



Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times

By Morris B. Kaplan

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Sodom on the Thames looks closely at three episodes involving sex between men in late-nineteenth-century England. Morris Kaplan draws on extensive research into court records, contemporary newspaper accounts, personal correspondence and diaries, even a pornographic novel. He focuses on two notorious scandals and one quieter incident.

In 1871, transvestites "Stella" (Ernest Boulton) and "Fanny" (Frederick Park), who had paraded around London's West End followed by enthusiastic admirers, were tried for conspiracy to commit sodomy. In 1889–1890, the "Cleveland Street affair" revealed that telegraph delivery boys had been moonlighting as prostitutes for prominent gentlemen, one of whom fled abroad. In 1871, Eton schoolmaster William Johnson resigned in disgrace, generating shockwaves among the young men in his circle whose romantic attachments lasted throughout their lives. Kaplan shows how profoundly these scandals influenced the trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 and contributed to growing anxiety about male friendships.

Sodom on the Thames reconstructs these incidents in rich detail and gives a voice to the diverse people involved. It deepens our understanding of late Victorian attitudes toward urban culture, masculinity, and male homoeroticism. Kaplan also explores the implications of such historical narratives for the contemporary politics of sexuality.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Though it has the trappings of a scholarly cult classic, Kaplan's look at the budding world of cross-dressing, transgenderism and male homosexuality that crossed the strict class lines of Victorian London can hook even the most unaware reader. Kaplan, a philosophy professor and the author of *Sexual Justice: Democratic Citizenship and the Politics of Desire*, draws on three major episodes involving sex between men (or the strong suspicion of it) to weave an intriguing, amusing and occasionally disturbing narrative of sexual controversy in staunchly conservative times. Kaplan painstakingly reconstructs Eton headmaster William Johnson Cory's shameful resignation after accusations of homosexual behavior surfaced in 1871; Kaplan even includes letters Cory wrote to a student that contain a clear "plaint of the disappointed lover." The cases can also be subversively funny, especially that of Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton, cross-dressers known as "Fanny" and "Stella," who were brought up on sodomy conspiracy charges in 1871. Famous for their female portrayals and infamous for frequenting clubs in feminine garb to solicit unknowing men, the term "drag" was first used to refer to the pair and their contemporaries. Kaplan's most impressive achievement is his ability to tell the story without judging; indeed, he shows a great deal of compassion for his real-life characters. This readable, eye-opening book will surely appeal to history buffs looking to learn something a little queer about the Victorian age.

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Review

"Though it has the trappings of a scholarly cult classic, Kaplan's look at the budding world of cross-dressing, transgenderism and male homosexuality that crossed the strict class lines of Victorian London can hook even the most unaware reader. Kaplan . . . draws on three major episodes involving sex between men (or the strong suspicion of it) to weave an intriguing, amusing, and occasionally disturbing narrative of sexual controversy in staunchly conservative times. . . . The cases can be subversively funny, especially that of Frederick Park and Ernest Boulton, cross-dressers known as 'Fanny' and 'Stella,' who were brought up on sodomy conspiracy charges in 1871. Famous for their female portrayals and infamous for frequenting clubs in feminine garb to solicit unknowing men, the term 'drag' was first used to refer to the pair and their contemporaries. Kaplan's most impressive achievement is his ability to tell the story without judging; indeed, he shows a great deal of compassion for his real-life characters. This readable, eye-opening book will surely appeal to history buffs looking to learn something a little queer about the Victorian age."?Publishers Weekly

"An engaging study of sexual scandal in late-nineteenth-century England. . . . Kaplan revels in the engrossing detail of the legal process, the attendant publicity, and the political fallout. . . . He is a good storyteller and he has good stories to tell. . . . His is a highly entertaining, superbly written, and thought-provoking book. Scholars of homosexuality will be grateful for the mass of informative detail, but it is accessible to and deserving of a much broader readership."?Journal of the History of Sexuality

"Kaplan makes a strong argument about the role of class and culture in the interpretation of nineteenth-century homosexuality that will engage the specialist as well as the more general reader. *Sodom on the Thames* is both highly readable and analytically sophisticated."?Victorian Studies

"Sodom on the Thames is an extraordinary achievement: a witty book about a serious subject. With flair and originality, Morris B. Kaplan shows us how sexuality and gender were not only constructed in Wilde's time in the discursive practices of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century England, but also in the dress, streets, and cafés in which people sought to make sense of who they were in their intimate lives. This is a book for any audience and is necessary reading in fields as wide ranging as anthropology, philosophy, political science, and women's studies."²Drucilla Cornell, Professor of Political Science, Comparative Literature, and Women and Gender Studies, Rutgers University

"In four detailed case studies, all based on archival work, Morris B. Kaplan explores a complex network of loyal romantic friends, brazen cross-dressers, upper-class male brothels³and astonishing legal decisions. His analysis of Eton College friendships uncovers a potent mixture of politics and sex among the most powerful men of the late nineteenth century. Kaplan is always sensitive to the ways in which the past is a different country, but also strangely familiar to us. In this very readable book, fresh, unexpected connections reveal the pervasive importance of male erotic friendship in the Victorian period."⁴Martha Vicinus, Eliza M. Mosher Distinguished University Professor, University of Michigan

"This is a book of stories. One after the other they are presented to the reader: the memoirs of Symonds, the spectacular career of Boulton and Park, the Cleveland Street scandals, the lives and times of William Johnson Cory and Reginald Brett. Morris B. Kaplan has gathered new material from the archives and has consolidated the work of biographers and historians: the result is a compelling, original, and often exhilarating work of historical recovery. Sodom on the Thames is a consistently interesting, often spellbinding, portrait of late-Victorian life."⁵Michael Levenson, William B. Christian Professor of Modern Literature and Critical Theory, University of Virginia

"Sodom on the Thames is a fascinating book about several notorious trials dealing with homosexuality. The first, about cross-dressing, was as early as 1871. Others concern a male brothel in London in 1889–1890 and, most famously, those of Oscar Wilde in 1895. Since these trials occurred in Britain, class plays a crucial role on both sides of the street⁶it drives both the prosecution of the well-off and their protection. Morris B. Kaplan juxtaposes the public world of the courtroom in intriguing ways to the private homoerotic Eton world of William Johnson Cory, Reginald Brett, and their friends. The reader learns much about sexuality and even love, the differences of the past, and the similarities to the present, perhaps most evident in a 'modern' figure, the rather heroic John Saul, a 'professional sodomite.'⁷Peter Stansky, Stanford University

About the Author

Morris Kaplan is Professor of Philosophy at Purchase College, State University of New York. He is the author of *Sexual Justice: Democratic Citizenship and the Politics of Desire*.

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Bruce Harrison:

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