"Áh yoù sílly àss, góds lìve in woóds!" Queer appropriations of Edwardian Classicism in Forster's short fiction and *Maurice*

Claire Braunstein Barnes,
University of Oxford

Abstract: This paper examines the interplay between classical tropes and queer identities in selected examples from Forster, in particular how his appropriation and interpretation of the scholarly classicism typical of his upbringing represents a point of divergence from the Wildean, Philhellenist hinterground of the previous century. The spectral schoolmaster figure, represented by e.g. Mr Bons in *The Celestial Omnibus* is often unseated – his tenure is over and he can no longer dictate the terms of classical engagement – but this paper argues that Forster goes further in his reappropriation of the classical ideal. Whilst the late nineteenth-century's queer, classicised aestheticism may be understood as grounded in the urban elite – extrapolated into the twentieth by the Platonism of the Cambridge Apostles (see: Clive in *Maurice*) – Forster's understanding of queer classicism is a more universalised quality and one evident anywhere in the *natural* world, should one wish to look. The figure of Pan is of particular relevance here, investigating Forster's engagement with a mythological figure so in vogue during this period.

Keywords: E.M. Forster, classical reception, *Maurice*, queer studies, English literature

This paper considers selected examples from Forster's short fiction and *Maurice*, identifying and exploring Forster's usage of classical imagery to subvert expectation and explore queer identity. Spanning the Edwardian period, always somehow adjacent to rather than representative of Modernist fiction, Forster's output nevertheless represents a key period both in terms of literary thought and socio-political attitudes; including those towards the teaching of Latin and Greek in Britain.

I will briefly outline the interlinking of the classical and the queer in the late nineteenth century, before exploring how these early twentieth-century examples from Forster might be understood as representing a point of divergence

from their 'Uranian', Philhellenist hinterground, and how this understanding might inform our own contemporary discourse when taking both queer and classical approaches to Forster's work. This latter intertext between classical literature and Forster studies is increasingly beginning to be raised in Classical Reception circles, notably the work of David Scourfield (Scourfield 2016, 2017). I am especially indebted to Christopher Stray for his rigorous publication on the role of classical education in Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Stray 2018).

Links between nineteenth-century Britain's prioritisation of classical study and the development of queer ideals are well established, tying into a flashpoint of British philhellenism which came a little later than that of mainland Europe. The scholarly and popular imagination indulged in what G.W. Clarke terms "The romantic separation of Greece from the stereotypes of the Renaissance (dominantly Roman) classical tradition [giving] rise to a vision of Hellas as a remote Theocritean Arcadia, primitive, unspoiled, pastoral" – something which married all too well with the "English philosophy of the Picturesque" (Clarke 1989, xi).

This movement's eighteenth-century roots in particularly German philhellenism are most tellingly associated with Winckelmann, himself of course a strong proponent of the interplay between classical aesthetics and homoeroticism (see Gustafson, 2002; Harloe, 2013). Alongside the idyll of the unspoiled Arcadia we can also see what Daniel Orrells terms a 'counter-discourse' – with the homoerotic potential of the Hellenic offering a response to the "legal criminalization and medical pathologization of … male-male desires" (Orrells 2011, 16). Whilst controversial Victorian sexologist Havelock Ellis did *not* understand the Greek (predominantly pederastic) model as relevant to modern homosexuality, his 1897 work *Sexual Inversion* does notably include an article from John Addington Symonds arguing to the contrary (ed. Crozier 2008). Symonds' stance is illustrative of an elite, often queer-coded philhellenism, urban and urbane, and strongly implicated in university scholarship. Compulsory Greek at Oxbridge remained in favour throughout this period, and prominent works on Plato by the likes of Walter Pater and Benjamin Jowett were bringing ideas of Platonic love, as deep spiritual love between two males, to the fore. Wilde, and writers of the Decadent movement, transported this influence more widely, whilst interpolating a more sensual, practical application to the Platonic ideal (Riley, Blanchard, and Manny 2017).

It is not in and of itself surprising, therefore, that Forster – as product of a late Victorian/early Edwardian pedagogical system – makes frequent allusions

to antiquity in his work. Forster's trajectory from Tonbridge to Cambridge is typical of his social stratum in the period; nor is it surprising that an upper class, queer man utilises these classical tropes to intimate homosexual desire in his writings. For instance, one character asking another if he has read Plato's *Symposium* as a tacit way of reading his sexual preference – one of Maurice's early interactions while at Cambridge (Forster 1971, 42). I would argue, however, that what is happening in Forster's navigation of classicised queerness is not just a reflection of these pervasive themes but a direct confrontation of them. The earlier short stories and *Maurice* represent comparatively early responses to a post-Wilde world and might be seen as representative of a reassessment and refutation of the queer classicisms seeded during the previous century.

Many of the themes evident in *Maurice* and the early short stories represent a key turn in attitudes towards classical literature in this period, with Forster firmly contributing his own link to the chain of reception. To quote Forster himself:

> A mirror [or a body of text] does not develop because a historical pageant passes in front of it. It only develops when it gets a fresh coat of quicksilver – in other words, when it acquires new sensitiveness (Forster 1927, 27).

Whilst the mirror inherited after the long 19th century may have been one gilded by Ellis, Symonds, Pater, Jowett, and Wilde, these modes of scholarship are not necessarily reflected as we move into the 'Edwardian summer' and beyond. If the 19th century sought to (at best) define, (at worst) pathologise male homosexual desire, imposing more concrete gender binaries and the "canalization of sexuality between the banks of homo- and hetero-sexuality" (Orrells 2011, 24), this later period begins to interrogate – however tentatively – a greater degree of nuance. Could we, perhaps, identify elements of a prototype for conversations which are only now beginning to gain significant traction, both in terms of the plurality of queer experience and the disproportionate weighting which classical antiquity has traditionally enjoyed?

For Classics in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain was not, simply, a playground for queer thought, even among the elite who sought to identify themselves with it. This is particularly the case for products of the British public school system. The reified, colonialised, classical experience which Forster would have been born into is excellently outlined in Christopher Stray's ob-

servation that "In learning grammar by rote in the lower forms of public schools, boys (as they almost all were) were learning both to learn and to obey: the two faces of *disciplina*" (Stray 2018, 287). Classical subjects still comprised the mainstay of establishment attitudes – including those which defined masculinity, and the type of man which British educational institutions sought to produce. Latin and Greek both loomed large on the curriculum, and any dilution of this was often interpreted as a risk to the fabric of masculine scholarly identity itself. Christopher Wordsworth, head of Harrow School, was not alone in his impassioned criticism of the use of English seeping into the study of Classics: tellingly, he worries that this will invite "mental effeminacy".[1]

It is this spectral schoolmaster figure which, on a surface level, many of Forster's classical allusions seem to be unseating. His tenure is over, and he can no longer dictate the terms of classical engagement.[2] In *The Celestial Omnibus* (1908) the short story's hero, a small boy whose discovery of a magic omnibus service offers him a true Arcadia, has invoked the frustrated disapproval of Mr Bons, the self-important president of his local Literary Society. On recounting the literary grandees he met on his adventure, including key figures from classical myth, the boy has (according to Mr Bons) failed to appreciate such elevated company – for instance mistaking Dante Alighieri as a simple bus driver called Dan. Yet when Mr Bons insists on accompanying the boy on his next visit, he – for all his literary society credentials – cannot engage with the beauty before him and ends up hurled earthwards – and finding a particularly undignified end behind Bermondsey gas works. Instead, it is the honest, earnest boy who is crowned with laurels and raised aloft on Achilles' shield to sit alongside heroes – becoming part of the ekphrastic moment best known from Homer's *Iliad*:

> Achilles raised him aloft. He crouched on the wonderful shield, on heroes and burning cities, on **vineyards graven in gold**, on every dear passion, every joy, on the entire image of the Mountain that he had discovered, **encircled ... with an everlasting stream**. 'No, no,' he protested, 'I am not worthy. It is Mr Bons who must be up here' (Forster 1908, 44–45).

1 Cited in Stray 2018, 295

2 It is worth noting here, however, that schoolmasters qua schoolmasters are not inherently figures of scorn in Forster's work – *The Longest Journey's* Rickie (soon to be a teacher of Classics, no less) is a particularly notable exception.

> ἐν δ᾽ ἐτίθει σταφυλῇσι μέγα βρίθουσαν ἀλωὴν καλὴν χρυσείην
> There he also placed a vineyard laden with clusters of grapes, beautiful and wrought in gold
> (*Iliad* XVIII.561)
>
> ἐν δ᾽ ἐτίθει ποταμοῖο μέγα σθένος Ὠκεανοῖο
> There he also placed the great might of the river Oceanus
> (607)

In the *Iliad* this ekphrasis takes place over several hundred lines, depicting all of the wondrous vignettes apparent on the shield, but in this brief section Forster is clearly making a direct allusion to the section – most notably his mention of golden vineyard and details such as the "encircling, everlasting stream" which refers to Oceanus, and is listed at the end of the ekphrasis in the Homer (see above).

In *The Classical Annex* (1972), another establishment figure – this time a beleaguered museum curator – finds himself at odds with the aestheticised potential of the Hellenic and its irrepressible pull on a guileless young boy. As the story was not published during Forster's lifetime, he is at liberty to illustrate this more facetiously, and in direct engagement with queer bodily experience. This time, he is destabilising nineteenth-century establishment classicism by grasping it right at its prudish core: the fig leaf, and all it represents. As the curator battles to replace a classical statue's fig leaf which keeps falling off, the job becomes impossible as the artefacts in the annex develop their own agency and the offending statue becomes grotesquely priapic:

> It might have been a dream but for an obscene change in the statue's physique. He gazed from his asylum in horror. He glanced at the fig leaf, now all too small (Forster 1972, 105).

We're seeing an inversion of the Galatea myth:[3] Pygmalion lusted after his own carved creation and sought to possess her wholly, whereas here the animated statue seduces the curator's young son Denis (ironically a classical name – from Dionysus). Pygmalion pulls Galatea into his own world of the living,

3 See Ovid *Metamorphoses X.243ff.*

whereas here the two figures then return to stone together and are immortalised in the act of penetration. (Forster very wryly has art historians interpret this position as a 'wrestling scene' between two brothers.)

This troubling of socio-sexual norms is perhaps a fitting link to what I understand to be the most significant trope in evidence here: one which unsettles not only the nineteenth-century public schoolmaster but the wholesale valorisation of Classical literacy – even within queer modes of engagement. This trope is the figure of the "Great God Pan," whose symbolic association suddenly becomes rife in Edwardian literature as a whole – one only has to think of J.M. Barrie's eponymous work, or the 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn' in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* – though the incipient nineteenth-century text is of course Arthur Machen's 1894 novella *The Great God Pan*. Jonathan Rose goes into detail on possible reasons behind the Edwardian "cult of Pan," suggesting that

> A combination of spiritual and sexual anxieties led … them to a surrogate religion of sexuality. The principal deity of this religion was Pan, the premoral nature god to incarnate the Edwardian Id (Rose 1986, 89).

Somerset Maugham, writing in 1930, reflects back on this sudden literary vogue, noting that

> In a hundred novels his cloven hoof left its imprint on the sward; poets saw him lurking in the twilight on London commons, and literary ladies in Surrey and New England, nymphs of an industrial age, mysteriously surrendered their virginity to his rough embrace. (Maugham 1920, 122)

Indeed Maugham, too, contributed to this list of caprine cameos[4] although Maugham's own presentation of Pan was representative of other more socially-conservative writers of the period, with the horned god as a frightening, almost Satanic figure. Dubbed the "equivocal" god by Saki, whose own short story *The Music on the Hill* can be counted in this wider compendium, Pan as the disinterested face of classicism offers different things to different writers in the period.

4 A comprehensive, though now rather dated list may be found in *Pan the Goat-God* (Merivale, 1969).

Forster's Pan is still an alarming figure, though often also a force for good – or at least redressing a world out of balance. He breaks up stale marriages, precipitates sexual awakenings, and calls into question deep-seated *mores* regarding gender, capitalism, and industrialisation. Much like the inconvenient physicality of a classical nude bringing his fig leaf smashing down, the figure of Pan is a force of nature, regularly intruding on the picnics, holidays, and social calls representative of superficial Edwardian respectability. It is here that we might uncover a deeper, more subversive address to that which saturates Forster's literary forebears: that illusory property we call "Classics."

In Forster's appropriately named *The Story of a Panic* (1904) Pan is expressed through Gennaro, the queer-coded Italian boy (doubly 'Other') who takes repressed public schoolboy Eustace into the woods and saves him from living inauthentically. Elsewhere, in *The Curate's Friend* (1907) Pan appears in person, romantically presented as a relic from the Roman occupation of Britain who flourished because "there is nothing particularly classical about a faun" (see quotation below). Here, too, Pan is a conduit for sexual awakening although here a heterosexual one: Emily, the Curate's intended, finds herself driven into another man's arms following the faun's divine intervention.

Whilst the late nineteenth century's queer, classicised aestheticism may be understood as grounded in the city and the university, what we're seeing here is a more universalised quality – evident anywhere in the natural world, should one wish to look. It is not only the Classics of the heteronormative which is beginning to discolour as we move further into the twentieth century. This may also be an extension of more generalised attitudes to identity and authenticity, in part a backlash against the pure aestheticism of Wilde's legacy – one where, to quote Wilde himself, "illusion is the first of all pleasures." Elizabeth Outka notes that

> At the turn of the century, particularly in Britain, what began to arise was the … desire to unite Wildean ideas of artifice and performance and continual self-fashioning with the contrary but appealing ideas of authenticity, stability, and continuity (Outka 2008, 3).

The wholesale valorisation of an imagined Greek ideal, at a significant temporal and geographic remove from the ancient Mediterranean, surely epitomises these notions of the artificial and performed. Forster's liminal identity – not quite a Modernist yet not entirely Edwardian – perhaps lends a degree of nuance

to his interpretation of this paradox. As may be noted in this passage taken from *The Curate's Friend,* Forster understands the force of classical imagery and its allure in the British mentality as a kind of false nostalgia against rapid modernisation, whilst also employing a judicious layer of critique through which one might re-evaluate these assumptions:

> It is uncertain how the Faun came to be in Wiltshire. Perhaps he came over with the Roman legionaries to live with his friends in camp … they in the joy of their recall forgot to take him on board, and he wept in exile; but at last he found that our hills also understood his sorrows, and rejoiced when he was happy. Or, perhaps he came to be there because he had been there always. **There is nothing particularly classical about a faun; it is only that the Greeks and Italians have ever had the sharpest eyes**" (Forster 1907, 71)

In *Other Kingdom* (1909) the narrator is a Classics tutor employed in a household which implodes after the eldest son of the house, a thrusting young businessman and product of the post-industrial age, attempts to privatise and domesticate a patch of woodland as a misguided gift for his reluctant fiancée, Evelyn. In another classicised exploration of sexuality and gender (or, perhaps more accurately now, an exploration of the *classical* through sexual identity), Evelyn's distress finds her invoking the primal wrath of the god Pan. Again, seeking to re-establish his pastoral supremacy, Pan rips up the carefully-manicured paths and arbors which have been imposed on his land, and Evelyn herself becomes one with the wood by turning into a beech tree, just like Daphne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses:*

> She flung her arms up above her head, close together, so that she looked like a slender column. Then her body swayed and her delicate green dress quivered over it with the suggestion of countless leaves. (Forster 1909, 69)

> mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro
> in frondem crines in ramos bracchia crescunt
> pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret
> ora cacumen habet remanet nitor unus in illa

> Thin bark closed around her soft breast
> Her hair became leaves, her arms became branches
> And her swift feet stuck to the ground as clinging roots
> Her face was hidden with encircling leaves …
> (*Metamorphoses* I. 548–551)

Interestingly, much like the humble schoolboy who successfully rode the Celestial Omnibus, Evelyn is accorded the honour of a classical allusion, yet Forster is also at pains to emphasise that she is actually very bad at Latin. Evelyn "was very earnest over her classics. She wished she could have said what good they had done her" (Forster 1909, 48).

In fact, being bad at Latin (or Greek) seems almost a prerequisite for authentic classical (and interpersonal) engagement in Forster. When we meet *Maurice*'s eponymous protagonist in his schooldays, he is caught daydreaming in class and tries to redeem himself by responding "Sir – oh! Dative absolute?" (Forster 1971, 16), a Latin construction which does not exist. Later in life, this ambivalence deepens to antipathy and Maurice "hates the very word [Greece]," associating it with "morbidity and death" (100). This queer hero of a celebrated queer love story has, by his own admission, little interest in the ancients he is supposed to consider his sexual, as well as intellectual, forebears.

The daydream Maurice is enjoying, prior to his rude awakening by the schoolmaster, involves the face of a handsome young man. He ponders: "Was he a Greek god, such as illustrates the classical dictionary? More probable, but most probably he was just a man" (16). Sitting in his Victorian British public school, the air redolent with classicised potential, Maurice considers making a link between the queer and the classical and immediately dismisses it. He may be surrounded by the stuff, but it doesn't work for him. Crucially, the narratorial voice later notes that Maurice's "interest in the classics had been slight and obscene, and had vanished when he loved Clive" (99). Clive, who asks him on their first meeting at Cambridge if he had ever read the *Symposium*, goes on to provide Maurice with the "real" thing – and, this achieved, Maurice considers his relationship with Plato now redundant. The reference to a classical dictionary is additionally interesting, as we know from biographers that the young Forster enjoyed perusing different classical dictionaries not for communion with the queer Platonic ideal, but for the chance sighting of undraped male "dirties" – Forster's euphemism for the penis (Stray, 2018).

Similarly, one might expect these woodcuts of classical nudes to be discarded once the "real thing" came along.

Orrells illustrates that it is Clive – whose Platonism in many ways echoes that of the Cambridge Apostles – who makes the required pilgrimage to Greece, while Maurice stubbornly remains at home (Orrells 2011). Clive returns from Greece both physically unwell and with his future wife in tow, whereas Maurice – unashamedly Greekless Maurice – flourishes, finding his true love Alec in an otherwise unremarkable English garden of which the Great God Pan might approve. As Robert Martin illustrates: "the novel opposes two kinds of homosexuality – one that is identified with Cambridge and Clive, and one that is identified with Alec and the open air" (Martin 1983, 35). There is a knowing paradox at play here: classicism is unseated, only to be reinstated in a very contemporary, localised setting. Late nights poring chastely over the *Symposium* are out, and passionate rendez-vous with Theocritean men of toil are in. Forster, discussing *Maurice* in a 1915 letter, states that he has "created something absolutely new, even to the Greeks" (Lago and Furbank, eds. 1983, 219).

As Forster would have it, this queer, classicised yet de-classicising potential is something that exists beyond *amo amas amat* and in the very fabric of the world around us. This is aptly conveyed in a quotation given to Evelyn, the young woman from *The Other Kingdom* who manages to elude the marital expectations placed on her by becoming one with nature and the Great God Pan. Prior to her ultimate union with her beloved woodland, she teases her husband-to-be by quoting Virgil's *Eclogues* II line 60, sung in English with a playful (and utterly incongruous) superimposition of metre: "Áh yoù sílly àss, góds lìve in woóds!".[5] In spite of her Cambridge-educated tutor's ministrations, Evelyn is not taking her Classics seriously – she doesn't need to. Gods of Classicisms past continue to live on in our woods, and we no longer require a public schoolmaster to help us see them.

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5 *Quem fugis a demens habitarunt di quoque*

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