

Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love and Scandal in Wilde Times*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012; ISBN: 978-0-8014-7792-8

It seems obvious to state that the Oscar Wilde trials of the mid-1890s did not happen in a vacuum, yet historically many episodes of sexual deviance and scandal have been eclipsed by the sensationalism of the Affair. In *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love and Scandal in Wilde Times*, Morris B. Kaplan sets out to tell the story of three such historically overlooked affairs involving male prostitution and same sex love. Not only do these affairs contextualize the Wilde trials, they also significantly contribute to the popular conception of queer identity in late nineteenth-century England. What do cross dressing prostitutes and teenage boys in uniform have in common? And what do they reveal about the public reception and judicial treatment of Oscar Wilde? Kaplan answers these questions by exploring the conflict between personal sexual desire and the insecurities of a society that refuses to accept them. Further, he does this by *reconstructing* the affairs through narrative, not *deconstructing* them through theory. Not surprisingly, his research affirms that the social performance of sexual desire is more significant to the evolution of sexual identity than the sexual act itself. At the time of its original publication in 2005, *Sodom on the Thames* was hailed as a “scholarly cult classic” by *Publisher’s Weekly*. Its recent reissue in paperback affirms this declaration and makes this unique study readily available to a larger public.

The three affairs which Kaplan treats in his study make for great storytelling. In fact, each chapter begins with a “Dramatis Personae,” underlining the author’s goal of creating a historical narrative rather than a cultural history. The first chapter, “Sex in the City,” begins with the subtitle, “Men in Petticoats.” It tells the story of “Stella” and “Fanny” who were tried in 1871 for conspiracy to commit sodomy. The Bolton and Park scandal, as it was known, was especially troubling to a fascinated public because it revealed an underworld of subversive sexual behavior based on gender role-play and homosexual prostitution. Further, upper and lower class men mingled in ways that scandalized a rigid class system. Kaplan argues that because the trial was extensively treated over many months in the press, the ‘public mind,’ as he calls it, for the first time began associating cross-dressing with same-sex sexual desire. This, of course, is debatable, but his argument is persuasive as Stella and Fanny were in fact creatures of the theater world who maintained their gender performance as they stepped from the stage to the boulevard. The import and attractiveness of Kaplan’s approach lies in his ability to weave together extracts from contemporary newspaper articles, personal letters, photographs, and eyewitness testimony. He is thus able to strike a careful balance between the public conception of events and the private desires of the people involved.

Chapter two of Kaplan’s work focuses on a more personal affair, the dismissal of a young teacher from Eton College in 1870. William Johnson, who later added the surname Cory in order to separate himself from the affair, was said to have maintained ‘inappropriate’ relationships with his male students. For the faculty of Eton, the suspicion of sexual deviance was just as troubling as the emotional and psychological bond Cory cultivated with his students. Additionally, while under the employ of Eton, Cory anonymously published a collection of poetry

addressed to a young man which revealed sentiments of love, affection, and admiration. Remarkably, Cory maintained these friendships for the rest of his life, a fact which emphasizes the dimension of love and friendship between men that goes beyond public judgment and scandal. Thanks to an abundant supply of personal correspondences and journals, Kaplan's study follows Cory from his Eton days to the decades beyond his death as the students he bonded with went through their own inner conflicts while remaining friends, recording their personal struggles in journals and letters.

Kaplan's initial analysis in the first chapter of the role of class in relation to prostitution lends itself to the Cleveland Street Affair of 1889-90 which forms the bases of chapter three. Drawing once again from many sources, Kaplan recounts the story of a group of teenage telegraph boys who prostitute themselves to socially prominent and wealthy benefactors. This affair directly sets the scene for the Wilde trials which follow only a few years later because the older upper-class patrons who were condemned for their involvement were viewed publically as cretins who used their social standing to exploit and pervert the much younger working class prostitutes. Of course, much like Cory at Eton, Wilde defends his relationship with Lord Douglas by saying that the intensity of such male bonds are necessary for the transference of knowledge from older experienced men to younger naive ones. However, Wilde's prosecutors, much like those of the Cleveland Street Affair, argue that the playwright simply exploited the younger man, led him astray and perverted him.

Feminist and queer theory has defined itself by its continual deconstruction of the individual in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, and religion. This approach has been integral to the development of postmodern theory, but as Kaplan argues, only storytelling and narrative can capture the "flavor" of erotic life and the nature of desire. As a historian and theorist, Kaplan sticks to the facts while acknowledging the gaps they leave. As a storyteller, he fills these gaps by embracing ambiguity and opacity through narrative. Although he deeply interrogates the role of class in his study and contextualizes contemporary views of sexuality in late nineteenth-century Britain, Kaplan questions the utility of deconstruction and over-categorization. This approach complicates the shifting definition(s) of homosexuality. After all, Stella's performance as what Kaplan calls a cross dressing "cock tease" reveals more about homosexual desire and identity than what did or did not happen in the bedroom. Additionally, the details of Oscar Wilde and Lord Douglass' sexual interactions remain unclear and their importance continues to diminish in the face of ever-evolving social constructions of gay identity. The true value of Kaplan's study for queer theorists and historians of sexuality lies in his exploration of desire. It is desire which shapes the individual and reveals the insecurities and contradictions of the society in which they live.

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