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Review of Jeff Nunokawa, *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire.*

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Jeff Nunokawa, Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. 164 pp. ISBN 0691113793 (paper).

**Reviewed by Kate Thomas
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This book is a meditation. As author Jeff Nunokawa describes it, the book is suffused by "a 'longing' so 'wild' that it is hard even to discern" (1). Conceived of as a "grand project of the work of Oscar Wilde," it is instead, Nunokawa notes, refractions of that ambition and it is all the better for that refracted quality. Since being resurrected in the late twentieth century, Oscar Wilde has become something of a by-word -- for homosexuality, wit, or tragic passion. In Nunokawa's skilled hands, however, Wilde becomes free and playful and we get to see the full and brilliant display of Wilde the philosopher, his arbitrations of love and his attention to quotidian passions. Nunokawa shows us not only new sides of a Wilde we thought we knew, but also educates us about how we came to think we knew him so well. As capacious as a governess' handbag, Nunokawa's study ranges from sociology to economics to queer theory and encompasses the work of Kant, Marx, Freud, Foucault, Erving Goffman and Judith Butler. His task: to describe modern desire and Wilde's role in constructing it.

After several decades of -- dare I say -- earnest scholarly inquiry, *desire* and *passion* have accrued an unwonted heaviness. Nunokawa turns to the work of Michel Foucault to explore what non-earnest work on desire produces. Pencil-licking followers of Foucault have often missed the way he theorizes the element of caprice in sexual cultures. They have also missed, Nunokawa points out, that Foucault's emphasis falls markedly more upon "management" than sex. Quoting Foucault's declaration that "sex is boring" in comparison to "problems about techniques of the self" (26), Nunokawa shows how modern desire has infiltrated more into daily life than it had in ancient times; it has become more widely socialized, more allied to and able to metastasize the tendrils of an industrialized, globalized market economy. Wilde is a compelling figure for Nunokawa because he both recognizes the shape of this modern desire and grapples with it. Nunokawa proposes that Wilde become both the author and the poster-child for what he calls "desire lite." The text that shows us this most graphically is Wilde's play in which passions are whims and whims are all-determining: *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "The light desire," Nunokawa writes, "that governs *The Importance of Being Earnest* partakes of a late-Victorian

climate of manufactured and manipulable passion associated with Wilde in particular and Aestheticism in general" (44).

The aesthetic interest in textures of desire leads us to another term that dominates the fin de siècle: style. *Tame Passions of Wilde* is in no small part a breakthrough study because it is a successful attempt to penetrate and animate the category of style. Other Victorian scholars, notably James Eli Adams in *From Dandies to Desert Saints*, have recognized the importance of theorizing rather than trivializing or allegorizing style (and specifically its relationship to masculinity), but the task itself has proved slippery. Style winks at these scholars and then with a flick of a hem eludes them.

Nunokawa, however, is supremely equipped for the task: not only is he a critic who has made a craft of conjoining material culture and queer theory, but his own writing style is perfectly tailored to the project. You have to glance backwards at his multi-faceted sentences to see the way that they glint and catch the light. His inquiry is at once musing and keen in a way that captures Wilde's own moods -- languid and quippish -- and, moreover, produces new terms of inquiry. We have seen "ennui" investigated before, but not "indifference" "obsolescence" and -- wonderfully -- "hunger." In "Is There a History of Sexuality?", David Halperin asked why it is we can't imagine the codification of appetites other than sexual. Nunokawa takes up that challenge, analyzing how Wilde both approaches and retreats from tropes of hunger and starvation: a coy flirtation that forms a compelling correlative to the sexual cravings that he helped define, historicize and defend.

Bringing Wilde and Foucault face to face, Nunokawa shows us how both are grand theorists of desire as an expansive and heterogeneous category of inquiry. Both are supremely interested in cultures of self-styling; Foucault's arts and techniques of existence resonate with Wilde's art of living. The cultures from which both men source their thinking were almost the same: their ideas refer back to both Hellenic ideals and ancient erotic disciplines. Nunokawa shows us, however, that the difference between the two thinkers is the texture between the "severe and the sybaritic," and that "The difference [. . .] between the weakness of will that Wilde wore like a badge of glory, and the strength of one required and achieved by the austere art that Foucault studies, measures more a decisive shift in the history of desire itself" (11). In sketching this difference, Nunokawa gingerly reveals that essentialism may not be the critical bogeyman that poststructuralist thought would have us believe. He shows us a Wilde who sees self-discipline as susceptible to the "incursions of desire" (11) -- desire that has been modernized into a flexible and insinuating and irresistible force. In Wilde's world, desire can erupt, Nunokawa claims, like a force of nature. Although Nunokawa does not venture this connection, his reevaluation of essentialist discourses of desire and passion comes at a time when theorists of transgenderism are similarly reinstating and resituating the term. Through the challenges of transgender

studies, the field of gender and sexuality studies is going to have to fine tune and complicate what has become an orthodoxy: that gender is constructed. Nunokawa's emphasis upon the way that Wilde wants to eat his cake and have it too -- see desire as a tyranny, yet try to manage that tyranny with style -- makes a contribution to the discussion that transgender theorists are currently bringing to the table.

If sexuality can thus return us to the way we theorize sex and gender, it must also return us to the way we theorize the "foreign." It is rare to find a comparatist approach to Wilde that moves beyond Irish-English relations, but Nunokawa does just that. Chapter Two, "Oscar Wilde in Japan: Aestheticism, Orientalism, and the Derealization of the Homosexual," forms an innovative and thoroughly perceptive reading of the centrality of Japan to Wilde's aestheticism. Reading Wilde alongside Gilbert and Sullivan, Nunokawa shows that Wilde's "desire-lite" and light Victorian musical entertainment find connection through a persistent national fascination with Japan. These purveyors of art and artifice imagined the origin of their wares to be Japan, rendering it a "site [. . .] for the process of aestheticization" (51). The chapter opens the topic like -- if I may be so bold -- a fan, showing us how European and American culture-makers have long flirted with and been wooed by the reductive metaphoric and metonymic citations of Japan as all art or all technology. There is, to borrow Wilde's own language from "The Portrait of Mr WH," really a great deal to be said about this theory. This chapter is the shortest in the book, but forms such a backbone to Nunokawa's arguments that it leaves the reader hungry for more. His claims about Japan might, for example, hold the potential answer to the riddle of why *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is punctuated with curious lists and litanies of exotic goods, jewels and textiles. The reach of the commodity and the market "into the parlors, bedrooms and closets of a domestic realm" (4) was the topic of Nunokawa's first book, *The Afterlife of Property: Domestic Security and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* unabashedly allows lengthy lists of commodities to intrude on its narrative. Although Nunokawa does not go there in that chapter on Japan, it is a curiosity of the text that Nunokawa does sidle up to in Chapter Four, "The Importance of Being Bored," where he notes that "there is still a secret left to be told about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [. . .] Let's face it, the book is boring." He proceeds to unravel the way that the novel figures the "labors of commodity consumption" as a means of postponing "sight of the spoiled body." Bringing the topics of these two chapters closer together and assessing at greater length the commodification of Japan would make yet greater contributions to work in the field of Victorian material culture. I would similarly have liked to see Nunokawa's study of style turn to style's bosom buddy, *fashion*, and to have him say more about the significance of Wilde's place in women's magazines, specifically his editorship of *The Lady's World: A Magazine of Fashion and Society*.

This is, of course, just a desire for more of Nunokawa's fresh and luminous treatments of an author who has recently seemed overworked. This study reveals what fuels the dazzling Wildean wit we all know and love, without destroying the dazzle -- rather, dazzlingly theorizing it -- in the process. The resulting study reveals the complex and conflicting passions of an author who was also a theorist, an activist, a prophet, a social and a cultural critic. The vision that both Nunokawa and Wilde catch sight of is of a world where we are liberated from tyrannies of want and care, finding our way instead to a magical, modern realm of desire and passion that delight, torment even, but never destroy us.