' *Electra*). Wilde's marginal emphasis draws out the internal contradiction and wishful thinking in Symonds's own position, and 'Women' is its long-form expression.

The third verbal interjection is on Penelope's cross-examination of Odysseus after the slaying of the suitors. Symonds finds her tiresome, and Odysseus heroically patient: 'There is something provocative of anger against Penelope in this cross-questioning' (p.91). The Wilde of the margins finds this preposterous: 'quite misses the good psychological analysis.' In 'Women', he spells this out more fully:

> For though his return was the consummation, yet it was in some way the breaking up of her life; for her occupation was gone. This is an extremely subtle psychological point in her character, and it shows that Homer had accurately studied the nature of women. It is entirely misunderstood, however, by Mr Symonds and, indeed, by all other writers I have read.[42]

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[41] Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 54.

[42] Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 45.

In Wilde's cutting-edge reading of the Homeric epics, the treatment of women is indicative of two radically opposed world-views, Asiatic (Iliadic) and Greek proper, which is to say, European (Odyssean):

> For the Iliad is clearly Asiatic, both as regards the seclusion of women as well as the terrible intensity and detail of their lamentations; while the Odyssey is more directly the product of Hellenic thought: for Penelope and Nausicaa are clearly Greek women with Greek mode of thought.[43]

This too is in direct reaction against Symonds, though this time without marginal comment: *Studies* had declared that 'in Helen we welcome the indestructable Hellenic spirit' (the next paragraph moves on to Penelope, her 'exact opposite', conceived by Symonds as an obsessive nest-builder). Wilde had underlined it and was clearly having none of it. This may have been a passage by which he was especially exercised, if a bookmark is any indication (and we must step with caution here; the bookmarks in Wilde's copies of *Studies* are the subject of a Postscript to this chapter.)

'Women', then, stands as a (currently) unique illustration of how Wilde might have unpacked the terse comments and gnomic emphases of his marginalia, had he continued in a classical vein. There is little doubt that he could have responded to any and all the individual Studies had he found himself motivated to do so; 'The Women of Homer' is no more heavily annotated than other

[43] Wright and Mead (eds.) 2008: 48. The editors note: 'Here Wilde anticipates Walter Pater's contention, in his essay 'The Beginnings of Greek Sculpture' (1880), later collected in *Greek Studies* (1895), that the *Iliad* is characteristic of the Ionian Greeks of Asia, whose oriental tendencies were counterbalanced by the Dorian Greeks of Europe' (2008: 102 n.70).

chapters, and Wilde was by now a thoroughly informed classical scholar with opinions on diverse topics and authors.

7. Conclusion

> '…as if behind the comic mask [of Aristophanes] there were a thinking, feeling human soul, as if the very uproar of the Bacchic merriment implied some afterthought of sadness.'
>
> -First Series p.251, with marginal emphasis in blue pencil, perhaps on a re-reading

The implications of 'Women' are clear for how we should read the marginalia to Wilde's copies of *Studies* as a whole, though perhaps with particular emphasis on the more assertive and scholarlike annotation of the Second Series. Admittedly the subject of female characterisation was already of interest to him; three years earlier he had felt strongly enough to take particular issue with Symonds's remarks on Antigone (and it is surely germane that his mother was a prominent feminist activist and that the theme of women's right to self-expression was to inform Wilde's own journalism and plays, although his relations with the feminist movement were ambivalent).[44] Nonetheless, the annotations to 'The Women of Homer' are no different in kind or frequency than those of numerous other chapters, and we must accept that these other marginalia too are the physical sign of sustained (and increasingly opinionated) critical engagement. Wilde then emerges as a very promising classicist in the making, had he in fact followed an academic career track. Instead Wilde steeped himself in Symonds's lush prose style, and found in his *mots justes* and potted characterisations the makings of his self-fashioning as the ironic mirror of a culturally 'late' age. Aristophanes' absurdism, candour, and controversy-baiting, [45] Euripides' mould-breaking

[44] Caine 2013: 290-5.

[45] Aristophanes as master of paradox: First Series p.22; as controversialist: p.30.

ingenuity and surface brilliance, Menander's sharp eye for social foibles — these made for a Studied persona and an enduring one.

Postscript: Wilde's bookmarks?

Wilde's copies of *Studies* contain several apparent bookmarks, taking the form of small, regularly formed strips of loose paper (1 cm x 9 cm approx), in all likelihood cut from personal stationery.[46] Their distribution (one in the First Series, seven in the Second) seems to accord with the picture that has emerged from the annotations: the intervening three years had made Wilde probably a more attentive and certainly a more critically engaged reader of Symonds.

The single bookmark in his copy of the First Series is at pp. 266-7, where the marginalia highlighted and call 'good' Symonds's remark on Aristophanes 'sculptural genius' in making the scene real in his audience's mind.

The Second Series contains the following bookmarks:

1. At pp.60-1, a bookmark appears to draw attention to Symonds's remarks on ancient homosexual 'chivalry'. In the margin, Wilde has written 'good'.
2. At pp.156-7, there is a bookmark in the passage on Aeschylus' foundational role in the emergence of tragedy.
3. At pp.172-3, a bookmark appears to highlight remarks on Clytemnestra.

[46] The volumes are on standard acidic pulp paper; the bookmarks are laid paper, showing grid lines when placed under light. It would be impossible to assign a date to the paper's manufacture. I am greatly indebted to John Vincler for talking me through this.

4. At pp.204-5, a bookmark appears to draw attention to the same theme (by way of Symonds's treatment of Greek mourning for the beautiful male dead, which he compares to the verse of Walt Whitman). Again, there is a marginal 'good', and in the top margin Wilde has been inspired by the Whitman comparison to add, 'cf. the eternity of sentiment in "In Memoriam".'
5. At pp.234-5, a bookmark appears to highlight remarks on Antigone.
6. At pp.352-3, a bookmark coincides with the marginally emphasised 'We are never free of the consciousness of a long past', and with Symonds's praise of Menander as the supreme dramatist of the 'accidents of civilised and social circumstance', discussed earlier.
7. At 370-1, a bookmark appears in Symonds's apprecation of Musaeus' *Hero and Leander*, where Wilde (p.371) has written 'good' and given double marginal emphasis to Symonds's account of how Marlowe's work of the same title relates to its model.

It is evident that for the most part[47] the bookmarks of the Second Series coincide with themes already identified by the marginalia as of interest to Wilde: female characterisation, Greek homosexual love, and what we would now term classical reception (the marginalia show keen attention to Symonds's pioneering efforts in that line, while sometimes critiquing his more fanciful connections).[48] One is therefore tempted to see these as Wilde's own bookmarks, and to surmise that they represent passages he revisited subsequent to his first reading of the Studies.

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[47] With the puzzling exception of (2) — but Wilde has surprised us on Aeschylus before, p.000.

[48] Symonds's forays into comparative studies and classical tradition, and Wilde's responses to them, would be worthy of a chapter in themselves; further instances include Wilde's marginal emphases in the Second Series at pp.31 (flagging up Symonds's comparative parallels on how myths coalesce in the folk imagination), 122 (sceptical on Vergil and Poliziano versus Hesiod), and 210, where underlining to Aeschylus's 'certain Shaksperian concentration of phrase' cues up the marginal comment, 'also Shakespeare's sudden leap from one metaphor to another'.

I would like to think this is right. However, the following cautions must be borne in mind. First, a bookmark can do no more, in and of itself, than identify for future consultation a pair of pages; to attach its significance to one passage on one page will always entail 'reading in' significance. Second, bookmarks are mobile: a later owner could have moved one or more of them (as could have Wilde himself), perhaps more than once. Third, we must consider the possibility that they have been added spuriously, whether by a later owner (for his or her own reference) or a bookseller (for profit). Sometimes a dealer will tamper with a rare book, with a view to making it appear more interesting to collectors; such a volume is said to have been 'sophisticated'.[49] I do not think this is the case here, because the more extensive bookmarking in the Second Series so neatly echoes the stronger marginal persona, and mirrors its concerns: one might imagine a greedy bookseller would tamper equally with both volumes, and perhaps (if placing them with any care) site the bookmarks so as to tell a more sensational story;[50] but the note of doubt is there and must remain.

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[49] The volumes came to the Morgan as part of a bequest, with the consequence that their history prior to acquisition is not recorded; anything could have happened to them. Again, I am indebted to John Vincler for all of this fascinating information.

[50] If it were me, I would have heavily bookmarked the homoerotic purple passages (important backstory for *Dorian Gray*) and the homosexual apologetics (which lay the groundwork for Wilde's famous later oratory in court) of the First Series' controversial concluding essay, 'The Genius of Greek Art'.

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