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THE BEST OF
Oscar Wilde

SELECTED PLAYS AND WRITINGS



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST
AN IDEAL HUSBAND
A WOMAN OF NO IMPORTANCE
LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN
SALOMÉ

WITH AN UPDATED INTRODUCTION BY SYLVAN BARNET

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Critical Writings

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Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was an outstanding student of classics at Trinity College; in 1874, he entered Magdalen College, Oxford, where he won the Newdigate Prize with his poem “Ravenna” (1878). An early leader of the “Aesthetic Movement,” which advanced the concept of “Art for Art’s Sake,” Wilde became a prominent personality in literary and social circles. His volume of fairy tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888), was followed by *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1892). However, it was not until his play *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1892) was presented to the public that he became widely famous. *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) confirmed his stature as a dramatist. In 1895, he brought libel action against the Marquis of Queensberry; during the trial, revelations concerning Wilde’s character were made. In May of that year, he was sentenced under the Criminal Law Amendment for homosexual acts. Upon his release in 1897, he settled on the Continent, where he wrote his most powerful and enduring poem, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898). For a more detailed chronology, see pages xxxix–xli.

Sylvan Barnet received his Ph.D. from Harvard University. A professor of English at Tufts University and a specialist in English drama, he is the General Editor of the Signet Classic Shakespeare series and the author or coauthor of many books, including *Types of Drama* (8th edition) and *An Introduction to Literature* (13th edition).

Introduction

A biographical note is printed at the front of this book, and a brief chronology of the life of Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (1854–1900) is appended to this introduction (pages xxxix–xli). At the outset it is enough to say that by April 1895 the Dublin-born Wilde had captivated the English-speaking world with his conversation, his lectures, his novel (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*), and his plays, two of which were running with great success in theaters in the West End of London. But his involvement with Lord Alfred Douglas (familiarily known as Bosie) and his subsequent conviction in April 1895 for homosexual offenses with several young men of low social position effectively brought his career to an abrupt end. After his release from prison—the term was for two years—he wrote only one significant work, a long poem entitled *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

SALOMÉ (AND SALOME)

As early as 1881 Wilde had encapsulated his entire career in a sonnet entitled “Hélas,” which served as an epigraph to his *Poems*, Wilde’s first significant book. Glancing at the echoes of Milton, Shelley, and others in this volume, Punch said, “The poet is Wilde, but his poetry’s tame,” and it must be admitted that there is something pretentiously schoolboyish in calling the epigraph “Hélas” rather than “Alas”; but the poem is wise beyond its years in its perception of the consequences of rejecting “ancient wisdom and austere control” in favor of a life subject to “all winds.”

To drift with every passion till my soul
 Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
 Is it for this that I have given away
 Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control?

• • •

Surely there was a time I might have trod
 The sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance
 Struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God.
 Is that time dead? lo! with a little rod
 I did but touch the honey of romance—
 And must I lose a soul's inheritance?

The sigh of the title and the note of self-criticism at the beginning are moderated in the last two and a half lines, where Wilde, quoting I Samuel 14:27 (Jonathan's confession that he has broken the fast imposed upon him by Saul), insists that his offense was slight and his punishment disproportionate. With hindsight one sees in the reference to the honey-tipped rod a phallic suggestion, but the passage must more generally be taken as concerned with the conflict between Christian asceticism and what Walter Horatio Pater (1839–94)—quoting this line of the Bible in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*—spoke of as “the artistic life with its inevitable sensuousness.” We will shortly return to Pater's *Renaissance*, which Wilde read in his first months at Oxford and which he characterized as a book that had “such a strange influence over my life,” but it is worth mentioning that Wilde as a playwright—especially as the author of *Salomé*—was also influenced by Pater's *Appreciations* (1889), where he read that a play “attains artistic perfection just in proportion as it approaches that unity of lyrical effect, as if a song or a ballad were still lying at the root of it.” With Pater's assertion of the primacy of lyric over dramatic writing, compare a remark in a letter Wilde wrote shortly after being released from Reading Gaol:

If I were asked, of myself as a dramatist I would say that my unique position was that I had taken the Drama, the most objective form known to art,

and made it as personal a mode of expression as the Lyric or the Sonnet, while enriching the characterization of the stage, and enlarging—at any rate in the case of *Salome*—its artistic horizon. . . . The recurring phrases of *Salome*, that bind it together like a piece of music with recurring *motifs*, are, and were to me, the artistic equivalent of the old ballads.

Wilde wrote *Salomé* in French, chiefly during a stay in Paris in fall 1891; he did not put the final touches on it until December of that year, after he had already completed *Lady Windermere's Fan*, but we can nevertheless begin with *Salomé* in our effort to see what he contributed to “enlarging” the “horizon” of drama. There is no reason to doubt his assertion that he discussed the subject of *Salomé* at lunch with André Gide and several other French writers and, warming to his own conversation, returned to his lodgings, wrote for several hours, supped, and then finished his draft of the play. In time he submitted a French text to Pierre Louÿs and to other French writers for revision, but their contributions apparently were slight; we have Gide's word that Wilde's French was excellent. In spring 1892 Sarah Bernhardt, in London, asked Wilde to read the play to her. After hearing it, she told him she wanted to act the title role, and the play went into rehearsal. Public productions of plays in England, however, had to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain, and *Salomé* was refused a license because it violated the centuries-old prohibition against portraying biblical characters, a prohibition originating in puritan opposition to the old Roman Catholic mystery plays. (Not until 1968 was this statute removed, though it had ceased to be enforced several decades earlier.) The production of *Salomé* was therefore dropped, but the play was published in France in 1893; in 1894 it was published in an anonymous English translation, dedicated to Alfred Douglas, with a cover design and ten illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. *Salomé* was first produced in February 1896, in France, when Wilde was still in prison. A Berlin production in 1902 was an enormous

success, as was Richard Strauss's operatic version, first performed in Dresden in 1905, and it is the opera rather than either the French play or the English translation that chiefly survives on the stage. The authorship of the English translation, by the way, is uncertain. Douglas prepared a version, but Wilde was dissatisfied with it; perhaps the anonymous version—often said to be by Douglas—is by Wilde himself, or is Wilde's revision of Douglas's attempt. (Henceforth, because I am talking about the translation, I will use the English spelling of the name.)

No reader or viewer today is likely to be shocked by the mere fact that a biblical episode is dramatized, but Wilde added to the story a shocking episode: Wilde's Salome kisses the decapitated head of Jokanaan (John the Baptist). There is nothing of this in the biblical sources, Matthew and Mark, or even in any of the later written versions, such as those by Flaubert, Huysmans, Heine, and Laforgue. In most of these versions, Salome (who is not named in the Gospels) is a minor figure, the tool of her mother, Herodias. It is Herodias who orders Salome to ask for the head of John (he had denounced Herodias because after the death of her husband she had married her brother-in-law, Herod) and—in some later versions—it is Herodias who kisses the head. Only in Wilde's version does Salome kill John out of frustrated love and then kiss the decapitated head. J.-K. Huysmans, however, in *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884), had called attention to the sketchiness of the figure in the Gospels and suggested that she could be understood only by "brains shakened and sharpened, made visionary as it were by hysteria." According to the central figure of Huysmans's book, only the painter Gustave Moreau had "realized" Salome, had revealed her as "a monstrous Beast of the Apocalypse, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning . . . all who came near her, all who see her, all who touch her." Wilde's sustained interest in perversity, or monstrosity, or criminality can scarcely be traced to any specific beginning, but he surely found in *À rebours* some confirmation of this interest.

It is worth looking very briefly at a few of Wilde's remarks about the relation of crime to art. In "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (1889), an essay about a man who poisoned several people, Wilde suggests that an artist of genius is scarcely subject to our ethical judgments. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) an aristocrat remarks that "crime" is to the lower classes "what art is to us, simply a method of procuring sensations." And one can turn to a letter, undated but probably of 1885 or 1886, in which Wilde says:

I myself would sacrifice everything for a new experience, and I know there is no such thing as a new experience at all. . . . Only one thing remains infinitely fascinating to me, the mystery of moods. To be master of these moods is exquisite, to be mastered by them more exquisite still. . . . There is an unknown land full of strange flowers and subtle perfumes, a land of which it is joy of all joys to dream, a land where all things are perfect and poisonous.

Or this, from an essay entitled "The Critic as Artist" (1891):

People sometimes say that fiction is getting too morbid. As far as psychology is concerned, it has never been morbid enough. We have merely touched the surface of the soul, that is all. In one single ivory cell of the brain there are stored away things more marvellous and more terrible than even they have dreamed of who, like the author of *Le rouge et le noir*, have sought to track the soul into its most secret places, and to make life confess its dearest sins.

These, and many other comments, relate Wilde to the hundred-year-old romantic tradition of men who, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's words, "venture at times into the twilight realms of consciousness, and . . . feel a deep interest in modes of inmost being," but the writer who

especially influenced Wilde was Walter Horatio Pater, and it is therefore Pater to whom we should briefly return.

Of Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873; retitled *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* in the second edition, 1877), Wilde said, according to W. B. Yeats, "It is my golden book; I never travel anywhere without it." As we have seen, Wilde read it in his first months at Oxford, and he could hardly have missed the celebrated Conclusion, in which Pater argues that external reality, apparently so solid, so evidently *there*, is utterly elusive and is perceived differently by each of us—and which in fact each of us perceives differently at different moments:

At first sight, experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects, pressing upon us with a sharp and importunate reality. . . . But when reflection begins to play upon those objects they are dissipated under its influence . . . loosed into a group of impressions—color, odor, texture—in the mind of the observer. . . . Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world.

Wilde often echoes this view, for example in an essay called "The Decay of Lying" (we reprint a portion of it) when he says, "Try as we may, we cannot get behind the appearance of things to reality," and in *De Profundis*, the long letter that he wrote to Alfred Douglas from prison in 1896:

It is in the brain that everything takes place. We know now that we do not see with the eyes or hear with the ears. They are really channels for

the transmission, adequate or inadequate, of sense impressions. It is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings.

What has this to do with *Salome*? One notices almost immediately that different characters in this play perceive the moon differently. For Herodias's page, the moon (in the second speech of the play) "is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman." For the Young Syrian, to whom the page speaks, the moon "is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. . . . One might fancy she was dancing." For Salome, the moon "is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower." For Herod, the moon "is like a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers." But for Herod's wife, Herodias, "the moon is like the moon, that is all." Similarly, when Salome sees Jokanaan, she says:

Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys,

but a moment later, after Jokanaan rebuffs her, she says:

Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall where vipers have crawled; like a plastered wall where the scorpions have made their nest. It is like a whitened sepulchre full of loathsome things.

In *Salome*, and especially when we are in Salome's mind, we are in the "unknown land . . . where all things are perfect and poisonous," the land of the mysterious brain in which "everything takes place." The style, or styles, that Wilde uses in *Salome* might in part be described by a passage from *Dorian Gray*, where Wilde comments on Huysmans's *À rebours*, which he characterizes as

a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own. . . . One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some medieval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner.

Huysmans's style, Wilde says, consists of "elaborate paraphrases" and "subtle monotony," terms that can be applied to much of *Salome*. More exactly, in *Salome* Wilde often uses a style that is supposed to remind us of the Bible with its repetitions, its lack of subordination, its unusual metaphors, and its catalogs. Here, for instance, is a passage from the Hebrew Bible:

Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain,

And here is Wilde's Jokanaan, prophesying the coming of Christ:

When he cometh, the solitary places shall be glad. They shall blossom like the rose. The eyes of the blind shall see the day, and the ears of the deaf shall be opened. The suckling child shall put his hand upon the dragon's lair, he shall lead the lions by their manes.

The real function of this style, however, is not merely to imitate the Bible but also to isolate the characters. Often the characters seem to be captivated by their own sentences, compelled to go on and on, and, surrounded by Pater's "thick wall of personality," they often seem curiously unaware of other characters, "each mind [to quote Pater again] keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world." The opening passage, which we have already glanced at, in which the Young Syrian and the

Page of Herodias comment on the moon, is only the first of many examples:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. How beautiful is the Princess Salome to-night.

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.

This is scarcely dialogue (an exchange of speeches) as any dramatist before the late nineteenth century conceived of dialogue. For another example of Wilde's "biblical" style we can look at part of one of Salome's speeches to Jokanaan:

It is thy mouth that I desire, Jokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and are redder than roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of doves who inhabit the temples and are fed by the priest.

The tower of ivory, the pomegranates, the blast of trumpets, the roses, the kings, the wine and the winepress, remind us of passages in the Bible; but even more important for Wilde's purpose is the sense, conveyed by this style, that, as in Pater's thought, Salome's varying perceptions or sensations of Jokanaan are all that she can know of Jokanaan. There is also in this passage an incantatory quality (we remember Wilde's pride in "the recur-

ring phrases of *Salome*, that bind it together like a piece of music with recurring motifs”), which Wilde felt moved the drama toward music, in accordance with Pater’s dictum that “All the arts aspire to the condition of music.” In *De Profundis* Wilde speaks of himself as an artist “making beautiful colored musical things such as *Salome*.” Earlier playwrights thought that they were making plays, chiefly out of plot and character. The reference to “beautiful colored things” reminds us that Wilde is, of course, also much influenced by the theories of the French Symbolists, which shaped not only lyric and dramatic poetry but also painting. Thus, in 1890 the French painter Maurice Denis—who was a close friend of the actor-manager who gave *Salomé* its first public performance—wrote words that were to become famous: “Remember that a picture—before being a war horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors arranged in a certain order.” That is, a work of art first of all is an independent creation, not an imitation of nature. In some of Wilde’s comments on art, this comes to mean that subject matter is irrelevant and that art is chiefly decoration, but often the point is that a work of art is something designed to evoke feelings (and pleasure) in the perceiver. (We will look again at this idea when we look at *The Importance of Being Earnest*.) To return to the passages on the moon: The different perceivers are not really describing the moon as it is, but are describing and conveying to us their feelings. Only Herodias sees the moon as merely the moon, and she is obviously the most vulgar person in the play—a person without, so to speak, a personality.

Salome, somewhat in the mode of Medea, Lady Macbeth, and Phaedra, is a figure whose powerful feelings are essentially destructive; but if she is a femme fatale, she is, like other tragic figures, to be judged not chiefly in ethical terms or in terms of worldly success but in terms of intensity of feeling. Salome is shocking when she strips the veils from her body, but this act of revelation is a sort of prelude to a more important revelation, the revelation of her innermost being, when she fully bares her passion by kissing the severed head: “I love

thee yet, Jokanaan, I love only thee." Although the comparison may sound outrageous, there is a kind of analogy here with King Lear, who also strips off his clothing as his mental experience becomes more and more painful, more and more extreme, until we are left with nothing but his passion. The intensity—far more than the ethical quality—of the tragic figure's experience is what makes the figure an object of awe in the eyes of the spectator. If we take Lear as a model and remember the tribute paid to this passionate man at the end of the play ("We that are young / Shall never see so much"), we can say that the tragic figure comes curiously close to subscribing to Pater's remark in the Conclusion of *The Renaissance*, "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end."

Herod, like Herodias, survives but he is presumably a broken man, a minor tragic figure (a sort of Creon, to Salome's Antigone?) who must live with the knowledge that he has done a deed of horror. (For all of its apparent unconventionality, *Salome* embodies the basic irony of a conventional tragic plot. Characters passionately desire something—Herod desires to see Salome dance, Salome desires the head of John the Baptist—and they get what they want; but they must pay a price greater than they had imagined.) Herodias alone is triumphant in the world (she loses her daughter, but we feel that she is chiefly concerned with humiliating Herod); she is successful because she is the most trivial person in the play. If she is in some ways the most "real" person in *Salome*, she is to the artist and to the audience the least interesting. "Nothing that actually occurs," Wilde wrote in 1884 "is of the smallest importance." Given his aesthetic views, Wilde might have said that no one who fails to feel intensely is of the smallest importance.

THE FOUR SOCIETY COMEDIES

Salome was not the first of Wilde's nine plays. As early as 1880 he had written *Vera; or The Nihilists*, a tragedy about a socialist who falls in love with a young man who turns out to be the son of the czar. Ordered to shoot

him, she instead commits suicide. The young man succeeds his father, with promises of social reform, so Vera's sacrifice is justified. The play is negligible as drama, but its political implications anticipate Wilde's essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) and the social interests of some of the comedies. His second play, *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), in the tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedy uses blank verse for the higher figures, comic prose for the lower, and all in all reads like a pastiche of Renaissance drama though it was seriously intended. But Wilde had already established himself as a literary personality, and especially as a witty speaker both at the dinner table and on the platform. His American tour, which occupied him during much of 1882, was a great success—a surprise even to his agent. The idea for a tour originated with Richard D'Oyly Carte, who thought that Wilde—regarded as the symbol of Art for Art's Sake—would furnish good publicity for D'Oyly Carte's production of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, a spoof on the Aesthetic Movement. Wilde, quite willing to exploit himself and to continue the role of the dandy already established in England by George (Beau) Brummel and Benjamin Disraeli, obliged by wearing a velvet jacket, knee breeches, and silk stockings (this garb was strictly for American consumption) and by lecturing on art and household decoration—as well as on dress reform and on the revolutionary Irish poets of 1848. His important writing begins in the late 1880s, and from 1888 to 1895 he produced most of the work for which he is remembered: stories, critical essays, a novel, *Salome*, and four witty plays—*Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband*, and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. After his arrest, conviction, and imprisonment in 1895, he produced chiefly letters—including the enormously long one, *De Profundis*—and in 1897, after his release from jail, the only poem of his that seems to have any popular reputation, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

It is to the four society comedies that we now turn. Wilde himself turned to this form at the suggestion of

George Alexander, a young actor-manager who, impressed by the witty conversationalist, urged Wilde to write a modern comedy. It should be mentioned that although there is no merit in the view occasionally suggested that much of the “poetic” language of *Salome* is intended as a parody, a few passages in *Salome* certainly were intended to be at least faintly amusing. A single brief example: “The Tetrarch does not care to see dead bodies save the bodies of those whom he himself has slain.”

Lady Windermere's Fan, written near Lake Windermere in fall 1891, combines Wilde's comic gift with his interest in social issues. The play had its premiere early in 1892, and though the critical reviews were mixed, it was a popular—which is to say a financial—success. The wit is evident enough even today, but the social commentary now seems so muted as to be almost invisible. We can begin with the wit. The chief epigrammatist is Lord Darlington, who says such things as “I can resist everything except temptation,” “[A cynic is] a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing,” and “Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about it.” Lord Darlington by no means speaks all of the epigrams, however, probably because Wilde could not resist the temptation to make the play sparkle throughout. Moreover, fairly early in the play Darlington reveals that he has feelings: He is in love with Lady Windermere and seeks to persuade her to leave her husband. This means that he is no longer entirely suited to act the role of the witty, apparently dispassionate commentator on life, and so in large measure the wit is then assigned to others, for instance to Dumby, who delights us with such lines as “The youth of the present day are quite monstrous. They have no respect for dyed hair.” Although wit, especially in the form of paradoxical and apparently unfeeling utterances, is an emblem of the dandy, the dandy is not to be regarded as a mere jester. Baudelaire's “Le Dandy” (1846) as well as other writings had argued that (in Baudelaire's words) “Dandyism is not, as many unthinking people seem to suppose, an immoderate interest in personal appearance and mate-