

AUBREY BEARDSLEY, OSCAR WILDE, AND *SALOME* AS AESTHETIC PARODY

by

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(Under the Direction of NELL ANDREW)

ABSTRACT

Among the innumerable literary and visual interpretations of the Biblical legend of Salome produced since early Christian times, perhaps the best-known is the 1894 English translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley. This collaborative work of art has most frequently been scrutinized in terms of Freudian castration theory and the sexual fetish. Moreover, it has been widely assumed that Beardsley's drawings are incongruous with Wilde's text. I propose instead that these artists meshed their respective mediums to create a parody of nineteenth-century aestheticism, and of the gender politics of *fin-de-siècle* England; in *Salome*, components of aestheticism are exaggerated and parodied, as are the era's stereotypes of women and homosexuals. I present a detailed interpretation of Beardsley's images, and evaluate their augmentation of Wilde's text. In analyzing *Salome* in this manner, I construct an alternative interpretation of this enigmatic play and the drawings inspired by it.

INDEX WORDS: Aubrey Beardsley, Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, Japonisme, Aestheticism, Gender Politics, Nineteenth-century England, Nineteenth-century Literature, James McNeill Whistler

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance.

--Oscar Wilde, in an inscribed copy of the original *Salome*, 1893¹

Buried within the gospels of Matthew and Mark is a brief anecdote concerning the death of John the Baptist, who is known as the precursor to Jesus Christ. John criticized the marriage of Roman tetrarch Herod to his sister-in-law Herodias, inspiring her to seek revenge. Herodias persuaded her daughter to dance for her husband; he was so delighted that he vowed to give the girl anything she desired. Acquiescing to her mother, the girl requested the head of the Baptist; the weak-minded Herod submitted to her demands. The girl later became known as Salome. Surely Matthew and Mark could never have imagined that this pithy description of the decapitation of John would generate a plethora of artistic renderings and literary interpretations for over a thousand years.

The nineteenth century saw a great reimagining of the Salome narrative in literature, which in turn revitalized Salome as a subject for visual representation. Novelists and poets Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jules Laforgue, and J. K. Huysmans made the tale of Salome relevant to their times by infusing it with decadent imagery and Orientalist aestheticism. Our vision of Salome today is as much informed by the nineteenth-century interpretation of her as it is by the original Biblical tale.

¹ Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Letters of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962), 348. The book resides in the Sterling Library at the University of London.

The best-known of nineteenth-century representations of the Salome myth is Oscar Wilde's play *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act*, originally written and published in French in 1891; in this paper, I will examine the 1894 English translation of the play, illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley.² This version has intrigued scholars and readers alike due to its grotesquery and gender opacity, both in the drawings and the text.

In Beardsley's *The Dancer's Reward* (Fig. 1), an illustration of the moment in which Salome has received on a charger the head of John the Baptist (whom Wilde refers to by his Hebrew name, Iokanaan), Salome's desire for the man has become sublimated into a desire for his decapitated head. She forces Iokanaan's head to face hers by pulling back a hank of his hair, as one would do in a passionate sexual encounter, and lovingly dips a finger into his pooling blood. In Wilde's accompanying text, Salome speaks lasciviously to the head as if it were the living Iokanaan, expressing her yearning to kiss his mouth.

Amalgamations of illustration and text such as this, appearing throughout the tome, would appear to support a Freudian reading of *Salome*. The great majority of scholarship on the play has focused on the argument that the trope of Salome is an illustration of Freud's theory of castration, and that the decapitation in the narrative sublimates a sexual fetish. Nevertheless, I would argue that the conception of Wilde's *Salome* as an exemplification of Freudian philosophies is problematic at best. The grafting of Freud's theories onto *Salome* is curious, considering that they were published over a decade after Wilde's play. Also, the assumption that *Salome* was created simply as a fetishistic text seems only to address the desire, fear and emasculation of the male viewer. In recent years, feminist scholars such as Megan Becker-

² Beardsley was able to utilize the latest printing technology of the time, the line block, which was a photo mechanical process. This enabled him to achieve the effect of a woodblock or engraving without relying on a block maker to properly interpret his drawings. See Linda Zatlin, *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1-2.



Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Dancer's Reward*, from Oscar Wilde, *Salome: A Tragedy in One Act*. Translated by Lord Alfred Douglas. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1967. Originally published in 1894.

Leckrone and Amanda Fernbach have scrutinized the Freudian reading of *Salome*, finding as I have that it is inadequate as an all-inclusive explanation of the play.

Moreover, there exists a perception that Beardsley's drawings contradict and even ridicule Wilde's text. For example, Holbrook Jackson, in his book *The Eighteen Nineties*, writes "The *Salome* drawings seem to sneer at Oscar Wilde rather than to interpret the play... [Beardsley's] designs overpower the text—not because they are greater but because they are inappropriate, sometimes even impertinent."³ An examination of Beardsley's illustrations in conjunction with Wilde's prose appears at first to corroborate this view. The modern aestheticism of Beardsley's drawings seems incongruous to the Biblical setting of Wilde's play; furthermore, Beardsley inserts caricatures of Wilde into his scenes that could be seen as derisive of the writer.

However, I would contend that a common thread, unrelated to Freud, links Beardsley's designs to Wilde's text. I propose that the two men harmoniously combined their talents to create a parodic tribute to nineteenth-century aestheticism, and a satiric commentary on the complex sexual atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* England.⁴

Aestheticism, as it was understood in Victorian England, centered on the doctrine that art exists for the sake of its beauty alone, and that it need serve no political, didactic, or other purpose. During the last decades of the nineteenth century, aestheticism had become a lifestyle, enthusiastically adopted and perfected by Wilde and his circle, of which Beardsley was an aspiring member, in the form of dandyism and decadence. In *Salome*, Beardsley emphasizes and

³ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1966), 103.

⁴ According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, parody is defined as a literary or musical work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule. Satire is defined as trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly. "Merriam-Webster," accessed November 21, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>. I would suggest that while Beardsley and Wilde good-naturedly exaggerate the main participants and tropes of aestheticism, their commentary on the commonly-held views of women and homosexuals is more critical.

reverently spoofs components of the aesthetic way of life, particularly those relating to Japonisme, by visually referencing two of the movement's principle figures, James McNeill Whistler and Oscar Wilde. Furthermore, the stereotypes of women and homosexuals held during this time are upended by Wilde and Beardsley through exaggeration, satire, and frankly sexual content. My analysis focuses on the illustrations of Beardsley, revealing how he used hyperbole and sly innuendo to enhance Wilde's text. By examining *Salome* as parody, I will demonstrate that Wilde and Beardsley did not merely create a Freudian case study, marred by a disconnection between writer and illustrator. Rather, their *Salome* is a self-mocking and collaborative celebration of the aesthetic movement and the sexual ambiguity found therein.

CHAPTER 2

A DANCE THROUGH TIME: A HISTORY OF SALOME

The chronicle of Salome occurs in the New Testament gospels of Matthew and Mark, and was elaborated upon by the Jewish historian Josephus during the first century CE. The following is a synopsis of the verses of Matthew and Mark on the subject.⁵ Herod Antipas, a Roman tetrarch, fell in love with his brother's wife Herodias; they divorced their respective spouses to marry one another.⁶ John the Baptist spoke out against the marriage on the grounds that Jewish law did not permit divorce (although it was sanctioned under Roman law.) Herodias wanted John to be executed, but Herod would only arrest him; according to the Gospel of Mark, he respected John and feared his influence.

Eventually Herodias had her moment. Herod had a large banquet on his birthday, attended by his officials, military commanders, and the elite of Galilee. Herodias's daughter by her first husband, not named in the Bible but identified by Josephus as the teenage Salome,⁷ performed a dance for Herod and his guests.⁸ Herod then vowed to give the girl anything she wanted. At the urging of her mother, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod felt he could not break his promise to her, so he ordered John decapitated and the head brought to him on a charger. He presented it to Salome, who in turn gave it to her delighted mother.

⁵ Matthew 14:1-12 and Mark 6:14-29, *Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769 Oxford Authorized Edition. "The Official King James Bible Online," accessed October 22, 2011, <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>.

⁶ Herodias was the granddaughter of Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas.

⁷ Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whitson (Faithpoint Press, 2006), 519.

⁸ The dance is not described in any detail; it is only written that the dance "pleased Herod" (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22). See footnote 8 for more.

These early accounts place the blame for John's death squarely on the shoulders of Herodias; Salome is merely a pawn in her mother's game, a tool of sexual manipulation. Although Herod is the one who ultimately orders John's death, his wife is the original villain of the piece. Herod is presented as a weak man who only kills John because of the machinations of Herodias, not because he has any desire to do so. Likewise, Salome merely does what her mother tells her to do. She does not have her own desires either; she is merely a child imitating and facilitating the murderous desires of her mother.⁹ The literary portrayal of the ruthless Herodias manipulating both her husband and her daughter is echoed in the first artistic renderings of the story.

The earliest known representation of Salome in art was found in Sinope, Greece, on fragments of a Greek manuscript depicting the Gospel of Matthew circa the 6th century CE (Fig. 2).¹⁰ Herod is shown as a passive voyeur, while Salome and Herodias are in contact with John's severed head. The head is almost half the size of Salome herself, showing her lack of importance in comparison to John. Many renditions were done in the subsequent centuries that emphasized Herodias's control over Salome. In *Salome Offering the Head of John the Baptist to her Mother* (Fig. 3), a capital by Gilabertus located on the Cathedral of St. Etienne in Bourges, France, it is clear that Herodias is calling the shots: she and her daughter are in the center of the relief, with the other figures arranged around them. Herod is removed from the main action; his distance from the head implies that his hands are clean. He is not held responsible for John's death.

⁹ Not only did Herodias precipitate the downfall of John the Baptist, but also of Herod; Herodias's ambition is believed to have caused Herod's eventual exile by Emperor Caligula in 39CE. Josephus, p.525-6.

¹⁰ According to Nanette B. Rodney, "Salome," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 11, 7 (1953): 193.



Fig. 2: Anonymous, *The Beheading of John the Baptist* from the Sinope Gospels, 6th century, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris



Fig. 3: Gilabertus, *Salome Offering the Head of John the Baptist to her Mother*, 1140, Cathedral of St. Etienne, Bourges, France

Over time, Salome became branded as an immoral temptress in her own right, instead of a girl manipulated by her mother. As Christian leaders struggled to eliminate pagan religions around Europe, Salome came to represent the so-called enemies of this new faith. Ewa Kuryluk, in her book *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex*, suggests that Salome and her mother were uniquely qualified to represent the perceived evils against the Roman Catholic Church, including paganism, sensuality, and female beauty. Kuryluk concludes that the battle between the old pagan faith and the new Christian one was a battle of the sexes; by demonizing women who manipulate men to get what they want, the Church could keep their male-dominated status quo intact.¹¹

To achieve that end, prominent church officials such as St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, and St. Jerome presented Salome as an example of the destructive power of dance, which they denounced as licentious; the dance of Salome is not described at all in the Bible, yet these leaders presented it as sexualized and with evil intent.¹² Her dance, personifying decadent and pagan femininity, became an important theme in works after 1000CE.¹³ Taking their cues from the writings of these Church leaders, many artists portrayed the dancing of Salome as bizarrely acrobatic and snake-like, perhaps alluding to the snake that tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; Salome became temptation incarnate.

¹¹ Ewa Kuryluk, *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 194.

¹² Kuryluk, 190, 336. For more information, see Blaise Hospodar de Kornitz, *Salome: Virgin or Prostitute?* (New York: Pageant Press, 1953), 37.

¹³ According to Megan Becker-Leckrone, Wilde was the first to name Salome's dance "The Dance of the Seven Veils." Megan Becker-Leckrone, "Salome©: The Fetishization of a Textual Corpus," *New Literary History* 26, 2 (1995), 254. The Dance of the Seven Veils is related to the Babylonian myth of the goddess Ishtar. In order to regain her lover from the underworld, Ishtar must pass through seven-times-seven gates. After each set of seven gates, she had to remove a jewel and a veil as the price of entrance; at the final gate, she had removed the last of them. Udo Kultermann writes that the Dance of the Seven Veils was a "Welcome Dance", relating to fertility and the renewal of nature. He adds that the name "Salome", or "Shalome" in Hebrew, means "welcome or peace." Udo Kultermann, "The 'Dance of the Seven Veils'. Salome and Erotic Culture around 1900," *Artibus et Historiae*, 27, 53 (2006): 187.

Examples of this type of depiction of Salome are found on the eleventh-century bronze doors of the Church of San Zeno in Verona, Italy (Fig.4) and in a fourteenth-century carving in the choir stalls of the Cologne Cathedral in Cologne, Germany (Fig.5), as well as in a fourteenth-century fresco from Buckinghamshire, England (Fig.6). In all of these works, Salome is dancing on her hands with her body oddly contorted. The grotesque nature of these renditions of the Salome legend foreshadows Beardsley's interpretation of Salome as a sexual predator, both sensual and monstrous.

By the Renaissance, Herod and Herodias had all but disappeared from visual representations of the myth, leaving Salome as the sole cause and beneficiary of the beheading of St. John. In Titian's 1516 *Salome* (Fig. 7), Salome is shown in contemporary Renaissance dress holding John's head on the charger like a trophy, her face an idealized mask. The macabre aspects of the tale are subordinated; instead, Salome is presented as a symbol of ideal beauty and sensuality. It is widely accepted by scholars that the head of John the Baptist in this painting is a self-portrait of Titian, symbolically making the artist a victim of the seductive nature of beauty.¹⁴

The Salome legend lay dormant during the eighteenth century, and was not revived again until nineteenth-century writers reimagined it. While much of this literature features Herodias as their main character, the imagery they present influenced Wilde's and Beardsley's portrayal of Salome. For example, in his 1841 epic poem *Atta Troll*, German poet Heinrich Heine imagines that Herodias orchestrated the death of John the Baptist because of her unrequited love for him.

¹⁴ See Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian Mostly Iconographic* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 43; and Rona Goffen, *Titian's Women*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 226-7.



Fig. 4: Anonymous, Bronze door, 11th century, Church of San Zeno, Verona, Italy



Fig. 5: Anonymous, *Salome*, 14th century, Cologne Cathedral Choir Stalls, Cologne, Germany



Fig. 6: Anonymous, *Herod's Feast: Decollation of John the Baptist with Salome*, 14th century, Chalfort St. Giles, Buckinghamshire, England



Fig. 7: Titian, *Salome*, c.1516, Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome

Lascaro, Heine's hero, sees a vision of Herodias out his window.

In her hands she holds forever
That bright charger with the head of
John the Baptist, which she kisses—
Yes, she kisses it with ardor.

For she loved him once, this prophet:
It's not written in the Bible,
But the people guard the legend
Of Herodias' bloody passion.¹⁵

Wilde's Salome parallels Heine's Herodias; both women are enamored with John, and both kiss his decapitated head.

French novelist Gustave Flaubert's version of the Salome myth, "Herodias," a short story in his *Trois Contes* from 1877, adheres more closely to the Biblical account than Heine's. Nonetheless, he does take some narrative liberties; in his version, Herodias marries Herod, hoping in vain to bear him a child of his own, while leaving her daughter Salome behind in Rome. As Herod's love for Herodias fades, and with it her power over him, she secretly trains Salome in the arts of dance and seduction, used to great effect in the final chapter. Salome's aspect and costume are described in a manner that foreshadows Beardsley's illustrations:

Through a drapery of filmy blue gauze that veiled her head and throat, her arched eyebrows, tiny ears, and ivory-white skin could be distinguished. A scarf of shot-silk fell from her shoulders, and was caught up at the waist by a girdle of fretted silver. Her full trousers, of black silk, were embroidered in a pattern of silver mandragoras, and as she moved forward with indolent grace, her little feet were seen to be shod with slippers made of the feathers of humming-birds.¹⁶

Other adaptations of the Salome narrative that appeared at this time include French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's *Hérodias*, an unfinished poem begun in 1864; and fellow French poet and prose writer Jules Laforgue's *Salome*, from his *Six Moral Tales* of 1886. Mallarmé's poem

¹⁵ Heinrich Heine, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine, A Modern English Version*, Hal Draper, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Suhrkamp/Insel Publishers Boston, 1982), 458.

¹⁶ "Gustave Flaubert, 'Herodias,' from *Trois Contes*," Page by Page Books™, accessed October, 2011, http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Gustave_Flaubert/Herodias/.

contains few references to the Biblical account; indeed, if he had not named his heroine Hérodiade, it would be difficult to know he was denoting the legend. Laforgue's *Salome*, on the other hand, retains the general narrative structure of the myth used by Flaubert, but with some significant modifications. Salome's climactic performance is not presented as a dance, but as a philosophical oration; it is the power of her words that extracts the deadly promise from Herod, not her sensual charms. A description of the death of Salome is not found in the Bible or Josephus's history, yet Laforgue's heroine falls off a cliff to her death while attempting to throw John's head into the sea.

Wilde, too, ends his play with Salome's death; Herod's soldiers crush her under the weight of their shields. Beside Laforgue's account, another possible source for Wilde's revisionist ending can be found in a letter supposedly written by Herod Antipas to Pontius Pilate, published in the 1890 tome *The Apocryphal Books of the New Testament*. Herod's letter, found in a Syriac manuscript from the sixth or seventh century located in the British Museum, reads:

I am in great anxiety. I write these things unto thee, that when thou hast heard them thou mayest be grieved for me. For as my daughter Herodias, who is dear to me, was playing upon a pool of water which had ice upon it, it broke under her, and all her body went down, and her head was cut off and remained on the surface of the ice. And behold, her mother is holding her head upon her knees in her lap, and my whole house is in great sorrow.¹⁷

The use of the name 'Herodias' instead of 'Salome' may be indicative of the confusion between the two women, stemming from the early Christian era. Supplemental accounts of the Biblical story were beginning to appear at this time; the heroine of these tales was variously named Salome, Herodias, and even the Egyptian version of the name, Pharaildis.¹⁸ As neither the Bible

¹⁷ William Hone, Jeremiah Jones, and William Wake, editors, *The Apocryphal Books of the New Testament* (Philadelphia : David McKay, 1901), 269. The letter also appears in a fifteenth-century Greek manuscript in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

¹⁸ Blaise Hospodar de Kornitz, *Salome: Virgin or Prostitute* (New York: Pageant Press, 1953), 3. As cited in Helen Grace Zagona, *The Legend of Salome and the Principle of Art for Art's Sake* (Geneva: Droz, 1960), 20.

nor the history of Josephus mention Herod having a daughter named ‘Herodias’, it would seem that the letter tells of the death of his step-daughter, Salome.¹⁹ The parallels between the decapitation of Herod’s daughter and that of John the Baptist must have intrigued Wilde. In fact, according to Richard Ellmann in his 1989 biography *Oscar Wilde*, Wilde originally wrote a conclusion to his play incorporating this version of Salome’s death, though he later rejected it.²⁰

A number of painters, inspired by these nineteenth-century writers, revived Salome as a visual character in the second half of the nineteenth century. Brad Bucknell suggests in his article, “On ‘Seeing’ Salome,” that Salome’s lack of identifying characteristics in the Gospels, including her name, made her a blank slate upon which nineteenth-century writers and artists could project their own fantasies and create their own visual interpretations.²¹ It would seem that many artists of this time wanted the viewer to be titillated and seduced by Salome as Herod was, unlike medieval artists who aimed for repulsion. The most prolific was French artist Gustave Moreau, who created numerous drawings, paintings, and even sculptures of Salome. Moreau, who was particularly influenced by Flaubert, highlighted the dangerous nature of seduction and obsessive love through the lens of exotic Eastern beauty.

Moreau’s paintings of Salome, such as *Salome Dancing Before Herod* from 1874 (Fig. 8) in turn inspired a florid description of Salome by French novelist J. K. Huysmans in his novel *A Rebours* of 1884. After purchasing this painting, Huysmans’s protagonist, Des Esseintes, infuses Moreau’s rather static dancing girl with an erotic power:

...Des Esseintes saw realized at long last the weird and superhuman Salome of his dreams. Here she was no longer just the dancing-girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly,

¹⁹ The idea that Herod and Herodias were childless is echoed in both Flaubert’s “Herodias” and Wilde’s *Salome*; in Wilde’s play the pair argues over which one of them is sterile.

²⁰ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1987), 343.

²¹ Brad Bucknell, “On ‘Seeing’ Salome,” *ELH*, 60, 2 (1993): 505.

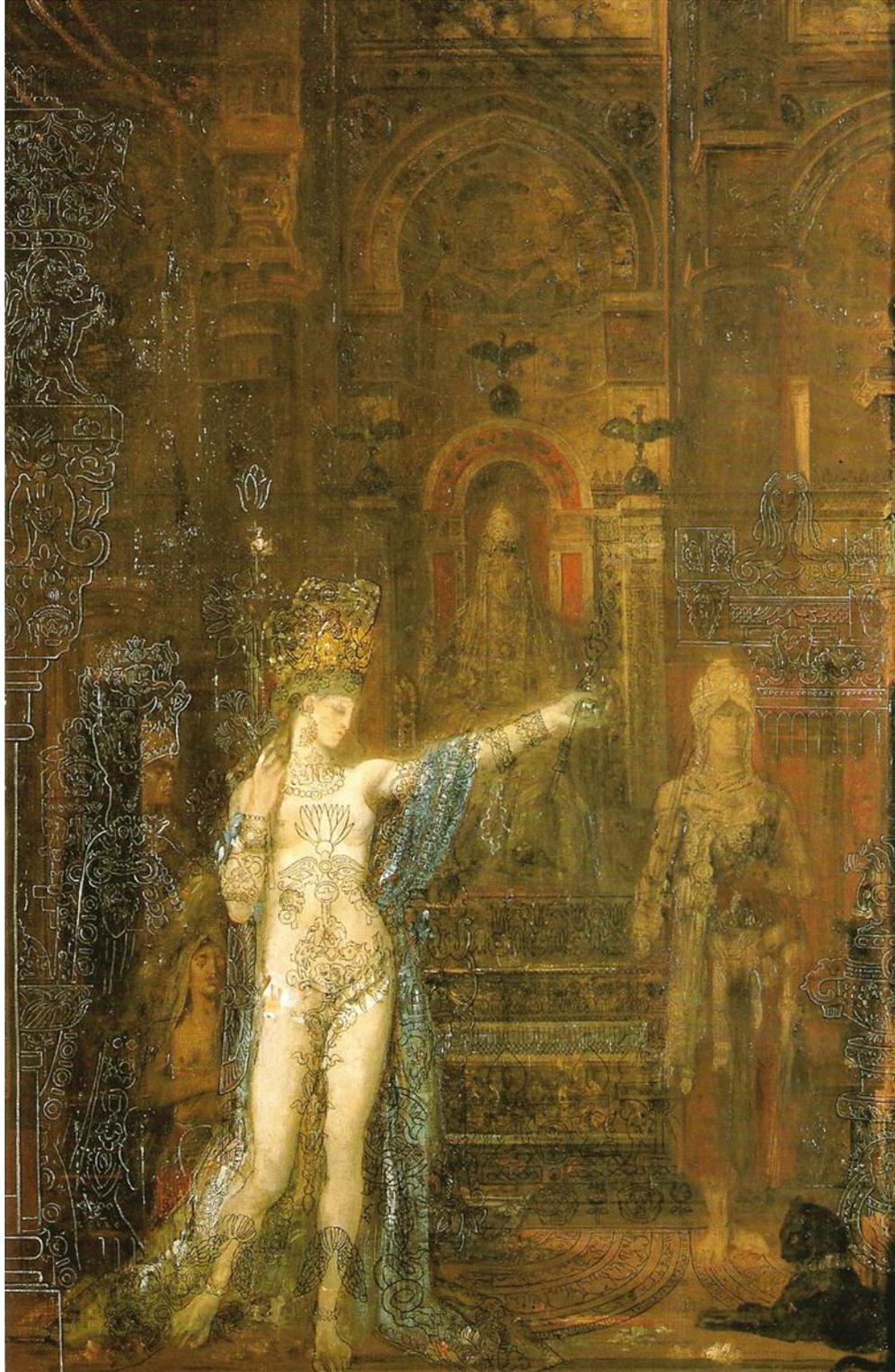


Fig. 8: Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, 1874, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris

the quivering of her thighs. She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everyone that sees her, everything that she touches. Viewed in this light, she belonged to the theogonies of the Far East.

The parallels between Huysmans's literary Salome and Beardsley's visual one are palatable. As Des Esseintes imagines Salome as an embodiment of Eastern eroticism, both beautiful and terrifying, so does Beardsley through the use of Japanese artistic tropes, as I shall discuss further in Chapter 4.

In their *Salome*, Wilde and Beardsley integrate the grotesque nature of medieval representations of Salome, the sensual beauty found in paintings of her from the Renaissance, and the erotic decadence associated with the nineteenth century, in order to create a work of art wholly of the *fin-de-siècle*.

CHAPTER 3
DECAPITATING THE FETISH: DISSECTING PREVIOUS INTERPRETATIONS
OF *SALOME*

A large portion of the scholarship on Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salome* interprets the play through two main arguments. For one, the play is often considered to be representative of Freudian castration theory, with the decapitated head as sexual fetish. Furthermore, Beardsley's drawings are generally characterized as being incongruent with Wilde's text.²² While these theories are certainly legitimate as analyses of both the play and its illustrations, they are recited so ubiquitously that they are presented as the only interpretations, so that nothing more need be said. In this chapter, I will summarize these interpretations of *Salome*, in order to create a foundation for my own.

Castration theory, as set out by Freud in his 1908 article "On the Sexual Theories of Children," refers to the male's fear of losing his penis. This is rooted in the childhood belief that everyone originally had a penis. When a boy becomes aware that his mother is lacking this organ, he assumes that it has been removed, and thus becomes fearful that he will lose his as well. According to Freud, the sexual fetish is a replacement for the mother's missing phallus. The fetish, then, is not a substitute for an actual penis, but fills a void that never existed. It completes the woman in the mind of the man, though she was not incomplete in the first place. The male is able to maintain the illusion of a phallic mother through the fetish.²³

²² I am not suggesting that no scholars have explored alternate readings of *Salome*, but simply that the theories listed above are the most commonly investigated.

²³ Sigmund Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London : Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 217.

According to many twentieth-century scholars, Freudian castration theory applies directly to *Salome*. The decapitation of John the Baptist (Iokanaan in Wilde's version) serves as a symbolic castration of a man by a sexually aggressive woman, or 'femme fatale'. Salome represents the male fear of being emasculated, and therefore feminized by a strong woman. The notion that Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salome* speaks to castration anxiety is effective in dissecting both the play and its illustrations. The prevailing idea that Wilde and Beardsley were expressing their own feelings of impotence in the face of a powerful woman through the decapitated head in *Salome* is certainly compelling when related to Freud's hypothesis. Furthermore, the mingling of eroticism and violence inherent in the *Salome* chronicle make it ripe for fetishism, especially in the context of the Decadent Movement in England at this time.

The application of Freud's theory to *Salome* can further be supported by Freud's discussion of the myth of Judith in his essay "The Taboo of Virginity" from 1917. In this essay, Freud frequently quotes from Friedrich Hebbel's *Judith* of 1841, a tragedy in which Judith extracts revenge upon Holofernes for taking her virginity by decapitating him.²⁴ The parallels between the legend of *Salome* and that of *Judith* are obvious. As *Salome* caused the decapitation of Iokanaan through her sexuality, so did *Judith* cause the decapitation of Holofernes. While

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, "The Taboo of Virginity," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London : Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953), 197. The original legend of *Judith* is described in the *Book of Judith*, an Apocryphal book in sixteen chapters. The book describes *Judith*, a daring and beautiful widow, who lived in a Jewish city called Bethulia, located in a narrow pass through which laid the entrance into Judea. A hostile Assyrian army came to the city, and blockaded it and cut off its water supply. The men of the town were ready to surrender, but *Judith* was not. She made a plea to the leaders of Bethulia to trust that God would save them, but they refused to listen. *Judith* then went with her loyal maid to the camp of the enemy general, Holofernes, to whom she slowly ingratiated herself, promising him information on the Israelites. Gaining his trust with her great beauty and cunning, she was allowed access to his tent one night as he laid in a drunken stupor. She decapitated him with a broad-bladed sword called a *fauchion*, and gave the head to her maid, who put it in a bag. The women took the head back to their cowardly countrymen; they praised God and blessed *Judith* for her heroic act. In the aftermath, the Assyrians, having lost their leader, dispersed, and Israel was saved. Though many desired her, *Judith* remained unmarried for the rest of her life, still loyal to her deceased husband. See *Book of Judith*, King James Version, Early Jewish Writings, <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/judith.html>

Salome asks for the head to be brought to her on a platter, as if it were a meal, Judith puts the decapitated head in a bag of food.²⁵ Judith even participates in a dance as Salome does, albeit a dance of tribute and celebration. It is not difficult to see how scholars made the leap from Judith to Salome.

Feminist scholars such as Megan Becker-Leckrone and Amanda Fernbach have pointed to the limitations of a fetishistic reading of Wilde's *Salome*. Becker-Leckrone, in her article "Salome©: The Fetishization of a Textual Corpus," posits that the literary accounts of Salome, from the Bible to Wilde's *Salome* and beyond, as well as scholarly interpretations of them, have confused the textual Salome with the historical personage of Salome. She contends that the body of writings on Salome became a fetishized replacement for Salome. According to Becker-Leckrone, Wilde's text has been particularly canonized by scholars, who have conflated his play with the Biblical version to create a natural "origin" for Wilde's *Salome*. Some have gone so far as to accept her "Dance of the Seven Veils" as biblical truth without acknowledging that it was Wilde who originally named it as such.²⁶

In her article "Wilde's *Salome* and the Ambiguous Fetish," Amanda Fernbach suggests, as the title of the article indicates, that the fetish is ambiguous in Wilde's play. She contends that the male is fetishized as much as the female in the play, pointing to the mutability of gender in *Salome* as a subverting element to the heterosexual male dominance found in Freud's theory. In

²⁵ The two myths have often been confused and amalgamated by artists and writers throughout the centuries. A classic example of this is Gustav Klimt's *Judith* of 1901, which is often identified as *Salome*. For more information on this confusion, see Nadine Sine, "Cases of Mistaken Identity: Salome and Judith at the turn of the Century," *German Studies Review*, 11, 1 (1988): 9-29.

²⁶ See Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco, 1983), 885-6; and Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1992), 340. Cited in Becker-Leckrone, 248-9.

her mind, the aberrant imagery found in both the drawings and the text reveals desires that are normally omitted from the Freudian reading.²⁷

The idea that Beardsley's drawings are out of synch with Wilde's text is, as Elliot Gilbert points out, "commonplace, amounting by now to dogma."²⁸ I would contend, however, that the common thread of parody links Beardsley's designs to Wilde's text. As Ewa Kuryluk points out, many of the previous versions of the Salome story are satirical in nature. It stands to reason that Wilde, as a satirist, would have been drawn to the legend's adaptability to parody.²⁹ Kuryluk also suggests that sections of Wilde's text correlate directly with the Song of Songs found in the Book of Solomon, in effect creating a Biblical parody.³⁰

Heine's *Atta Troll*, for example, is full of exaggeration and parody, employed to poke fun at the grotesque fantasies of his time, as this description of Herodias's activities bears out:

Ah, she wept and lost her reason,
And she died of loving-madness.
(Loving-madness? How redundant!
Love is nothing but a madness!)

Nightly rising from the grave, she
Bears the bloody head, it's said,
In her hands and goes out hunting—
But with a women's crazy fancy

Sometimes she will toss the head up
In the air with childish laughter,
And then catch it very nimbly
As if playing ball with it.³¹

Likewise, in his *Salome*, Laforgue ridicules the familiar tropes common to representations of the infamous princess:

²⁷ Amanda Fernbach, "Wilde's 'Salome' and the Ambiguous Fetish," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29, 1 (2001): 197.

²⁸ Elliot L. Gilbert, "'Tumult of Images': Wilde, Beardsley, and 'Salome,'" *Victorian Studies* 26, 2 (1983): 133.

²⁹ Kuryluk, 200.

³⁰ For a detail analysis, see Kuryluk, 223-226.

³¹ Heine, 459.

As soon as the object [John's head] had been delivered, Salome, to appease her scientific conscience, had tried the famous, much-discussed postdecapitation experiments; as she had expected, her electric caresses drew from the face nothing but inconsequential grimaces....Salome finally shook herself like a reasonable person and raised her sash; then lifting from her body the cloudy gold and gray opal of Orion, she placed it like a sacramental wafer in John's mouth, then kissed the mouth mercifully and hermetically, and sealed it with her corrosive seal (all in a matter of minutes).³²

Laforque also employs gender ambiguity and a sardonic tone that serves to mock both the Decadents and the Bible, as can be seen in this excerpt.

While Beardsley expresses his parodic vision in a way dissimilar than Wilde does, I will demonstrate in the following chapters that Beardsley captures the spirit of Wilde's ideas in his illustrations.

³² Jules Laforque, *Salome*, in *Moral Tales*, translated by William Jay Smith (New York: New Directions Books, 1985), 108.

CHAPTER 4

BENEATH THE SURFACE: BEARDSLEY, WHISTLER AND JAPONISME

Beardsley's illustrations for *Salome* display such an obvious link to nineteenth-century Japonisme that they have often been discussed as a form of homage. I would contend, however, that Beardsley was creating more than a tribute to Japanese printmakers and the European artists who incorporated their symbolism and line treatment into their own work. By using familiar tropes of Japonisme to create unsettling and sexualized tableau, Beardsley parodied an artistic faction that had been in the forefront of the art world for decades.

Beardsley was initially influenced by Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, with whom he became acquainted in 1891.³³ As seen in his drawings for the title page (Fig. 9) and the list of pictures (Fig. 10) for *Salome*, nearly every inch of these pages is covered with intricate floral designs reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites. During the next few years, Beardsley discovered Japanese *ukiyo-e*; he became a collector of erotic Japanese woodcuts, which were readily available in Victorian England and France.³⁴ In a letter to Leonard Smithers, dated to 1895, Beardsley mentions owning a set of "erotic Japanese prints."³⁵ He visited the Print and Drawing Gallery at the British Museum in 1893, where he would have been able to examine

³³ Maas, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 21-22. Beardsley writes in a letter to A.W. King that he visited Burne-Jones at his studio to have his work evaluated. Burne-Jones was favorably impressed and offered to help Beardsley with his career. Beardsley was then invited to have tea with Burne-Jones and his friends, including Oscar Wilde. This may have been the first time that Wilde saw Beardsley's drawings.

³⁴ *Ukiyo-e* is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints produced between the 17th and 20th centuries, originating in the metropolitan culture of Edo, or Tokyo.

³⁵ Henry Maas, J.L. Duncan, and W.G. Good, editors, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 98.

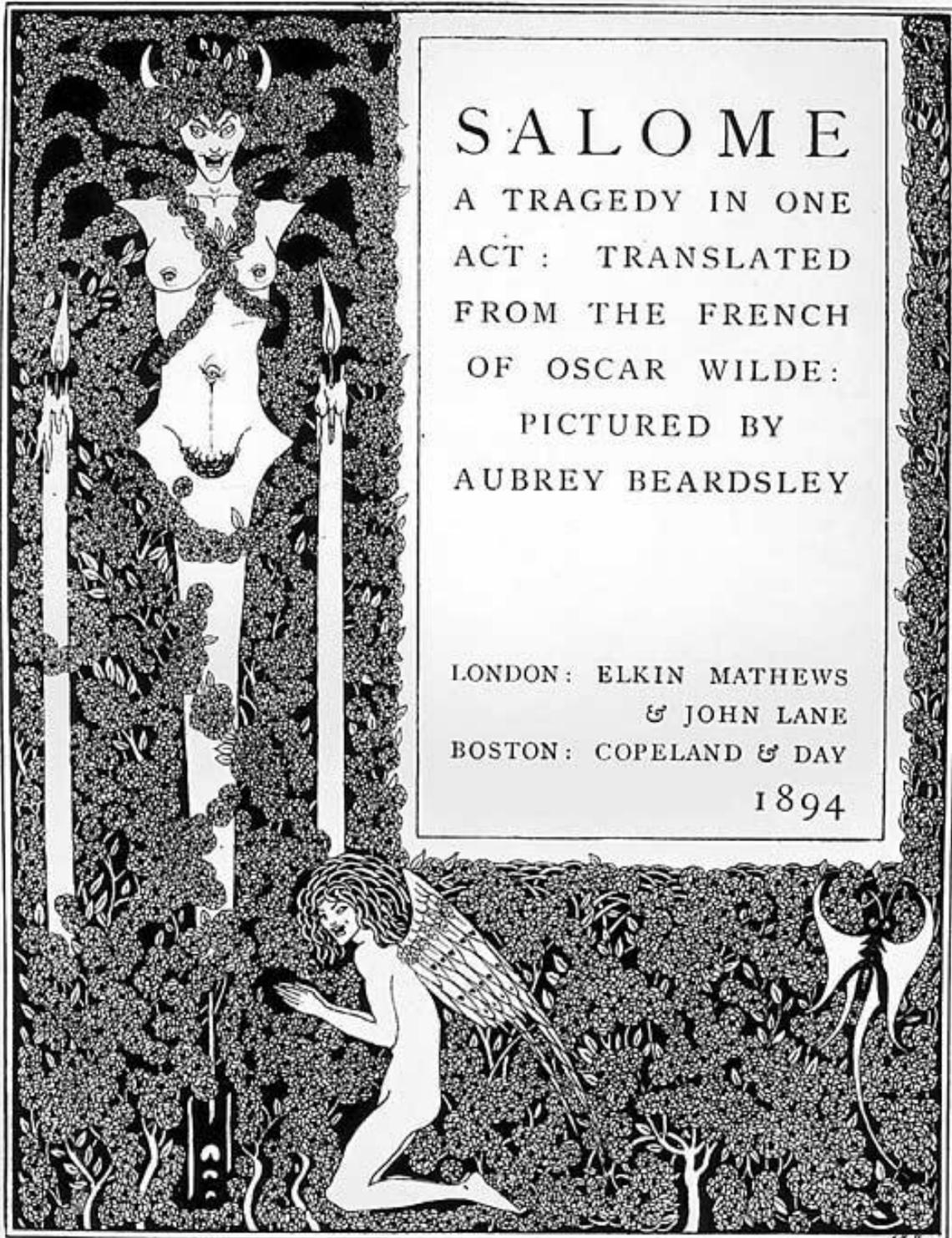


Fig. 9: Beardsley, Title Page for *Salome*



Fig. 10: Beardsley, List of Pictures for *Salome*

individual Japanese prints;³⁶ he also visited the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum), where he would “hunt over a pile of old Japanese prints.”³⁷ Beardsley’s exposure to the flattened depth of field and simplicity of line found in the work of Japanese artists such as Hishikawa Moronobu, Utamaro, and Hokusai inspired a transformation in his illustrations, all the while maintaining an originality that marked them as his own.

It is not difficult to make a correlation between Beardsley’s drawings for *Salome* and Japanese *ukiyo-e*; a cursory examination of *Salome* yields references to these woodblock prints on nearly every page. Beardsley exaggerates traditional elements found therein to create a parody of the English and French fascination with all things Japanese. Throughout the illustrations to *Salome*, we see references to Japanese decorative touches that were so captivating to artists at this time: spindly black tables, windows obscured with vertical blinds, wizened men playing the shamisen, women in sumptuous kimonos. Beardsley’s drawings are stark and uncluttered, with large areas of solid black and white. His figures occupy the foreground of the picture plane, emulating a stage set.

A story set in the pre-Christian Middle East would hardly seem to lend itself to Japanese imagery; some scholars point to this as evidence that Beardsley’s drawings are contradictory to Wilde’s text. On the contrary, I would argue that Beardsley’s parodying of Japonisme reflects the spirit of Wilde’s play. In his biography of Beardsley, Haldane MacFall writes:

It would be difficult to imagine a man less competent to create the true atmosphere of the times and Court of King Herod than Oscar Wilde—but he could achieve an Oxford-Athenian fantasy hung on Herodias as a peg. It would be as difficult to imagine a man less competent than Aubrey Beardsley to achieve the true atmosphere of the times of King Herod—but he knew it, and acted accordingly. What he could do, and did do, was

³⁶ Linda Zatlín, *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12.

³⁷ “Aubrey Beardsley: In Memoriam,” *Westminster Budget*, March 25, 1898, 9.

to weave a series of fantastic decorations about Wilde's play which were as alien to the subject as was the play.³⁸

At first glance it might seem that Beardsley is simply paying tribute to the aforementioned Japanese artists, as many had done before him. Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals that Beardsley was utilizing Japanese elements in a far more subversive manner.

In *The Toilette of Salome II*, (Fig. 11) Beardsley undermines the aesthetic beauty of his Japanese references by inserting disconcerting elements of Western decadence.³⁹ Salome's dressing table appears to be of Asian design, as are the decorative jars and vases arranged haphazardly on it. In the right foreground, a nude attendant sits on an ottoman decorated in Japanese designs. This figure, as well as the musician standing behind and the servant standing across the way, is much smaller than Salome and her hairdresser, even though spatially they should be larger. This indicates their lesser narrative importance, in line with Japanese compositional strategies. All of this should serve to create the harmonious aesthetics of a Japanese scene. Yet, the books on the middle shelf of Salome's dressing table are by French Decadent writers such as Baudelaire and Zola, placing the scene in the nineteenth century. Moreover, her hairdresser, a masked man who appears to have been transplanted from that bastion of debauchery, Venice's Carnival, hovers malevolently over Salome; his leering decadence threatens to overtake her.

Furthermore, in *The Black Cape* (Fig. 12), Beardsley presents a woman, presumably Salome, wearing an elaborate black kimono decorated with roses and a starburst design. She holds what appears to be a long folded fan. Her hair is done up in an exaggerated bouffant; the line of her body follows a sinuous S curve. This brings to mind Japanese prints such as

³⁸ Haldane MacFall, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and his Work* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1928), 49.

³⁹ This drawing was eliminated from the first edition of *Salome* because of its frank sexual content, which I shall discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters; it was replaced with *The Toilette of Salome I*.



Fig. 11: Beardsley, *The Toilette of Salome II, Salome*



Fig. 12: Beardsley, *The Black Cape, Salome*

Hishikawa Moronobu's *Standing Beauty*, ca. 1690 (Fig. 13). Yet Beardsley's figure is no traditional Japanese woman. Beardsley places an absurdly small hat upon her cone-shaped hair of a style worn by English women out for a morning stroll. Her kimono is open to the waist, exposing her navel. A faintly drawn crinoline flows out to the side. She is depicted as a Western woman of the nineteenth century wearing a Japanese costume, with anachronistic details that serve to make her look ridiculous.

In doing so, Beardsley parodies the usurpation of Japanese design by Western artists such as James McNeill Whistler. For example, in Whistler's *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* (Fig.14), located in his famous Peacock Room (which I shall discuss later in this chapter), a Caucasian woman stands in a room decorated with a Japanese screen, vase, and rug. As in Beardsley's *The Black Cape* (Fig.12, p.29), she wears a costume consisting of a flowing kimono and fan decorated with flowers. In a letter to his friend G. F. Scotson-Clark, dated July 1891, Beardsley discusses a visit to *The Peacock Room*, mentioning Whistler's painting and even providing a sketch of it (Fig. 15).⁴⁰ The incorporation of Japanese designs into an incongruous context by Whistler and other nineteenth-century artists was ripe for parody.

The influence of Whistler, both as an aesthetic icon and as an interpreter of Japanese prints, can be found throughout Beardsley's drawings for *Salome*. In 1893, around the time Beardsley was working on *Salome*, he produced a caricature of Whistler (Fig. 16). Whistler is presented as the ultimate aesthete: he wears a tiny hat perched on long, curly hair, a genteel mustache and goatee, an artist's smock with a huge boutonniere, and tiny pointed shoes. He has

⁴⁰ Maas, *Letters*, 20-21. Haldane MacFall contends that the dating of this letter is suspect, and that Beardsley likely visited the Peacock Room in early 1893. His reasoning for this lies in the fact that Beardsley's work did not show the influence of Whistler's aesthetic masterpiece until 1893; the idea that this influence did not manifest itself until two years after the fact is nonsensical to MacFall. Haldane MacFall, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Limited, 1928), 47. However, Leyland died in 1892, and the room was not moved to a London gallery until 1904; whether Beardsley could have visited the room in 1893 is unclear.



Fig. 13: Hishikawa Moronobu, *Standing Beauty*, ca. 1690, Collection of Richard Fishbein and Estelle Bender, Asia Society Museum, New York



Fig. 14: James McNeill Whistler, *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, 1864-5, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 15: Beardsley, sketch of Whistler's *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, from a letter to G.F. Scotson-Clark, July, 1891, Pennell Whistler Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Manuscript Division



Fig. 16: Beardsley, *Caricature of James McNeill Whistler*, c.1894, pen and ink on paper, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

the lined and flabby neck of an old woman; this is unusual, as many portraits of Whistler present him as a man in the prime of life.⁴¹ He sits on a Japanese-style bench in an effete, curved position, his physique rounded and undefined. He appears to be talking enthusiastically to a butterfly, gesturing at it with a pointed finger. The butterfly evokes Whistler's stamp, which was derived from signatures on Japanese woodblock prints.⁴² By representing Whistler in this manner, Beardsley seems to be commenting not only on Whistler's legendary ego, but on the aesthetic movement and its appropriating of Japanese imagery. Whistler is lecturing to his favorite and most devoted audience: himself. The satirical elements in the drawing were intentional; in a letter to French poet André Raffalovich from 1896, Beardsley recalls this drawing as "a very malicious caricature." He adds that he hung the drawing on his Christmas tree as an ornament, alluding to the decorative properties of Whistler's work.⁴³

Through his *Salome* illustrations, Beardsley parodies Whistler's works more formally in several ways. First, Beardsley creates his own Japanese-style signature and incorporates it subtly into each drawing, as Whistler did with his famous butterfly signature.⁴⁴ Like Whistler's signature, Beardsley's is based on those found in Japanese prints. It consists of three narrow cylinders, with the middle one stretching above the others. Under it, Beardsley has drawn three shapes, arranged vertically. These shapes are not consistent throughout the book; they resemble hearts, circles, flowers, or abstract shapes, depending on the drawing (Fig. 17). As Whistler's butterfly signature varies throughout his body of paintings, Beardsley's signature changes from page to page, as if encompassing Whistler's entire career in one series of drawings. The fluctuating way in which Beardsley signs his illustrations also serves as a commentary on the

⁴¹ For an example, see William Merritt Chase's 1885 portrait of Whistler.

⁴² Zatlin, *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, 138.

⁴³ Maas, *Letters*, 230.

⁴⁴ See Whistler's *Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland (1871-3)*; the signature is drawn on the wall, partially obscured by a plant.



Signature
from back
cover, first
edition



Signature
from *The
Black Cape*



Signature
from *The
Dancer's
Reward*

Fig. 17: Beardsley's signatures from *Salome*

pomposity and superficiality of Whistler's signature, indicating that his intention was to parody the infamous stamp, not pay tribute to it.

While Whistler inserted his signature into his paintings in a decorative way, Beardsley often uses his to emphasize the sexual components in his drawings. The cylindrical shapes of his signature echo other phallic shapes in the drawings. For example, in *The Peacock Skirt* (Fig. 18), Beardsley places the signature directly above the outstretched hand of Narraboth, also referred to as the Young Syrian. We know from the text that the Young Syrian is enamored with Salome, causing him to be easily manipulated by her. Instead of drawing him with an erection, Beardsley uses the signature to stand in for his arousal in the presence of Salome. It is as if his fantasy of having sex with Salome is manifested in the signature, like a thought bubble in popular comics.

Beardsley's signature functions similarly as a replacement for a phallus in *The Climax* (Fig. 19). The drawing depicts Salome holding the head of Iokanaan, which is dripping a long trail of blood. The signature is cradled in the curve of the blood trail, directly under the severed head. While Iokanaan was alive, he spurned the sexual advances of Salome; now that he is dead, she may possess him at last. His sexual organ, as represented by Beardsley's signature, is erect for Salome as it was not when he was alive.

In the drawing for the title page, (Fig. 9, p.24) Beardsley's signature refers to both male and female sexuality. The picture is filled with roses, weaving in and out of the figures. One figure is hermaphroditic, with both breasts and male genitalia, and a long shaft instead of legs. This figure resembles a herm, an ancient Greek sculpture type featuring a head and torso above an undefined lower section, on which male genitals are carved. He is placed between two phallic taper candles; chains of roses cross between the rounded breasts. Directly under this figure appears Beardsley's signature, with its central stick pointing towards the exposed genitals of the



Fig. 18: Beardsley, *The Peacock Skirt, Salome*



Fig. 19: Beardsley, *The Climax, Salome*

hermaphrodite. The triangular form of the signature mirrors the arrangement of the hermaphrodite and the candles, thus equating it with a dual sexuality that Beardsley explores throughout; I will discuss this further in following chapters.

Beardsley further parodies Whistler's butterfly signature by placing butterflies in five of the drawings: the title page, the list of pictures, *The Black Cape*, (Figs. 9-10, 12; pp.24, 25, 29) *John and Salome*, and *The Eyes of Herod* (Figs. 20, 21).⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, the drawings that contain butterflies also contain roses, equating Whistler with femininity. The last of these, *The Eyes of Herod*, appears midway through the play, as Herod begins in earnest to attempt to fulfill his unrequited lust for Salome by convincing her to dance. After that, the butterflies disappear. Beardsley seems to be suggesting that Whistler's aestheticism is ill-suited to describe the complexities of the unnatural desire of Herod for Salome, and Salome for Iokanaan.

The *Salome* illustrations owe their greatest debt to Whistler's famous *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*. Beardsley filled his drawings for *Salome* with designs inspired by the room, which was completed in 1877 as a dining room for the London home of Frederick R. Leyland. The architecture of the room was designed by Thomas Jeckyll to house Leyland's collection of porcelain.⁴⁶ Whistler was asked to consult on the colors for the door and the windows, since his *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain* was to hang above the fireplace. When Whistler saw the walls, lined in antique Spanish leather with red roses, Whistler was concerned that the red would clash with his painting. Whistler was given permission to touch up the roses, but when Leyland left for business in Liverpool, Whistler painted the leather with a deep blue and covered it with golden peacocks and decorative feather

⁴⁵ *John and Salome* was withdrawn from the first edition of the book. MacFall suggests that this was done because the drawing was a "very second rate design." MacFall, 51.

⁴⁶ Leyland was a wealthy Liverpool ship owner and lifelong patron of the arts. The following account can be found in Frances Spalding, *Whistler* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1994), 38. See also Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, D.C. and New Haven: Freer Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, 1998).



Fig. 20: Beardsley, *John and Salome*, *Salome*



Fig. 21: Beardsley, *The Eyes of Herod, Salome*

designs. He then invited the press to view the room, without asking permission from Leyland. Whistler was so proud of his accomplishment that when he later visited the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, he remarked that his *Peacock Room* achieved a more beautiful effect. Leyland, understandably upset by Whistler's antics, refused to pay the entire amount Whistler asked. In retaliation, Whistler painted a scene of fighting peacocks into the room, representing Leyland and himself squabbling over money, with the feathers of the Leyland peacock consisting of silver coins. Despite the drama involved in its formation, the room remained as Whistler left it—and as Beardsley would later see it.

Although he does not mention the controversy surrounding the creation of the room, it was common knowledge at the time. By incorporating elements from *The Peacock Room* into *Salome*, Beardsley is able to make a commentary on both Whistler's narcissistic belief in his artistic sensibilities and his penchant for decorative artifice, as he did in the previously mentioned caricature of Whistler.

The most obvious example of Beardsley's intended parody is *The Peacock Skirt* (Fig. 18, p.38), in which a peacock is surrounded by a mirror-like roundel made of pointillist semi-circles. This is a clear reference to Whistler's walls, as is the design on Salome's skirt and the peacock feathers in her hair (Fig. 22). *The Eyes of Herod* (Fig. 21, p.42) also contains a Whistler-esque peacock emerging from behind a pair of trees, depicted as a swath of solid black. Salome again wears peacock feathers in her hair. Many of the other drawings also contain decorative elements reminiscent of *The Peacock Room*. In *The Dancer's Reward*, (Fig. 1, p.3) Salome's hair is drawn to resemble the feathers found on the wings of Whistler's peacocks. Likewise, *The Climax* (Fig. 19, p.39) features a section of these bubble-like feathers in the upper left of the picture.



Fig. 22: James McNeill Whistler, South Wall (detail), *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

While peacocks had long been a symbol of beauty, pride, and arrogance, Whistler's *Peacock Room* popularized peacocks and their distinctive feathers as symbols of the aesthetic movement.⁴⁷ Beardsley spoofs this by exploiting their aesthetic features to reference base sexuality. As demonstrated in his rejected sketch for the cover design of *Salome*, (Fig. 23) Beardsley was well-aware of the resemblance of the eye of the peacock feather to female genitalia. By placing the feathers protruding from the head of Salome, Beardsley makes her a woman whose sexuality and vanity is apparent to all. This serves to satirize Whistler's masculine ego by implying that Whistler asserted his independence from the wishes of his patron by painting simulated vaginas in the name of aestheticism.

Beardsley's use of the butterfly emblem and peacocks to parody Whistler and his work parallels Wilde's personal relationship with and admiration for Whistler. Wilde had known Whistler since he was an undergraduate at Oxford; he considered the artist to be one of his heroes.⁴⁸ Wilde was an admirer of *The Peacock Room*; in his 1882 lecture "The House Beautiful", he described the room as "the finest thing in colour and art decoration that the world has ever known since Correggio painted that wonderful room in Italy where the little children are dancing on the walls."⁴⁹ Further, he embellished the ceiling of his drawing room with peacock feathers, which purportedly was Whistler's idea.⁵⁰

In *Salome*, the Young Syrian refers to Salome's hands as "white butterflies."⁵¹ Wilde could be obliquely referencing Whistler's paintings of women in white, such as *Symphony in*

⁴⁷ Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, translated by Stephan Sartarelli (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 309.

⁴⁸ Merrill, 275. In a letter to Mrs. George Lewis, Wilde mentions his three heroes: Henry Du Pré Labouchere, Lawrence Irving, and Whistler. Hart-Davis, 105.

⁴⁹ Oscar Wilde, "The House Beautiful," in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989), 916. As cited in Merrill, 310.

⁵⁰ Ellmann, 257-8.

⁵¹ Wilde, *Salome*, 7-8.

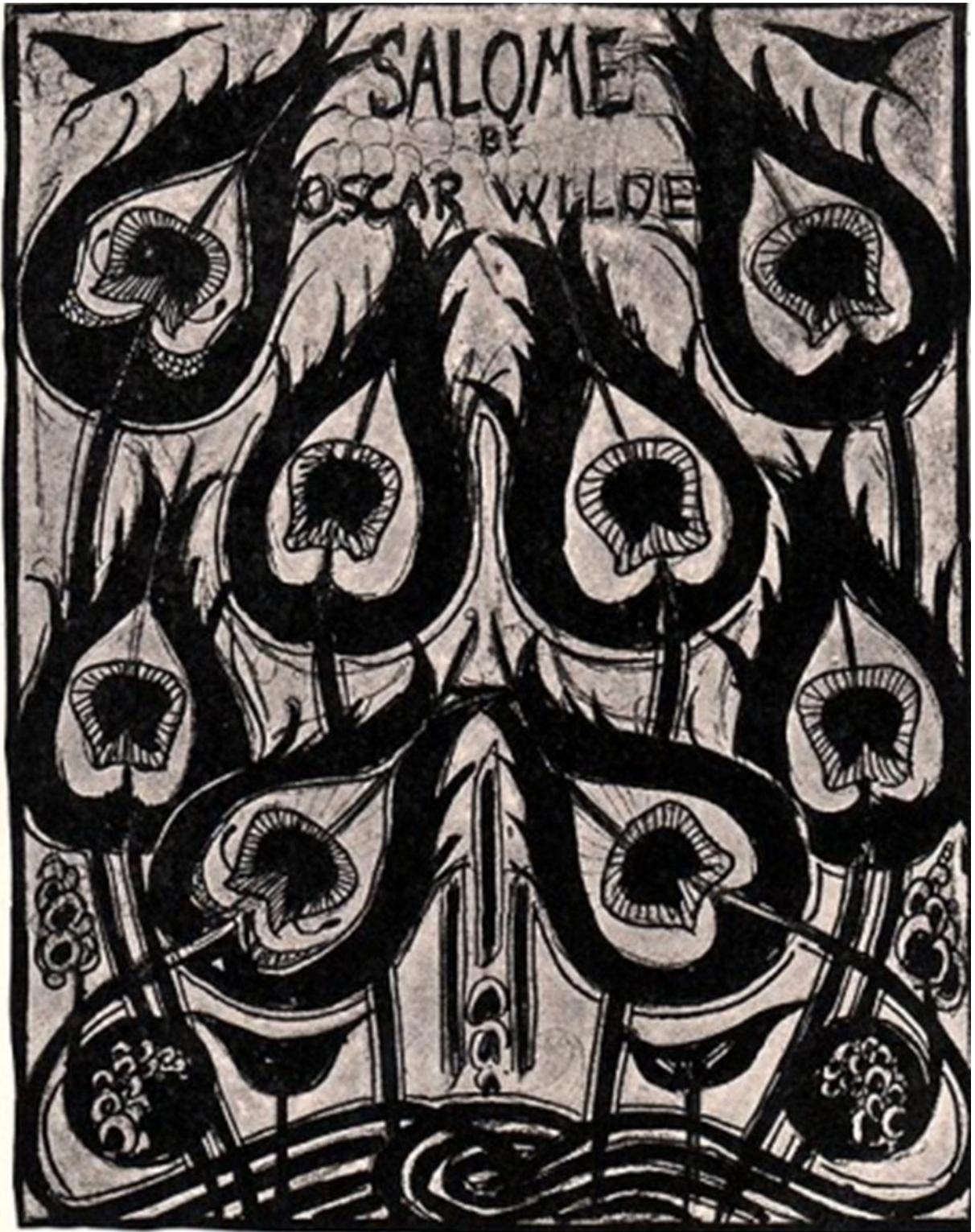


Fig. 23: Beardsley, Sketch for cover design, *Salome*

White No. 1: The White Girl. Moreover, when Salome requests the head of Iokanaan from Herod, he offers her fifty peacocks instead. He tells her that “their beaks are gilded with gold and the grains that they eat are smeared with gold.” Salome refuses them, and Herodias tells Herod “you are ridiculous with your peacocks.”⁵² This exchange could be a good-natured dig at Whistler, who filled Leyland’s dining room with golden peacocks.

Therefore, while it may seem at first glance that Beardsley’s compulsive utilization of Whistler’s motifs is incongruous with Wilde’s text, a deeper examination insinuates that Wilde would have approved of a parody of Whistler and his work in conjunction with *Salome*.

⁵² Wilde, *Salome*, 58-9.

CHAPTER 5

FEMININE WILES: SALOME AND GENDER AMBIGUITY

In order to evaluate Beardsley's illustrations for *Salome*, it is necessary to understand the politics of gender in late nineteenth-century England. The roles of women changed dramatically during the latter half of the century, with women beginning to make inroads towards gender equality and sexual liberation; Beardsley explores these issues in his illustrations.

During the second half of the nineteenth century in England, women began receiving more legal and social concessions, allowing for greater personal freedom. This shift in societal mores served to create a modern female archetype, generally referred to as the "New Woman." In her book *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics*, Linda Zatlin explores gender issues in *fin de siècle* England as they relate to Beardsley's body of work. Zatlin lists several laws that demonstrate the increasing legal rights of English women, including the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 extending the grounds for divorce to include cruelty, desertion, incest, rape, and sodomy, in some situations granting married women the same control over their property that single women already had.⁵³ The revised Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 allowed for an assaulted wife to separate from her husband and to retain custody of her young children, and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1874, and 1882 granted women control of any personal property they had owned before or acquired during marriage.⁵⁴

⁵³ At the same time, this act effectively equated sodomy with rape and incest, crimes that by definition are not committed with consent.

⁵⁴ Discussion of these laws can be found in Linda Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 11-12. For more information see O.R. McGregor, *Divorce in England: A Centenary Study* (London: Heinemann, 1959), 14-24, 36, 58-97.

Zatlin further suggests that formal education of women became prioritized during this time, as reform of the school system allowed women to receive an education equal to that of men, including matriculation at the university level.⁵⁵ A number of educators, regardless of reforms, still did not believe that higher education was beneficial to women; for example, Percy Gardner, in his 1897 article “Women at Oxford and Cambridge,” suggested that women would not profit from higher education because of their “feminine elements of mind and character.”⁵⁶ Gardner allowed that an “exceptional” woman could be allowed to attend Oxford or Cambridge, but failed to define the term; instead, he focused his argument on the majority of women, who he found to be “unexceptional.” Their admission, he wrote, would “unfit ordinary women for womanly tasks.”⁵⁷

Despite naysayers such as Gardner, the increase in educational opportunities for women resulted in more middle and upper class women in the workplace than ever before. New legal entitlements were accompanied by alterations in women’s economic and social standing. Women were able to find employment as teachers, nurses, secretaries, clerks, even lawyers and doctors. According to Zatlin, “women who worked hastened the demise of the Victorian stereotype of woman as a domestic creature who unequivocally submitted to her father’s or husband’s will.”⁵⁸ In fact, according to an 1890 statistical study of marriage rates in England and Wales conducted by Dr. William Ogle, marriages were more prevalent in geographical areas with higher female employment rates. Ogle interpreted this data as proof that men preferred to marry women who

⁵⁵ However, not all universities adhered to these reforms. The two most prestigious universities in England, Oxford and Cambridge, did not award degrees to women in the nineteenth century; at Oxford women were not awarded degrees until after WWI, while at Cambridge they were not awarded degrees until after WWII. Cited in Zatlin, 12. For more information see Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914* (Hamden: Archon, 1973), 3-67.

⁵⁶ Percy Gardner, ‘Women at Oxford and Cambridge’, *Quarterly Review*, 186 (Oct. 1897), p.540. Cited in Zatlin, 12.

⁵⁷ Gardner, 551.

⁵⁸ Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, 12.

were bringing in their own income. Ogle also compiled data showing that women in the middle and upper classes were marrying later due to their employment. He correlated this fact with the decline in birth rates, due to diminished years of fertility. However, as Ogle considered population growth in England and Wales to be increasing at an alarming rate, the decline in birth rates was a positive development in his eyes.⁵⁹

Although middle and upper class women were able to enjoy a level of independence at the university and in the workplace, the sexual freedom that had always been accessible to men remained out of their reach. Not only was a woman not encouraged to explore her sexuality, but also it was assumed that she had no desire to do so. In his 1892 study *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Richard von Krafft-Ebing suggests that “woman, however, if physically and mentally normal, and properly educated, has but little sensual desire.”⁶⁰ Moreover, Havelock Ellis wrote in his 1901 book *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* that, “By many, sexual anesthesia is considered natural in women.”⁶¹ Ellis also associated “the sexual impulse in women” with “passivity” and “need of stimulation” in order to achieve arousal, adding that “The youth spontaneously becomes a man; but the maiden—as it has been said—must be kissed into a woman.”⁶²

With female desire in question, Victorian erotica tended towards scenarios of female submission and domination. According to Zatlin, there were two types of male sexual fantasies during the 19th century: pornography and erotica (both were called erotica during that time). In erotica, sexuality is one part of a greater human relationship; while pornography is concerned

⁵⁹ Dr. William Ogle, “On Marriage-rates and Marriage-ages, with Special Reference to the Growth of Population,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 53 (1890), 267-80. Zatlin mentions Ogle’s study in an attempt to show that women were becoming more independent; however, Ogle does not interpret his data in that manner.

⁶⁰ Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. Harry E. Wedeck (New York: Putnam’s, 1965), 33. Cited in Amanda Fernbach, “Wilde’s ‘Salome’ and the Ambiguous Fetish,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29, 1 (2001), 212.

⁶¹ Havelock Ellis, “The Sexual Impulse in Women,” *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 1, 2 (New York: Random House, 1942), 191. Cited in Fernbach, 212.

⁶² Ellis, 205, 241.

only with sexual activity. Pornography replicated the conquest of women by men, portraying women as objects of male sexual desire who yearn to be controlled. Late Victorian pornography often depicted rape, flagellation and other types of physical reprisal, representing, according to Zatlin, the self-loathing men felt at their need for female submission as a measure of their masculinity. In this interpretation, sadistic acts against women served as retribution for their increasing commandeering of male roles. The desire of men to hold on to their superiority over women in a changing world is also demonstrated in pornography showing women being subjugated by improbable acts of male sexual prowess.⁶³

The ambivalence felt towards women during the late nineteenth century is palatable in Beardsley's drawings for *Salome*. Beardsley depicts Salome and other female characters as masculine and feminine, menacing and alluring, using a sly wit that satirizes social and artistic conventions in the representation of both Salome and women in general. Beardsley's illustrations mirror the tensions between those who embraced the idea of the New Woman, those who scoffed at it, and those who feared it.

Many social pundits who were against women's rights expressed their concern that independent women would lose their femininity. Beardsley parodies these views by suggesting the underlying fear behind these concerns: that a strong woman would weaken a man. To that end, Beardsley often presents Salome with an exaggerated masculinity that feminizes the men around her. In *The Peacock Skirt*, (Fig. 18, p.38) Beardsley reverses the traditional male and female roles in accordance to Wilde's text. The drawing depicts Salome and the Young Syrian. Salome is taller than the Syrian; her body curves around his, and her skirt obscures his legs. A long-stemmed peacock feather crosses over the Syrian's knees, showing the power of Salome's sexuality over him. She leans towards him in a menacing way, her eyes boring into his, her

⁶³ See Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, p.20-21.

mouth open angrily. She appears to be strong and aggressive. The Syrian, on the other hand, is drawn in a contrapposto stance with one hand on his hip and the other limply extended; this serves to make him effeminate. He wears a tunic that would perhaps have been seen as an appropriate garment in the court of Herod. However, Beardsley presents the tunic as uplifted at the bottom with indications of motion around it, as if the Syrian were swiveling his hips like a young girl twirling her skirt. Furthermore, in *The Toilette of Salome II*, (Fig. 11, p.28) Beardsley puts nearly the same tunic on a female musician. In this scene, Salome is pictured as a man while the Young Syrian is the woman.

In *The Climax*, (Fig. 19, p.39) Beardsley presents Salome holding the head of the man whose death she has caused—this is the ultimate example of a strong woman emasculating a man. Salome’s bulbous chin and narrowed eyes framed by sharply-drawn eyebrows cause her to look masculine. She wears a loose robe that conceals her body, further serving to make her an androgynous figure. Her sash extends aggressively, piercing through the trail of blood dripping from the severed head as a penis would pierce through a virgin’s hymen. The blood seems to pool on the surface of a pond, out of which grows a lily with three protrusions on the top that mirror Beardsley’s signature. A lily pad with a non-flowering stem floats above it, directly under the figure of Salome. In Christian iconography, the lily represents chastity and purity, and is traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary, particularly in the Annunciation scene.⁶⁴ By featuring both a living and a dead lily in this scene, Beardsley is simultaneously referring to the physical chastity of Iokanaan and Salome, and the symbolic deflowering of both caused by Salome’s deadly desire.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Impelluso, 85; Rowena and Rupert Shepherd, *1000 Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 261.

⁶⁵ In Japan, the lily was believed to contain a drug that could alleviate grief; women wore the flowers in their belts in hopes of forgetting the pain of lost love. See Shepard, 261.

The lily was also a symbol for Wilde himself, as he was often seen carrying the flower; this is visualized in a caricature done of him from 1882 (Fig. 24).⁶⁶ Wilde alludes to this as well in the play. When Salome encounters Iokanaan for the first time, she describes his physique thusly: “I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! Thy body is white, like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed.”⁶⁷ After she has obtained his severed head, she croons to it, as if to a lover, “Thy body was a column of ivory set upon feet of silver. It was a garden full of doves and lilies of silver.”⁶⁸ According to Colin Cruise in his article “Versions of the Annunciation: Wilde’s Aestheticism and the Message of Beauty,” Wilde’s references to the lily serve to parody the Annunciation; the prophecy of female chastity proclaimed by the angel Gabriel has been bastardized by the personage of Salome.⁶⁹

In *The Stomach Dance* (Fig. 25), which illustrates Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils, Beardsley presents a woman who embodies both masculine and feminine characteristics. Salome has a feminine face with cat-like eyes and pouty lips, surrounded by a halo of dark hair decorated with vulval peacock feathers. Her rounded breasts are exposed, as are her abdomen and navel. Yet Beardsley undermines this by giving her masculine characteristics. She has an indentation on her clavicle that can be read as an Adam’s apple, and small dots leading from her navel to her waistline that could be hair. Beardsley even draws a rounded shape at crotch-level that may indicate male genitalia. Both her feminine beauty and her masculine aggression give her power in this scene.

⁶⁶ Colin Cruise, “Versions of the Annunciation: Wilde’s Aestheticism and the Message of Beauty,” in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*, ed. Elizabeth Prettejohn (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 169-71.

⁶⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, 21-22.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶⁹ Cruise, 182.

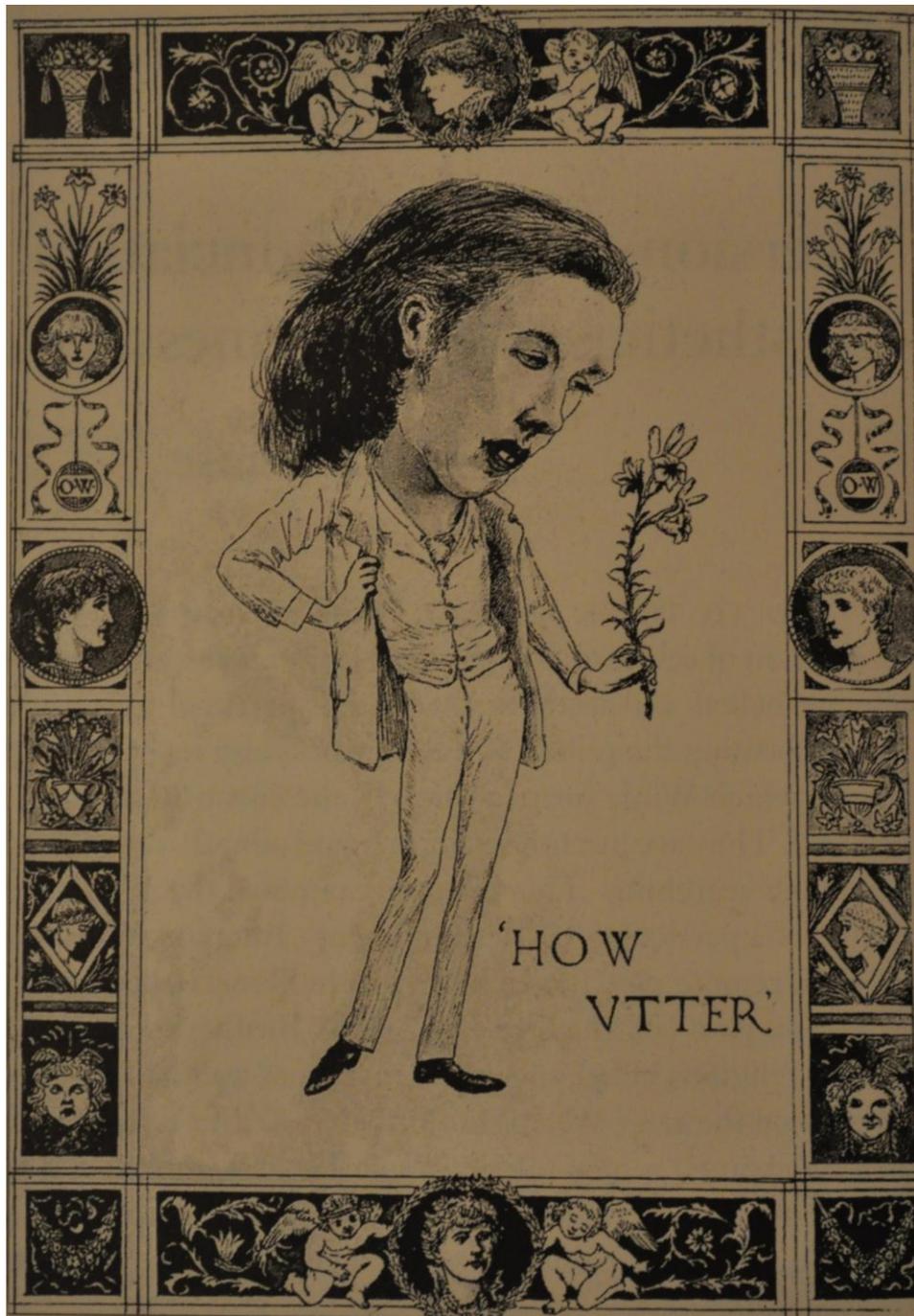


Fig. 24: 'How Utter!', caricature of Oscar Wilde, c. 1882, reproduced in Colin Cruise, "Versions of the Annunciation: Wilde's Aestheticism and the Message of Beauty," in *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England*



Fig. 25: Beardsley, *The Stomach Dance, Salome*

Moreover, by drawing roses floating around the dancing Salome and decorating her ankles, corset, and nipples, Beardsley exploits the multitude of meanings associated with roses to create a character both masculine and feminine. The rose was associated with Venus, the goddess of love, during antiquity; it also had a funerary connotation. In the Christian tradition, roses symbolize beauty and purity, and are often associated with the Virgin Mary; the thorns represent the Virgin's suffering over the death of her son, and consequently man's suffering.⁷⁰ In *The Stomach Dance*, Beardsley's Salome embodies the rose: she is beautiful, virginal, and feminine, yet her masculine and aggressive qualities are like thorns that cause pain and death.

In the drawing *John and Salome* (Fig. 20, p.41), Beardsley further blurs stereotypical gender lines through androgyny. Two figures of similar height face each other; both wear loose robes. They look so much alike that they appear to be doppelgangers. Salome is indicated by her exposed breasts and skirt decorated with Whistler's butterflies. Yet her slouchy stance is masculine. She wears a headdress made of sharp phallic symbols, further emphasizing her role as sexual aggressor. John (Iokanaan), on the other hand, has the full, flowing locks of a woman, and his robe falls provocatively off his shoulder, revealing the line of his breast. He has been emasculated by Salome's lust; in turn, that lust has made her more masculine.

Beardsley likewise upends the commonly held view that women were not sexual creatures. He goes much further than exploiting Salome's nakedness, as artists such as Moreau had previously done, which would objectify instead of empowering her. Instead, Beardsley shows her controlling her own arousal. In the illustration for the list of pictures (Fig. 10, p.25), Salome faces away from the viewer, her head turned back towards in a coquettish manner. As Zatlin has pointed out, the angle of her right arm, hidden from view by her body, implies that she

⁷⁰ Impelluso, 118; Shepherd, 261.

is masturbating.⁷¹ Beardsley uses a similar visual device in *Salome on Settle* (Fig. 26).⁷² Salome sits on a large ottoman with her back to the viewer. Her dressing gown is open, and her left arm is bent at an angle that indicates that her hand is in her lap. In her right hand she holds a baton, suggesting a stand-in for a phallus.⁷³ Her mouth is open in an expression of ecstasy, and her foot points upwards, as if she is in the midst of a toe-curling orgasm.

In *The Toilette of Salome II* (Fig. 11, p.28), Beardsley makes explicit what is implied in the aforementioned drawings. Salome sits at her dressing table in front of a large mirror, her robe open to reveal her naked body. Her hand is between her legs; she appears to be pleasuring herself. Her head is tilted down as though she is watching herself masturbate, and her mouth is opened in a contented smile. Despite the presence of her attendants, Salome is having a private moment, not done to titillate the males in the room but for her own pleasure. This scene is a blatant slap in the face to those who considered female sexuality to be solely for the benefit of men.

In his text, Wilde also treats the fears that men had about an independent woman in a satirical way. Salome is presented as an overblown caricature of the common stereotypes of female behavior. She is governed by emotion instead of reason; she uses her sexuality to manipulate the men around her while keeping them at bay with a cloak of virginity. Finally, her overwhelming lust causes the unjust murder of a holy man. This would appear misogynistic, if not for the fact that Wilde depicts Herod in the same manner. Herod's obsession with Salome makes him illogical; his desire for her causes him to agree to an act that he knows in his heart to

⁷¹ Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, 114.

⁷² A settle is a long seat or bench. This drawing was removed by the publisher before the first addition was released, and not published until after the turn of the century. I find that amusing that this drawing, which can be read as sexual but is not explicit in any way, was considered less appropriate than a drawing like *Enter Herodias*, which depicts both male and female nudity and an man with a possible erection.

⁷³ I am joined in this interpretation by Stanley Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley: Imp of the Perverse* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 77. As cited in Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, 114.



Fig. 26: Beardsley, *Salome on Settle, Salome*

be wrong. Wilde implies that capitulating to one's desires is not a feminine trait, but a human one.

Wilde also makes the voice of reason in the play a female one: Salome's mother, Herodias. Throughout the play, she is calm and pragmatic, whether ridiculing visiting soldiers speaking of the miracles of Christ, or admonishing Herod for his incestuous desire for Salome. While other characters speak in overly poetic metaphors, Herodias speaks plainly, irritated by the absurdity of those around her. For example, when Herod compares the moon to a woman in a long-winded speech I will quote in full later on, Herodias responds, "No; the moon is like the moon, that is all."⁷⁴ She condones Salome's request for the head of Iokanaan, not because she sympathizes with Salome's bizarre yearning to kiss the head, but because the death of Iokanaan removes a thorn from her side, as he had been speaking out against her. Herodias's power lies not in her sexuality, but in her intelligence. Wilde goes against the stereotype of an illogical, weak-minded woman by making Herodias a new type of woman, one ruled not by passion but by her practicality and ambition. As I have shown, this view is complemented by Beardsley's visual representation of women in his illustrations.

Another way in which Wilde satirizes the commonly held views of women was by upending the idea that women were merely objects to be gazed upon. The words "look" and "looking" are used by Wilde over fifty times in the play. For example, when the Young Syrian expounds upon the beauty of Salome, the Page of Herodias responds, "You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people like that."⁷⁵ The Page is not alone in noticing the lustful gaze of the Syrian; Herod says of him, "I remember that I saw that

⁷⁴ Wilde, *Salome*, 28.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

he looked languorously at Salome. Truly, I thought he looked too much at her.”⁷⁶ Yet Herod continually looks at Salome himself, despite the fact that Herodias repeatedly warns him not to. “You are looking again at my daughter,” she admonishes him shortly before he asks Salome to dance for him. “You must not look at her. I have already said so.”⁷⁷

Wilde’s absurdly repetitive use of the word “look,” serves to satirize the objectification of women. Furthermore, Wilde blurs the line between passive object and aggressive subject by making Salome not only a target of the salacious contemplations of others, but also a perpetrator of the destructive gaze herself. She speaks of looking at Iokanaan, lusting over his body, then his hair, and finally his mouth. Iokanaan implores her not to look at him, and will not return her gaze; even after he is dead, Salome still begs him to look at her. The gaze is not objectifying to Salome, but instead empowering; Iokanaan refuses to regard Salome because those who do fall under her control.

Moreover, Wilde mocks male fears of manipulative female sexuality by making it not merely emasculating but literally deadly. When Salome ignores the Syrian in favor of Iokanaan, he kills himself out of grief. Herod’s incestuous desire for Salome culminates in his unwilling ordering of Iokanaan’s death. Moreover, at the end of the play, Salome is killed on Herod’s orders. This could be seen as Wilde punishing Salome, and by implication the modern woman, for her liberated sexual appetites. However, Herod’s betrayal of Salome is due to his disgust after witnessing her necrophilic kissing of Iokanaan’s severed head, a plot point that takes aggressive female sexuality to its most preposterous conclusion. Her murder is also exaggerated and absurdly violent; unlike Iokanaan, who is executed off stage, Salome is crushed by Herod’s soldiers with their shields in full view of the audience. The play abruptly ends at this climactic

⁷⁶ Wilde, *Salome*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

moment without the customary dénouement, infusing the moment with an ambiguity that undermines any perceived strictures on female sexuality.

In his drawing that accompanies this scene, identified in the list of pictures as the “cul-de-lampe (Fig. 27),” Beardsley picked up on this absurdity.⁷⁸ The drawing features two figures, one a masked man and the other a satyr, carrying the nude body of Salome. These figures wear gleeful expressions, as if Salome’s death is an amusing joke. She is not being lowered into a coffin, but instead into a powder bowl, which is partially obscured by an oversized powder puff. The container is decorated with roses, suggesting that upon death, her sexual power is obscured by a traditional femininity. Now that Salome is dead, she has become an aesthetic object, reduced to the mere artifice represented by makeup. The drawing, then, is a perfect complement to Wilde’s textual satire of female sexuality and empowerment.

⁷⁸ A cul-de-lampe is the ornament placed at the bottom of a page at the end of a chapter or book. Zatlin refers to this drawing as “The Burial of Salome.” Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, 95-6.



Fig. 27: Beardsley, *The Burial of Salome*, cul-de-lampe for *Salome*

CHAPTER 6

THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME: OSCAR WILDE AND HOMOSEXUALITY

During the nineteenth century, homosexuals were forced to keep their activities behind closed doors, cloaking their relationships in euphemisms if indeed speaking of them at all. Not even a famous and well-respected writer like Oscar Wilde could get away with bringing homosexual practices out into the open, as he found out to his detriment.

Wilde appeared in three trials in 1895. These highly publicized cases, with their lurid descriptions of male intimacy, effectively dragged the issue of homosexuality out of the proverbial closet. In the first, he sued Lord Queensberry for libel. As the father of Wilde's companion (and translator of *Salome* from French to English) Lord Alfred Douglas, Queensberry had obtained a copy of a love letter that Wilde had written to Douglas. His many attempts to break apart the couple failed, including cutting his son off from his inheritance and threatening Wilde for nearly a year. As a last resort, he left a card with the porter at the Albemarle Club, where Wilde was a member, accusing Wilde of being a sodomite (although he misspelled the word). Wilde then sued him for libel. However, Queensberry had accumulated damning evidence against Wilde, and he was acquitted when the jury found the statements on the card to be true.⁷⁹ Due to the Labouchère Amendment to the 1885 Criminal Law Act, which made all homosexual

⁷⁹ H. Montgomery Hyde, ed., *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: University Books, 1948), 9-57.

acts illegal, Wilde was then charged with gross indecency.⁸⁰ He was acquitted on eight counts. On the other charges, the jury was unable to reach a verdict, and therefore Wilde was released on bail to await his retrial.⁸¹

In the middle of his second trial, a conversation about trial strategy was recorded between Wilde and his later biographer, Frank Harris. Wilde said: “You talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent.” Harris: “But you are innocent, aren’t you?” Wilde: “No. I thought you knew that all along.” Harris: “No. I did not know. I did not believe the accusation. I did not believe it for a moment.” This exchange occurred despite the fact that young men were testifying that they had had sexual relations with Wilde; Harris thought they had been paid to lie on the stand.⁸²

This conversation seems to indicate that Wilde’s homosexuality was not obvious to all. Wilde had developed his dandy persona in 1877, and by 1882 was presenting himself as an effeminate aesthete; yet, neither strangers nor friends regarded him as a homosexual. It wasn’t until 1894 that “serious rumors about [Wilde’s] private life and habits became more persistent in both London and Paris,” according to English journalist Holbrook Jackson.⁸³ Moreover, many believed the allegations to be false. In his autobiography, W.B. Yeats, a longtime friend, wrote that he had believed Wilde was unjustly accused when the trial began. He said “I was certain that guilty or not guilty, he would prove himself a man.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Fernbach, 206. Also discussed in H. Montgomery Hyde, *The Other Love: An Historical and Contemporary Survey of Homosexuality in Britain* (London: Heinemann, 1970), 153-55.

⁸¹ Hyde, p.73-75.

⁸² Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Frank Harris, 1918), 286. As cited in Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.1.

⁸³ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1927), 95.

⁸⁴ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 285. Cited in Sinfield, 21.

Wilde's dandyism, aestheticism, and effeminacy, which today have become stereotypical indicators of homosexuality, did not prompt the same responses in his time; perhaps those traits became signs for homosexuality because of Wilde. Michel Foucault suggests that during the late nineteenth century, the homosexual:

became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species."⁸⁵

By the end of his third trial, in which Wilde was found guilty of several counts of gross indecency with another male person and sentenced to two years hard labor, Wilde had become the prime example of this "species", and his story its first cautionary tale.⁸⁶

Beardsley, too, is often assumed to prefer the company of men, due to his acquaintance with several well-known homosexuals; besides Wilde, these include his lifelong friend Robert Ross, a journalist and art critic who became the executor of Wilde's estate, and French poet André Raffalovich.⁸⁷ MacFall suggests that in an effort to keep up with his fashionable friends, Beardsley dressed and acted the part of the dandy, affecting a caustic wit and flippant manner in order to gain acceptance.⁸⁸

When the publication of *Salome* made Beardsley a star, he used his new-found clout to co-found and become the art editor of *The Yellow Book* in 1894. Published by John Lane and Bodley Head, *The Yellow Book* was a quarterly literary periodical that featured work by some of the top writers and artists of the day, including John Singer Sargent, Walter Sickert, Henry

⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 43.

⁸⁶ Hyde, *Trials*, 337-9.

⁸⁷ Zatlin, *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, 219.

⁸⁸ MacFall, 11-12, 19.

James, and H.G. Wells. After Wilde was outed during his infamous trials, the public assumed that Beardsley shared the same predilections, although MacFall asserts that the two men, while in the same social circle, were not intimate friends.⁸⁹ Due to the rumors and innuendo surrounding Beardsley, several members of the Bodley Head publishing list, urged on by novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward, threatened to withdraw their names if Lane did not fire Beardsley. Lane acquiesced, and Beardsley lost his job.

Despite this, there is scant evidence that conclusively proves that Beardsley had homosexual leanings. Zatlin contends that the mere fact that many of Beardsley's male figures have an androgynous appearance, and seem to lack sexual aggression, does not necessarily indicate a personal homosexuality.⁹⁰ In fact, such a description could apply to Beardsley himself; as a child, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and remained emaciated and sickly throughout his twenty-five years. Moreover, in his monograph on Beardsley, Brian Reade points to love letters Beardsley wrote at Brighton Grammar School to a Miss Felton; the letters indicate that Beardsley's disease-addled disposition prohibited him from exploring the relationship physically.⁹¹ Throughout Beardsley's youth, a time when homosexual tendencies might manifest themselves, there were no indicators of any same-sex attachments. Beardsley's closest relationship appears to have been with his sister Mabel, whom he lived with throughout his life; according to Reade, Beardsley's primary sexual encounters were incestuous, and heterosexual.⁹²

Whatever his sexual orientation, in *Salome*, Beardsley alludes to homosexual practices and desires; and includes caricatures of Wilde, while keeping them abstruse enough to satisfy

⁸⁹ MacFall, 61-2.

⁹⁰ Zatlin, *Victorian Sexual Politics*, 73.

⁹¹ Brian Reade, *Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), 15, 20. According to Reade, these letters are privately owned and undated.

⁹² Reade cites a correspondence between David Carr and Olive Scanlan, a friend of Mabel Beardsley, in which Scanlan tells of the siblings' acknowledgment of a sexual relationship. Reade, 20.

Lane, the book's publisher.⁹³ These caricatures, which are identified as being of Wilde by Robert Ross, comprise the artist's most obvious references to Wilde.⁹⁴ They are often cited as proof that Beardsley was making fun of Wilde and his play. However, I would suggest that they serve as veiled allusions to Wilde's homosexuality.

In *The Woman in the Moon* (Fig. 28), the frontispiece for *Salome*, and in *A Platonic Lament* (Fig. 29), Beardsley has given the moon Wilde's face. In the text, however, the moon is repeatedly associated with Salome. For example, in the opening scene of the play, the Page of Herodias describes the moon as "a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things."⁹⁵ This metaphor refers to Salome's necrophilic desire to kiss Iokanaan's decapitated head, and foreshadows her death. In another scene, Salome expounds upon the virginal qualities of the moon, indicating her own.⁹⁶ Later, the Young Syrian calls the moon "a little princess"; after he has killed himself because of Salome's indifference, the Page of Herodias says "Why did I not hide him from the moon?"⁹⁷ Most significantly, following a scene in which Salome attempts to seduce the still-living Iokanaan, Herod makes this speech:

The moon has a strange look tonight. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to cloth her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman... I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not?⁹⁸

⁹³ Some drawings were eliminated from the original publication of the play due to their indecency, including "The Toilette of Salome II" and "Salome on Settle."

⁹⁴ Robert Ross, "A Note on 'Salome,'" in Wilde, *Salome*, xv. This essay was originally published in the 1930 edition of the play.

⁹⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 17, 25.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 27-8.

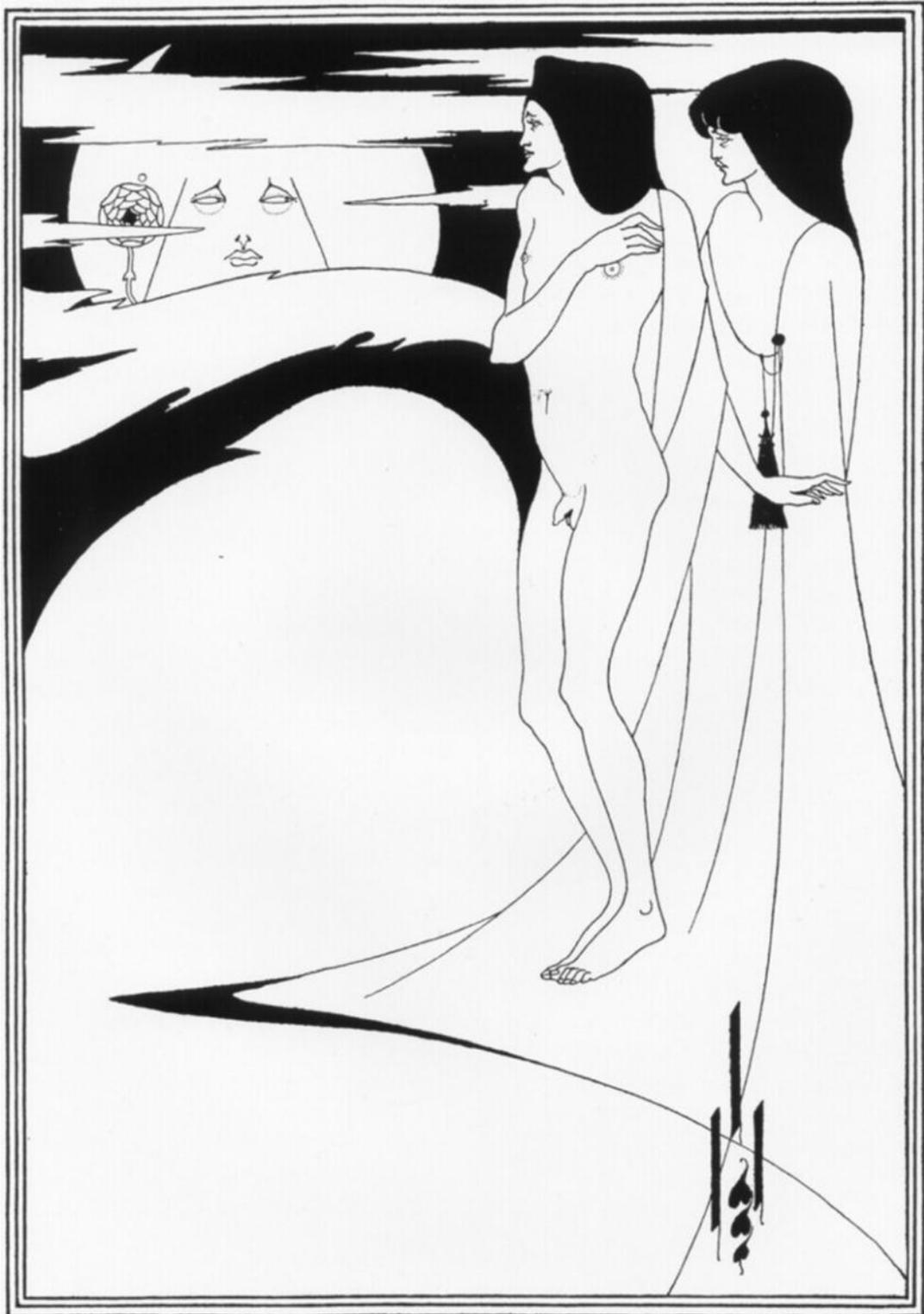


Fig. 28: Beardsley, *The Woman in the Moon, Salome*

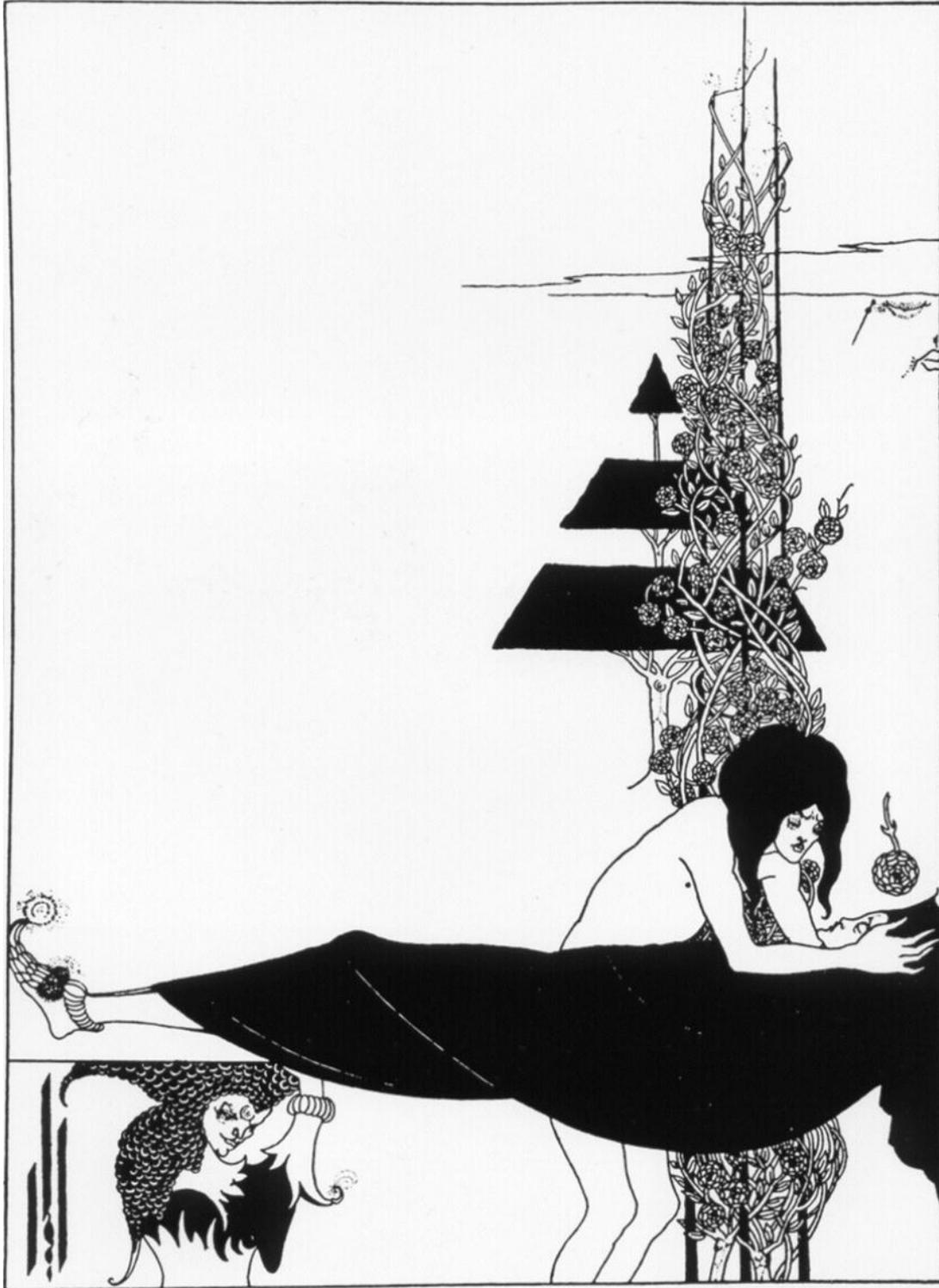


Fig. 29: Beardsley, *A Platonic Lament, Salome*

The audience hearing this monologue would have connected his description of the moon with Salome's lustful interaction with Iokanaan. Also, the emphasis on nakedness foreshadows Salome's upcoming striptease. Iokanaan prophesizes that the "the moon shall become like blood."⁹⁹ After Salome has agreed to dance for Herod and is preparing to do so, Iokanaan's prophecy is fulfilled: Herod comments that the moon has become blood-red. This exchange alludes to the symbolic loss of Salome's virginity through both her erotic dance and her lust.¹⁰⁰

By drawing the moon as Oscar Wilde, Beardsley suggests that Salome is a representation of Wilde. Like Salome, Wilde was both effeminate and virile. Like Salome, Wilde had a public persona of propriety that hid private desires. And like Salome, his desires were ones that his society did not accept. In a way, Wilde does this himself in the text. When Salome visits Iokanaan and tries to seduce him, he repeatedly calls her the "daughter of Sodom."¹⁰¹ As the creator of the play, Wilde is in effect Salome's father; he appears to be making a veiled allusion to Salome as his daughter, and himself as a sodomite.

In *Enter Herodias*, (Fig. 30) Beardsley presents a caricature of Wilde as author and creator of the drama found in the play. Wilde wears a jester's cap with the head of an owl on the top, with wings that resemble sperms. He holds a copy of *Salome* in his arms, as well as a staff entwined with snakes. His sleeve is decorated with a rose, reminiscent of the rose on the moon in *The Woman in the Moon* (Fig. 28, p.68). Wilde appears to be in front of a curtain, gesturing at the scene above, as if he is introducing his play to the theater audience. The scene includes Herodias, whose full, bare breasts bulge over her corseted stomach. The robe of the bald man attending her juts out to form a triangle with a bulge at the apex; it appears as if he has an enormous erection. Furthermore, his small foot, covered in a decorative slipper, points at the

⁹⁹ Ibid, 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 53.

¹⁰¹ Wilde, *Salome*, 21-3.



Fig. 30: Beardsley, *Enter Herodias, Salome*

phallic candles below. Wilde's outstretched hand indicates the central candle, whose extended flame appears to be about to set fire to the possible erection of the man on the left. This could refer to the taboo of homosexual desire. Directly above Wilde stands a nude male holding a powder puff and a mask; he appears to be staring at Herodias's breasts. This figure perhaps denotes the closeted homosexual, who was forced to wear a mask of heterosexuality.

Beardsley further explores this theme in his caricature of Wilde in the drawing *The Eyes of Herod* (Fig. 21, p.42), with Wilde standing in for Herod. Herod/Wilde and Salome are separated by five long tapered candles with billowing flames. Through the flames, he surreptitiously glances at Salome's exposed breast, as she gazes back at him with contempt. Again, Beardsley is commenting on Wilde's societally unacceptable yearnings by likening him to a man that lusted after his own step-daughter. This could be read as contempt on Beardsley's part regarding homosexuality, but I might argue instead that Beardsley was offering Wilde a subtle warning.

In addition to commenting on Wilde's sexuality specifically, Beardsley also makes allusions to homosexuality in general that we find mirrored in the text. When the Young Syrian kills himself, the Page of Herodias laments his death as though he is mourning a lover:

I gave him a little box full of perfumes, and a ring of agate that he wore always on his hand. In the evening we were wont to walk by the river, and among the almond-trees, and he used to tell me of the things of his country. He spake ever very low. The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute...¹⁰²

Wilde makes it clear that the Page was in love with the Syrian, despite his passion for Salome; Beardsley's *A Platonic Lament* (Fig. 29, p.69) makes visual this idea. The Syrian lays dead covered in a black shroud. The nude Page stands over him, his genitals obscured by the body of the Syrian. He holds the Syrian's head in his hands with a gentle caress. The caricature of Wilde

¹⁰² Wilde, *Salome*, 27.

as the moon looks on with downturned eyes. The tenderness of this scene, combined with the presence of Wilde, makes it clear that the Page is grieving the loss of the man he loved.

The title of the drawing, *Platonic Lament*, (Fig. 27, p.62) supports this reading: while the term “Platonic” can mean a non-sexual relationship, it also refers to another use of the word during this time. In the mid-nineteenth century, a revival in the study of Plato was popularized by Oxford scholar Benjamin Jowett. While Jowett’s approach ignored or suppressed the homoerotic subtexts of Plato’s writings, his pupil Walter Pater and the essayist John Addington Symonds, brought this aspect of Plato’s writings to the forefront of the English imagination. Pater taught classes at Oxford on Plato’s *Republic* from 1875 to 1892, publishing his lectures in the collection *Plato and Platonism* in 1893; he also wrote books on Winckelmann, Leonardo and Michelangelo, in which he discussed Plato in terms of homosexuality. Symonds, too, wrote texts with a homoerotic bent, such as a translation of Michelangelo’s poems, in which he added back the masculine pronouns to indicate that these poems were written to a man. According to Patricia Cruzalegui Sotelo in her book *The Platonic Experience in Nineteenth-Century England*, the Plato these writers examined was “the least academic of all and perhaps the one most remembered today. He is the most literary Plato, the most gay Plato, and in formal terms the most attractive one.”¹⁰³ Wilde embraced this interpretation of Plato, as evidenced by this famous speech from his second trial:

‘The love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathon, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect.”¹⁰⁴

As the homoerotic Plato came into vogue, the term “Platonism” became, in the words of

¹⁰³ Patricia Cruzalegui Soletto, *The Platonic Experience in Nineteenth-Century England*, Yannis Giannaris, trans. (Catalan: PPU, 2006), 591.

¹⁰⁴ Hyde, *Trials*, 201.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, “unobjectionable as a euphemism” for homosexuality.¹⁰⁵

Therefore, with Beardsley titling his drawing thusly, the scene within may be read as a not-so-veiled reference to Wilde’s homosexual love.

Beardsley also alludes to “the love that dare not speak its name” in *The Toilette of Salome II*. (Fig. 11, p.28) A nude male figure with exposed pubic hair sits with his hands between his legs, as if he is masturbating. The design on the stringed instrument points at his lap for emphasis. He is not looking at the nude figure of Salome pleasuring herself, but instead at the exposed genitals of the hermaphroditic figure opposite him. The masked man above also gazes leeringly at this figure, instead of at Salome. The hermaphrodite watches Salome in the mirror she faces, yet he is not aroused, indicated by his flaccid penis. While the viewer may be titillated by Salome’s nudity and private sexual act, the male figures in this scene are only interested in one another. By inserting veiled references to homosexuality into his drawings, Beardsley cleverly parodies a story normally depicted as a voyeuristic heterosexual fantasy.

¹⁰⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, vol. II, 1869-1875 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 261. As cited in Soleto, 593. For more information see Part Six of Soleto, and Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The story of Salome has been explored by a myriad of artists and writers since it first appeared in the Bible; the version put forth by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley is among the most famous. The traditional approach to the study of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salome* focuses on the Freudian theory of the sexual fetish, and on the hypothesis that Beardsley's illustrations do not belong with Wilde's text. These interpretations have an evident validity, as they have been repeated and reexamined for a century. Nonetheless, a parodic interpretation helps to describe the often bizarre imagery found in both the text and the illustrations, and also ties them together as a complete work of art.

As enthusiastic participants in the aesthetic movement, Wilde and Beardsley were singularly equipped to both poke fun at and pay tribute to elements of that artistic lifestyle; and found the perfect outlet in the oft-repeated tale of Salome. While Wilde realized this feat through his exaggerated and often deliciously ludicrous text, Beardsley achieved it through a parody of the European fascination with Japanese influenced aestheticism, and its devoted proponent, James McNeill Whistler. Further, Wilde and Beardsley combined their considerable talents to gently satirize male trepidation towards the New Woman, and the closeting of homosexuality. The collaboration of the two, through the tale of Salome, yielded an encompassing summation of *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism and the sexual politics of Victorian England.

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