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Anti-Colonial Oscar Wilde: Homoeroticism in Classical Greece

Pouya Gholamalipur
M.A. in English Literature,
English Department,
Payame Noor University.
&
Mohammad Ali Alaeddini
Ph.D. in English Literature, Pnu
Ph.D. in English Literature,
English Department,
Payame Noor University.

Abstract:

Eurocentric language makes sense only if history begins with Europe. It ignores the existence of earlier worlds, such as those of Greece. "English", supplanted the "Classics", the literature of two Mediterranean peninsulas dating back to over two thousand years ago. Instead of Homer and Aeschylus, men in training now read Shakespeare, and Eliot. This change might have been inconsequential enough had Britain not been the center of a global empire. Wilde's admiration of classics becomes discussed as a clue for his anti-colonial tendencies. Wilde defended homoerotic love as an emotion experienced by some of the world's greatest men. He insisted that it had its roots in ancient Greece and was, therefore, fundamental to the development of Western thought and culture. This reference to non-Western classics, helps revealing the anti-colonial theme in his works. The West (colonizers) tried to ignore classical antiquity as much as possible. Wilde's admiration of the non-Western classics becomes one of the key elements leading to an anti-colonial interpretation of his works.

Keywords: Anti-Colonialism, Classical Greece, Eurocentrism, Homoeroticism, Oscar Wilde

Introduction

In 1883, Irish-born Oscar Wilde returned to London bursting with exuberance from a yearlong lecture tour of the United States and Canada. Full of talent, passion and, most of all, full of himself, he courted and married the beautiful Constance Lloyd. A few years later, Wilde's wit, flamboyance and creative genius were widely renowned. His literary career had achieved notoriety with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Oscar and Constance now had two sons whom they both loved very much. But one evening, Robert Ross, a young Canadian houseguest, seduced Oscar and forced him finally to confront the homosexual feelings that had gripped him since his schooldays . . . In 1892, on the first night of his acclaimed play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Oscar was reintroduced to a handsome young Oxford undergraduate, Lord Alfred Douglas, nicknamed "Bosie". Oscar was mesmerized by the cocky, dashing and intelligent young man and began the passionate and stormy relationship which consumed and ultimately destroyed him (Fry).

"After unsuccessfully bringing a libel suit against the marquess of Queensbury, the father of his young lover Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas, who accused Wilde of corrupting his son, Wilde was arrested and stood trial for indecency and immorality" (Burt 83).

When Wilde was released from prison in 1897, he tried to comply with Constance's wishes, sending Bosie a deeply moving epic letter, *De Profundis*, explaining why he could never see him again (Fry). In *De Profundis*, Wilde's long letter to his lover, he admits the limitations of the modes of thought and living that structured his life:

> Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I grew careless of the lives of others. I took pleasure where it pleased me, and passed on. I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character, and that therefore what one has done in the secret chamber one has some day to cry aloud on the housetop. I ceased to be lord over myself. I was no longer the captain of my soul, and did not know it. I allowed pleasure to dominate me. I ended in horrible disgrace. There is only one thing for me now, absolute humility (11-12).

Love, passion, obsession and loneliness combined however to defeat prudence and discretion. Despite the certain knowledge that their relationship was doomed, Oscar was unable to resist temptation and he and Bosie were reunited, with disastrous consequences (Fry).

The relationships between the colonizer and the colonized can be paralleled with those of male homoerotic relationships. In this respect, while the colonizer allegorizes homophobia, the colonized allegorizes homophilia. Etymologically, homophile is derived from two Greek words - 'homo', meaning 'the same', and 'philos', meaning 'friend', or possibly 'philein', meaning 'to love', or 'to be dear to'. Greek uses 'eros' to signify 'sexual love', so philein should be taken to signify non-sexual love between friends or members of the same family, e.g. brothers. In homophilia, 'homo' could signify a shortened form of homosexual. Thus homophilia could have two meanings: 1) supportive, brotherly friendship towards gays and lesbians, or 2) non-sexual love between two men or two women. The colonized resembles homophobic groups by ignoring the rights of minorities, marginalized groups, colonized people, etc. Regarding the fact that Wilde himself was a homophile person, this matter can be taken into account from three viewpoints:

1- In spite of the seeming opposition towards homophilia and homoerotic relationships in the course of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde was by no means against it and was trying to depict hardships and indemnities of living a homosexual life. He such defends homosexuality that Dorian's first step towards downfall is represented by his start of a heterosexual relationship with a female, i.e. Sibyl Vane. Thus, Wilde's predilection for (rights of) homophilia becomes parallel with his predilection for (rights of) the colonized. "As a homosexual living in an intolerant society, Wilde asserted this philosophy partially in an attempt to justify his own lifestyle. For Wilde, homosexuality was not a sordid vice but rather a sign of refined culture. As he claimed rather romantically during his trial for 'gross indecency' between men, the affection between an older and younger man places one in the tradition of Plato, Michelangelo, and Shakespeare" (SparkNotes Editors).
2- In spite of his personal inability to resist living such a life, Wilde was against homoerotic and homophile relationships and this opposition is well represented in his *The Picture of*

Dorian Gray, where homosexual relationships are criticized together with their allegorical reference to colonialism. "An allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the 'literal' or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to communicate a second, correlated order of signification" (Abrams 7). Thus in this allegory, homosexuality has the "literal" or primary level of signification and colonialism communicates a second, correlated order of signification. If this true, then one can generalize that Wilde was also in favor of colonialism and British imperialism.

3- The works are not intended by Wilde to be allegories, and whether he was in favor of homosexuality or not is not relevant to his ideas about colonialism. In this case, he may or may not be a critic of colonialism and it depends on the reader or critic to infer and decide which.

Now it is time to create links between colonialism and (Greek) homosexuality. In *Homosexuality and Civilization* we read:

> In all history, no society has aroused the same enthusiasm as ancient Greece. This is a truism, yet the fact remains incontestable. Greek achievements in literature, art, and architecture set norms for the Western world for two thousand years. When we think, we still employ the intellectual categories its philosophers and scientists devised . . . And indeed, despite the importance of the subject, no book on Greek homosexuality was circulated openly in English until 1978. Christian Europe, from the fourth century onward, regarded same-sex relations as anathema, and its nations competed in devising punishments for "unnatural" crimes. Homosexuality became the *peccatum non nominandum inter Christianos,* "the sin not even to be mentioned among Christians" (Crompton 1).

Elsewhere in the book we read: "In Greek history and literature, on the other hand, the abundance of accounts of homosexual love overwhelms the investigator" (1-2), and that "Greek lyric poets sing of male love from almost the earliest fragments down to the end of classical times" (2).

> Though it has often been assumed that the love of males was a fashion confined to a small intellectual elite during the age of Plato, in fact it was pervasive throughout all levels of Greek society and held a honored place in Greek culture for more than a thousand years, that is, from before 600 BCE to about 400 CE . . . Mythology provides more than fifty examples of youths beloved of deities. Poetry and popular traditions ascribe such affairs to Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Hercules, Dionysus, Hermes, and Pan—that is, to nearly all the principal male gods of the Olympian pantheon. Only the war god Ares is (surprisingly) missing (Crompton 2).

"Phaedrus believes that no man would run away in battle if his lover's eyes were upon him: this would be too ignominious to imagine" (Crompton 3).

> The ancient Greeks had no word that corresponded to our word "homosexual." *Paiderastia,* the closest they came to it, meant literally "boy love," that is, a relation between an older male and someone younger, usually a youth between the ages of fourteen and twenty. The older man was called the *erastes* or lover. Ideally, it was his duty to be the boy's teacher and protector and serve as a model of courage, virtue, and wisdom to his beloved, or *eromenos,* whose attraction lay in his beauty, his youth, and his

> promise of future moral, intellectual, and physical excellence. In the *Symposium*, Phaedrus and the other speakers are always careful to use one term or the other as the occasion requires (Crompton 3-4).

"Were homoerotic themes popular in the classical Athenian theater? Here is Athenaeus' testimony on the point: `So active was the pursuit of love-affairs, since no one regarded erotic persons as vulgar, that even a great poet like Aeschylus, and Sophocles, introduced in the theater love themes in their tragedies— the first that of Achilles and Patroclus, the second that of the boys in *Niobe:* hence some call the tragedy *Paederastria* [sic] and the audience gladly accepted such stories`" (Crompton 51).

Literature Review

"Joseph Conrad was what we used to call a man's man. He was more comfortable with men than women" (Ruppel 1).

> So his stilted, insincere-sounding letters of courtship, his awkward and uncomfortable honeymoon, his unaffectionate, frequently dismissive references to his wife Jessie, the unconvincing representations of women and, especially, heterosexual relationships in his fiction, and his exclusion of women readers from his intended audience in the first part of his career might all be explained quite simply by that familiar phrase; after all, we might say, he was a "man's man." (Ruppel 1)

> Men clasp each other frankly by the hand, look deeply into one another's eyes, appreciate one another's physical grace, strength, and good looks, mourn each other's absence or death, and obsessively seek each other's companionship in ways that suggest homosexual love. His narrators—his fictional surrogates—are all bachelors, and most are obsessed with another man, frequently a younger man. Conrad dealt covertly but explicitly with homosexuals only in three works—"Il Conde," *Lord Jim*, and *Victory*—but he dealt with homosexual desire in many more . . . Conrad himself would have been horrified by the first statement—that he preferred intimacy with men—just as another writer born a generation before Conrad was horrified when he was "accused" of same-sex desire. Oscar Wilde visited Walt Whitman twice in 1882, when Wilde was twenty-seven and Whitman sixty-three. They both spoke highly of each other after each meeting, and Wilde bragged to a friend later that "The kiss of Walt Whitman is still on my lips" (Ellmann, 171). "Giving Whitman"—giving someone a copy of Whitman's poetry—became code for acknowledging one's homosexuality in England. And the word "calamite," used at the turn of the last century to denote a homosexual, originated with Whitman's frankly homoerotic "Calamus" poems (Ruppel 2).

"To argue that there is no homoerotic undercurrent among the crew in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, that Marlow could have manifested no sexual interest in Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, or that Denver, the mill owner in *Lord Jim*, is not sexually attracted to Jim is just as ahistorical as it would be to argue that Marlow or anyone else in Conrad's fiction is "gay" in the twenty-first-century sense of that word" (Ruppel 5).

> It could be argued that what has come to be known as the First Trial of Oscar Wilde, those three days in April 1895 which so captivated London society - they thronged the public galleries of the Old Bailey - changed the lives of British homosexuals more profoundly than anything else in the next three quarters of a century. They were certainly taunted with cries of 'Oscar, Oscar!' right up until the beginning of the First World War.
>
> Every generation needs its own heroes, and for three or four generations of gay men Wilde seemed to more than fit the bill. Indeed, until the emergence or 'outing' in the last twenty-five years of a more divergent range of role models - W. H. Auden, Alan Turing, Guy Burgess, Rock Hudson, Sir Ian McKellen, Chris Smith, M P, the black footballer Justin Fashanu - he was about all there was (David 5-6).

"Wilde's campness ('To write, I must have yellow satin'), the brittle archness of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the lush prose of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* played no small part in defining the dialect o f the tribe: 'All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That's his.' By contrast, the selfishness and spite apparent in *De Profundis* have been overlooked" (David 6).

> It changed for many other people too. Along with the sexually tormented homosexual poet Algernon Charles Swinburne and the artists James McNeill Whistler and Aubrey Beardsley, Wilde had personified the Aesthetic movement, a band of poets, would-be poets, artists and socialites who had added significantly to the gaiety of the nation since the late 1870s. There *was* an Aesthetic philosophy - it had its origins in the precious atmosphere of Oxford University in the early 1870s, in Immanuel Kant's notion of the essential disinterestedness of Art, and in the later writings of Théophile Gautier and Walter Pater — but, in the popular mind at least, this was soon replaced by far cruder slogans. The Aesthetes stood for 'Art for Art's sake', lilies and green carnations, blue-and-white china and the concept of 'the house beautiful'. Out on the street, in London and in Oxford, they were immediately recognizable by their long hair and their affected, adjective-rich vocabulary: *'blessed!'*, they'd say; *'divine!';* 'a *total* marvel!'; 'how *consummate!';* 'what a *precious!*' . . . (David 10).

"W. B. Yeats agreed.'The rage against Wilde', he told H. Montgomery Hyde, 'was also complicated by the Britisher's jealousy of art and the artist, which is generally dormant but is called into activity when the artist has got outside his field into publicity of an undesirable kind.' And it wasn't just Puritan, middle-class 'Britishers'. Wilde's fame was such that details of Queensberry's accusations were well-known and widely reported throughout Europe" (David 14).

> The writer Beverley Nichols recalled how in around 1914 (when he would have been in his mid-teens) he was discovered by his father reading a copy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* ' You *pretty* little bastard! You *pretty* little boy!' his father shouted at him. 'Oscar Wilde! To think that my son . . .' And then he spat on the book and ripped it apart with his teeth. Nichols protested - disingenuously by all the evidence, since the book was a gift from an older, overtly homosexual friend - that he knew nothing about Wilde. The next day his father enlightened him. 'That is what the man did,' he said, handing his son a sheet of paper on which was written: ' **ILLUM CRIMEN HORRIBILE QUOD NON,**

NOMINANDUM EST '. Nichols *fils*, who went on to read Latin at Oxford, construed this as meaning, ' The horrible crime which is not to be named' (David 31).

Analysis

In *Literary Theory: An Anthology* by Rivkin and Ryan, we read:

> "English," the name given the literary tradition of a body of work produced in the dialect of the southeastern region of an island off the west coast of Europe, supplanted the "Classics," the literature of two Mediterranean peninsulas dating back to over two thousand years ago, as the body of texts used in the cultural training of young professional men in Great Britain in the late nineteenth century. Instead of Homer, Aeschylus, Pindar, Seneca, and Cicero, men in training now read Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Wordsworth, and Eliot. This change might have been inconsequential enough had Great Britain not been the center of a global empire. But because of that imperial status, "English" soon became a very powerful global cultural institution (1071).

Oscar Wilde's reference to the ancient Greece and to all the non-Western classics at all, which is at the same time a positive reference, helps revealing his anti-colonial views. Just regard the following inference from Tyson's *critical theory today*:

> An example of Eurocentric language can be seen in the terms *First World*, *Second World*, *Third World*, and *Fourth World* to refer to, respectively, (1) Britain, Europe, and the United States; (2) the white populations of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and southern Africa (and, for some theorists, the former Soviet bloc); (3) the technologically developing nations, such as India and those of Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia; and (4) the indigenous populations subjugated by white settlers and governed today by the majority culture that surrounds them, such as Native Americans and aboriginal Australians (and, for some theorists, nonwhite populations who have minority status in "First World" countries, such as African Americans). Although these four "worlds" are commonly referred to today, we should be aware of their Eurocentric implications. Such language makes sense only if history begins with Europe and is organized in terms of European colonial conquest. It ignores the existence of earlier worlds, such as those of Greece, Egypt, and Africa, and it privileges European military conquest as the primary means of organizing world history (420).

Aestheticism has been driven from the Greek "pertaining to sense perception" (Abrams 4). It prefers art and literature to be far from morals and morality lessons; however, on the contrary, post-colonialism by acting vice versa, tries to exhibit lessons from life and morality that are mainly drawn from bitter colonial experiences. Yet, colonizers as well as aesthetics run away from moralities, especially in the literature. However, it should be reminded that they have a quite different reason for this: to prevent their colonies from gaining enough wisdom and clairvoyance and the consequent revolt.

"An attitude which hopes to derive aesthetic pleasure from an object is often thought to be in tension with an attitude which hopes to derive knowledge from it . . . this alleged conflict only makes sense when the aesthetic attitude and knowledge are construed unnaturally narrowly, and that when both are correctly understood there is no tension between them" (Schroeder 1).

Aesthetic movement was in favor of a useless literature free from moral maxims. Each literary text has its own specific readers, and the reading of its reader(s) is the means by which it comes into the life/existence. From a colonial point of view, the colonized constitutes the readership of a specific text; and the authorship of such a literature belongs to the colonizer or its agents. This literary text or book (such as the yellow book Lord Henry gives Dorian in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) serves the role of a colonial ideology used to influence, dominate, and finally colonize the colonized. In this situation, such a literature has no usage for the colonized as its reader, and lacks morality.

Regarding these, a straight, and at the same time reverse link can be imagined between the aesthetic movement and colonial enterprises. Yet, such a linkage between the colonizers and the aesthetics cannot be generalized to all the practitioners of the aestheticism; discovering existence or lack of such a relation demands new and different researches in this context, which are far beyond the present research that deals exclusively with the ideas of Oscar Wilde.

Conclusion

So far, we regarded a direct relationship between "colonialism" and "aestheticism". Thus, if "aestheticism" has also a direct relationship with "homosexuality", then "colonialism" has a direct relationship with "homosexuality" too:

Colonialism » Aestheticism

Aestheticism » Homosexuality

Colonialism » Homosexuality

"Wilde defended homosexual love as an emotion experienced by some of the world's greatest men. He insisted that it had its roots in ancient Greece and was, therefore, fundamental to the development of Western thought and culture. In his trial, when asked to describe the "love that dare not speak its name," Wilde explained it as:

. . . such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. . . . It is beautiful, it is fine, it is the noblest form of affection. There is nothing unnatural about it" (SparkNotes Editors).

In fact, Wilde defended aestheticism. As a proponent of the doctrines of Decadence, he advocated literature of Hellenistic Greece and Roman literature (which is also obvious in his advocacy of homosexuality) in which the prime of an age is about to decay. In addition, in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the aesthetic protagonist (Dorian) is represented in a state of decay, or rather decadence, which for an aesthetic writer or a proponent of Decadence is only a sign of prime.

"Given Wilde's increasingly indiscreet lifestyle and the increasingly hostile social attitudes toward homosexuality that flourished at the end of the nineteenth century, the reader can assume that Campbell's transgression is of a sexual nature:

> In 1885, the British Parliament passed the Labouchere Amendment, which widened prohibitions against male homosexual acts to include not only sodomy (which was punishable by death until 1861) but also "gross indecency" (meaning oral sex), an offense that carried a two-year prison term. Oscar Wilde himself was eventually found guilty of the latter offense. This new law was commonly known as the Blackmailer's Charter. Thus, Alan Campbell, a seemingly inconsequential character, serves as an important indicator of the social prejudices and punishments in Wilde's time" (SparkNotes Editors).

The West; i.e. the colonialism, tries to ignore classical antiquity and the ancient Greece as much as possible. On the other side, Wilde was in much favor of the classics; however, his reason was not a political or colonial one, but rather an aesthetic matter dealing with homosexual tendencies that was highly admired in those times. His admiration of the non-Western classics becomes one of the key elements leading to an anti-colonial interpretation of his works.

This can help to generalize that Wilde not only did not advocate colonialism and colonial ideology in his works, but also was against it.

"Wilde's ideal male relationship was that of affection and admiration between an older and a younger man. In his *Republic*, Plato has Socrates venerate male attractions and liaisons but condemn them being taken to the point of intercourse or orgasm. Within the conventions of Greek love the older man was expected to be strongly attracted to the young man's beauty and to court him with gifts, while the young man was expected to admire to older man as his model of wisdom and culture" (Sloan 17).

Further information about the above-discussed suggestion can be obtained from *Colonialism and Homosexuality* by Robert Aldrich. An example from the book would be helpful for further clarification of the subject:

> The links between colonialism and homosexuality often seem a paradigm of European men taking advantage of the colonial situation, and the benefits of foreign status, to extract sexual favours from foreign men or subaltern Europeans. Homosexuals thus appear complicit with the imperial order, and present-day commentators generally stress the more or less pronounced imperialist ideas of almost all Europeans overseas (Aldrich 367).

The "camaraderie between men fits into Wilde's larger aesthetic values, for it returns him to antiquity, where an appreciation of youth and beauty was not only fundamental to culture but was also expressed as a physical relationship between men" (SparkNotes Editors).

> What the followers of Alexander failed to achieve, the Romans accomplished during the next three centuries—the consolidation by force of arms of a farflung and stable empire. After their bitter struggle with Carthage for control of Sicily and the western Mediterranean, they were able to extend their rule first to Spain, north Africa, Macedonia and Asia Minor, and then to Gaul, Egypt, and Britain. Impelling the Romans to these victories was what Nietzsche was to call, admiringly, "the will to power," an overwhelming need to dominate . . . Inevitably, when the Romans encountered Greek civilization they encountered Greek homosexuality. Here, in particular, the two cultures diverged. The Greeks were able to conceive of love between an older and a younger male as a protective and affectionate mentorship, while the Romans, generally speaking, did

> not accord this privileged status to male relationships. There was no taboo of silence such as developed under Christianity—the Romans were quite willing to acknowledge the prevalence of same-sex desire. Indeed, the earliest Latin literature treats it quite openly (Crompton 79).

"On the contrary, homosexual relations were perceived primarily as a form of dominance, an extension of the will to power. We see this in early Roman comedy, where the same-sex intrigues are not between men and freeborn youths but exclusively between masters and slaves" (Crompton 80).

"Morality can serve as a measure of decline or advance in church life depending on one's perceptions. Moral issues such as homosexuality can dramatize divergent ideals and practices and become the basis of activism to correct perceived flaws in the church and the world (Sachs 2).

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