

increasing economic and social pressures on the very universities and colleges within which Romantic Studies came to institutional prominence, some see the writing on the wall for Romantic Studies. Some say this is as it should be: such cultural designations are too hegemonic and restrictive. Others bemoan this possible future: Romantic Studies having developed such a historically and theoretically diverse body of scholarly knowledge, it would be a tragedy to lose the very sense of cultural ‘discrimination’ that makes the further enrichment of this corpus possible. Either way, we *can* say with some certainty that such struggles, anxieties and possibilities remain profoundly reminiscent of the same period to which they address themselves. (137–38)

Given this awareness, this book may communicate with those with a wide range of research perspectives on English studies, possibly worldwide; and it may be beneficial to students of English Romanticism to read it in light of contemporary political concerns governing academia in North America and Europe, as well as in other countries in which English studies have become part of the literary tradition.

Waka Ishikura

Ruth Robbins. *Oscar Wilde*, London and New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011. £14.99.

Ruth Robbins’ *Oscar Wilde* is an indispensable critical account of all things Wilde. It is written in a delightful, almost conversational tone and astutely examines an array of Wilde’s works. Robbins’ perceptive readings fuse observations about Wilde’s life into engaging and persuasive discussions of his major writings. Most welcomingly, Robbins comprehensively discusses Wilde’s less explored texts such as ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’, ‘The Canterville Ghost’, ‘The Model Millionaire’ and ‘The Sphinx without a Secret’ as well as his fairy stories, poems, and prison writings. General readers who are unfamiliar with Wilde’s critical canon will find detailed summaries of traditional approaches and interpretations of his works. For instance, Robbins offers an insightful overview of how Wilde’s ideas are rooted in Ruskinian, Arnoldian and Paterian views. She details Wilde’s extension of their

subject matter, and directs the reader to overlooked issues such as the debates around the nature of realism that were discussed in the pages of various journals, although these debates are not explicated. All of the familiar names and circles usually associated with Wilde like Lilly Langtry, the Queensbury's as well as anecdotes about Wilde's family, travels and personal life are included in this very generous introduction to Wilde. For those readers eager to go beyond popular Wilde-lore Robbins offers careful and sensitive readings of complex aesthetic and philosophical issues. Each chapter is devoted to exploring the fluid categories of 'genre' and 'gender' which Robbins demonstrates are subtly interwoven.

Over the last two decades there has been an increasing awareness amongst Wilde scholars that biographical readings of his works have outstripped contextual accounts of his creativity. Robbins cleverly shows that there need not be a divide between accounts of Wilde's life and critical interpretations of his works since 'discussions of Wilde oversteps textual limits and enters the biographical'. Robbins does not shy away from connecting Wilde's personal life and ambivalent sexuality with her critical observations. She links Wilde's subversive writing practices such as his self-plagiarism to the concept of Victorian masculinity which, Robbins argues, in turn defined acceptable, canonical texts and genres. Robbins quotes from a variety of Victorian reviewers that declared Wilde's poetry insincere, and sensual. His poems, which were rejected by the Oxford Union, inverted traditional notions of Victorian masculinity which, states Robbins, was characterised by sincerity, originality and restraint — all of which Wilde's poetry was accused of lacking. Robbins intertwines the category of genre and gender into her reading of 'Requiescat' and 'Charmides'. 'Requiescat', a poem about the death of Wilde's nine-year-old sister Isola, states Robbins, is the one poem which critics approved because its tight metrical arrangement and sparse imagery signified emotional restraint. This emotional reserve was lacking in Wilde's other passionate poems such as 'Charmides'. Whilst 'Requiescat' reinforced the Victorian sense of masculinity by veiling painful emotion, 'Charmides' revelled in the pleasure of the senses and the sexual appetite of a young sailor who desecrates the statue of a Greek goddess with his 'excessive sexual energies'.

Wilde's fairy stories are also, according to Robbins' account, an example of Wilde destabilising genre. Nevertheless, her reading of genre and gender as interrelated categories parts ways at this juncture as these stories 'occasionally show homoerotic content', but, Robbins importantly reminds readers, the 'force of that content is muted, especially when we recall that the majority of Wilde's earliest readers

did not necessarily seek it. It ‘comes out’ because late–twentieth–century readers are tempted to look for it’. In ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H’ and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, states Robbins, the painting or portrait is ‘entangled in another form of exchange or intercourse: that of sexuality’. In her analysis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Robbins accentuates the connection between the Wilde trials where the novel was used as ‘evidence’ of Wilde’s ‘crime’, and his ‘subversive’ sexuality. Both narratives explore a ‘fascination with youth’, ‘sexual ambiguity of boyhood’, and ‘visual artistic objects that are charged with subject status and with homoerotic potential’. For Robbins forgery is at the centre of both ‘The Portrait of Mr W. H’ and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which she connects to Wilde’s personality since he ‘was a master impersonator and impersonation is related to forgery’. This ‘celebration of forgery’, argues Robbins, was at the heart of Wilde’s attack on the Victorian sense of masculinity, and by implication on generic conventions which reinforced values of sincerity and consistency, or masculinity. According to Robbins, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ‘reproduces the notion of genre subversion.... Because genre and gender are related concepts, what Wilde does in rendering one area (genre) of definition unstable has radical effects on the other (gender), and by extension on sexuality’. It is this brazen approach to Wilde’s sexuality and creativity that makes Robbins’ readings so refreshingly different from wholly biographical accounts of Wilde’s oeuvre.

Robbins situates Wilde’s essay ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ in the context of Social Darwinism in ‘pages of journals such as the *Fortnightly Review*’, but again Robbins does not elaborate on the specific debates that were under discussion. Moreover, her observation that ‘ethics and aesthetics have no relation to each other’ must be reevaluated given that that debates around social Darwinism were essentially debates about social conduct, mores and values, or ethics. Readers will find the chapter ‘Plays’ especially entertaining. ‘In both *Salomé* and *Earnest*, language is the medium of play, but it is also the medium by which the play’s action is baffled’. Both plays, argues Robbins, are experiments in modernism. Her reading of Aubrey Beardsley’s ‘black and white line drawings’ for *Salomé* as a ‘creative critical commentary’ is a pleasure to read. In *Earnest* ‘it is not what is said that matters, but how it is said’. Robbins’ witty account of *Earnest* dwells on the ‘failure of language to live up to its promise to make sense of the world’. She also finds traces of Wilde’s preference of giving his young lovers cigarette cases in the first act of *Earnest* where Jack loses his case whilst he is off ‘Bunburying’. Robbins ends on a detailed account of Wilde’s illusive text *De Profundis* and his realist poem *The*

Ballad of Reading Gaol. Wilde, argues Robbins, refused ‘totalizing explanations’ and it is on this line of thought that Robbins executes this more than merely ‘introductory’ volume. She concludes that Wilde’s writings positively invite a biographical approach which is a welcome shift of thought in Wilde studies.

Nazia Parveen

Ben Saunders. *Do Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*. London: Continuum, 2011. Pp. 192. £16.99.

Superheroes, it seems, are everywhere in the current cultural moment. Barely a week goes by without the announcement or release of yet another adaptation/reboot/sequel/prequel following the epic post-traumatic post-human exploits of some Nietzschean copyright-branded iconic figure. In retrospect 2012 may be viewed as the apotheosis of the cinematic superhero boom, with the release of fan-boy auteur Joss Whedon’s much anticipated Marvel comics team up *Avengers Assemble*, along with the concluding chapter in Christopher Nolan’s noirish *Dark Knight* trilogy, not to mention yet more reboots for *Superman* and *Spider-Man* (with a post-Nolan take on *Batman* already lined up by Time-Warner). Superheroes have also become an increasingly popular source of critical scholarship: to take just one example that could easily be multiplied, Continuum are also publishing Will Brooker’s treatise on *The Dark Knight* — ironically, itself a sequel to Brooker’s revised thesis published little more than a decade ago under the title *Batman Unmasked* (2001).

The sheer ubiquity of superhero fantasies across multiple media, and their overdetermined, fascinating and frankly contradictory dialectical narratives combining liberating bodily transcendence and authoritarian social excess, surely more than justifies the attention that they command. Saunders’s engaging concise study possesses a title that somewhat misleadingly suggests a light-hearted, even fan-ish, approach to the topic of superheroes and spirituality. In fact Saunders’ account is largely philosophically and theologically sophisticated in his analysis of mainstream Anglophone, predominantly American, characters.

Superheroes have always been creatures of a multi-media environment, having descended from the masked crime fighters of inter-war pulp fiction to become re-mediated and defined within comics from the 1930s onwards (much to the chagrin of many), only to be re-mediated once more via film, radio and computer games. Saunders’