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The Provenance of Oscar Wilde's "Decay of Lying"

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde believed that “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” which he first published in 1889 in the *Nineteenth Century* and reprinted in a revised version in *Intentions* (1891), was his most accomplished essay.¹ He made this belief clear in a long recriminatory letter that he wrote to his lover Alfred Douglas from jail in 1897:

One of the most delightful dinners I remember ever having is one Robbie [Ross] and I had together in a little Soho café, which cost about as many shillings as my dinners to you used to cost pounds. Out of my dinner with Robbie came the first and best of all my dialogues. Idea, title, treatment, mode, everything was struck out at a 3 franc 50 c. *table d'hôte*.²

12 As editor Josephine M. Guy points out, even though there is not sufficient information to
13 determine when exactly this dinner took place, the idea that the “essay topic . . . was thought up
14 in relaxed conversation with a close friend is plausible.”³ Yet, thanks to newly unearthed
15 manuscript evidence, it is now clear that both the “treatment” and “mode” did not arise
16 spontaneously from Wilde’s dinnertime exchange with Robert Ross, the close friend who would
17 go on to be Wilde’s literary executor and who managed Wilde’s estate until 1918. One of the
18 points that emerges from the complex textual history of “The Decay of Lying” is that it began as
19 a traditional critical discourse, adopting the third-person voice familiar to two of his other long

¹ Portions of this essay have appeared in “Fair Copy Manuscript of Oscar Wilde’s ‘The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,’” *Notes and Queries* 61, no. 4 (November 2014) and in the online blog of the Rosenbach Library (<http://rosenbach.blogspot.com/2015/01/the-decay-of-lying.html>).

² Oscar Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, January–March 1897, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 688.

³ Josephine M. Guy, Introduction, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Vol. 4: Criticism. Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxxiv. This edition notes the variants in the twenty-page holograph that contains nineteen pages of an early draft of “The Decay of Lying” and the text in the *Nineteenth Century* 25, no. 143 (1889): 35–56, takes as its copy text the version of Wilde’s essay that appears in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine, and Co., 1891). As we discuss below, Guy’s edition appeared five years prior to the discovery of the fair copy MS, housed at Akron University. Where necessary, we draw attention to significant differences between the 1889 and 1891 texts.

1 essays, "Shakespeare and Stage Costume" (1885) and "Pen, Pen and Poison" (1889). This recent
2 discovery about the provenance of the fair copy of this fine essay illuminates in exceptional
3 detail the ways in which Wilde transformed his discussion into a remarkable and dynamic
4 dialogue between two interlocutors, Vivian and Cyril.

5 As readers of Wilde's essays know well, in its final form "The Decay of Lying" features
6 primary speaker Vivian—who is interrupted occasionally by Cyril—staging a passionate defense
7 of lying as an imaginative art. After developing a thoroughgoing critique of contemporary
8 realism, at the end of the dialogue Vivian establishes the three doctrines that uphold his theory of
9 a "new aesthetics."⁴ His first principle, he states, is that "Art never expresses anything but
10 itself." (4:102). He proceeds to his second observation that "bad art comes from returning to Life
11 and Nature, and elevating them into ideals." (4:102). Next, he posits "Life imitates Art far more
12 than Art imitates Life." The sum of these three doctrines appears in Vivian's "final revelation,"
13 where he maintains "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art."⁵

14 From the dialogue's opening, these counter-intuitive assertions impress their originality
15 through many a burnished phrase, often tempered with Wilde's inimitable wit. No sooner has
16 Vivian greeted Cyril, who has just entered the parlor from the terrace outside, than he repudiates
17 Cyril's desire to return to the open air and "enjoy Nature." (4:73). "Enjoy Nature!" Vivian
18 expositulates. (4:73). "People," he says, "tell us that Art makes us love Nature more than we
19 loved her before; that it reveals her secrets to us; and that after a careful study of Corot and

⁴ Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying: An Observation," in *Criticism*, ed. Guy, 4:102. Subsequent volume and page references appear in the main text. Guy's edition, which notes the variants in the twenty-page holograph that contains nineteen pages of an early draft of "The Decay of Lying" and the text in the *Nineteenth Century* (25, no. 143 [1889]: 35–56), takes as its copy text the version of Wilde's essay that appears in *Intentions* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine, and Co., 1891). As we discuss below, Guy's edition appeared five years prior to the discovery of the fair copy MS, housed at Akron University. Where necessary, we draw attention to significant differences between the 1889 and 1891 texts.

⁵ Guy, *Criticism*, 102. Other than varying capitalization on "Life," "Art," and "Nature," these lines remain identical to the first version published in the *Nineteenth Century*. Elsewhere, the 1889 text places no capitals on these words.

1 Constable we see things in her that had escaped our observation.”⁶ In a direct challenge to
2 Classical theories of mimesis, Vivian contends, “My own experience is that the more we study
3 Art, the less we care for Nature.”⁷ (4:73). On no account will Vivian tolerate the view—one
4 against which he protests throughout the dialogue—that art should mirror the real world.

5 The provenance of the fair copy manuscript, on which the *Nineteenth Century* version
6 was based, has made it possible to comprehend more clearly the evolution of “The Decay of
7 Lying” into this compelling dialogue. Long thought to be missing or lost, the fair copy has been
8 in the Special Collections at the University of Akron since the early 1960s. In 2012, the
9 manuscript entered the OCLC when Victor S. Fleischer—the archivist at the University of
10 Akron—completed the electronic cataloguing of this document, which his institution acquired as
11 part of a larger collection from the rubber magnate Herman Muehlstein (1880–1962). Prior to
12 Muehlstein’s purchase of this item (the precise date of his ownership remains unclear), the fair
13 copy of Wilde’s essay had traveled widely. In this essay, we focus on the extraordinary paths that
14 this manuscript followed as it made its way through the hands of some very well known as well
15 as rather obscure booksellers and auction houses on both sides of the Atlantic between 1905 and
16 the 1930s. Especially noticeable is the rapid movement of this manuscript between a series of
17 owners, some of whom put it back on sale within a few years of obtaining it.

18 The present discussion situates the provenance of the Akron fair copy in relation to the
19 provenance of three other documents that represent all known versions: first, the Berg bound
20 manuscript, which has been held at the New York Public Library since 1940 (most of these
21 folios come from the earliest stages of the essay’s composition); and secondly, two forged drafts,
22 the one held at the Folger [Shakespeare](#) Library, and the other at the William Andrews Clark
23 Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.⁸ We believe that it is important to
24 consider the provenance of the two forgeries because these documents also assist us in
25 understanding the increasing value that vendors and collectors placed on Wilde’s writings during
26 the early and mid twentieth century As early as 1911, Stuart Mason—the professional name of

⁶ In the 1889 text, “our observation” appears simply as “us.”

⁷ [Guy, Criticism, 73.](#)

⁸ In 2013, we alerted Dr. Heather Wolfe, Curator of Manuscripts and archivist at the Folger that the MS in her collection is in fact a forgery. Their catalogue has since been updated to reflect the dubious provenance.

1 Christopher Sclater Millard, whose authoritative bibliography of Wilde's oeuvre appeared just
2 before World War I—observed that forgeries “sufficiently skillful to deceive any one except
3 experts” were circulating among auction houses such as Sotheby’s, which promptly rejected
4 many of them.⁹

5 For years “The Decay of Lying” held a somewhat unusual position in debates about the
6 provenance of Wilde’s manuscripts, in part because it remained difficult to determine how the
7 drafts of the essay came into circulation after the fraught events that ensued when the police
8 arrested Wilde at the Cadogan Hotel, London, during the early evening of Friday, 5 April 1895.
9 The police had a warrant that charged Wilde with committing acts of gross indecency with other
10 men. It is remarkable that Ross was able to gather up many of the manuscripts that he discovered
11 at Wilde’s home at the time the Crown decided to prosecute the author for violating the eleventh
12 clause of the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, which criminalized sexual relations between
13 men in both public and private spaces. On the evening before Ross left for the Continent, not
14 long after Wilde’s arrest, fearful that he (like Wilde) might be taken to court for his
15 homosexuality, he visited Wilde’s family home in Tite Street, Chelsea, with instructions from his
16 friend to find the manuscripts of several unpublished works. Once he and a companion entered
17 Wilde’s study, they were not able to locate the materials Wilde requested but witnessed instead
18 “all of the published MSS . . . lying about in various fragmentary states.”¹⁰ To Ross, one thing
19 was clear: “someone familiar with the author’s writing had been there before us.”¹¹ The
20 unspecified “someone” had doubtless invaded the Tite Street home in search of incriminating
21 evidence that would strengthen the charge that Wilde had indulged in sexual acts with other men.
22 The need to rescue Wilde’s papers and letters was urgent for another reason as well: two weeks
23 later, all of Wilde’s household goods were to go up for auction. Besides Wilde’s papers, his

⁹ Quoted in “The Book Collector: Oscar Wilde’s Forgery,” *Publisher’s Weekly*, 9 December 1911.

Millard’s comments, which focus on two batches of forged letters, originally appeared in *Publisher’s Circular*.

¹⁰ Robert Ross, Introductory Note, in Oscar Wilde, *A Florentine Tragedy: Opening Scene by T. Sturge Moore* (Boston: John W. Luce, 1908), v–vi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, vi.

1 furnishings and artworks went under the hammer in the residence where he had lived with his
2 family since the start of 1885,¹² a sale necessitated to defray considerable debts.¹³

3 As is clear from reports of the crowded auction at Tite Street, which took place on 24
4 April 1895, the manuscripts that Ross had been unable to retrieve fetched low prices. The
5 *Illustrated Police News*, for example, noted that a parcel of Wilde's papers went for £5 15s.¹⁴
6 One of the parties most interested in securing his manuscripts was Charles Russell, the solicitor
7 of John Sholto Douglas, 9th Marquess of Queensberry and obstreperous father of Lord Alfred
8 Douglas, who had unearthed plenty of information that revealed Wilde's friendships with young
9 men, including several sex workers and extortionists. In 1929, the lawyer Edward Maltby
10 recalled on good authority that Russell "sent several private detectives" to the sale: "[Russell]
11 wanted none of [Wilde's] books, only holograph manuscripts, his object being to obtain,
12 something in Wilde's handwriting which could be used to prove the truth of the charges for
13 which he was then awaiting trial at the Old Bailey."¹⁵ In all probability, the private detectives
14 who were on Queensberry's payroll, which Russell no doubt administered, had already beaten
15 their way into Wilde's library before Ross was there earlier that month.

16 With such conflicting interests passionately invested in harvesting as much of Wilde's
17 holograph material as possible, it is no wonder that some of his manuscripts were scattered with
18 few reliable traces. The fragmented draft version of "The Decay of Lying" held in the New York
19 Public Library, for example, reminds us of the disorder that on occasion affected the ways in
20 which booksellers and collectors pieced together several of Wilde's manuscripts that had been
21 left in such confusion by the time of the Tite Street sale. To date, the most detailed textual
22 editing of "The Decay of Lying," which Guy completed in 2007, relied on the Berg manuscript,

¹² Devon Cox remarks that the decoration and furnishing of Wilde's family home at 16 Tite Street "was finally finished just after the New Year 1885" (*The Street of Wonderful Possibilities: Whistler, Wilde, and Sargent in Tite Street* [London: Frances Lincoln, 2015], 131).

¹³ The exact nature of Wilde's debts remains a matter of debate. Upon his arrest, Wilde held writs for debts owed to tobacconists and silversmiths. For further discussion of Wilde's financial situation at the time of his trial, see Joseph Bristow, *Oscar Wilde on Trial: The Criminal Proceedings, from Arrest to Imprisonment—5 April 1895–25 May 1895* (Yale University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁴ "The Wilde-Taylor Case," *Illustrated Police News* (London), 4 May 1895.

¹⁵ Edward Maltby, *Secrets of a Solicitor* (London: John Long, 1929), 177.

1 which binds together twenty folios that are evidently from very different phases of the earliest
2 composition of the essay. By 1902 this manuscript was in the possession of the poet and critic
3 Richard Le Gallienne, who spent several pages in his 1925 study, *The Romantic '90s*, recalling
4 his intimate knowledge of Wilde's legendary decadence. ("This morning," Le Gallienne
5 remembers Wilde as saying, "I took out a comma, and this afternoon—I put it in again."¹⁶) As
6 Guy points out, these folios indicate that in its formative stages Wilde had not conceived of "The
7 Decay of Lying" as a critical dialogue between his two protagonists Vivian and Cyril, names
8 shared by Wilde's two young sons. Instead, the Berg folios suggest that Wilde's essay—which
9 he originally titled "On the Decay of Lying"—took a conventional form.

10 The Akron fair-copy manuscript shows how the shift to a dialogic method enabled Wilde
11 to make a decisive advance on his acknowledged precursors Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater.
12 His decision to introduce dialogue allowed him both to anticipate and give voice to the
13 objections that readers might make to several of the bolder, unorthodox arguments that Vivian
14 elaborates at length. These claims at times provoke Cyril's bemusement or downright
15 bafflement: "[Y]ou don't mean to say," he asks Vivian at one point, "that you seriously believe
16 that Life imitates Art, that Life in fact is the mirror, and Art the reality?"¹⁷ (4:90) Cyril's
17 incredulous remark nicely summarizes Vivian's unfamiliar thesis. This claim, repeated with
18 considerable skepticism by Cyril, does not appear in the Berg manuscript; it is, though, included
19 in the Akron fair copy and remains intact through all of the published iterations of the essay.
20 Tracing the provenance of the somewhat fragmentary Berg folios, which belong to very different
21 stages of Wilde's compositional process, and the fifty-five continuous folios of the well-
22 preserved Akron fair copy, is instructive. It not only tells us much about the ways this essay
23 adopted an entirely fresh structure to establish its conventional ideas; the provenance also draws
24 into focus the ways in which Wilde's works circulated through an unstable market where his
25 literary value fluctuated considerably, within the different contexts of Britain and America,
26 between 1902 and the 1930s.

27 RICHARD LE GALLIENNE'S FRAGMENT (BERG COLLECTION, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY)

28 Exactly how the twenty manuscript pages labeled as "The Decay of Lying" came into the
29 possession of Richard Le Gallienne remains unclear, but they evidently held a special place in

¹⁶ Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1925), 235.

¹⁷ Guy, *Criticism*, 90.

1 his collection.¹⁸ Nevertheless, when in 1902 Le Gallienne—according to his biographers—
2 became “desperately short of money” he tried to sell “a prized manuscript of Oscar Wilde’s
3 which he had decided to sacrifice from his library,” though he was unable to find a buyer.¹⁹ Just
4 three years later, when he faced “an outstandingly large American debt,” Le Gallienne put the
5 bulk of his remarkable library, including the twenty folios of Wilde’s “Decay of Lying,” on the
6 auction block. Each volume bore Le Gallienne’s bookplate (see figure 1), and the poet composed
7 a verse for the occasion, which appeared at the opening of the catalogue: these lines, according to
8 the *Literary Collector*, constituted a “poetic epistle to prospective buyers.”²⁰ In 1905, Le
9 Gallienne’s salesmanship extended throughout the Anderson Galleries sale catalogue, which
10 touted the significance of the manuscript:

11 787. — Original MS. of his Essay “On the Decay of Lying,” written on 20 folio pages,
12 with corrections, alterations, additions, etc. (As a lot.)
13 One of the most desirable of Wilde’s manuscripts. It is apparently not quite perfect—few
14 manuscripts are—but the beginning and the end are both there, and every page is brilliant
15 with sarcasm and inimitable wit. His criticisms of Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider

¹⁸ For example, “He had bought the first of [his bookcases] from Norman Gale and had had the others built in keeping as they were required. He lost no time in arranging his prized collection on their shelves, the shoals of new books which he had from time to time reviewed, his old and well-loved favourites, and a fair sprinkling of editions de luxe, including his own books and a nearly complete set of the works issued by William Morris’ Kelmscott Press, as well as bound manuscripts of Oscar Wilde and John Davidson” (Richard Whittington-Egan and Geoffrey Smerdon, *The Quest of the Golden Boy: The Life and Letters of Richard Le Gallienne* [London: The Unicorn Press, 1960], 235–36).

¹⁹ Whittington-Egan and Smerdon, *The Quest of the Golden Boy*, 397. The title of this “prized manuscript” is not disclosed in the biography. Also auctioned in the later 1905 auction were the manuscript of “The Birthday of the Infanta” (lot 784), “Dogmas” (lot 788), and a “sketch of chapters and accounts of travels in France” (lot 791), so the “prized manuscript” offered for sale in 1902 was not necessarily the “Decay of Lying.” Nevertheless, what is significant is that Le Gallienne was compelled to sell a work he so valued and that, in 1902, he could not find a buyer (*Books, Letters and Manuscripts from the Private Library of Richard Le Gallienne, Sale for 5–7 June 1905* [New York: Anderson Galleries Catalogue 1905], 70–71).

²⁰ “Notes,” *Literary Collector* 9, no. 6 (June 1905): 206–07.

1 Haggard, Mrs. Humphry Ward, of numerous French writers, of the drama, etc., are novel
2 and entertaining.²¹

3 While the description of the essay might be on point, terming the twenty-folio lot the "Original
4 MS." is rather fanciful, and the caveat that the document is "apparently not quite perfect"
5 understates its fragmentary nature.

6 Such careful marketing made Wilde the central attraction of the sale. According to one
7 report, "What the bidders wanted was Oscar Wilde."²² The result seems to have been something
8 of a surprise, less than five years after Wilde's untimely demise in penury at Paris, as press
9 accounts suggest that the high prices garnered by Wilde's texts—the sale included some sixteen
10 works either written by or owned by Wilde—were unexpected. "Remarkably high prices for
11 autograph manuscripts of Oscar Wilde were the most interesting feature of the third and last
12 day's sale of the library of Richard Le Gallienne," the *New York Times* observed.²³ Other sources
13 agreed that Wilde's works were the highlight of the auction.²⁴ His two-volume Oxford edition of
14 Herodotus, "interleaved to 8vo size, and containing many Notes, Passages translated, etc., in the
15 handwriting of Oscar Wilde," fetched \$1,320, the highest price of the auction, although that
16 figure proves to be somewhat misleading.²⁵ Le Gallienne instructed the auctioneer to purchase

²¹ *Books, Letters and Manuscripts from the Private Library of Richard Le Gallienne*, 70.

²² "Notes," *Literary Collector*, 206–07.

²³ "Wilde Manuscripts sold. Bring High Prices at the Sale of the Le Gallienne Library," 8 June 1905, *New York Times. Current Literature* noted: "At the sale in New York City, June 8, of Richard Le Gallienne's library, manuscripts of Oscar Wilde brought surprisingly high prices" ("Recent Fiction and the Critics," *Current Literature* 39, no. 1 [July 1905]: 105), and *Book News* wrote: "especial interest was manifested in the collection of autographed copies and manuscripts of the works of Oscar Wilde, all of which brought unusually good prices" ("In the World of Letters," *Book News: An Illustrated Magazine of Literature and Books* 23, no. 275 [July 1905]: 926).

²⁴ See also "High Prices for Oscar Wilde MSS," *Publishers' Weekly* 47, no. 24 (17 June 1905): 1635.

²⁵ *Books, Letters and Manuscripts from the Private Library of Richard Le Gallienne*, 69. For prices, see "Wilde Manuscripts sold. Bring High Prices at the Sale of the Le Gallienne Library," *New York Times*, 8 June 1905. As many scholars have noted, Wilde's correspondence documents his arrangement with Macmillan & Co. to translate and introduce a volume of Herodotus (see "To George Macmillan," 22 March 1877, *Complete Letters*, 78–79). While no further correspondence about the project has been located, advertisements suggest that the project might have extended beyond the planning stage. The

1 the Herodotus on his own behalf. Unfortunately, Le Gallienne "never [dreamed] that Oscar's
2 MSS. would bring such absurd prices"; he expected the Herodotus volumes to sell "for \$100 or
3 so."²⁶ In what he termed a "sad-laughable, and very Irish, stroke of humour," Le Gallienne's
4 own expenditure of \$1,320 drastically undercut the profits from the auction, and after he had
5 paid his debts and related expenses he was left with only \$234.95 of the \$4,736 in sales.²⁷

6 Other buyers fared better. Book dealer George D. Smith purchased "The Decay of Lying"
7 manuscript at the Le Gallienne auction for \$375.²⁸ Smith later published a catalogue of "a
8 collection of original manuscripts and first editions" from Le Gallienne's library, although the
9 "Decay" manuscript was not among the articles listed; we have been unable to locate the
10 transaction that brought Le Gallienne's "Decay" folios to their next owner.²⁹ What is certain,
11 however, is that the manuscript eventually landed in the collection of W. T. H. Howe, collector
12 and president of the American Book Company. In September 1940, Dr. Albert A. Berg
13 purchased Howe's extraordinary collection of over 16,000 books and manuscripts, a collection
14 that would later form part of Berg's bequest to the New York Public Library.³⁰ The interior cover
15 of the bound manuscript contains bookplates of both Le Gallienne and Howe.

16 Although it is bound, the leaves of this manuscript clearly derive from multiple drafts of
17 "The Decay of Lying." In eighteen of the pages, the contents are not presented as a dialogue,

Publishers' Trade List Annuals for 1882 and 1883 list "Scenes from Herodotus. Translated by Oscar
Wilde, B.A. *In Press*" ("Macmillan and Co.'s," 1882, 16; "Macmillan and Co.'s," 1883, 16). The
current location of Wilde's copy of Herodotus is unknown.

²⁶ Quoted in Whittington-Egan and Smerdon, *The Quest of the Golden Boy*, 417.

²⁷ Whittington-Egan and Smerdon, *The Quest of the Golden Boy*, 417–18.

²⁸ "Wilde Manuscripts Sold," *Boston Evening Transcript*, 8 June 1905.

²⁹ See *Richard Le Gallienne: Catalogue of a Collection of Original Manuscripts and First Editions* (New York: G. D. Smith Book Co. [1910?]).

³⁰ "History of the Berg Collection," accessed 4 August 2014, <http://www.nypl.org/history-berg-collection>. It is worth noting, as Guy does in an article on Wilde's self-plagiarism, that Lawrence Danson misattribution the Berg manuscript in the notes of his study *Wilde's Intentions*; he thanks Lady Eccles for granting permission to quote from the texts, when in fact the manuscript was not in her possession. See Guy, "Oscar Wilde's Self-Plagiarism: Some New Manuscript Evidence," *Notes and Queries* 52, no. 4 (December 2005): 486, and Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 171.

1 while only two of the leaves attribute dialogue to "Cyril" and "Vivian." Guy, in the introduction
2 to her edition of Wilde's *Criticism*, offers a comprehensive discussion of the Berg manuscript, in
3 which she makes a compelling argument for a stemma of the folios. As she points out, it is
4 difficult to know how these sheets—which "may represent as many as three, and possibly four
5 different stages of composition"—came to be bound together.³¹ Nevertheless, the Berg
6 manuscript casts into relief Wilde's wholesale revision of "The Decay of Lying" that
7 transformed it into the vibrant critical dialogue that we find in the fair copy housed at Akron.

8 PRINTER'S FAIR COPY FOR THE NINETEENTH CENTURY (AKRON)

9 Significant development took place between the Berg draft and the Akron fair copy, which
10 was clearly the version handed over to the printers for the *Nineteenth Century*, since typesetters'
11 marks appear throughout. In his 1914 bibliography of Wilde's works, Millard states that Wilde
12 gave this manuscript to Frank Richardson, a minor novelist and humorist who shared literary and
13 social circles with Wilde.³² Richardson, about whom comparatively little is known, went so far
14 as to include a reference to the manuscript of "The Decay of Lying" in *The Other Man's Wife*,
15 the 1908 novel considered to be his best. It opens with a scene set in a library decorated
16 according to the precepts of Dorian Gray (the protagonist of Wilde's only novel, published in
17 1890 and revised in 1891), with a choice selection of "only forty books, each in a binding
18 appropriate to its contents."³³ Among the volumes, shelved next to Jane Austen's *Pride and*
19 *Prejudice*, is "'The Decay of Lying,' the original manuscript for which [the owner] had paid 150
20 guineas" in "jade-green leather" binding.³⁴ Richardson, or at least his publisher, seemed to

³¹ Guy, *Criticism*, xxxvii.

³² Stuart Mason [Christopher Sclater Millard], *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1914), 123.

³³ Frank Richardson, *The Other Man's Wife* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1908), 2. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde writes that Dorian "could not free himself from the influence" of a novel, long thought to have been modelled on Joris-Karl Huysman's 1884 *À Rebours*: "He procured from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control" (*The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde. Vol. 3: The Picture of Dorian Gray, the 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], 276).

³⁴ Richardson, *The Other Man's Wife*, 3.

1 delight in comparisons to Wilde, evinced by the inclusion of a comment from the *Manchester*
 2 *Guardian* in a list of press blurbs at the novel's end: Richardson "occasionally hits on some such
 3 happy perversion or wears an air of affected triviality with so good a grace as to recall the author
 4 of *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Decay of Lying*."³⁵

5 In light of the pride of place that Richardson accorded the manuscript and the value given to
 6 his association with Wilde, the circumstances of his decision to offer the work at auction remain
 7 unclear.³⁶ After leaving his collection, the manuscript's route to Akron was circuitous. In 1910,
 8 the manuscript was included in a Sotheby, Wilkinson, and Hodge's sale of "books and
 9 manuscripts," where, according to *Book Prices*, the London bookseller J. Hornstein purchased it
 10 for £111, or approximately \$540.³⁷ At this stage, the work was described as "the Original
 11 Manuscript," with "54 leaves in the handwriting of Oscar Wilde, signed by the author, in limp
 12 blue morocco. sm. folio."³⁸ Sotheby's catalogue, with the erroneous page number listed, seems to
 13 have been Millard's source for the entry in his *Bibliography*. Many onlookers did not anticipate
 14 competing interests, and the relatively high prices that resulted from such competition came as a
 15 surprise. Five years after Le Gallienne's sale, the British *Connoisseur* declared, "it would seem
 16 that the day is breaking, and that Oscar Wilde comes into his kingdom at last."³⁹ If £111 for the
 17 manuscript signaled Wilde's rising star, the next recorded sale offers evidence that Wilde's
 18 "kingdom" was gaining in stature: the manuscript sold to Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach for \$1,525 at
 19 the April 1920 sale of John B. Stetson Jr.'s "Oscar Wilde Collection." As Rosenbach's

³⁵ Ibid., 422.

³⁶ Richardson's fate in the years following the sale serves as a sad coda to the manuscript's journey. After he was found dead in his London flat in August 1917, an inquest ruled his demise as a suicide. His sister testified that he had lately suffered from depression and "[drank] to excess . . . a good deal at times." Richardson's valet agreed and noted the novelist "had a horror of going blind . . . He said that he preferred to be dead to being blind," and as he was suffering from cataracts, this might have contributed to his end ("Dread of the Dark," *Hull Daily Mail*, 4 August 1917).

³⁷ Contemporary exchange rates here and throughout the remainder of the essay are derived from *Measuring Worth*, accessed 14 October 2015, <http://measuringworth.com/>.

³⁸ Lot 94, *Catalogue of Valuable Books, Autograph Letters & Manuscripts* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson, & Hodge, 26 July 1910), 11.

³⁹ "In the Sale Room," *Connoisseur: An Illustrated Magazine for Collectors* 18 (September–December 1910), 60. The sale was also reported in "Nell Gwynn's 'Autograph,'" *New York Times*, 5 August 1910.

1 biographer Edwin Wolf observes, at the Stetson sale "Dr. Rosenbach swept the board almost
2 clean, taking virtually every item of real importance."⁴⁰ The Anderson Galleries catalogue for the
3 sale contains noteworthy details about the fair copy, including a description of the binding:
4 "Written on 55 pp folio, and mounted with inner guards in book form, full blue morocco covers,
5 and preserved in a lined cloth case."⁴¹ Further, the catalogue notes the reason for the discrepancy
6 in pagination; in Millard's bibliography, "this is erroneously stated to consist of 54 folios,
7 whereas there are 55—48a and 48b constituting the extra folio."⁴² Many of the items at the
8 Stetson sale—fifty-one were Rosenbach's purchases—were destined for Colonel H. D. Hughes,
9 a collector from Pennsylvania, who (as Wolf notes), wisely entrusted to Dr. Rosenbach bids of
10 over \$10,000 at the profitable sale.⁴³

11 This was not the last time that Rosenbach handled the manuscript. Just four years after the
12 Stetson sale, the document again appeared at auction when, following the colonel's death, the
13 Anderson Galleries sold much of his collection. Still bound in blue morocco, the manuscript was
14 also noted as including the bookplate "from the J. B. Stetson, Jr. collection."⁴⁴ According to a
15 price list tipped into the auction catalogue held at the Grolier Club, the manuscript sold for \$625,
16 a significant drop from its previous sale.⁴⁵ Dr. Rosenbach managed to make a tidy sum on the

⁴⁰ Edwin Wolf II with John F. Fleming, *Rosenbach: A Biography* (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Company, 1960), 135.

⁴¹ [Anderson Galleries, *The Oscar Wilde Collection of John B. Stetson, Jr., Elkins Park, PA. Sale #1484, April 1920* \(New York: American Art Association, 1920\)](#), 14.

⁴² [Anderson Galleries, *The Oscar Wilde Collection of John B. Stetson, Jr., Elkins Park, PA. Sale #1484, April 1920* \(New York: American Art Association, 1920\)](#), 14.

⁴³ The sales book of Rosenbach's company records the purchases, Rosenbach Library VIId(15), 162–63 (entry for 23 April 1920). We are deeply grateful to Elizabeth Fuller and Kathy Haas at the Rosenbach Library and Museum for their assistance and for permission to cite these unpublished documents. See also "Oscar Wilde Collection of J. B. Stetson Sold," *New York Times*, 24 April 1920; see also Wolf, *Rosenbach*, 135.

⁴⁴ Lot 365, American Art Association, *Fine Books and Manuscripts of the Greatest Rarity and Interest including the Further Property of a Prominent Pennsylvania Collector* (New York: American Art Association, 1924), n. p. The catalogue further describes a "cloth box-case, fleece lined."

⁴⁵ "Book Sale Closes," *New York Times*, 3 December 1924. The correct figure is listed on the Rosenbach Library's sales card in addition to the auction price list. The *New York Times* recorded an erroneous

1 resale; in 1930, he sold the fair copy of "Decay" for \$4,850 to Comte Alain de Suzannet, a
 2 Switzerland-based collector of British manuscripts with a particular passion for Dickens.⁴⁶ He
 3 maintained a lively correspondence with Rosenbach, and the firm routinely offered him
 4 Dickens's works. The good humor that underscored the relationship was called on in 1933, when
 5 Wilde's "Decay of Lying" manuscript appeared in the Rosenbach catalogue for sale at \$3,400.⁴⁷
 6 Including price information seems to have been a rare move for Rosenbach, whose firm—as the
 7 *New York Times* observed—was regarded “with a little awe, as being something too immaculate
 8 and refined to descend to the vulgar level of mentioning money.”⁴⁸ Suzannet did not fail to
 9 notice the prices when Rosenbach sent him a copy of the catalogue, as he wrote to the company’s
 10 salesman Harry Hymes that it presented “a feast spread out for hungry (but poor) men, who can
 11 only enjoy these good things through a plate-glass window!”⁴⁹ Suzannet asked to purchase a few
 12 items by Kipling at a discount before noting “that 338 [Wilde’s “Decay of Lying” manuscript] is
 13 priced \$3400. As I had the pleasure of purchasing this same ms. from you three years ago for

sales figure of \$525, though they noted correctly that the manuscript was purchased by the Rosenbach Company.

⁴⁶ See the sales book of the Rosenbach Library VIId(22), 141. Suzannet was interested in other Wilde-related items. Caspar Wintermans observes that the manuscript of the French translation of Alfred Douglas’s unpublished essay, “Oscar Wilde: A Plea and a Reminiscence” (which Douglas planned to publish in *Mercure de France* as a protest against Wilde’s conviction on 25 May 1895), bears Suzannet’s bookplate. Wintermans assumed that Suzannet obtained the manuscript after 1925, since the item does not appear in the collector’s privately published catalogue that appeared that year; the manuscript was sold or given to J. Harlin O’Connell, whose daughter presented it to Princeton University Library (see Lord Alfred Douglas, *Oscar Wilde: A Plea and a Reminiscence*, ed. Wintermans [Woubrugge: Avalon Press, 2002], 14).

⁴⁷ Rosenbach Company, *A Catalogue of Original Manuscripts Presentation Copies First Editions and Autograph Letters of Modern Authors* (Philadelphia and New York: The Rosenbach Company, 1933), 44, no. 338.

⁴⁸ “Notes on Rare Books,” *New York Times* 9 April 1922. The *New York Times* noted that “[o]nly the barest details” of the books were described, and thought that “the question as to whether high-priced manuscripts can be sold by means of a check-list such as this is highly speculative.”

⁴⁹ [Comte Alain de Suzannet, “To Harry Hymes,” 20 March 1933 \(Rosenbach Museum and Library, correspondence folder I:167:10\)](#).

1 \$4750, are you crediting my account with the balance? In that case I would not bargain for the
2 Kipling items.”⁵⁰ Hymes, as Wolf puts it, had the “unfortunate habit of offering books for sale
3 from catalogue cards rather than from physical volumes; this card had never been marked
4 sold.”⁵¹ Dr. Rosenbach was concerned enough about the mistake to respond to Suzannet directly:
5 “I wish to apologize to you personally for the error relative to Oscar Wilde’s ‘Decay of Lying.’
6 By mistake it was included in the catalogue and, of course, the mark-down was on that as well as
7 all the books and manuscripts in stock.”⁵²

8 Suzannet’s collecting turned increasingly to Dickens.⁵³ In March 1934 he sold several
9 (non-Dickensian) works from his collections at a Sotheby’s auction; the “Decay of Lying”
10 manuscript went for the low price of £45 (approximately \$227).⁵⁴ By 1935, the price of the
11 manuscript was again on the rise, since Maggs Brothers listed it for £250 (approximately
12 \$1225).⁵⁵ In 1937, the “Decay” manuscript—now rebound in “full russia by Sangorski &

⁵⁰ Comte Alain de Suzannet, “To Harry Hymes,” 20 March 1933 (Rosenbach Museum and Library, correspondence folder I:167:10). Suzannet underestimated the price he paid by \$100.00.

⁵¹ Wolf, *Rosenbach*, 383.

⁵² A. S. W. Rosenbach, “To Comte Alain de Suzannet,” 4 April 1933, Rosenbach Museum and Library, correspondence folder I:167:10. Suzannet was given the Kipling works at a discount.

⁵³ See Michael Slater, Introduction, in *The Catalogue of the Suzannet Charles Dickens Collection* (London: Sotheby Parke Bernet Publications, 1975), ix–xvi. In 1932, Rosenbach succeeded in persuading Suzannet to pay \$45,000 for thirty-nine pages of the original manuscript of *Nicholas Nickleby* (Wolf, *Rosenbach*, 369).

⁵⁴ Lot 256, Sotheby’s, *Manuscripts, Autograph Letters and Printed Books Forming part of the Library of the Comte de Suzannet, La Petite Chardière, Lausanne, March 1934* (London: Sotheby’s, 1934), 39. The sale took place on 26–27 March 1934, with the Wilde manuscript sold on the second day. The Grolier Club copy indicates the ms. was purchased by “Mayes.” The auction catalogue includes a reproduction of the final page of the manuscript, which confirms that this version is the same sold by Rosenbach in 1933; the binding is still listed as “blue leather.” The sale price of £45 is confirmed in the *Times Literary Supplement* (“Notes on Sales,” 5 April 1934, 248), and *British Books/The Publisher’s Circular* (1934: 539 <Fuller cite?>).

⁵⁵ *English Literature of the 19th & 20th Centuries, Being a Selection of First and Early Editions of the Works of Esteemed Authors & Book Illustrators, together with Autograph Letters & Original*

1 Sutcliffe” and again on auction—was purchased by Retz & Storm for \$975.⁵⁶ They advertised it
2 soon thereafter for sale at \$1,500, observing in the catalogue that “some of the changes and
3 corrections” in the manuscript “are exceedingly interesting. It would be difficult to imagine the
4 writings of Wilde without this particular work, for it contains one of the clearest expositions of
5 his attitude towards certain questions of living.”⁵⁷

Today the manuscript retains this same binding in Akron, where it was donated as part of a large bequest of rare books owned by Muehlstein, a patron of the university, which awarded him an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters in 1957. The privately printed catalogue of the Muehlstein Rare Book Collection includes the following entry: “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue. (1889?) Folio. The autographed manuscript, signed ‘Oscar Wilde,’ of one of the author’s most famous and important works.”⁵⁸ Apart from this listing, the manuscript has escaped scholarly scrutiny since it entered the Akron library in 1962, following Muehlstein’s death.⁵⁹

ON THE FORGERIES (FOLGER AND CLARK)

15 There are, in addition to the authentic holograph manuscripts, at least two known forged draft
16 fragments of "The Decay of Lying." The Folger forgery perhaps illuminates more about the state
17 of the market for Wilde manuscripts in the years after World War I than it does about the
18 composition of "The Decay of Lying." Comprising four leaves of cream paper (18 x 25cm), the

Manuscripts; also Books on Sports and Pastimes (London: Maggs Bros., 1935), 174. The manuscript does not appear again in Maggs's catalogues.

⁵⁶ Lot 578, *Books and Autographs including Library sets in fine bindings from the collection of Mrs. Peter W. Rouss, Colored plates and Sporting Books from the Collection of Reginald Burbank, M.D.; Two Superb autograph letters by George Washington; Coaching and Sporting Prints; First Editions (American Art Association <City/state?>; A [yellow circle with a question mark]erson Galleries, 1937), 234. “\$2,500 for a Work on Old New York,” *New York Times* 15 January 1937. The price is confirmed in “Notes on Sales,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 February 1937.*

⁵⁷The listing erroneously lists Wilde's birth year as 1858, but describes the manuscript as "55 pages, folio; bound in full dark niger morocco, by Sangorski and Sutcliffe" (Retz & Storm, Inc. *Autograph Letters, Manuscripts, and Documents Catalogue* [New York: Privately Printed, n. d.], 50).

⁵⁸ The Herman Muehlstein Rare Book Collection (Akron, OH: University of Akron, 1963), 26.

⁵⁹ Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," unpublished manuscript, f.3, PR5818.D43 1889, Special Collections, University of Akron Library.

1 fragment is written in pencil and corrected in places with purple ink. It opens with “a language
2 full of resonant | music + sweet rhythm,” lines drawn from the paragraph of Vivian’s dialogue
3 that begins: “Take the case of the English drama.”⁶⁰ Even without that opening, it is clear that the
4 fragment’s emphasis is squarely on the drama and the limitations of realism on the stage, and, in
5 particular, on the realistic staging of Shakespeare. Such content would have been interesting to
6 the Folgers, who were actively building their collection at that time. With competition
7 approaching blood sport during what has been called the “golden age of book collecting,”
8 information on book sales inside and outside the auction rooms was regularly reported in the
9 popular press.⁶¹ As Stephen Grant writes, from around 1910, when the Folgers began building
10 their collection in earnest, they were actively pursued by booksellers: “Once the news spread that
11 the Folgers were collecting Shakespearean items, friends, family, and colleagues sent them news
12 clippings. Enterprising book dealers sent other essential references: Maggs forwarded copies of
13 *Bookman Journal*; Edgar Rogers regularly sent the *Times Literary Supplement*; and Rosenbach
14 dispatched issues of the *London Mercury*.⁶² Records at the Folger indicate that the manuscript
15 was purchased from Maggs Brothers in 1920, though no other details of its provenance survive,
16 and searches in Maggs Brothers catalogues of the period have turned up no listing of Wilde’s
17 “Decay of Lying” for sale. It is possible that the work was not advertised but offered directly to
18 the Folgers. Upon reviewing the four folios in 2014, we questioned their authenticity. Merlin
19 Holland, Wilde’s grandson and the current executor of Wilde’s estate, agreed that the Folger
20 manuscript was not authentic.

21 By comparison, the manuscript ~~that purports to be~~ purportedly from Wilde’s drafts of
22 “The Decay of Lying” held at the Clark Library, which constitutes eight folios, counts among the
23 large group of forgeries that the University of California, Los Angeles acquired for the sum of
24 £360 (approximately \$1,004) from George Sims in 1957, four years after Sims first listed the

⁶⁰ Forgery of fragment of The decay of lying [manuscript], ca. 1920. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C. Shelfmark Y.d.520. f.1. [Manuscript text from](#) Wilde, “The Decay of Lying: A Dialogue,” *Nineteenth Century* 25, no. 143 (January 1889): 43.

⁶¹ See Nicholas Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomaniacs, and the Eternal Passion for Books* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 221.

⁶² Stephen H. Grant, *Collecting Shakespeare: The Story of Henry and Emily Folger* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 109–10.

1 documents in a catalogue. This forgery contains several folios featuring an enlarged version of
2 the author's readable Greek hand; the florid purple ink, however, accentuates the forger's telltale
3 variations on Wilde's handwriting. The remaining leaves, which are smaller and in pencil,
4 present an arguably more accurate emulation of Wilde's hand. To anyone acquainted with
5 Wilde's manuscripts, the forgery reproduces quite well Wilde's method of deleting and inserting
6 specific words. Yet the emendations, it has to be said, hardly inspire confidence in the idea that
7 Wilde conjured these corrections. According to the forged draft, Vivian's comment to Cyril at
8 the start of the dialogue, "The air is exquisite," was originally "The air is like wine."⁶³ The
9 forger's amendment to another of Vivian's lines is equally unconvincing. In Wilde's version,
10 Vivian opines, "At least everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching—that is
11 really what our education has come to"; the faker suggested that Wilde originally repeated
12 "learning" in place of "education."⁶⁴

13 What remains significant about this document is that someone claiming to be the
14 distinguished French writer André Gide, who befriended Wilde in Paris in 1891, had managed to
15 bamboozle the Dublin bookseller William Figgis into purchasing this fake, along with many
16 more, in 1921. For some time, scholars speculated that the impostor must have been Wilde's
17 nephew-in-law, Fabian Lloyd, who gained notoriety as a Surrealist performance artist in the late
18 1910s.⁶⁵ On occasion, Lloyd, who in 1912 changed his name to Arthur Cravan, enjoyed
19 producing hoaxes that he signed "Oscar Wilde," and in 1913 he published an article in his avant-
20 garde journal *Maintenant* stating that his uncle was both alive and a regular visitor to Cravan's
21 home.⁶⁶ Lloyd, however, was last seen in 1918 in Salina Cruz, Mexico, where he likely
22 drowned.⁶⁷

⁶³ Wilde Forgeries, "The Decay of Lying," Clark Library, f.1^r, Mixed Materials 1, Folder 27.

⁶⁴ Ibid., f.4^r.

⁶⁵ See Dudley Edwards, "The Wilde Goose Chase," *American Book Collector* 7, no. 5 (1957): 3–14.

⁶⁶ Arthur Cravan, "Oscar Wilde est vivant!" *Maintenant: Revue Littéraire* 3 (1913): 1–26. The entire issue is devoted to this single article, which demonstrates Cravan's pugilistic style and dada sensibilities. Of the journal's five issues, only number 4 (March–April 1914) did not include an article devoted to Wilde.

⁶⁷ The circumstances of his death remain murky. Most sources point to drowning, though when *La Bête Noire*, a provocative and short-lived interwar literary and artistic magazine, reprinted Cravan's *Poète et Boxeur* from the final number of *Maintenant*, the headnote remarked "Arthur Cravan termina

1 Until it becomes possible to identify the individual who duped Figgis, we must rely on a
 2 typewritten document, also held at the Clark, in which Figgis records parting with two checks,
 3 amounting to £138, which he paid to a fraudster claiming to be Gide.⁶⁸ Both checks were cleared
 4 and endorsed in the French writer's name. The following year Figgis journeyed to Paris with a
 5 view to acquiring more documents of this type. In a hotel room, instead of Gide, however, he
 6 encountered a striking young man in his twenties who called himself (with Wildean aplomb)
 7 Dorian Hope. This imposing youth—whom Figgis recalls “was dressed like a Russian Count
 8 with a magnificent fur-lined coat”—claimed to be Gide’s secretary.⁶⁹ Since he had grown
 9 suspicious, Figgis arranged a visit to Gide himself, who greeted Figgis with “surprised
 10 courtesy.”⁷⁰ “We now knew,” he states, “that Andre Gide was not the source from which the
 11 MSS. had been derived.”⁷¹

12 The story, though, does not end there. Figgis adds that Millard, whom he calls “the
 13 accredited expert on Wilde MSS.,” was for a time convinced that these forgeries were genuine.⁷²
 14 In July 1922, however, the “accredited expert” decided that they were fakes, which prompted in
 15 turn a letter of self-abasement. But whatever the embarrassments that these purple-inked
 16 forgeries caused, it remains impossible when studying the provenance of Wilde’s manuscripts to
 17 dismiss these frauds entirely. They remain connected with the fortunes of the genuine items that
 18 were disseminated in a busy transatlantic market. Regardless of the economic vicissitudes that

logiquement sa vie en se faisant assassiner au Mexique dans une rixe” (Cravan logically terminated his life by being murdered in Mexico in a brawl), (*La Bête Noire* 3 [June 1935]: 8). See also Roger L. Conover, “Mina Loy’s ‘Colossus’: Arthur Cravan Undressed,” *Dada/Surrealism* 14 (1985): 102–19.

⁶⁸ The much-anticipated research that Gregory Mackie is completing on the long tradition of Wilde forgeries will no doubt reveal the identity of the individual who fooled Figgis.

⁶⁹ [The three folios of Figgis's typewritten document, which is titled “Wilde M.S.S.,” accompany the forgeries that the Clark Library acquired from Sims. Our thanks go to Rebecca Fenning Marschall for making the document available to us during the library's temporary closure.](#)

⁷⁰ [Figgis, Wilde M.S.S., Clark Library.](#)

⁷¹ Figgis, Wilde M.S.S., Clark Library. [The three folios of Figgis's typewritten document, which is titled “Wilde M.S.S.,” accompany the forgeries that the Clark Library acquired from Sims. Our thanks go to Rebecca Fenning Marschall for making the document available to us during the library's temporary closure.](#)

⁷² Ibid.

1 defined the book trade during the first half of the twentieth century, one thing about the value of
2 Wilde's manuscripts is now assured. Since the time Akron acquired the fair copy of "The Decay
3 of Lying," vendors have placed an increasingly high price on items whose provenance proves
4 that their distinctive Greek hand is Wilde's.⁷³

5

⁷³ On 8 May 2013, for example, an autograph manuscript of Wilde's sixteen-line poem, "Les Ballons," fetched \$24,994 at Bonhams, London. The paper folder that contains the manuscript features the bookplate of John B. Stetson, Jr.

- 1
- 2 Author Bios
- 3
- 4 Joseph Bristow (complete postal  address) is <two or three sentences telling the readers a little
5 about you>.
- 6
- 7 Rebecca Mitchell (complete postal address) is <two or three sentences telling the readers a little
8 about you>.
- 9
- 10 Image Caption
- 11 *Fig. 1: Richard Le Gallienne, "Ex Libris R. L. G." Reproduced from Books, Letters and
12 Manuscripts from the Private Library of Richard Le Gallienne, Sale for 5–7 June 1905 (New
13 York: Anderson Galleries Catalogue 1905).*