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 **Oscar Wilde at Toad Hall: Kenneth Grahame's Drainings and Draggings**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Oscar Wilde at Toad Hall:
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U. C. Knoepfmacher (bio)

In 1888, the year in which he published *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, Oscar Wilde explained that his fairy tales were only "meant partly for children," since they also addressed "those who have kept the child-like faculties of wonder and joy, and who find in simplicity a subtle strangeness" (*Letters* 215). He seemed to have changed his mind, however, after the 1891 appearance of his *Dorian Gray*. In a letter in which he boasted about having become enmeshed in "red roses of pleasure," Wilde abruptly dismissed fairy tales as a tepid and bloodless form unsuited for "bodies of flesh" and "souls in turmoil." He thus advised a friend who had sent him a fairy tale manuscript to abandon "such fanciful, winsome work," proclaiming that those who truly "know what passion is, what passions are" should clothe them in "their red raiment, and make them move before us" (315). Yet near the end of his career, Wilde signaled still another turn. In *De Profundis*, the confessional work written after his humiliating imprisonment, he claimed that tales such as "The Happy Prince" and "The Young King" might well offer some salutary alternatives to "the primrose path" he had taken (*De Profundis* 92).

Oscar Wilde's oscillations provide me with a frame for this essay's contention that *The Wind in the Willows* can be read as Kenneth Grahame's attempt to distance himself from the excesses of the Aesthetic Movement with which he had once been identified. For the book that begins and ends with acts of house-cleaning undertaken by Grahame's band of male friends tries to domesticate Walter Pater's and Oscar Wilde's more extravagant versions of "The House Beautiful."¹ Begun in 1906, *The Wind in the Willows* appeared in 1908, a bare three years after the posthumous publication of *De Profundis* and in the same year in which Robert Ross brought out a fourteen-volume edition of Oscar Wilde's *Complete Works*. **[End Page 1]**

Grahame's lyric exaltation of the benign pastoral haven shared by Mole, Rat, and Badger is in keeping with his much earlier insistence, in his 1893 *Pagan Papers*, that it was "good to get back" to unencumbered and "sequestered" natural sites (*Pagan Papers* 23, 28). The comic misadventures of Mr. Toad, the garrulous speedster who is thrown into jail

for his social transgressions and whose ancestral Hall becomes possessed by the anarchic inhabitants of the Wild Wood, now act as a foil to the wholesomeness of a reclusive life that features a de-eroticized male bonding. Unlike his more decorous animal friends, the attention-seeking Mr. Toad is childishly uninhibited. As I will try to show, Toad bears more than the casual resemblances to Oscar Wilde that both Seth Lerer and Annie Gauger have noted in their recent annotated editions of *The Wind in the Willows*.² Still, Grahame's mockery of a cigar-smoking Toad he dresses in drag is not his only means to signal a retreat from the excesses of the 1890s. As I will show at the end of this article, even the most reliable of the river-bank's band of male friends, Water Rat, must be drained of any proclivity for untrustworthy Wildean "passions."

The pastoral river bank that acts as the prime setting for *The Wind in the Willows* is a version of the landscape to which Kenneth Grahame and his motherless siblings were transported when he was but five years old. In 1906, two years before the book's publication, Grahame resettled in Cookham Dene in Berkshire after more than thirty years of life in London. The river-islands, weirs, and backwaters where an imaginative child had once watched otters, moles, water-rats—and toads—were now revisited in a sort of Wordsworthian return. Yet this river-world also contained a very different memorial. As Peter Green notes in his fine Grahame biography, Cookham Dene was "almost in sight of Reading Gaol," a prison bordered by the Thames marshes (Green 284). As the site of Oscar Wilde's incarceration and literary recantations, Reading Gaol must...



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