

THE ILLUSTRATOR AS CRITIC:  
DESIRE, CURIOSITY, AND THE MYTH OF PERSEPHONE  
IN JESSIE M. KING'S ILLUSTRATIONS OF OSCAR WILDE'S  
*A HOUSE OF POMEGRANATES*

Catherine Delyfer

From the moment of its first publication in 1891, Oscar Wilde's collection of fairy tales *A House of Pomegranates* was considered as a beautiful object, an aesthetic artefact. Designed and illustrated by Charles Ricketts and Charles Haslewood Shannon, it was a volume of arresting visual beauty, drawing the viewers into a singular form of reading which was not simply intellectual, but embodied.<sup>1</sup> Building on Jerome McGann's influential notion of the book as irreducibly dependent for meaning and effect on its "textual condition"<sup>2</sup> – that is to say, its form as a material object – I shall discuss another striking, though less famous, edition of *A House of Pomegranates*: the 1915 Methuen edition, designed and illustrated by Scottish Art Nouveau artist Jessie Marion King. Bound in Prussian blue cloth, with panel-stamp cover-design and a gilded top-edge, the volume contains sixteen colour-line, photo-engraved plates made from watercolour originals, as well as illustrated monochrome end-papers and illuminated initial letters. At a time when Methuen was working on restoring Wilde's tarnished reputation, such an exquisite new edition enticed wary twentieth-century readers to delve afresh into Wilde's texts.

But Jessie M. King's designs and illustrations are not merely seductive; they engage with the literary text in profound and illuminating ways. They form new impressions, both in the literal, etymological, and technical sense as engravings ("impressus" in Latin means to be "pressed into," "stamped," "imprinted") and, in the figurative sense, as post-Victorian Paterian impressions, i.e., interpretations, creative reconstructions. Deeply committed to a collaborative visual/verbal aesthetic in a manner inherited from the Pre-Raphaelite tradition of artistic illustration, Jessie M. King demonstrates the potential of the image as a medium for pictorial responses to literature. In analyzing the material constructions which enable King to visualize the invisible, I intend to show that this sixth edition of *A House of Pomegranates*