Between Image and Text: The Illustrated *Salome*[1)]

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In 1894, the English version of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* with inclusive illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley came out amidst cries of outrage at the decadent quality of the entire work and claims of incomprehension at the apparent radical departure of the drawings from the text. Reviewers used terms such as "fantastic," "repulsive," and "unintelligible" (*Times*, pg. 12). It is true that if one read with the expectation of finding a version of the story between Herod and Salome compatible with the Biblical one with which many were familiar and looked at the pictures seeking visual representations for particular events in the story, then one would certainly have been confused and dismayed. However, I believe that a great deal of the negative reaction among critics and the public towards *Salome* arose out of expectations about art, literature, and theater that were grounded in Victorian English thought, and these inevitably came into conflict with the spirit in which the text and images of the play were produced, that of French symbolist theater. In order to understand this better, I would like to look first at the context from which Wilde's *Salome* came.

1) This essay is a reworking of a larger project entitled "Theatrical Moments: Aubrey Beardsley's Salome Illustrations" (1994), which the author wrote as the thesis for a Master's Degree.

The Context: Symbolist Theater

When confronted with the question of why an English-speaking author living in England would write a play in French, there are several possible reasons. Under the censorship regulations of the 1890s, a playwright could get away with more and still receive approval from the Examiner of Plays with a work in French (Powell, pg. 35), and Wilde was certainly aware of the scandalous nature of the material. In addition, Sarah Bernhardt, the actress whom he later claimed was "the only person in the world who could act Salome" (*Times*, pg. 3), did not speak English. More important than these practical concerns which made writing in French advantageous was the aesthetic climate in which Wilde wrote *Salome*.

The year before the author began his play, the archetypal symbolist playwright Maurice Maeterlinck had a sudden surge of success with his works *The Intruder* and *The Blind* (Good, pg. 77). Both anti-realist plays employed simple repetitive dialogue that resembled the speech of one learning a language from a textbook. Wilde, like Beardsley, had an intense interest in French literature, especially that regarded as "decadent" or avant-garde (Maeterlink was certainly the latter), and surely it must have occurred to him that Maeterlinck's use of French fell well within the limits of his own ability. The story of Salome had already been made famous by the writings of authors popular with British aesthetes, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, the last of whom gave a detailed description of two Moreau paintings of Salome in his catalogue of decadence, *A Rebours*. Salome's ancient story interested many British and French *fin de siècle* writers,

for its theme of conflict between a dying and a new world order had renewed relevance at the close of the nineteenth century. Wilde assimilated these various facets of style and tradition for his own interpretation of Salome. He drew upon the decadence of Salome's character, which owed so much to French literature, he utilized the French language in a fashion similar to Maeterlinck, and, most important of all, he cast his play thoroughly in the style of French symbolist drama.

In reaction against the thrust in French theater towards realism, the same trend that by this time had come to dominate the English stage, an avant-garde group that became known as the symbolists wrote and directed plays based on the belief that the realistic theater reveals only part of life's truth, that perceived by the senses, and not the truth that exits only in mystery. Whereas the mainstream theater devoted its energies to the direct representation of the material world, the symbolists focused on creating a spiritual atmosphere through suggestion and evocation. They expressed themselves through forms intended to be perceived not objectively but as signs of ideas. The characters in such plays acted as instruments of hidden forces emanating from the unseen reality surrounding them, and they stood more for ideas than specific people. In general, the symbolist theater focused on conceptualization whereas the mainstream theater emphasized representation (Carlson, pg. 210).

Symbolist playwrights wrote in a style closely aligned with poetry. For drama that does not directly name its subject and that has an intentionally ambiguous atmosphere, poetic language suited their purposes better than the prose of everyday speech. In perfor-

mance, the spoken words worked in conjunction with the physical sets as part of the total illusion. Through words, the writer evoked the drama and the meaning of his play for the audience to interpret; similarly, he used mysterious scenic decor to evoke a significance in the mind of the spectator greater than the material execution on stage (Deak, pg. 144). In performance of symbolist drama, an artificial (as opposed to naturalistic) setting capable of creating a mysterious atmosphere ripe for interpretation was valued more than a scene focused on the "accurate" representation of everyday decor and dialogue. Preferring to suggest rather than directly represent, the symbolist dramatists emphasized the vague and universal over the particular. For that reason, they intentionally left their sets ambiguous and avoided references to particular times or recognizable locations (Deak, pg. 169).

Wilde, like the symbolist playwrights, leaves the setting of *Salome* ambiguous. The only description occurs at the very beginning of the text: "A great staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze" (Wilde, pg. 1). This brief explanation invites the reader to imaginatively supply the details of the story's location; in addition, its vagueness frees Wilde's play from a direct alignment with its Biblical origin. Wilde already distinguishes his interpretation from the Bible by expanding into poetic elaboration and, whether an oversight or an attempt to construct a type rather than a particular character, by drawing his Herod from three different Biblical figures named Herod; as a result, the story's time and location are nebulous and not necessarily in correspondence with the Bible. This autonomy that Wilde establishes allows the

reader more imaginative freedom in envisioning and interpreting the play's setting and, more importantly when trying to understand the illustrations in relation to the text, it not only freed Beardsley from directly representing scenes in Wilde's play, it makes appropriate his apparent departure from the text in favor of his own mysterious and heavily atmospheric interpretation.

Salome: Text and Illustrations

If one approaches both Wilde's and Beardsley's versions of *Salome* through the context of symbolist theater, then everything begins to come together, and the strand that links together the text and illustrations becomes clearer. Each in his own medium, Wilde and Beardsley used similar techniques to evoke a symbolic rather than a realistic atmosphere in line with what one might find in the French symbolist performance of *Salome*. In order to better understand these techniques, I would like to look at a passage of text in conjunction with a related illustration.

Throughout his play, Wilde uses language that, in its ornamentality, brings it closer to poetry than prose. Characteristic of symbolist drama, his poetic language removes the drama from the quotidian world; it creates an aura of mystery that appeals to the senses and the imagination as opposed to imitating ordinary speech in order to appear "accurate" or naturalistic. This ornamentative mode of expression flourishes in the passages in which Herod tries to convince Salome to accept various extravagant possessions so he will not have to give her the head of Iokanaan that she requested. He offers her fifty of his peacocks:

> Salome, thou knowest my white peacocks, my beautiful white peacocks, that walk in the garden between the myrtles and the tall cypress-trees. Their beaks are gilded with gold and the grains that they eat are smeared with gold, and their feet are stained with purple. When they cry out the rain comes, and the moon shows herself in the heavens when they spread their tails. Two by two they walk between the cypress-trees and the black myrtles, and each has a slave to tend it (Wilde, pg. 58-59).

Wilde's visually oriented description, rich in color and imagery, evokes a decorative picture of the peacock. It conveys a spectacle that could only exist in fantasy; yet, rendered so vividly, it evolves in a series of concrete images. Taken individually, each phrase conjures up a distinct mental picture, but cumulatively they form a mysterious world unknowable to the reader. Wilde describes an imaginary peacock, and, not bound by the constraints of the material world, it transcends the earthly, physical bird. He uses language for its ability to create the artificial, and through his decorative and poetic style, he builds an atmosphere of decadence in which artifice is prized over authenticity. As Herod hopes to entice Salome by ascribing his birds with magical qualities, Wilde seduces the reader into the realm of the imagination with Herod's speech by embroidering it like a tapestry with colors and fanciful pictures. One can only be enchanted and transported as Herod hoped Salome would be by the elaborateness of the description.

The image of the peacock occurs throughout Beardsley's *Salome* illustrations, but it becomes an especially prominent motif in *The*

Peacock Skirt (Figure 1). In the drawing, the bird takes on three different forms; it appears surrounded by a circular flowery arrangement of dots to the left of Salome, a design of crescent shapes resembling its tail feathers comprises the bottom half of her robe, and peacock feathers spread out like an open tail on Salome's headdress. Like the text, in which details concentrated on the peacock give cohesion to the passage, Beardsley's descriptions of the bird unify the illustration visually but do not contribute to the viewer's understanding of the picture or its subject matter. More than anything else, Beardsley's peacocks are evocative designs, not representations. His treatment of the motif and its emphasis on ornamentation, one of the image's most striking features, helps to distance the scene from any connection with the material world the viewer would have in response to a naturalistic depiction of peacocks.

In addition to ornamentation, Beardsley also uses abstraction in his peacock motif to achieve a dematerialized otherworldliness. By not adding texture or shading, he flattens out Salome's "peacock skirt," making ambiguous the relationship between her legs and feet, her garment, and the obscured ground upon which she stands. The peacock design, because it is offset by a dramatic black sweep, captures the viewer's initial focus of attention and asserts the two-dimensionality of Salome's figure. As Beardsley does not indicate depth, one cannot ascertain the relation of the left-hand peacock to the figures; the bird looks like a seal the artist stamped on the drawing rather than part of a background. As a result, the peacock, like the skirt, becomes an embellishment separate from the object it supposedly represents. In other words, the bird and the skirt turn

away from representation towards abstract surface decoration, just as the peacock in the textual passage does. Wilde's flowery description of Herod's peacocks "flattens" the bird into poetic abstraction, severing its ties to the world of prose and illusionistic representation. Both Wilde and Beardsley rely on the techniques of ornamentation and abstraction in their descriptions of the peacock to transport the reader and viewer to a place of artifice and imagination.

In another passage, Wilde's poetically stylized treatment of language flourishes when Salome, in an attempt to seduce Iokanaan, obsessively details the qualities of his mouth. She is like a poet who writes for a lover, each section growing more elaborate than the last. By the end, she has pushed beyond mere description.

> Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and are redder than the roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of the doves who inhabit the temples and are fed by priests. It is redder than the feet of him who cometh from a forest where he hath slain a lion, and seen gilded tigers. Thy mouth is like a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea, the coral that they keep for kings! . . . It is like the vermilion that the Moabites find in the mines of Moab, the vermilion that the kings take from them. It is like the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped with coral. There is nothing in the world so red as thy mouth . . . Suffer me to kiss thy mouth (Wilde, pg. 23).

Wilde uses Salome's speech to focus on a single color, abstracting the color from its source to reach its essence, excessively expanding on its most striking qualities until he has stretched the possibilities of redness to a level of passionate intensity. He relies heavily on simile to produce vivid images and on glimpses of the foreign and the uncommon to lend exoticism. In the end, the importance of red as an inspiration for making poetic statements surpasses its value as a color. The reader easily forgets that Salome is describing a mouth, as she is swept away in a rapid succession of images, from tower to temple, from the forest to the sea. It is a wash of sensuality that builds passion and crystallizes decadence. Both the visualization of red and the repetition of the word hold the text together, and the formalized reappearance of words such as vermilion and coral add to the tight unification that reminds one of a poem.

Each sentence in the passage is a new image, separate from what precedes or follows but connected by the focus on red. Wilde's self-conscious use of language, with its emphasis on descriptive word choice and rhythm, brings attention to the phrases themselves and the manner in which they are constructed. The content of every line in relation to the subject matter is of secondary importance. One could extract passages from the text and they would be compelling independent of the story, but taken as a whole, they create a mood and sense of mystery in which one can perceive though maybe not entirely understand, the spirit of the play.

These same concepts of abstraction, essentialization, and formalization that Wilde uses appear in all of Beardsley's drawings, but the *Toilette of Salome* (Figure 2) provides an especially good example.

The image depicts a masked Pierrot figure attending to Salome at her toilette. He touches her exaggeratedly coifed hair while dusting powder on her with his other hand. Salome wears a stylish nineteenth century dress and sits in front of a three-tiered dressing table. The table contains cosmetic items as well as several books considered decadent by many Victorians; formally, it provides a nice balance to the window with Venetian blinds in the background.

Beardsley uses abstraction in the treatment of Salome's clothing. A black arced section of her dress, bearing delicate white dots and stems, borders the bottom edge of the dress, and the same material in a narrow triangle complements the top. At her front, the black dotted design on her white petticoats reverse the white on black pattern in the rest of her dress and provides contrast to the textureless large white fold on her right side. The strong outline of the petticoats emphasizes the supersession of outline by silhouette in the portions of black cloth. Throughout the dress, black and white material and design alternate and oppose one another in combinations that form abstractions independents from the object represented. As with the chair upon which Salome sits, if one isolated the dress from its surroundings it would be reduced to unidentifiable pattern; however, in relation to the complete image, one understands both objects as stylized renderings.

The play of black and white continues in the rest of the image, with the dark masses guiding the viewer's gaze along crossing diagonal lines, from the bottom of Salome's dress at the lower left to the Pierrot figure's mask at the upper right, from the table at the lower right to the window at the upper left. The former line of vision is

made up mostly of the rounded masses that occur in Salome's figure and which serve compositionally to bring her together. The large dark oval of Salome's hair draws one's attention to her encircled face, while the juxtaposed black domino links the two figures in the same diagonal sweep. In contrast, the line that moves the viewer from foreground to background consists of sharp, geometric horizontals and verticals. They appear straightforwardly simple in the window, but tilted slightly in the table they add a touch of instability. The deliberate arrangement of black shapes set against white expanses throughout the drawing accentuates the formalization in the image. Like the vision of red in the description of Iokanaan's mouth, Beardsley's compositional technique separates the pattern from the representation and pushes it into abstraction, but taken as part of the whole, the stylization creates an atmosphere of artifice in sympathy with the subject of the illustration and paralleling the artificiality of many descriptive passages in the text.

In the Pierrot figure, Beardsley again essentializes by utilizing only the basic lines necessary to convey forms. He limits his description of the arm and apron to outline, except for the detail of the pocket composed of a thin dotted line. The straight edges that meet at the sharp point of his elbow contrast with the curve of his inner arm, and together they create a formalized appendage, abstracted from an arm's actual appearance. The Pierrot's right hand, equally formalized, is detached from his body by the daintily ruffled cuff and poised prominently against the solid white curtain in the background. It holds the powder puff with an affectation that crystallizes the entire scene's artificiality, a result of the abstract and stylized objects

and figures created by Beardsley's reductive use of line.

In line with the symbolist theater's emphasis on the general over the particular, Beardsley renders both figures as types rather than as individuals with particular characteristics. One can identify the arched eyebrows, full lips, and downcast eyes of Salome as the look of a stylish, privileged woman and the mask and ruffled collar of her attendant as a Pierrot. Together their importance as characters comes from their status as symbols, recognizable by the viewer in the same way the audience sees the faces of actors in symbolist dramas as universalized types, not limited by the particularity of their roles.

Among all of the *Salome* illustrations, critics cite the *Toilette of Salome* as particularly anachronistic and irrelevant to the subject matter of Wilde's play; however, both artist and writer use similar formal techniques that lead towards the same effect. They employ abstraction, essentialization, and formalization to promote an artificiality that helps locate their works outside the sphere of the naturalistic or the familiar and that creates an atmospheric heaviness. Beardsley achieves this by stripping his forms down to their basic lines, using patterns of black and white that contribute to the stylization of the image, flattening his figures and their surroundings to create spatial ambiguities and to accentuate the decorativeness of the picture, and making identifiable types of his figures rather than depicting particular characters. Wilde focuses on the essence of an object, a peacock or a mouth, and expands into a series of imagistic similes that stylize and abstract the description from its subject. He uses decorative language that pushes his text away from the confines of prose, and repetition as a formal device that further turns his

characters' dialogue into poetic recitations.

Conclusion

For the British audience of one hundred years ago, and even for the audience of today, the text of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and its accompanying illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley may appear at first to have a tenuous, possibly unintelligible, connection to each other. That, however, may be the result of looking at them from a less appropriate point of view. If one examines both works through the eyes of the French symbolist theater, then the qualities that they share and the link that draws them together becomes more apparent. The moody lyricism found in both text and illustrations propels the works into a strange world of decadence and foreboding, removed from the prosaic concerns of daily life. Such a suggestive atmosphere, ripe for interpretation and evocative in all its mystery, is a point of departure for the reader's or viewer's own imagination. And this flight into one's own personal realm of symbolism, is indeed the strongest tie that binds together the text and illustrations of *Salome*.

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Figure 1

Figure 2