

You in Greek Days: Oscar Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, and the Hellenic Ideal

As much as the carefully- maintained and often outrageous personae adopted by Oscar Wilde could be said to be expressions of vehemently individual self-invention, Wilde was as much a product of his time as he was an aberration from its norms. His education at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Oxford, where he excelled in Classical scholarship, marked a lifelong interest in and identification with the Greeks. Indeed, Hellenic ideals, or his understanding of them, formed a large part of the metric by which he measured the world around him. From his student days onward, it was often through a Greek lens that Wilde began to explore and articulate his aesthetic sensibilities, and, somewhat more covertly, his homosexuality.

Wilde was hardly alone in this. In the previous generation of British academia, a growing liberalism, coupled with a trend towards Hellenophilia, had created an environment in which many young men of the elite found a new vocabulary – and one set on a lofty cultural pedestal—to express thoughts and feelings that could not be otherwise safely expressed. The homoerotic poems of William Cory, a master at Eton, enjoyed wide, if furtive circulation. John Addington Symonds, whose *Studies of the Greek Poets* was to have an enormous impact on a young Wilde, was then attending Oxford. He would later write and publish (at first privately) *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, which dealt in a frank and celebratory manner with themes which had only been alluded to in his earlier work: namely, the nobility, propriety, and masculinity of “Greek Love.”

Perhaps the most public expression of this confluence of underground Victorian sexuality and Hellenophilia, and the most disastrous, was the relationship between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. Both men were thoroughly immersed in Greek culture, having both studied Classics at Oxford, though only Wilde completed his degree. What is particularly fascinating about their relationship is how closely it maps to the Athenian idiom of the *erastes* and *eromenos*, and the related question of how consciously or unconsciously each fulfilled his role. Douglas, beautiful, irresponsible, and with a streak of cruelty, closely resembles the feckless *eromenoi* encountered (as Wilde and Douglas must have) in the lyric poetry of Ibykos and Theognis, as well as Plato’s *Symposium*.

Wilde, for his part, as an older, established, married man, quite satisfactorily fulfills the role of *erastes*, even to the point of his unswerving devotion, despite exasperation and eventual self-destruction, to a heartless youth. In his relationship with Douglas, Wilde, with varying degrees of self-realization, adopted the role of the *erastes* just as he had the role of the Great Aesthete, and later, the devoted family man.

In this paper, I explore Wilde’s relationship with Douglas through the lens of the *erastes/eromenos* dynamic, as well as the broader context from which it sprang – the unique confluence of Victorian academia, homosexual self- identity, and ancient Greek ideals.