

The Sphinx

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The Sphinx

by Oscar Wilde, with decorations by Charles Ricketts

A Facsimile

Edited and with an Afterword by Nicholas Frankel

LbD
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*Literature by Design:
British and American Books 1880-1930*

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Front cover of *The Sphinx* (1894, ordinary issue), gilt stamped on full vellum boards. 8 x 6 inches. Designed by Charles Ricketts, executed by Leighton Son and Hodge. Ricketts's monogram is visible at lower left.

THE SPHINX

THE EDITION OF THIS
BOOK IS LIMITED FOR
ENGLAND TO 200 COPIES
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TO
MARCEL SCHWOB
IN FRIENDSHIP
AND
IN ADMIRATION

THE SPHINX BY OSCAR WILDE



WITH DECORATIONS BY CHARLES RICKETTS
LONDON MDCCCXCIV
ELKIN MATHEWS AND JOHN LANE . AT THE SIGN OF THE BODLEY HEAD.



N A DIM CORNER OF MY ROOM FOR LONGER THAN
MY FANCY THINKS

A BEAUTIFUL AND SILENT SPHINX HAS WATCHED ME THROUGH THE SHIFTING GLOOM.

INVIOLE AND IMMOBILE SHE DOES NOT RISE SHE DOES NOT STIR

FOR SILVER MOONS ARE NAUGHT TO HER AND NAUGHT TO HER THE SUNS THAT REEL.

RED FOLLOWS GREY ACROSS THE AIR THE WAVES OF MOONLIGHT EBB AND FLOW
BUT WITH THE DAWN SHE DOES NOT GO AND IN THE NIGHT-TIME SHE IS THERE.

DAWN FOLLOWS DAWN AND NIGHTS GROW OLD AND ALL THE WHILE THIS CURIOUS CAT
LIES COUCHING ON THE CHINESE MAT WITH EYES OF SATIN RIMMED WITH GOLD,

UPON THE MAT SHE LIES AND LEERS AND ON THE TAWNY THROAT OF HER
FLUTTERS THE SOFT AND SILKY FUR OR RIPPLES TO HER POINTED EARS.

COME FORTH MY LOVELY SENESCHAL! SO SOMNOLENT, SO STATUESQUE!

COME FORTH YOU EXQUISITE GROTESQUE! HALF WOMAN AND HALF ANIMAL!

COME FORTH MY LOVELY LANGUOROUS SPHINX! AND PUT YOUR HEAD UPON MY KNEE!

AND LET ME STROKE YOUR THROAT AND SEE YOUR BODY SPOTTED LIKE THE LYNX!

AND LET ME TOUCH THOSE CURVING CLAWS OF YELLOW IVORY AND GRASP

THE TAIL THAT LIKE A MONSTROUS ASP COILS ROUND YOUR HEAVY VELVET PAWS!

THE SPHINX



THOUSAND WEARY CENTURIES ARE THINE WHILE I HAVE HARDLY SEEN
SOME TWENTY SUMMERS CAST THEIR GREEN FOR AUTUMN'S GAUDY LIVERIES.

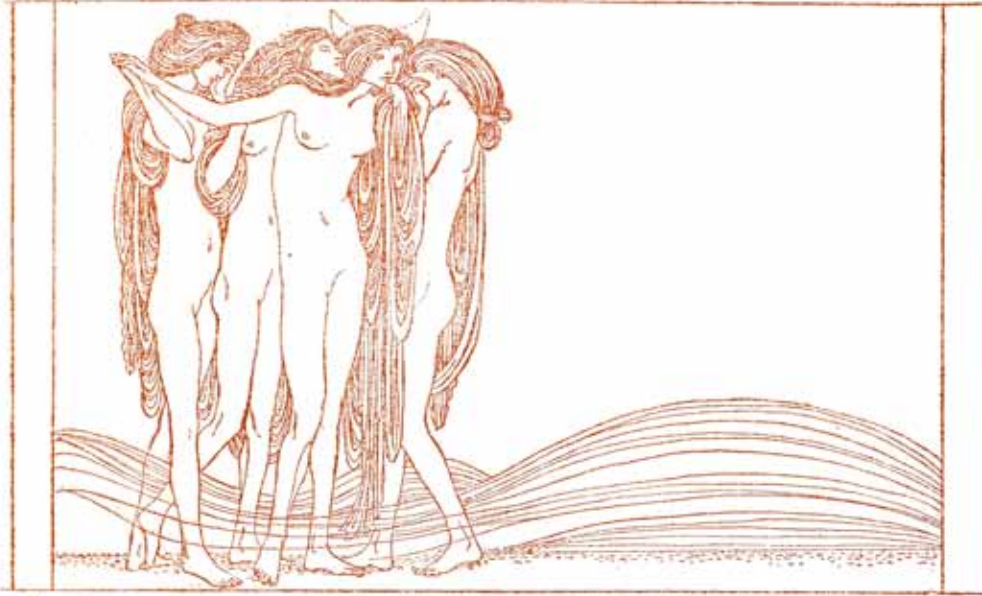
BUT YOU CAN READ THE HIEROGLYPHS ON THE GREAT SANDSTONE OBELISKS,
AND YOU HAVE TALKED WITH BASILISKS, AND YOU HAVE LOOKED ON HIPPOGRIFFS.

O TELL ME, WERE YOU STANDING BY WHEN ISIS TO OSIRIS KNELT?
AND DID YOU WATCH THE EGYPTIAN MELT HER UNION FOR ANTONY

AND DRINK THE JEWEL-DRUNKEN WINE AND BEND HER HEAD IN MIMIC AWE
TO SEE THE HUGE PROCONSUL DRAW THE SALTED TUNNY FROM THE BRINE?

AND DID YOU MARK THE CYPRIAN KISS WHITE ADON ON HIS CATAFALQUE?
AND DID YOU FOLLOW AMENALK, THE GOD OF HELIOPOLIS?

AND DID YOU TALK WITH THOTH, AND DID YOU HEAR THE MOON-HORNED IO WEEP?
AND KNOW THE PAINTED KINGS WHO SLEEP BENEATH THE WEDGE-SHAPED PYRAMID?



LIFT UP YOUR LARGE BLACK SATIN EYES WHICH ARE LIKE CUSHIONS
WHERE ONE SINKS!
FAWN AT MY FEET FANTASTIC SPHINX! AND SING ME ALL YOUR MEMORIES!
SING TO ME OF THE JEWISH MAID WHO WANDERED WITH THE HOLY CHILD,
AND HOW YOU LED THEM THROUGH THE WILD, AND HOW THEY SLEPT BENEATH
YOUR SHADE.

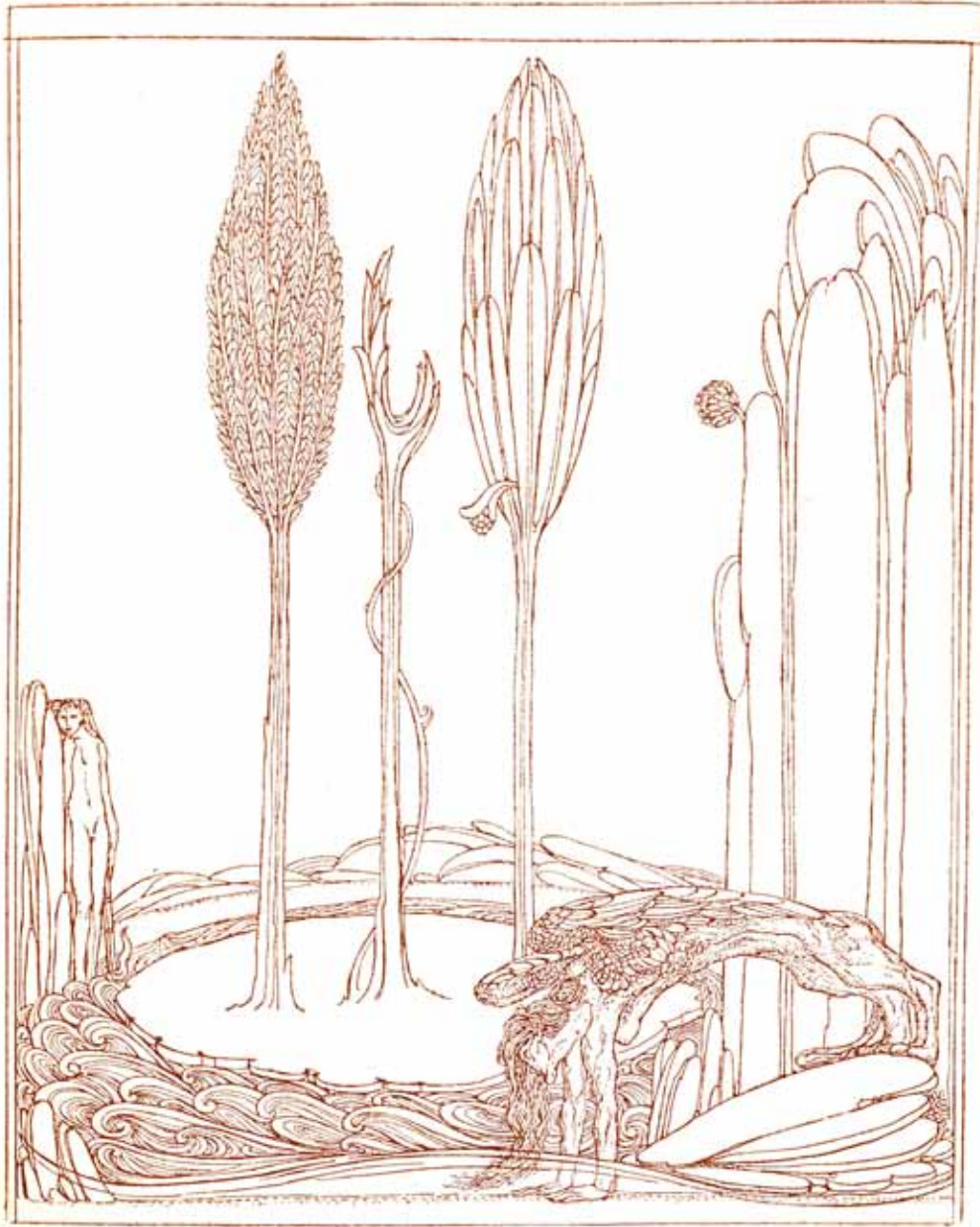
THE SPHINX

SING TO ME OF THAT ODOROUS GREEN EYE WHEN COUCHING BY THE MARGE
YOU HEARD FROM ADRIAN'S GILDED BARGE THE LAUGHTER OF ANTINOUS

AND LAPPED THE STREAM AND FED YOUR DROUTH AND WATCHED WITH HOT
AND HUNGRY STARE

THE IVORY BODY OF THAT RARE YOUNG SLAVE WITH HIS POMEGRANATE MOUTH!

SING



THE SPHINX

SING TO ME OF THE LABYRINTH IN WHICH THE TWY-FORMED BULL WAS STALLED!
SING TO ME OF THE NIGHT YOU CRAWLED ACROSS THE TEMPLE'S GRANITE PLINTH

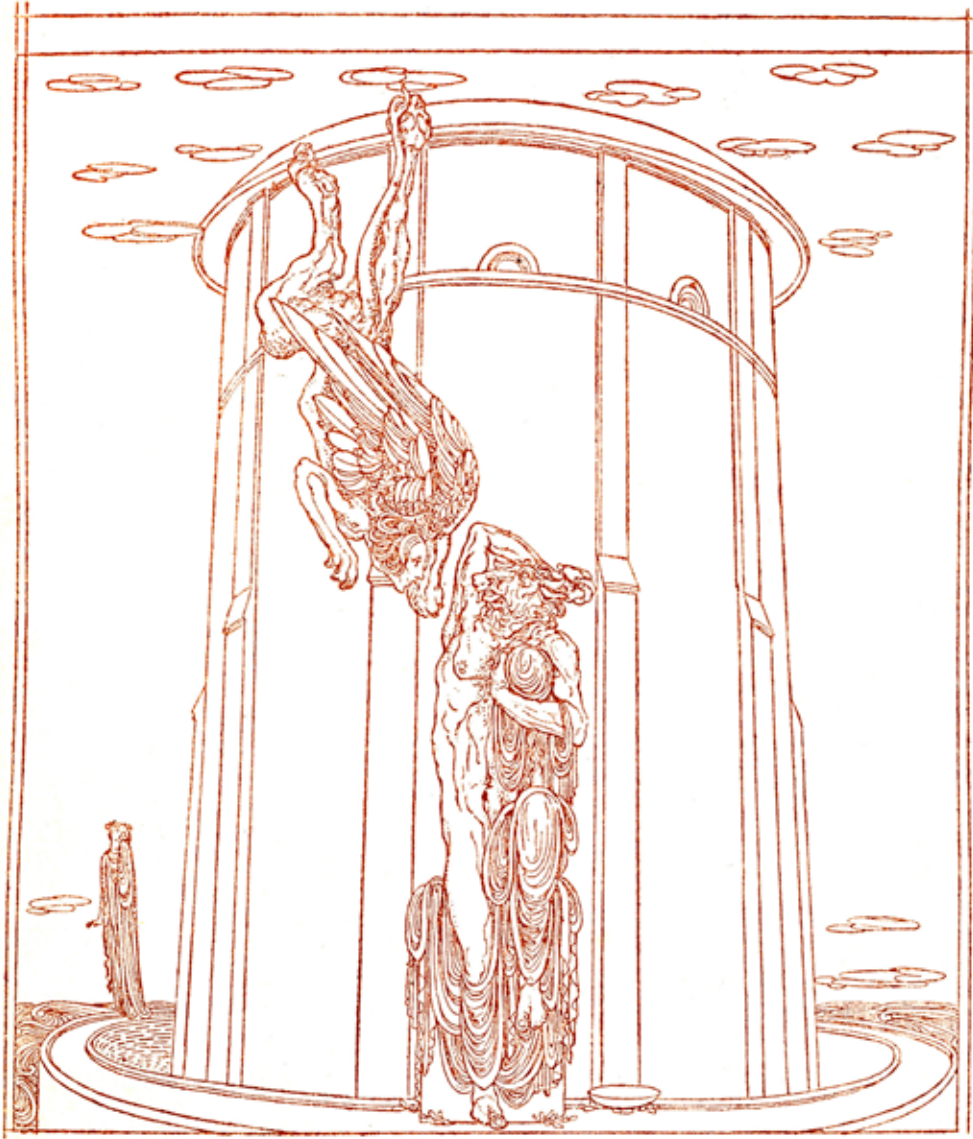
WHEN THROUGH THE PURPLE CORRIDORS THE SCREAMING SCARLET IBIS FLEW
IN TERROR, AND A HORRID DEW DRIPPED FROM THE MOANING MANDRAGORES,

AND THE GREAT TORPID CROCODILE WITHIN THE TANK SHED SLIMY TEARS,
AND TARE THE JEWELS FROM HIS EARS AND STAGGERED BACK INTO THE NILE,

AND THE PRIESTS CURSED YOU WITH SHRILL PSALMS AS IN YOUR CLAWS
YOU SEIZED THEIR SNAKE

AND CREPT AWAY WITH IT TO SLAKE YOUR PASSION BY THE SHUDDERING PALMS

THE SPHINX



WHO

THE SPHINX



WHO WERE YOUR LOVERS? WHO WERE THEY WHO WRESTLED FOR YOU IN THE DUST?
WHICH WAS THE VESSEL OF YOUR LUST? WHAT LEMAN HAD YOU, EVERY DAY?

DID GIANT LIZARDS COME AND CROUCH BEFORE YOU ON THE REEDY BANKS?
DID GRYPHONS WITH GREAT METAL FLANKS LEAP ON YOU IN YOUR TRAMPLED COUCH?

DID MONSTROUS HIPPOPOTAMI COME SIDLING TOWARD YOU IN THE MIST?
DID GILT-SCALED DRAGONS WRITHE AND TWIST WITH PASSION AS YOU PASSED THEM BY?

AND FROM THE BRICK-BUILT LYCIAN TOMB WHAT HORRIBLE CHIMAERA CAME
WITH FEARFUL HEADS AND FEARFUL FLAME TO BREED NEW WONDERS FROM YOUR WOMB?



OR HAD YOU SHAMEFUL SECRET QUESTS AND DID YOU HARRY TO YOUR HOME
SOME NEREID COILED IN AMBER FOAM WITH CURIOUS ROCK CRYSTAL BREASTS?

OR DID YOU TREADING THROUGH THE FROTH CALL TO THE BROWN SIDONIAN
FOR TIDINGS OF LEVIATHAN, LEVIATHAN OR BEHEMOTH?

OR DID YOU WHEN THE SUN WAS SET CLIMB UP THE CACTUS-COVERED SLOPE
TO MEET YOUR SWARTHY ETHIOP WHOSE BODY WAS OF POLISHED JET?

OR DID



THE SPHINX

OR DID YOU WHILE THE EARTHEN SKIFFS DROPPED DOWN THE GREY NILOTIC FLATS
AT TWILIGHT AND THE FLICKERING BATS FLEW ROUND THE TEMPLE'S TRIPLE GLYPHS

STEAL TO THE BORDER OF THE BAR AND SWIM ACROSS THE SILENT LAKE
AND SLINK INTO THE VAULT AND MAKE THE PYRAMID YOUR LÚPANAR

TILL FROM EACH BLACK SARCOPHAGUS ROSE UP THE PAINTED SWATHÈD DEAD?
OR DID YOU LURE UNTO YOUR BED THE IVORY-HORNED TRAGELAPHOS?

OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF FLIES WHO PLAGUED THE HEBREWS AND WAS SPLASHED
WITH WINE UNTO THE WAIST? OR PASHT, WHO HAD GREEN BERYLS FOR HER EYES?

OR THAT YOUNG GOD, THE TYRIAN, WHO WAS MORE AMOROUS THAN THE DOVE
OF ASHTAROTH? OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF THE ASSYRIAN

WHOSE WINGS, LIKE STRANGE TRANSPARENT TALC, ROSE HIGH ABOVE HIS HAWK-FACED HEAD,
PAINTED WITH SILVER AND WITH RED AND RIBBED WITH RODS OF OREICHALCH?

OR DID HUGE APIS FROM HIS CAR LEAP DOWN AND LAY BEFORE YOUR FEET
BIG BLOSSOMS OF THE HONEY-SWEET AND HONEY-COLOURED NENUPHAR?

HOW SUBTLE-SECRET IS YOUR SMILE! DID YOU LOVE NONE THEN?
NAY, I KNOW

GREAT AMMON WAS YOUR BEDFELLOW! HE LAY WITH YOU BESIDE THE NILE!

THE RIVER-HORSES IN THE SLIME TRUMPETED WHEN THEY SAW HIM COME
ODOROUS WITH SYRIAN GALBANUM AND SMEARED WITH SPIKENARD AND WITH THYME.

HE CAME ALONG THE RIVER-BANK LIKE SOME TALL GALLEY ARGENT-SAILED,
HE STRODE ACROSS THE WATERS, MAILED IN BEAUTY, AND THE WATERS SANK.

HE STRODE ACROSS THE DESERT SAND: HE REACHED THE VALLEY WHERE YOU LAY:
HE WAITED TILL THE DAWN OF DAY: THEN TOUCHED YOUR BLACK BREASTS WITH
HIS HAND.

YOU KISSED HIS MOUTH WITH MOUTHS OF FLAME: YOU MADE THE HORNED GOD YOUR OWN:
YOU STOOD BEHIND HIM ON HIS THRONE: YOU CALLED HIM BY HIS SECRET NAME.

YOU WHISPERED MONSTROUS ORACLES INTO THE CAVERNS OF HIS EARS:
WITH BLOOD OF GOATS AND BLOOD OF STEERS YOU TAUGHT HIM MONSTROUS MIRACLES.

WHITE AMMON WAS YOUR BEDFELLOW! YOUR CHAMBER WAS THE STEAMING NILE!
AND WITH YOUR CURVED ARCHAIC SMILE YOU WATCHED HIS PASSION COME AND GO.

THE SPHINX

W

WITH SYRIAN OILS HIS BROWS WERE BRIGHT: AND WIDESPREAD AS A TENT
AT NOON

HIS MARBLE LIMBS MADE PALE THE MOON AND LENT THE DAY A LARGER LIGHT.

HIS LONG HAIR WAS NINE CUBITS' SPAN AND COLOURED LIKE THAT YELLOW GEM
WHICH HIDDEN IN THEIR GARMENTS' HEM THE MERCHANTS BRING FROM KURDISTAN.

HIS FACE WAS AS THE MUST THAT LIES UPON A VAT OF NEW-MADE WINE:
THE SEAS COULD NOT INSAPPHIRINE THE PERFECT AZURE OF HIS EYES,

HIS THICK SOFT THROAT WAS WHITE AS MILK AND THREADED WITH THIN VEINS OF BLUE:
AND CURIOUS PEARLS LIKE FROZEN DEW WERE BROIDERED ON HIS FLOWING SILK.

O

ON PEARL AND PORPHYRY PEDESTALLED HE WAS TOO BRIGHT TO LOOK UPON:
FOR ON HIS IVORY BREAST THERE SHONE THE WONDROUS OCEAN-EMERALD,

THAT MYSTIC MOONLIT JEWEL WHICH SOME DIVER OF THE COLCHIAN CAVES
HAD FOUND BENEATH THE BLACKENING WAVES AND CARRIED TO THE COLCHIAN WITCH.

BEFORE HIS GILDED GALIOT RAN NAKED VINE-WREATHED CORYBANTS,
AND LINES OF SWAYING ELEPHANTS KNELT DOWN TO DRAW HIS CHARIOT,

AND LINES OF SWARTHY NUBIANS BARE UP HIS LITTER AS HE RODE
DOWN THE GREAT GRANITE-PAVEN ROAD BETWEEN THE NODDING PEACOCK-FANS.

THE MERCHANTS BROUGHT HIM STEATITE FROM SIDON IN THEIR PAINTED SHIPS:
THE MEANEST CUP THAT TOUCHED HIS LIPS WAS FASHIONED FROM A CHRYSOLITE.



THE SPHINX

THE MERCHANTS BROUGHT HIM CEDAR-CHESTS OF RICH APPAREL BOUND WITH CORDS:
HIS TRAIN WAS BORNE BY MEMPHIAN LORDS: YOUNG KINGS WERE GLAD TO BE HIS GUESTS,
TEN HUNDRED SHAVEN PRIESTS DID BOW TO AMMON'S ALTAR DAY AND NIGHT,
TEN HUNDRED LAMPS DID WAVE THEIR LIGHT THROUGH AMMON'S CARVEN HOUSE—AND NOW
FOUL SNAKE AND SPECKLED ADDER WITH THEIR YOUNG ONES CRAWL FROM STONE TO STONE
FOR RUINED IS THE HOUSE AND PRONE THE GREAT ROSE-MARBLE MONOLITH!
WILD ASS OR TROTTING JACKAL COMES AND COUCHES IN THE MOULDERING GATES:
WILD SATYRS CALL UNTO THEIR MATES ACROSS THE FALLEN FLUTED DRUMS,
AND ON THE SUMMIT OF THE PILE THE BLUE-FACED APE OF HORUS SITS
AND GIBBERS WHILE THE FIGTREE SPLITS THE PILLARS OF THE PERISTYLE.

THE GOD IS SCATTERED HERE AND THERE: DEEP HIDDEN IN THE WINDY SAND
I SAW HIS GIANT GRANITE HAND STILL CLENCHED IN IMPOTENT DESPAIR,
AND MANY A WANDERING CARAVAN OF STATELY NEGROES SILKEN-SHAWLED,
CROSSING THE DESERT, HALTS APPALLED BEFORE THE NECK THAT NONE CAN SPAN.
AND MANY A BEARDED BEDOUIN DRAWS BACK HIS YELLOW-STRIPED BURNOUS
TO GAZE UPON THE TITAN THEWS OF HIM WHO WAS THY PALADIN.



GO SEEK

THE SPHINX

GO, SEEK HIS FRAGMENTS ON THE MOOR AND WASH THEM IN THE EVENING DEW,
AND FROM THEIR PIECES MAKE ANEW THY MUTILATED PARAMOUR!

GO, SEEK THEM WHERE THEY LIE ALONE AND FROM THEIR BROKEN PIECES MAKE
THY BRUISED BEDFELLOW! AND WAKE MAD PASSIONS IN THE SENSELESS STONE!

CHARM

THE SPHINX

CHARM HIS DULL EAR WITH SYRIAN HYMNS! HE LOVED YOUR BODY! OH, BE KIND,
POUR SPIKENARD ON HIS HAIR, AND WIND SOFT ROLLS OF LINEN ROUND HIS LIMBS!

WIND ROUND HIS HEAD THE FIGURED COINS! STAIN WITH RED FRUITS THOSE PALLID LIPS!

WEAVE PURPLE FOR HIS SHRUNKEN HIPS! AND PURPLE FOR HIS BARREN LOINS!

AWAY

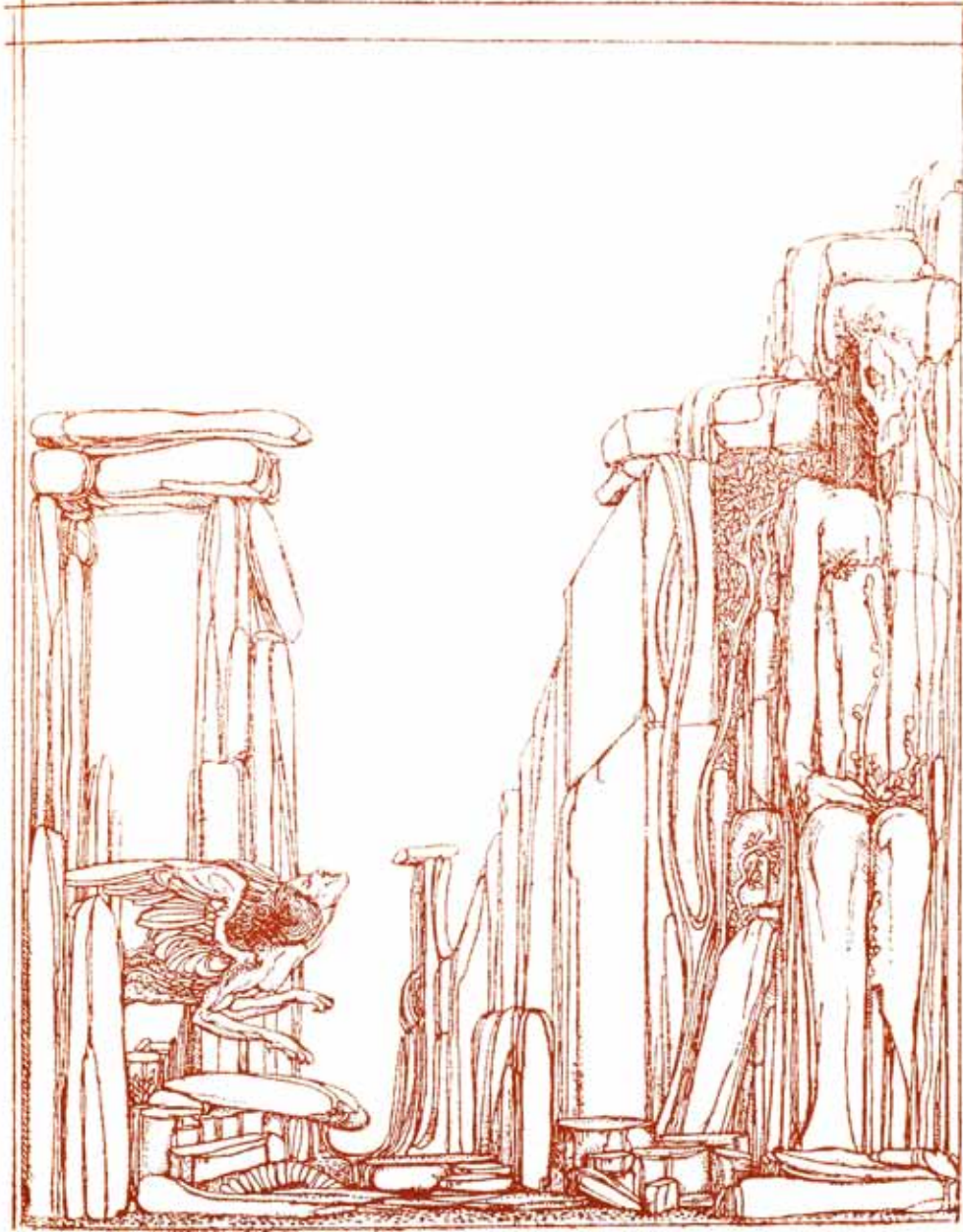
THE SPHINX

AWAY TO EGYPT! HAVE NO FEAR. ONLY ONE GOD HAS EVER DIED.
ONLY ONE GOD HAS LET HIS SIDE BE WOUNDED BY A SOLDIER'S SPEAR.

BUT THESE, THY LOVERS, ARE NOT DEAD. STILL BY THE HUNDRED-CUBIT GATE
DOG-FACED ANUBIS SITS IN STATE WITH LOTUS-LILIES FOR THY HEAD.

STILL FROM HIS CHAIR OF PORPHYRY GAUNT MEMNON STRAINS HIS LIDLESS EYES
ACROSS THE EMPTY LAND, AND CRIES EACH YELLOW MORNING UNTO THEE.

AND



THE SPHINX

AND NILUS WITH HIS BROKEN HORN LIES IN HIS BLACK AND OOZY BED
AND TILL THY COMING WILL NOT SPREAD HIS WATERS ON THE WITHERING CORN.

YOUR LOVERS ARE NOT DEAD, I KNOW. THEY WILL RISE UP AND HEAR YOUR VOICE
AND CLASH THEIR CYMBALS AND REJOICE AND RUN TO KISS YOUR MOUTH! AND SO,

SET WINGS UPON YOUR ARGOSIES! SET HORSES TO YOUR EBON CAR!
BACK TO YOUR NILE! OR IF YOU ARE GROWN SICK OF DEAD DIVINITIES

FOLLOW

THE SPHINX

FOLLOW SOME ROVING LION'S SPOOR ACROSS THE COPPER-COLOURED PLAIN,
REACH OUT AND HALE HIM BY THE MANE AND BID HIM BE YOUR PARAMOUR!

COUCH BY HIS SIDE UPON THE GRASS AND SET YOUR WHITE TEETH IN HIS THROAT
AND WHEN YOU HEAR HIS DYING NOTE LASH YOUR LONG FLANKS OF POLISHED BRASS

AND TAKE A TIGER FOR YOUR MATE, WHOSE AMBER SIDES ARE FLECKED WITH BLACK,
AND RIDE UPON HIS GILDED BACK IN TRIUMPH THROUGH THE THEBAN GATE,

AND TOY WITH HIM IN AMOROUS JESTS, AND WHEN HE TURNS, AND SNARLS, AND GNAWS,
O SMITE HIM WITH YOUR JASPER CLAWS! AND BRUISE HIM WITH YOUR AGATE BREASTS!

WHY

THE SPHINX



WHY ARE YOU TARRYING? GET HENCE! I WEARY OF YOUR SULLEN WAYS,
I WEARY OF YOUR STEADFAST GAZE, YOUR SOMNOLENT MAGNIFICENCE.

YOUR HORRIBLE AND HEAVY BREATH MAKES THE LIGHT FLICKER IN THE LAMP,
AND ON MY BROW I FEEL THE DAMP AND DREADFUL DEWS OF NIGHT AND DEATH.

YOUR EYES ARE LIKE FANTASTIC MOONS THAT SHIVER IN SOME STAGNANT LAKE,
YOUR TONGUE IS LIKE A SCARLET SNAKE THAT DANCES TO FANTASTIC TUNES,

YOUR PULSE MAKES POISONOUS MELODIES, AND YOUR BLACK THROAT IS LIKE THE HOLE
LEFT BY SOME TORCH OR BURNING COAL ON SARACENIC TAPESTRIES.

AWAY! THE SULPHUR-COLOURED STARS ARE HURRYING THROUGH THE WESTERN GATE!
AWAY! OR IT MAY BE TOO LATE TO CLIMB THEIR SILENT SILVER CARS!

SEE, THE DAWN SHIVERS ROUND THE GREY GILT-DIALLED TOWERS, AND THE RAIN
STREAMS DOWN EACH DIAMONDED PANE AND BLURS WITH TEARS THE WANNISH DAY.

WHAT SNAKE-TRESSED FURY FRESH FROM HELL, WITH UNCOUTH GESTURES AND UNCLEAN,
STOLE FROM THE POPPY-DROWSY QUEEN AND LED YOU TO A STUDENT'S CELL?

WHAT



WHAT SONGLESS TONGUELESS GHOST OF SIN CREPT THROUGH
THE CURTAINS OF THE NIGHT,
AND SAW MY TAPER BURNING BRIGHT, AND KNOCKED, AND BADE YOU ENTER IN.
ARE THERE NOT OTHERS MORE ACCURSED, WHITER WITH LEPROSIES THAN I?
ARE ABANA AND PHARPHAR DRY THAT YOU COME HERE TO SLAKE YOUR THIRST?

THE SPHINX

GET HENCE, YOU LOATHSOME MYSTERY! HIDEOUS ANIMAL, GET HENCE!

YOU WAKE IN ME EACH BESTIAL SENSE, YOU MAKE ME WHAT I WOULD NOT BE.

YOU MAKE MY CREED A BARREN SHAM, YOU WAKE FOUL DREAMS OF SENSUAL LIFE,
AND ATYS WITH HIS BLOOD-STAINED KNIFE WERE BETTER THAN THE THING I AM.

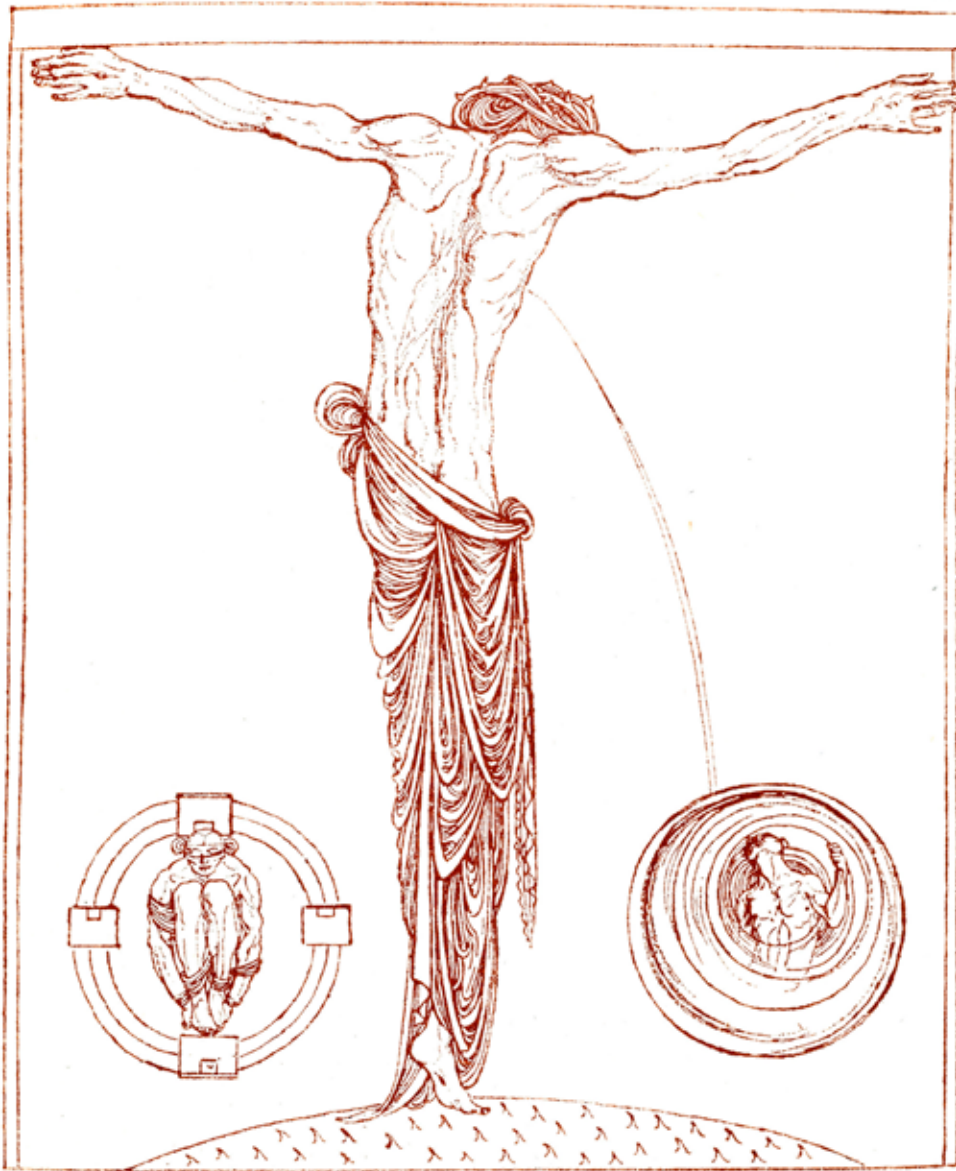
FALSE



THE SPHINX

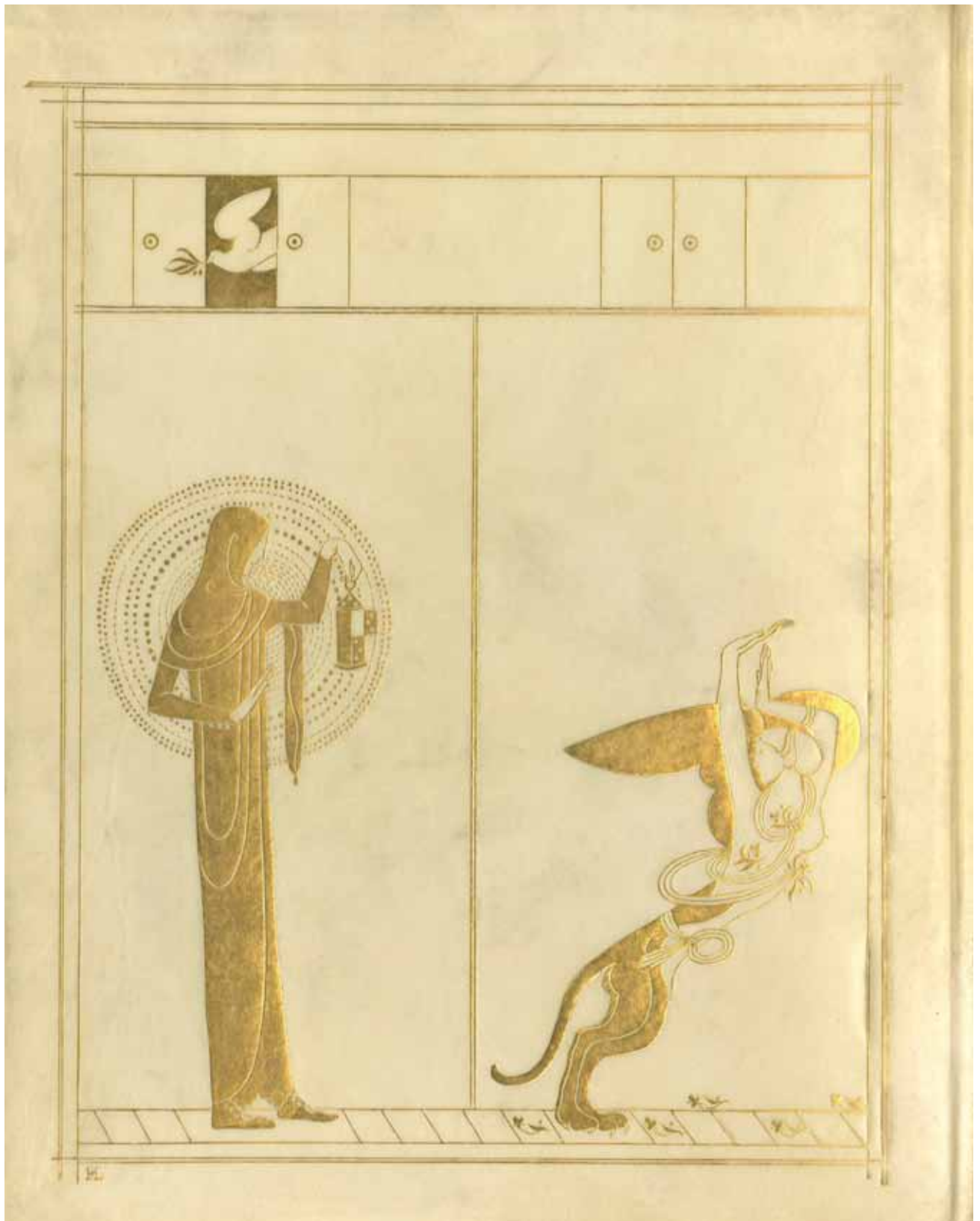
FALSE SPHINX! FALSE SPHINX! BY REEDY STYX OLD CHARON, LEANING ON HIS OAR,
WAITS FOR MY COIN. GO THOU BEFORE, AND LEAVE ME TO MY CRUCIFIX,

WHOSE



WHOSE PALLID BURDEN, SICK WITH PAIN, WATCHES THE WORLD WITH WEARIED EYES,
AND WEEPS FOR EVERY SOUL THAT DIES AND WEEPS FOR EVERY SOUL IN VAIN.

BALLANTYNE PRESS
LONDON & EDINBURGH



Back cover of *The Sphinx* (1894, ordinary issue), gilt stamped on full vellum boards. 8 x 6 inches. Designed by Charles Ricketts, executed by Leighton Son and Hodge. The monogram of Henry Leighton, the binder, is visible at lower left.

Afterword
by Nicholas Frankel

The Appearance of *The Sphinx*¹

By the time Oscar Wilde's poem *The Sphinx* appeared in June 1894, with decorations and illustrations by Charles Ricketts, Wilde had been working on the poem intermittently for at least eleven years. The timing was opportune, as was the choice of publishers (John Lane and Elkin Mathews in London, "at the Sign of the Bodley Head," and, simultaneously, Copeland and Day in Boston). The previous February, Mathews and Lane had issued the first English-language edition of Wilde's play *Salome*, translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas and "pictured" by Aubrey Beardsley (like *The Sphinx*, this book was simultaneously issued in Boston by Copeland and Day). And the first volume of the soon-to-be-notorious illustrated quarterly *The Yellow Book* had appeared in April, again published by Mathews and Lane in London and, one month later, by Copeland and Day in Boston. The English Decadence was at its height, fanned into flames by Wilde's own English publishers from their bookshop in London's Vigo Street ("The Bodley Head," named for its street sign displaying the head of the Renaissance scholar-diplomat Thomas Bodley, founder of the Bodleian Library). And thanks to the offices of Copeland and Day, those flames were beginning to reach the United States (see Kraus; and Weir, 50-74) where, as other works published in the Literature By Design Series show, their effects on American writers and artists would be considerable. Only an Act of Parliament would "meet the case," the *Westminster Gazette* had declared of the first volume of *The Yellow Book*, the previous April, "to make this kind of thing illegal" (quoted in Mix, 88). Although the *succès de scandale* of such works as *Salome*, *The Yellow Book* and *The Sphinx* would eventually lead to a permanent breakdown of the partnership between the conservative Mathews and the more adventurous Lane, in the summer of 1894 Mathews and Lane were bringing to a fever pitch certain movements in the literary and textual arts that were to have long-standing effects on the course of literature and design in the English-speaking world. Not for nothing did the poet and critic W. E. Henley comment, upon reviewing *The Sphinx* in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1894, that it was "about as *fin de siècle* a business as you ever saw" (Henley, 168).

Exact dates for when Wilde began composing *The Sphinx* and when he completed it to his satisfaction are hard to determine precisely (see “Origins of *The Sphinx*” below). But there is little doubt that *The Sphinx* occupied a large portion of Wilde’s life and, along with his *Poems* and “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.,” it was at the forefront of Wilde’s mind when late in 1891 he decided to transfer his publishing arrangements to Mathews and Lane. As Wilde would have been acutely aware, the Bodley Head was rapidly developing “a reputation for breaking with conventions—not only literary conventions, but social and moral ones” (Stetz, 72). Before Wilde joined their list, Mathews and Lane had already published, or were on the point of publishing, important work by the young poets of the Rhymers’ Club and by older poets such as Philip Bourke Marston and Lord De Tabley, noted for their affinities with the Pre-Raphaelite Movement. Just as important, they published emerging women writers such Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper (who wrote jointly and published under the pseudonym “Michael Field”), and Dollie Radford. Over the coming months, that list would be supplemented by such important *fin de siècle* writers as Arthur Symons, John Gray, John Davidson, “George Egerton” (Mary Chavelita Dunne) and John Addington Symonds, among others. A “Vigo Street School” (Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 300) was coming into existence, and the Bodley Head was rapidly becoming a home to writers and book artists of what is now termed the Decadent Movement. Five of Wilde’s works (but not “The Portrait of Mr. W. H.”) were to be published by the firm over the ensuing years before Wilde’s imprisonment in 1895.²

When he chose Mathews and Lane as publishers for *The Sphinx*, then, Wilde was making a calculated decision about the company his work would keep as well as the form in which his works would be issued: as Stetz remarks, “the phrase ‘Bodley Head book’ came to possess a particular meaning and... raised a quite specific set of expectations” (Stetz, 71). Prominent among those expectations was the firm’s reputation for publishing what Tennyson would have termed “poisonous honey stolen from the flowers of France” (quoted Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 184)—poetry “heavily influenced by Swinburne, [that] belonged to what was known in the Victorian period as the ‘fleshy school’—sensuous rhymes constructed around sensual subjects” (Stetz, 72; see Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 184-220). But no less important was the reputation

of Mathews and Lane for producing books whose physical appearance and design belied their relatively low cost. Close attention was given to such matters as paper quality and texture, binding materials (usually dyed cloth), typeface, and page layout. Master printers such as Walter Blaikie, of the firm T. and A. Constable, or Ballantyne Hanson and Co. of Edinburgh, were employed for printing purposes; and designers of considerable talent were employed to decorate—but not necessarily to illustrate—the book. Many of these designers—Walter Crane, William Strang, Aubrey Beardsley, Charles Ricketts, Laurence Housman—are now renowned as “artists” in their own right, and although they were occasionally commissioned to contribute illustrations, as in the case of *The Sphinx* or Wilde’s *Salome*, they were more typically employed by Mathews and Lane to contribute a distinctive gilt-stamped cover design, an original frontispiece, or an attractive title page (or all three) to the Bodley Head book. If, as Wilde contended, “what is interesting about people in good society...is the mask that each one of them wears, not the reality behind the mask” (“The Decay of Lying,” 297), such decorative details constituted the “mask” in which the literary work engaged its public, and they bore out Wilde’s longstanding contention that any visual performance or staging was dependent upon “small details of dress” (“The Truth of Masks,” 410). The fact that Bodley Head books were issued in strictly limited editions, typically in print runs of a few hundred copies, with twenty-five or fifty extra copies printed on larger paper to be sold as a special or “deluxe” edition, added to their air of exclusivity and other-worldliness.³ All of these traits are evident in the edition of *The Sphinx* reproduced here: Henley might just as easily have remarked, upon reviewing the book, that it was “about as Bodley Head a business,” or as typical a Bodley Head business, “as you ever saw.”⁴

Wilde duly entered into an agreement with Mathews and Lane in the Summer of 1892 for publication of *The Sphinx* with decorations by Charles Ricketts. The timing of the agreement is interesting in its own right: *Salome* and *The Yellow Book*—the two works on account of which publication of *The Sphinx* would eventually be delayed, and with which its fate would to some extent be associated upon publication—were not yet on the horizon, at least so far as Mathews and Lane were concerned.⁵ And in summer 1892 Wilde was,

by some accounts, reeling from the actions of England's Lord Chamberlain, who in June 1892 had refused to license the first stage production of *Salome*—with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, and despite the fact that rehearsals for the production were well advanced—on the grounds that the play contravened an ancient statute prohibiting the depiction on English stages of Biblical characters. Publicly at least, Wilde was promising to “leave England and settle in France...[unwilling] to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in its artistic judgement” (Mikhail, 1:188). But since Mathews and Lane had done an exemplary job of publishing the “Author's Edition” of Wilde's *Poems*,⁶ the first of Wilde's works to be published “at the sign of the Bodley Head,” in late May of 1892, there is reason to speculate that it was in large part the prospect of Mathews and Lane publishing his future books that kept Wilde from carrying out his threat to emigrate to Paris, where his involvement in the leading literary circles, especially with such writers as Mallarmé, Gide and Louÿs, was considerable.

According to the terms of his contract with Mathews and Lane, Wilde was to receive a ten percent royalty for the poem (Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 96-97), though he complained to his publishers that “I did not contemplate assigning to you the copyright of so important a poem for so small an honorarium,” and he accepted their terms only on condition “that no new edition is to be brought out without my sanction: I mean no such thing as a popular or cheap edition is to be brought out: nor are you to be able to assign the right of publishing the poem to any other firm” (*Complete Letters*, 533-34). Wilde's concern for the kind of book to be published, as well as his lack of faith in other publishers doing justice to his work, will be clear from these comments. But his agreement with Mathews and Lane is interesting for other reasons as well: we can detect something of the importance Wilde attached to the poem, as well as the importance of poetry to his own conception of himself, in the care with which Wilde changed “author” to “poet” throughout the contract, insisting to his publishers upon returning it that “the maker of a poem is a ‘poet,’ not an ‘author’: ‘author’ is misleading” (*Complete Letters*, 533). More significantly and unusually, the contract was a joint one, co-signed not only by Wilde and his publishers but also by Charles Ricketts, the book's designer; and at the same time as it specified the terms upon which Wilde

was to receive an author's (or poet's) royalty, it specified the exact terms upon which "the artist" would execute, submit, and be paid for his work. Thus it stipulates that "the artist will...submit to the publishers for their approval ten designs for decorating, colouring, and fully illustrating the Poem, also specimens of paper and other material and binding" (quoted Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 96). At the same time it assigned to Ricketts an unusual degree of responsibility for overseeing the book's printing and binding: "The artist will execute and see to the reproduction of the designs...and prepare for and superintend through the press the said work, and will make arrangements for the supply of all materials and labour for printing, issuing and binding the first and other editions thereof according to his own judgment but at the expense of the publishers" (quoted Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 96). No less than the resulting book itself, the publishing agreement for *The Sphinx* raises graphic design to the status of "art," places the book's designer on a footing parallel to its author (or "poet"), and above all treats art and poetry as interdependent entities, at least so far as commercial and legal considerations are concerned.

This elevation of design to the status of art owes something to the personal determination of Charles Ricketts, designer/illustrator of *The Sphinx*, to be understood as an artist in his own right. Ricketts shared this determination with other Bodley Head designers such as Aubrey Beardsley, Walter Crane and Laurence Housman, and it is not irrelevant here to note that Ricketts would later be elected to the Royal Academy, his paintings and sculptures collected by the Tate, the Ashmolean, the Carlisle City Museum, the Manchester Art Gallery, and the Fitzwilliam, among other major English galleries. As telling, Ricketts would later become an important authority on art in his own right, composing books on Titian and The Prado, and serving as advisor to the Canadian National Gallery after previously declining to direct the National Gallery in London.

But the elevation of the book's design to the status of art also owes much to Wilde, whose personal and intellectual interest in design had been longstanding by 1892. In January 1889, for instance, he had written that "our aim should be to discover some mode of illustration that will harmonise with the shapes of our letters" ("Some Literary Notes I," 392). Two months earlier, he had written that "no ornament or illustration should be used in a

book which cannot be printed in the same way as the type” while pleading for “harmony” between a book’s “type and the decoration” (“Printing and Printers,” 100-1). These remarks had been made in the course of reviewing a lecture on “Printing” that Emery Walker delivered to the Arts and Crafts Society on November 15, 1888—the third of five lectures on the arts of design delivered to members of the Arts and Crafts Society, which Wilde reviewed enthusiastically for the *Pall Mall Gazette* in November 1888. (This lecture series is now generally regarded by scholars as constituting an epochal moment in the Arts and Crafts Movement. Emery Walker’s lecture on printing, for instance, was attended by William Morris, as well as by Oscar Wilde, and it led directly to Walker’s informal partnership in Morris’s Kelmscott Press.) Wilde’s five reviews made it clear that he had attended closely to such luminaries of design as Walker, William Morris, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, and Walter Crane; and in his review of Crane’s closing lecture Wilde had enthusiastically endorsed Crane’s elevation of design over representational art on the grounds of its “ideal beauty,” its “loveliness” and its subordination of “appearance” to “decorative motive” (“The Close of the Arts and Crafts,” 106-7).⁷

As important, in 1890 Wilde had written the following:

The art that is frankly decorative is the art to live with.... The marvels of design stir the imagination. In the mere loveliness of the materials employed there are latent elements of culture. Nor is this all. By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty, as well as of the imitative method of the ordinary painter, decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement. (“The Critic As Artist,” 398)

In the light of such ideas, it is perhaps not surprising that all of Wilde’s previous books had incorporated significant design elements; and Ricketts had played a central role personally in no less than five of them,⁸ beginning with the book edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891, while also contributing designs and page ornaments to *The Woman’s World* during Wilde’s tenure as the magazine’s editor (1887-1889). By late 1891, Wilde proudly declared Ricketts to be “the subtle and fantastic decorator” of his books (*Complete Letters*, 501)

and there can be little doubt that the seriousness given to arrangements for the design and illustration of *The Sphinx* mattered as much to Wilde personally and intellectually as it did to Ricketts.

In his publishing agreement with Mathews and Lane, Wilde also specified carefully how the book should be disseminated upon publication. As important as his already-quoted remark that he could sanction “no such thing as a popular or cheap edition” are Wilde’s initial refusal to countenance advertising of the book⁹ and his comment to his publishers that “a book of this kind—very rare and curious—must not be thrown into the gutter of English journalism.... I hope that the book will be subscribed for before publication, and that as few as possible will be sent for review” (*Complete Letters*, 533). Such remarks are crucial not because of Wilde’s elitism but because of a certain resistance to appropriation, a façade or cool indifference, that is built into the work at the level of meaning, and which it famously shares with its enigmatic subject, the sphinx. As one reviewer quickly perceived at the time, the poem was “born rare” and “destined—at least in its original form—to become rarer still” (“Mr. Oscar Wilde and Edgar Poe,” n.p.) Certainly Wilde was fearful of the intellectual damage that “ordinary English newspapers” (*Complete Letters*, 533) could do to his work. The scorn with which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bernhardt’s banned production of *Salome* had been met in the British press bore out this fear, just as the journalistic reception of the first English edition of *Salome*, *The Yellow Book*, and indeed *The Sphinx* itself (see “Critical Reception” below) were to do. And it is certainly true that, from a strictly commercial viewpoint, “the author did everything he could to undermine” publication of *The Sphinx* (Stetz and Lasner, *England in the 1890s*, 13). But a certain detachment from the circulation process was essential if the book was wholly to incarnate the central conceit of Wilde’s poem, which is on one level at least about the unattainability of positive knowledge, the history of art’s neglect, and the almost hieroglyphic indecipherability of art’s apparent meanings. If *The Sphinx* aspired to the archaeological condition of a monolithic “sphinx,” in all its enigmatic beauty and unknowability, it was crucial, as Wilde remarked to a correspondent about another of his books, that it reach only “a small and quite unimportant sect of perfect people” (*Complete Letters*, 526-27). His initial idea, in fact, was to publish an edition of just three

copies, Wilde quipped: “one for myself, one for the British Museum, and one for Heaven. I had some doubts about the British Museum” (quoted Ellmann, 421).

In Wilde’s remarks to his publishers about the poem’s reception, we can detect the emergence of an *avant-garde* sensibility that would become commonplace among Modernist writers and contributors to the little magazines in the twentieth century. This sensibility goes back in the nineteenth century at least as far as the 1840s, to the Pre-Raphaelites’ concern for the “Brotherhood” of art and poetry, if not also to William Blake’s scornful rejection of commercial print media at the turn of the nineteenth century. (Blake combined within himself the roles of poet, artist, printer, and publisher; and he embraced painstaking printing methods that ensured his works were issued, with virtually no publicity, only in extremely limited numbers or even single copies.) But if, like these earlier figures, Wilde felt that books are “delicate and most sensitive things, and if they are books worth reading, [they have] a strong dislike of the public” (*Complete Letters*, 527), he was nonetheless fearful of the reaction with which *The Sphinx* would be met. “No book of mine...ever goes to the *National Observer*” (edited by W. E. Henley), Wilde specified; “I wrote to Henley to tell him so two years ago. He is too coarse, too offensive, too personal.... The *St. James Gazette*, again, I would not have a copy sent to. They are most scurrilous” (*Complete Letters*, 533). Although Wilde had begun composing *The Sphinx* long before he ever put pen to paper to compose *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in late 1889, the scandalized reception of his novel in 1890 hangs like a shadow over arrangements for the publication of *The Sphinx*. Wilde was clearly conscious of the destructive effect English newspaper reviews had had upon *Dorian Gray* two years earlier,¹⁰ and he clearly predicted the scurrilous review of *The Sphinx* that Henley would compose (and print unsigned) in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1894. For these reasons, Wilde is reported to have said that he “hesitated to publish *The Sphinx* as it would destroy domesticity in England” (quoted in “The City of Books,” 165-66; also in Millard, 399).

In the event, of course, the reverse proved to be the case. Far from destroying domesticity in England, *The Sphinx* blazed scandalously but briefly across English and Bostonian skies in the summer of 1894 only to

fall into a long period of comparative neglect. This neglect was due in part to the disgrace brought upon Wilde's work and upon aestheticism generally, in the eyes of many, by Wilde's imprisonment for "gross indecency" in the spring of 1895. For it was Wilde himself who ended up destroyed by English domesticity, an impoverished, nearly broken, man following his release in 1897 from a two-year gaol sentence for sexual "offences" that are now legal in most parts of the English-speaking world and that are perhaps obscurely hinted at in the perverse imaginings of his greatest poem. Probably for this reason, many accolades have been awarded in the past 112 years to Wilde's oft-anthologized and mournful poem *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, composed in the immediate aftermath of his prison experiences, a poem that went into numerous editions even before Wilde's death in 1900. But the poem that dominated Wilde's creative mind in the years running up to his imprisonment, and that in some ways best embodies the Decadent Movement as a whole, is *The Sphinx*. Its republication in the form that Wilde personally countenanced is long overdue.

The Origins of *The Sphinx*

The precise origins of *The Sphinx* are clouded in myth. While scholars generally agree that Wilde finished writing the poem in 1893, one year after contracting to publish it and one year prior to its eventual publication, there is considerable disagreement about when he began composing it. Many scholars now accept the view, first advanced in 1907 by Wilde's bibliographer Christopher Millard (who published under the pseudonym "Stuart Mason") and reiterated by him in 1914 ("Mason," *Bibliography*, 398), that the poem was begun while Wilde was a student at Oxford, before his graduation in 1878. The evidence upon which Millard based this view was twofold: the existence of a manuscript draft of lines 141-3 incorporating a cartoon by Wilde of a gowned academic; and the fact that lines 17-18 of the poem, "WHILE I HAVE HARDLY SEEN/ SOME TWENTY SUMMERS CAST THEIR GREEN IN AUTUMN'S GAUDY LIVERIES," recur in Wilde's Newdigate Prize-winning poem *Ravenna*, which he had read aloud at Oxford's Sheldonian Theater in June 1878, nearly three months after submitting it to the Prize committee. For Millard, the fact that *Ravenna* contains no other instances of lines recurring in

poems of indisputably later date is evidence that Wilde began composing *The Sphinx* before *Ravenna*. Millard's evidence, it will be observed, is conjectural and thin—Wilde was a frequent visitor to Oxford in the late 1870s and early 1880s, so the cartoon could easily postdate his undergraduate years. But it has been endorsed by many scholars, including the poem's most recent editors, Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, who write “that the poem was begun during Wilde's Oxford years can be inferred from a MS draft of lines 141-3, which also contains a cartoon sketch of a gowned professor” (Fong and Beckson, 305-6). Fong and Beckson also date to Wilde's Oxford years the earliest surviving fair copy of the poem, written in Wilde's hand on three folio sheets containing early versions of lines 1-44 and 73-106, as well as eleven pages of fragmentary jottings that correspond closely to lines contained in the fair copy. Significantly, Fong and Beckson make no claims about dating based upon the line shared with *Ravenna*, writing only that *The Sphinx* “echoes” the earlier poem (Fong and Beckson, 307).

Wilde's executor and friend Robert Ross muddied the waters further in 1910 when he declared, in a prefatory Note to a new printing of the poem (without Ricketts's decorations), that Wilde had told him that *The Sphinx* had been commenced during a trip to Paris in 1874 but that he (Ross) could not help thinking that Wilde's account of the poem's origins was a “poetical licence” (Ross, vii). Wilde is known to have visited Paris in 1874, and this dating, which predates Wilde's Oxford years, has been accepted—though with some skepticism—by Wilde's preeminent biographer, Richard Ellmann.

But if scholars are uncertain about the precise date Wilde began composing *The Sphinx*, there is widespread agreement that much of the poem was composed shortly after Wilde's yearlong lecture-tour of America had ended, during an extended visit Wilde made to Paris from January to April 1883. It is significant that Wilde turned to the poem so swiftly once his tour commitments were over, and significant too that much of the poem was composed in Paris. Egypt's Great Sphinx of Giza had preoccupied many French artists and poets ever since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1798-1801), and Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier, the two French poets most beloved by Wilde, had both written important sphinx poems. In the third of his “Spleen” poems, for instance, Baudelaire had written:

*From this time forth, O stuff of life, you are no more
Than blocks of granite compassed round by some vague fear,
Dozing in the depths of Sahara's dust;
An ancient sphinx, lost in the world's disinterest,
Lost on the map, your wild caprice was never sung
Except beneath the luster of the setting sun.*

(Baudelaire 139)

While in Paris, Wilde formed a close friendship with the journalist Robert Harborough Sherard, the grandson of William Wordsworth, who would go on to become Wilde's first biographer. Much of their conversation turned on the work of Baudelaire, Gautier, de Nerval, and Poe (Ellmann, 218)—and indeed the influence of all four writers can be traced in *The Sphinx*, whose particular debts to Poe's "The Raven," as well as to the two poems titled "The Cat" in Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, have frequently been remarked by critics. In *Oscar Wilde: The Story of An Unhappy Friendship* (1902), Sherard wrote memorably that he personally witnessed Wilde putting the finishing touches to his verse drama *The Duchess of Padua* in the spring of 1883, as well as "those two wonderful poems 'The Harlot's House' and 'The Sphynx':"

I was with him all the time that they were being elaborated. I heard him fashion the lines, often repeating, as we walked abroad, passages that had pleased him in their writing.... I remember that for "The Sphynx" he asked me for a rhyme in `ar' for a lagging verse. I can recall the accent with which he often repeated this request, and chid me with the question "Why have you brought me no rhyme from Passy?"... On the day when I found `nenuphar' for the wanting rhyme, I was made as proud by his thanks as though I had achieved great things in literature. We may have been precious and ridiculous, but...neither for him nor

for me was there anything outside of literature. (Sherard, 31-32)

In a letter from early April 1883 that demonstrates the intensity of the two men's shared concern for poetics, Wilde commended to Sherard the "Envoi" he had written the previous year, for a volume of poetry by his one-time friend Rennell Rodd, with the words "The rhythmical value of prose has never yet been fully tested. I hope to do some more work in that genre, as soon as I have sung my Sphinx to sleep, and found a trisyllabic rhyme for 'catafalque'" (*Complete Letters*, 205-6). Wilde considered Sherard a fellow poet and aesthete, though there were clearly bonds of love between the two men as well. But at the end of April Wilde returned to London, from where he confessed to Sherard two months later "Not that I have written here—the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London sweeps me from my Sphinx.... I wish I were back in Paris, where I did such good work" (*Complete Letters*, 211). By this time, Wilde had produced a second fair-copy draft of the poem, written on seventeen quarto sheets, representing "a substantially completed version of the poem" (Fong and Beckson, 306) including thirteen stanzas later omitted from the first published text.

Wilde appears to have been "swept" from his sphinx for at least the next six years. According to Robert Ross, "the poem was polished and improved in 1889, after [Wilde] unearthed the MS. from an old despatch box at Tite Street in my presence" (Ross, vii). At some point after 1891, Wilde dedicated the poem to the French Symbolist poet Marcel Schwob, a fact that tempts one to associate the poem's composition with *Salome*, written in Paris in fall 1891. Schwob was a continual presence in Wilde's life during the composition of *Salome*, and he is known to have corrected proofs of the play late in 1892, prior to its publication in French in February 1893. And certainly, as we have seen, *Salome* was much on Wilde's mind when he contracted with Mathews and Lane for publication of *The Sphinx*. But Ellmann conjectures that Wilde dedicated *The Sphinx* to Schwob largely in thanks for his help in proofing and correcting the French *Salome*, and perhaps also in thanks for Schwob's earlier dedication of his story "le Pays bleu" to Wilde in 1892 (Ellmann, 346 and 374), and no evidence has ever surfaced to suggest that Wilde took up *The Sphinx* between 1889 and summer 1892.

But in summer 1892, as we have already seen, plans for publishing the poem with decorations by Ricketts were already well advanced. In the same letter in which he returned the signed publishing agreement for *The Sphinx*, Wilde asked John Lane to “have a type-written copy made for me, so that I can correct the text before Ricketts writes it out” (*Complete Letters*, 534). Wilde frequently made arrangements for his manuscripts to be typewritten around this time (see Frankel, *Masking the Text*, 83-100) and the typescript of *The Sphinx* that Wilde requested survives today with Wilde’s handwritten corrections on it. Shortly prior to this, Wilde had written out a fair copy draft of the entire poem, as it then existed, shorn of the thirteen additional stanzas composed in Paris in 1883. This draft survives, along with accompanying sketches revealing Ricketts’s first ideas for visualizing the poem. Crucially, both these surviving texts from 1892 present the poem in couplets, the two-line stanza form in which it was eventually printed, whereas all previous drafts had been written out in quatrains, or four-line stanzas, reminiscent technically of Tennyson’s so-called “*In Memoriam* stanza.” This “stretching” of the Tennysonian stanza was understood in 1894 by one reviewer as “proof... of the cynical humour which distinguishes Mr. Wilde” (“Unsigned Review,” 170). But it is an important, in-built indicator of Wilde’s intentions for publishing the poem—for the poem to be *seen*—and, as Henley perceived, it was almost certainly dictated by Wilde’s and Ricketts’s imagining of how the poem would appear on the printed page, as well as their “aesthetic” concern with foregrounding the poem’s artistry. As Henley was to write, “the couplets... are really quatrains, as the staves of *In Memoriam*, but by a special stroke of art they are printed as something else” (Henley, 168).

Although Wilde’s poem was essentially complete in the summer of 1892, it still lacked three features crucial to publication. We have already seen that—as with all of Wilde’s recent books—Ricketts’s visual designs were integral to Wilde’s own concept of the poem at the moment of publication. Ricketts labored over his designs in fall 1892/winter 1893, painstakingly producing a series of studies and finished drawings in pen and ink for the covers, title page, and illustrations, as well as the series of illuminated capitals that is such a conspicuous feature of the resulting book. With the exception of those for the cover designs, Ricketts’s drawings would be reproduced photomechanically,

by line-blocking or “process” printing, in the printed book, though Ricketts’s original drawings “have an even greater nervous quality of line than the process blocks” (Calloway, 16), owing to subtle changes introduced by the exigencies of photomechanical printing. Ricketts began this work in June 1892 (Delaney, 82); according to his contract with Mathews and Lane, it was to be completed by October 1, 1892, and Ricketts was to be paid a total of £45 in monthly installments beginning on July 18. Two of Ricketts’s drawings were published separately from Wilde’s poem in 1893, within months of Ricketts completing them.¹¹ Ricketts later gave the following memorable account of his intentions in producing these pictures:

In the pictures I have striven to combine, consciously or unconsciously, those affinities in line work broadcast in all epochs. My attempt there as elsewhere was to evolve what one might imagine as possible in one charmed moment or place, just as some great Italian masters painted as they thought in the antique manner, studying like Piero della Francesca, for instance, to fulfill the conditions laid down by Apelles, whom he had of course never seen, but had taken on trust (Ricketts, A Defence, 25).

But although Ricketts always regarded his pictures for *The Sphinx* as the best of all his illustrations, to the extent that later in life he produced a second unpublished series along similar lines, Wilde was disapproving, remarking cattily, “No, my dear Ricketts, your drawings are not of your best. You have seen them through your intellect, not your temperament” (quoted in Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, 38).¹²

The second crucial feature introduced between 1892 and 1894 derives from Ricketts’s decision to print the entire poem, save for the wood-blocked initial letters of the 1894 edition, in roman capitals. Like the decision to print a familiar stanza form in couplet form, this decision not only adds to the air of estrangement and artifice by “defamiliarizing” Wilde’s language itself, but also turns each line into an iconic or monumental thing not unlike the sphinx itself. (Roman capitals, sometimes called “inscriptional capitals,” are so-called because of their survival on notable Roman monuments, such as Trajan’s Column in Rome, where their letter-forms inspired printers and typographers

in the fifteenth century to invent “old” or “roman-face” typeforms.) As Ricketts himself later justified this decision, “I made an effort...towards a book marked by surviving classical traits, printing it in Capitals” (Ricketts, *A Defence*, 25).

By February 1893, the designs and text had evidently been submitted for printing, since Wilde wrote to Lane at this date eager “to hear how *The Sphinx* is progressing, and what date it is likely to come out on” (*Complete Letters*, 545). (Four months later, Wilde referred to himself confidently, in a telegram to Ada Leveson, as “the author of *The Sphinx*” [*Complete Letters*, 568].) But upon returning corrected proofs to Ricketts, Wilde remarked, “Don’t you think the pages are terribly few in number ? Why not put fewer verses on each page ? We could easily have four or five pages more” (*Complete Letters*, 591).¹³ And in a letter speculatively dated June 1893 by its recent editors, Wilde expressed a sudden concern to “make the whole poem longer” at the proof stages: “I return proof of *The Sphinx*,” he wrote to Ricketts: “Will you kindly have a corrected proof copy sent to me, as I want to see if I could make the whole poem longer. I do not know the name of the printers, or I would write to them direct” (*Complete Letters*, 566). Shortly after this, Wilde composed and inserted lines 75-88 (“THE RIVER HORSES IN THE SLIME.... HIS MARBLE LIMBS MADE PALE THE MOON AND LENT THE DAY A LARGER LIGHT”), arguably the most erotic and decadent lines in the poem. The incorporation of these lines represents the third and final change made after 1892, Wilde having first drafted these lines in fragmentary form in a notebook that survives to this date (see Fong and Beckson, 306-7).

Critical Reception of *The Sphinx*

As already observed, publication of *The Sphinx* was held up for the best part of a year, in part because of the attention given by Mathews and Lane to *Salome* and *The Yellow Book*, but perhaps also because of some reticence on the part of the publishers as well as by Ricketts’s efforts, whilst engaged on *The Sphinx*, to illustrate, print, and privately publish an edition of Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*. When the book was eventually published in June 1894,¹⁴ copies did fall into the “gutter” of English journalism, despite Wilde’s own wishes, where the book met with generally hostile—though not

unperceptive—reactions. After making the already-quoted remark about the “cynical humour” to be found in Wilde’s “writing such a poem...in the meter of *In Memoriam*,” *The Athenaeum* commented only that “admirers of some of Oscar Wilde’s previously published poems...will not welcome this poem” (“Unsigned Review,” 171). The poem’s gorgeousness of diction disguised a “poverty of motive,” remarked the *Athenaeum*’s anonymous reviewer; and while the poem’s meter was “handled” with “skilfulness,” and its lines possessed an “easy flow and sonorousness,” the poem showed obvious defects such as “the too frequent use of the word ‘paramour’ or the employment of ‘curious’ in a somewhat precious sense” (“Unsigned Review,” 171). The *Pall Mall Budget* was more biting: “the keen olfactory nerves of the Nonconformist conscience would not...find it difficult” to “scent” the “meaning underlying Mr. Wilde’s poem,” remarked the *Budget*’s anonymous reviewer (“The City of Books,” 164-65), implying by this elliptical remark that the “meaning underlying” Wilde’s poem was decadent, presumably sexual, and offensive to conventional taste. Or again, “it will be interesting to watch the effect of this poem on the eminently respectable newspapers” (“The City of Books,” 166). But despite these strictures, the *Budget*’s reviewer went on, the poem’s “motive is mainly important as affording Mr. Wilde a theme for the display, in a sort of processional, of beautiful words strangely shaped and coloured” (“The City of Books,” 165). Meaning was a secondary consideration to the poem’s “beautiful sound”: “How many of us, I wonder, know the nature of ‘rods of oreichalch’ [or of]... ‘samite’?” (“The City of Books,” 164). For the *Pall Mall Budget*, the unintelligibility of Wilde’s language “serves...all the more to give that sense of mysterious luxury at which Mr. Wilde is aiming” (“The City of Books,” 164).

As Wilde had feared, the most scathing, clever, and influential review came from the pen of Wilde’s nemesis (and one-time friend) W. E. Henley:

Conceive a largish quarto bound in white and gold, and composed of some twenty leaves of fair, rough paper (many of them blank); ten designs by Mr. Charles Ricketts; thirteen initials by Mr. Charles Ricketts, all printed in a curious green; and eighty-five couplets by Mr. Oscar Wilde, all printed in small caps and in decent black. Also, the distribution of these precious eighty-five... for on one page there are as many as nine, and on another there are as few as one,

and on another you shall count some five, and on another yet are four, or six, or two, as providence hath willed. And the reason thereof let no man seek to know; for, if he do, the half of it shall not be told to him. (Henley 168)

Henley saw the volume's self-conscious design in typically personal terms, as a reflection of its author's transgressive dandyism and homosexual "narcissism," though as was common among homophobes in his day, Henley imputed such things only indirectly through now-obscure allusions to the shedding of a waistcoat and "gaskins," to the minor poet's fondness for Piccadilly, to the predilection for affectionate diminutive names, and to the need for police to maintain public order:

*Not to be remarked is not to live; and we are all Strug-for-Lifers now. If Hughie went forth without his coat, and walked in Piccadilly, Ernie would take off his waistcoat, and do likewise; and Bobbie and Freddie would each of them go one better than Ernie; till in due course the police must interfere. It is thus with the New Style, or Fin-de-Siècle, Minor Poet. His ancestors were modest – after their kind; they wrote and printed, being to the manner born, but all the while they knew that in the end the Twopenny Box was theirs until crack of doom. Their latest-born is of less abject mould. He may despair of being read; but he will be remarked, or he will die. So he goes forth into the world, year after year, as MM Ernie and Co., into 'Piccadilly, that immortal street,' still shedding something – some rag of style, or sentiment, or decent manners – as he goes; and in the end one looks to see him without his gaskins (so to speak)... Not yet, we haste to add, is this the fortune of the learned and enterprising author of *The Sphinx*. He has discarded certain lendings, it is true; but he has retained enough for Mrs. Grundy and the suburbs, and the fashion of that he has retained is so deliberately frantic, its hues are of so purposeful a violence, that his end is gained, and immediate conspicuousness assured. To put his case in a figure: You mark, in front of you, under a pea-green umbrella, in a magenta chlamys, fleshings of mauve, and a yellow turn, an antic thing, whose first effect is that of a very bedlamitish bookie. You approach the creature with a view to business – when lo! you are aware that it is only Mr. Wilde's latest avatar, after all. Then you note*

that he is trading in a novel sort of fancy goods. (Henley 167-68)

Henley implies here that Wilde flaunts his sexuality through the very physique of *The Sphinx*, despite retaining “enough for Mrs. Grundy and the suburbs.”¹⁵ But Henley’s judgments here are colored not merely by barely concealed homophobia: for by figuring Wilde’s “case” as that of the “bookie” or “fancy goods” trader, Henley also exposes Wilde’s artistic pretensions to the harsh light of “business,” reducing a work over which Wilde and Ricketts had labored for years to a carefully calculated, even crude, work of commerce. This was precisely the kind of reaction that Wilde had feared from the British press, and to a writer eager to be taken as a poet, not merely an author (to invoke the distinction made by Wilde in signing his contract), it must have been especially disturbing. But in truth Henley’s review exposes fault lines at the heart not merely of Wilde’s work but of aesthetic art and writing generally; for as the critic Jonathan Freedman has observed, aesthetes such as Wilde and Henry James participated in a market economy, particularly in “the commodification of art and literature wrought by such an economy,” even as they critiqued or refused it through what Freedman terms their “professionalization of literary and artistic practice” (Freedman, xii). By some lights, *The Sphinx* seemed nothing more than a carefully-packaged commodity, designed to yield the maximum profit for its author and publishers, even as it obscured its own commodity status behind the language of art, decoration, and poetry.¹⁶

Henley’s review typifies the generally hostile reception with which *The Sphinx* was met in the popular press in Britain. But a contrasting reaction can be detected in the pages of British art magazines, as Wilde had predicted. The most important voice in this respect is that of Gleeson White, one-time editor of *The Studio*, and later (before his early death in 1898), an important spokesman for illustration as an art form in its own right. Initially White contented himself merely with reproducing Ricketts’s cover design for *The Sphinx* in the course of a wide-ranging, illustrated, scholarly essay in which White held up Ricketts’s cover designs generally as epitomizing the principles governing “The Artistic Decoration of Cloth Book-Covers.”¹⁷ But in 1896 White published an important essay-length study of Ricketts’s work in which

he paved the way for twentieth-century appreciations of Ricketts as one of the most important designers of the *fin de siècle*. Here White treated Ricketts's visual designs for *The Sphinx* not as secondary or peripheral but as integral elements of the total book, not any the less expressive of "imagination" and "artistry" for Ricketts's self-conscious concern to adhere to decorative or "conventional" principles:

Invention and technique are poised in masterly balance. On purely typographical grounds, one must... note the well-arranged changes of line to suit the type destined to be set with the woodcut [sic]. Thus when the pictures (as in Lord de Tabley's poems) are inserted as full-page plates, they fulfill a distinctly pictorial convention;... but when (as in The Sphinx) they are embedded in the text, they are intensely conventional, and entirely disdain the naturalistic circumstances and intricate workmanship of the earlier book. Yet all the same they equal the earlier fancies in complexity of idea and intensity of situation. Planted among the type they forbear to arrogate supreme importance to themselves. Although dominating the page, they do so with a courteous affectation of being merely decorative adjuncts; yet all the time they maintain their dignity unimpaired. In the illustrations to The Sphinx, where the type, sparsely planned to decorate large pages, supplies a modicum of text, the pictures are also in delicate lines, with masses of white to balance and accord with the matter of the book. The mere spacing of the pages and the placing of the pictures and text in this one volume... demonstrate the principle of balance and harmony which it is the peculiar aim of Mr. Ricketts to secure. (White, "Work of Charles Ricketts" 86-91)

For White, Ricketts's designs for *The Sphinx* were the embodiment of an artistry of "line," more commonly associated with Ricketts's contemporary Aubrey Beardsley, that powerfully expressed "the prodigal imagination brought within the most restrained limits":

In [The Sphinx], the main purpose of the imagined poem in line is directly insisted upon, and reiterated without any comments or similes.... To grasp the intention... demands a poetic vision hardly less keenly sustained than that of its author. Such work never has been, and never is likely, to be popular with the

multitude. (White, "Work of Charles Ricketts" 83)

White's important appreciation represents the last serious public engagement with *The Sphinx* in Wilde's own lifetime, and it paved the way for a number of scholarly studies in the 1960s and 1970s that saw *The Sphinx* as one of the most important and successful examples of art nouveau bookmaking in Britain (see Taylor, Ray and Muir). But if White's was the last *serious* engagement in Wilde's lifetime, mention must be made too of a parodic response, published in *Punch* shortly after the book's publication, that squarely foregrounds the subject of gender as no "serious" response was to do either in Wilde's lifetime or for many years after. The late-Victorian age was an age of tremendous parodies and caricatures, and one of the best practitioners in this respect was Wilde's friend the satirist Ada Leveson, whom Wilde dubbed "the Sphinx" in 1892 or 1893 (he first met her in 1892 and was immediately drawn to her wit, intellect, and great personal kindness).¹⁸ Wilde was amused by the satirical sketch of his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that Leveson published anonymously in July 1893 in the satirical magazine *Punch* (which had a long tradition of satirizing Wilde and his fellow Aesthetes). And he was delighted once again when, in July 1894, she took to the pages of *Punch* afresh to parody *The Sphinx*. Leveson's parody, accompanied by a brilliant pen and ink caricature by E. T. Reed of Ricketts's illustrations, was titled "The Minx – A Poem in Prose." It took the form of a conversation, modeled closely on the celebrity interviews that were becoming a conspicuous feature of the so-called New Journalism, between the Poet and The Sphinx:

Poet. It's so good of you to see me. I merely wished to ask one or two questions as to your career. You must have led a most interesting life.

Sphinx. You are very inquisitive and extremely indiscreet, and I have always carefully avoided being interviewed. However, go on.

Poet. I believe you can read hieroglyphs?

Sphinx. Oh yes; I *can*, fluently. But I never do. I assure you they are not in the least amusing.

Poet. No doubt you have talked with hippogriffs and basilisks?

Sphinx (modestly). I certainly *was* in rather a smart set at one time. As they

say, I have “known better days.”

Poet. Did you ever have any conversation with THOTH?

Sphinx (loftily). Oh, dear no!....

Poet. What was that story about the Tyrian ?

Sphinx. Merely gossip. There was nothing in it, I assure you.

Poet. And APIS ?

Sphinx. Oh, he sent me some flowers, and there were paragraphs about it—in hieroglyphs — in the society papers. That was all. But they were contradicted.

Poet. You knew AMMON very well, I believe?

Sphinx (frankly). AMMON and I *were* great pals. I used to see a good deal of him. He came in to tea very often—he was *quite* interesting. But I have not seen him for a long time. He had one fault—he *would* smoke in the drawing-room. And though I hope I am not too conventional, I really could not allow *that*....

Poet. Is it true you went tunny-fishing with ANTONY?

Sphinx. One must draw the line somewhere! CLEOPATRA was so cross. She was horribly jealous, and not nearly so handsome as you might suppose, though she *was* photographed as a “type of Egyptian Beauty!”

Poet. I must thank you very much for the courteous way in which you have replied to my question. And now will you forgive me if I make an observation ? In my opinion you are not a Sphinx at all.

Sphinx (indignantly). What am I, then ?

Poet. A Minx.

A number of features of this parody are remarkable. First by casting the poem in the language of present-day journalism, and by characterizing the “Sphinx” as a sexually uninhibited woman of the present day, Levenson squarely emphasizes femininity and female sexuality while defusing their outrageousness as it is implied by Wilde’s own characterizations of the sphinx. Where Wilde (or at least the speaker of his poem)¹⁹ characterizes the sphinx

as an “EXQUISITE GROTESQUE! HALF WOMAN AND HALF ANIMAL!” AND AS A “LOATHSOME MYSTERY” WHOSE “PULSE MAKES POISONOUS MELODIES” AND WHO “WAKE[S] FOUL DREAMS OF SENSUAL LIFE,” Levenson returns the sphinx to a world of familiar, even tame, heterosexual femininity and prosaic, if faintly flirtatious, conversation. As Margaret Debelius remarks in a valuable essay-length study of Levenson’s parodies, “by defusing the threat of the femme fatale in Wilde’s poem, Levenson revised the role of sphinx to suggest that femininity is much less strange and dangerous than decadent poets imagine” (Debelius, 203). This accentuating of a distinctly unthreatening and modern heterosexual femininity is accomplished too by Levenson’s reversal of the unspoken gender rules structuring the celebrity interview of Wilde’s and Levenson’s own day. In the 1890s such interviews typically paid homage to powerful male writers, politicians, and artists: Wilde himself had been the subject of several such interviews, and Levenson here seems conscious of the deference with which Wilde himself had been treated by star-struck interviewers. By offering that same deference to a female subject, Levenson reverses the conventions governing the celebrity interview so as to cast the “Poet” in the role of interviewer, while celebrating the power and authority of a distinctly female subject. But most important of all, by casting Wilde’s subject as “not a Sphinx” but a “Minx,” Levenson downplays the historical, poetic, or archaeological aspects of Wilde’s poem and accentuates an element of sexual seduction, suggesting “that Wilde’s poem...beneath its overblown syntax and labored rhymes, is really just an elaborate pick-up line” (Debelius, 203).²⁰

It might easily be objected that this is to make too much of a comic bauble and that Levenson’s parody is not a “critical” response to *The Sphinx* at all. After all, its tone is deliberately light-hearted—at the opposite extreme from Henley’s caustic sarcasm—and Levenson was among Wilde’s staunchest personal friends. (Levenson and her husband offered shelter to Wilde in 1895, when he was released on bail between his two trials for “gross indecency,” when no other home or hotel in London would open its doors to him. See Ellmann, 469-70). Significantly, Wilde himself was vastly amused by Levenson’s skit, perhaps seeing it as a form of tribute no less than critique: “*Punch* is delightful and the drawing a masterpiece of clever caricature. I am afraid she really was a minx after all. You are the only Sphinx” (*Complete*

Letters, 593). But affection is a crucial element of parody; and scholars of parody (especially of parody by women) argue that such tendencies to love, affection, and gentleness as Levenson's "The Minx" manifest license rather than defuse its capacity for critique. As Wilde himself recognized, "Parody, which is the Muse with her tongue in her cheek, has always amused me; but it requires a light touch and a fanciful treatment and, oddly enough, a love of the poet whom it caricatures. One's disciples can parody one—nobody else" (*Complete Letters*, 390). As Debelius states, "in Levenson's case parody worked as a double-edged sword that allowed her both to express her great loyalty to Wilde and to use her great wit to distance herself from those aspects of aestheticism she found distasteful.... It is precisely through parody that Levenson defined herself as a writer sympathetic to aspects of aestheticism while still critiquing its masculinist politics.... Levenson loved Wilde enough to repeat him convincingly, but it was a repetition with a difference. And this difference carries the power of subversion" (Debelius, 193-96).

Levenson's 1894 parody, then, represents one of the most important critical responses to the poem in Wilde's own lifetime, especially from the standpoint of gender, even if acknowledging its "importance" flies in the face of a triviality or wittiness that is as cultivated as that on display in Wilde's own *The Importance of Being Earnest*. But if Levenson's parody holds obvious appeal today, it heralded no sudden growth in readership of Wilde's poem, and *The Sphinx* remained neglected and unread for many years into the twentieth century. There are many reasons for this neglect: Modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and T. S. Eliot worked hard (and largely successfully) in the early decades of the twentieth century to denigrate the "aestheticism" of the 1890s; but even before this, Wilde's work had been disgraced in the eyes of many readers by Wilde's imprisonment for "gross indecency" in the spring of 1895. External causes were not wholly to blame, however; the poem's neglect had to some extent been "willed" by the poem itself, or at least by its author and first publishers. The format of the 1894 edition embodies the book's "strong dislike of the public"; and as we have seen, Wilde was determined that it should reach only "a small and quite unimportant sect of perfect people." Ricketts's designs for *The Sphinx* began to attract serious attention from art historians and print historians in the 1960s

and 1970s, following a more general resurgence of interest in art nouveau, printmaking, and the arts of the book. But Wilde's poem languished as an entity in its own right till the final decades of the twentieth century, when the rise in Wilde's reputation, the growth of scholarship in book history, and increased scholarly attention to the "composite" nature or "textual condition" of literary works all conspired to bring fresh attention to it.²¹ At first, that attention was confined largely to the work of editors who had set out to present Wilde's works generally to a larger academic readership. But the past two decades or so have seen a number of important critical studies of Wilde's poem, in some of which the questions of gender raised into prominence by Leveson's parody are taken up, in others of which Ricketts's powerful decorations for the first edition of 1894 are seen as important constituents of meaning.

Excavating *The Sphinx*: Towards An Archaeological Poetics

Henley was right to ask his readers to "conceive a largish quarto bound in white and gold...composed of some twenty leaves of fair, rough paper (many of them blank); ten designs...thirteen initials...all printed in a curious green; and eighty-five couplets...all printed in small caps." For the matters that Henley enumerates force their attention upon readers of the 1894 text even before reading has gotten under way. The cover design alone is a consummate work of art or design, as Gleeson White appreciated, and it bears the monogram of both Charles Ricketts, its designer, and Leighton, Son, and Hodge, the book's binder. In gilt stamped onto white vellum boards, Ricketts's "remarkably spare architectural composition" contains both representational elements, suggested by the poem directly, as well as more decorative elements that "tease the viewer in the same way that the enigmatic sphinx within fascinates and mystifies the poet" (Brooks, 312). In some ways, Ricketts's binding is reminiscent of those bindings that operate powerfully upon the eponymous hero of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. We are told in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, of a binding "of citron-green leather, with a design of gilt trellis-work and dotted pomegranates" (*Dorian Gray*, 304) or of another "powdered" with "gilt daisies" connoting the ownership and

character of the book's first owner (*Dorian Gray*, 208). Perhaps most famously, at a critical juncture within the plot of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde's hero rebinds nine copies of the first edition of a powerfully "poisonous" work in different colors so that they might suit the "various moods" and... "changing fancies" of his nature (*Dorian Gray*, 276). Ricketts's binding for *The Sphinx* is no less arresting than these fictive bindings, aggressively calling the eye into play and forcing the reader to linger over its composition and material properties. Michael Brooks writes that the binding "perfectly exemplifies the style that Ricketts...forged for the whole" (Brooks, 312), while Giles Barber writes "the design is perhaps the high point of Ricketts's art and stands at the watershed of the period" (Barber, 329). In its "symbolism, its sparse decoration, and highly Japanese vertical lines and sliding doors," adds Barber, "it harks back to Rossetti and the...seventies" while "equally its mystic symbolism and its architectural lines, where the curvilinear is demoted from pride of place, now look forward to the rectilinear style popular in Britain after 1900" (Barber, 329). As important, the binding's gilt surfaces catch the light and glitter as the book is moved, throwing into relief the two-dimensional flatness of Ricketts's "figures," and suggesting a "mysterious lost-and-found quality" beyond the reach of "any normal tonal range" (Lamb, 137).

Like Ricketts's decision to print the poem in Caslon capitals, Ricketts's binding invites us to see the poem it contains as a monumental and wondrous *thing*. This is true of the book's title page too, which defies all the usual expectations: where the title pages of trade books almost invariably occupy a right-hand or "recto" page, Ricketts's for *The Sphinx* is printed on a left-hand or "verso" page, facing the poem's opening; and it relegates the book's publication information, and even the author's name, to the margins in order to concentrate our attention all the more forcibly on the elaborate vine-like composition occupying the center of the page, printed in rust-colored ink.²² Here, as with others of Ricketts's title pages for Wilde's books,²³ the reader is torn between conceptualizing the page as a representational entity and a purely decorative one. The juxtaposition of the figure identified as "Melancholia" with the semi-human "sphinx," reaching longingly for fruit positioned agonizingly just out of reach, invites us to read the design symbolically as a "representation" of insatiable desire and its consequences. But equally the

page demands to be understood “decoratively” for the sheer exuberance of its curvilinear composition and for the sense of beauty exhibited by its snaking, vine-like, forms. At this level, it exists only to be appreciated for its own sake, as the embodiment of what Wilde once called a “beautiful untrue thing” (“The Decay of Lying,” 320). Like the wallpapers, fabric designs, and book borders of William Morris, or the beautiful floral border designs that Ricketts would himself print in later years for books emanating from his Vale Press, its “only excuse...is that one admires it intensely” (Preface to *Dorian Gray*, 236).

Perhaps most important, the title-page to *The Sphinx* is the first of many pages to be printed in three colors, and it must have been especially breathtaking to the poem’s first readers on this account. The Victorian period contains few precedents for the manner in which Ricketts has used color, both on the title page and throughout *The Sphinx*, to integrate strictly visual material and letterpress text. For instance, the rust-colored ink utilized first for the title page “Melancholia” design is used again repeatedly, throughout the book, for the title words (“The Sphinx”) of the book’s running header. Similarly, green ink is utilized throughout to achieve a series of visual “rhymes” between illuminated capital letters and catchwords, on the one hand, and the bibliographic data listed on the title page. Though green ink has admittedly been confined to strictly “textual” materials in each case, the effect of Ricketts’s use of it is to highlight such materials as visual and material phenomena, thereby integrating them with other colored and visual elements of the book.

This integration of text and vision through color is all the more remarkable when we consider that fine color printing was still a great luxury in the 1890s, especially where letterpress printing was involved. Chromolithography, a planographic technique for the printing of color perfected in the early Victorian period, had been utilized previously with great success in such works as Owen Jones’s *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) or Henry Noel Humphreys’s *The Art of Illumination* (1849), but it required colors to be printed—at great expense of time and money—on a separate “plate” from the text, often on a different paper. Already on the wane by the 1870s, chromolithography was best suited to works of abstract and geometric design, but it was ill suited to letterpress printing and to book illustration (insofar as book illustration requires representational forms), where a more

thoroughgoing integration of text and design was required (see Frankel, “Ecstasy of Decoration” and “The Designer’s Eye”). Wood engraving held more promise so far as literary publishers and printers were concerned: a number of printers had perfected the art of printing from wood engravings in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, producing color-illustrated books (McLean, 171-204) that are still notable both for the excellence of their printing and for the marriage of letterpress text with wood-engraved illustration. But such successes were usually confined to the children’s and gift book markets or to specialized works, such as works of ornithology and botany. Rarely had relief printing in color been applied to works of poetry and adult literature; and rarely had the text itself been saturated with color.²⁴ Even in the hands of master printers such as George Leighton and Edmund Evans (the latter of whom printed books by Kate Greenaway and Walter Crane, as well as illustrations by Randolph Caldecott), color was almost always confined to “illustration” as an accompaniment to the monochrome letterpress text. With the exception of Ricketts’s friend Lucien Pissarro (whose Eragny Press from 1895 onwards would earn a reputation for finely-printed color wood engravings as accompaniments to works of literature), no fine printers or private presses associated with the so-called revival of printing had hitherto experimented with printing in multiple colors, let alone with using color to integrate text and vision.²⁵ As Ricketts rightly observed in 1899, *The Sphinx* “is the first book of the modern revival printed in three colours” (*A Defence*, 25), and its printing must have been especially eye-opening to its earliest readers on this account.

The title page, then, obliges us to see the book as a printed and decorative entity, and this impulse is sustained when we begin to read the poem itself. For the further we venture into the book, the more increasingly iconic begin to seem all of its textual elements. As the monastic illuminators of the Middle Ages would have appreciated, no greater example of text as monument could be given than the illuminated “I” that commences the poem, printed in green. This illuminated capital is among the finest to appear in a trade publication in the nineteenth century, comparable to the best illuminated capitals printed by such private presses as the Kelmscott Press, the Doves Press, and Ricketts’s own Vale Press in the closing years of the nineteenth century. Its effect here,

in juxtaposition with the Caslon capitals used to print Wilde's couplets, is to estrange or "aestheticize" an already estranged text, making the poem appear all the more monumental and other-worldly. Like the sphinx itself, it occupies a "dim corner," its "silent" beauty posing an immediate enigma so far as the processes of imagination and cognition are concerned:



N A DIM CORNER OF MY ROOM FOR LONGER THAN
MY FANCY THINKS

A BEAUTIFUL AND SILENT SPHINX HAS WATCHED ME THROUGH THE SHIFTING GLOOM.

The width of the engraving block has, significantly, obliged the printer to set "MY FANCY THINKS" on a separate line typographically, a visible sign of beauty's capacity to "tease us out of thought." Even as the poem commences, the page visibly foreshadows the derangement of the speaker's mind that will result from his engagement—or failure of engagement—with the sphinx.

But as with Poe's "The Raven," this derangement of the speaker's mind, while hinted at obscurely in the opening lines of the poem, will only become clear retrospectively. And as with many other Victorian dramatic monologues, the opening lines invite us to read the monologue as an interpersonal or social drama. The fact that the monologue possesses psychological interest for what it reveals "ironically" of its speaker's mind, or the suggestion that the poem's addressee might not be as wholly "present" as the speaker believes, will become clear only through hindsight. The opening lines of *The Sphinx*, then, contain little in themselves to suggest the unsettling psychological toll that the sphinx's silence will later take on the poem's speaker. Thus the poem commences with the speaker confidently imagining that the sphinx, far from being inanimate, is sensate, half-human, and can be brought to life if he only poses the right form of address:

COME FORTH, MY LOVELY SENESCHAL! SO SOMNOLENT, SO STATUESQUE!
COME FORTH YOU EXQUISITE GROTESQUE! HALF WOMAN AND HALF ANIMAL!

COME FORTH MY LOVELY LANGUOROUS SPHINX! AND PUT YOUR HEAD UPON
MY KNEE!

AND LET ME STROKE YOUR THROAT AND SEE YOUR BODY SPOTTED LIKE THE
LYNX!

A THOUSAND WEARY CENTURIES ARE THINE WHILE I HAVE HARDLY SEEN
SOME TWENTY SUMMERS CAST THEIR GREEN FOR AUTUMN'S GAUDY LIVERIES.

BUT YOU CAN READ THE HIEROGLYPHS ON THE GREAT SAND-STONE OBELISKS,
AND YOU HAVE TALKED WITH BASILISKS, AND YOU HAVE LOOKED ON
HIPPOGRIFFS.

O TELL ME, WERE YOU STANDING BY WHEN ISIS TO OSIRIS KNELT?
AND DID YOU WATCH THE EGYPTIAN MELT HER UNION FOR ANTONY?

AND DRINK THE JEWEL-DRUNKEN WINE AND BEND HER HEAD IN MIMIC AWE
TO SEE THE HUGE PROCONSUL DRAW THE SALTED TUNNY FROM THE BRINE?

AND DID YOU MARK THE CYPRIAN KISS WHITE ADON ON HIS CATAFALQUE?
AND DID YOU FOLLOW AMENALK, THE GOD OF HELIOPOLIS?

AND DID YOU TALK WITH THOTH, AND DID YOU HEAR THE MOON-HORNED IO
WEEP?

AND KNOW THE PAINTED KINGS WHO SLEEP BENEATH THE WEDGE-SHAPED
PYRAMID?

These questions and apostrophes serve two principal purposes. On one level, they deliver the poem's speaker over completely to the task of "imagining" the sphinx; and so they very quickly become more fanciful, baroque, and more fully eroticized, like those driving Swinburne's poem "Faustine" (which consciously or unconsciously Wilde's lines recall). As a result, the sphinx itself—like the implied addressees of such "dramatic" monologues as Tennyson's "Locksley Hall" or "St. Simeon Stylites"—quickly disappears from view, and the poem gives itself up to a purely imaginative excursion. On this level, the poem is technically what Tennyson would call a *monodrama*, and the sphinx itself is merely the catalyst or spark that ignites the speaker's excessive imagination. Consequently, our immediate impulse is

to focus critically not on what the sphinx actually *is* (a question the poem does not answer), but on the dreamlike effects produced “in” the poem’s speaker by his confrontation with it. As Regenia Gagnier has observed, at this level the poem is finally a poem of (auto)seduction, ripe for psychoanalysis: “The poem is a poem of excess in the sense that the object of desire is technically absent; the desire compulsively flows from the subject’s brain. But the consummate mastery, the *style*, of having the shy beloved *seduce himself* must be admired” (Gagnier, 45).

But this is not the only level on which the speaker’s mad interrogation of the sphinx can be understood. For Wilde’s speaker possesses a neophyte’s pretensions to scholarship, and he lives, metaphorically at least, in an ivory tower, as the lines “DAWN SHIVERS ROUND THE GREY GILT-DIALLED TOWERS, AND THE RAIN/STREAMS DOWN EACH DIAMONDED PANE” would seem to indicate. His obsessive questioning of the Sphinx is driven at bottom, then, by an archaeological and historicist impulse, centered on the problem of defining just what an accurate knowledge of the sphinx might consist of. Insofar as the sphinx exists simply as an object or relic, “BEAUTIFUL AND SILENT... SOMNOLENT... STATUESQUE,” its existence constitutes an unbearable enigma to his neophyte scholar’s imagination; and his questions are, in one sense at least, historicist attempts to “know” the sphinx using the language of philology and myth, especially insofar as this approach had become a critical reflex among students of archaeology in the nineteenth century.

Like the neophytes at the beginning of Wilde’s play *Salome*, then, the speaker of *The Sphinx* poses a series of increasingly monstrous interpretive questions only to find that, no matter how urgently they are posed, those questions remain unanswered:

WHO WERE YOUR LOVERS? WHO WERE THEY WHO WRESTLED FOR YOU IN THE
DUST?

WHICH WAS THE VESSEL OF YOUR LUST ? WHAT LEMAN HAD YOU, EVERY DAY?

DID GIANT LIZARDS COME AND CROUCH BEFORE YOU ON THE REEDY BANKS?
DID GRYPHONS WITH GREAT METAL FLANKS LEAP ON YOU IN YOUR TRAMPLED
COUCH?

DID MONSTROUS HIPPOPOTAMI COME SIDLING TOWARD YOU IN THE MIST?

DID GILT-SCALED DRAGONS WRITHE AND TWIST WITH PASSION AS YOU
PASSED THEM BY?

.... OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF FLIES WHO PLAGUED THE HEBREW AND WAS
SPLASHED

WITH WINE UNTO THE WAIST ? OR PASHT, WHO HAD GREEN BERYLS FOR HER
EYES?

OR THAT YOUNG GOD, THE TYRIAN, WHO WAS MORE AMOROUS THAN THE DOVE
OF ASHTAROTH? OR DID YOU LOVE THE GOD OF THE ASSYRIAN...

These questions are a virtual index of nineteenth-century Orientalist mythology. Yet here they only point up the “SONGLESS TONGUELESS” condition of the sphinx and draw our attention to the massive irony that, for all the breadth of the Orientalist pseudo-knowledge employed by the speaker, the sphinx finally remains as silent and unknown as at the beginning. The monologue’s speaker proceeds on the assumption that if he employs the right hermeneutic, the sphinx will finally yield its truth. Like the practical critic he is, he assumes that the sphinx contains its own meanings and can be *glossed* (both in the sense of having its truth revealed by way of attached commentary, and in the more medieval sense of *glozed* or “peered into”). But these assumptions only lead to his intellectual and psychological breakdown (“GET HENCE, YOU LOATHSOME MYSTERY!.../ YOU MAKE MY CREED A BARREN SHAM, YOU WAKE FOUL DREAMS OF SENSUAL LIFE”); the excesses of Orientalist myth, projected onto the sphinx as “POISONOUS MELODIES,” are finally no match for the “STEADFAST GAZE” and “SULLEN WAYS” of the object he faces. So the sphinx remains as much a “LOATHSOME MYSTERY” at the poem’s end, at which point superstition has usurped the speaker’s will to knowledge, as it was at the beginning.

At this level, the poem can be read as about archaeological knowledge itself, at least as put to use within a late-Victorian Orientalist context. The sphinx then represents the absolute object faced by the archaeologist (the “relic”), ultimately indifferent to the scholar’s naive attempts to appropriate it to a mythologically inflected historicism. The breakdown faced by the poem’s speaker, according to this account, represents the collapse faced by Orientalist knowledge itself, and it must have been one with which many nineteenth-

century Egyptologists and Orientalists were familiar.

But as Henley's review of the poem demonstrates, the processes of reading also frequently break down when readers of *The Sphinx* misconstrue the striking format of the 1894 book. And just as the speaker's imagined resuscitation of the sphinx involves a willful blindness to its somnolence or "STATUESQUE" objectivity, a certain deafness to its unyielding silence, so reading the poem involves a certain blindness to the material and visual "distractions" offered by the book's illustrations, decorations, type-design and paper. For these features declare their parity or integrity with the poem itself, at every turn of the page, without ever threatening to overwhelm it. They embody what Jerome McGann would call the poem's "textual condition." When we take these features into account, the book enacts an archaeological problematic very similar to the one played out at the poem's semantic level. Just as the silent curio in the dim corner of the speaker's room points up all the more sharply the "excess" implicit in his mythic constructions of it, so the book's decorations short-circuit the customary processes of reading, making self-conscious our desire to consume or to interpret the poem, as if the poem were somehow conscious of the historical problem posed by the event of its own reading. In this sense, *The Sphinx* constructs itself as a relic even as its archaeological "referent" recedes from view.

So we find ourselves in the same position reading the 1894 book as the speaker reading the sphinx "in" the poem. The book too is "SONGLESS TONGUELESS," "BEAUTIFUL AND SILENT"; and self-evidently it also "WAKE[S] IN ME EACH BESTIAL SENSE." Even before reading has gotten under way, as we have seen, the poem disappears into the sheer mass of the book, and the reading process gets undermined by material signifiers that stare us in the face at every turn of the page. Although the text is not actually illegible, the sheer variety of experimentation involved in its printing makes it extremely distracting to read: on many pages, the poem's lines have been pushed to the margins and, on others, the poem appears eccentrically spatialized by the page's overall appearance of whiteness (or what Henley terms "blankness"). Illuminated capitals, illustrations, colored inks, isolated catchwords, and Ricketts's strict adherence to Whistler-esque principles of asymmetry in the book's typography²⁶ all call our attention to the print medium while

possessing considerable visual artistry in their own right. The result is a visual phantasmagoria that makes it extremely difficult to concentrate on “the poem itself.” By the end, the book has become not merely the poem’s vehicle; to all intents and purposes, it has become the sphinx *itself*, embodying an “archaeological” decorativeness that the poem can only attempt to grasp adequately. Clearly, this is what Stephen Calloway means when he says that the book is the “most harmonious” of all Ricketts’s productions and that it “precisely mirrors the exquisite and perverse text” (Calloway, 44) or what Percy Muir means by calling the book “an ideal setting for the artificiality of Wilde’s text” (Muir, 193). As the *Pall Mall Budget’s* reviewer had written in 1894, “the vellum binding, the various symbolic designs, the quaint rubricated initials and the general arrangement of the text, all by Mr. Ricketts’ sympathetic art, are most subtly infused by the spirit of the poem” (“The City of Books,” quoted in Millard, *Bibliography*, 393).

Nonetheless, saying that the decorated book *mirrors* Wilde’s text needs qualification, because the relation between book and poem is not one of simple parity or reflection. Rather, the decorated book poses in real and perceptual terms what the poem rehearses at an imaginative level. To this degree, the problems posed by the decorated book of 1894 lend the poem an urgency that it lacks when printed conventionally. In its 1894 edition, the poem demands to be seen in its integrity with Ricketts’s marvelous designs. To see it for anything more or less—to abstract the poem from the decorated book, on the assumption that the book is immaterial—is to commit precisely the error that leads the poem’s speaker to his grotesque misconstrual of the relic that presents itself to his eyes, culminating in his eventual mysticism and breakdown.

As the *Pall Mall Budget’s* reviewer had understood, this materializing or “archaeologizing” spirit extends to Wilde’s language as much as to the book itself. For Wilde’s language is itself a highly material entity, a “sort of processional, of beautiful words strangely shaped and coloured,” whose underlying “meaning” remains constantly just out of reach, and may be less important than its power of suggestion or affect: “How many of us...know the nature of ‘rods of oreichalch’?” The strangeness of Wilde’s diction, the obscurity of his allusions, and the neat closure of Wilde’s rhymes remain ends in themselves, their self-consciousness entirely “necessary to give that sense of

mysterious luxury at which Mr. Wilde is aiming.” For “poetical purposes,” as the *Budget’s* reviewer perceptively wrote, it were better that the “meaning” of the “strangely named beings and things that load every rift” remain obscure lest “the meaning...clash with the beautiful sound” (“The City of Books,” 164).

For this reason, a decision has been made to offer no Glossary of terms, myths, and allusions in the present edition, and readers have been left to construe for themselves the nature of a *hippogriff*, a *basilisk*, and an *ivory-horned tragelaphos*. The poem’s speaker, after all, presents us with an object lesson in the price to be paid for imagining that works of art can be (mis) construed by reference to the world of objective fact. As Wilde had written previously, “aesthetic value... does not in the slightest degree, depend on... facts, but on the Truth, and Truth is independent of facts always, inventing or selecting them at pleasure” (“The Truth of Masks,” 423). Like the literature of the northern hemisphere of Borges’s “Tlön,” *The Sphinx* abounds not in real things but in “ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs... [The] word forms a *poetic object* created by the author” (Borges, 435-36, my translation). For a similar reason, no attempt has been made to supply annotations clarifying or “realizing” the historical identities (if any) of such mythic gods as Ammon, Pasht, Adon, and Memnon; and to point up any “mistakes,” “inaccuracies,” or “anachronisms” (Murray, 74) in Wilde’s allusions is to miss the fundamentally imaginative and poetic nature of those allusions. If, as Wilde maintained, “the only real people are the people who never existed” (“The Decay of Lying,” 297), Ammon, Pasht, Adon, and Memnon are entirely fictive and artistic creations, who possess no life outside the work itself. And Wilde would surely say the same of such terms as *oreichalch*, *hippogriffs*, *catafalque*, and *nenuphar*. In other contexts, these terms might denote things that exist in this world. But in *The Sphinx*, “there is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type” (Borges, 436, my translation), and these words’ sounds and other-worldliness are everything. As Wilde had written, what the materials of art “suggest, what imitative parallel may be found to them in that chaos that is termed Nature, is a matter of no importance.... A thing in Nature becomes much lovelier if it reminds us of a thing in Art, but a thing in Art gains no real beauty through reminding us of a thing in Nature. The primary aesthetic

impression of a work of art borrows nothing from recognition or resemblance. (*Complete Letters*, 502). Like the metaphysicians of Tlön, Wilde does “not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for a kind of amazement” (Borges, 436, my translation). As much as it represents a central work of the Decadent Movement as a whole, *The Sphinx* is arguably the central work of Wilde’s creative mind and the ultimate embodiment of Wilde’s ideas about the power of artifice and the nature of art. It expresses nothing, but it suggests everything. *The Sphinx* is the consummate example of Wilde’s notion that “the artist is the creator of beautiful things” (Preface to *Dorian Gray*, 235).

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Endnotes

- 1 I am indebted to Mark Samuels Lasner and Margaret Stetz, of the University of Delaware, for invaluable assistance with this Afterword.
- 2 Only four of Wilde's books appeared with both Mathews's and Lane's names on the title page. Though Wilde had arranged with Mathews and Lane for the publication of *A Woman of No Importance* in 1893, the acrimonious split between the two publishers in the summer of 1894 threw Wilde's publishing arrangements into disarray, and the book eventually appeared in October 1894 under Lane's name alone. *A Woman of No Importance* was not merely the last of Wilde's books to be published "at the sign of the Bodley Head," but also the last to be published before his imprisonment and bankruptcy, with the exception of the privately printed selection *Oscariana* (London: Arthur Humphreys, 1895). For the acrimonious split between Mathews and Lane, see Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 266-79. For Wilde's preferred publication arrangements following the split, see *Complete Letters*, 604-613 passim.
- 3 In this respect, as Margaret Stetz has argued, Mathews and Lane made a virtue of necessity brilliantly, since the small batches of often-remaindered paper that they bought cheaply meant that they were forced to limit the number of copies printed (Stetz, 74).
- 4 Although *The Sphinx* represents the epitome of the Bodley Head's practice of issuing finely printed books containing a strong graphic or decorative component, it was nonetheless the most expensive book in their 1894 catalogue, and in some ways even the standard issue comes closer to private press books of the period than to the most common Bodley Head books. Ricketts's admiration for the work of William Morris is well documented, and although *The Sphinx* is designed according to very different principles from those applied by William Morris in the design and printing of books issued by Morris's Kelmscott Press (1891-1898), the influence of Morris's "typographical adventure" upon *The Sphinx* is palpable. Significantly, *The Sphinx* was printed on specially made unbleached paper (laid paper for the standard issue: handmade paper for the large-paper copies) bearing the watermark of Ricketts's own private press, the Vale Press; and paper so watermarked was subsequently used again, repeatedly, by Ricketts for the production of books emanating from the Vale Press. Nonetheless, Ricketts refused to consider *The Sphinx* to be a "Vale book" since it was "without woodcuts" (*A Defence*, 24).
- 5 *Salome* had been written in French, and it remained untranslated into English when Wilde committed to publish *The Sphinx*. At some point in the fall of 1892, Wilde arranged for *Salome* to be published by the Librairie de L'Art Indépendent, in French, in Paris the following February, paying all printing expenses himself. In November 1892, Wilde agreed verbally that Mathews and Lane could distribute this edition in Britain, in consequence of which their names were added to the title page and the print run increased. In a letter to John Lane dated Feb. 1893, Wilde complained that he had still received no written agreement from Lane and "the fact of your name being on the title page was an act of pure courtesy and compliment on my part" (*Complete Letters*, 546). *The Yellow Book* was not conceived until New Year's Day 1894 (Mix, 68) according to its literary editor, although this date has been questioned by Stetz. See Mix, 66-72 and Stetz, *The Yellow Book*, 12-17.
- 6 The 220 (230?) copies (Nelson, *A Checklist*, 35) of the Author's Edition of Wilde's *Poems*, priced at 15/-, sold out within days; and although Elkin Mathews's contract with Wilde (Nelson *The Early Nineties*, 96) stipulated a twenty percent commission for the publisher, as well as precise limits for the cost of advertising, design, block-making and binding, it must have earned Wilde a reasonable profit.

- 7 For Wilde's evolving response to T. J. Cobden-Sanderson's lecture on bookbinding, see Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*, 114-16.
- 8 See Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*; also Frankel, *Masking The Text*, 191-221.
- 9 In mid-June 1892, Wilde wrote to Mathews objecting to advertising of *The Sphinx* as "too indefinite" and "not...practical" (*Complete Letters*, 527). That advertising costs were expressly limited—"not to exceed £5.5.0"—in the eventual contract (Nelson, 96) was almost certainly due to Wilde personally.
- 10 See especially the scathing review of *Dorian Gray* in the *St. James Gazette*, dated 20 June 1890 (rpt. in Beckson, 67-71), as well as another by one of W.E. Henley's minions in the *Scots Observer* (edited by Henley), dated 5 July 1890 (rpt in Beckson, 74-75). These reviews, alongside other disparagements of *Dorian Gray*, were republished in Millard, *Art and Morality*.
- 11 Ricketts's pen and ink drawing of the crucifixion, printed as an illustration to the closing lines of the poem in the 1894 text, was published separately in 1893, untitled and uncaptioned, in the Dutch avant-garde magazine, *Van Nu en Straks*, 5 (1893), interleaved between pages 30 and 31; and the drawing eventually printed in the 1894 text illustrating "the labyrinth in which the twy-formed bull was stalled" was published in October 1893 in *The Dial*, no. 3, under the title "In The Thebiad: An Illustration to A Poem By Oscar Wilde To Be Published at the Sign of the Bodley Head."
- 12 Corbett sees this remark as paradigmatic of the personal tensions between writer and artist, nearly always present in the creation of even the most successful literary illustrations (Corbett, 36). Paradoxically, Wilde required the visual artistry of Ricketts and Beardsley—and before them, of Whistler—even as he privately disparaged these men or their work.
- 13 Holland and Hart-Davis, the editors of Wilde's correspondence, date this (undated) letter "Spring 1894." I follow Isobel Murray ("Some Problems," 73) in regarding Spring 1893 as a more likely date.
- 14 *The Sphinx* appeared on either 8 June 1894 (Nelson *The Early Nineties*, 322; *A Checklist*, 59) or 11 June 1894 (Mason, *Bibliography*, 394) as a small quarto, measuring 8 ½ inches by 6 ¾ inches, printed on unbleached laid paper watermarked "Unbleached Arnold," priced at two guineas. Fifty copies were exported to Copeland and Day for sale in America (Nelson, *The Early Nineties*, 311 and 322). According to Mason, "The agents for the book in America, Messrs. Copeland and Day, of Boston, having drawn the attention of the London publishers to the fact that *The Sphinx* did not bear the imprint of the Boston firm, a special label was designed by Charles Ricketts for insertion in the copies for sale in the United States of America" (*Bibliography*, 394). Later in the year, an additional twenty-five large-paper copies were issued, measuring 10 inches by 7 ½ inches, printed on handmade paper watermarked "Unbleached Arnold (Ruskin)," with Copeland and Day's imprint appearing alongside Mathews and Lane's on the title page. These were priced at five guineas in England and thirty dollars in America. Owing to the larger format, Ricketts's cover designs were extended vertically by approximately one inch for the large-paper issue. It is not known how many of the large-paper copies were exported to America.

There exists some uncertainty about the size of the edition where the small-paper copies are concerned. The book's statement of limitation states merely, "the edition of this book is limited for England to 200 copies," and Mason too mentions this figure (though he underestimates the number of small-paper copies shipped to America when he writes "besides the 200 copies for sale in England, fifty additional copies were printed for the Press and for sale in America" [*Bibliography*, 394]). The publisher's announcement of August 1894 (see Mason, *Bibliography*, 394) states "250 copies." It was common practice, then as now, to hold back some copies for the author's and publishers' private use, and though the number of such copies cannot now be determined with accuracy, eight presentation copies are known to exist inscribed with Wilde's signature. Intriguingly,

- the Bodley Head's stock inventory of 30 June 1894 (Nelson *The Early Nineties*, 322) lists a print run of 303 small-paper copies, as well as domestic sales of just 81 copies prior to the end of June, with another 128 copies standing unbound in quires. Clearly the book was not "subscribed for before publication," as Wilde had hoped when agreeing to publishing terms (*Complete Letters*, 533), and almost as certainly a large number of copies remained unsold by the time of Wilde's imprisonment, only to be accidentally destroyed in a fire at the Ballantyne Press in 1899 "with the result that *The Sphinx* is not only the most splendid of Ricketts's early books, but also the rarest" (Calloway, 16).
- 15 Mrs. Grundy, a character in Thomas Morton's play *Speed the Plough* (1798), was by the mid-nineteenth century widely considered a personification of prudery and conventional propriety.
 - 16 Henley's point was underscored a few months later by a short notice of the large-paper issue which appeared, under the byline "Mr. Wilde's 'Expensive Book,'" in the American periodical *Munsey's Magazine*: "While almost everybody is crying for cheap books, Mr. Oscar Wilde is sending out a lament that it is impossible to buy an expensive book any more. So he has written one. It is called 'The Sphinx,' and it is a poem. Twenty five copies only have been printed, and they are sold, or are to be sold, for thirty dollars apiece. The book is illustrated by Mr. Charles Ricketts, and is, as a matter of course, an ideal book from the printer's point of view." After giving "a sample of Mr. Wilde's idea of an 'expensive' poem," *Munsey's* commented only "if anybody wants to give Mr. Wilde thirty dollars, this is an opportunity to do so. He is taking up a collection for current expenses" ("Oscar Wilde's 'Expensive Book,'" *Munsey's Magazine*, Feb. 1895 [12:5], 551). *Munsey's* was one of very few notices of *The Sphinx* to appear in America in Wilde's lifetime.
 - 17 This was not the first occasion on which White praised Ricketts's work in print. See White "Decorative Illustration," 182.
 - 18 See esp. Wilde's telegram to Levenson of June 1893: "The author of *The Sphinx* will on Wednesday at two eat pomegranates with the Sphinx of Modern Life" (*Complete Letters*, 568). For the life of Ada Levenson, see Violet Wyndham, *The Sphinx and her Circle* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963) and Julie Speedie, *Wonderful Sphinx: The Biography of Ada Levenson* (London: Virago, 1993).
 - 19 We would be mistaken if we conflated Wilde with the speaker of his poem, since Wilde goes to considerable lengths to characterize the speaker of *The Sphinx* as an ingenuous young man of extremely limited experience, ruled by his imagination, given to excessive and ungrounded speculative fantasy. Formally, Wilde's poem is a dramatic monologue or "monodrama," and by the end of the poem the speaker's characterizations of femininity are shown up to be as outrageous and unreliable as any other aspect of his characterizations of the sphinx and of ancient history.
 - 20 Debelius overstates her case by arguing (confusingly) that "Levenson countered Wilde's counterdiscourse by unmasking him as a flirt: he is the sphinx/minx in pursuit of [Marcel] Schwob" (Debelius, 204). Debelius's biographical reading here, of both "The Minx" and *The Sphinx*, is grounded in the claim first made by Regenia Gagnier that *The Sphinx* represents Wilde's seduction of the symbolist poet Marcel Schwob and that "In writing the poem, Wilde the seducer/Sphinx confronted the reticent student/Schwob with Schwob's own thinly repressed desires" (Gagnier, 45). But Debelius accepts Gagnier's assertion (which is itself based upon the unsupported claim that Wilde met Schwob in Paris in 1883) somewhat too easily. No evidence has ever surfaced suggesting that Wilde met Schwob before 1891, by which time Wilde's poem was largely complete (though Schwob's biographer, Pierre Champion, writes that Wilde "avait été annoncé à Marcel Schwob par John Gray en 1892" [*Marcel Schwob et son temps* (Paris, 1927), p. 98]). By 1891 Schwob was hardly the sixteen-year-old *ingénue* Gagnier makes him out to be but an experienced *décadent*. As I suggest above, following Ellmann, it is likely that Wilde dedicated *The Sphinx* to Schwob in thanks for the work Schwob had done on *Salome*.
 - 21 Important new editions of *The Sphinx* were produced prior to World War I in formats distinct from the first edition of 1894—notably the edition illustrated by "Alasdair" [Hans Henning von Voight],

though this was not published by John Lane till 1920; and private presses occasionally printed very limited runs of the poem, accompanied by new illustrations in each case, in the 1950s and 1960s. Crucially, however, none of these editions generated critical comment or significant new readership for the poem.

- 22 The bibliographic details, including the title and author's name, appear to have been an afterthought so far as Ricketts personally was concerned. Ricketts's original drawing for the title page (see *The Turn of A Century*, 18) does not contain or allow for these features, suggesting that it was originally executed, like the other full-page "illustrations" in the book, merely as one of the ten "designs" specified in Ricketts's contract with Wilde and Mathews and Lane. In the resulting book, eight of these other "designs" occupy a full page, and one occupies a half page, though in each case they resist the accepted logic of illustration and demand to be treated as decorative, imaginative artworks in their own right. See also n. 10 above. In this respect, Ricketts's designs operate similarly to Aubrey Beardsley's pictures to Wilde's *Salome*, though whether Ricketts influenced Beardsley or vice versa remains a matter of conjecture. For Beardsley's refusal to "illustrate," see Frankel, *Masking The Text*, 153-89.
- 23 See Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*, 120-23 and 143-45; also *Masking the Text*, 191-93.
- 24 There are two exceptions to this rule—firstly, the occasional printing of illuminated capitals and chapter headings in red ink, especially in religious and bibliophile productions. See also n. 25 below. The second exception is constituted by many of the books produced for children by Walter Crane, such as *Baby's Own Aesop* (1886) and *Flora's Feast* (1889), where the text itself is printed in color by the process of wood-engraving rather than letterpress printing. Wilde wrote a review of *Flora's Feast* upon its appearance in 1889, calling it "as lovely in colour as it is exquisite in design" ("Some Literary Notes I," 390). As stated above (pp. 71), Crane provided an important model for Wilde's own ideas about design.
- 25 The best surveys of the so-called revival of printing are Colin Franklin, *The Private Presses* (2nd ed. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991); Roderick Cave, *The Private Press* (2nd ed. New York: Bowker, 1983) and Will Ransom, *Private Presses and Their Books* (1929; rpt. New York, AMS Press, 1976). See also Ricketts's *A Defence* and Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 309-23. William Morris had been persuaded before 1894 to introduce color into Kelmscott Press books in the form of chapter titles and catchwords printed in red (a practice later to be imitated by many other private printers, including Ricketts). But Morris utilized red ink only sparingly and was averse to the introduction of any other colors.
- 26 While commonly associated with Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (Paris, 1897), the typographic asymmetry of *The Sphinx* derives largely from Ricketts's absorption of principles developed in the pamphlets and books of the painter James McNeill Whistler. See Frankel, *Masking The Text*, 223-49 and *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books*, 94-99.

A Note on Paper

Regular copies of the 1894 edition of *The Sphinx* were printed on finely-made laid paper, manufactured by Joseph Arnold at the Eynsford Paper Mill in Kent. (A further twenty-five large-paper copies were issued, at a slightly later date than the regular copies, printed on a different stock of paper.) This paper—which was produced according to the specifications of Charles Ricketts, the book’s designer—bore two watermarks that have not been reproduced in the present edition: “Unbleached Arnold” (a watermark classifying the paper’s type and manufacture) and another watermark consisting of the letters V P interlaced with a leaf of wild thyme, which Ricketts had recently designed for incorporation into the paper of books printed at his Vale Press. Although *The Sphinx* predates the first Vale Press publications, and although it was published by a trade press (Elkin Mathews and John Lane), bibliographers refer to the paper on which it was first printed as “Vale paper” since it is identical to that used in a number of books issued by Ricketts from his Vale Press over the ensuing years. *The Sphinx* was in fact one of the first books ever printed on Vale paper.

The luxuriousness of the book’s paper was immediately noticeable to some of its earliest readers. This is not surprising, since *The Sphinx* originally consisted of twenty-four unpaginated (i.e., unnumbered) leaves, six of which were blank on both sides and another four of which were blank on one side. But there were practical reasons for the inclusion of so much blank paper. Two of the entirely blank leaves were, strictly speaking, “free endpapers” and thus part of the mechanism that tied the book’s covers to its paper “body.” The remaining four entirely blank leaves—two of which were situated adjacent to the front cover of the 1894 edition, immediately following the front endpapers, and two adjacent to the back cover, just before the rear endpapers—were incorporated so as to give bulk to the body of the book, to ensure that the binding did not encroach upon the text’s inner margins when the leaves were gathered and bound together. For this reason, while the present edition faithfully reproduces those leaves which were blank on one side only, it omits all those leaves which were entirely blank on the grounds that they were not properly part of the text itself but rather endpapers and “endleaves,” introduced into the 1894 edition principally for binding purposes.

