

## Queer (dis)orientation in Oscar Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W.H" (1889)

### Abstract:

Since Foucault dated the "birth" of modern homosexuality in 1870 (43), many queer scholars have considered the different genealogical agents that enabled this emergence, as well as the precision of the date offered. Many of these studies have focused on the medical, social, and legal aspects of the Victorian era that contributed to the alleged consolidation of homosexuality. Other scholars such as Linda Dowling or Dustin Friedman, however, have addressed the impact that the study of ancient Greece, and of the Renaissance had on the formation of a Victorian queerness that predated Foucault's idea of modern homosexuality.

Following Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of queer phenomenology, this paper addresses how a relatively lesser-known short story by Oscar Wilde, "The Portrait of Mr W.H." (1889) can be read as an orientation device towards the different artistic discourses of the past that inform queer culture and historiography.

In the story, a cast of unreliable characters become obsessed with a forgery that attempts to pass as the original portrait of Shakespeare's muse: Mr W.H. By positing this portrait as a point of historic and artistic conflict, the narrative turns its back to heteronormative realities and (dis)orientates both the characters and the readers, creating a queer effect. Wilde's story exemplifies how specific objects can serve as points of reference from which to rethink human subjectivity, or even as a tool through which to access one's own sexual or affective identity. The power of the portrait, however, lays ultimately on its ability to conjure the past as a cultural space that allows for the expression of these identities.

In this way, Wilde's short story orientate readers, I argue, towards the different ways in which aesthetic assumptions about Ancient Greece and the Renaissance enabled queer men to explore their desires before the discourses identified by Foucault as the progenitors of modern sexuality became predominant, or even how these assumptions allowed men who refuse to accept these discourses to approach their identities from a different angle.

### References

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