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Precis on Beardsley's drawings

Hale

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Gilbert, Elliot L. "Tumult of Images: Wilde, Beardsley, and *Salomé*." *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences* 26.2 (1983): 133-159. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

In his article, "Tumult of Images," Elliot Gilbert argues against the traditional criticism that no such coherence exists between Wilde's *Salomé*, and the designs Aubrey Beardsley drew to accompany them. It's true that the illustrations seem, as one critic put it, "completely irrelevant and irreverent and irrational" within the context of the play (Beckson 134). Scenes that never occur in the play, such as Salomé having her hair done by a hair dresser or dressing in Japanese clothing, accompany the illustrations, seeming to show an irreverence for the play by the artist. Further, critics of the time praised Beardsley's drawings as being superior and more complex than the play they were meant to illustrate. One critic theorized that the "alleged disjunction of pictures and text in the *Salomé* volume arises from Beardsley's low opinion of the play" (Gilbert 134), though no such feelings can be confirmed (though Beardsley is on record calling the drawings "irrelevant").

However, Gilbert suggests that there is actually a greater connection between the drawings and the play than early critics were led to believe. He argues that other paintings and illustrations of Salomé in Herod's court, which one might think gave a more accurate and less anachronistic depiction of the *femme fatale*, fail completely to capture the "demonic and perverse sexuality that is one of the chief elements of Wilde's drama" (135). Beardsley's illustrations on the other hand contain "lurid

representations of hermaphroditism, masturbation, genetic monstrosities and full nudity that most accurately illustrates both the subject matter and the spirit of the play and is, therefore, the most truly relevant of all contemporary graphic depictions of Wilde's *Salomé*" (138).

Furthermore, Gilbert also argues that the drawings irrelevance and seeming mockery of Wilde's play connect to the "mocking and parodic elements" of his work. One critic, San Juan, calls the play a "pastiche of erotic psalmody," (140), a play that playfully and self-consciously parody's erotic biblical cadences. In that sense then, Gilbert argues that Beardsley is simply creating illustrations that are "as alien to the subject as was the play" (140).

However, Gilbert also acknowledges that this reading of Wilde's play simply being humorous and irrelevant can only take us so far, and doesn't do justice to the speciousness of the play. Gilbert argues instead that, "Wilde 'fixes the legend of Salomé's horrible passion'...not only by positioning the girl more centrally in the plot – assigning to her certain actions which before had been ascribed to her mother – but also by taking her more seriously...a subjectivity and interiority which is signally absent from the sources" (142). While the original characters of Salomé and Herodias often appear as objectifications of "female destructiveness, of apocalyptic beastiality...world-old vice," (144) and are meant to be seen from the outside, Wilde's play draws the observer into the subjectivity of the characters. Gilbert argues that repellent scenes in the play become somewhat touching, and we feel sympathy for characters like Salomé, as if we are "in experiencing the dark obsessions of Salomé we are experiencing our own" (144). To Gilbert, Beardsley's drawings show the "process by which a conventionally monstrous act can be made to appear recognizably human through association with ourselves replicates the more general process by which objective reality can be made to yield to the dissolving influence of individual perception" (144). We see this self-created reality in the different interpretation of the moon, and the end of the play, when Herod calls for the stars and moon to

disappear and they do, in fact, disappear. Gilbert continues to give multiple examples of this, from the “Page’s homosexual devotion to the Young Syrian, a form of masturbatory self-love” to the prophet’s self-fulfilling death prophecy. This solipsistic element is then, perhaps, no better represented than in Beardsley’s drawings.

Gilbert writes, “Beardsley offers, in support of Wilde’s daring exploration of the possibilities and limits of a self-relexive life, an equally startling visualization of that life. Wilde’s face for example, self-referentially brooding over so many of the pictures, shows that it is the writer’s mind that is the true theatre in which the drama is being performed. Then, too, the anachronism of the toilet scenes dramatically asserts that in a self-created world, history is just one more projection of the imagination” (147).

Finally, Gilbert argues that “both the text and the drawings of *Salomé* embody this confrontation,” (148), the confrontation between forces commonly associated with women and the *femme fatale* (natural, cyclical, ahistorical subjectivity), and the dominating patriarchy and authority seen as under attack during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (a sense of the world as possessing an objective reality independent of, and more absolute, than any individual). *Salomé*, according to Gilbert, “is essentially a play about power: about who is to have it, who is to exercise it, how it is to be transmitted” (148). On one side, you have the male authority Wilde fought all his life (Herod, Caesar, Christ, the prophet, soldiers), and on the other, the female side, disobedient, corrosive, and unapologetically sexual. Salomé’s power, in particular, is drawn from her completely “apolitical self-indulgence, a total lack of concern for process and consequence” (152). Both Beardsley and Wilde undermine authority by blurring the objective reality. The line between men and women is almost completely blurred, female power is matched with male anatomy, youth are given virgin faces, and Salomé decorates herself with erotic vulval images.

Thus, Gilbert makes an effective argument linking the works of Beardsley and Wilde, showing not dissonance between the two, but a mutual understanding of the inherent themes of the play.