

***Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations*, by John Stokes. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.**

*Oscar Wilde: Myths, Miracles, and Imitations* is a study of some of the mythologies surrounding Wilde's life. At first glance, John Stokes's book seems a somewhat eclectic collection of essays for which the persona of Oscar Wilde appears as a general organising principal. He begins with Wilde as story-teller, proceeds with reference to personalities, events and ideas loosely associated with Wilde throughout his extravagant life and death, and ends with a discussion of theatrical interpretations of Wilde's plays. This enables Stokes to link Wilde's literary and spoken performances with ideas of reproduction and interpretation, drawing attention to the ways in which "Wilde's behaviour hinged on the ability to be recorded quickly and endlessly" (19). As Stokes points out, "we reproduce him according to circumstance, his and our own—even when that leads to confusion and error" (19).

The Wilde that emerges from this work is rational and superstitious, but above all performative. Regenia Gagnier (1986) and Ed Cohen (1993) have both referred to theatricality as the source of a discursive connection between Wilde's life and work. Stokes extends this idea by referring to the way in which the Wildean also continues to be performed through a succession of cultural reproductions and interpretations, as in Arthur Cravan's fictionalised vision of his Uncle Oscar as a beautiful "pachyderm"(4), in the various claims that Wilde's ghost was still speaking and writing from the spirit world, or through the staging of successive biographies. Wilde thus becomes a theatrical public property, through whom certain claims—personal, cultural, historical—are made through the invocation of his name. In his final chapter, Stokes explores the mythology of the British theatre itself in a comparative and historically informed discussion of "real" performances of Wilde's plays.

Stokes also makes a claim for the performativity of his own work: "My own involvement with Oscar Wilde began when I played the role of Gwendolen Fairfax, not accurately but with wonderful expression" (xi). He goes on to reproduce a succession of Wildean enactments, alluding to Neil Bartlett's meditation on the production of male homosexual identity, *Who Was That Man: A Present For Mr Oscar Wilde* (1988) in which Wilde emerges out of the shadows as the "ghost-writer" whose story Bartlett must tell in order to tell his own" (8). Theatricality and reproduction are thus seen as spectral forces, through which each new rehearsal of Wildean mythology is haunted by an array of past and future manifestations.

The first chapter, "The Magic Ball," offers some charming evidence for the idea that "life imitates art." As evidence for his argument that popular culture is a phenomenon of reproduction, Stokes traces Wilde's tale of a magical golden ball through a sequence of literary and historical allusions, including his own coincidental witnessing of the magic ball circus act in 1949: "Wilde's miracles are always of this kind. They draw upon a level of collective experience in which we all participate. . . . Life imitates art because art draws on life in the first place, not life as nature, but life as culture, popular culture, so 'popular' as to be unspoken" (p. 37).

*Oscar Wilde* is particularly useful, in scholarly terms, for its interest in the historical "special effects" of the spectral Wilde. Stokes's book gives attention, for example, to Wilde's somewhat neglected advocates, such as George Ives and James H.

Wilson, and to the culture of the *fin de siècle* as a major site of consumption and reproduction. If Ives was eccentric, Wilson, as Stokes observes:

though socially marginal, was symbolically central. He can stand not only for all those who were moved to tears and sometimes to action by Wilde's imprisonment, but for an even wider constituency of moral protesters who emerged in new formations in the late nineteenth century. . . . In that respect his very obscurity is a continuing mark of his significance. (47)

Wilson produced a pamphlet entitled "Some Gentle Criticisms of British Justice" which he hoped to have published in the republican *Reynolds' Newspaper*. Since the paper was well-established as "the natural home for outspoken attacks on class and legal corruption" (54) and had supported the Irish cause, here "Wilson was following a long tradition as well as responding to recent events" (54). In attempting to enlist *Reynolds'* support, Wilson may have hoped to recuperate Wilde from the charge of upper-class decadence, for which the newspaper had itself attacked Wilde during the trials. What seems most interesting here is the nexus between issues of national, sexual and class identity. Indeed, it is partly Wilde's Irish origins that render him available as a figure for a complex and contradictory set of identity politics. Stokes points out that *Reynolds'* did eventually publish material sympathetic to Wilde, although Wilson's pamphlet was never published in the form he intended.

There are other numerous Wildean mythologies upon which Stokes draws, sometimes all too briefly. There is, of course, the familiar mention of Wilde's attraction to Catholicism, the "scarlet lady" of Rome by whom Wilde was seduced on his deathbed. There are various ways of reading his conversion. It is impossible, however, to know how significant this moment is in the narrative of Wilde's life. As Stokes indicates, there is considerable irony in the fact that only when Wilde was "beyond speech, was he admitted" (2) to the Roman Catholic church.

Finally, Stokes's chapter on Dieppe is both engaging and fascinating for its evocation of *fin-de-siècle* seaside life at the point of cultural threshold between France and England. Dieppe is conveyed as a holiday town, a working city and a diversion for the celebrated travellers—artists, writers and the nobility—who passed through during the last five years of the century, living out their fashionable or interesting lives in the grand hotels and private salons of this French border town. Stokes remarks, with reference to Walter Sickert, that Dieppe "came to mark a symbolic threshold between English and French art" (130). Dieppe also suggests other kinds of liminality and it seems strangely appropriate, that it was here, in death as in life, that Oscar Wilde continued to be engaged at the boundaries of this "performance space" of English authenticity, always the English author, but always different, at one remove. As Stokes concludes, "the power of Dieppe's past still dares the artist to be different" (151).

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