

# Beardsley's Comfort in the Grotesque: Exposing the Amorphous Masculine Identity, Making Space for Otherness

## Introduction:

Aubrey Beardsley's *Salomé* illustrations<sup>1</sup> cracked the nationalistic echo chamber of a fin de siècle Victorian London. Apart from his prolific catalog of illustrations and association with Oscar Wilde, there is more to be said of his pioneering perspective in exposing the fragility of the male gaze, the body and sexuality. This paper attempts to introduce two works of Beardsley's *Salomé* collection (*The Climax* and *John and Salomé*) by examining them through gender politics and aesthetics, the societal context, the fear of late-Victorian men, and a unique queer lens.<sup>2</sup> His perspective resonates even today with its nuanced approach born in part from his childhood struggles: born impoverished, diagnosed a consumptive at the age of 9, and labeled a social pariah.

This examination concludes with a question of whether Beardsley accomplishes what others of his time were unable to do: abstract the delineations of vice and virtue, and make way for the age of dandyism, debauchery, liberation and the quintessence of Beardsley's "New Woman."<sup>3</sup>

Aubrey Beardsley sought to conjoin polarizing cultures: from tyrannically rigid Vienna and London, to the sexually liberated and free-thinking France and Japan. Beardsley infiltrated the global consciousness of aesthetics with his utilization of the grotesque.

The queering of norms and imaginative chaos of Beardsley made up the pathology of his corporeal, individual existence. Beardsley was agent of both the grotesque and "Otherness" — in his wavering health, ambiguous sexual identity, and perhaps the physical and artistic manifestations of his idiosyncrasies.<sup>4</sup> In his pain, there was pleasure, beauty in the grotesque, delectable sin and pious virtue, elements that all played and intermingled in an amorphous Beardsleyan wonderland. His creations undoubtedly established a sanctuary for the contemporary outcasts and deviants — who all understood the beauty and strange comfort of Beardsley's grotesqueries.

This paper will focus on exploring (1.) a historical look at the constructed female archetypes in patriarchal art of his time and how Beardsley combated this, (2.) Beardsley's cultivation of a space for Otherness or queerness, disability and forbidden love — met with xenophobic outrage and dangerous desire, and (3.) concluding with what Beardsley may have

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<sup>1</sup>The *Salomé* series is composed of a collection of 16 black and white line block print illustrations on Japanese vellum. Each is meticulously patterned and delicately etched.

<sup>2</sup>While some scholars have noted Beardsley's Otherness by his disease, a lesser explored meaning of Otherness can, I propose, be linked to his sexual identity, a sometimes ambiguous, other times unambiguous queer lens.

<sup>3</sup>Susan C. Anderson, "Otto Weininger's Masculine Utopia," *German Studies Review* Vol. 19, no. 3 (1996): 437, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/1432526>.

<sup>4</sup>Amanda Fernbach, "Wilde's 'Salome' and the Ambiguous Fetish," *Victorian Literature and Culture* Vol. 29, no. 1 (2001): 198, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058547>.

intended to portray through his interpretation of the French play, queer “utopian desires” and male “dystopian fears.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Forced Voyeurism, The New Woman, and the Good Mother**

a philosophical look at constructed female archetypes and the sanctity of the male gaze

Beardsley often used his grotesque female figures as an apparatus of terror. In European orientalist art, the employment of the odalisque provides a subservient and demure living fetish for the male gaze. While the eye line of the reclined harem women commonly appears as obsequious and avoiding or in a trance, Beardsley’s women stare back. This disruption and publicization of a man’s private vices, evoked shame, disgust, and a primitive hatred. Beardsley’s female gaze, in contrast to the turn of the century male gaze, challenges the masculine ideal of the depiction of a woman to be one of two Freudian categories: the madonna or the whore.



Aubrey Beardsley’s influences on the Viennese artists are seen in their use of the female archetypal figure as a totem for perversion and play. For example, prior to *Salomé*, Gustav Klimt often used biblical characters for this purpose. The biblical woman perfectly encapsulates the fears of men, their dangerous desires and wishes, and the birth of original sin. Beardsley’s *Salomé* illustration *The Climax* (fig. 1) and Klimt’s *Judith and the Head of Holofernes* (also known as *Judith I*)<sup>6</sup> share the motif of the sinful, lustful, confrontational succubus. The staging of the exemplicative succubus is one that uses sexuality as the “overwhelming force embodied in the woman as seductress to which men must submit.”<sup>7</sup> *Salomé* and *Judith* are both the heroine, and the woman scorned, the femme fatale — victorious and holding up the trophy of her decapitated victim. Gruesome and grotesque yet sadistically inviting, “the more disturbing images appeal to the tendency to be fascinated by that which is repulsive or appalling, placing the reader/viewer in the position of the voyeur.”<sup>8</sup> *Salomé* and *Judith* represent the harbingers of death just as the Jungian Good Mother embodies life. There is a terrifying realization in the New Woman exhibiting the role of both the porter of life and death, the alpha and omega, the gatekeeper of cyclical existence.

*The Climax*, is quite literally the pinnacle of the play as its title suggests as well as a Beardsleyan double entendre. At the moment of suspense, the viewer is a captive audience to the floating, villainous *Salomé* that holds her beloved (holy man John the Baptist), now decapitated.

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<sup>5</sup>Amanda Thibodeau, “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future: Sexual Revision in Octavia Butler’s ‘Bloodchild’ and James Tiptree, Jr.’s ‘With Delicate Mad Hands’,” *Science Fiction Studies* Vol. 39, no. 2 (2012): 262, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.39.2.0262>.

<sup>6</sup>It is worth noting that patrons regularly referred to the painting as “*Salomé*” because *Judith*’s visible satisfaction and sexuality was hard for the public to associate with the attributes of a pious heroine. Instead, Klimt’s subject was associated with the lustful harlot. Klimt, Gustav, “*Judith I*,” Oil and gold leaf on canvas, 1901, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere-Vienna, In “*His Wretched Hand*”: *Aubrey Beardsley, the Grotesque Body, and Viennese Modern Art*, by Nathan J. Timpano, p. 574, *Art History*: Wiley Blackwell, 2017.

<sup>7</sup>Wendy Slatkin, “Maternity and Sexuality in the 1890s,” *Woman’s Art Journal* Vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring - Summer, 1980): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1358012>.

<sup>8</sup>Higgins, “Unfamiliar Places,” 69-71.

In her clutch, the serpent-haired head hovers above an abstract flourish meant to represent blood. The blood trickles down in such a way as to resemble a phallus. Beside the pool of blood, a flower emerges from the foreground in sharp contrast to the theatrically gruesome imagery. The background is comprised of abstract orientalist patterning, further contributing to the beauty amongst the morbidity. The Medusa imagery in work oozes sexuality and strongly suggestive allusion to the phallus yet again. A perverse scene encapsulated the orgasmic satisfaction of slaying her object of desire in an act of vengeance and obsessive possession. The piece may be the most grotesque of the *Salomé* collection - without a knowledge of Beardsley's visual catalog, an inference of necrophilia is apparent to a Victorian viewer and modern viewer alike. An allusion of sexual gratification is also present in both pieces. The orgasmic glare of Judith works in tandem with the scene of apotheosis in Wilde's play. *Salomé* is moments away from indulging in her forbidden love and lust while Judith lingers in the satisfaction of her prized disembodied head. The gaze of these two once again harkens to the confrontational nature and disrupted gaze of the odalisques.

These images seemed designed to upset the male gaze, an intentional disturbance in masculine stability in an age of women's suffrage and the fight for bodily autonomy. The difference between the villainous woman and the puritanical young girl leave little room for gray areas in the eyes of the voyeur. Madonna and whore, pious virgin and corrupt harlot, "The dynamic of idolization and debasement... only oscillation between woman as pure artifice or sign and a debased reality associated with nature that is figured as lacking and incomplete."<sup>9</sup>

English eugenicist Havelock Ellis writes about the expectations of a woman and how a woman is to be taught about her budding sexuality: "The youth spontaneously becomes a man; but the maiden -- as it has been said -- 'must be kissed into a woman'."<sup>10</sup> Quite the problematic statement, but evidence of the infantilization of women for the purposes of fetish as well as the delegitimization of intelligence, sentience, and self governance.

Beardsley's work vehemently opposes the late-Victorian self-imposed necessity for a library of ageless and perpetual archetypes to categorize and subjugate. By maintaining an unchangeable maternal image, women can continue to be denied individuality and equity while simultaneously being idealized, fetishized, and a worshiped piece of iconography, eliminating any progress in their position in a modern world. He pushed for progress in the representation of his New Woman in exchange for the timeless images of his society's spectacle of femininity.

### **Chastity, Illicit Love, and the Queer Body**

Otherness, queerness, disability, dangerous desire

Aubrey Beardsley challenged Victorian notions of sexuality and power, placing the power in the hands of the sexually self-assured "New Woman and the Dandy" rather than the patriarchal

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<sup>9</sup>Fernbach, 199.

<sup>10</sup>Havelock Ellis, "The Sexual Impulse in Women," in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Volume 1, (New York: Random House, 1942), 241.

standards made to conquer women.<sup>11</sup> In his illustrative interpretation of *John and Salomé* (fig. 2), the masculine, assertive woman and the feminine, passive man take center stage. Sigmund Freud's belief in the origin of fetish lying in the fears and anxieties of castration were disproven by the multiplicitous and heterogeneous nature of Wilde's decadently imagined *Salomé*. After all, "decadence homogenized with wholesomeness is Decadence destroyed."<sup>12</sup> The ambiguity surrounding Salomé's gender identity grants the character access to resonate with the individual viewer's own perspective, a subject for universally shared suffering and empathy.

Salome is pictured to the right a very feminine depiction of the prophet. She appears in a dress accentuated by her exposed breasts and stomach and accompanying headdress. Her head extends forward into the baptist's space to appear as if she might be inquiring, while John returns a rather disparaging, docile expression. John the Baptist is dressed simply and is quite reserved, highlighting the tousled wild locks of his black hair. The opposing energies reflect the duality of revulsion and lust. Beardsley's illustrations were in essence, a parody of the once established Freudian truth, meant to demolish this standard in favor of a more nuanced take that incorporated the vast spectrum of sexuality and gender. Queer non-conforming individuals gravitated toward Beardsley's work and recognized the implications of queer connections and desires as one with limitless potential. "Its fetishistic imagery generates a plurality of erotic meanings and fantasies that are not limited to the framework of male heterosexual desire."<sup>13</sup> Beardsley acknowledges women, queer, and disabled people in a rare, empathetic light. By shifting the societal power imbalances in even an imaginary scene, the bodily representation and representation of illicit love is revolutionary and unique to Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde's creations.

The idea of forbidden love was undoubtedly accessible to a multitude of queer identities. Modern American author and activist Leslie Feinberg comments of the shared struggles among the queer community imagined, "loneliness had become an environment-- the air I breathed, the spatial dimension in which I was trapped."<sup>14</sup> In the same way that modern queer people might identify with the underdog of a narrative, there is room for identifying with Salomé in her imprisonment and the subsequent persecution of her transgressive sexuality.

The existence and acknowledgement of queerness and queering of the body's presentation or possible dynamics in non-normative relationships is a challenge to traditional notions of progress. "[The body is] othered and criminalized because of both a perceived lack of able-bodiedness--i.e., normative embodiment-- and unacceptable gender performance and sexual orientation."<sup>15</sup> Disgust for unacceptable Otherness carried wholly sinister implications of the danger in interaction between the oppressor and the queer/crip subject. Brought on by intrinsic male fears of the unknown and incomprehensible, these frustrations gave way to a lethal aggression but also "a dual sensation of revulsion and attraction."<sup>16</sup> The patriarchal anxiety

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<sup>11</sup>Fernbach, "Wilde's 'Salomé' and the Ambiguous Fetish," 196.

<sup>12</sup>Dowling, "Venus and Tannhäuser," 38.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993), 221.

<sup>15</sup>Hammer, "A Scar is More than a Wound," 163.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

desires to be at peace when whatever contingencies stand in their way are finally extinguished, penetrated, conquered, and subjugated. Disgust and lust. Fear and desire. Subjugation and fetishization, “when this revulsion/attraction dialectic becomes overwhelming, violence may ensue.”<sup>17</sup>

Seeing Beardsley’s work exhibited on the international stage, German art critic Julius Meier-Graefe described the queer body of the artist himself, as “Shockingly thin, weak of bone and precociously diseased.”<sup>18</sup> Beardsley had his body and appearance habitually picked apart by his critics, the queer body that he housed was made a spectacle, a medicalized anomaly. However, there is a sense of pride he maintained in his galling freakishness. A pride of self-identifying as grotesque, he embraced the spectacle and surrendered to a radical acceptance of his corporeality. “The alien body bears the burden of utopian representation, displaying a shifting pattern of fears and hopes for the future”<sup>19</sup> and Beardsley subconsciously or not bears this burden as he fuels normative fears and tends to the hopes of the unorthodox.<sup>20</sup>

Beardsley’s self-induced and quarantined lifestyle was both a place of pain and pleasure, his sadomasochistic subject material once again mirroring its creator. “Home can be both a refuge and a painful reminder of the dangers outside... the trauma of daily life, and the space always feels vulnerable” and “‘the street’... a humiliating catwalk or a battleground.”<sup>21</sup>

Beardsley and Wilde’s interpretation of the biblical story was their escape as much as it was for the audience they had cultivated with their queer voices. Homosexual or not, Wilde and Beardsley spoke to the idea of queerness, Otherness, extravagant difference. After the play’s completion, Wilde inscribed a copy of its manuscript to Beardsley that read: “for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see that invisible dance.”<sup>22</sup> Beardsley and Wilde had a kinship of some surreptitious bond in whatever was truly encoded in the scene of the dance of the seven veils.

### **Conclusion: Queer Utopian Desires and Male Dystopian Fears**

*Community in shared trauma and the worldbuilding of imaginary queer spaces*

Within a fictitious Beardsleyan world, *Salomé* offers a newfound multiplicity of perspectives. Beardsley’s utopia is a haven of illusory security acting as a cheap replica of the queer imaginary utopia of his mind’s eye.

In the words of the scholar Greg Grewell, *The New Man’s* otherworldly utopia is made up of four innately behavioral components: “The explorative” – discoveries of men, things

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, (London: William Heinemann, 1908), 307.

<sup>19</sup>While Thibodeau is generally discussing alien bodies as they exist in science fiction, a parallel can be drawn here to Beardsley’s rendering of the grotesque and pathological body.

<sup>20</sup>Thibodeau, “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future,” 263.

<sup>21</sup>Hammer, “A Scar is More than a Wound,” 162.

<sup>22</sup>Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis eds., *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 348.

already known, but not acknowledged until it is recognized by the patriarchy.<sup>23</sup> “The domesticative” - subjugation of the inferior sex and accompanying outlying identities.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, “The combative” - the aggression and conflict of men.<sup>25</sup> These fantasies in tandem were the “male insemination of history, language, and reason” and art.<sup>26</sup> The mere existence of Beardsley’s queer characters invoke the heteronormative “imperial thrust,” a demonstration of masculine strength, ambition, ingenuity, and the inclination to conquer.<sup>27</sup> As scholar Amanda Thibodeau notes, “I read utopian queerness in the eroticism of the unknown and incomprehensible -- the desire across a boundary we consider uncrossable,” the use of androgyny to represent desires one can’t have, the wantonness of the male and the torture brought on by his simultaneous sexual curiosity, intrigue and disgust.<sup>28</sup>

Conceptually, there is no end to define what possibilities *Salomé* represents. It is an unwritten fabled future and Beardsley is one of its many cited contributors.<sup>29</sup> Fiction reveals utopian desires and dystopian fears.

If the street was a humiliating catwalk then “The domestic space and the objects within it become vital to their survival” like the cumulative taste of a decadent house-ridden aesthete.<sup>30</sup> Surrounding himself with libraries of worldly literature and finely crafted furniture-- adorned in sharply tailored suits with a muslin to accentuate his partialness to a little garish display.

Perhaps Beardsley’s genderbending worlds were the products of his social dreaming – wishes for a world of queerness and acceptance of the invalids and deviants. “Common vulnerability creates an opportunity to embrace a sense of interdependence through mutual precarity.”<sup>31</sup> Our scars can attract a solidarity of those who have been othered, identifying with a new intimate and unified image. *Salomé* is the conduit to which queer men and women found comfort and solace. To vicariously live through her raging vengeance in the name of desire, there is a satisfaction to be gained in the subtlety of Wilde’s and Beardsley’s reinterpretation of the biblical parable. Not tales of morality and virtue, but sentiments of sexual liberty.<sup>32</sup> Specifically, feminine sexuality which undermines the dominance that men have created and fetishized for themselves out of necessity.

Ultimately, Aubrey Beardsley operated on his own terms in his own world. He lived on “queer time”: “a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety,

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<sup>23</sup>Thibodeau, “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future,” 267.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 31.

<sup>27</sup>Thibodeau, “Alien Bodies and a Queer Future,” 267.

<sup>28</sup>Thibodeau, 273.

<sup>29</sup>Thibodeau, 275.

<sup>30</sup>Hammer, “A Scar is More than a Wound,” 170.

<sup>31</sup>Hammer, “A Scar is More than a Wound,” 159.

<sup>32</sup>Zatlin, “Aubrey Beardsley’s ‘Japanese Grotesques,’” 100.

and inheritance.”<sup>33</sup> Queering the very notion of time meant making space on the periphery of real time, a point of respite in the universe's fabric of chaos. Beardsley's timeless invention was an oasis to vicariously live in, and escape for the shared “traumatic texture” of the queer mind.<sup>34</sup> Disregarding the sexual ambiguity of Aubrey Beardsley, there is still a present queerness that he embraced and exuded with grace. Like the English Poet John Keats, Beardsley felt (and knew) perhaps that he was living a “posthumous existence” but decreed just the same, “I will not sing in a cage,”<sup>35</sup> unless that cage were designed and curated in the infinite abyss of his imaginative conception.

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<sup>33</sup>Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York: New York UP, 2005), 6

<sup>34</sup>Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 56.

<sup>35</sup>John Keats, “The Keats Letters Project,” The Keats Letters Project, 2016, <https://keatslettersproject.com/>.

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