

Wilde's *The Happy Prince and A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups.

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Wilde's *The Happy Prince and A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Fisherman and His Soul by Ben Kutcher From *A House of Pomegranates* (Dodd, Mead & Co, 1930) Wilde's *The Happy Prince and A House of Pomegranates*: Bedtime Stories for Grown-Ups Michelle Ruggaber Marquette University OSCAR WILDE knows what his audiences want. This is hardly a controversial claim, given Wilde's fame for pushing the envelope, bringing decorum just to the breaking point in his lectures and at dinner parties. In the famous preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that he wrote in response to negative reviews and in the revisions to the book that tone down the homosexual themes, Wilde again acknowledges the necessity of playing to an audience.¹ However, in Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small's study *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2000) this claim seems to be

called into question, at least in terms of Wilde's fairy tale collections, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *The House of Pomegranates* (1891).² While Guy and Small readily point out the differing marketing strategies that Wilde and his publisher employed in the production of each volume to appeal to a wide range of readers, they dismiss the idea that the creative content of the collection is an equally clear indicator of the different intended audiences for each collection. They assert, "Put simply: the stories in *A House of Pomegranates* were not different enough to signal unequivocally that they were intended for adults, and this confirms the suspicion that Wilde's and his publisher's identification of them as adult material was a marketing rather than creative decision."³ As I will discuss, Guy and Small are correct in their assertion that the collections were marketed differently, but they too readily dismiss the evidence that shows significant creative differences between the two collections. The stories in *Pomegranates* do, in fact, "signal unequivocally that they were intended for adults." The stories do suggest significant creative differences and 141 ELT46 : 2 2003 each collection implicitly acknowledges a different audience. The first collection tells tales of love, friendship, and sacrifice that lead to happiness, redemption, and stability; the second seeks to disrupt calm and comfort with details of violence, cruelty, and betrayal and calls into question the traditional categories of right and wrong. The first contains stories short enough for children to enjoy in one setting; the second strives for complexity of plot and confusion of morals. Overall, in contrast to *The Happy Prince and Other Stories*, *A House of Pomegranates* consists of stories of a dark nature with complex plots, which, while they can still be enjoyed by children, are meant to challenge and destabilize the expectations of adults.⁴ If the stories of *The Happy Prince* are the songs of innocence, then these are the songs of experience. The publication history of both collections implies that, minimally, the books were intended to be marketed towards different audiences. In a June 1888 letter to Florence Stoker, Wilde calls stories in *The Happy Prince* "simple," an adjective that describes the physical nature of the book, as well.⁵ Guy and Small explain: "[T]he stories in [the book version] of *The Happy Prince* are set in large type with wide margins; the format could have been designed with the child reader in mind."⁶ However, Wilde's letters indicate a desire to market *A House of Pomegranates* to an audience expanded to include adults. In a 12 November 1891 letter he describes the forthcoming *Pomegranates* as similar to *The Happy Prince*, "only more elaborate,"⁷ and in a letter to Dodd, Mead, & Co., the American publishers of *Pomegranates*, he requests, "Gentlemen, It will give me great pleasure to arrange with you for the publication of my book *The House of Pomegranates* in America___I hope the book will be well printed and bound."⁸ Certainly a book constructed as Wilde suggests would cost more than *A Happy Prince* or any other book designed for children, and Wilde's concern with the quality of the binding of *Pomegranates* implies a desire for it to belong to the library of an adult rather than a child. Guy and Small continue...



The Fisherman and His Son by Hen Kutcher
From *A House of Pomegranates* (Dodd, Mead & Co, 1930)



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