

Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books by Nicholas Frankel. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000. xvi, 222 pp. ISBN 0-472-11069-1. \$47.50.

As Oscar Wilde said or implied in so many ways and places, there is no worse fate for a writer than not to be talked about. In the year 2000, the centenary of Wilde's death, it is clear that Wilde is being talked about more widely (and, perhaps, "wildly") than ever. He is, moreover, the subject of numerous public spectacles, both academic and non-academic in character. Conferences and symposia about him--some large-scale and some modest in scope--have sprung up everywhere from Los Angeles to New York to Dublin to Oxford to Bologna to Bergen. Three different London exhibitions have drawn crowds to the Geffrye Museum, to the Barbican, and to the British Library. Wherever the tributes and the shows have been staged, his grandson, Merlin Holland, who is responsible for the first new edition of Wilde's letters since Rupert Hart-Davis's efforts, has been asked to appear as well. For the interest in Wilde continues to be dominated by an interest in his life, or at least in certain aspects of it. And as much as these symposia and exhibitions might aim ostensibly to re-position Wilde in a historical context--whether the context of late-Victorian literary culture, or aesthetic debate in the visual arts, or house design and decor--they tend to enact, again and again, the celebration of Wilde as a martyr and as a "unique" figure of genius, who stood above and apart from others and whose writings have "transcended" their age.

But if the general emphasis in the burgeoning field of Wilde Studies continues to be on the biographical and on the reception sides--on using the texts to search for the "real" Oscar or on establishing how his life and his writings have changed the progress of cultural politics since the 1890s--that is not where Nicholas Frankel places it. Frankel's *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* is, instead, an analysis of the physical objects produced collaboratively under Wilde's supervision: the editions of his works that appeared during his lifetime. For Frankel, these books were not the equivalent of Russian dolls; they were not mere dsings that housed texts that, in turn, housed independent "meanings" within, all waiting to be opened up and separated from one another. On the contrary, their formats constructed their meaning; their design, their typography, their binding, and their ornamentation interacted with the words of the so-called text, as well as with the expectations of contemporary purchasers and readers. For they too were the "text" that Wilde issued, doing so by working deliberately and painstakingly with a circle of publishers, designers, illustrators, binders, and typesetters.

Frankel employs one of Wilde's paradoxes--"It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances"--as the epigraph for his own critical study and shows that, when it came to the matter of publishing, Wilde spoke only the truth. And the Wilde industry, as Frankel implies, has indeed been shallow in denying this. Twentieth-century scholars may have learned to accept that the "Oscar Wilde" of the 1880s would not have been the same "text," if arrayed in a soberly cut business suit, instead of in velvet jackets and silk stockings (a point easily comprehended by