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An Outline of Oscar Wilde's Reception in Greece[1]

Greece at the turn of the century was, a small newborn state[2] with a long and eventful history. It was big enough to show up on the Europe map but, although regularly toured by artists and academics, quite out-of-the-way. It was ruled by a Danish prince who was surrounded by a Bavarian court and a thin Greek bourgeoisie who had made their fortunes abroad, in trade. The intellectual elite was not enough to count and most of its members torn between a poor but stirring present and a magnificent but long-lost past. Its art and literature held a peripheral position in the European turmoil of the period. The desire of the young to break new ground was checked by their duty to recover and preserve their ancient tradition which appeared to them as the only possible way of bridging the gap between contemporary Greece and modern Europe. More often than not, this conflict between novelty and tradition, the present and the past, lead the ones to reluctance, the others to inconsistency and all to fanaticism. It was within this climate that Oscar Wilde's works were first read.

Wilde`s works arrived in Greece in the original English through Leipzig, and in French or Russian translations through Paris and Odessa.[3] However Wilde was made known to the Greeks through his scandal.

The early pieces in which his name was mentioned seem to already point at a somewhat committed interest in him. The first article on him was published anonymously on 8th March 1895 in the daily paper *Acropolis*. It was entitled "Platonic Love in Practice Between a Marquess and a Playwright." In spite of the irony in the title, it conveyed no clear point of view about the case it reported, which was indicative of the writer's infirmity of purpose. However, the ending was rather uplifting as it read, "after the trial, Wilde and Douglas fled to Paris."[4] Of course this was not true. But a happy ending to a grim story might be a way of committing oneself to a Wildean outlook rather than to the commercial principles of the editor who had commissioned the article.[5] The new trials were almost given full coverage in April, and from May to November more articles, systematically unsigned, came out commenting on the harshness of the sentence, reporting Wilde's declining health in prison, the circulation of

[1] In the present paper I propose to draw an outline of Wilde's reception in Greece through a succinct overview of the early articles referring to his life and works, a condensed account of the translations of the latter and their dramatic productions. The essay is partly based on E. Vernadakis, « Esquisse de la réception du théâtre d'Oscar Wilde à Athènes » in Sylvie Jouanny (ed.): *Théâtre européen, scènes françaises, culture nationale, dialogue des cultures*, L'Harmattan 1995. Most of the early translations and editions of Wilde's works as well as the stage productions of the above from 1990 to the present I found listed in an M.A. dissertation on Wilde's early reception in Greece defended by Aekaterine Iatrou at the University of Crete in 2005 (cf. Works Cited). Iatrou's detailed account of Wilde's early reception was most helpful.

[2] Recognised, under the London Protocol, as a free state in 1830.

[3] The first editions of Wilde's works in English registered in public libraries (i.e. National Library of Athens, Municipal Library of Athens etc.) as well as the ones still on sail at second hand booksellers are either French (by Mercure de France) or German (from the Library of "British and American Authors series" of the Bernard Tauchnitz's inexpensive reprints series). However, sometimes, when the original English or a French translation of it was not accessible the translators resorted to Russian translations. Thus, *A Florentine Tragedy* was translated from a Russian translation (in *Panathenaea*, 182, Apr. 30, 1908, pp. 34-42), by Agathocles Constantinides who had also translated Chekhov.

[4] in *Acropolis*, 4696 (March 8th 1895). In the same issue there is a translation of Queensbury's interview in *The New York Herald*.

[5] The editor of *Acropolis* had first commissioned Alexander Papadiamantes to report on Wilde's case. Papadiamantes now considered one of the most remarkable Modern Greek writers, could not make a living out of his fiction and endured hardship throughout his lifetime. In spite of his being in need, he declined the offer. The incident is reported by Aecaterini Iatrou in her BA dissertation: Αικατερίνη Ιατρού, in *Οι τύχες του Όσκαρ Ουάιλντ στην Ελλάδα*, (1895-1930), Διπλωματική εργασία, Ρέθυμνο, 2005, p. 6.

petitions for mitigation of sentence[6] and so on. Between 1896 and 1901 miscellaneous news were reported concerning Wilde's letters from prison,[7] *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis*.[8] No paper gave details on Wilde's release from prison and his death was not attached great importance. However, in 1909, instead of reporting the re-interment of his remnants from Bagneux to Père Lachaise, a chronicle signed by a respected writer and critic,[9] humorously discussed a hoax circulating in Athens claiming that Wilde was still living.[10] The critic obliquely addressed those who had been spreading the joke. Together with the previous false information,[11] the present hoax showed that some reporters as well as some of their readers seemed to be improving on reality. Quite in keeping with Wilde's own philosophy of art and life, the above incidents seem to show that the man and his works were quite a topical question during the first decade of the century.

Actually the literary reviews[12] regularly published translations of Wilde during this period, and the daily papers often hosted articles devoted to him. The press spoke of the 'Oscar Wilde phenomenon.' Thus, in one of the dailies it was possible to read,

> There can be no doubt that Oscar Wilde has started to become a conquering spirit among us [...] It has been rare for a foreign writer to become so widely and rapidly well-known here [...] In other countries, considered more advanced than ours, his work has taken longer to be appreciated. The young love and admire his work [...] Older people always show themselves more hesitant. Nonetheless, they cannot resist the fugue of youth and, convinced by its beauty, will also be transported by it.[13]

During this period his short φιψτιον was translated in full and published in various literary reviews in Athens and Nicosia as well as in papers of the Greek Diaspora, in Alexandria, Cairo and Constantinople. "The Nightingale and the Rose" was his first work to come out in translation[14] in *Panathenaea*, a literary review which from 1901 to 1922 also published "Maxims,"[15] "Phrases and Philosophies,"[16] "The Artist," [17] "The Master"[18] in two different translations,[19] "The Doer of Good" and the "Disciple."[20] *Noumas*, another literary

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[6] See *Acropolis* 4718, *Acropolis* 3-31-1895; *Acropolis* 4719, *Acropolis* 4-1-1895; *Acropolis* 4720, *Acropolis* 4-2-1895; *Acropolis* 4721, *Acropolis* 4-4-1895; *Acropolis* 4745, *Acropolis* 4-28-1895; *Acropolis* 4764, *Acropolis* 5-17-1895; *Acropolis* 4769, *Acropolis* 5-22-1895; *Acropolis* 4770, *Acropolis* 5-23-1895, *Acropolis* 4772, *Acropolis* 5-27-1895; and *Acropolis* 4955, 11-25-1895.

[7] *Panathenaea* 43, June 30, 1902; *Panathenaea* 107, March 15, 1905; *Panathenaea*150, Dec. 31, 1906, pp. 195-196 quoted by Aecaterini Iatrou in *op.cit.* p. 142.

[8] *Ο Ακρίτας*, 21, May 1905, p. 116.

[9] Paul Nirvanas.

[10] "The fortnight. Things to be said on both sides. Life and Death" in *Panathenaea* 201 Feb. 15 1909, p. 266.

[11] Concerning Wilde's flight.

[12] Short-lived reviews such as '*Ορμή* (Hormè, 'fugue'), *Κορυδαλλός* (Korydallos, 'Skylark'), '*Αλκαίος* (Alcæus) et *Δάφνη*, (Laurel).

[13] Article from 1908 in Ηλίας Βουτιερίδης (Helias Voutierides), quoted in Γιάννη Παπακώστα (Y. Papacostas), *Φιλολογικά σαλόνια και καφενεία* (*Literary salons and cafés of Athens*), 1880-1930, Athens, 1988, p.158.

[14] By Menandros, pen-name of Pericles Giannopoulos, (1869-1910). In *Panathenaea*, May 31, 1901. pp. 140-144. A minor writer of the turn of the century and an aesthete, Giannopoulos spent several years in both France and England before setting himself up as a journalist in Athens. He also translated works by Dickens, Baudelaire and Edgar Alan Poe.

[15] I.e. "A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated," *Panathenaea*, 107, Marc 15, 1905, p. 331. An unsigned translation.

[16] I.e. "Phrases and Philosophies for the instruction of the Young,"*Panathenaea*, 118, Aug. 31, 1905, pp. 266-267, also unsigned.

[17] *Panathenaea*, 139-140, Jul. 15-31, 1906, by Kimon Michaelides, a well-known art critic who covered painting exhibitions.

[18] *Panathenaea*, 139-140, Jul. 15-31, 1906.

[19] *Panathenaea,* 287-288, Sept. 19012, p. 292.

[20] *Panathenaea, 219, Nov. 1909, p. 76,* translated by Nicolas Poriotis, a co-editor of *Panathenaea* who had also translated *Salomé* (see bellow) as well as Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Maeterlinck, D'Annuzio, Shakespeare

review, published new translations of almost all the above pieces within the same period.[21] "The Young King" came out in *The Truth*,[22] a daily paper of Chios, "The Happy Prince" in *New Life*, an Alexandrian paper,[23] "The Devoted Friend" in the Cypriot daily *Freedom*, "The Selfish Giant"[24] and the "Happy Prince"[25] in the Athenian paper *Hellas* which issued a still new translation of "The Nightingale and the Rose."[26] Within the same years, the review *Art Gallery* (*Πινακοθήκηκη*) also published "The House of Judgement," "The Sphinx Without a Secret," and "Letters from Reading."[27]

In actual fact an enthusiasm for Wilde swept Athens between 1908 and 1910 for besides the numerous articles and translations hosted by the reviews during this period, Wilde had his Athenian 'disciples', who would meet at *Byron's*, a literary Café. Called 'Wildists', they even published their own review, called *The Anemone*, which included Palamas among its collaborators. This cult for Wilde provoked a reaction among the unco' guid. The daily paper '*Εστία* (*Hestia*, the Home), published on 28th 29th May 1910 two spiteful articles 'Oscarwildismes' and 'The Flesh, oh the Flesh !'. The author of the latter, Spyros Melas, demanded the intervention of the Public Prosecutor to ban *Anemone* and put a brake on this extravagant cult. These interventions, however, did not in the least reduce the enthusiasm of the Athenians for Wilde.[28]

It may happen that a piece of foreign literature be translated several times in Greek. However, as far as Wilde's translations are concerned, the occurrence is out of all proportion. The "Preface" to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* circulated in pamphlet form and in various translations between 1910 and 1911 before the publication of the novel[29] which was first translated by Stavros Stagos and published in 1914[30], then by Leander Palamas[31] in 1916, then anonymously in 1918[32] and 1922,[33] and the year after as a book translated anew by Nicolas Callergis-Maurogenis.[34] (Up to the present day the novel has been retranslated eleven times over[35] and most translations reprinted.) The same occurrence may be noticed with the *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* first translated in 1906,[36] then in 1916 and[37] thenceforwards

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and Molière.

[21] including "The Disciple," (in Vol. 392, May, 1910, p. 7. The translation is signed by the initials Α. Γ.) "Phrases and Philosophies…," (Vol. 75, May 1907, p. 58. An unsigned translation.), "The Nightingale and the Rose" (Vol. 433, April 24 1911, p. 266-269).

[22] Aug. 27, 1910 translated by Victor Zenon.

[23] *Νέα Ζωή*, 8-9, 331-339.

[24] Vol. 323, March 29, 1912, p. 7.

[25] Vol. 103, Nov. 13, 1909.

[26] April, 15, 1912.

[27] See Aecaterini Iatrou, *op. cit.* pp. 150-151.

[28] See in regard to this review Mario Vitti, op.cit. p. 271. See also the article by Φ. Γιοφύλλης, « Τα λογοτεχνικά καφενεία των Αθηνών » [*The literary cafés of Athens*] in *Πολιτισμός*, 26th December 1921.

[29] By Stephanos Pargas as "Opinions" and published as a leaflet in Alexandria in Jan. 1911, In Athens it was translated by Emmanuel Magakis and published in *Anemone* in 1910.

[30] In *Papyri* 3, Constantinople, March 1914.

[31] In *Art and Theatre*.

[32] *Cosmos*, (a literary review published by the Greek community in Constantinople) Vol. 3, Aug. 29, 1918. Translated by Nicolas Kakkonaeos, pen name of M. Karekos.

[33] In *New* Life, an Alexandrian literary review (*Nea Zoe* vol. 11-12, Jan. 2, 1922). The translation was not signed.

[34] Νικόλαος Γρ. Καλλέργης – Μαυρογένης; Athens, Εκδώσεις Ζηκάκης 1923

[35] By G. Tsocopoulos, Athens, Agyra, 1918 ; Constantine Carthaeos, Athens, Gianiaris, 1930; Stathis Speliotopoulos, with an introduction by Frank Harris, Athens, Govostis 1940 (reprinted several times) ; Nicolas Catzias, Athens, Kerameus, 1950 ; Epameinondas Caouris, Athens KM 1954; Johannes Vyzantios, Athens, Delta, 1961; Annica Fertaki, Athens, Agyra, 1971; Sparta Gerodemos, Athens, Hermeias, 1992; Pauline Panaretos, Athens, De Agostini Hellas, 2000 ; Dimitri Gyzas, Athens, Smili, 2000; Crassas Leonidas, Athens, Hellenike Ekdotike, 2005, Georgia Arvaniti, Athens, Metaechmion, 2006.

[36] In three instalments in *Noumas*, 213, 214, 215 Sept. 1906. The translation was not signed.

[37] In four instalments Vols. 595, 596, 597 and 598, July-Sept. 1916 translated by Constantine Karthaeos.

republished as a book in ten different translations,[38] including one by the sandal-maker poet of Athens Stavros Melissinos in 1970. *De Profundis* was first published in 1907 in an incomplete version in *Panathenaea*,[39] then in 1910 in a fuller version[40] and again in 1922[41]. Then in the twenties and early thirties *De Profundis* was almost yearly republished; it became a classic piece to read for the Greeks during the Holy Week. Not only had Wilde's works been translated in full by the end of the twenties, but some of them had been so up to eleven times over.[42] Furthermore, from 1910 to 1930 most of them came out as individual volumes, sometimes in elaborate editions as for instance the 1917 illustrated volume of his *Collected Stories*.[43]

In the twenties and thirties criticism on Wilde was undertaken by his translators by way of introductions to their translations of his works. Aside from these, several Greek writers devoted significant articles on Wilde. Xenopoulos, Lapathiotis and Palamas are probably the best remembered of as their opinion had some impact on the early reception of Wilde's translations and the productions still to come. In 1907 Gregorios Xenopoulos, a leading figure in the Greek letters, published a long article on the uselessness of art in *The Picture of Dorian Gray,*[44] while the novel had not yet been translated. In 1908 Napoleon Lapathiotis,[45] a devoted admirer of Oscar Wilde, wrote some exalted pages on Wilde, praising his relationship with Alfred Douglas whom Wilde "adored as one may adore a rose." He acclaimed the disturbing qualities of *Salomé* whose music was rising "straight from the depths of [Wilde's] soul."[46] The poet Costes Palamas[47] published a memorable paper on Wilde's sensuousness entitled "A Sequel to the Same Old Story."[48] In this he declared that Wilde was an inheritor of Milton's craft and that his writings should be placed next to those by Byron, Shelley and Keats. Although he called him "a sinner," Palamas tried to vindicate Wilde's honour by referring to his literary genius and his straightforwardness. His paper closes on the hypocrisy of the English, perhaps hinting at that of the Greeks, too, in concluding that: "At least, what Wilde did, he did it quite openly."[49]

Salomé, was Wilde's first play to be produced on a Greek stage. It was translated by one of the most gifted translators of the period, Nicolas Poriotis, and published in 1907 in *Panathenaea*, from which five hundred copies had been abstracted for separate sale. Poriotis had made his translation from the English version of *Salomé*, and not from the original French. He did not take into account the archaisms in the original which the two varieties of Greek (*katharevoussa* and demotic) would have rendered. Nor did he use the Greek of the

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[38] Marpouzoglou in 1916, Valsamides in 1919, Regas Gartaganes in 1952, an anonymous translation published by Difros in 1958, Panagiotis Antonopoulos and Gregory Leptakis in 1970, Stavros Melissinos in 1970, Nicolas Papaconstantinou in 1980, Michael Kokkinos in 1984 and Georgios Zafeiris in 1940.

[39] *Panathenaea*, 157, Apr. 15, 1907, pp. 3-7, translated by Paul Nirvanas who signed by his initials.

[40] in ten instalments in the literary review *Laurel*, by Constantine Ouranes *Ibid*.

[41] Vol. 754, Feb. 1, 1922, translated by A. Dionas.

[42] Eleven translations of the prose poem "The artist" were published on various reviews between 1901 and 1920. "The Nightingale and the Rose" was available in four translations (by Maeandros in 1901, Migoules in 1911, A. P. Michas in 1912, anonymously in 1917).

[43] *Collected Stories,* Translated by Elmina Xanos, illustrated by Theodore Triantaphyllides, Athens, Hestia 1917.

[44] Gregorius Xenopoulos, "The Useless" in *Corn and Poppies*, *I*, Athens, Hestia, 1923, p. 94-100 quoted by Αικατερίνη Ιατρού, *op.cit.* p. 45.

[45] N. Lapathiotis, "Love and Religion: The Universal Tragedy in *Salomé*, the Work of the Great Writer" in *Hesperini*, June 8, 1908. "Oscar Wilde" in *Hellas,* vol. 50, Sunday, Nov. 9, 1908.

[46] "Love and Religion: The Universal Tragedy in *Salomé*, the Work of the Great Writer" op. cit. p. 7, quoted by Aecaterini Iatrou in *op.cit*. p. 48.

[47] Wilde had read at least one of Palamas's poems translated by E. M. Edmonds in *Greek Lays, Idylls, Legends* a book he reviewed for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the May 27, 1885.

[48] In the news paper *Free Discourse*, Aug. 1924, quoted by Aecaterini Iatrou in *op.cit*. p49.

[49] Ibid. p. 50.

original for Wilde's quotations from the New Testament. Since the foundation of the Greek state the "language question" had been a critical issue which reflected the conflict between the liberals who championed Demotic and the conservatives who considered it a peasant dialect and defended the purified Katharevousa, a construct halfway between ancient Greek and Demotic. Poriotis, as the huge majority of Wilde's translator's, was an activist in the cause of the popular language, and as an ardent defender of Demotic, he was blind to the possibilities that ancient Greek and the varieties of modern Greek offered by *Salomé* when translating the tensions within the text. In reality, at the moment it was difficult, not to say impossible, to envisage a happy cohabitation between the Greek of the people and the expurgated version. They came to function less like variations of language and more like dialectic class signifiers in conflict, each the property of political groupings. It was difficult to steer nuances here, for the language question inflamed passion. For example, four years before the appearance of *Salomé* in Greek, the demotic translation of the *New Testament* had brought the reactionary students into the streets to lay siege to the house of Palamas, one of the most highly regarded of the poets, shouting 'Excommunication and Death to the vulgarisers!'[50] Poriotis' translation of Salomé was then one of the first text in Demotic to be highly praised by the critics for that matter. Wilde was therefore connected with the struggle of the Greeks for the establishment of Demotic.

Salomé was directed by Thomas Economou, director of the Royal theatre between 1901 and 1908. The strict regulation of this theatre in favour of using the 'purified' Greek language (*katharévoussa*) made any innovative approaches difficult for a director. Thus as soon as he left his post in March 1908, together with a group of actors who had left the Royal Theatre with him, he went on tour to Smyrna, Samos, Simi, Rhodes and Egypt with a first production of the Importance of Being Earnest under the title *Bunburisms*. However, as soon as he returned to Athens he announced a production of *Salomé* in Poriotis' highly praised translation which was reprinted for the occasion in *Hesperini*, the daily with the largest circulation at that period. In the Athenian public there was an interest, or more simply a curiosity to see upon the stage the play by this Irishman which had been forbidden by the English censorship. At the end of May, the fuss grew larger when the Holy Synod also wished for *Salomé* to be banned. In the upshot, by way of pronouncing on the morality of the work, the Director of the National Police Force was ordered to confiscate the text from the actors. The press became aware of this and to avoid a scandal, the text was swiftly restored to the company—purged of 'certain isolated words.'[51] The evening before the première, a new eulogy of the Poriotis translation of *Salomé* was carried by the daily paper *Acropolis* over a column on the front page, with a commentary on Wilde's play taking up three columns. The author of the commentary congratulated the director on his choice, as announcing the arrival of a new spirit that the playhouses of Athens badly needed. The tone was one of enthusiasm, and the structure feeling an exalted one.[52] Two days later, the papers were talking all the time about *Salomé*; but now the tone had changed: for enthusiasm, there was substituted disappointment; for exaltation, irony.

[50] In N. Βέης, *Νέα Εστία,* Christmas 1943, p. 89.
[51] *Ακρόπολις* (*Acropolis)* 6164, 3rd June 1908, p. 3.
[52] Is it boldness that suddenly stirs the stagnant waters of the Dead Sea of our theatres? Is it from effrontery that poetry blows upon our stages to reinvigorate them ? [...] *Salomé* is the work of an author of genius – by a man in anguish!*Ακρόπολις (Acropolis)* 6166, 5th June 1908, p. 1.

The orchestra might as well have been replaced by a barrel-organ [...] As for Salomé's famous dance, it saw itself transformed into a *sirtaki*[53][…] [54]

Economou's work on Wilde's plays was never very happy. On 9th September 1908 he opened his season with a rather poor translation of *A Florentine Tragedy* at the Municipal Theatre in Athens. One might suggest that his choice, rather a programmatic one, of this author was motivated less by a real taste for his work than by his keenness to produce it for more superficial reasons, such as doing what his predecessor Constantine Christomanos, the Antoine of Greek theatre who proclaimed himself a fervent admirer of Oscar Wilde, had not been able to do in his lifetime for want of translations.[55]

In March 1914, Cybele, a former pupil of Christomanos, produced the *Florentine Tragedy* with her company at the Varieties Theatre[56]. The critics praised the art and grace of the actress who, two years later, gave the première of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, staged the year before in London. In order to follow closely the European model, instead of an original drama, Cybele preferred an adaptation which nevertheless filled the seats of her theatre. Often indulgent towards her, this time the critics did not forgive her this choice. They condemned the poor quality of the adaptation, made twice as bad by the mediocrity of the production and of the acting which hardly convinced.[57] In contrast, the demotic translation by Leander Palamas, son of the poet, became the object of encomia in many newspapers. All the same, a journal noted a number of grammatical points that took too many liberties. As a result, the translator felt obliged to defend himself in a heated article, associating art and patriotism, which embroiled Wilde for the second time in the battles for the establishment of demotic.[58] A year later, the critics retrieved their tenderness towards Cybele who, in April 1915, took the risk of staging *An Ideal Husband* at her own theatre, and this is the play of Wilde's that would become the most produced in Greece. *Salomé* remained, however, the most staged in Athens. The reviews of the 1920s reflect the fascination of this play by Wilde through the number of articles that they dedicated to it, and which are, for the greater part, illustrated.[59]

The twenties was a febrile period for Greece, nourished by Cavafy, Sikelianos, Kazantzakis and Varnalis, authors whose work is often held between a sensual materialism and a fascination for the mystical. Dominant in the literature of the period, these tendencies

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[53] In order to make visible the irony of the original text I have used an anachronism in translating the Greek ζεϊμπέκικο by 'sirtaki'. In both instances dances are invoked: the first, *Zeïbekico,* was danced by the caste of *rébétes,* whereas the second, the *sirtaki*, was invented in the 1960s to be danced by Anthony Quinn in *Zorba the Greek*.

[54] *Ακρόπολις (Acropolis*)2 6168, Saturday, 6th June 1908.

[55] Christomanos studied philosophy in Vienna where he was part of the literary circle of the *Wiener Rundschau*, a review of which he was editor-in-chief between 1898 and 1899. Under the direction of Christomanos Wilde held an exceptional place in this publication if one can judge from the number of articles devoted to him. the intelligent working out of Christomanos' productions was amply fuelled by the æsthetics and ideology that Wilde develops in *Intentions.* See a monograph devoted to this director by Myrto Mavrikiou-Anagnostou, *Constantin Christomanos* and the *'Nea Skini'*: Athens 1964, and A. Sahinis, *Η Πεζογραφία του αισθητισμού* (*The Prose of Æstheticism*), Athens 1981, Part II 'Greek Prose Writers', 'Constantin Christomanos' p. 352. Economou's fixation on Wilde, whose *Earnest* he reprised the following year at the Popular Theatre, perhaps reflected his admiration for Christomanos.

[56] In a translation by A. Constantinides.

[57] Pavlos Nirvanas wrote, "Unfortunately, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was a disappointment for those who knew the poetry of the novel of the same name. Let us hurry to re-read the novel"*Τέχνη και Θέατρο* 4, 18th June 1916, pp. 50-51.

[58] In the Journal *Έθνος* (The Nation), in Γιάννη Παπακώστα (Y. Papacostas), op. cit. pp. 155-7.

[59] Thus, by way of an example, in *Νέα Εστία* (Néa Héstia), 2nd year vol. 12, 15th June 1928, p. 532-535, one finds a long article on the designs by Vassos for an edition of *Salomé* published by E.P. Dutton (New York, 1928). On the same tack, again in *Νέα Εστία*, vol 21, pp. 968-9, there was an article on the canvasses of Nelli Kyriakou inspired by the play: Vertiges, John the Baptist, The Dancer …

become tied together in a '*mal de vivre'* in the work of Polydouri or, again, of Kariotakis, who put an end to his own life. These tendencies reflect the inspiration, the location in literary work and the fall of what was called 'the Great Idea'—a visionary nationalist aspiration that aimed at the liberation of all Greeks under Turkish rule, the reestablishment of the Byzantine empire and the recovery of Constantinople. *Salomé*, where the conflict between sensual materialism and fascination for the mystic is revealed in the intrigue, reflects the preoccupations of the period; what was being made from the new realities.

Salomé was produced in October 1922 at the Municipal Theatre of Athens. The title role was taken by Marica Cotopouli, Cybele's rival, and all Athens spoke of a 'great success.'[60] Nevertheless, it was not this production that remains the most famous in the annals of Athenian theatre but that by the company of the Odeon Theatre given three years later on 21st March 1925 at the National Theatre in the same Poriotis translation. The χορηγέτης, the 'Chorus leader' – an 'atticism' of the period used to describe the director – was Spyros Melas, who fifteen years earlier had demanded that the Public Prosecutor should take action against the 'Wildists' and their review ... Responsible for the company since January of that year, Melas – he also – wished to follow the example of Christomanos and to present works of quality in elaborate productions. *Salomé*, which remained on the programme until the end of the season, was an outstanding success. [61]

Towards the end of the 1920s, when a third *Salomé* was created in Athens[62] by Helen Halcoussi, people began to form an idea of impact of Wilde's works on Greek cultural thinking. From 1927 and into the first years of the next decade, we find numerous articles which explore the 'Oscar Wilde phenomenon', if not in a critical fashion, then at least retrospectively.[63]

The 1930s saw nine Wilde productions: three of *A Florentine Tragedy*, three of *An Ideal Husband*, the simultaneous staging of *Lady Windermere's Fan* by two companies and the first production of *A Woman of No Importance*. Divided between independent companies and the subsidised theatre, Wilde's work henceforth was part of the classic repertory of Greek theatre. The game at the present time did not so much lie in seeing Wilde produced as such, but more in research and the refinement of this. One notes that the period when the plays of Wilde were considered old-fashioned in France[64] coincided with the period of their greatest success in Athens.

Lady Windermere's Fan, given at the Royal Theatre in 1937-8 season, was a new outstanding success. The director of this production,[65] had worked with a new translation[66] with a galaxy of actors whose names are legendary even to-day.[67]

An Ideal Husband was produced again three times during the 1940s, and we add to the count a new adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Néa Skini ('New Stage'), at that time directed by Melina Mercouri. As well as these, there were produced *The Importance of*

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[60] Preface by Poriotis in the 'new' edition of *Salomé* (Τα έργα, Τα Άριστα γράμματα, Athens, 1925).

[61] Στάθης Σπηλιωτόπουλος (Stathis Spéliotopoulos), *Όσκαρ Ουάιλντ, Θέατρο ΙΙ,* (Oscar Wilde, *Theatre II*) Ίκαρος (Icarus - publisher), Αθήνα (Athens) s.d., 'postface on *Salomé*', pp. 343.

[62] Actually in Phaleron.

[63] As for example in *Εβδομάς*, (*Evdomas,* 'The Week') 288, du 7 avril 1933p. 831 or, again in the same journal, 257, 9th June 1933, p. 1054.

[64] Robert Merle, *Oscar Wilde* ; Paris ; Perrin, 1984, p. 339.

[65] Dimitri Rontires.

[66] By Vassili Heliopoulos.

[67] Helen Papadakis – the Herodias of the 1925 *Salomé* –, Dimitri Myrat, Manos Katrakis, Alexis Minotis, and, above all, the *tragédienne* Catina Paxinou.Paxinou gained an Oscar as supporting actress in 1943 in Sam Wood's film *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and the Prix Jean Cocteau in 1947 for her interpretation of Christine Manon in the film by Dudley Nicols *Mourning Becomes Electra.* She also played the mother of Rocco in the film by Visconti *Rocco e suoi fratelli* (1961).

Being Earnest,[68] *A Florentine Tragedy* by the Royal Theatre and *A Woman of No Importance* by the Art Theatre company of Carolos Koun– seven productions in all. Carolos Koun was one of the greatest directors in Greek theatre. His production of *A Woman of No Importance* made a great impression.

There was no great director of Greek theatre whom Wilde left cold. After Carolos Koun, *A Woman of No Importance* was staged by Michael Cacoyannis at the Cybele Theatre for the 1953-1954 season. This is an extract from the criticism that appeared in the review *Greek Creation*:

> In the international repertory, the works of Wilde present handsome challenges for both directors and actors [...] Wilde was a Victorian in rebellion against himself [...] and from his plays, in spite of their apparent carefree air, there emanates from time to time the distress of a man who at the same time loved himself and hated himself. Wilde loved his age with all its prudery [...] even when his Irish blood roused him against it. [...] Wilde's battles with himself, the cult of beauty for beauty's sake on the one side, and, on the other, the quest for truth and ethical values for his theatre, give to his plays the personal face of their author and assures their floating free from their epoch. In spite of appearances, his dramatic works show themselves to be prototypes of the new comedy: elegant, superficially *sans gêne* and completely self conscious, their characters are the forerunners of the responsible heroes of our age [...] In the performance at the Cybele Theatre, the attempt of Michael Cacoyannis to attain a wildean ensemble was obvious, and for the most part, successful.[69]

As a decade of confrontations, the 1960s were controlled for the Greeks and their readiness to rebel by the coup d'état in April 1967. In the run-up to the Colonels' seizing power and even during the military regime, the dramatic work of Wilde was played in its entirety.[70] During this period, Athens was literally plunged into Wilde theatre: for the Athenians, and for a reason that awaits discovery, the Beatles years were also the Wilde years.

The following decade saw, in 1971, a dramatic confection composed of extracts from several of Wilde's works called *The Importance of being Oscar Wilde*[71]; a production – which I have not succeeded in dating – of *Salomé* by the Theatre of Four; and, finally, in 1976, after the fall of the military *régime* and despite a political effervescence that pushed works that were not politically engaged into the background, a dramatic adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Dimitri Potamitis' Research Theatre remained in the programme for a whole year.

The 1980s saw four productions of Wilde works: two plays and an adaptation. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol,*[72] *Lady Windermere's Fan* By Voutsinas and *Salomé*[73] mounted in 1983 by a company of young actors at the Lykabettus theatre, then by Nouria Espert's company at the *Odeion* of Herod Atticus in September 1985.

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[68] By Vasso Manolides' company.

[69] *Ελληνική δημιουργία;* XIII, 148, 1954, p. 443.

[70] One can number nine productions in Athens: the company of the State Theatre of Northern Greece staged *Salomé* and *A Florentine Tragedy* in Athens in 1961-2. *Lady Windermere's Fan* was staged in a new production by Dimitri Volanakis by Elsa Vergi's independent company in 1964-5 at the Vergi Theatre and reprised in the summer of the same year, with a slightly different cast, at the Pallas Theatre. *A Woman of No Importance* was given, also in 1964-5, by Maria Alkaio's company at the Municipal Theatre in Piræus before setting of on tour in the following year. *An Ideal Husband* was produced by the National Theatre in its houses for the 1967-8 season and was reprised with a different cast in the following year at the Municipal Theatre in Piræus. Xenia Calogeropoulos' company mounted *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Orvo Theatre in 1968-9. Finally, the National Theatre closed the decade with a new production of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1969-70.

[71] By the Studio-Theatre of Dimitri Constandinides

[72] Adapted for the stage by Savvas Axiotis at the Border Theatre.

[73] Produced in 1982-3 by Andreas Voutsinas at the Kappa Theatre.

The experimentation which the directors wished to put to the test was not well received by the public. Nor did it convince the body of critics, which showed itself lukewarm, above all with regard to the work by Voutsinas which, to be sure, aroused the anger of a number of commentators. Thus *Nea Hestia* published an inflammatory on the subject of this director in the shape of an ironic letter which Wilde might have sent to the editor from Hades.

> [...] Saint Genesius, actor, martyr and patron of our profession, has not refused me the right to ascend to earth to see my first night [Voutsinas' *Lady Windermere's Fan*]; more than that he threw me a sad glance and said 'Do you really want to? [...] The other day, Mnesarchos' son [i.e. Euripides] spoke to me of a director who has transformed his *Helen* into a circus show. It is the same one who has staged your play. He has an appropriate name which means 'to give kicks with his clogs to oxen'[74]and which bodes nothing good.' I replied that my play need fear no perfidious treatment [...] St Genesis was right. This man has truly boiled down my play [...] it is like flat champagne [...] My neighbour whispered 'This man has taken the mystery out of Wilde!' His admiring tone irritated me more than his suggestion – and from Wilde I became – Wilder. I returned directly to Hades and with Euripides, son of Mnesarchos,[75] we have cut two branches from Tantalus' fig tree – they make excellent beaters – and we will await his arrival at the gates of Hades – for his future is the same as ours – of the one who gives oxen kicks with his clogs. Please say nothing of this to him, as we wish to give him a surprise.[76]

In 1991 the New Stage of the National Theatre staged *An Ideal Husband.*[77] According to an inventory drawn by Aecaterini Iatrou[78] during the same decade were also produced *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1991, then again in 1997 by two different groups, a dramatisation of The Fisherman and his Soul in 1997, and of all the tales from *A House of Pomegranates* in 1997, then "The Selfish Giant" alone in 1997, 1998 and 1999, "The Starchild" in 1998-1999 and eventually "The Canterville Ghost" in 1999.[79]

Greece was given a prominent position in Wilde's Works; it was only right that Modern Greece gave Wilde a prominent place in its literary landscape. Wilde found his way in the makeup of its new realities though the numerous translations of his books whose excellence haunted several writers of the early century.[80]

For a century and a half, the townscape of Athens, once the metropolis and cradle of theatre, has been progressively transforming itself into a modern capital. Inquisitive, innocently affected and a little gauche like a real provincial, it appears through the openings made by its theatre like that Jerusalem of *Salomé*, peripheral city of a great empire, where Wilde's tetrarch is eager for news from Rome: 'You, Tigellinus, who have been in Rome...' The views of the critics occasionally sound like those of the soldiers, Jews and Nazarenes in this same *Salomé*: they too repeat what they have by hearsay concerning things about which they are ignorant or only know wrongly. But in the reception that Athens reserved for the theatre of Wilde, the voices of the court of a distant province are from time to time concealed by that other voice that cried from the desert and which the Athenians so well heard.

In spite of its modest condition, Athens demonstrated its own character. It recognised, well in advance of other European capitals, the 'classic' value of a theatre too long considered

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[74] This is effectively the sense, if not etymologically at least phonetically of the name *Voutsinas*.
[75] Wordplay with the name Mnesarchos, whose root [–mnés-] evokes memory (c.f. amnesiac) – hence 'we won't forget him'.
[76] Article published in *Néa Hestia* op. cit., vol. 122, 1330, 1982, pp. 1642-1644.
[77] under the direction of G. Remoundos.
[78] *Op. cit.* pp. 163-4.
[79] In Aecaterini Iatrou *op. cit.* p. 164.
[80] Penelope Delta, for instance, adopted not only the idiosyncratic grammar of the best among Wilde's translators, but also his sensitive and sensuous aesthetics which, in spite her special style, filter through her books for children.As in *A Tale Without a Name* (1911).

old-fashioned or of the second rank. Athens also showed its uniqueness in demonstrating its preference for *Salomé*, *A Florentine Tragedy* and *An Ideal Husband* at the expense of *The Importance of being Earnest.* It accepted them in the same spirit in which Wilde himself preferred his tragedies to his comedies. Compared by Marguerite Yourcenar to Menander, and deeply marked by Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes, Wilde offered the Athenians a theatre which, through a poetical and highly praised use of modern Greek awoke in them something of the spirit of their ancestors – that is the reason why he numbers them in Hades according to the ironic letter published in 1982 by *Néa Hestia*. As many a scholar has shown,[81] Wilde, nourished by Hellenism, integrates in his plays characters and plots deriving from Classical theatre. Staged by national companies, in the greatest auditoria, by the best directors and the most outstanding actors, they knew how to captivate the interest of the Athenians. If from 1908 to the present day, one can reckon on average a production every two years, it is because these plays offered Athens an Irish mirror, indeed a Dublin mirror which well reflected Athens` double status of 'little colony' and of great metropolis.

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[81] Owen Dudley Edwards *Διαβάζω*, 152, 8-10-86, pp. 46-54, Alex Falzon, "Wilde and Euripides: Dionysus at the Theatre" in Giovanna Franci and Giovanna Silvani, (ed.), *The Importance of Being Misunderstood: Homage to Oscar Wilde,* Estrato, Patron editore, Bologna, 2003, pp. 211-222 and many others.