



### Queer Procreation

[\*Oscar Wilde, Wilfred Owen, and Male Desire: Begotten, Not Made\*](#). James Campbell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 241 pp.

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<1>James Campbell presents an unusual pairing of writers in an unorthodox, though theoretically original and often stimulating way. By tracing the development of Wilde's ideas about the 'artistic importance of same-sex relations,' Campbell outlines what he describes as the writer's 'theory of male procreation ... a theory of cultural reproduction through erotic connections between two men.' (1) Substantiating this theory is at the heart of the project and takes up the majority of the chapters. However, Campbell's book also attempts to provide a demonstration of this Wildean theory of male procreation by situating Wilfred Owen as a symbolic 'son of Wilde', one who received the earlier writer's theories and 'used' them to 'articulate his ideas about the physical and cultural damage caused by the First World War.' (1) As this summary suggests, the book has an impressively ambitious aim and breadth of reference; not only Wilde studies and Owen's poetry, but also queer theory, masculinity, and, in particular, military masculinities of the First World War. It is refreshing to read such an original and boldly-argued thesis, one which proposes an intriguing new perspective on literary influence. Campbell also makes a persuasive case for blurring period boundaries, noting that 'the division between eras ... has not always been a helpful organization for considering the culture of 'transitional' periods' (8). At the same time, however, he takes particular care to 'historicize Wilde's ideas about sexuality,' (15) the

discussion of which is nuanced and convincing, criticising the practice of ‘constructing Wilde unproblematically as a gay man’ (24).

<2>The first chapter, ‘Sexual Gnosticism: Male Procreation and “The Portrait of Mr W.H.”’, lays the basis for the whole book by locating Wilde’s theory of male procreation in his 1889 story, the Wilde text which for Campbell ‘most directly confronts sexual identity’ (24). Campbell provides a persuasive close reading demonstrating how Wilde employs an analogy with sexual reproduction to express his theory of ‘homoerotic fecundity’, suggesting how ‘new philosophies and new ways of making and critiquing art are produced by masculine inspiration’ (29). Labelling ‘The Portrait’ a ‘gnostic text’, Campbell also discusses the religious context of Wilde’s theory. Chapter Two, ‘Shades of Green and Gray: Dual Meanings in Wilde’s Novel’, extends Campbell’s close reading to another of the *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (which, like the earlier story, was published in two versions). The ground covered in this chapter, however, will be much more familiar to a specialist reader, particularly the sections spent on Wilde’s second trial in 1895, which does not add significantly to Campbell’s argument. A theoretical interlude is provided in the third chapter, ‘Love of the Impossible: Wilde’s Failed Queer Theory’, where Campbell engages with a number of influential critics, namely Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, Heather Love and Judith Halberstam, to situate Wilde’s theory of male procreation within the framework of queer theory. This is the strongest and most stimulating chapter in the book, one which acknowledges the ‘failure’ of Wilde’s theory of male procreation (as well as its misogyny), but which contributes to recent theorising on queer futurity and the child. Chapter Four, ‘Oscar and Sons: The Afterlife of Male Procreation’, marks a return to close reading of texts, in this case *De Profundis* and *Salomé*. It also turns from ‘the figurative to the literal sons of Wilde’ by discussing the writer’s fatherhood in relation to his son Vyvyan and ‘the younger men of his circle who survived him’ (104), though the combination of literary and biographical criticism in the chapter is not entirely convincing.

<3>The second part of the book moves on to situating Wilfred Owen as a symbolic son of Wilde, embodying his theory of masculine ‘cultural reproduction’. Campbell acknowledges this as an ‘admittedly ... unusual’ way of reading the First World War poet, though some of the connections he highlights, such as Owen’s association with Robbie Ross and his circle, are fascinating. Overall, however, Campbell’s methods for making his argument are not compelling. Chapter Five, ‘Priests of Keats: Wilfred Owen’s Pre-War Relationship to Wilde’, draws attention to both writers’ ‘shared taste bordering on obsession for Keats’ (141), which, while being an interesting subtopic, feels stretched as the subject of an entire chapter. This section also begins by glossing Yeats’s and Heaney’s criticisms of Owen which indicate their distaste at what they see as Owen’s effeminacy, or, as Campbell puts it, that ‘the aesthetic to which Yeats and Heaney object has a sexual element to it’ (140). Yeats’s criticism of Owen’s ‘overwriting’ is used as the basis for Campbell’s argument that this ‘overwriting’ cannot be divorced from [Owen’s] status as a Wildean writer’ (21). Elsewhere in the chapter Campbell engages with recent work on masculinity and the First World War by writers such as Joanna Bourke, Sarah Cole, and Santanu Das, and this context for Owen’s work is developed in the final chapter, ‘OW/WH/WO: Wilfred Owen as Symbolic Son of Oscar Wilde’. As in Chapter Four, in this section Campbell combines close readings of three war poems with biographical criticism of Owen, including the contested subject of his sexuality.

<4>It is difficult not to admire a book of such theoretical originality and ambition. Campbell attempts to construct and demonstrate a new perspective on how literary influence works, one rooted in a queer theory of male procreation. However, the book’s ambition is its weakness as much as its strength. Campbell makes ambitious claims for his project which are not convincingly carried out in his execution. In the introduction, for example, he writes that ‘Owen’s familiarity with the idea of male procreation

would be little more than a bit of biographical trivia if it did not affect the way in which he articulated the war, and, consequently, also affect the way in which subsequent culture had come to understand the Great War at least partially through Owen' (8). However, a large part of the evidence provided for this argument is based precisely on 'biographical trivia', as well as a number of disconnected close readings of texts. While some of Campbell's analysis is astute, much of the material covered, such as the close reading of *Dorian Gray* and Wilde's two trials, will be over-familiar to a specialist reader. Near the end of the book, Campbell describes Wilde's 'dream of male procreation' as being 'always a rather tenuous thing' (183), and unfortunately the same description could also apply to much of Campbell's argument. Some of Campbell's evidence is too weak to bear the weight of his argument. For example, when outlining Owen's Wildean credentials, Campbell speculates of Owen being given a copy of Flaubert's *Tentation de St Antoine* ('a favorite of Wilde') that '[i]t is entirely possible that such reading caused Owen to turn to English decadents' (150). The connection between Wilde and Owen, while genuine enough, ultimately comes across as too tenuous for the ambitious claim which Campbell makes for it. The real strength of the book is as a work of theory, and in this respect it represents a valuable contribution to both queer theory and the burgeoning field of military masculinities.