

The film *Wilde*: Additional considerations

3 June 1998

To David Walsh:

I wish to address this directly to Mr. David Walsh, regarding his fine and well-constructed review of 'Wilde.'

Mr. Walsh, I applaud your thoughtful criticism of 'Wilde.' I think you were absolutely correct to address the lack of political presence in the film's portrayal of Wilde. I do not have issue with that.

I only wish to challenge your criticism of the portrayals of Bosie and Queensberry. I am hardly an authority on Wilde, but I have read Ellmann's definitive biography, nearly all of Wilde's writings, and various other biographical and critical texts.

I maintain that, if anything, Jude Law's depiction of Bosie, as directed by Brian Mitchell, was a fairly kind picture. Bosie was a foul, spoiled, destructive brat, and unfortunately there is no way around this fact. In later years, his memoirs were full of patent lies and fiction, and he became a Nazi sympathizer. That the film portrayed his difficult and abusive treatment by his father I think provided a very human and sympathetic picture.

The Marquess of Queensberry, on the other hand, was by all accounts a borderline psychopath. In addition to his relentless persecution of Wilde, he also may have driven his elder son, Lord Drumlanrig, to suicide. Lord Drumlanrig was the lover of Sir Rosebery, a MP who became Prime Minister by the time of Wilde's trials. As the tale goes, the Marquess demanded that Drumlanrig reject his homosexuality and his relationship with Rosebery, or they would both be exposed, and Drumlanrig disinherited. Promptly thereafter, Drumlanrig shot himself. Though there is no proof of this fact, it is speculated that Queensberry may have blackmailed Rosebery into forcing a relentless prosecution of Wilde, under threat of exposure. Had Rosebery been exposed, he could have been subject to prosecution himself, and almost certainly the 'Liberal' ruling party would have been quickly overturned.

Queensberry died suddenly in 1899, suffering from an advanced persecution complex; he was convinced to his death that he was being hounded, followed and persecuted by unknown 'persons' that wanted revenge for his persecution of Wilde.

I certainly do not wish to merely recant facts that you probably already know, but I do wish to illustrate why I feel those two performances were accurate. Bosie and Queensberry were human, no question. But at the same time, they were malevolent, self-hating monsters who, saving Wilde's own tragic complicity in his fall, were largely responsible for Wilde's destruction.

Allow me to end by again congratulating you on what is perhaps the best review I have read thus far of 'Wilde.' Thank you for your time.

Yours truly,

JM

26 June 1998

To David Walsh:

Thank you for your continued elucidation of the issues raised by Oscar Wilde, the man and the artist. I have yet to see the film, but I agree that reducing Wilde to his sexual orientation does both him and the contemporary audience a disservice. It seems to me he was victimized on the basis of his homosexual liaisons, but his real crime was to flout the conventions of society. He challenged the hypocrisy of the social order, in both his life and his work, and that made him dangerous.

At the risk of promoting "identity politics," I can't help but wonder whether society's oppression of his sexual orientation--long before he may have been aware of it himself--helped instigate his general attitude of opposition. No doubt there were many factors. Being Irish may have been another. Conversely, there are plentiful examples of gay people, famous and otherwise, who are quite content with the capitalist order.

Would you expand your reference to how a democratic principle is involved in the explicit depiction of Wilde's homosexuality, vs. the soft-pedaled references in prior films?

And who was Gertrude Himmelfarb?

JB

Brooklyn, NY

29 May 1998

Dear JB,

Thank you for your note. The film is worth seeing, but it has something vital missing. As someone said to me, it is, frankly, less controversial in 1998 to show two men in bed together than to discuss the idea of socialism. Today that is "the idea that dare not speak its name."

Did society's oppression of Wilde's sexual orientation help instigate his general attitude of opposition? I think that is a very difficult question. I suppose I would answer yes, in a qualified way. First, let's recall that there was radicalism in his background, specifically, in the form of his mother's democratic-radical views. She wrote for an Irish nationalist newspaper *The Nation*, under the name Speranza, a name she adopted from her motto: Fianza, Constanza, Speranza (faith, constancy, hope). One has to take into account as well the general radicalism of the time, the growth in influence of socialist ideas. Besides Wilde, Shaw and Morris, two of the premier writers of the time, consciously considered themselves socialists. Hardy's writings are dominated by issues of class and social distinction. Even Yeats, at least in his early days, assumed that socialism was a higher social order, he simply wasn't interested, he said, in pursuing political matters.

As you point out, as well, history is full of examples of "gay people, famous and otherwise, who are quite content with the capitalist order." So where does that leave us? I would say that, *given certain other conditions*, Wilde's sense of the outlawed character of homosexual behavior--and perhaps just as much, frankly, his sensitivity to the conventional and soul-deadening character of Victorian bourgeois family life--did deepen his oppositional views. To what extent did it also delude him or divert him? For, after all, sexual orientation is not the central axis in social life. Anyway, what do you think?

The democratic principle is simply the right to lead one's personal life as one sees fit, to be free of

discrimination, recrimination, etc., and to express openly one's feelings and interests. This holds for artists and film-makers, as well as for individuals in all walks of life. The suppression of the truth about Wilde's life imposed on previous film-biographers was a violation of democratic principles.

Gertrude Himmelfarb is the author of a work entitled *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values*, which, as its title suggests, advocates the restoration or reconsideration of Victorian virtues, à la Margaret Thatcher, as the solution to contemporary problems. She is the wife of the neo-conservative (and ex-radical) Irving Kristol.

Sincerely,

David Walsh

1 June 1998

See Also:

Wilde's martyrdom in perspective
[30 May 1998]

Oscar Wilde and "art for art's sake"
[8 November 1997]

Oscar Wilde: his lasting significance
[28 July 1997]

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