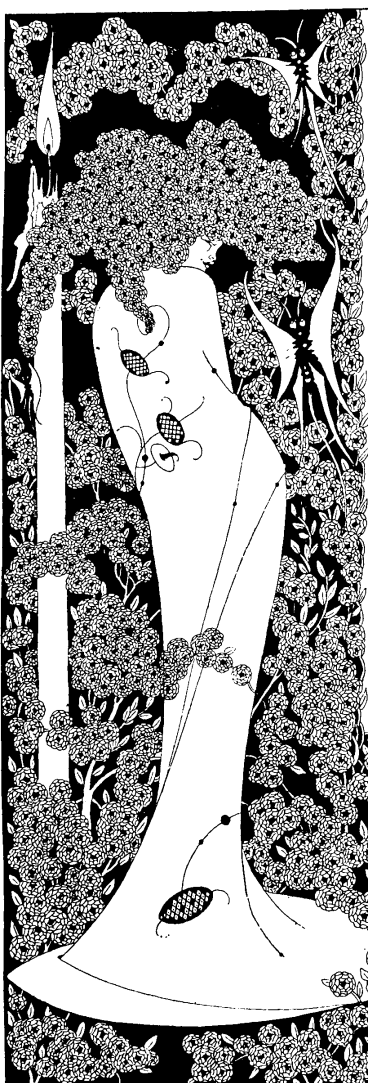


# Oscar Wilde, *Salome: a tragedy in one act*, 1894

Special Collections featured item for February 2007 by  
Fiona Barnard, Rare Books Librarian

**Wilde, Oscar. *Salome: a tragedy in one act: translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: pictured by Aubrey Beardsley. London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894.***

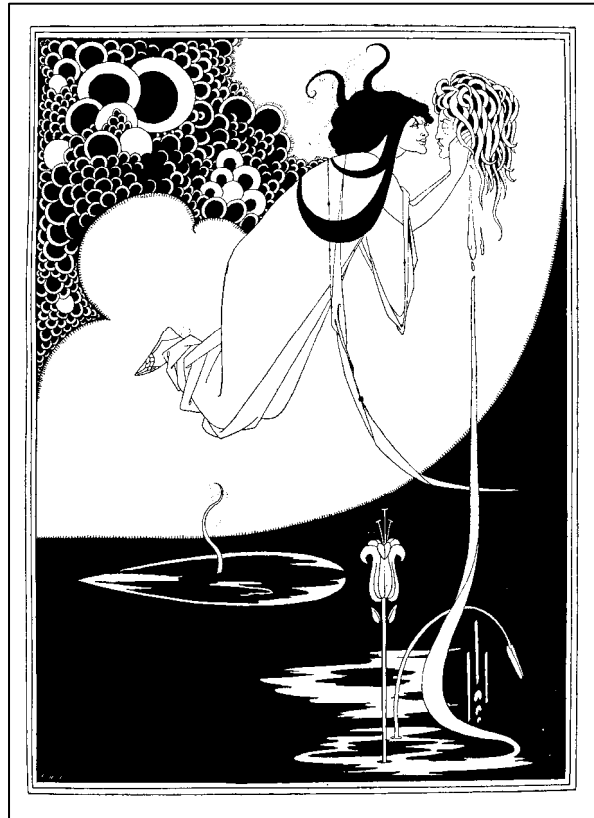
**Item held in the Reserve Collection, Reading University Library Special Collections.**



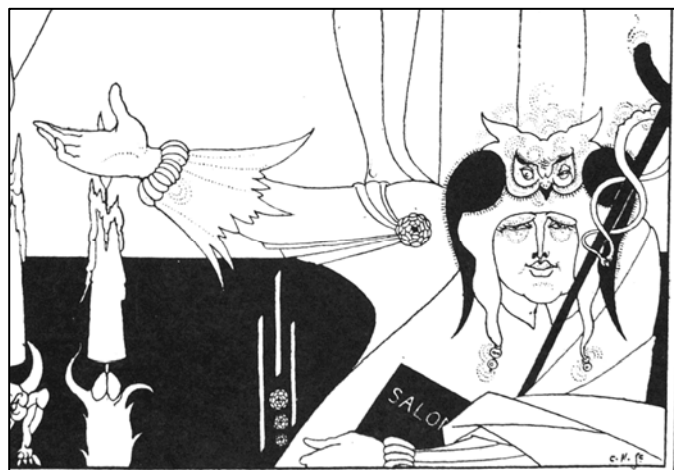
Aubrey Beardsley was born on August 21st 1872 and died from tuberculosis on March 16th 1898, at the age of only twenty-five. During his short and brilliant career he became notorious for his illustrations in two 'decadent' periodicals of the period, *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. His designs and illustrations for books such as *Le Morte Darthur*, *The Rape of the Lock*, *Lysistrata* and *Volpone* added to his notoriety as the most daring artist of the 1890s. However, it is for his illustrations for *Salome*, a play by Oscar Wilde, that he is perhaps most well-known, a book which brought together two of the key figures of cultural life in London in the 1890s.

This rather solemn and sombre play, told in verse, is the biblical story of Salome [shown left, in the 'List of Pictures' plate], a beautiful but depraved and sadistic princess, who becomes infatuated with the imprisoned John the Baptist, and offers to dance for the tetrarch Herod, hoping to receive the Baptist's head as a reward. Such a story had obvious appeal to the 'decadent' sensibility of excess, eroticism and aestheticism that both Wilde and Beardsley became so closely associated with. Sarah Bernhardt, the greatest actress of the period, agreed to play the role of Salome to the delight of Wilde. However, he was unable to secure a licence for performance from the Lord Chamberlain's office on the grounds of an old Puritan law forbidding the representation of a biblical character on the English stage.

Wilde responded by threatening to relinquish his British nationality and move to Paris, but hoped to capitalise on the publicity by issuing an English version of his now infamous text. Beardsley's first association with Wilde's drama was in 1893 when *Salome* was published in Paris, and Beardsley produced a drawing illustrating Salome embracing the severed head of John the Baptist, an image later to be known as '*The Climax*', which was reproduced in the periodical *The Studio*. The drawing attracted the attention of Wilde and the publisher John Lane, who agreed to publish an English version, translated by Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, with illustrations by Beardsley, which included a re-working of *The Studio* drawing [shown below]. In the bottom right-hand corner can be seen a version of the artist's emblem of three candles, an emblem which is included in every drawing in either black or white as a form of signature.



As well as the thirteen main illustrations, Beardsley also designed motifs for the cover, a border for the list of pictures [see border image at top], and the title-page. Four of the illustrations contain images of Wilde in caricature [see detail below from the '*Enter Herodias*' plate], although critics have argued that Beardsley used caricature both with and without hostile intent.



Relations between Wilde and Beardsley were, at times, strained. The writer Ian Fletcher notes that “Wilde ... was disconcerted by the reversal of the usual role of illustrator as submissive interpreter of the author’s intentions ... and felt [there] to be a deliberate evasion of the spirit of the play”. He remarked that “I admire, I do not like Aubrey’s illustrations. They are too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine”. “Beardsley’s art”, said Wilde, was “cruel and evil and so like dear Aubrey, who has a face like a silver hatchet, with grass-green hair”. Beardsley, for his part, often felt patronised by Wilde, and was disliked and distrusted by Douglas. There were tensions relating to the text of *Salome*. When the translation by Douglas proved to be inept and slipshod, Beardsley offered to produce an alternative version, to the fury of Bosie, who demanded that Wilde refuse the offer. Douglas’s name was removed from the title-page, and the text altered by several other hands, but, to keep the peace, Wilde put in the dedication ‘To My Friend Lord Alfred Douglas, the translator of my play’. Beardsley, however, felt snubbed by them both, and, in a state of exasperation, confided in Robert Ross, Wilde’s friend and supporter, that “both of them are really dreadful people”. Beardsley is known to have disliked *Salome*, and on completing the illustrations is said to have arrogantly remarked that “Now I have given distinction to that tedious book”.



The publisher, John Lane, once described by Wilde as “the fly in the amber of modernity”, persuaded Beardsley to change a number of details in certain images that would be considered to be indecent, by the standards of the day, or to provide entirely new alternative images. The ‘*Toilet of Salome*’ design [shown above] was one of a number of images that were replacements for previous, more unacceptable designs. However, Beardsley took

his revenge on those, such as Lane, who attempted to censor his work, by introducing new controversial elements into the replacement designs. In the case of this image, the choice of books on the dressing table, which include a book by the Marquis de Sade, and the risqué classical text *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius, were subtly calculated to cause outrage to a conventional nineteenth-century audience.

Many of the scenes and characters depicted by Beardsley are entirely invented by the artist, and do not appear in the text. It has been argued that the style and nature of the drawings, however striking and beautiful, is also often irrelevant to Wilde's play. Beardsley himself freely acknowledged these views. '*The Black Cape*' [shown below] was another of the designs substituted by the artist for an unacceptable image, and was described by him as "simply beautiful, but quite irrelevant".



However, the avant-garde Japanese style of the drawings, with their flat blocks of tone and highly decorative style was in keeping with the modernity of Wilde's play. The bold graphic stylisation and abstraction of form practised by the Japanese artists of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Utamaro and Hokuyei was of huge importance to Beardsley. The curator and writer Stephen Calloway has pointed to the acquisition of a major collection of Japanese prints by the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) in 1886, which for the first time made a large body of these influential images available to artists and a wider public.

*The Peacock Skirt* [shown below] is perhaps the most well-known of Beardsley's images. He portrays Salome as a powerful, aggressive figure, which is emphasised by the peacock design and emblem with its connotations of display and male aggression. She appears to be on the verge of engulfing the Syrian Captain with her expansive and billowing skirt, as she urges him to bring the imprisoned John the Baptist to her, triumphantly concluding in the text of the play that "I know that thou wilt do this thing".



The image has been seen to display numerous artistic influences including Japanese art, Art Nouveau and the work of the artist James McNeill Whistler, famous for his painted decorations for the Peacock Room from the house of Frederick Leyland, produced between 1876-7.

Salome is rewarded for her dance with the head of the saint, shown in the image below being thrust towards her on a dish by the hand of the executioner.



Salome receives her prize, but is punished by Herod with death for her attempt to manipulate and challenge male authority, and the *cul de lampe* at the end of the play [shown below] shows her being placed by two servants in a powder box coffin, a symbol of femininity, suggesting that Salome is being 'put back in her place'.



When the book finally appeared in February 1894, a fearful reviewer in the *Art Journal* remarked that “*Salome* is a book for the strong-minded alone, for it is terrible in its weirdness and suggestions of horror and wickedness”, whilst *The Times* perceived Beardsley’s illustrations to be “unintelligible for the most part and, so far as they are intelligible, repulsive”. Beardsley’s reputation was now assured, and as Stephen Calloway notes, “for good or ill, Beardsley was now regarded on all sides as *the* quintessential artist of the Decadent camp”.

On 11 February 1896, Beardsley attended the opening night of *Salome* in Paris (performed without Sarah Bernhardt). Although by this time Wilde was imprisoned in Reading Gaol, and heard about the performance only through the letters of friends, he was pleased that his infamous drama was finally being performed on the public stage.

Reading University Library Special Collections holds a number of books illustrated by Beardsley, including *The Rape of the Lock* (1896), as well as a number of volumes of *The Savoy* and *The Yellow Book*. The University Archives holds correspondence and personal papers relating to Beardsley, which include family photographs [see examples below]. There are also a number of archive collections relating to other figures associated with *Salome*, including Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde (in the Sherard papers), and the publishers John Lane and Charles Elkin Mathews.



Portrait of Beardsley as a boy (above left)



Portrait of Beardsley (undated) (above right)

## References

Calloway, Stephen, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 1998.

Fletcher, Ian, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 1987.

Zatlin, Linda Gertner, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian sexual politics*, 1990.

