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Rezension von: Schwandt, Waleska (2002): Bekenntnis, Pose, Parodie. Oscar Wilde und das Ästhet-Stereotyp. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier (Horizonte; 31). ISBN 3-88476-533-7. € 24,50. In: The OSCHOLARS III, April 2003 (Internet-Zeitschrift)

Waleska Schwandt's doctoral thesis was written with the declared intention of debunking the popular image of Oscar Wilde. She wants to offer a "Beitrag zur Versachlichung jener widersprüchlichen und schillernden Gestalt Oscar Wilde" by a detailed "Rekonstruktion der anti-ästhetizistischen Rezeptionswirklichkeit vor und um 1880" (12). The gist of her argument is that Wilde, far from being an original writer or even phenomenon, merely posed as such whereas in fact he did nothing but adopt and act out stereotyped roles previous writers and cartoonists had been creating from the 1860s on. "Er erlangt Popularität als Karikatur einer Karikatur, als deren Original er sich gleichwohl anbietet: als Ästhet" (9). In the illustrated appendix to the book the reader can find 28 pictures demonstrating the fact that Oscar's poses were inspired by Pre-Raphaelite paintings or were, far more often, verbal or bodily imitations of *Punch* cartoons.

Ms. Schwandt's approach is both historical and somewhat moralistic. How can one prove Wilde's lack of originality? She seems to think that it is sufficient to trace some of Wilde's best-known attitudes, characters, motifs, ideas, metaphors, etc. back to their supposed origin. I admit that Ms. Schwandt presents the reader with many interesting literary and other documents. There is no denying the fact that Wilde was widely read and that, as a consequence, a multitude of influences may be discovered in his writings. I do also admit that Ms. Schwandt's comments are always trenchant and, now and then, even brilliant. And yet, I am not convinced about her core argument, i.e. Wilde's lack

of originality. In short, my admiration for Oscar Wilde as an original writer has not suffered in the smallest degree. One reason for this might be Ms. Schwandt's moralizing, even self-righteous tone. Her approach seems to me to be deeply Victorian, Puritan, "earnest", without even a hint of irony, and occasionally even without realizing Wilde's own irony (e.g. on page 155, footnote 222). (May I add, at least in brackets, that I get equally bored by outright *gay* interpretations of Wilde's writings. I am not at all amused by seeing a potential biographical subtext steal the limelight from a brilliant plot, splendid characters, and a wonderful language).

Another reason why Ms. Schwandt's effort at demythologizing fails to hit home is the superficial way in which she deals with Wilde's literary work (apart from ten stimulating pages on the *Portrait of Mr. W. H.*). She certainly did study her *Punch* and quite a lot of secondary sources but I do not get the impression that she has given much thought to Wilde's plays from *Salomé* to *An Ideal Husband*. How on earth can she blurt out sweeping statements condemning all of Wilde's "Bühnenfiguren" as mere "Charakterschablonen", decrying their alleged lack of any psychological foundation (147)? Having translated two of Wilde's plays myself I cannot help admiring his literary genius in creating interesting characters who, a hundred years after, have not lost their appeal to modern audiences.

Ms. Schwandt's book must, without any doubt, be recommended as a source of valuable background information about Oscar Wilde's life and times. However, her pretensions of debunking Wilde's originality will be lost on most readers. As an antidote to Ms. Schwandt's somewhat heavy-handed Victorianism I recommend Oliver Parker's beautiful and thoughtful film *An Ideal Husband*.