

Review: Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto, Buffalo, & London: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 304pp. ISBN 978-1-4875-0290-4, \$80.00.

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WHEN OSCAR WILDE lay dying in his hotel room, he was barely able to acknowledge the presence of his friends; in Robert Ross's account, he communicated by raising his hand from the bedsheet. In those final days, the legendarily eloquent conversationalist had fallen silent and, at the last, in the place of brilliant epigram came a harrowing death rattle.¹ After 30th November 1900, many people expected, in some cases hoped, that would be the last they heard of Oscar Wilde. However, they were quite wrong in assuming that this particular Victorian would vanish with the nineteenth century, as Gregory Mackie demonstrates in his lively, well-researched account of Oscar Wilde's afterlife.

The 'beautiful untrue things' of the book's title, borrowed from Wilde's essay 'The Decay of Lying',² are various forms of Wilde-related forgery. Giving due acknowledgement to the existing scholarly literature on other fakers, such as the poet and palm-oil trader J.M. Stuart-Young and the poet and pugilist Arthur Cravan, Mackie zeroes in on three fascinating fabricators: 'Dorian Hope', Hester Travers Smith, and Mrs Chan-Toon. Stuart-Young's absence from the study is the result of Mackie's focus on forgeries of the 1920s, as well as Stephanie Newell's excellent biography *The Forger's Tale: The Search for Odeziaku* (2006). The forgeries of the twenties include fake love letters in pseudo-Wildean prose, manuscripts copied in a convincing Wildean hand, even entire dramas, not to mention messages from beyond the grave.

The study opens with a discussion of Wilde's story 'The Portrait of Mr. W.H.' (1889). It is itself a story about the practice of forgery centred on the theory that the true addressee of Shakespeare's sonnets was a boy actor named Willie Hughes. Charles Ricketts produced a real-world equivalent of the tale's titular portrait done in oils. This was sold at auction in 1895 after Wilde's bankruptcy and remains untraceable. All we

¹ Robert Ross, 'Robert Ross to More Adey (14 December 1900)', in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 1219-1223.

² 'The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.'

have is a cursory sketch of the original done by Ricketts in 1912, now in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library; it appears as the first of the book's twenty-one illustrations. Mackie neatly employs the history of the Ricketts portrait as a framing device for his overall theme: involvement in Wilde's 'story' through the creation of new literary material.

The core of Mackie's persuasive and engaging argument is that 'the Wilde forgeries of the 1920s', whilst having an obvious financial incentive, 'can also be recognized as forms of fan fiction'.³ Drawing on the work of Sabine Vanacker and Catherine Wynne, as well as Daniel Cavicchi, he extends the concept of fandom to include his trio of minor criminals and, by observing the 'intersection of art and crime' in Wilde's own aesthetic system, builds on recent research by Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell.⁴

Mackie's argument is especially well expressed in the first chapter which outlines the law-abiding activities of Wilde's literary executor Robert Ross; Wilde's bibliographer Christopher Millard; and the collector of Wildeana, Walter Ledger. As the compilers of the first *Collected Works* (1908) and several volumes of bibliography, these three men were the producers of what Mackie calls 'fan fact', to be distinguished from fan fiction.⁵ In their efforts he identifies the same kind of admiration, even devotion, that prompts the forger's pen. Rather than see these as two opposing groups, Mackie points out that the verb 'forge' applies both to the quest to authenticate Wilde and to the practice of creating works that simulate authenticity.⁶

The jacket illustration, a 'Portrait of Oscar Wilde' by a forger of Aubrey Beardsley, adroitly embodies the primary concerns of the work. We recognise Wilde, with his wing-collar and jewelled tiepin, but it is not quite the real Wilde, the mouth is too pinched and the posture a touch too languid. One wonders if University of Toronto Press

³ Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2019) p. 200.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10; See Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism, and the Art of Forgery* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2015), and 'The Provenance of Oscar Wilde's "Decay of Lying"', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (2017) pp. 221-240.

⁵ Mackie, p.28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.11.

considered, at some stage, imitating the green and gilt design of the Ross-curated *Collected Works*.

Chapter 1 also provides the potted history of Wilde's posthumous legacy necessary for a full understanding of the milieu in which the forgeries of 'Hope', Travers Smith, and Chan-Toon appear. This contextual leg work might have made for heavy reading, but in Ross, Millard and Ledger, Mackie has a colourful cast. Ross was a wit in his own right and Ledger was an eccentric who often dressed as a sailor. This makes *Beautiful Untrue Things* a rare book, one in which Ross is outdone by a medium who could channel quips direct from Wilde's disembodied personality, and in which Ledger's nautical quirks are upstaged by Mrs Chan-Toon's pet parrot, Co-co, who lent her a piratical air. Mackie capitalises on the latter brilliantly in his discussion of mimicry and exoticism under the subheading 'The Parrot Text'.⁷

Mrs Chan-Toon, the subject of Chapter 4, is the most audacious of the book's forgers.⁸ She succeeded in passing off an entire play as Wilde's. Astoundingly she even managed to have this dramatic work, *For Love of the King*, brought out by Methuen, the publisher of the *Collected Works*, despite, as Mackie reveals, having plagiarised the plot from a short story she had published two decades earlier. Wilde would have been impressed; no wonder he later referred to her as a 'perfect specimen' in one of his communiques from the Great Beyond.⁹ Mackie also discusses Mrs Chan-Toon's made-up memoir of Wilde which is much less well-known and has been previously overlooked. He sees her overarching project as a mixture of 'discipleship' and an attempt to 'establish a textual relationship with Oscar Wilde' from which she could profit.¹⁰

Chapter 2 showcases the extent of the book's original research. Mackie offers a highly plausible, and indeed highly probable, identity for 'Dorian Hope'. A forger or the ringleader of a group working under a single soubriquet: 'Hope' is Brett Holland, drag performer and 'queer-identified son of a bourgeois family from Gastonia, North

⁷ Ibid., p. 186-190.

⁸ The discussion of Mrs Chan-Toon in chapter 4 expands on Mackie's 'Forging Oscar Wilde: Mrs. Chan-Toon and *For Love of the King*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2011) 267-288.

⁹ Mackie, p. 161.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 190.

Carolina'.¹¹ He committed multiple impostures, such as signing himself as 'André Gide' or 'Pierre Louÿs' on counterfeit manuscripts. The fact that he donned a fur coat for his business meetings in allusion to the famous Napoleon Sarony photographs of Wilde indicates just how blurred forgery and fandom can become. Holland even inserts himself into the narrative, dropping his pseudonym into a piece of sham correspondence between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. 'Dorian Hope', "Wilde" writes, 'is really the Dorian Gray of my book'; Mackie sees this fabrication as a sort of fanciful origin story.¹²

In the book's subtitle 'afterlife' refers to posthumous activity and mythmaking. However, 'afterlife', when a proper noun, possesses another meaning: the continuing existence of the spirit. Chapter 3 explores the juncture of these two definitions. In 1923 the medium Hester Travers Smith began publishing Wilde's post-mortem pronouncements on, among other things, his current existential state, contemporary literary criticism, and that year's production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Haymarket Theatre, London. Wilde communicated through a kind of automatic writing or by directing the planchette on a Ouija board.

The collaboration between Wilde's spirit and Travers Smith culminated in a play; at first titled 'The Extraordinary Play' and later retitled 'Is It a Forgery?' (the answer being yes, yes it is). There is only one known typescript in existence which is held at UCLA's Clark Library.¹³ Given its rarity, it is a pity Mackie does not take the opportunity to quote from it more extensively, although he does provide an evocative synopsis and some short remarks from each of the three acts. While we do get two complete lines of dialogue on page 150, these are also cited in a 1924 article in the *Occult Review* which is available online. In general, having read several of the forged works myself, I believe a reader of *Beautiful Untrue Things* would benefit from first-hand familiarity.

The final section presents an act of forgery possibly sanctioned by Wilde himself. In a letter to his publisher Leonard Smithers, Wilde implies that his friend Maurice Gilbert had signed some copies of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* on his behalf.¹⁴ With this example Mackie demonstrates that little had changed since 1898: Wildean forgeries had

¹¹ Ibid., p. 69.

¹² Ibid., p. 108-109.

¹³ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 201-202.

always been driven by both finance, in the marked-up price of the signed author's edition, and fandom, as Wilde's admirer Gilbert dutifully turned his hand to copying Oscar's signature. Admiration for Wilde motivates the makers of forgeries and the creators of 'fan fact' alike, and, for Mackie, brings together the 'otherwise disparate groups that shaped the archival contours of his literary afterlife'.¹⁵

Wilde might, if he ever read these sham texts, have called them 'untrue' but never, one doubts, 'beautiful'. Whilst 'true' is the wrong term, Mackie's study is certainly both extensively researched and beautifully written; his own fandom may be sensed in his allusive prose and clever headings. This book represents a substantial contribution to the study of Wilde's afterlife and itself demonstrates the attraction of adding to Wilde's story.



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¹⁵ Ibid., p. 200.