Illustrating Wilde: An examination of Aubrey Beardsley's interpretation of *Salome*

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[The author wrote this essay for Professor Troy Thomas's graduate-level course, HUM 530 Narrative in Art and Literature at Pennsylvania State University. In the original text of the play the name of the speaker occurs on a line previous to the dialogue. I have placed them on the same line for easier reading on the WWW. — George P. Landow]

Respectability is a mask maintained by a conspiracy of silence [Burdette 42]

Oscar Wilde wrote his original, French version of the one-act tragedy of *Salome* in 1891 while living in Paris, the epicenter of the transnational yet distinctly Parisian movement of Symbolism (Balakian 9) he was so attracted to. The play was initially banned from theaters in England after rehearsals for its performance were already underway, purportedly on the basis of an old law forbidding the stage interpretation of biblical figures. It was more likely than not that the true reason behind the ban was the overt sexual passion permeating the work and Wilde's portrayal of woman in extreme opposition to the traditional notion of virtuous, pure, clean and asexual womanhood the Victorians felt comfortable living with. Wilde had struck a nerve in deviating from the prevailing belief of the era that "no truth that was unrespectable should be mentioned" (Burdett 40), offering a view of woman which society did not want to consider and an expression of the latent fear of her which men preferred to keep as repressed as they liked to keep their women.

Enter Beardsley. A young artist of only twenty-one, Aubrey Beardsley was just making a name for himself around the time of the first publication of Salome. Though acquaintances, the two artists were not friends and in spite of the impact of the play on him being so powerful as to spur him to illustrate its climactic moment entirely independently and spontaneously, Beardsley shared the opinion of many of the two men's contemporaries that the originality of Wilde's work was questionable.

Wilde's many influences were so obviously evident in Salome that he was accused of nothing less than shameless plagiarism. The victims of his alleged crime included Flaubert, with his short story of Herodias, Moreau, with his paintings of *Salome Dancing before Herod, Tattooed Salome*, and *The Apparition*, Huysman, with his novel *A Rebours* (text), where two of Moreau's paintings are described in chapter Five, and Mallarmé, with his poem "Herodiade," depicting the beheading of John the Baptist. Though certainly and visibly inspired by all of these works, Wilde's Salome was nonetheless different than any seen before.

Its originality was underlined and compounded by the illustrations made by Beardsley for the work's English edition of 1894. In them we see an "empowered woman, coldly aware and in control of her sexuality" (Bielski 47) yet never actually giving herself to any man, thus dually enraging him as she had thus appropriated for herself the role of the one who calls the shots traditionally reserved for the 'superior' sex. This is a woman who was to be unspoken of in the century of outward respectability. Yet her menacing presence was lurking behind dark corners and threatening every man with the loss of his power and thus his manhood.

There were strong undercurrents at work in redefining Woman in the traditionally patriarchic Victorian society. The second half of the century reaped the benefits of the first efforts of organized feminism and saw reforms in divorce law, property law and the school system, giving women more dignity and equality than they had previously enjoyed. Complacent with their social progress on the surface, within the men trembled at the fear and uncertainty of the threat posed by the loss of their meek and submissive household innocents. The reemergence of the popular subject of the *femme fatale* in much of the art of the day was an expression of this terror which consumed them.
J’ai baisé ta bouche

Beardsley's visual interpretation of Wilde's *femme fatale* was published in the debut of the London journal, *The Studio*, in April of 1893 (see Fig. 1). Published with eight other drawings of his, the title of the *Salome* illustration was an echo of her final words before her death — *J'ai Baisé ta Bouche, Iokanaan* ("I Have Kissed Your Mouth, Iokanaan"). The illustration resonated astoundingly with Wilde. Apparently feeling he had found a kindred soul in Beardsley, he soon delivered him a copy of *Salome* with the inscription, "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, beside myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance." Through this seeming marriage of minds a sort of 'collaboration' was born. Wilde commissioned Beardsley to illustrate all of *Salome*.

The public was outraged when the English edition of the work was published with its illustrations and Wilde himself was taken aback when he laid eyes upon Beardsley's completed drawings. Not only did he find their style inappropriate, but the illustrations had caused such public controversy with their fascinating, grotesque appeal that Wilde was concerned they would overshadow his work and "reduce the text to the role of 'illustrating Aubrey's illustrations'" (qtd. in Kravec 30). Further, since the publishing of the English edition many have posed the question of whether or not the illustrations even corresponded to the written text.

When considering this question one should be clear about what is meant by the term illustration. While many manuals in the nineteenth century insisted the illustrator "was not at liberty to paint or draw his own unaided imaginings; he is merely interpreting another's words into a graphic representation" (qtd. in Owens 81), in *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions*, James Heffernan points out that, according to Martin Meisel, there is in fact a distinction between the nineteenth century comprehension of the terms illustration and realization. "While a realization faithfully recreated a verbal description or a painting on the stage . . . illustration meant "enrichment and embellishment" on the page, with the artist's imagination freely at work in the two dimensions" (qtd. in Heffernan 201). Further, it was not at all uncommon for the author of a work which was to be illustrated to be surprised by the final product he or she had commissioned as in the 1890s the writer and illustrator rarely, if ever, actually worked together. On the contrary, it was customary for the illustrator to receive the manuscript from the publisher and work independently with no interaction whatsoever with the author (Heffernan 201).

The Toilette of Salome I and II

If one adds to that the driving principle behind symbolism — representing something rather than showing it — it would be difficult to accuse Beardsley of deviously veering from the text and creating something irrelevant for no reason other than to indulge in the aesthetic belief of 'art for art's sake.' That said, while working on the commission Beardsley himself confessed in a letter to art historian Robert Ross that he had "withdrawn three of the illustrations and supplied their places with three new ones (simply beautiful and quite irrelevant)" (qtd. in Greslé 25). Some believe these illustrations to be *The Toilette of Salome I*, *The Toilette of Salome II*, and perhaps *Salome on Settle*. I will not include an examination of *Salome on Settle* in this work, not only because it was not published until the 1907 edition of the play but also because I believe it to truly be quite irrelevant, significant only in the fact that it alludes to possible auto-eroticism in Salome's holding of the phallic symbol as she sheepishly looks back at the observer. I do believe, though, it is likely that this was one of the three drawings Beardsley had referred to in the above quote. On the other hand I do not believe *The Toilette of Salome I* or *II* could have been among these irrelevant illustrations as history tells us that *The Toilette of Salome II* was forbidden by the censors and thus replaced with *The Toilette of Salome I*, in an altered form, indicating that they were made and remade with a purpose, not exclusively for their beauty. The published version is placed beside the following text:

HEROD. No, no, Salome. It is not that thou desirest. Do not listen to thy mother's voice. She is ever giving thee counsel. Do not heed her.
SALOME. It is not my mother's voice that I heed. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Iokanaan in a silver charger. You have sworn an oath, Herod. Forget not that you have sworn an oath.

HEROD. I know it. I have sworn an oath by my gods. I know it well. But I pray thee, Salome, ask of me something else. Ask of me the half of my kingdom, and I will give it thee. But ask not of me what they lips have asked.

SALOME. I ask of you the head of Iokanaan.

HEROD. No, no, I will not give it thee.

SALOME. You have sworn an oath, Herod.

HERODIAS. Yes, you have sworn an oath. Everybody heard you. You swore before everybody.

HEROD. Peace, woman! It is not to you I speak.

The text appears to bear no direct correlation to the illustration which accompanies it. But if we regard Beardsley as illustrator, not realizer, we can see in the image the self-satisfied Salome, for the first time ever in a treatment of the story herself desiring the head of John the Baptist, smugly sitting on a phallic symbol she can almost be said to be sneering at, satisfied with herself and her approaching victory. Unlike in The Climax, dealt with below, her hair is here perfectly composed, reflecting her control of the situation at hand. If viewed in such a manner, it can be said that the illustration in fact does parallel the text, as it is expressing its mood and Salome's newfound power and awareness of it. Her satisfied expression can also be attributed to auto-erotic activity, for it can be argued that her dress is concealing just that beneath it, perhaps mirroring the satisfaction she feels in her domination in negotiations with Herod. The suggestion of auto-eroticism is far more overt in The Toilette of Salome II; in this initial drawing Salome's arms are not hidden under a gown and she is visibly naked, clothed only by a robe thrown over her back and appearing to be on the verge of slipping off her body, leaving her and her pleasure entirely exposed.

In The Toilette of Salome I we can also see two pairs of scissors, one in the pocket of the Pierrot-Harlequin and one on the third shelf from the bottom of the dressing table, representative of castration, which is at once a foreshadowing of the prophet's looming decapitation and an expression of the fear felt by Victorian men at the prospect of the loss of their manhood and thus power in the face of the growing strength and independence of women. The Harlequin hair-dresser is wearing both the mask Wilde and Beardsley strived to peel off of hypocritical Victorian society and the mask they themselves were forced to wear as homosexuals leading double-lives. Aside from the mask bringing homosexuality to mind, the Harlequin-Pierrot himself, holding a symbolic powder-puff in one hand — a slang term for homosexuals in the late nineteenth century (Owens 91) — is in his androgyn and role a representation of homosexuality, criminalized in the nineteenth century. Some regard the Harlequin as Beardsley's insertion of himself in the work, expressing his own role in both the subject matter and creation, I would say even decoration, of the work. On the bottom shelf we see books which are traditionally considered to be decadent, including Emile Zola's Nana, Paul Verlaine's Fêtes galantes, and the writings of the Marquis de Sade, among others. Owens believed that the inclusion of these titles was more than just a reference to Decadence but a "joke more subtle in that they were all banned or suppressed in the late nineteenth century. Beardsley takes the opportunity to needle Wilde with these reminders of the humiliating fate of Salome" (Owens 99).

The Climax

In stark contrast to the Toilette illustrations, Beardsley's initial Salome drawing, published in The Studio, and its modified version in the published English edition of Salome were indeed supreme 'realizations' of a specific moment in time suspended in perversity and powerfully expressed in the play. The illustration of The Climax was placed opposite the following text, painfully pouring out of Salome:
Ah! Thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now . . . But wherefore dost thou not look at me, Iokanaan? Thine eyes that were so terrible, so full of rage and scorn, are shut now. Wherefore are they shut? Open thine eyes! . . . Thou wouldst not have none of me, Iokanaan. Thou rejectedst me . . . Well, I still live, but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me . . . I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth.

Both text and corresponding illustration depict Salome in a state of perverse ecstasy coupled with suffering as she holds the lifeless head of Iokanaan in her hands. The tormented virgin's hunger for his body overcame her that same evening during the celebration of her stepfather's birthday. Her stepfather was Herod, Tetrarch of Judea. Lusting after Salome (who was, in fact, his niece, as his brother was the first to marry Herodias, Salome's mother), Herod begs her to dance for him, offering in return anything she desires, even half his kingdom if need be. Held captive in a cistern is Iokanaan, the prophet (John the Baptist). Salome has by this moment grown to desire him passionately but, his chastity unassailable, he refuses her advances. When pressed enough by the Tetrarch to dance, she concedes. In return she requests the head of the prophet, in punishment for his unrequited love.

In reading the text we feel her perverted elation as she kisses the lips of the dead prophet whose mouth she has likened to 'ripe fruit' and 'a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory,' as if his lips truly were meant to be feasted on. Beardsley brilliantly captures and shares the ardor of the moment just after Salome had acquiesced to her necrophilic appetite and in his illustration we see her literally floating in the air, lifted to a state of suspended rapture above a puddle of blood from whence a lily of the perverse grows tall and erect.

Just as her body is levitating above the confines of earthly morality in its state of twisted frenzy, her hair too is rising, an extension of her mood of supreme elation, vibrating and writhing and curling with pleasure. The medusa-like locks mirror those of Iokanaan, though his tendrils in contrast hang limply from his decapitated head. In the upper left-hand corner of the picture we are reminded of the 'clusters of black grapes' to which Salome previously compared Iokanaan's hair in the text, again speaking of his body as something to be devoured, ravaged, thus reversing the traditional roles of woman and man in regards to sexuality.

Woman's hair accounts for a significant element in Symbolist iconography and as Robert Goldwater has pointed out in his book Symbolism, "woman's hair, through representation and design, becomes the symbolic expression of the moral forces which, for good or ill, woman exercises over the will and psyche of man" (Goldwater 67). Indeed the now ghoulish Salome's snake-like coils of hair can here be seen to represent her moral depravity through which she tried to divest the prophet of his virtue and when unsuccessful divested him of his life, leaving nothing stirring in him but the blood dripping from his head and into a sea of blackness.

Another illustration that bears a vraisemblance to the text is the frontispiece (see Fig. 6). There are three generally accepted interpretations of who it is depicted in this illustration: Narraboth (the Young Syrian) and Salome, Iokanaan and Salome, and the Page of Herodias and Narraboth. I am of the belief that the two characters depicted are the Page of Herodias and Narraboth, the frontispiece in this case depicting the opening scene of the play.

The Woman in the Moon

Salome was not the only character in the tragedy who suffered from unrequited love (in Salome's case we here use the word 'love' liberally), for Narraboth himself was quite enamored with Salome, and the Page of Herodias was in turn deeply in love with him. Below is the opening text of the play.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. How beautiful is the Princess Salome to-night!

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a dead woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.
THE YOUNG SYRIAN. She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.

In *The Woman in the Moon* we see the Page cowering before the moon, 'hiding' himself with one arm from the dangers he believes it is waiting to release upon them and shielding Narraboth with the other. He appears to be standing on Narraboth's robe, fearful of losing him, in both cases foreshadowing the tragedy and death that is to come. Narraboth is gazing elsewhere, one could assume towards Salome if we take this illustration to be another 'realization' of the text. In the moon we see a face which I believe to be that of Wilde (other interpretations identify it as Salome or Herod) (Greslé 36). One could imagine the creator of the piece observing his characters while they, in this case the Page, look back apprehensively, distrustful of what the creator has planned for them, corresponding to the Page's expression of his anxieties in the text itself.

In placing those two characters in the frontispiece, where the illustrator traditionally depicted the main theme or protagonists of a work, Beardsley brings the theme of same-sex passion appearing throughout the text to the foreground and refers to Wilde's own homosexuality by here inscribing him into the moon (Greslé 36). Supporting the theory that it is Wilde's face depicted in the moon is the fact that the lines of the face and droopy eyes bear a similarity to other characterizations of Wilde made by Beardsley (Greslé 38). Further, the drawing was in fact initially entitled "The Man in the Moon." What is more, to the left of the moon there is what seems to be a single carnation, possibly indicative of the 'green carnation' worn as an emblem by nineteenth century Parisian homosexuals (Greslé 38), again sending the message that the homosexual author of the work is inextricably part of the work itself.

It should be noted that the moon is a leitmotif recurring throughout Wilde's text, at times being compared to Salome, at times almost existing as a menacing presence and character in and of itself, and as we see in *The Woman in the Moon*, it can at times be taken to be the very author himself. Often expressing the emotional states of the characters, it is always setting the mood of the play with its changing color (Sato 65). References to the moon include the following lines: "She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin," (suggesting whiteness and purity) and "She has become red. She has become red as blood."

Beardsley's insertion of what is evidently Wilde in this drawing, as well as in other *Salome* illustrations (*A Platonic Lament, Enter Herodias* and most likely also in *The Eyes of Herod*, all three dealt with below) is indicative of the method he employed in illustrating the work. The true Symbolist he was, he looked beyond the text. His holistic approach infused in his illustrations the wider context within which the written work was given life — the homosexuality of its author, the changing role of woman in Victorian society and the fear of her felt by Victorian man, the secret desires society experienced and indulged in yet dared not speak of, and the unflattering view of Wilde held by Beardsley and others (some illustrations seeming quite flagrantly to poke fun at the author). As Wilde had evidently recognized prior to sending Beardsley a copy of the text with the afore-mentioned inscription, the young artist possessed the ability not only to see what the work presented on the surface but also to unveil what it suggested, hidden in its many layers, instinctively understanding the underlying messages Wilde was giving form to and which Beardsley was able to recognize, thus illustrating the entirety of the work of art and all that was infused in it rather than simply 'realizing' the text.

**The Platonic Lament**

Carrying further the underlying theme of homosexuality brought to the surface in the frontispiece rather than the main theme of the play, the illustration of which would have had to include Salome, is the depiction of the Page mourning the death of Narraboth in the illustration entitled, interestingly enough, *A Platonic Lament*. The text beginning on the page facing the drawing is as follows:

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. The Young Syrian has slain himself! The young captain has slain himself! He has slain himself who was my friend! I gave him a little box of perfumes and ear-rings wrought in silver, and now he has killed
himself! Ah, did he not say that some misfortune would happen? I, too, said it, and it has come to pass. Well I knew that the moon was seeking a dead thing, but I knew not that it was he whom she sought. Ah! Why did I not hide him from the moon? If I had hidden him in a cavern she would not have seen him.

The effeminizing of the Young Syrian is clear in the selection of gifts the Page had bestowed upon him, traditionally reserved for women. And later we have another suggestion of the nature of the Page's feelings for the Young Syrian when he reminisces of their time together: "In the evening 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 very low. The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute, of one who playeth upon the flute. Also he had much joy to gaze at himself in the river. I used to reproach him for that." The sound of the Syrian's voice was literally music to the enamored Page's ears. In this speech we should also note the portrayal of the Young Syrian gazing at himself in the river, which can be said to correlate with the story of Narcissus, often taken as a metaphor for homosexuality in the nineteenth century (Greslé 38) in its expression of the love of the likeness of oneself.

In this drawing again we have that familiar face in the moon, here in the upper right of the illustration. As in The Woman in the Moon the Page is again nude, most likely I would say depicted as such to signify his vulnerability in the face of his impossible situation and perhaps also the innocence of his love and his willingness to give himself fully to the Young Syrian. Again we have a single carnation (if that is what the flower is taken to be) falling to the ground to wither away and die in sorrow on behalf of the Page as he gently holds the head of his beloved in his hands.

It is important to note the similarity of the facial features of the two characters that render them almost entirely indistinguishable from one another. This similarity is something we have seen in The Climax and the frontispiece as well and it is a device employed throughout Beardsley's Salome illustrations. This characteristic of mirroring images not only introduces a balance in the illustrations but, more importantly, it blurs the lines between personal identities and even more significantly it underscores the messages being relayed. Both in terms of same-sex relations and the definition of woman, it blurs the line between the sexes. Masculine and feminine cease to exist as they are indistinguishable in this androgynous realm of questionable desires and unclear relations that balance the role of man and woman in the battle of the sexes and separate love from procreation. There is no longer man or woman, there is neither, and gender identity is rendered irrelevant in this work which transgresses all accepted norms of sexual identity and behavior. The suggested androgyny of the characters leaves no room for stereotypes and sets the stage in which Salome clearly enjoys powers otherwise reserved exclusively for men in Victorian society — she is her own voice, she is the decision-maker, she is the one who objectifies the human body; she is the powerful, the predator, in command.

The Peacock Skirt

In The Peacock Skirt we have what is generally assumed to be the Young Syrian casting his gaze upon Salome. This identity can be inferred from the text below, though again, the faces do not allow us to determine whom we are looking at. The figure to the right, assumed to be the Young Syrian, can be identified as a man by observing his legs and knees that betray the androgyny of his face. Though his expression does not convey the image of the gentle affection he feels for Salome according to the text, his eyes appear to be blinded by what he sees as her beauty, represented by the haze or veil of denial visibly clouding his vision, in opposition to Salome's clear, dead-white glare.

The illustration is placed amidst an unrelated dialogue where two soldiers are discussing the commotion heard from the banquet hall while we intermittently have the Page speaking of the menacing moon and the Young Syrian again repeating how beautiful he finds Salome. The following exchange that begins on the page opposite the illustration gives us reason to believe it is the Syrian and Salome depicted in the drawing:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. How beautiful the Princess Salome is to-night!
THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such fashion. Something terrible may happen.

The elaborate dress and décor about Salome correspond to the Young Syrian's vision of her as the embodiment of ultimate femininity and elegance. Beardsley might have been inspired to use the peacock theme and imagery in this picture due to Herod's offer later in the text to give the princess all of the peacocks in his possession if only she would take back her request for the prophet's head: "Salome, thou knowest my white peacocks, my beautiful white peacocks... Their beaks are gilded with gold and the grains that they eat are smeared with gold, and their feet are stained with purple... There are not in all the world birds so wonderful. I will give thee fifty of my peacocks... I will give them to thee, all." Considering this later description of the regality (gold and purple) and beauty of the peacocks and the possibility of Salome having them in her possession, this illustration could be an example of how, in a manner that some describe as anachronistic, Beardsley's drawings bring together various elements, images, feelings and hidden messages from differing moments in the work into one illustration, endowing it with numerous connotations and references and telling a broader story than one might expect or critics may find "appropriate" within the bounds of his task.

The Black Cape

The Black Cape must be a representation of Salome. In the English publication the illustration accompanies the text which introduces Salome to the stage just before she first hears the voice of the prophet. The text reads as follows:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. She is like a dove that has strayed... She is like a narcissus in the wind... she is like a silver flower.

[Enter Salome.]

SALOME. I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. You have left the feast, Princess?

SALOME. How sweet is the air here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies, and barbarians who drink and drink and spill their wine on the pavement, and Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes and painted cheeks, and frizzed hair curled in columns, and Egyptians silent and subtle, with long nails of jade and russet cloaks, and Romans brutal and course, with their uncouth jargon. Ah! How I loathe the Romans! They are rough and common, and they give themselves the airs of noble lords.

Chronologically the third illustration in the play, The Black Cape is the second drawing depicting Salome, the first being The Peacock Skirt. The Young Syrian's silver flower is here seen bending and contorting like a snake, yet appears somehow quite elegant in doing so. From beneath her cape hangs limply a hand reminiscent of the Chinese woman's bound foot representative at times of the lotus/vagina and at others of the penis. She holds in her other hand what is evidently another phallic symbol, further defining her in terms of her potential to hold man firmly in her clutches. This illustration stands as the only one depicting Salome alone and due to its placement in the text it can be thought of as her official introduction to the reader. She is enshrouded in black attire, serpentine in her form and cold in her indifference as she cannot be bothered to return the glance of the observer. Beardsley portrays her with a mock dignity, putting the shameless temptress' nose in the air and clothing her in elegantly rigid attire, her true nature revealed only in the form of her grotesque fist falling out from under the cape.
Perhaps this illustration was one of the 'irrelevant' ones Beardsley referred to, as it was in fact a replacement for John and Salome, which was not to be published until 1907 due to its depiction of Salome's flowery breasts, standing proudly as she strives to overpower the faith of the prophet, coldly staring him down. As Latimer says of the John and Salome illustration, it "reinscribes psychologically the resonant polarities of love and hate, attraction and repulsion, like those written into Salome's dialogue with Iokanaan" (Latimer 27).

**John and Salome**

An example of the dialogue he refers to follows:

SALOME. I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! Thy body is white, like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Suffer me to touch thy body... Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall, where vipers have crawled... It is of thy hair that I am enamored, Iokanaan...

Love and hate, intertwined and playing against each other in irrational passion and present in Salome's dialogues are reflected in the balanced, contrasting yet complementary images of John and Salome. It is also worth noting that the image is indicative of the treatment of femininity in the play, as Salome is here not only on a par with the male, but seems to be in command and with her "masculine desiring gaze effectively feminizes Iokanaan" (Latimer 27).

Moving on to the illustration of Enter Herodias, we see a drawing the title of which was taken from Wilde's stage direction itself ("Enter Herod, Herodias, and all the court"). In this very act we again see Beardsley's view of Salome as a work beyond just the story. As stated by Owens, "This title draws attention to the mechanics of a production of the play, surely a teasing reference to the fact that Wilde's planned production of Salome in 1892... had been denied a license" (Owens 84). This is underlined by the insertion of Wilde in the image, this time not a character in the work, such as his presence in the moon can be interpreted, but rather as creator, director and proud artist, seen in the bottom-right hand corner motioning to the greatness he has (not) brought to the stage behind him.

Nothing short of a caricature, Beardsley adorned the image of Wilde with numerous 'props' meant to illustrate his character as seen by Beardsley and others. Among them we see a caduceus staff under his left arm, like the rod of Mercury, the "messenger god and the god of orators, merchants and thieves" (Owens 88). With this comparison we see a reference to Wilde's celebrated eloquence and also to his purported plagiarism. The staff can similarly be seen as a crutch, as he relied heavily on his earlier-mentioned 'sources' to create his Salome (Owens 88), both ideas — thief or dependant — are emphasized by the copy of a work of Salome Wilde holds in his hand.

Further mocking Wilde, Beardsley here depicts him wearing an owl hat. As noted by Owens, 'owl' was a slang term used to describe somebody whose "superficial wisdom masked underlying foolishness" (Owens 92), the bells adorning the hat further underlining the reference to Wilde as a jester, certainly not a representation the man known for his unrivaled wit would have expected or taken lightly.

**Enter Herodias and The Eyes of Herod**

As for Herodias, Beardsley here went beyond the moderate androgyny with which he impregnated his Salome series and depicts the woman as nothing short of "an enormous drag-queen" (Latimer 27). Her theatrical presence, with its overbearing hair, is in line with Beardsley's other allusions (through Wilde himself) to the ill-fated play's failure to see the light of the stage. In the same mood we see a fetus-headed grotesque attendant seemingly run amuck on stage, boasting an enormous, veiled erection and peering under the skirt of Herodias with wild eyes which could be taken to be an allusion to the Young Syrian's and Herod's
persistent ogling of Salome (Owens 93). Embryos and aborted fetuses are devices Aubrey often made use of in his works. Kuryluk explains their appearance in much of the age's Decadent art as representations of "the deadly secrets and dangers of sex" (qtd. in Navarette 67). This interpretation makes sense in the context of Salome, as in this work sex is closely linked with, as it eventually leads to, death. Infamous for his insertion of the male sexual organ and craftily hidden phallic symbols in his work, in this illustration we see three phallic candles, two of which are supported by the more evident phallic symbols of the candle-holders themselves. The image is placed next to the page where Herodias is singled out as the only character fully grounded in reality, as after observation upon observation of the looming danger represented by the moon by other characters she tersely states, "No; the moon is the moon, that is all."

More phallic candles are found in The Eyes of Herod. Here we see Salome, again unfeminine save her breast which falls out of her robe, literally upstaging Herod, indicative of her forthcoming victory in the power game the two are engaged in. The text opposite the picture describes the lascivious Herod's attempt at reeling in Salome so that she would quench his desires with her enticing dance. Salome is, characteristic of her in Wilde's rendition, defiant and impenetrable:

HEROD. Pour me forth wine. [Wine is brought.] Salome, come drink a little wine with me. I have here a wine that is exquisite. Caesar himself sent it me. Dip into it thy red lips, that I may drain the cup.

SALOME. I am not thirsty, Tetrarch.

HEROD. You hear how she answers me, this daughter of yours?

HERODIAS. She does right. Why are you always gazing at her?

HEROD. Bring me ripe fruits [Fruits are brought.] Salome, come and eat fruits with me. I love to see in a fruit the mark of thy little teeth. Bite but a little of this fruit, that I may eat what is left.

SALOME. I am not hungry, Tetrarch.

HEROD. [To Herodias.] You see how you have brought up this daughter of yours.

The leering eyes of Herod are transposed onto a face which, familiar to us by now, resembles that of Wilde himself, thus a correlation is drawn between the author and Herod, perhaps referring to the popular view of the artist held by much of society as an almost monstrous figure due to his notorious escapades. And again, it shows how the artist and the work can hardly be separated when one is aware of the former, and Beardsley does not even strive to separate them as, already noted, he apparently believes Wilde's presence to be an important element of the work itself.

The Stomach Dance

The next illustration we come across in the work is The Stomach Dance. There is no need to question the pertinence of the illustration to the work as the dance itself is the key that unlocks the horrific decapitation and climax that ensue. Yet the portrayal of the dance is a far cry from what Wilde had envisioned for his princess, as he is reported to have told a friend she should appear "totally naked, but draped with heavy and ringing necklaces made of jewels of every color, warm with the fervor of her amber flesh" (qtd. in Puffet 3). In spite of this brilliant vision, there is no such description of the dance in the text and its interpretation was truly left entirely in Beardsley's hands. The entire dance is reduced to a single stage direction (Salome dances the dance of the seven veils) on the page facing the drawing and the entire extent of any description of that dance is found in Herod's brief expression of how he envisions how her delicate feet would flutter in the air when he sees her sandals have been removed: "Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet! 'Tis well! 'Tis well! Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees . . ."
Her nipples, "tipped with carnations" (qtd. in Owens 95), do not match the masculine and stony expression on Salome's face and overall the only emotion evoked by her somewhat guarded bearing is one of slight tension. Evidently the illustration lacks the richness and sensuality envisioned by Wilde and expected by the reader due to the consummate anticipation produced by Herod's continual insistence on seeing her dance.

Herod's lechery is embodied in the grotesque "drooling dwarf whose priapus is barely disguised as clothing decoration" (Bielski 50). In this 'drooling dwarf' we see a supreme example of how the mischievous Beardsley ingeniously built phallic symbols and male genitalia into the ornate decoration of his illustrations, slipping "flagrant eroticism past the Victorian sensors" (qtd. in Greslé 32) — a certain victory the young, controversial artist no doubt delighted in.

The Dancer's Reward

After performing her dance of the seven veils Salome demands the head of the Prophet. Begging her to ask for anything else, Herod is left with no choice but to surrender in the face of Salome's usurpation of male power (Bielski 50). *The Dancer's Reward* is placed beside the text where the power struggle comes to an end. A few pages later she is delivered the head of the prophet — in the words of Salome, "the head that is mine" — and we now have before us the bitter words of Salome which are the inspiration for both this illustration and *The Climax*, its sequel, which includes the following:

SALOME. Thou wouldst have none of me... Thou didst put upon thine eyes the covering of him who would see his God. Well, thou hast seen thy God, lokanaan, but me, me, thou didst never see. If thou hadst seen me thou hast loved me. I saw thee, and I loved thee. Oh, how I loved thee! I love thee yet, lokanaan. I love only thee. I am athirst for thy body; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor apples can appease my desire. What shall I do now, lokanaan?

We know that what she did was press her lips against his, as she was elevated to a state of debased intoxication, consoling her pain and injured ego while feeding her monstrous hunger. Before doing so, she is here shown "taking possession of her reward" (Latimer 30). In part of the monologue from which the above text has been extracted she goes on to say, "Well, I still live, but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me. I can do with it what I will." A more disturbing scene or disturbed mind is one we should not even wish to imagine and Beardsley here illustrates this moment when the demented Salome grabs a fist of the prophet's blood-soaked hair, pulling his face up towards her penetrating glare, believing in her state of delusion that he is present and aware of her ultimate victory, her violation of his body.

The blasphemous depiction of *The Dancer's Reward* and *The Climax* are paramount examples of how Beardsley, rather than misrepresenting the text of the play, as he has often been accused of doing, takes what is written a step further, as his "drawing begins at the point where the text stops" (Burdeett 111). In conclusion, the *Salome* drawings do not take away from the text or 'miss the point' but rather enhance and give further voice to the play's numerous 'unspeakable' themes and underlying subtexts. Unhappy as he might have been with the style of the illustrations, Wilde was certainly fortunate to have found in Beardsley an artist privy to the world within which the writer created both himself and his work, as the illustrator evidently had the uncanny ability to recognize Wilde's numerous hidden messages — Victorian man's fear of woman, woman's growing independence, homosexuality as a love as pure as any other, and the overall dark side of human nature none dared to speak of at the time — and convey the feelings therein in his 'repulsive,' 'audacious' and 'extravagant' illustrations (qtd. in Sato 71).

Related Material

- Beardsley's Relationship with Oscar Wilde
- Aubrey Beardsley, The Pre-Raphaelites, and Victorian Culture
Bibliography


Shepherd, Anne. "Overview of the Victorian Era." www.history.ac.uk.