On the Politics of Decadent Rebellion: Beardsley, *Japonisme*, Rococo

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WHAT did decadent rebellion look like in visual form? The graphic designer Aubrey Beardsley was a signal contributor to the British decadent movement of the 1890s. His tremendous artistic influence came to span continents despite his 1898 death from tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-five. Beardsley's visual interests encapsulate some of the typical qualities we associate with decadent visuality: elongated, grotesque bodies, weird costumes, strange proportions, fetuses, dwarfs, ambiguous or pornographic markers of sex and gender. This imagery rebelled against conventional Victorian styles, in which realistic renderings conveyed the bourgeois values of family, morality, and respectability. Most scholarship on Beardsley has focused on his images' perverse gender play. His effeminate men and monstrous women—hallmarks of decadent gender—have inspired scholars to apply Freudian theories of sexuality, or to link them to the advent of feminism and the New Woman.[1] Critics have also focused on Beardsley's illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1894), images that Wilde famously disliked for their defiant refusal to subordinate themselves to the verbal original. The competition between word and image staged by the *Salomé* illustrations has invited diverse scholarly theories of medium, as critics compare Wilde's words, Beardsley's images, subsequent theatrical stagings, and even recent film adaptations.[2]

This essay, however, chooses a different emphasis. Beardsley's visual experiments were famously influenced by foreign styles—most strikingly, those of nineteenth-century Japan and eighteenth-century France. Looking to Japanese prints, Beardsley experimented with linear forms and flattened picture planes. And his turn to eighteenth-century France informed a late style of extreme ornament, adorning human

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figures with highly patterned surfaces. While scholars have acknowledged these influences, I want to delve deeper into the decadent visual engagement with Japanese and French models. Looking at Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé* and *The Rape of the Lock* (1896), I'll argue that these two stylistic influences are actually connected despite their diverse geographies and temporalities. An analysis of both styles will reveal the ways that decadence embraced hierarchy and the inequality of persons, wielding a surprisingly normative politics of racial and cultural otherness to produce a Victorian counterculture.

This account will intervene in a larger conversation about decadence and the politics of its rebellions. Critics in the 1890s accused decadence of being distasteful and degenerate—accusations that the movement itself invited, as when Arthur Symons declared in 1893 that it was really a "new and beautiful and interesting disease."[3] Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, in their introduction to the important collection *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999), note how scholarship across the twentieth century tended to malign decadence for its perverse morals, its deliberate naughtiness, and its investments in negative qualities like disease, decay, and promiscuity. Starting in the 1980s, however, scholars began to embrace decadence for its admirable rebelliousness, its willingness to engage in formal experimentation in both word and image. Decadent philosophies of self-as-surface were seen to anticipate the more relativistic and deconstructionist strains of postmodernism. Queer theorists celebrated decadence for its radical "sexual dissidence," as it rejected constraining Victorian gender roles (see Dollimore). Many of the scholars writing in *Perennial Decay* see decadence as desirable for its oppositional stance, resonating with scholars' own critiques of Victorian middle-class moral bromides.[4]

As a number of contributions to this special issue make clear, scholars today are still divided as to the politics and moral valences of the decadent movement.[5] In this essay, I want to highlight the perhaps counterintuitive ways that decadence, as practiced by Aubrey Beardsley, in fact recapitulated some of the mainstream values of the 1890s, for all its countercultural attitudes. When we contemplate decadence not as an aesthetic tactic but as a historical art movement of the fin de siècle, we notice how it was very much a product of its era. Its deliberate immorality and amorality unfolded in the midst of high European imperialism, a development that it in many ways accommodated. Decadence was not a democratic enterprise; it thrived on a power dynamics of

inequality, attuned to differences of culture or class, even while it gained energy from transgressing gender divides. If scholars take gender nonconformity as decadence's most defining rebellion, they miss some of its more accepting attitudes toward normative concepts of distinction and otherness, including its racism, elitism, misogyny, and ease with late-century imperialism and orientalism. What's interesting, I'll argue, is that decadence harnessed these familiar attitudes in strange ways, using models of taboo difference to create a transgressive aesthetics that moved toward both embodiment and abstraction. Beardsley's turn toward new Japan or old France came weighted with philosophical and political resonances: a reckoning with these models of otherness will afford a more nuanced vision of decadence as a whole.

1. *Japonisme*

Already in the 1890s, critics were observing that *Japanese* and eighteenth-century French influences were producing a new kind of decadent counterculture. Arthur Symons, writing in "The Decadent Movement in Literature," quotes from Edmond de Goncourt: "The search after *reality* in literature, the resurrection of eighteenth-century art, the triumph of *Japonisme*—are not these . . . the three great literary and artistic movements of the second half of the nineteenth century?"[6] The sentiment links modernism and artistic experimentation to the influences of Japanese art and French eighteenth-century styles—which also connoted the fearless decadent portrayal of "*reality* in literature," a willingness to offend mainstream tastes and values.

Art historians have studied the profound influence of Japanese prints, ceramics, lacquer objects, and other decorative wares on Western artists in the later nineteenth century.[7] After Japanese markets opened to the West in 1858, Japanese art objects made a sensation at London's International Exposition of 1862, with over six hundred objects on display. Aesthetes signaled their cultivated taste by displaying Japanese décor, including screens, fans, and textiles, while impressionist painters imitated Japanese style with brilliant blocks of color and flattened picture planes. For many scholars, the artistic turn to Japan inaugurated the triumphant arrival of modernism, as *Japonisme* opened an avenue to Western formal experimentation across diverse media.

Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé* show his use of Japanese visual motifs. Each image offers its own strange spatial play. Patterns on costumes move sinuously around planes of white and black. Figures float

Figure 1. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Black Cape." From Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (London: Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1894). Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

against a white backdrop, a netherworld lacking coordinates in space and time. In "The Black Cape" (fig. 1), Salomé appears incongruously attired in Japanese dress, with swooping black layers imitating a samurai's armor. A petite Victorian ladies' hat perches on her large, stylized black hair. The image uses Japanese visual style to render a formalist vision, as Salomé's dress assembles black blocks in elegant, shapely forms. Linda Gertner Zatlin, in a study of Beardsley's *Japonisme*, notes how this

image combines two stylistic influences borrowed from Japanese prints: *shironuki*, picking out a linear design in white against a black background; and *ishizuri*, using blocks of white against a black ground to create an illusion of volume and depth.[8] Zatlin's study traces numerous formal mirrorings between Beardsley's work and the Japanese print tradition. She narrates a familiar story by which a Western artist embraced a foreign art style to arrive at both formal innovations and rebellious subversions.

With its unlikely mixture of cultures and eras, this image raises some pointed questions about Beardsley's use of Japanese iconography. The startling eruption of Japanese style occurs in what is essentially an illustration to a Christian Bible story. Outfitting Salomé in samurai style, Beardsley draws on Japan's associations with "the Orient," connoting all the stereotypical sensuousness and racial exoticism assigned to the East. The image emphasizes the fact that the biblical Salomé was a Middle Eastern princess, rather than an English one. As I've discussed elsewhere, nineteenth-century British audiences had thoroughly appropriated the Christian Bible for Britishness, such that Salomé's racial overtone might not have been an immediate signifier.[9] But both Wilde's play and Beardsley's image bring forward the Bible's racial otherness. Wilde's *Salomé* depicts Herod's court as a melting pot of empire, as different characters dispute the nature of religion and politics according to their diverse ethnic backgrounds. Characters within the play label each other according to their cultures of birth, including "Romans," "Jews," "Syrians," "Nubians" (African people indigenous to present-day Sudan and southern Egypt), "Nazarenes" (a Jewish sect considered an early form of Christianity), and "Cappadocians" (from a historical region in central Turkey), among others. Wilde's *Salomé* implicitly links the Roman Empire under Caesar to the British Empire and its dominions, including Ireland and Africa. In both realms, diverse ethnic traditions are held together under the military might of a strong central ruler. When Beardsley clothes Salomé in Japanese costume, he alludes to the heterogeneous styles and ethnicities brought together under the modern British Empire. Victorian Japan was not directly colonized by Britain, but the British played a large role in the economy and commercial profits of Japan's newly opened markets. Japan belonged to Britain's so-called "informal empire," designated by economic historians to describe the impact of British culture through trading treaties and laissez-faire capitalism.[10] When Beardsley clothes Salomé in Japanese dress, then, he marks her with a foreign otherness that Victorian audiences would have associated with other imperial subordinates. Japan, like India, China, and

Egypt, was a source of "Eastern" allure whose commodities became prized by British collectors and connoisseurs.

Japanese style here offers a motif for maneuvering around cultural otherness, courting its exoticism, wielding its sensuality, and using its patterns to make human bodies strange. Salomé's *Japonisme* is a desirable exoticism put on like a costume, available for a Western feminine identity. Her body in "The Black Cape" reflects grotesque distortions. One prominent hand is insectile and four-fingered; along the dress's plunging neckline, she appears to have no breasts, but a marked belly button. Her legs are impossibly skinny and lengthened within the tight black dress. The serpentine shape of her body is almost more snakelike than human. When Salomé becomes a Japanese geisha, the sexuality bestowed on that exotic figure melds with the notorious allure of the biblical princess.

Beardsley's *Japonisme* reflects a complicated Orientalism, one that exceeds the basic model described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*. The feminized voluptuousness by which Western artists and spectators characterized "the East," according to Said, certainly manifests in Beardsley's images. But for decadent writers and artists, Japan sometimes also connoted a more ethereal abstraction. In "The Decay of Lying" (1891), Wilde's decadent manifesto, Vivian famously announces that "in fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention. There is no such country, there are no such people." Japanese artists have fabricated scenes, styles, and figures with no bearing on any actual reality. Vivian takes a "Japanese effect" to epitomize the formalist antirealism espoused by the essay as a whole, one that pivots away from the concrete world toward a more quicksilver, abstracted aesthetic. This antihuman artifice is a kind of "lying," a romance of beautiful confabulations, rather than any straightforward account of real people. When a Japanese effect appears in the opening of Wilde's novel *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), it too performs a dematerialized abstraction. Lord Henry Wotton, lounging in an artist's studio, watches as birds cast their shadows across a curtained window, "producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect." The bird shadows transform the window into a Japanese screen, making Lord Henry "think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion." Here Lord Henry reflects the values Wilde promotes in his essay, privileging Art and Mind over Nature and its discomfiting embodiments. In this aspect, Japan connotes what Grace Lavery describes as "aesthetic judgment in general, and what Kant calls the

'subjective universal' character of the judgment of taste in particular." As Lavery glosses this concept, Japanese style invited "the feeling that *everybody in the world* should and would find this object beautiful."[11] Japanese visual abstraction was taken by Victorian decadents and others to signify a universalized aesthetic, a disembodied truth of beauty that moved toward universalism precisely because it left behind the specific, particularizing details of an actual world.

Yet Japanese style, for Western artists, also always evoked racial difference, a truth inescapably rooted in the body. Lord Henry thinks of Japanese artists as "pallid" and "jade-faced," their racial difference leading them to create an art defined by its oxymoronic combinations of stillness and movement. "Jade-faced" is an especially rich descriptor; while it typically connoted a pale green color, here it also clearly invokes yellow as the familiar stereotypical Asian racial marker. That both yellow and green were signature hues of the aesthetic movement, even blurring together as "greenery-yallery" in the Gilbert and Sullivan parody, is a slippage underlying the Asian racial imagery of "jade-faced."[12] (Jade sculpture, moreover, was a characteristically Chinese art form rather than a Japanese one, suggesting that Lord Henry is engaging in a typical Victorian conflation of Asian cultures.) Jade-faced artists become art objects themselves, stony and semi-precious, their Japanese-ness imbuing them with an aesthetic quality that is itself a distinction of race. Lord Henry's imaginings also draw upon the familiar Victorian stereotype by which Asian cultures were "immobile," static, and circular, while European cultures were progressive and driving forward in history. Wilde's imagery employs a common decadent tactic by invoking racial difference in order to embrace it, celebrating an exotic other that mainstream culture would disdain or exclude. (In this case, Lord Henry admires the abstracted beauty of a Japanese screen, showing off his aesthetic sensibility.) In fact, art for art's sake was profoundly compatible with racialized embodiment, since the aesthetic avant-garde valued beautiful shape, pattern, color, and pigment, inviting the eye to land emphatically upon the body of the art object, rather than encouraging the mind to see through the object toward a narrative or moral conclusion. When Beardsley makes Salomé look Japanese, arranging her body according to the formal distortions familiar from Japanese prints, he invokes the broader racialized counterculture that united both erotic embodiment *and* ethereal abstraction—as both of these opposed the Victorian middle-class values of realist style, three-dimensional space, moral storytelling, Christian ethics, and female chastity.

Figure 2. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Climax." From Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (London: Elkin Matthews and John Lane, 1894). Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

Beardsley's art also particularizes the kind of abstraction that the Japanese effect entailed. It cultivates qualities of "the exquisite," a word that, as Lavery argues, Victorian writers applied to Japanese aesthetics to describe a link between "tasteful formal arrangement" and "an experience of some kind of pain." Japan in the Victorian mind suggested "an *irresistible* violence," says Lavery, but one precise and targeted rather than vast and bludgeoning.[13] The exquisite beauty of Japanese style

connoted a sadomasochistic eroticism, a brutality channeled into formal constraints, bindings, and bondage. Lavery's study does not focus on decadence per se, but her term seems especially evocative for the decadent arts of the 1890s, with their outré experiments in gender and pain. Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé* capture exactly this kind of combination of formal exactitude with power-inflected violence. The drawings are precise, linear, patterned, detailed, and perfectly controlled; they echo the violent yet stylized thematics of Wilde's play, in which men and women are forced to perform for the pleasures of a tyrannical king. When, in Beardsley's image of "The Climax" (fig. 2), the monstrous Salomé floats in space while holding the decapitated head of John the Baptist—her lips adjacent to his—the odd bubbles imitate marine-themed Japanese prints, while the flower growing out of John the Baptist's spilled blood imitates a Japanese flower.[14] The picture shocks with its erotic glorying in decapitation, but it also distances itself from that obscene violence, rendering messy bodily disfigurement in neat swathes of light and shadow. Blood becomes ink, as the drops from the Baptist's head solidify into a sinuous, pleasing pattern. The image is actually a tasteful, neatly organized scene of a ghastly woman holding a decapitated head. All the violence of the scene, and the power wielded by the monstrous woman, is concentrated into a matter of forceful lines, shapes, and blocks, some of them completely abstract. The image's controlling formalism reflects an aesthetic of the Japanese exquisite, the binding of power into line and pattern. Beardsley's *Japonisme*, then, united formal experimentation with some of the exoticized, stereotypical associations of Japaneseness, harnessed toward the expression of an erotic counterculture both embodied and abstract.

2. Rococo

The other distinctive visual influence in Beardsley's imagery was that of the French eighteenth century. While *Japonisme* inspired stripped-down, minimalist forms and blocks of dark and light, eighteenth-century influences wrought a more extreme ornamentalism, with detailed patterns and encrusted spaces. Beardsley's illustrations for Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1896) epitomize this influence, though it can also be traced across a range of his later works, including his illustrations to Ernest Dowson's *Pierrot of the Minute* (1897) and his pornographic illustrations to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (1896). The visual influence of Japan seems very different from that of a style adopted from a previous

European century. Yet I want to explore some ideological connections between these two very different cultures and times, as they were appropriated by Beardsley's decadent works. Both styles featured within late-Victorian interior design, as collectors sought both Japanese wares and eighteenth-century *objets*. As Linda Dowling notes, both styles shared "a concern with asymmetrical compositions and elongated proportions, with the ornamentation of flat surfaces, and with the treatment of a room—architecture, furnishings, and decoration—as a unified aesthetic whole."[15] Like *Japonisme*, eighteenth-century style also enabled formal visual experimentation, pushing against the realist three-dimensional modeling typical of Victorian visual culture.

Visual experiment also accompanied a distinct counterculture philosophy. While "high" Victorianism aspired to seriousness and authenticity, with realist figures engaging in weighty psychological dramas, the eighteenth century offered a lighter gaiety. It was "the age of mask and pose, superficiality and mere surface," as Dowling summarizes.[16] Light, but not lightweight: eighteenth-century culture modeled a theory of self-as-surface that would be taken up by many decadent writers and artists, a theory that some scholars have seen to anticipate postmodernist accounts of subjectivity. Wilde's "Truth of Masks" (1886) sums up a decadent antihumanism that eighteenth-century style helped to channel, proposing notions of the self as performative, theatrical, and artificial.

A major figure in the late-Victorian revival of the eighteenth century was the French painter Antoine Watteau (1684–1721). The artist was the subject of an "imaginary portrait" by Walter Pater, "A Prince of Court Painters" (1885).[17] Arthur Symons and Michael Field wrote poems about Watteau paintings. Beardsley celebrated the Watteau vogue in an 1895 letter: "The cult for him is so entirely modern."[18] They were all inspired by the Goncourt brothers, whose writings in *French XVIII Century Painters* (1859–75) turned a decadent eye on the previous century. The Goncourts wrote of the sensuality of Watteau:

> All the fascination of women in repose: the languor, the idleness, the abandonment, the mutual leanings on one another, the outstretched limbs, the indolence, the harmony of attitudes, the delightful air of some *gamme d'amour*, the breasts' receding, elusive contours, the meanderings, the undulations, the pliancies of a woman's body; the play of slender fingers upon the handle of a fan, the indiscretion of high heels peeping below the skirt, the chance felicities of demeanour, the coquetry of gesture, the manoeuvering of shoulders, and all that erudition, that mime of grace, which the women of the preceding century acquired from their mirrors; all this, with its peculiar intensity of tone, its special lustre, lives on in Watteau.[19]

This description echoes Edmund Burke's aesthetic category of "the beautiful"—feminized, curved, petite, voluptuous—as opposed to the seemingly more masculine, overawing concept of the sublime. Watteau's style merges into the qualities of his painted seductive women, an eroticism that is performative and "acquired from mirrors." Watteau, like *Japonisme*, offered another route toward eroticism, taking the female body as the symbol of embodiment itself. But this embodiment also occurs via a play of façades, a mode of feminine indirection and swerves implying larger philosophical values based in game-playing and the self as a surface.

The Goncourts were French writers looking back on a native French tradition, but the cult of Watteau gained additional significance in England, where it took on the loaded connotations of Frenchness. Indeed, it is significant that the decadents looked specifically to eighteenth-century France rather than to England. The English eighteenth century might have signaled what Dowling humorously labels "roast beef, brown ale, and genial Henry Fielding"—in other words, a comic middle-class aesthetic.[20] France, by contrast, signaled an exotic foreignness in its Catholicism, its licentiousness, and its loose morals. Most importantly (and not discussed by Dowling), it was the site of a pre-Revolutionary aristocratic culture, a deeply unequal world of wealthy gentility alongside peasants or servants. The era's visual arts focused especially on aristocratic games of etiquette and flirtation. Watteau was famous for his depictions of *fêtes galantes,* aristocratic parties in the countryside, where French courtiers dressed up as rustic *commedia dell'arte* characters to perform scenes of playful seduction. The frothy curves of rococo style relayed scenes of playful revelries, the elegant leisured pursuits of an aristocratic elite.[21] In Watteau's painting *Embarkation for Cythera* (1717), a parade of figures in lavish costumes—some of them *commedia dell'arte*—make their way toward a ship wreathed with winged putti. Men and women exchange glances and caresses; they process toward "Cythera," already a famously sexualized utopian garden, described in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499) as a topiary labyrinth and fountain of Venus evocative of a woman's body. The gardens of Cythera invited "pilgrimages of love" from carousing aristocrats.[22] For late-Victorian decadent writers, Watteau's countryside parties connoted a frank eroticism and overt sexuality that was forbidden by middle-class taboos in the later moment.

These associations inform Beardsley's illustrations to *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope's satirical poem renders the battle of the (elite) sexes as a

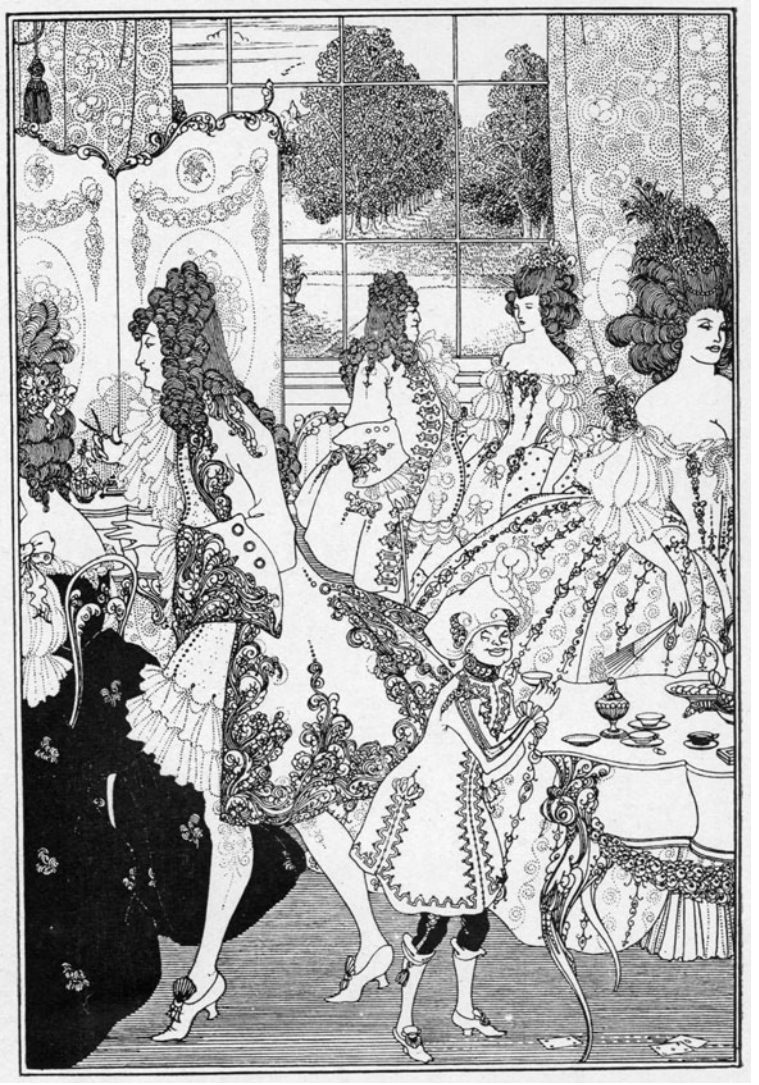

Figure 3. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Rape of the Lock." From Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (London: L. Smithers, 1896). Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

mock epic, serving as the perfect vehicle for a rococo visual style. While Pope's poem is English, rather than French, its admiring and voyeuristic view into aristocratic lifestyles makes it an ideal subject for Beardsley's rococo illustrations. His depiction of the climactic scene of the "rape" (fig. 3) presents a surfeit of décor, swirling patterns on costumes and curtains that overwhelm the eye and obscure the narrative action. In fact, the

Baron's scissors are poised over the unwitting hair of the victim, Belinda, but these are sidelined to the image's very far edge. We see Belinda's hair and exposed back; her face is abruptly cut off. The omission of Belinda's face implies that her deep personhood is not important to the metaphysics of the image. What matters is the gorgeous spectacle of figures luxuriously costumed, maneuvering like peacocks within the space of the frame. Men and women alike sport poufed coats and dresses covered with patterns. The predatory baron, scissors aloft, wears a costume equally elaborate to those of the women, with his shapely bared leg and high heeled shoe. Like Pope's satire, the image gains force with its visual jokes: the women's ornate hair is mirrored by the men's luxuriant wigs, which in turn echo the manicured trees through the window. Victorian gender norms emphasized a biological divide between men and women, but Beardsley undermines essentialist gender distinctions by costuming male and female characters identically. The baron is swathed in ruffles, his frilly pants evoking a woman's petticoat. Art triumphs over nature, and even the trees outside participate in the artful game. (The mirroring of humans and gardens also hearkens back to the Goncourts' Watteau, whose female figures epitomized an erotic artifice embedded into a sinuous landscape.) In another joke, human costumes match the inanimate décor, as patterns writhe across curtains, screens, and table legs. Human interactions and manners become a matter of winding surfaces, games wrought on the façade. The swanning figures exhibit a patent eroticism, especially in their corseted voluptuousness. And at the image's center, a grotesque dwarf, also fabulously attired, sips what appears to be a cup of tea. This figure situates us solidly within the terrain of decadence, showing us the artist's knowing eye. We are distanced from the scene: the illustration does not yearn for an old aristocracy so much as it uses the style to invoke manners that are themselves grotesque and discomfiting.

Eighteenth-century style enables Beardsley to pursue both taboo embodiments and ethereal abstractions: figures flirt and coquette, while intense patterning evokes a mode of life lived entirely through surfaces. Both of these transgressive modes are signaled by visual grotesquerie, a recurring motif throughout all of Beardsley's work. In his illustration to "The Cave of Spleen" from *The Rape of the Lock* (fig. 4), Beardsley's image literalizes the fantasia of Pope's verses, blurring together human bodies, animals, wings, plumage, tails, headdresses, ornamented objects, and swirling costumes. Pope writes of "Bodies chang'd to various forms by Spleen," including "living teapots" and

Figure 4. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Cave of Spleen." From Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (London: L. Smithers, 1896). Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

talking jars; "Men prove with Child, as pow'rful Fancy works, / And Maids turn'd Bottels, call aloud for Corks." The bodies of Beardsley's figures are likewise distended and grotesque, insinuating strange pregnancies and weird mixtures of human flesh and ceramic vessels. The grotesque was a venerable Victorian style with weighty resonances; for John Ruskin, it signified a profound authenticity, linking ugliness to truth. Grotesque

medieval ornaments bespoke a sublime individualism, modeling an aesthetics that was rugged and deep. Beardsley's grotesque, by contrast, emerges by way of Watteau and the Goncourts. It is feminized and perverse, based in curves, surfaces, and linearity; it bespeaks brittleness rather than depth, featuring monsters of gender and culture, fetuses and gnomes.

Both *Japonisme* and rococo style provided means of stylization and detachment. The grotesque figure at the center of Beardsley's eighteenth-century scene offers a commentary on the realm it occupies, separating the artistic intelligence from the values of the old aristocratic world. Yet aristocracy itself, an idea of stark class difference, was crucial to decadent aesthetics, whose works often featured male gentlemen surrounded by luxury. These fantasies were usually created by middle-class male artists, highlighting their phantasmatic and symbolic aspects. The smirking grotesque in the midst of plumed gentry does not undermine the fact of gentry so much as propose a new aristocracy, one that will appreciate erotic jokes and visual games without applying the codes of Victorian morality.

Beardsley's own background was middle-class—his father worked as a jeweler and clerk, while his family often battled poverty—lending a certain wistful gleam to the luxurious scenes of *The Rape of the Lock*.[23] Pre-Revolutionary French culture offers a way to meditate on style and stylization itself, as class becomes not a matter of birth or blood but a theatrical performance or masquerade. In Beardsley's decadent visual culture, the extreme ornamentalism of minute patterning foregrounds the hand and the handmade, itself a pre-industrial referent; but these images are produced using photomechanical processes of reproduction, remaking a faux-aristocratic aesthetic for the modern world of circulating media.

3. Two Toilettes

Both Japanese nineteenth-century styles and French eighteenth-century styles enabled Beardsley to produce a visual counterculture, arriving at forms of embodiment and abstraction based in modes of difference and hierarchy. At a basic level, Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé* seem strikingly different from those for *The Rape of the Lock*, as *Salomé*'s Japanese-inflected biblical horror seems a far cry from *The Rape of the Lock*'s satirical gender games. Yet the two are surprisingly connected via Beardsley's imagery. As James A. Heffernan argues, the illustrations

reveal certain shared thematics between *Salomé* and *The Rape of the Lock*: "[B]oth works incongruously mingle the social and domestic rituals of civilized life—applying makeup, formal dining, dancing, card-playing, tea-drinking, gossiping, flirting—with acts of brutal barbarity: rape and decapitation."[24] Heffernan does not study the contrasting visual styles of the illustrations, nor their Japanese or French influences, but these elements help to elucidate his keen insight. Beardsley's style-mixing across time periods and geographies is subversive: at a moment when many Victorian artists were striving for realism, using historical research to inform authentic costumes and settings, Beardsley dresses his biblical figures as Japanese geishas and eighteenth-century aristocrats in the same work. In particular, Beardsley made two different versions of "The Toilette of Salomé," portraying the heroine seated before a mirror while an attendant in a Pierrot costume applies cosmetics with a powder brush. This scene does not occur in Wilde's play. It is pure invention on Beardsley's part. (The original version of the scene appeared to include masturbating figures and was censored by the publisher [fig. 5]; Beardsley replaced it with a second version that was published in *Salomé* [fig. 6].) In both versions, the toilette scene shows how an eighteenth-century trope became a useful vehicle for decadent aesthetics: as the Goncourts described the beauty of Watteau's female figures, defined by artifice, game-playing, coquetry, and skills "acquired from mirrors," so too the decadent woman was often portrayed seated in front of a mirror, applying cosmetics and glorying in her own beauty. The makeup artificially enhanced her allure so that she could more effectively ensnare men.

An illustration for *The Rape of the Lock* likewise portrays Belinda seated at her toilette, while a female servant fixes her hair (fig. 7). The visual style of this image, with its eighteenth-century patterning, seems very different from the more Japanese-inflected minimalism of the Salomé scene. Yet it is striking that both works portray a heroine seated at her toilette in a boudoir-type chamber. In *The Rape of the Lock*, the image emphasizes the cleavage of both mistress and maid while elaborating the voluminous décor of their dresses. The maid's dress even appears to be decorated with a ruffled vagina, a visual joke naming the frank eroticism of the woman-in-the-boudoir motif. Meanwhile, the feminized ruffles and flounces are visually pierced by the long, vertical candles on the dressing-table, and a pair of scissors sits ominously beside them, foreshadowing the "rape" to come. In the published *Salomé* toilette scene (fig. 6), a pair of scissors also appear on a dressing table, though in this case they

Figure 5. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Toilette of Salomé." First version. Broadside, 23 x 18 cm., 1894. Courtesy of the Rare Book Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

hint at the more ominous and gruesome violence that will unfold at the play's end. Books on Salomé's bookshelf mention Zola's *Nana*, the Marquis de Sade, and "Les Fêtes Galantes"—tracing a lineage of outré French sexuality from the eighteenth into the nineteenth centuries. Both Salomé and Belinda are players in a power game, mock-epic in Pope and slant biblical epic in Wilde. In the original Bible story, princess Salomé is merely an obedient daughter to her mother; in Wilde's play, though, she becomes her own perverse agent working against Herod's dominant power, using her sexuality as her only available weapon. Beardsley's images amplify these moments of female agency, showing a female figure preparing to dominate over a man by amplifying her

Figure 6. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Toilette of Salomé." From Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, 1894. Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

sexuality, or even taking pleasure in her own appearance without any need for a male spectator. The woman supervising her own makeup or hair-styling is an agent of self-creation: she becomes her own work of art.

Not coincidentally, both of these "toilette" scenes portray the female protagonist assisted by servants. The aristocratic Belinda is attended to by her maid, while the princess Salomé is attended by a smirking Pierrot with a powder brush. In the earliest version of Salomé's toilette

Figure 7. Aubrey Beardsley, "The Toilet." From Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock* (London: L. Smithers, 1896). Courtesy of Dartmouth College Library.

(fig. 5), she's surrounded by a group of servants, two of them nude, one standing ready with a tea tray. These details point to some of the tricky political connotations underlying Beardsley's imagery. On one hand, *Salomé* in particular centers on a disempowered princess who attempts to seize control over both a tyrannical king and a male religious zealot. The play's final grotesque imagery, in which Salomé holds aloft John

the Baptist's decapitated head, evokes the French Revolution and its bloody reckoning against kings and aristocrats.[25] Yet Salomé cannot be unambiguously aligned with the leveling forces of revolution. Beardsley's inserted toilette scenes, with their referents to eighteenth-century France, still draw upon a titillating aesthetics of the aristocratic woman and her subversive, sexualized idleness. In fact, with the respective toilette scenes in both *Salomé* and *The Rape of the Lock*, Beardsley links the realms of both artworks via a kind of dream logic. Wilde's biblical world, ruled over by King Herod, is luxuriously materialistic, erotic, and deeply hierarchical and brutal. These are qualities that Victorians also associated with the eighteenth century before its revolutions, a world occupied by aristocrats and servants (or slaves). Japan, too, summoned associations of the character of the "Oriental despot," connoting feudal stagnation despite its modernizations during the Meiji period. Ultimately, Beardsley doesn't seem especially interested in political critique. His Salomé is surrounded by fawning attendants and servants. (Wilde's play, too, highlights an erotics of enslavement, with Herod's court populated by peoples he has enslaved, and some characters pronouncing themselves "slaves" for love.) Like many decadent artists, Beardsley enjoys the elite exclusivity conjured by luxurious worlds of masters and slaves while exploiting the implicitly violent power dynamics underlying forms of bondage and servitude.

This discussion has examined Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé* and *The Rape of the Lock* in order to limn the complicated politics of otherness wielded by decadent visuality. The images transgress Victorian moral codes, especially those surrounding gender and sexuality. But they also draw on familiar, stereotypical tropes of race and class in order to make their transgressions. Decadent visual and verbal rhetorics of Japaneseness or pre-Revolutionary Frenchness depict perverse power dynamics, gaining pleasure from forms of difference, hierarchy, and abject otherness. Scholars have long noted that both Japanese and French styles enabled late-Victorian modes of visual experiment, tending toward antirealism, flatness, and abstraction. But my analysis has also brought other connections to the fore. Both styles served as avenues toward forms of antihumanism, in the flattening of bodies and persons, enabling distortions, masks, and grotesque transformations of the human. Both styles highlighted forms of distinction, portraying aristocracies, empires, hierarchies, domination, and an antidemocratic ethos of grandeur and violence. And both styles were channels for a perverse sexuality, whether the games of flirtation and seduction in Watteau, or the

geishas of Japanese prints, producing distorted bodies and strange genderings. Paradoxically, this stylized imagery worked via both embodiment and abstraction, drawing especially on the embodied racialized body to convey an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic. My account ultimately provokes a reconsideration of how a counterculture actually works, as it uses familiar modes of belief to make its radical challenges.

Notes

1. Many scholars, too numerous to cite here, have debated the gender politics of Beardsley's imagery, especially in his illustrations to Wilde's *Salomé*. Two representative examples are Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, which applies a Freudian lens to Beardsley's imagery; and Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics*, which argues that Beardsley's images supported a feminist agenda.
2. See, among others, Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*; and Boyd, "Staging the Page."
3. Symons, "Decadent Movement," 859.
4. See especially Spackman, "Interversions," 35–49; and Riffaterre, "Decadent Paradoxes," 65–82.
5. For a recent account, see Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*.
6. Symons, "Decadent Movement," 860.
7. See, among others, Ono, *Japonisme in Britain*; Irvine, *Japonisme*; and Burnham, *Looking East*.
8. Zatlin, *Beardsley*, 106–11.
9. See Teukolsky, "Orients of the Self," 143–214.
10. See Gallagher and Robinson, "The Imperialism of Free Trade."
11. Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite*, x.
12. The phrase "greenery-yallery" appears in the famous Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Patience*. The aesthete character, Bunthorne, declares himself "A greenery-yallery, Grosvenor Gallery, Foot-in-the-grave young man!" The conflation of aesthetic yellow and green also occurs in Oscar Wilde's poem "A Symphony in Yellow." The poem's lines all delineate yellow objects, until the final two lines: "And at my feet the pale green Thames / Lies like a rod of rippled jade."
13. Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite*, 5.
14. In *Beardsley, Japonisme*, Zatlin reproduces numerous examples of Japanese prints featuring abstracted flower-forms. Two of the most

famous nineteenth-century Japanese printmakers, Hokusai and Hiroshige, both painted water using formalist effects; they often stylized water in swirling, circular, or rounded forms.

15. Dowling, "The Aesthetes," 364.
16. Dowling, "The Aesthetes," 359. Studying artists like Beardsley, Wilde, and W. B. Yeats, Dowling concludes that the late-century returns to the eighteenth century were largely ineffectual failures. "Centered in an unconscious ideology created out of a rejection of ideology, [this revivalism] largely dissipated its energies in prettiness and mere fashion" (360). The eighteenth century ultimately offered "for each late-Victorian revivalist an essentially private meditation upon a personally experienced past" (377). By contrast, my analysis reads the eighteenth-century revival as operating politically, beyond the choices of individual artists, and of greater significance than "mere fashion."
17. For a useful discussion of the late-Victorian Watteau revival, see Andrews, "The Figure of Watteau."
18. The letter is reproduced in Maas, Duncan, and Good, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 89.
19. Goncourt, *French XVIII Century Painters*, 1–2. This passage is also quoted in Dowling, "The Aesthetes," 368.
20. Dowling does not delve into the aristocratic class associations of the French aesthetic, simply noting that it allowed late-Victorian artists to disdain what she calls "vulgarity" (369).
21. Thomas E. Crow argues that the *commedia dell'arte* dress-up in Watteau's paintings represented a subtle rebellion on the part of aristocrats against an absolutist French state. Opposing the court's values of universalism, classicism, and nationalism, aristocratic nobility turned to "a resistance . . . displaced into style, leisure, and intimate forms of art" ("Fêtes Galantes" 70).
22. Ennis explicates the erotic symbolism of Cythera in "From Gardens to Grub Street."
23. Stetz and Lasner suggest that Beardsley's illustrations of eighteenth-century aristocratic culture reflect his own middle-class cravings for wealth and class, especially following his financial difficulty in the wake of the disastrous Wilde trial ("Aubrey Beardsley in the 1990s," 301).
24. Heffernan, "Love, Death, and Grotesquerie," 211.
25. Heffernan, "Love, Death, and Grotesquerie," 207.

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