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Some Unpublished Oscar Wilde Letters

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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES COURIER

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- Manuscripts Processing at Syracuse: An Insider’s View
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- African Americans and Education: A Study of Arna Bontemps
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In Memoriam

Some Unpublished Oscar Wilde Letters

BY IAN SMALL

THE DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL COLLECTIONS at Syracuse University Library has four letters by Oscar Wilde.¹ Three are unpublished; one has not been published in its entirety and has hitherto only been known from an unauthoritative transcription. The recipients of three of the letters are identified: Lawrence Alma-Tadema, James Knowles, and Frank Harris. The recipient of the fourth is unknown.

The first and most interesting is a long letter to the painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema. The date is uncertain, but there are good reasons to believe that it is either late 1880 or early 1881. The first reason is the address. After his return from his 1882 American tour, Wilde usually gave his address as “16 Tite Street” rather than (as here) “Keats House, Tite Street.” The second reason is the subject of the letter. Around this time Wilde was deeply interested in Greek culture, and despite being relatively unknown, was attempting to establish himself publicly as an authority on it. The subject of his essay for the Chancellor’s Prize at Oxford in 1879 had been “Historical Criticism in Antiquity,” and in the same year he was in correspondence with George Macmillan over the possibility of

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Note: The text of the Wilde letters is © The Estate of Oscar Wilde by whose permission they are here reproduced. This article has been reprinted from *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 41, no. 4 (1998) with permission. As this *Courier* went to press, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), appeared. Three of the Wilde letters at Syracuse are included in that edition.

1. I am very grateful to Ms. Kathleen Manwaring, the manuscript supervisor of the Department of Special Collections at Syracuse University Library, for bringing these letters to my attention. I am also grateful to Syracuse University and Mr. Merlin Holland, Oscar Wilde’s grandson, for permission to print them.

translating Herodotus and Euripides.² In late 1880 and early 1881 Alma-Tadema was working on his picture *Sappho and Alcaeus* (opus CCXXIII, 1881). By this time he had achieved considerable fame (and earned a great deal of money) for his meticulous rendering of classical subjects; indeed Alma-Tadema's desire for absolute historical accuracy led him to undertake detailed research for many of his works.

It seems likely that he had asked Wilde's advice over the accurate rendering of the Greek names which appear in *Sappho and Alcaeus*. Wilde's letter refers to a prior meeting and suggests that there was some form of social acquaintance between the two men. Indeed, Vern Swanson, Alma-Tadema's cataloguer, mentioned that Alma-Tadema met Wilde at about this time, but this letter apart there is no evidence of any friendship or correspondence between the two men. However, Wilde's friendly disposition towards Alma-Tadema (and interest in his work) is borne out by a favourable mention, probably of Alma-Tadema's *The Women of Amphissa* (opus CCLXXVIII, 1887), in an anonymous notice in the *Court and Society Review* in 1887:

Take, for instance, the Tadema (No. 31). Here is all the archeological detail so dear to this industrious painter; all the cups of polished metal, the strangely embroidered robes, and the richly veined marbles, that exemplify so clearly the "rights of properties" in art; and the one thing that was wanting in Mr Tadema's work has been added, the passionate interest in human life and the power to portray it.³

Sappho and Alcaeus depicts a marble exhedra set beside a deep-blue sea on the island of Lesbos in which Sappho and some companions listen to the poet Alcaeus of Mitylene playing a kithara. Inscribed in Greek on the backs and the bases of the seats in the exhedra are the names of the members of Sappho's sisterhood. The legible names are as follows:

2. See Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 102–3; and Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), 49.

3. *Court and Society Review* 4, 147 (27 April 1887): 390; repr. in Stuart Mason [C. S. Millard], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), 35.

[Mnasi]dika[,] Gongyla of Colophon[,] Atthis
Errina of Telos[,] Gyriannos[,] Anactoria of Miletos

It appears that Alma-Tadema took Wilde's advice over the spelling of these names, but rejected Wilde's suggestion to include some lines of Sappho's poetry in order to "strike that literary note." Alma-Tadema may also have rejected (or perhaps misunderstood) Wilde's advice about the significance of Greek orthography and the relationship between the Aeolic and the Attic dialects. In expounding the difference between the Aeolic dialect (that associated with Lesbos, and therefore with Sappho and the Alcaeus) and other Greek dialects, Wilde was merely reiterating what would have been routinely taught at Oxford. So Evelyn Abbott (a pupil of Benjamin Jowett at Balliol) and E. D. Mansfield in their influential *Primer of Greek Grammar: Accidence* authoritatively stated that:

There are three principal dialects of Greek:—

(1.) Aeolic, divided into Asian or Lesbian Aeolic (Sappho, 611 B.C., Alcaeus, 606 B.C.) and Boeotian Aeolic (Pindar, in parts, 490 B.C.)

(2.) Doric, spoken in parts of the Peloponnesus . . .

(3.) Ionic, divided into (a.) Old Ionic, the language of the Homeric poems . . . (b.) New Ionic (Herodotus, 443 B.C., Hippocrates, 430 B.C.)

An offshoot of the Ionic was the Attic—the ordinary dialect of Athenian writers.⁴

Ironically a later reviewer of a book on Alma-Tadema complained that in *Sappho and Alcaeus* Alma-Tadema had used the Attic rather than the Lesbian (Aeolic) form of the Greek alphabet.⁵ Of course, in

4. Evelyn Abbott and E. D. Mansfield, *A Primer of Greek Grammar: Accidence* (London: Rivingtons, 1877; 1893), 2. Modern scholars see the relationship between Ionic and Aeolic literary language as more complicated. See, e.g., J. T. Hooker, *The Language and Text of the Lesbian Poets* (Innsbruck: Innsbrucker Beiträge Zur Sprachwissenschaft, 1977), 70ff.

5. See Georg Moritz Ebers, *Lorenz Alma-Tadema, His Life and Works*, Mary J. Safford, trans. (New York: William S. Gottsberger, 1886), reviewed anonymously in the *Nation* 43 (16 September 1886): 235–40; the detail is noted by Vern Swanson, *The Biography and Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (London: Garton and Co., 1990), 213.

the absence of the “enclosed list” which Wilde mentions, it is impossible to know whether the mistake the reviewer refers to was Wilde’s or Alma-Tadema’s. It is worth noting, however, that despite Wilde’s care to render accurately what he terms the “curious” shapes of Aeolic script, his inscription in the letter is, to a reader not educated in Greek, somewhat confusing. It is also possible that Alma-Tadema may have been misled by Wilde’s opening distinction between stone inscriptions and writing on paper or parchment which suggested that differences in orthography were not historical but due to the material or medium used. Significantly in *Sappho and Alcaeus* the names on the seats are inscribed in stone. Wilde’s suggestion about the accurate spelling of names (“Mnasidika” and “Gyrinnos”) refers to a fragment of Sappho which a contemporary editor, Henry Thornton Wharton, translates as: “Mnasidica is more shapely than the tender Gyrinno.”⁶ The reference to Catullus’s famous ode, *Ad Lesbiam* (“Ille mi par esse deo videtur”), is to his imitation of Sappho. It was widely translated into English in the nineteenth century by, among others, William Ewart Gladstone and John Addington Symonds. It is also worth noting that Alma-Tadema had taken Catullus as the subject for an earlier classical picture, *Catullus Reading his Poems at Lesbia’s House* (opus LXXX, 1870).

Keats House,
Tite Street,
Chelsea.

Dear Mr. Tadema,

There is a good deal of difficulty in obtaining a *really* correct idea of Greek writing at the time of Sappho: Sappho is so early, 610 B.C., that we have no inscriptions at all contemporary—and the earliest Aeolic coin is about 550. Taking this as my starting point and following out the Aeolic shapes of the letters, which are quite different from the Attic—I have drawn out the enclosed list—which is as accurate probably as one can get it.

The early shapes are curious and I imagine conditioned by the material on which they wrote—paper or parchment—as opposed to the later

6. Henry Thornton Wharton, *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings and a Literal Translation* (London: David Stott, 1885), 107; see also *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, ediderunt Edgar Lobel et Denys Page (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 57.

forms when *stone* inscriptions became usual: and the lines consequently more rigid and straight, and, it seems to me, less beautiful.

I have written *Mnasidika* instead of *Mnasidion* as in your letter; all the M.S.S. read *Mnasidika* in the line from Sappho, and besides *Mnasidion* is a man's name. *Gyrinnos* is the Aeolic form for *Gyrinna*.

I remember your talking about Catullus the other night—one of the most beautiful of his poems is taken from a still extant song of Sappho's beginning

(only a blot)
ΔΑΙΝΕΤΑΙ ΦΟΙΚΕΙΝΟΣ

I don't know if you will care to strike that literary note and scrawl it on your marble?

I hope that whenever you want any kind of information about Greek things in which I might help you that you will let me know.

It is always a pleasure for me to work at any Greek subject—and a double pleasure to do so for any one whose work mirrors so exquisitely and rightly, as yours does, that beautiful old Greek world.

Believe me

Sincerely yours

Oscar Wilde

* * *

The second Wilde letter in the Syracuse collection is addressed to James Knowles, editor of the *Nineteenth Century*. It concerns the first publication of Wilde's essay "The True Function and Value of Criticism" (the more familiar title of the book version of the essay is "The Critic as Artist"). The first part of Wilde's dialogue had appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* in July 1890. Around 16 August 1890 Wilde wrote to Knowles complaining that he had received no proofs for the second part of the essay; he had obviously expected it to appear in the August number of the magazine. The next known letter to Knowles is dated 9 September 1890 and refers to the publication of the second part of the dialogue in the September issue. In it Wilde complains about omitted material.⁷ The letter in the Syra-

7. Hart-Davis, *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, 272 and 274; see also Lawrence Danson's account of this exchange in *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 178.

cuse collection is the missing item in the sequence published by Hart-Davis. It refers to the proofs, where Wilde discovers for the first time Knowles's decision to omit Wilde's long account of Dante (a passage which Wilde subsequently restored in *Intentions*).

16, Tite Street,
Chelsea. S.W.

Dear Mr. Knowles,

I have very great reliance on your literary judgment, and have cut out the additions I made to my article—of course with regret, but still ready to recognise your point of view, fully and frankly. Of course I am disappointed that you did not let me know earlier about the matter, as the second part should have immediately followed the first. This I think was agreed between us. Two months is far too long a gap.

However, that cannot be helped now.

Believe me
Truly
Oscar Wilde

* * *

The recipient of the third letter is unknown. The letter is also undated, but the address suggests the summer (June–September) of 1893, when Wilde was staying in Goring:

The Cottage
Goring-on-Thames.

Dear Sir,

I am at present in the country, but am coming up to town tomorrow and if possible will look in during the course of the evening at your conversazione.

Wishing your club every success, I remain
Truly yours
Oscar Wilde.

* * *

The last letter in the Syracuse collection is one of thanks to Frank Harris for some unspecified act of generosity (probably a gift of money). The letter was partly printed by Hart-Davis in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*; he tentatively dates it 7 March 1898.⁸ The source of

8. Hart-Davis, 713–14.

Hart-Davis's text was not the holograph MS, but a copy of it "taken from Maggs's catalogue 269 (1911), supplemented by the Anderson Galleries catalogue of 19 November 1931."⁹ The final paragraph was omitted, and there are a number of differences in punctuation between the Maggs/Hart-Davis form of the letter and the MS.

Hotel de Nice,
Rue des Beaux-Arts.
Paris.

My Dear Good Friend,

Just a line to thank you for your generosity, and the sweet way by which you make your generosity dear to one. Many can do acts of kindness, but to be able to do them without wounding those who are helped in their trouble is given only to a few: to a few big, sane, large natures like yours.

I long to see you, and catch health and power from your presence and personality.

The *Mercure de France* is going to publish my poem here, with a prose translation by a young poet who knows English, so I have something to think of besides things that are dreary or dreadful, and I am starting on a play, so perhaps there is something for me in the future.

With a thousand thanks,

Your sincere and grateful friend
Oscar Wilde

9. *Ibid.*, 713.