

Katsaros on Rose (2015)

Rose, David. *Oscar Wilde's Elegant Republic: Transformation, Dislocation and Fantasy in Fin-de-siècle Paris*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, pp. 610, ISBN 978-1-4438-8360-3

Laure Katsaros, Amherst College

Who was the “real” Oscar Wilde? The question is almost impossible to answer, in spite of the countless biographies and critical studies devoted to this flamboyant incarnation of fin-de-siècle literature and culture. His image is a tangle of contradictions. On the one hand, he is remembered as an aesthete and dandy who delighted in exquisite epigrams and *bons mots*. On the other hand, his trial for homosexuality and subsequent sentencing to two years’ hard labor have given him a tragic aura. In *Oscar Wilde's Elegant Republic*, the English scholar David Charles Rose has chosen, in his own words, a “social approach” (xi), placing his subject in the midst of a wide-ranging network of public and private connections across literature and the arts. Staying away from sociological analyses as well as from the many exegeses of Wilde’s sexuality, Rose offers an oblique perspective on Oscar Wilde in Paris.

Wilde first visited Paris as a teenager, when he accompanied his mother on a trip to France. During his later stays, in 1883, 1884, and 1891, he was introduced to celebrated writers, artists, and actors, such as Sarah Bernhardt, Edmond de Goncourt, Paul Verlaine, and André Gide. Debunking one of the many legends attached to Wilde’s name, Rose describes the writer as having played a relatively minor role on the literary and artistic stage of fin-de-siècle Paris. Rose usefully reminds his readers that contemporary translations of Wilde into French were few (161–62). After his release from prison in 1897, Wilde went back to Paris to spend the last three years of his life in penniless exile.

Instead of presenting a chronological account of Wilde’s fluctuating fortunes in the French capital, *Oscar Wilde's Elegant Republic* takes the form of a cultural biography of the city. On this vast and varied stage, the author of *Salomé* (a play originally composed in French) and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* is one character among many. References to Wilde’s presence and activities in Paris are buried inside quotation-studded paragraphs that provide snapshots of Parisian life at the turn of the century. Bounding from the boulevard to the salon, from public dance halls to early movie theaters, Rose offers an encyclopedic compendium of the “Elegant Republic” mentioned in his title. Readers fond of historical anecdotes will note with delight that a wave of French Anglomania in the 1870s must be thanked for whiskey and soda, which was sipped with straws on the French side of the English Channel (50). There is also pleasure to be had in the discovery that itinerant trimmers of poodles were a feature of boulevard life (190); or that the very first striptease in Paris was “‘Le Coucher d’Yvette’ at the Divan Fayanon in the rue des Martyrs on the 13th March 1894” (225).

Scrupulously accurate when referencing historical facts, Rose disputes the accounts provided by previous biographers who are faulted for not properly acknowledging or crossing their sources. A warts-and-all portrait of Wilde takes shape—less, perhaps, the literary lion worshipped by the avant-garde than a self-centered provocateur whose jokes were not always well-received in distinguished Parisian society. Sadly for this master of self-promotion, historical evidence cuts Wilde down to size. In chapter fourteen, for instance, Rose’s detailed analysis of Wilde’s interactions with Sarah Bernhardt dispels the myth of the union of two kindred spirits. Rather, we see Wilde courting a reluctant Bernhardt with increasing desperation in the hope of selling her the rights to his play *Salomé*.

The wide-ranging scholarship displayed by David Rose makes *Oscar Wilde's Elegant Republic* a treasure-trove of stories and anecdotes. This book is likely to become a useful reference for Wilde scholars or anyone interested in turn-of-the-century Paris. On the other hand, the author’s method of “thickened narrative” drawn from “recovered stories” (xiii) stands in the way of narrative coherence. There is no thread to stitch together these pieces of nineteenth-century French history and culture. This is, in part, the result of a deliberate overall strategy. Rose summarily concludes his book with the assertion that “Paris is experienced fractured, diversified” (423), and that for Wilde it represented “the city in which his multiple and multiplied selves were in harmony with his surroundings” (424). The point is hard to dispute, yet it works somewhat like a thin veil thrown over a cluttered desk. Furthermore, the puns contained in chapter titles are less than dazzling, especially in a book with “Oscar Wilde” in the title. To call a chapter about the cultural exchanges between London and Paris “Paris mutuels” or to place a discussion of Parisian cafés under the heading “Café au fait” falls below the standards set by the master humorist. To Rose’s credit, however, his point is not to emulate Wilde’s lapidary wit, but to sift through sources, assess them critically, and fragment the story of Oscar Wilde into a series of kaleidoscopic views of Paris at the turn of the century.

Volume: 46.1-2

Year:

- 2017