

**The Publishing History of Aubrey Beardsley's  
Compositions for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé***

by

**Joan Navarre**

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## ABSTRACT

### **THE PUBLISHING HISTORY OF AUBREY BEARDSLEY'S COMPOSITIONS FOR OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOMÉ***

This study claims that scholars need to examine all twenty-seven English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* to understand whether Beardsley's compositions do, or do not, illustrate Wilde's words. For the last one hundred years scholars have addressed the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions (whether or not Beardsley's compositions illustrate Wilde's words), and each scholar sees something different: Beardsley's compositions are "irrelevant" to Wilde's words; Beardsley's compositions are "relevant" to Wilde's words; Beardsley's compositions are both "irrelevant" and "relevant." What is at issue here is that this traditional dance of signification (scholars' interpretations of the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions) relies upon an interpretive strategy that disavows the history of textual transmissions. To put this another way, what scholars "see" depends upon the particular English illustrated edition(s) they read. Beardsley's compositions are physical objects conditioned by a physical setting--i.e., the components of total book design. Yet, for many, the visible appears invisible.

The motivation for this study arises from previously unexamined phenomena--the genesis and textual transmission of Beardsley's compositions for *Salomé* (1894-1994). As historical textual scholarship, this study uses the methodologies central to descriptive bibliography: the English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* are treated as socially constructed physical objects. Binding, format, and paper are a few of the signifying systems described. Specifically, this investigation draws upon the model presented by Philip Gaskell in *A New Introduction to Bibliography*. The necessary tasks include: transcribing the title-page; analyzing the format; examining the appearance of the binding; detailing the kind of paper used; and noting other information, such as titles.

As the centenary of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* commences, this is the opportune time to trace the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions, to update existing descriptive bibliographies, and to turn to an empirical method for a socialized model of literary production.

THE PUBLISHING HISTORY OF AUBREY BEARDSLEY'S  
COMPOSITIONS FOR OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOMÉ*

by

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## Preface

This study claims that scholars need to examine all twenty-seven English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* to understand whether Beardsley's compositions do, or do not, illustrate Wilde's words. For the last one hundred years scholars have addressed the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions (whether or not Beardsley's compositions illustrate Wilde's words), and each scholar sees something different: Beardsley's compositions are "irrelevant" to Wilde's words; Beardsley's compositions are "relevant" to Wilde's words; Beardsley's compositions are both "irrelevant" and "relevant." What is at issue here is that this traditional dance of signification (scholars' interpretations of the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions) relies upon an interpretive strategy that disavows the history of textual transmissions. To put this another way, what scholars "see" depends upon the particular English illustrated edition(s) they read. Beardsley's compositions are physical objects conditioned by a physical setting--i.e., the components of total book design. Yet, for many, the visible appears invisible.

The motivation for this study arises from previously unexamined phenomena--the genesis and textual transmission of Beardsley's compositions for *Salomé* (1894-1994). As historical textual scholarship, this study uses the methodologies central to descriptive bibliography: the English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* are treated as socially constructed physical objects. Binding, format, and paper are a few of the signifying systems described. Specifically, this investigation draws upon the model presented by Philip Gaskell in *A New Introduction to Bibliography*. The necessary tasks include: transcribing the title-page; analyzing the format; examining the appearance of the binding; detailing the kind of paper used; and noting other information, such as titles.

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*Chapter One*

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM: WHY AN INVESTIGATION OF THE PUBLISHING HISTORY OF AUBREY BEARDSLEY'S COMPOSITIONS FOR OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOMÉ* IS NEEDED

*AN INTRODUCTION*

On February 15, 1894, six days after the first English illustrated edition of Oscar Wilde's and Aubrey Beardsley's *Salomé* was published in London by the Bodley Head and in Boston by Copeland and Day, an anonymous book review from *The Studio* raised a question which continues to intrigue scholars: "whether the compositions do or do not illustrate the text"(184). Contemporary critics such as Robert Schweik, Elaine Showalter, Ian Fletcher, and Elliot L. Gilbert still address this question. Yet in the very act of arguing whether Beardsley's compositions harmonize with Wilde's words, these critics assume that they are referring to the same edition. Ian Fletcher acknowledges that the 1894 Bodley Head editions censor and suppress a few of Beardsley's compositions and that the 1907 Bodley Head edition prints almost all that had been expurgated. But Fletcher fails to investigate that twenty-seven English editions make significantly different changes to Beardsley's compositions.

This dissertation traces the publishing history of Aubrey Beardsley's compositions for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and updates existing bibliographies. The motivation for this study arises from previously unexamined phenomena--the English illustrated editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* published between 1894 and 1994. For the last one hundred years scholars have agreed about the importance of analyzing the relationship between Beardsley's compositions and Wilde's words as presented by the 1894 and 1907 Bodley Head editions (See *Chapter Two*, "Summary of Scholarly Literature"). Lately scholars have begun to recognize the importance of studying the genesis and transmission of Wilde's dramatic output (Oxford University is currently constructing the unillustrated *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*). However, scholars do not acknowledge that the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé* includes twenty-seven different English illustrated editions. Nor do they investigate how these editions provide perspectives that alter existing inquiries into and

interpretations of Beardsley's compositions. The purpose of this project is to update existing descriptive bibliographies of the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé*. At the same time, it aims to provoke critics to question common strategies and assumptions--not only "whether the compositions do or do not illustrate the text," but What constitutes terms like "Beardsley's compositions" and "Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé*"? and How do different editions demand different definitions of these terms?

What constitutes "Beardsley's compositions"? What constitutes "Beardsley's and Wilde's *Salomé*"? Both of these questions pose ontological implications that critics have neglected to consider because they have failed to analyze the one hundred year history of the genesis and transmission of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé*. As the chronological overview of scholarly literature reveals, a common interpretive strategy is to pose the problem of aesthetic function first presented by *The Studio* ("whether the compositions do or do not illustrate the text"), and to refer to the numerous English illustrated editions as a merely single or double "the English edition." The continuation of this strategy has encouraged inquiries into Beardsley's compositions. But this continuation also magnifies a significant limitation: the disjunction that Fredson Bowers observes in his 1958 lecture on "Textual Criticism and the Literary Critic."

In his lecture, Bowers states that scholars "should be disturbed by the lack of contact between literary critics and textual critics" (300-301). Furthermore:

Every practising [sic] critic, for the humility of his soul, ought to study the transmission of some appropriate text. If he did, he would raise such an outcry that we should no longer be reading most of the great English and American classics in texts that are inexcusably corrupt. We should no longer complacently accept the sleazy editing that even today too often marks the presentation of works of literature to the student and to the general public. (Bowers 300-301)

In keeping with Bowers' main objective, this study aims to prevent an artificial disjunction between empirical and theoretical textual criticism. However, this study does not align with



Bowers' biases. Specifically, it does not subscribe to Bowers' interpretive strategy of "no longer... reading most of the great English and American classics in texts that are inexcusably corrupt." The object here is to perform, rather than to prevent, an investigation of how total book designs (the twenty-seven English illustrated editions) fashion and re-fashion Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé*.

### *DESIGN OF THE STUDY*

The body of this dissertation analyzes previous studies which address the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions (whether Beardsley's compositions illustrate Wilde's words). It also describes previously unexamined phenomena--for example, the 1894 Bodley Head edition as a product of Wilde's and Beardsley's correspondences with the Bodley Head book, the fin de siècle fine press movement, and total book design. Descriptions of how Beardsley's compositions appear in the English illustrated editions are presented in chronological order. These descriptions update existing bibliographies of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé*. Specifically, the information presented updates Aymer Vallance's "Revised Iconography" of Beardsley's compositions for *Salomé* (1909) and Stuart Mason's descriptive bibliography of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* (1914). Both *raisonnés* are outdated. For example, Mason (alias Christopher S. Millard) stops with the 1912 Bodley Head edition. Since 1914, eighteen different editions of Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* have been published.

Particular details about the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions establish a revised history. Critics have defined Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* as either the 1894 or 1907 Bodley Head editions; however, bibliographical details broaden the interpretive horizon from which critics define Wilde's and Beardsley's *Salomé* and question the role of Beardsley's compositions. For example, a centenary report about the peregrinations of Beardsley's frontispiece published in the twenty-seven English illustrated editions encourages readers to question Sir Kenneth Clark's assumption that Beardsley's frontispiece for *Salomé* is one of

Beardsley's most "liberated" compositions (78). The publishing history of this composition reveals publishers and editors perplexed about the same problem posed by *The Studio*: the function of Beardsley's compositions. Yet numerous critics investigate inquiries into the function of Beardsley's compositions without understanding that multiple editions exist and present Beardsley's compositions in various guises. Descriptions of the numerous editions outline changes to Beardsley's compositions (for example, Beardsley's frontispiece undergoes the alteration of its title in the 1890s, the emasculation of a figure in the 1930s, the addition of a caption in the 1950s). These descriptions enable scholars to redefine interpretations of Beardsley's compositions.

Quite simply, the descriptions show that the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions involves editors and publishers grappling with the same problem addressed by *The Studio*. But they also reveal that when elements central to total book design (for instance, the layout and the paper) change so does the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions. With its updated bibliographic descriptions, this dissertation allows critics to see that different book designs present Beardsley's compositions in myriad ways.

#### *STATEMENT OF METHODOLOGY*

"An Investigation of the Publishing History of Aubrey Beardsley's Compositions for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*" is a textual study that incorporates theories about the social construction of texts. The term "the publishing history" derives from the investigation of the following physical objects: the original Beardsley compositions and/or the subsequent line blocks; the English illustrated editions published during the eighteen-nineties; the English illustrated editions published at the beginning of the twentieth century; the pirated English illustrated editions; and the contemporary English illustrated editions.

As historical textual scholarship, this dissertation uses the methodologies appropriate to descriptive bibliography. In keeping with the branch of bibliographical investigation known as

descriptive bibliography, the various editions are treated as socially constructed physical objects (Williams and Abbott 8). Layout, paper, and binding are a few of the signifying systems described in relation to Beardsley's compositions.

This investigation draws upon the model presented by Philip Gaskell in *A New Introduction to Bibliography*. Gaskell's model is based on Fredson's Bowers' *Principles of Bibliographical Description*. The necessary tasks include:

1. Transcribing the title-page
2. Analyzing the format
3. Examining the appearance of the cover and the binding
4. Detailing the kind of paper used
5. Noting other information (such as additional titles)

(Gaskell 321)

The descriptions of the 1894 and 1907 Bodley Head editions show that a (doubled) origin shuffles Beardsley's set of compositions so that "the set of compositions" no longer appears as a singular unit. Moreover, the descriptions suggest an origin that both adheres to and deviates from the theory of the copy-text presented by Sir Walter Greg in his classic article "The Rationale of the Copy-Text." Greg argues that the first edition in an ancestral series of editions (editions that are similar--i.e., all share the same name--and yet, because of format and overall layout, are different) constitutes the copy-text. However, critics such as Jerome McGann, Peter Shillingsburg, and Hans Walter Gabler challenge Greg's theory about the ideal copy-text. They question Greg's assumption that a return to the first edition rewards the textual scholar with an origin that is unified and stable: the perfected product of an author's final intention (a text, as Bowers suggests, that is unmarked--free from "sleazy editing"--rather than "inexcusably corrupt"). For example, in *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* McGann questions Greg's main assumptions and strategies. McGann succinctly argues that Greg's theory of a copy-text assumes a naïve belief system (an unflagging belief that the following notions exist: unified meaning and final authorial intention). Textual editing, argues McGann, must not remain oblivious to post-structuralist theories about the inherent instability of language, and, thus, of all

texts: "editors cannot follow the guidance of a rule of final authorial Intentions in determining the texts they will print because final authorial intention is a deeply problematic concept" (68). What McGann argues for is not the death of the author, but, rather, for "a socialized concept of authorship and textual authority" (8). McGann assumes that all copy-texts, even those seemingly original and unified, are multiple, inherently social, constructions.

In the process of tracing the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's *Salomé*, this dissertation demonstrates why McGann's theory of a socialized model of literary production refuses the oversimplification insisted upon by Greg. Multiple authors contribute to Beardsley's compositions. For example, the 1894 Bodley Head editions show Beardsley's engraver Carl Hentschel participating in the creation of *Salome*. Also, the numerous changes made to Beardsley's frontispiece by editors and publishers reveal challenges to and redefinitions of Beardsley's authority. Thus, publisher John Lane is not the only one who meddles with Beardsley's compositions. Such pertinent historical facts provide an interpretive framework that challenges the concept of recuperable authorial intention.

*Chapter Two*

SUMMARY OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

*THE PURPOSE OF THE SUMMARY OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE*

The following summary of scholarly literature establishes the status of knowledge concerning the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions, discusses previously unacknowledged interpretive assumptions and strategies, and documents how the proposed study differs from prior studies.

Numerous scholars provide overviews of the history of critical responses to the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's play; however, scholars, past and present, fail to analyze the correspondence between the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions and claims about aesthetic function. For example, Elliot L. Gilbert (1983), Ian Fletcher (1987) and Robert Schweik (1994) summarize the various interpretations of aesthetic function. They establish the status of knowledge concerning definitions of the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions. Moreover, they begin identifying interpretive assumptions and strategies. At the same time, all three perform a common critical gesture: they divorce definitions of aesthetic function from details specific to the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions. This disjunction contributes to nebulous--historically inaccurate--scholarship.

Gilbert divides the literature that defines aesthetic function into two fields: traditional criticism and contemporary criticism. According to Gilbert, traditional criticism assumes that Beardsley's compositions function as irrelevant and irreverent commentary; contemporary criticism, on the other hand, proclaims "a closer relationship between pictures and play than the traditional judgment finds" (134-135).

Fletcher takes Gilbert's classification system one step further. He claims that traditional criticism consists of two arguments. Fletcher states:

Broadly there are two traditional arguments. First, that the drawings are

parodic, mocking, satiric. Second, that they are purely irrelevant, ignoring the text, and by implication the artist regards that text as trivial, unintentionally comic, or, as Lord Clark puts it with fine aristocratic bluntness, "rubbish." Both views can, of course, be combined. (57-58)

Recently, Robert Schweik (1994) provides another variation on the same theme. But Schweik also performs a unique interpretive gesture: he identifies, although does not analyze, one specific rhetorical strategy. Schweik states:

The history of responses to Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of the first English edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* clearly reveals a widespread feeling that those illustrations were in many respects irrelevant to the text of Wilde's play. In fact, with few exceptions, even most revisionist critics have limited themselves to no more than brief assertions that Beardsley's illustrations are in some way appropriate to Wilde's *Salome*. (9)

These surveys of scholarly approaches to Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's play reveal the following interpretive strategies: 1) numerous critics form main claims from an issue of definition (whether or not Beardsley's compositions illustrate Wilde's play); 2) numerous critics present weak arguments: critics interpreting the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions fail to support their definitions with evidence; and 3) no bibliographer provides precise descriptions of contemporary criticism and rhetorical strategies.

While Gilbert, Fletcher and Schweik present an overview of scholarly literature that defines the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's play, these scholars never develop a thoughtful claim of their own that explores how the analyzed edition, or combination of editions, imposes specific limits and demands on definitions of aesthetic function. To date, a descriptive bibliography of the twenty-seven English illustrated editions does not exist. Bibliographers assume that past and present definitions of the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions draw upon a singular text (the 1894 Bodley Head edition) and/or two texts (the 1894 and 1907 Bodley Head editions).

## *CRITERIA FOR AND ORGANIZATION OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE*

This dissertation analyzes studies relevant to the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's play. Relevance is defined as any source that adheres to the following twofold topical classification system: TOPIC A--Studies that form a claim from an issue of definition: What is the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions?; and TOPIC B--Studies that form a claim from an issue of fact: Whether or not the genesis and transmission of Beardsley's compositions begins with the 1894 Bodley Head edition and ends with the 1907 Bodley Head edition. Both topics are equally important. However, the literature that addresses aesthetic function (TOPIC A) outnumbers the literature that addresses text transmission (TOPIC B). Studies that relate theoretically, speculatively, or tangentially to TOPIC A appear first; this is for no other reason than that TOPIC A marks a longer history than studies related to TOPIC B.

## *METHODOLOGY*

Contemporary critics summarize scholarly literature that defines the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions. However, these critics fail to analyze the production of definitions. In other words, contemporary critics classify critical claims formed from definitions of aesthetic function, yet they neglect to identify specific rhetorical strategies (Gilbert 1987, Fletcher 1989, Schweik 1994).

The following five tasks define the methodology used to analyze related scholarly literature: classifying the state of knowledge regarding the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions. Do scholars approach TOPIC A? TOPIC B? Both A and B?; examining and evaluating the congruence of design; analyzing the main assumptions and rhetorical strategies of studies reviewed; identifying historical sources and their "historical facts" about the publishing history of Beardsley's compositions for Wilde's play; and proposing how the studies reviewed

are related to the proposed study. Gaps in the knowledge of contemporary criticism and specific rhetorical tactics justify these tasks.

### *DEVELOPING A READING PRACTICE*

A performance of the stated tasks requires a particular reading practice: analyzing both *what* critics claim is the definition of the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions and *how* critics produce such definitions.

In 1894 *The Studio*, the first magazine to review the 1894 Bodley Head illustrated edition of *Salomé*, raised the question which continues to intrigue and to divide scholars: "whether the compositions do or do not illustrate the text." The anonymous reviewer from *The Studio* never attempted to answer this question; however, as the following excerpts show, a number of scholars have answered this question. Scholarly approaches to this question about the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions (TOPIC A) can be viewed in light of two definitions: Beardsley's compositions are irrelevant to Wilde's words; Beardsley's compositions are relevant to Wilde's words.

A majority of the critics writing about TOPIC A align themselves with the definition of "irrelevance" rather than with the definition of "relevance."<sup>1</sup> A few critics, such as Maureen T. Kravec (1983), Norbert Kohl (1989) and Robert Schweik (1994), align themselves with both definitions.

Studies that define the aesthetic function of Beardsley's compositions as irrelevant (TOPIC A, DEFINITION #1) adhere to specific rhetorical strategies: critics claim that Beardsley's compositions function as irrelevant commentary on Wilde's words. (Critics form, then, a thesis from an issue of definition.); critics leave key words, such as "irrelevant," "illustrate" and "commentary," undefined and ambiguous; and critics support the main claim not with specific examples drawn from textual details, but with a motive, or motives, drawn from speculative bibliographical details.



For example, in his foreword to the Mosher edition of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1911) Thomas Bird Mosher performs the aforementioned rhetorical strategies. Mosher states:

Frankly, we believe that Beardsley who hated Wilde wreaked himself in his so-called illustrations which never did and never could illustrate a conceivable *Salomé*. One glance at these diabolical fascinations of art and the open secret of Beardsley's loathing is readily revealed. (ix)

Mosher claims that Beardsley's compositions function as "irrelevant" commentary upon Wilde's words. Mosher also leaves key words, such as "illustrate," undefined, and supports his main claim with a motive drawn from speculative bibliographical details. With regard to the last interpretive strategy (Mosher turns to bibliographical speculation as support for his main claim of "irrelevance"), Mosher fails to explain why Beardsley "hated Wilde."

Jane Marcus (1974) repeats these strategies. Marcus claims: "Beardsley may have drawn a *Salomé* who was ugly and perverse but he didn't read the play. *That Salomé* is not in Wilde" (99). Marcus establishes a comparison. However, she never describes or defines the two implied subjects (*this Salomé* and *that Salomé*). Then, Marcus supports her claim of irrelevance with a motive drawn from speculative bibliographical details. According to Marcus, "Beardsley's insolent drawings are an attack on Wilde, the person" (98). Marcus believes that Beardsley's work functions as "a satire on Wilde" (98). Her working assumption is that Beardsley disliked Wilde and considered Wilde's play weak and trivial.

A few critics (Gilbert, Fletcher and Schweik) begin addressing these rhetorical strategies. However, these critics fail to identify and analyze the strategy of using a motive, or motives, as evidence for the claim of irrelevance. The following list provides an organizational structure for such an anatomy. The list shows that many critics, not just Mosher and Marcus, support claims about TOPIC A, DEFINITION #1 with bibliographical speculation and misinformation.

Numerous critics appeal to the following motives: 1) Beardsley considered Wilde's play weak: anonymous review in *Saturday Review* (1894); anonymous review in *The Times* (1894); Child (1908); Walker (1948); 2) Beardsley resented the censorship of a number of his original