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Wilde and the Rewriting of Medieval Drama

Elisa Bizzotto

In *The Death of Character. Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (1996), Elinor Fuchs makes some important points on the rise of interest in the Middle Ages in the Paris of the early 1890s. This interest was particularly relevant for certain theatrical productions of the time, which it affected also in association with the occultist vogue ingrained in certain aspects of Symbolism and Decadence. Medievalism in the drama of the period, Fuchs explains, "ranged from revivals of religious forms to atmospheric evocations of a remote time out of time", while "the medieval craze was closely related to the hermetic revival" and to mysticism (Fuchs 1996, 36). And she adds:

> In the theater, "mystery" shortly became a loose designation for any play that regarded human life *sub specie aeternitatis*, ranging in form from Van Lerberghe's fable on the coming of death, *Les Flaireurs*, to Claudel's comparatively realistic saint play *La jeune fille Violaine*, to Maeterlinck's static dramas of everyday life, to neo-romantic occult dramas by Edouard Schuré and Péladan. Strindberg called his 1898 religious fairy-tale play *Advent* a "mystery."
>
> By the early years of the century the mystery play was being conceived not only as any play of a mystical bent, but as a performance mood and also as a distinct dramatic type. […] The Russian poet and budding Nietzschean philologist Vyacheslav Ivanov conceived the mystery as a dramatic genre, central to a new "prophetic" Theatre of the Future; this third theater would be the modern analogue to the choric tragedy of ancient theater and to the comic form of medieval religious theater (Fuchs 1996, 36-37).

After Fuchs, such influence on turn-of-the-century literature and culture has been underlined by Martin Puchner, who explains how "medieval

passion plays" relying "on liturgical and other gestures endowed with religious symbolism" were "central for the European avant-garde" (Puchner 2002, 208), thus laying further emphasis on the trends brought to light by Fuchs as both preliminary and necessary to the pre-Modernist and Modernist scene. Implicit in Puchner's statement is the notion that, starting from Paris, the theatrical vogue identified by Fuchs thrived transculturally, well beyond the *fin de siècle* and into the new century, with evidence of its circulation in various European contexts.

Even previous to the rediscovery just described and to its dissemination across Europe, however, Medievalism had provided a well-known inspiration in the literature and visual arts of certain countries throughout the nineteenth century. Especially in England, the resurgence of sacred drama of the Medieval and early-modern eras, with such genres as the mystery or morality plays impacting on the national imagination in Symbolist and *fin-de-siècle* poetics (Schramm 2019, 49-86), was also a result of the Medievalist renaissance that went back to Romanticism and Pre-Raphaelitism and gradually became an essential part of cultural heritage. As a consequence of this complex and long-lasting Medieval revivalism, by the beginning of the twentieth century English religious theatre of yore was flourishing even in peripheral areas of the country, which established close dialogues with the London theatrical scene in order to revive old local forms of representation. A fine case study to understand these trends is provided by the town of Chester, where

> [a] new interest in the performance of medieval plays was stimulated by William Poel's production of *Everyman* at the Charterhouse in London in 1901; it was paired with a production of Chester's *Sacrifice of Isaac*, the first performance of a Chester play in modern times. One of Poel's company, Nugent Monck, formed his own company and staged versions of Chester's *Nativity*, *Shepherds*, and *Magi* plays in Bloomsbury Hall, London, in 1906. Monck wrote to the Chester Archaeological Society offering to produce the whole cycle in the traditional manner over three days at Whitsun 1907. The proposal, which must be seen against the background of Chester's music festivals and the city's growing concern with its past, would have resulted in the first complete revival of any English play-cycle. […] a number of Cestrians who had seen *Everyman* in London or on tour reported favourably on the production. Following the meeting, the three 'Nativity' plays were

> performed at the Music Hall in 1906 to test local reactions. An edition of the performance-text [...] was published to accompany the production. [...] The production was enthusiastically received [...] (Barrow et al. 2005, 175).

The present contribution will probe the ideas and issues that have been illustrated so far to suggest that, at the *fin de siècle* and shortly afterwards, Medieval theatre paved the way for a new type of drama, based on Medieval models though expressive of contemporary and future aesthetic and thematic issues. It will also and particularly argue that Oscar Wilde was among the pioneers, practitioners, and disseminators of this drama, both in England and abroad. His efforts to revitalise, or adapt, old theatrical features and devices developed well beyond his and other contemporary authors' works and would find fuller expression in the pre- and post-World War I eras. In those periods, as Kirsten Shepherd-Barr elucidates,

> dramatists and directors [drew] on medieval or renaissance theatrical forms – Meyerhold and many others on commedia dell'arte, Jarry on the tradition of the Grand Guignol, Gordon Craig, O'Neill, Pirandello, and the Dadaists on masks, which certainly go back to the Greek theatre, and Verhaeren and Maeterlinck on medieval drama, to name but a few. But they were using these traditions in new ways, combining them with new forms of dialogue and structural changes in order to forge a dynamic aesthetic for the stage, especially in terms of the relationship between actors and audience. A permanent record of these ideas exists in the vast body of theoretical writings by many of these directors in addition to their theatrical work – writings that make it into the historiography of modernism even less frequently than the performances they help to explain (Shepherd-Barr 2005, 63).

A main point that will be here made is that Wilde anticipated the Modernist interest in Medieval drama mentioned by Shepherd-Barr; a further point is that, thanks to the international circulation of his work, he contributed to spread that interest in England as well as abroad. In other words, the attention towards Medieval theatre that surged in the *fin de siècle*, would become more pervasive in the first decades of the twentieth century, and can be assessed as an attempt to establish a type of world literature,

representative of an advanced cosmopolitan community of *literati* and *literatae*, had in Wilde one of its first advocates.

John Austen, *Beauty Goeth Fast Away*, illustration for *Everyman and Other Plays* (1925).

In the early 1890s, when the works above mentioned by Fuchs were being composed and represented, Wilde was trying to establish his own style as a dramatist – a quest that to a considerable degree seems to have involved the revitalisation of aspects and conventions of the Medieval or early-modern stage. The most patent example in this sense is *Salomé* (1891), written in Paris and originally in French, "whose stereotyped characters, Biblical intertextuality, repetitive dialogues, and extensive use of figurative language are indeed grounded in such a symbolist-decadent medieval vein" (Bizzotto 2021). The connections of *Salomé* – fundamentally a Biblical story, hence conforming to the mystery play pattern – with vernacular theatre did not go unnoticed at the turn of the century. At the play's first private representation in London, in May 1905, the reviewer of "The Daily Chronicle" observed that *Salomé* appeared "as a sort of cross between Maeterlinck and a 'mystery play'" (cit. in Tydeman, Price 1996, 42), thus putting its most patent Symbolist inspiration on a par with the Medieval legacy, as was evident at a time in which the re-evaluation of Medieval theatre proliferated. *Salomé* could appropriately be defined as a "Symbolist mystery play" (Fuchs 1996, 137): quite an unrecognised genre, in fact, although contributing to what Fuchs calls the early-twentieth-century "mysterium", a literary expression rooted in "the medieval Christian mystery" (Fuchs 1996, 37). The mysterium "evolved in part as a revival of allegorical methods, however dislocated by a self-conscious, modernist irony" and bore "the stamp of *fin-de-siècle* symbolist occult aesthetics" (Fuchs 1996, 37), which was a key feature of the Symbolist mystery play.

The metamorphosis from Symbolist mystery play to Modernist mysterium – or, in any case, to plays composed with a greater awareness of their Medieval and early-modern roots – is investigated by Helen Solterer also on the basis of Gustave Cohen's *Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théatre religieux français du Moyen Age* (1906), a ground-breaking study for its times. In his historical overview,

> Cohen had pioneered an understanding of medieval performance en masse that fed the popular theatrical fashion. […] He underscored how the modern miracle play mixed ritual and farce in ways that evoked fifteenth-century performances. In Paris […] his works resonated for several leading playwrights. Charles Péguy […] was composing mystery plays that bore all the trademarks of Cohen's renditions of medieval drama – its violent emotions, its populist fervour, its story of personal sacrifice and transformation. Gabriele D'Annunzio […] turned directly to Cohen for help staging *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*. […] [D'Annunzio] insisted that his production faithfully reconstituted medieval drama as the scholar had reconstructed it (Solterer 2010, 31-32).

It is not difficult to agree with Solterer's inclusion of D'Annunzio's tragedy – composed in France and in French as *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911) – within this revival. Stemming from minute philological research (Solterer 2010, 32), *Le Martyre* follows contemporary debates on the art of the theatre, which both in France and elsewhere entailed adaptations of antique drama, particularly the mystery play (Datta 2011 24, 36, 154), and is defined as a *mystère* in the subtitle. By doing so, D'Annunzio positioned his work within international networks that could offer him a wider recognition as the European playwright for the new century, a role that Wilde himself had been playing previous to his downfall. *Salomé*, with its re-use of Medieval dramatic conventions, constituted a main subtext for *Le Martyre*, which certainly expanded on them by showing a deeper knowledge of Medieval liturgical drama and its structural conventions (Bizzotto 2018, 149-150).

Far from exerting any widespread influence on subsequent drama, another, lesser known among Wilde's tragedies can be labelled as belonging to the same genre as *Salomé* and to the broader Medieval theatre revival that also involved D'Annunzio. The reference is to the

unfinished *La Sainte Courtisane; Or, The Woman Covered With Jewels*, most probably the "mystery play" the writer said he had "begun" in a telegram to his friend More Adey of 23 November 1893 (Wilde 2000, 577), although in *De Profundis* he revealed that Lord Alfred Douglas's return from abroad in December prevented him from concluding it (Wilde 1994, 982). The play's subsequent history was even more unfortunate. Following the dramatic turn of events in Wilde's life in spring 1895, the manuscript of *La Sainte Courtisane* was lost in bizarre circumstances, as explained by Robbie Ross, his literary executor:

> At the time of Wilde's trial the nearly completed drama was entrusted to Mrs. Leverson, who in 1897 went to Paris on purpose to restore it to the author. Wilde immediately left the manuscript in a cab. A few days later he laughingly informed me of the loss, and added that a cab was a very proper place for it (Wilde 1908, xii-xiii) [1].

What remained was a mere fragment – enough, however, to establish close intertextual connections with *Salomé*. Accordingly, Chris Snodgrass has affirmed that "*La Sainte Courtisane* […], in its blurring of the distinctions between good and evil, only reaffirms what *Salomé* had indicated six years earlier – that the sacred and the erotic are not contradictions, but twin sides of life's irresolvable double-bind" (Snodgrass 1975, 108). Katharine Worth has found even more direct parallels between the two works:

> The curiously named play has obvious links with *Salome*; the French title, the biblical rhythms, the duel between an ascetic and a sexually provocative woman, the symbolic emphasis on jewels (the sub-title of the fragment is 'The Woman Covered with Jewels'). Some critics have thought it was written with Sarah Bernhardt in mind, though that seems doubtful. What it does show is that Wilde was looking for a new way of expressing the idea demonstrated tragically in *Salome*: an extreme of passion is drawn to its own opposite and the two can never be harmonised, only clash or reverse themselves. In *La Sainte Courtisane* he was aiming, it seems, at a witty treatment, along a line sketched to Beerbohm Tree: 'When you convert someone else to your own faith you cease to believe in it yourself' (Worth 1983, 184-185).

Worth's observations are in line with Wilde's own perception of the play in *De Profundis*, where he blames Douglas because, as he confesses, "Instead of making beautiful coloured, musical things like *Salomé*, and the *Florentine Tragedy*, and *La Sainte Courtisane*, I found myself forced to send long lawyer's letters to your father and constrained to appeal to the very things against which I had always protested" (Wilde 1994, 1042). Beauty, colours, and music are the elements Wilde sees as common to the works he mentions, which also share the relevant characteristic of being antithetical, in his mind, to the worst experiences of his life: the trials and incarceration, as well as the relationships with the Marquis of Queensberry, his lawyers, and the blackmailers, i.e. the debased humanity who had ruined him. Hence it would not be an exaggeration to say that, for Wilde, *Salomé*, *A Florentine Tragedy*, and *La Sainte Courtisane* belonged to the same theatrical genre not simply as tragedies, but on the ground of more pervasive and distinctive similarities. The hypothesis is supported by Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, to whom *A Florentine Tragedy* and *La Sainte Courtisane* in particular suggest how "alongside the society comedy […] [Wilde] retained a lifelong interest in another sort of drama altogether, one more self-consciously 'literary'" (Guy, Small 2000, 102). Worth offers an analogous, and somehow complementary, analysis of *La Sainte Courtisane* as evidencing Wilde's need to find other ideal typologies of plays than his most successful comedies of society and as the original model for new dramatic experimentations that, according to Robbie Ross, he would conceive while in jail. "Ross" – Worth points out – "tells that in prison [Wilde] invented two plays on biblical themes, *Ahab and Isabel* and *Pharaoh* which were 'similar' to *La Sainte Courtisane*" (Worth 1983, 185).

Like *Salomé*, *La Sainte Courtisane* may have indeed inaugurated Wilde's attention towards "biblical themes" in his theatre. What has seldom been noticed, however, is that such themes possibly derived from Medieval drama, some of whose stock traits Wilde recycled in his poetics, to the point that, in Rita Severi's words, *La Sainte Courtisane* "contains all the elements of the Symbolist Mystery play", namely

> symbolic characters that embody ethical, philosophical, spiritual ideas; one main action (*drama*) that unfolds in three macro-sequences or *tableaux* and around which the whole play revolves, in some unidentified space (the

> desert) and time (a timeless past); highly metaphoric repetitive language that reverberates in the rhythmic dialogue like a music of words […]. Elaborate speech patterns that unfold a double meaning, an allegory (Severi 2007, 63).

While Severi goes on indicating such *fin-de-siècle* French plays as Pierre Quillard's *La fille aux mains coupées. A mystère* (1886) and Rémy de Gourmont's *Théodat. Le vieux roi* (1893), both modelled on the life of a saint, as inspirational for Wilde (Severi 2007, 63-64), Richard Ellmann more convincingly argues that *La Sainte Courtisane* derives from Anatole France's novel *Thaïs* (1890), the story of Saint Thaïs, a beautiful courtesan living in Alexandria of Egypt under Roman rule, in the fourth century (Ellmann [1987] 1988, 411) [2]. A monk, who had known Thaïs in his debauched youth, meets her again and converts her to Christianity. She enters a convent, while he – secretly mesmerised and tormented by her beauty – becomes a stylite and retires in the desert. Months pass until he learns that Thaïs is dying a saintly death. Hastening to her deathbed, he declares that faith is a mere illusion and confesses his love, though aware that the act will damn him for eternity. In its few surviving pages, *La Sainte Courtisane* rewrites this plot by hybridising it with elements from *Salomé*: Myrrhina, the title character, is told of a hermit who hides in a cave, believes in one God, and snubs the love of women. Although at first she can only hear his voice – just like Salomé with Jokanaan – Myrrhina is adamant in wanting to seduce him. Unexpectedly, her alluring speech – as manipulative and tempting as Herod's tirade to convince Salomé to dance – enthrals the hermit, whilst she is touched by his words on salvation and begins to question the sense of life. Wilde's manuscript abruptly stops here.

Fragmentary though it is, the plot still justifies a slight departure from Severi's, and Wilde's own, classification of *La Sainte Courtisane* in terms of genre. Whereas the tragedy possesses the features of a mystery play, its focus on the life of a saint more directly associates it with the miracle play. On the other hand, the thematic fight between good and evil and the didactic ending – however oppositional and counterintuitive – show analogies with the morality play, which has not infrequently been evoked apropos of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), or of Wilde's fairy tales (see, among many, Jones 2011). As might be expected, the morality play model is also present in other contemporary authors. George Bernard Shaw's

turn-of-the-century problem plays *Mrs Warren's Profession* (1893), *Candida* (1894), *The Devil's Disciple* (1896), and *Major Barbara* (1905) have all been considered as more or less openly replicating the paradigm, which also underlies such a Modernist work as *Saint Joan* (1925) (Adler 1982, 13; Stafford 1982; Weintraub 1992, 64; Berst 1994, 121). What is more, *Saint Joan* has been directly related to *Salomé* (Walshe 1997) – a play Shaw admired and whose Symbolist and Biblical imagery he had fully assimilated, as is evident from a letter to Wilde of 28 February 1893 (Wilde 2000, 554). Another, less known, morality play of the period is Aleister Crowley's *Mr Todd. A Morality*, written in July 1908 in Paris, privately printed in the author's collection *The Winged Beetle* (1910), and republished in "The Equinox" in September 1910. Mr Todd, the title character, is an obvious embodiment of Death appearing to a contemporary London family – the modern version of the vernacular 'everyman', which would also inspire Hugo von Hofmannsthal's far more famous morality play *Jedermann* (1911) – and whispering words, unheard by the audience, which awaken in them a joyous epiphanic awareness. The use of straightforward personification and symbolism, of a basic plot structure, and of the central thematic concern with death confirm the ultimate Medieval inspiration signalled from the title.

Yet, despite being instrumental to the early-twentieth-century fascination with Medieval drama, Wilde's theatre was more conspicuously entrenched in Aestheticism and Decadence. If *La Sainte Courtisane*'s far-fetched and allusive language, evocative imagery and tropes, and extensive presence of allegory – which would become all-important in Modernist Medieval theatre, but were "already integral to the symbolist plays associated with nineteenth-century decadence by authors such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Maurice Maeterlinck, Gabriele D'Annunzio, and Oscar Wilde" (Herold 2021, 1-2) – characterise it as a Symbolist morality play, the text was conceived as a non-moralistic parable legitimising the poetics of Aestheticism and Decadence in their pursuit of beauty, pleasure, nihilism, and self-annihilation. Accordingly, *La Sainte Courtisane* mostly investigates pagan, rather than Christian, themes – a fact that calls for its classification as a 'pagan mystery play': a rarity in literary history, though finding roots in the Christo-pagan syncretism from which English theatre originated in the Middle Ages (Diller 1992, 127-128, 232, 241-242). Not many other pagan-Medieval plays can be identified in the long *fin de siècle*: one is *Le Martyre*

de Saint Sébastien, another Crowley's *The Rites of Eleusis* (1910), a mystery play whose heathen and esoteric elements reprise the "hermetic revival" evidenced by Fuchs in the Parisian drama of the 1890s. As Nick Freeman has shown, besides, Crowley was not at all insensitive to Wilde's philosophy of Aestheticism, nor, so it seems, to *Salomé* (Freeman 2007, 19-21, 24-27). It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that he adapted certain aspects of Wilde's theatre in his own drama.

Wilde could as well be seen as the representative of what Gregory Mackie has called "late Victorian theatrical 'archaeology,' a practice that sought to mount historical dramas with as much accuracy and precision in costume and design as possible" (Mackie 2012, 219). The author himself theorises this practice in the 1891 essay *The Truth of Mask* (Wilde 1994, 1156-1173), in which he insists on archaeology as related to theatre – Shakespearean drama in particular – based on the necessity for it to be historically accurate to the smallest details in order to allow the audience to more thoroughly enjoy fictional characters (Wilde 1994, 1162). In Wilde's view, these trends and principles were not only typical of Shakespeare, but also of late-Medieval and early-modern stages at large. They, moreover, constituted a trans-national phenomenon stemming from the rediscovery of classical architecture and culture at the time. As Mackie (Mackie 2012, 219-220) further points out, Wilde himself created his own historical, or "archaeological", type of theatre from the English tradition whenever he wrote plays that were not comedies of manners. It was this historical theatre, in its reworking of stock features of old dramatic forms, that was especially influential for the pre-Modernist and Modernist stage, both in England and abroad. A fine example of Wilde's role as a precursor within these archaeological dramatic forms across cultures is offered by Anglo-Italian writer Vernon Lee's pageant *The Ballet of the Nations. A Present-Day Morality* (1915), whose programmatic subtitle – a declaration on the aptness of the morality play as a contemporary genre – establishes a direct affiliation with Medieval theatre and its turn-of-the-century adaptations. Like Wilde's archaeological plays, Lee's Modernist text has been seen as possessing "the allegorical framework" and "liminal status" of Medieval drama (Maxwell and Pulham 2006 ,15); it is soaked in symbolism and pagan allusions and adopts the more spontaneous and inclusive performance practices and subgenres of early modernity – among which

the *danse macabre* and *auto sacramental* – to effectively represent Lee's radical pacifism at the beginning of World War I.

For all its possible derivations from Medieval drama and Symbolist-Decadent morality plays, I have argued elsewhere (Bizzotto 2021) that an even more distinct source text for *The Ballet of the Nations* can be detected in Walter Pater – a master to both Wilde and Lee. The source can be identified in his imaginary portrait *Denys l'Auxerrois* (1886), which devotes some space to the description of late-Medieval and early-modern theatre practices. Here I would like to bring these reflections even further and suggest that *Denys l'Auxerrois* was crucial not only to Lee's, but also to Wilde's perception and interpretation of outdated theatrical forms. Textual evidence of such affiliation can be found in Wilde's story *The Portrait of Mr W.H.* (1893), revolving around the identity of the dedicatee of Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, recognised in the boy actor of the Bard's company – a historical-fictional character called Willie Hughes. In the tale, Willie Hughes is supposed to have died in Germany, where he migrated after Shakespeare's retirement, to have been there slaughtered by an enraged crowd, and finally buried in a vineyard by some young followers. Wilde conjectures that

> it was not improbable that Willie Hughes was one of those English comedians (*mimi quidam ex Britannia*, as the old chronicle calls them), who were slain at Nuremberg in a sudden uprising of the people, and were secretly buried in a little vineyard outside the city by some young men "who had found pleasure in their performances, and of whom some had sought to be instructed in the mysteries of the new art" (Wilde 1994, 342).

For those familiar with Pater's work, the scene described by Wilde appears as a rewriting of the protagonist's death in *Denys l'Auxerrois*, where the hero is lynched by the mob during a street performance, whose main actor he is, and then literally torn to pieces. Not just in its final part, but throughout the text, *Denys l'Auxerrois* re-enacts the myth of Dionysus-Zagreus and, particularly in the quotation above, so does Wilde (Bizzotto 2000).

This kind of mythical method *avant la lettre* is not the only device shared by the two writers, since their stories similarly propose thoughts and

assessments on past English drama seen as fundamental in heralding new historical-cultural eras. Both Pater and Wilde set the deaths of their heroes within the context of popular open-air representations in Medieval or early-modern times and emphasise the regenerative power of that type of participatory and collective performances: while for Pater it is a "rude popular pageant" in which a personification of Winter gets "hunted blindfold through the streets" of Auxerre, Wilde depicts Willie Hughes as a strolling actor who takes Shakespeare's and Marlowe's art to Germany. By doing so, he becomes

> the precursor of that *Aufklärung* or Illumination of the eighteenth century, that splendid movement which, though begun by Lessing and Herder, and brought to its full and perfect issue by Goethe, was in no small part helped on by another actor Friedrich Schroeder – who awoke the popular consciousness, and by means of the feigned passions and mimetic methods of the stage showed the intimate, the vital, connection between life and literature (Wilde 1994, 342).

In both texts, that is, cultural renovation comes through the agency of Medieval and early-modern theatre, its ritualistic nature, allegorical significance, symbolic gestures and actions, and the communal involvement it entailed. Wilde's archaeological drama, rooted in the poetics of the *fin de siècle*, handed down these features to the early twentieth century and became founding for the poetics of Modernism, especially in the case of *Salomé*. The last point has famously been made by Petra Dierkes-Thrun in *Salome's Modernity* (2011), though neglecting the possible relevance of Medieval legacy in the play's success. These considerations elicit some final reflections on Wilde's role as a writer of world literature – a perspective on which recent scholarship has been delving into (see Davis, Dierkes-Thrun 2018, Stilling 2018, Evangelista 2021). Wilde's work was translated, read, imitated, and interpreted globally by the end of the nineteenth century, thus substantially contributing to the passage of crucial ideas into the twentieth. A dramatist, novelist, essayist, poet, and journalist, he was also an important theorist whose literary experimentation proved much influential in the European scene from the mid-1880s on. In such respect, his dramatic works, most specifically the ones here labelled as "archaeological" according to Mackie's definition, appear paradigmatic. As a most

inspirational playwright in the decades to come, Wilde demonstrated, also by means of his Symbolist and pagan Medieval plays, what Michael Davis and Petra Dierkes-Thrun (2018, 15) have described as the "ability to move freely from world to world and across worlds, his plurality [...] appealing and influential beyond his own world".

Notes

[1] While this essay is being written, Joseph Bristow, Yvonne Ivory, and Rebecca Mitchell are editing *La Sainte Courtisane* for the two volumes of Wilde's uncollected, unfinished, and miscellaneous writings that will be included in the *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Oxford University Press). The editors have kindly allowed me to consult some of their draft material.

[2] In *The Critic as Artist*, Wilde identifies Alexandria, instead of fifth-century Athens, as the cultural centre of antiquity – a choice explained by Stefano Evangelista by arguing that "Alexandria was attractive to Wilde because it was a culture that committed itself to preservation, transition, and transmission" (Evangelista 2021, 46). In light of Evangelista's words, one can better understand why Anatole France's *Thaïs*, with its Alexandrian setting, became a hypotext for *La Sainte Courtisane*, a play based on processes of cultural persistence, mediation, and dissemination.

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English abstract

The essay traces the influence of Medieval vernacular drama in the British culture of the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century. In particular, it argues that Oscar Wilde's plays *Salomé* (1891) and the unfinished *La Sainte Courtisane* (1893), as well as the short story *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889, 1893), bear traces of the revival of Medieval theatre that began in France in the 1890s and subsequently disseminated in other European countries. In England, this revival had an unexpected champion in Walter Pater and most probably reached Wilde also through him. Wilde, and others such as Vernon Lee, delved into both Pater's vision of the Middle Ages and into Medieval ritualistic and participatory performances in order to craft dramas better suited to the turn of the century, with their radical epistemological transformations. Wilde, Lee, and other authors did so within a network of transcultural aesthetic exchanges which – especially in Wilde's case - generated works that can be construed as examples of world literature.

keywords | Oscar Wilde; *Fin-de-siècle* drama; Medieval drama; Modernist drama; Medieval revival; World literature.

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