

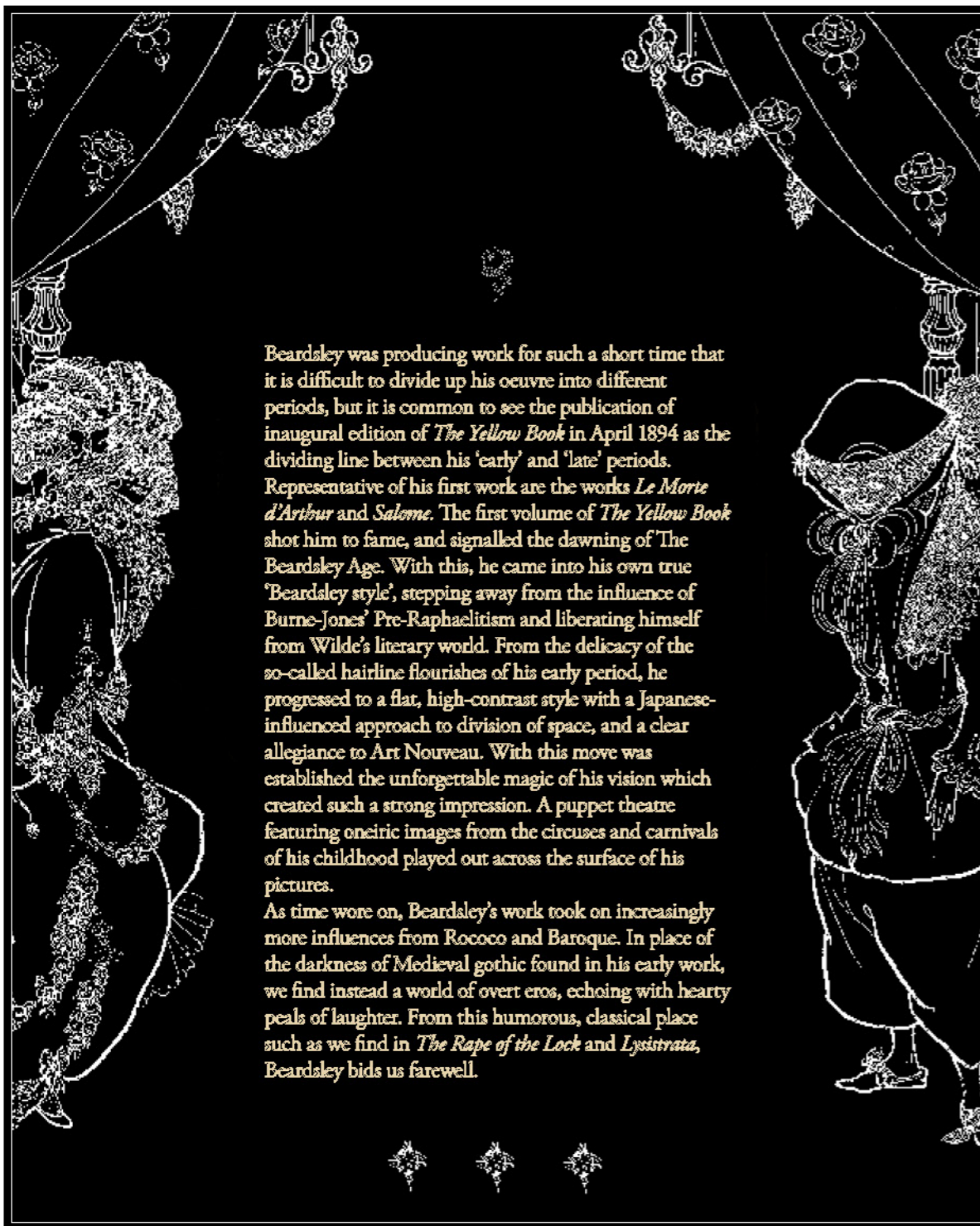
Aubrey Beardsley

The Decadent Magician of the Light and the Dark

Hiroshi Unno

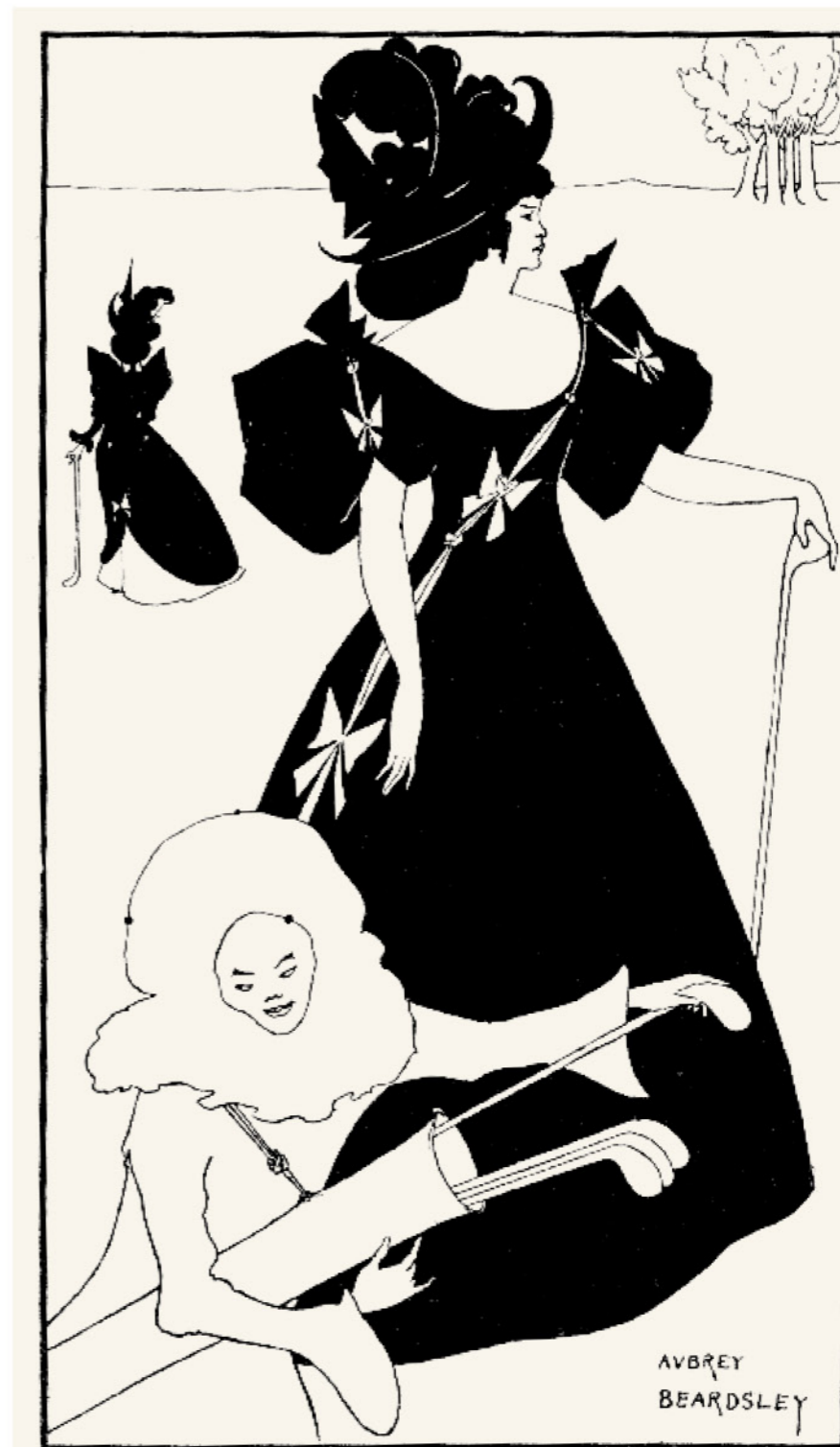


LATER WORKS OF BEARDSLEY



Beardsley was producing work for such a short time that it is difficult to divide up his oeuvre into different periods, but it is common to see the publication of inaugural edition of *The Yellow Book* in April 1894 as the dividing line between his 'early' and 'late' periods. Representative of his first work are the works *Le Mort d'Arthur* and *Salome*. The first volume of *The Yellow Book* shot him to fame, and signalled the dawning of The Beardsley Age. With this, he came into his own true 'Beardsley style', stepping away from the influence of Burne-Jones' Pre-Raphaelitism and liberating himself from Wilde's literary world. From the delicacy of the so-called hairline flourishes of his early period, he progressed to a flat, high-contrast style with a Japanese-influenced approach to division of space, and a clear allegiance to Art Nouveau. With this move was established the unforgettable magic of his vision which created such a strong impression. A puppet theatre featuring oniric images from the circuses and carnivals of his childhood played out across the surface of his pictures.

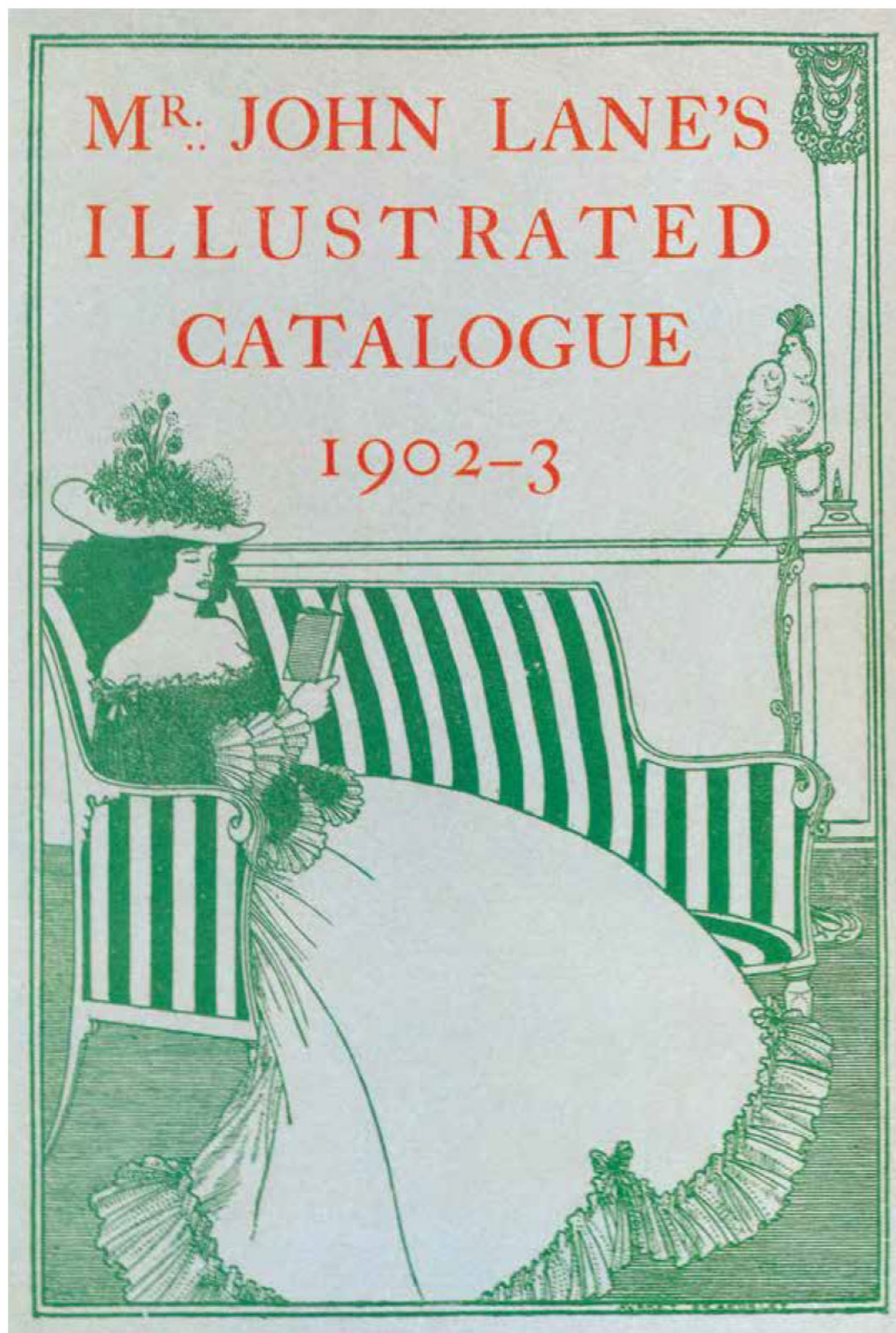
As time wore on, Beardsley's work took on increasingly more influences from Rococo and Baroque. In place of the darkness of Medieval gothic found in his early work, we find instead a world of overt eros, echoing with hearty peals of laughter. From this humorous, classical place such as we find in *The Rape of the Lock* and *Lysistrata*, Beardsley bids us farewell.



AUBREY
BEARDSLEY

Invitation to the Opening of Prince's Ladies Golf Club 14th July 1894; Mitcham, Surrey

In keeping with the latest fashion trends, a lady in a large-brimmed hat stands holding a golf club, accompanied by a down serving as her caddy. Golf was a cutting-edge activity for fin-de-siècle women. Of course, this scene was a figment of Beardsley's imagination—in reality nobody would have golfed in outfits such as these. The picture has a simple, eye-catching composition, with the silhouette of a similarly dressed woman in the distance and the trees on the horizon.



Cover for Mr John Lane's Illustrated Catalogue 1902

This same picture was used up until the seventh edition of Leonard Smithers' catalogue of second-hand books, with editions five to seven printed in assorted colour variations. This one is a catalogue of the second-hand John Lane books. The vertical stripes on the sofa are eye-catching. The column at the top right is most likely a permutation of Beardsley's signature mark. Between the framing of the wall and the compositional emphasis to the left where the woman is sitting, the picture shows a sumptuous sense of balance.



'Isolde' 1898

This is likely the most decorative of all the colour works that Beardsley produced. The contrast between the red and the white is extremely eye-catching. The contour lines are rendered in grey, with the head and bracelet in green and black. The woman's white figure looms large against the impossibly simple background of white floor and red curtain. This is one of Beardsley's colour works where lithograph printing has served him well. Looking at it, one can practically hear the strains of *Tristan und Isolde*, the artist's favourite Wagner opera.



'The Dancer's Reward'

As a reward for dancing for King Herod, Salome requests John the Baptist's head. This immaculately balanced composition features not a single redundant element. Beardsley's rendering of the black arm holding up the silver plate bearing the severed head, and the sharp lines of the folds in Salome's gown are breath-taking. Behind Salome's head rests a hat—most likely the ascot hat which the pierrot is placing on her head in 'The Toilette of Salome' II. At the bottom right we can see her sandals, for predecessor to Isabella Duncan that she was, Salome had danced barefoot.



'The Climax'

This image was created by Beardsley after he saw *Salomé*, the French edition of Wilde's play, and was featured in the inaugural volume of *The Studio* in 1893. It was after seeing this that John Lane commissioned Beardsley to illustrate the English edition. The drawing featured in the magazine was drawn in pen. This picture, where the detailed sections from the original have been simplified, was used for the first edition of *Salomé*. The wonderful of division of space, with the gently curving line that changes from horizontal to vertical dividing the black and white backgrounds, remains unchanged, but some miss the delicate tremors of the fine lines of the original. Personally, I like both versions.



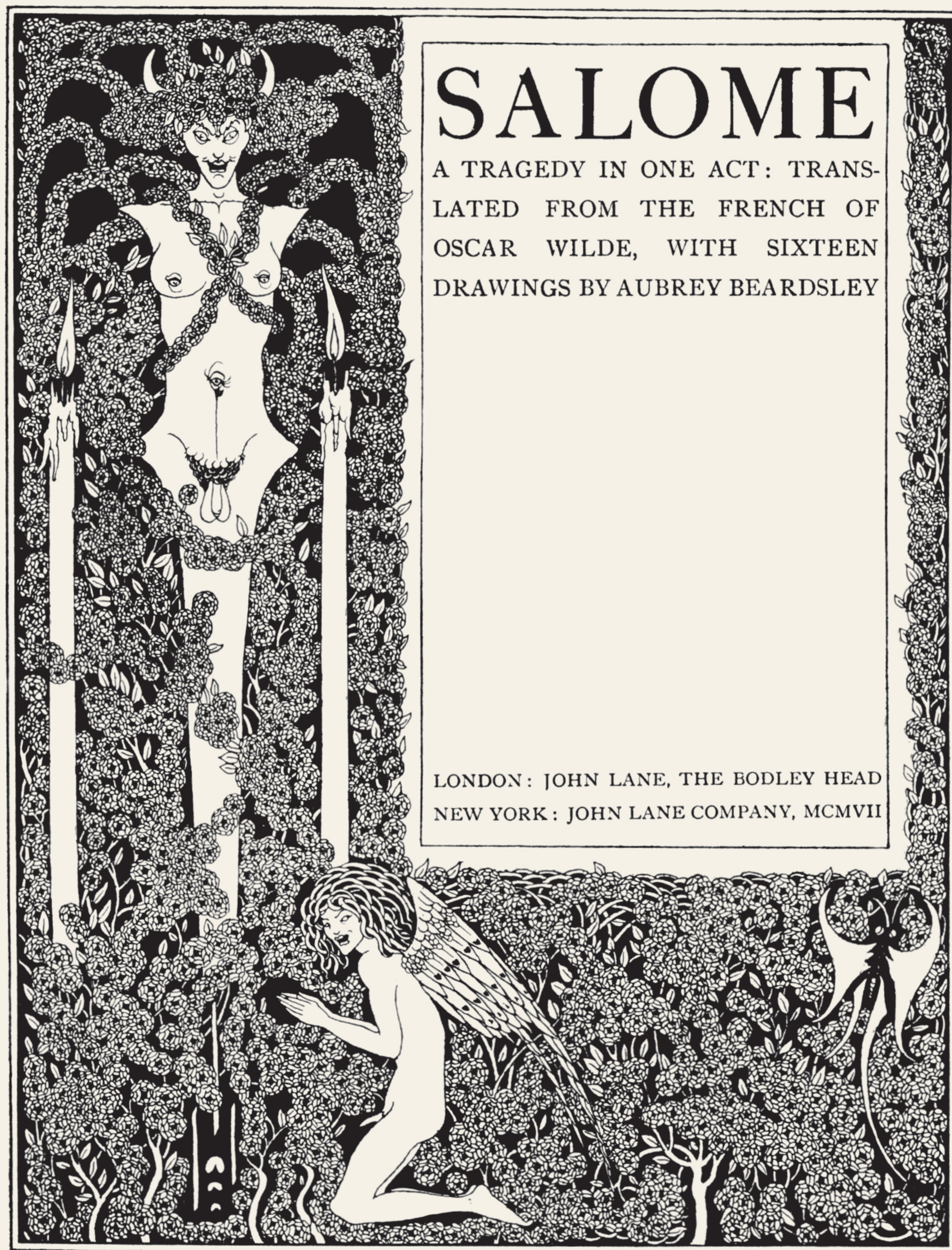
'The Eyes of Herod'

'Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids?' asks Salome. To the right is King Herod, bewitched by the sight of his daughter-in-law, Salome. On the left is Queen Herodias, who looks on disapprovingly. Between the two of them towers a candle stand supported by two putti, or naked children. The simple lines picking out the contours of the king and queen, and the curved lines above the king's head are extremely effective. They also form a wonderful contrast with the intricately detailed sections of the picture, such as the Queen's hair ornament and the peacock standing beside the furred candlestick. Beardsley's characteristic composition that combines abstract with erotic details is here seen in full force. The simple contours of the queen's body are particularly outstanding.



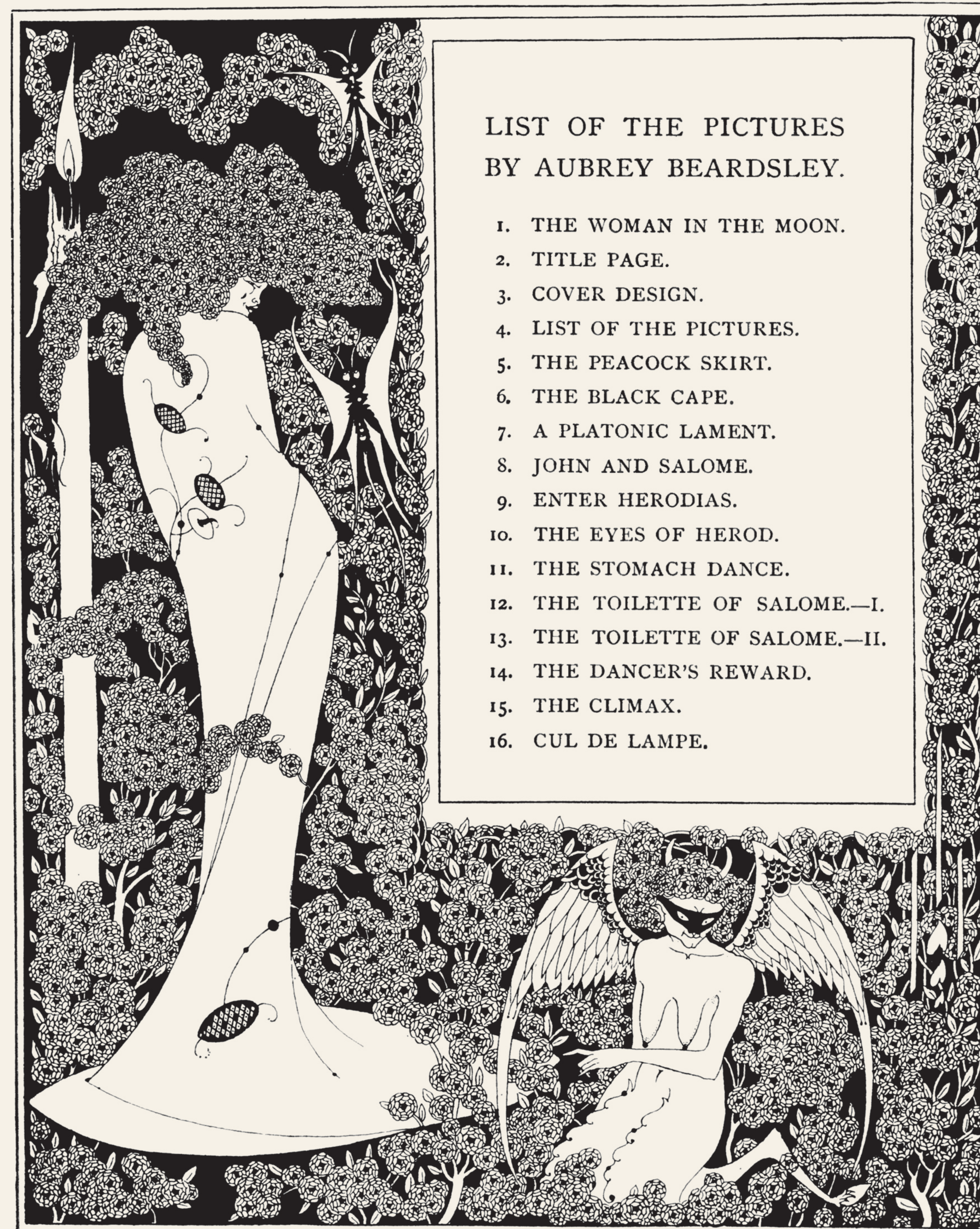
'The Peacock Skirt'

Because of the free nature of Beardsley's illustrations, it is hard to know what in Wilde's original they are depicting, and from which scene. Some see the woman on the left-hand side of this picture as Salome, but it seems more likely that it is intended to be Salome's mother, Herodias. The young man on her right is her slave. The text says of Queen Herodias that she 'wears a black mitre sewed with pearls, and whose hair is powdered with blue dust.' Beardsley adorns her entire figure with a peacock patterning from the crown of her head to the hem of her skirt, and adds in a real peacock standing beside her. The bizarre shape of her body seen from the back is said to have been influenced by the *oiran* courtesan depicted by Hiroshige, but also hints at the shape of the phallus.



Title Page

An angel is worshipping a devil standing between two candles. This devil icon is an instantiation of Beardsley's signature mark (look closely and one can see the mark has been repeated underneath.) It barely seems thinkable that an artist would insert his own secret emblem into the title page, but Beardsley has done so. The devil seems to be a hermaphrodite, having both breasts and a penis, and its nipples have eyes. The figure seems to have borrowed inspiration from the herma, a form of sculpture with a head and genitals that originated in ancient Greece and was placed by the side of the road. The angel, who looks much like a young boy, is also showing his genitals. The butterflies to the right are possibly there as a dig at Whistler, whose emblem was a butterfly. Beardsley's mockery knew no bounds.



LIST OF THE PICTURES BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY.

1. THE WOMAN IN THE MOON.
2. TITLE PAGE.
3. COVER DESIGN.
4. LIST OF THE PICTURES.
5. THE PEACOCK SKIRT.
6. THE BLACK CAPE.
7. A PLATONIC LAMENT.
8. JOHN AND SALOME.
9. ENTER HERODIAS.
10. THE EYES OF HEROD.
11. THE STOMACH DANCE.
12. THE TOILETTE OF SALOME.—I.
13. THE TOILETTE OF SALOME.—II.
14. THE DANCER'S REWARD.
15. THE CLIMAX.
16. CUL DE LAMPE.

Picture Index

A woman with her back to us stands next to a giant candle. The pose is reminiscent of the mikaeri-bijin—"beautiful woman turning around"—which is a common trope in Japanese prints. Her twisted back creates glorious curved lines, but a close examination reveals a somewhat unnatural shape, as if she didn't have hands. Beardsley would often ignore the principles of anatomy so as to give rise to his own unique forms. To the right is an evil-looking angel in a black mask with breasts, whose lower half is that of a goat. A rather eerie butterfly is flying through the dense foliage.



‘The Rape of the Lock’

We finally reach the climactic scene where the lock of hair is stolen. The dwarf jester standing centrally is a kind of narrator, informing the audience of the theft. The interjection of this kind of narrator allegedly stems from Beardsley’s memories of travelling shows and farce comedies, of which he was fond. To the left side of the picture, one can see Belinda, and the Lord approaching from behind with a pair of scissors. The woman to the right takes out a pair of scissors from her handbag and passes them to the Lord, while trying to make off unnoticed. The dwarf is laughing at their elaborate artistry. And thus, the lock is cut off...



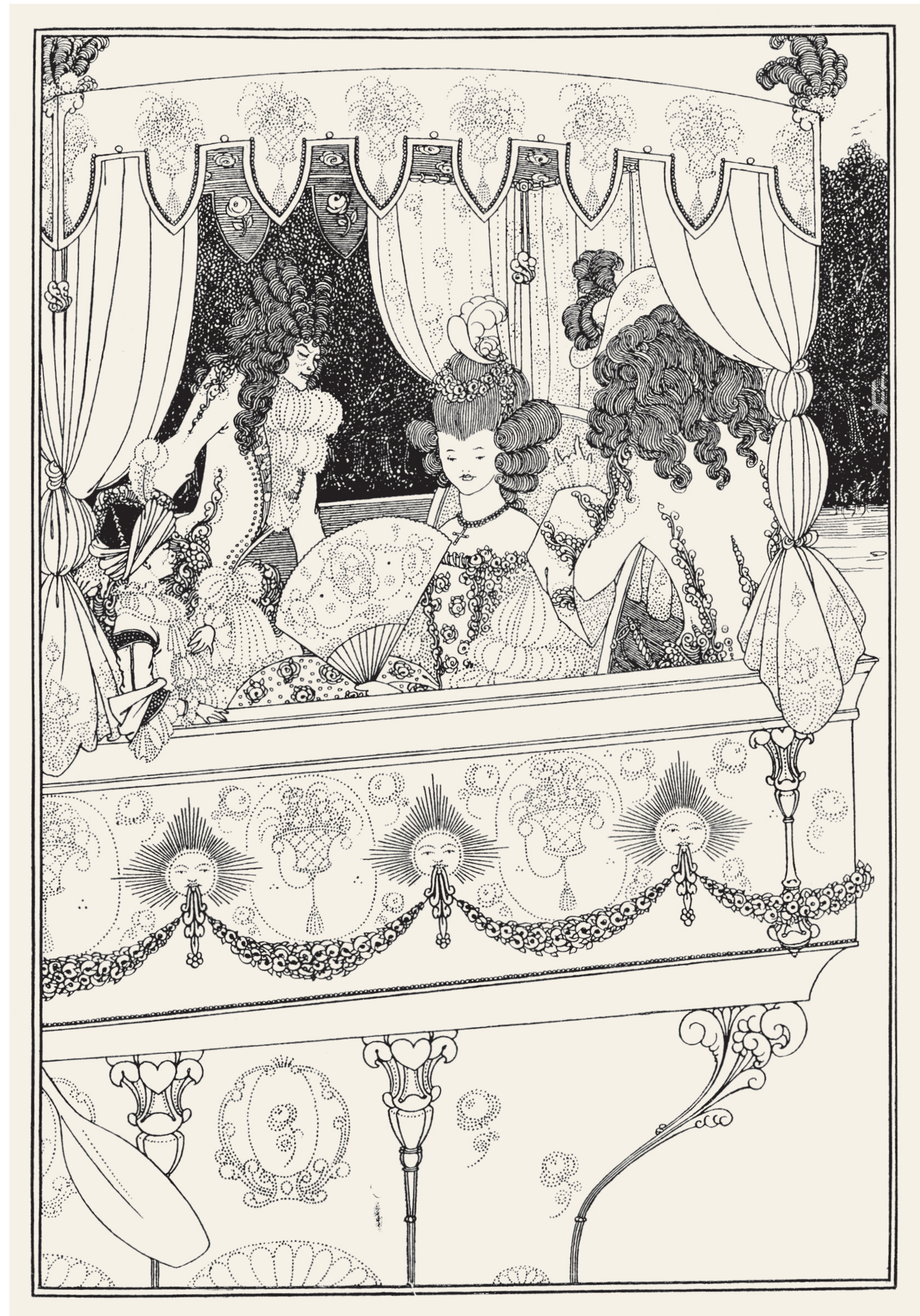
‘The Battle of the Beaux and Belles’

Belinda rushes over to the Lord in a fury. The dwarf stands between them, cocking his head amusedly as he surveys the situation. Belinda’s hair is still looking as abundant as ever, and it’s impossible to tell which part has been snipped. Her flamboyant costume has been portrayed in the pointillist style. The men’s attire is rendered in the style of the eighteenth century in which Pope was writing, but the women’s costume seems mismatched. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that Beardsley dressed his characters in whichever costumes most appealed to him, regardless of the age they came from. The dense arabesque pattern on the Lord’s coat is staggering.



‘The Baron’s Prayer’

Belinda’s glorious hair was the talk of the town, and eventually a certain Lord got wind of them. The Lord, who was something of an aesthetic connoisseur, collected works of art and books, and worshipped at the temple of beauty. Hearing the rumours of Belinda’s beautiful locks, he decided he must get his hands on one of them, and install it in his own personal shrine. Here the Lord attired in a dressing gown is praying at an altar created on top of a stack of books. The trees and garden outside the window seem as if they have been embroidered. The Lord’s hands clasped in prayer come together with the garland pattern on the wallpaper, which elsewhere appears to have grabbed hold of his hair. Rococo-style furniture is dotted about the room.



‘The Barge’

A party held on a pleasure-boat offers the Lord the chance he has been waiting for, and he is able to approach Belinda as she is surrounded by fashionable gentlemen. Her notorious ringlets are swept up high on her head. The plate offers a catalogue of Rococo ornamentation, with the details of the side of the barge particularly enthralling.

After enjoying the journey down the river, Belinda and the gentlemen sit down to play at cards, and as the betting intensifies, so does the mood of gaiety. Wearing the hair swept up on the head in this way was the fashion in the late Baroque era, when hair served as a symbol of beauty and strength.

THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

Written by Alexander Pope
Illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley
Published in the UK, 1896 (Leonard Smithers, London)
For more about the book design, see p.104.

A Portrait of a Beautiful, Cruel Mistress, Part I: An Invitation to a Rococo Banquet

In his early work, Beardsley was heavily influenced by medieval, Pre-Raphaelite, and Japanese art, while in his final years, his interest migrated towards the Rococo style of the eighteenth century. Within the earlier work, a frustrated sense of sexuality finds expression in myriad eccentric ways, while in the later pieces, the open-spirited generosity of the eighteenth century allows for the presence of unmasked eros and humour. This shift across time away from the Beardsley's avant-garde period and towards a more mature, refined style finds its clearest expression in the nine illustrations he created for Pope's poem, 'The Rape of the Lock'.

Based on a true-life incident of 1711, the poem tells the story of Lord Petre stealing a lock of hair from the beautiful Arabella Fermor, an event which prompted a feud between the two families. Construing this disagreement as symbolic of the battle between the sexes, Pope used it to create a satirical poem where a troupe of beautiful *belles* wages war on a troupe of handsome *beaus*.

In 1896, the London publisher Leonard Smithers released an edition of "The Rape of the Lock" illustrated by Beardsley. Beardsley's illustrations were, almost without exception, far removed from the content of the poem, and thus the book was termed not an 'illustrated' but an 'embroidered' version. The term also reflected the fact that with these pictures, Beardsley had used not the continuous lines of his past work, but a conglomeration of delicate dots, so that they truly did look like works of embroidery.



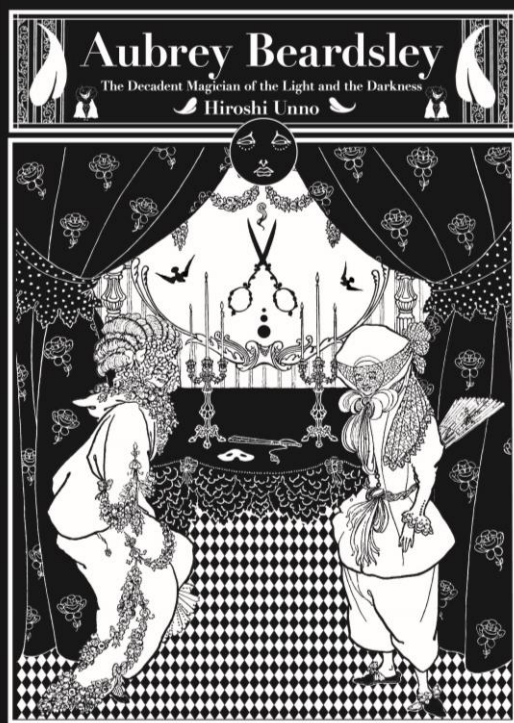
Frontispiece: 'The Dream'

The picture shows a sylph who has slightly parted the drapes of the four-poster bed in order to whisper to its inhabitant. In the bed is Belinda, a beautiful woman whom the sylph is protecting—in this case, bestowing her with a morning doze and pleasant dreams. The design of peacocks and floral bouquets embroidered on the curtains almost seems to be the content of Belinda's dreams. The sylph holds a magic cane with a shining star at its top. The picture seems suffused with the peaceful contentment of dreamtime. How different this illustrative style seems from Beardsley's bold early work, with its disregard for the laws of perspective.

New Release Information

Available in US/Europe: August 4 2020

Aubrey Beardsley : The Fin-de-Siècle Magician of Light and Darkness

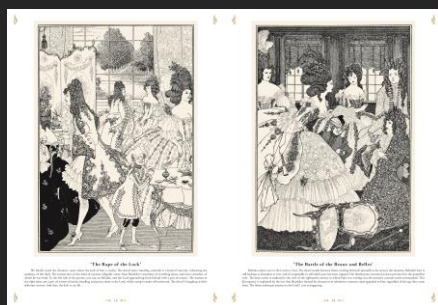
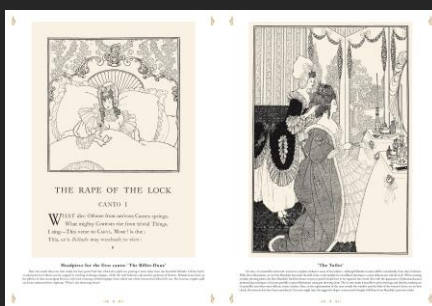
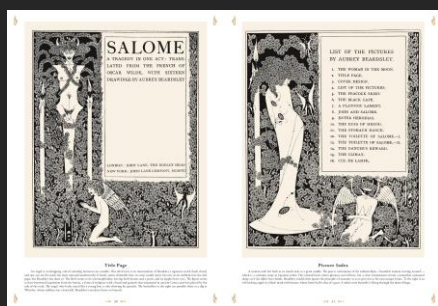


Aubrey Beardsley, a shooting star who vanished into fin de siècle darkness.

This 240-page book, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Decadent Magician of the Light and the Darkness*, reveals the core of the artist Aubrey Beardsley through more than 180 of his art works, compiled under the supervision of Hiroshi Unno, a critic and a writer who has contributed to many books on the fin-de-siècle.

Like a meteor flashing across the night sky, Beardsley briefly illuminated the end of the nineteenth century, the era of fin-de-siècle decadence, and then faded away, his tragically short life ending after just twenty five years. He was active for less than ten years but his art was forever emblazoned on people's mind.

The Victorian era, the age that Beardsley lived was gripped by strict, rigid, conservative morality. The society was male dominated and forced women to be modest. Anything related to sex was hidden from the public as if it didn't even exist. Beardsley's genius grasped the oddness of the society of this era. A woman with a fearless smile, extremely exaggerated genital...seductive motifs that he drew for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, the French magazine *Yellow Book*, and the play *Lysistrata* were far from the ideals of beauty and morality of that time. How did the rebellious, yet refined, monochrome artworks drawn by Beardsley, who was called the Devil's younger brother, come about? Was his life simply the art itself? This book is a gem that approaches the artwork that is "Beardsley" himself, the artist and the idea, by introducing Beardsley's masterpieces and his life.



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