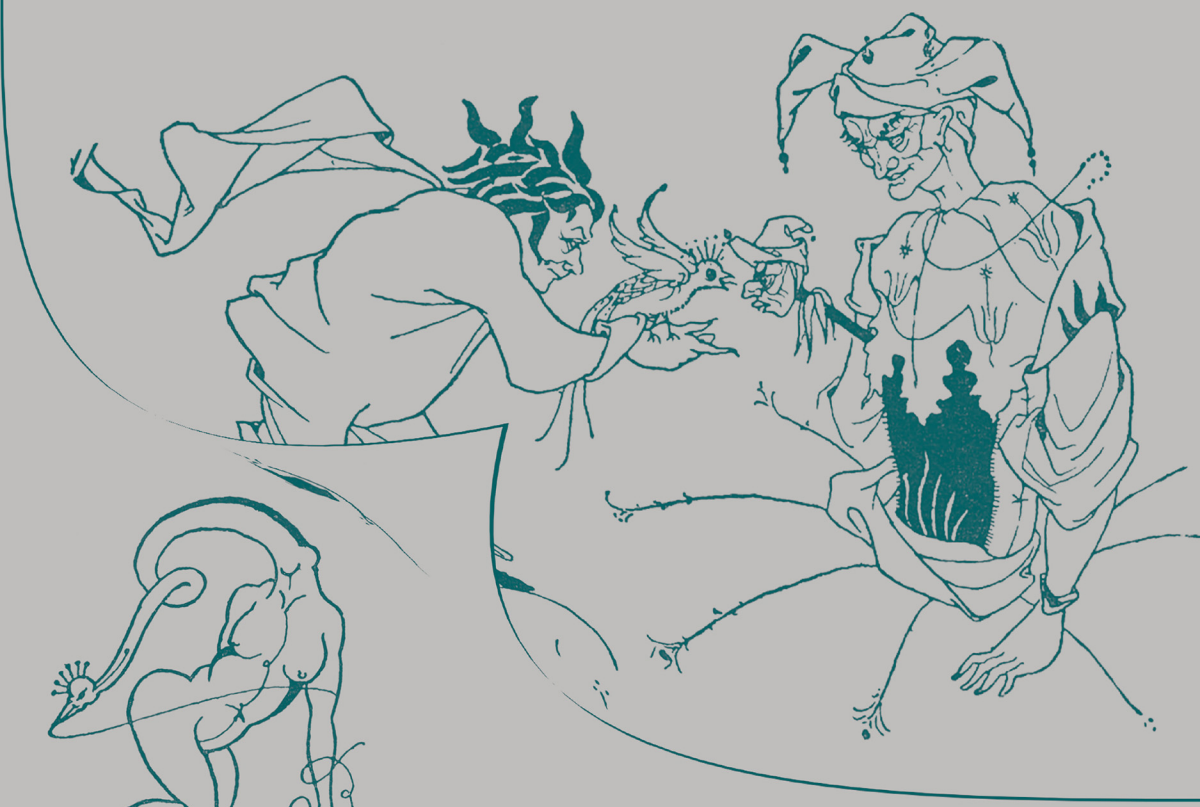
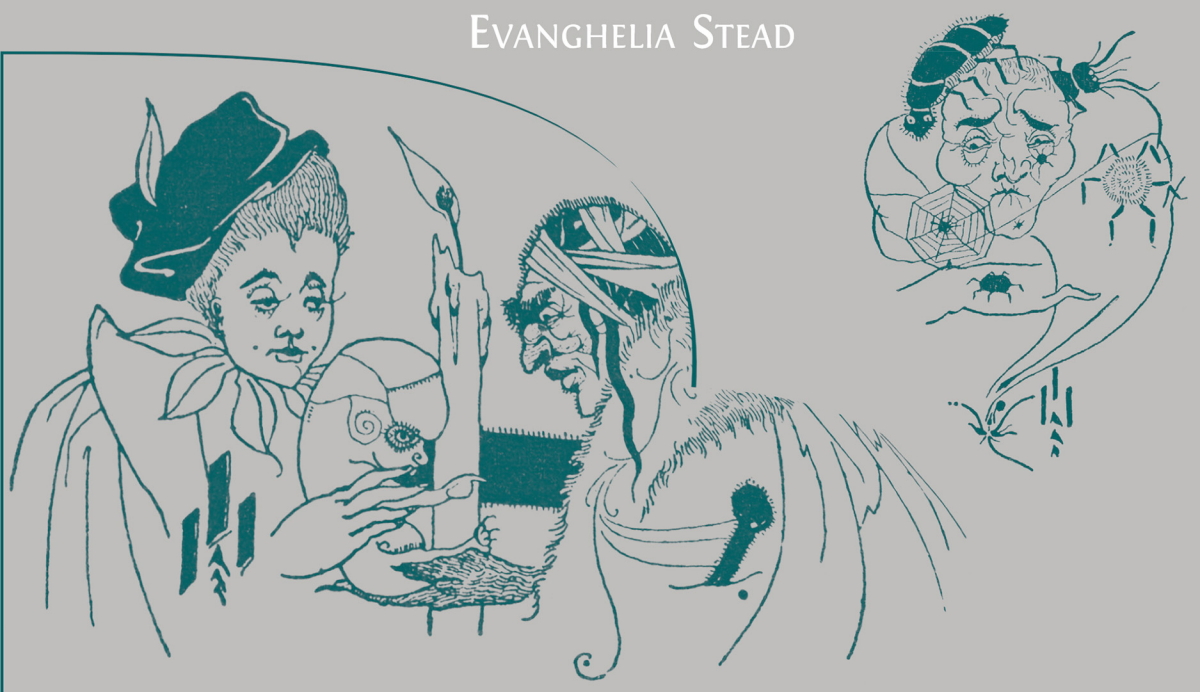


Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley

Evanghelia Stead



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Introduction : Breaking the Mould of Victorianism

"A New Poster" by Evelyn Sharp is a short story published July 1895 in the sixth volume of the *Yellow Book*. A piece of light social satire, it depicts a wealthy but rather unremarkable widow dithering over two suitors: an egotistical English artist and a matter-of-fact American businessman. The widow's naive view pits talent, intellect, and innovation against commerce and conventionality. Mrs Cynthia Milton, who adopts the arty name of Mrs Angelo Milton, deploys Aesthete tactics to break out of the world of trade and her own wealth from the commercial success of her deceased husband, manufacturer of the Milton Fountain Pen. The story would be of little concern here, had it not taken its subject (and title) from an up-to-the-minute poster advertising all over London this very pen. The billboard is designed by Cynthia's first choice of suitor, Adrian Marks, "a black and white artist, very new."[1] Adrian conceals his association with the poster from Cynthia in order to feign indifference to her fortune. Yet, if they marry, she will lose all her money. She finally marries the prosaic American businessman, her deceased husband's former associate, which ends her coveted foothold in fashionable avant-garde society and circles à la mode.

Adrian Marks resembles Aubrey Beardsley in no way: there are no common threads in age, manner, appearance, their intentions or behaviour. And yet a whiff of Beardsley's poster art seems to trigger and foster Sharp's story. The idea of a "new poster" gives the piece its title, and impels the plot. "Effete and decadent," Adrian, a "dandy artist,"[2] moves in good society and a cultivated set. He practises an

1 Evelyn Sharp, "A New Poster," *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895): 123–66 (124).
2 *Ibid.*, 155 and 135.

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0413.00

art which, however exclusive, spurs a woman's modern dilemma in a quarterly journal from the 1890s. Several details draw on established fin-de-siècle clichés (awkward drawings, stark contrasts, interest in yellow as "peculiarly distinguished,"[3] flippancy, innuendo, dandified houses, impressive poses, witty remarks) to set them against the "commercial spirit"[4] from which Cynthia in vain strives to free herself. As a "new black and white artist," Adrian hence reads as Beardsley's fictionalised *alter ego* in a gently and innocuously ironic context.

Still, the billboard itself is not innocent. It has "a scarlet background with a black lady in one corner and a black tree with large roots in another corner, and some black stars scattered about elsewhere."[5] The off-the-cuff description (by an "ugly boy") disapproves of abstraction and teems with aesthetic qualms. It reads like a spoof of Beardsley's creations since "that nonsensical poster," "that ridiculous poster," "that hideous new poster"[6] makes no sense: "What has a black lady and a black tree to do with Milton or a fountain pen?" deliberates the boy, who "now at liberty, said it was howling cheek of the painter chap to stick different things on a scarlet sheet and call it an advertisement for something that wasn't there."[7] The blunt rebuff reflects regular reproaches and satires against strong flat colour, and its clever advertising of something absent on Beardsley's posters in the press, decrying the lack of perspective and rendering, choice of two-dimensionality, sparse colour scheme, flat tints and style.[8] The poster's conceptually abstract composition and its sharp contrasts recall both Beardsley's idea of the art of the hoarding and several of his own works.[9] Moreover, the Milton Fountain Pen it advertises is an ambiguous device: it bears the name of a successful American business;

3 *Ibid.*, 140.
4 *Ibid.*, 134.
5 *Ibid.*, 125.
6 *Ibid.*, 155, 160, and 140.
7 *Ibid.*, 126.
8 On Beardsley's poster art and negative reactions in the press, see Linda Gertner Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), II, 186, 188, 191 and 195.
9 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Art of the Hoarding," *The New Review*, 11 (July 1894): 53–55, collected in A. E. Gallatin, *Aubrey Beardsley: Catalogue of Drawings and Bibliography* (New York: The Grolier Club, 1945), 110–11; repr. in *Decadent Writings of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Sasha Dovzhyk and Simon Wilson, MHRA Critical Texts 10, Jewelled Tortoise 78 (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2022), 188–89.

yet, more than once in the story, it is taken for an allusion to John Milton (and even competes with Shakespeare). Paradoxically, but as subtly as Sharp's adroit plot and fine irony, it shows that meaning should not be taken at face value. It arouses the desire to know more.

Sharp had certainly not penned such a description innocently. Spring of that same year, Beardsley had designed the cover, title page and initial key of her novel *At the Relton Arms* for the publisher John Lane's "Keynotes Series" (Zatlin 847). The story, of a "woman who refuses to marry and consequently loses the man she loves,"[10] belongs to the same pool of Sharp's women faced with life-changing decisions. Later on, in her book of reminiscences, Sharp would compliment both Beardsley and Lane: their fine edition supported her work, and, when her daring plots had faced dire criticism, Lane's "eye for a page and sense of the feel of a book" and Beardsley's cover design redeemed the publication to her critic's eyes.[11] "A New Poster" appeared in the *Yellow Book* after Lane had sacked Beardsley as art editor for his presumed association with the recently arrested Oscar Wilde. Two months after these events, Sharp's piece inevitably carried a veiled meaning. To put forward a black-and-white effete artist, suggestive of Beardsley's posture and artwork, shortly after his forced eviction from his first periodical, reads as an act of daring, even though the story itself – and its central character – are neither bold nor risky.

In fact, on close examination, various contributions to the *Yellow Book* after Beardsley's departure read as oblique defences of avant-garde writing and unconventional art that were the periodical's original aims.[12] Beyond Sharp, several contributions to volume six turn it into

10 Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, I, 506.

11 See Evelyn Sharp, *Unfinished Adventure: Selected Reminiscences from an Englishwoman's Life* (London: John Lane, 1933), 72. Qtd. by Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, I, 507.

12 See for instance Évanghélia Stead, "Les perversions du merveilleux dans la petite revue ; ou, comment le Nain Jaune se mua en Yellow Dwarf dans treize volumes jaune et noir," in *Anamorphoses décadentes, Études offertes à Jean de Palacio*, ed. by Isabelle Krzywkowski and Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2002), 102–39, revised version "Nain Jaune and Yellow Dwarf dans *The Yellow Book*: Un kaléidoscope," in É. Stead, *Sisyphe heureux. Les revues littéraires et artistiques, approches et figures* (Rennes: PUR, 2020), 195–218. In their general introduction to volume six of the *Yellow Book*, Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra state that its editors "struggled to address the backlash against Wilde and Beardsley without eradicating the decadent bourgeois-baiting

a sophisticated reflection of the *Yellow Book*'s own reception, as well as Beardsley's. Two black-and-white drawings by Fred Hyland, for example, both read as imitations of Beardsley's own. First, Hyland's *The Mirror* pictures a woman facing her looking glass by candlelight without the slightest trace of makeup and against Japanese-inspired wallpaper, her hand ostensibly toying an absent piano.[13] It draws its idea from Beardsley's cover design for volume three of the *Yellow Book*, with a woman making herself up at her dressing table by street gaslight (Zatlin 901). Second, Hyland's *Keynotes* – an obvious reference to Lane's series designed by Beardsley – depicts another woman in ostensible outdoor garb playing the piano in a decorated drawing room while the upright case of the instrument assumes the oval shape of a fake mirror.[14] While it evidently refers to Hyland's preceding *Mirror*, it also reads as the reverse of Beardsley's title-page drawing for the first volume of the *Yellow Book* with a woman in a low-necked dress and hat playing the piano in an open field (Zatlin 888). This would later become Beardsley's poster for Singer sewing machines (Zatlin 971) – another "advertisement for something that wasn't there."

Both Hyland drawings represent such material that made young ladies blush and look with temptation and embarrassment at an open *Yellow Book* volume. Such is indeed the subject of a third picture, Gertrude D. Hammond's *The Yellow Book*, also published in volume six.[15] In this bold piece of art and in a clever *mise en abyme*, a man proffers an open volume of the periodical to a young lady in an Aesthetic interior decorated with Japanese fans. The tendered *Yellow Book* volume clearly bears Beardsley's designs on its front and back covers from issues of this very periodical before he was sacked. Beardsley, the *Yellow Book*'s

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that had served as the periodical's hallmark of avant-gardism in the past." Kooistra and Denisoff, "*The Yellow Book*: Introduction to Volume 6 (July 1895)," in *The Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 2012. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2019, https://1890s.ca/yb-v6-introduction/

13 Fred Hyland, "Two Pictures: I. The Mirror," *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895): 279. See *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, ed. by Denisoff and Kooistra, 2011–14. *Yellow Nineties 2.0*, Ryerson University Centre for Digital Humanities, 2020, https://1890s.ca/yb6-hyland-mirror/

14 Fred Hyland, "Two Pictures: II. Keynotes," *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895): 281. See *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb6-hyland-keynotes/

15 Gertrude D. Hammond, "The Yellow Book," *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895): 119. See *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/yb6-hammond-yellow/

recently dismissed art director, has again slipped into the picture. All three works carry a veiled celebration of the absent artist along with the periodical for which he was famous. Sharp's story joins in. Even though her effete Adrian Marks both resembles Beardsley and differs from him, Sharp's story invites us to gauge Beardsley's work in ways rendering visible concealed messages and handlings. In this book, I will often discuss hidden references and messages, details and oblique treatment, as well as the manner in which printed media take them on.

Beardsley's art is not to be taken at face value. It carries devious and playful meanings and reproves overt declarations. It further prompts clever artworks, stories that rejoice in coded messages, and hints at concealed significances. His covert presence in Sharp's "A New Poster" haunts a quarterly from which he had recently been banished. His spirit and stance became prevalent, indeed inescapable, within a year of his appointment as the *Yellow Book*'s art editor. His rapid advancement had been possible through printed books, posters, and the press. Adrian's poster design, obviously styled on Beardsley's, has coined a new currency in graphic art. The "ugly boy"'s glib dismissal of the fictitious poster suggests a new order of intelligence in art. The new poster is an essential part of modern life, with a commercial, tradable appeal for the fictitious artist. Nought distinguishes a dandified from a marketable stance, and Adrian embodies both. Sharp suggests that artistic and social principles are on the move: she herself and her adroit piece are part of the change. Her quip on Cynthia Milton, "mildly eccentric within the limits of conventionality," ironically signals predictable boundaries and limited elasticity within conformism. It recalls the phrase "popular in the better sense of the word," the original aim for the *Yellow Book* as announced in the magazine's first prospectus.[16] Yet boundaries have moved. "A New Poster" indirectly shows how Beardsley's work, aesthetically and thematically bold, exemplified a mould-breaking spirit. It had rocked the toed line to settle on metropolitan streets, straddling both the bohemian and the mainstream, like one of Cynthia's parties: "characteristic neither of Bohemia nor of South Kensington; she amused the one, puzzled the other, and received both."[17] Larger readerships, already Beardsley's own

16 Prospectus of *The Yellow Book*, 1 (Apr 1894). *Yellow Book Digital Edition*, https://1890s.ca/wp-content/uploads/YB1-prospectus.pdf

17 Sharp, "A New Poster," 123.

public, were newly confronted by a cutting-edge audacity, out to test their abilities of interpretation. It is Beardsley's art and persona as an embodiment of these paradoxes that this book seeks to explore.

Five months before his twenty-sixth birthday, Aubrey Vincent Beardsley, born in Brighton on 21 August 1872, died in Menton of tuberculosis on 15 March 1898. In less than six years, he had created over 1,000 drawings, had branded numerous texts with images now inseparable from his name, shaped two periodicals of literature and art, the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*, fashioned two series for Lane (the "Keynotes Series" and "Pierrot's Library"), drawn iconic posters, and designed several books. He had launched a style that was to spread throughout Europe and beyond, developed a highly recognisable and dynamic black-and-white technique, and galvanised a new artistic category. His flat, clear-cut graphics reproduced by line-block in print would undermine classic academic rankings of "high" and "low" art. By 1894, his friend Max Beerbohm had facetiously turned his truncated lifespan into an era: "the Beardsley period."[18] The phrase would be honoured in the title of Osbert Burdett's study from the 1920s.[19] His early death froze his mythic status, that of a young mischievous artist. He is still often seen as the representative *enfant terrible* of the English fin de siècle and regular exhibitions of his work since 1966 testify to his lasting appeal.

Already famous during his lifetime, Beardsley faced serious health problems. He fell ill as a child and throughout life knew his time was limited. There is an autobiographical element in much of his work, which speaks to the prospect of his premature end, but which he regularly downplayed with paradox, wit, and riddles. Creating an oeuvre to rival Mantegna's[20] within such a limited life expectancy required a unique daring and focus. Although critical approaches to his work form now

18 Max Beerbohm, "Diminuendo," first published as "Be it Cosiness," *The Pageant*, 1 (1896): 230–35, repr. in *The Works of Max Beerbohm, with a Bibliography by John Lane* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 160.

19 See Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925).

20 On Beardsley and Mantegna, see Brigid Brophy, *Beardsley and his World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 44, 82–84; Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V & A Publications, 1998), 33–37, 53–54, 200–201, 220; and Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), 76, 95, 103.

a long list, many of his images still guard their secrets. This book aims at discussing some of them. Building on extensive knowledge of fin-de-siècle literature and art,[21] it endeavours to break new ground on Beardsley's grotesque oeuvre, aesthetics, and use of media.

I explore here several of Beardsley's significant contributions and lesser-discussed aspects of his art. First, I examine his renewal of the grotesque in the fin de siècle and his revitalisation of marginalia. The book seeks to give substance to his statement "If I am not grotesque, I am nothing" by reference to his grotesque drawings and self-portraits. I discuss for the first time the aesthetic importance of his *Bon-Mots* vignettes, often considered marginal in his oeuvre, and show how this graphic reservoir fostered the artist's liberation from the Pre-Raphaelite style. The book calls on histories of culture and aesthetics. It shows how Beardsley potently revamped the fin-de-siècle grotesque by reworking traditional images beyond recognition and by wittily recycling contemporary motifs; how he borrowed from and transformed iconic pieces of others' work, and how he shaped miniature bibelot books into innovative statements.

Second, I seek to illuminate Beardsley's distinguishing intellectual dandyism. His oeuvre is not limited to his drawings, a few posters and scarcer paintings. He also projected an image of the artist through performance – using his clothing, appearance, stance, and repartee – as a means of expression as vital as his graphic art. He shaped and promoted his images, bolstered by his skills as a writer, designer and raconteur in public space. He joked and provoked, retorted and bantered. "Have you heard of the storm that raged over No. 1?" he wrote to Henry James once the first volume of the *Yellow Book* was out. "Most of the thunderbolts fell on my head. However I enjoyed the excitement immensely."[22] He delighted in scandal and made good use of it, manipulating both an educated readership and a more commercial audience.

Third, I look at how border art and slight or minor creations attracted him, like textual fringes and odd details on monuments. His

21 See Évanghélia Stead, *Le Monstre, le singe et le foetus: Tératogonie et Décadence en Europe fin-de-siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2004). Published version of a thesis defended in French in 1993 and awarded the 1994 Arconati-Visconti prize.

22 Letter to Henry James, 30 Apr 1894, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. by Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (London: Cassell, 1970), 68.

art made that periphery central in bold ways, often questioning his contemporaries' perceptions of cultural and artistic hierarchies. This book discusses Beardsley's witty gallery of monstrous self-portraits and body art. It considers key pictures of his media performance: printed in periodicals as opposed to books, and as modern photographs expertly referring to medieval cathedrals. A differential comparison to related motifs by other writers and artists reveals his wit and avant-garde *forma mentis*.

Fourth, I seek to understand the under-scrutinised art of Beardsley's performances and show the innovative ways in which he manipulated printed media, and why such a feat was original at the time. "Like most artists who have thought much of popularity, he had an immense contempt for the public; and the desire to kick that public into admiration, and then to kick it for admiring the wrong thing or not knowing why it was admiring, led him into many of his most outrageous practical jokes of the pen," wrote Arthur Symons in the *Fortnightly Review* shortly after Beardsley's death.[23] The book shows how practical jokes also lie in his published portraits. However, his powerful image making sometimes also escaped his control, with dramatised pictures circulating in a manner he would rather have avoided.

Fifth, this book applies a broader perspective to the artist's reception, beyond Britain, with a lens that encompasses the breadth of Western cultural history. Beardsley was a draughtsman whose fame quickly spread beyond British borders: his style had a lasting impact on European and American graphic design, and yet he is still mostly considered in his British context and through British references. I probe Beardsley's presence and reception in Italy, France, the United States, and Germany through periodicals, a vital channel of communication in media-driven modernity, and show how the artist constructed his iconic image both at home and abroad.

Chapter 1, "Grotesque Vignettes and the 'All Margin' Book," extensively discusses the origins, meaning, and uses of Beardsley's grotesque vignettes. It showcases the 126 grotesques decking three tiny volumes of witticisms known as *Bon-Mots*, and contrasts them with the major commission of *Le Morte Darthur*, which Beardsley completed in

23 Arthur Symons, "Aubrey Beardsley," *The Fortnightly Review*, n.s., 69: 377 (1 May 1898): 752–61 (753).

parallel. I argue that the foundational spirit of such an early grotesque nucleus in Beardsley's work has been unduly neglected in scholarship. As a crucible of graphic forms, the grotesques cover a wide range of styles, radically transform motifs, and continually question meaning. Beardsley borrowed from closely contemporaneous artistic styles (Aesthete, Pre-Raphaelite, French), and then subverted them in a way that freed him from their very influence. His remodelling of the earlier grotesque tradition blurs or erases traces of paternity and affiliation beyond recognition. I relate calligraphic grotesques to adjacent textual quips, and highlight the relation between grotesques and naked bodies. This chapter evidences the vignettes' contribution to fin-de-siècle text-and-image relations (wry illustration, literal use of language). It shows how a new print culture bridged print categories and explores the fin-de-siècle idea of a book as "all margin." In a decisive reversal, with Beardsley, marginal creation becomes central.

Using new evidence, Chapter 2, "A Foetal Laboratory and Its Influence," investigates Beardsley's innovative foetus motif, from its earliest advent among the *Bon-Mots* vignettes to the end of his career. While previous scholarship has focused on the biographical origins of this motif, I focus on its aesthetic use and significance: its adaptability, cultural weight, shock value, and its particular resonances in the Decadent *zeitgeist*. By placing it within the Darwinian and biological preoccupations of the period, I show its bearing as a portrait of a generation and its potency as art manifesto. The chapter stresses the motif's graphic malleability, its effect on fin-de-siècle design, and its influence on three artists in Europe: the German Marcus Behmer (foetal variations), Dutch Karel de Nerée tot Babberich (*mises en abyme*), and Frenchman Henri Gustave Jossot (defending caricature as a superior form of deformation art).

Chapter 3, "A Dandy's Portico of Portraits," bridges the grotesque part of Beardsley's vignettes in the *Bon-Mots* and his monstrous self-portraits. Aplomb, caprice, and nerve characterise his dandified attitudes. A comparison between Beardsley and Beau Brummell shows an inherent versatility in his mischievous, disturbing, and progressively scandalous self-representations. Beardsley's dandyism became more intellectual under Baudelaire's influence. The chapter reveals how Beardsley deliberately placed himself at the margin of two related

cultural monuments – the book and the cathedral – overturning the relationship between whole and part. I analyse his monstrous self-portraits in the *Yellow Book* and the *Savoy*, highlighting the subtlety of his humour and its manifesto-like potential, extending to typical fin-de-siècle tropes, parody, and replication. I further investigate Frederick H. Evans's photographic portraits of the artist, in which Beardsley posed as Charles Meryon's *stryge*[24] and a cathedral gargoyle, and compare them to the ancient practice of inscribing artists' "signatures" on a cathedral. Beardsley's clever use of Evans's platinum prints led to them becoming icons of fin-de-siècle visual culture, and a form of climactic grotesque expression that heralded body art. This gallery of eccentric depictions, fantasised or ludicrous images of the self, against an explicit background of monstrosity, call *in fine* for a revision of conventional assumptions about beauty and cultural hierarchies.

Chapter 4, "Beardsley Images and the 'Europe of Reviews,'" stresses the exceptional number of press articles devoted to Beardsley and how he worked them into shaping his image, having early grasped the importance of media in an artist's career. It follows Beardsley's images beyond the London scene and discusses his media performance in the Italian magazine *Emporium* as compared to other European periodicals. In this chapter, I differentially compare fine and applied arts journals aimed at the educated reader, mainstream periodicals for the general public, and avant-garde art and literature reviews. Beardsley's self-modelling of images comes to the fore, yet also apocryphal images conveyed by the press, replicating Beardsley's own practices. Considering periodicals in a network allows us to fathom not only an image's or a phrase's origins but also gauge the ever-increasing power of fin-de-siècle media.

Chapter 5, "Paris Performance Alive and Dead," explores Beardsley's reception in French periodicals and the press using new first-hand evidence. Unlike previous studies which have focussed on the textual element of reviews, I also look at the way Beardsley's artworks and portraits were reproduced in periodicals: I believe that images circulate more powerfully than text, make a stronger impact on the imagination

24 Based on Greek and Roman legendary creatures, the French term *strige* or *stryge* refers to the dead or sorcerers and sorceresses returning to suck their victims' blood. Famously used by artist and engraver Charles Meryon, it named one of the Notre-Dame gargoyles, on which more in Chapter 3. See also Fig. 3.9.

and prove crucial in evaluating reception. After recounting Beardsley's multiple connections to France, the chapter follows his reception in Jules Roques's *Le Courrier français*. It looks at the artist's likely deliberate choice of images for the publication as those that had most shocked the English public, his willing adaptability to commercial concerns, and his influence on French artists. Diverging from expected associations between Aesthete reviews either side of the Channel, I show how Beardsley's portrayal in the English *Savoy* was relayed by a large-circulation satirical paper in Montmartre, not the intellectual journals of the Parisian literary avant-garde. The chapter looks at how, after his death, touching tributes mixed with chauvinistic anecdotes borrowed from the English press. It shows that the artist was represented posthumously in ways he himself would not have approved.

This book aspires to show the importance of approaching artists in differential comparison. The concept is pertinently discussed by Ute Heidmann and has emerged from numerous seminars in the University of Lausanne with linguist Jean-Michel Adam, Hellenist and anthropologist Claude Calame, and philosopher Silvana Borutti.[25] It is myth-, genre-, and discourse-based and mainly applies to textual comparisons but I have often used it in my own work on images, reading books and prints as cultural objects, and the reception of major texts in visual and print culture.[26] Although this book is not a comprehensive study of Beardsley's global work, I stress the relations between his artwork approached in varying media and the spirit of the time. By showcasing his innovative approach to art, I analyse Beardsley's impact on a new artistic vocabulary and themes. I discuss his wide-ranging inspiration in differentiated contexts and also consider his influence on the work of fellow artists at the time. While not a monograph focused on a single man, this book's comparative and European perspective offers an approach applicable to other artists' work with analogous international appeal and impact

25 Ute Heidmann, "Pour un comparatisme différentiel," in *Le Comparatisme comme approche critique*, ed. by Anne Tomiche in cooperation with Kelly Morckel, Pauline Macadré, Léa Lebourg-Leportier *et al*., Rencontres. Série Littérature générale et comparée (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), 31–58.

26 See for instance Evanghelia Stead, "Introduction", in *Reading Books and Prints as Cultural Objects*, ed. by E. Stead, New Directions in Book History (Cham: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2018), 1–30; and Evanghelia Stead, *Goethe's "Faust I" Outlined: Moritz Retzsch's Prints in Circulation*, Library of the Written Word. The Industrial World (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

on graphics and aesthetics. Its interdisciplinary methodology – bringing together art, literature, comparative studies, print culture and periodical studies – could easily adapt to other cases. The emphasis is on processes rather than finished products and fixed objects. I stress flux rather than stasis, interaction rather than stability and invariability, and procedures rather than Beardsley's finished pieces. In Beardsley's case, even paradox and oxymoron are exceptionally productive. His work aspired to a synthesis and activated the imagination. To re-read Beardsley is to revive him. How did he ingeniously break the mould of Victorianism while – in Sharp's words and through her fictional character – still remain acceptable to the "mildly eccentric within the limits of conventionality"?