Title of Paper: **Sexualizing Audiences: Aubrey Beardsley’s Exclusive Codes and Mass Appeal**

Author: Olexandra Dovzhyk  
Affiliation: Birkbeck, University of London  
Section: Articles  
Date of Publication: March, 2014  
Issue: Volume 2, Number 1

Abstract:

To date, Aubrey Beardsley’s output and personality have been linked with an idea of sexual transgression. In academic discussions, his provoking art is usually opposed to Victorian sexual mores which are regarded as hypocritical and suppressive. The essay argues against generalizations in understanding contemporary recipients of Beardsley’s works and explores his possible target audiences. Beardsley conceived his works as multilayered pieces capable of appealing to different social groups depending on their level of knowledge. Alongside the erotic elements that were visible to anyone willing to participate in the game of sexual hints, he saturated his art with in-jokes that could be read only by the members of his exclusive social milieu.

Keywords: Beardsley, Reception, Gender and Sexuality, Victorian Art, Fin de Siècle, Decadence, Contextualization, Under the Hill

Author Bio:

Olexandra Dovzhyk has graduated from Victorian Studies (MA) at Birkbeck, University of London. Her doctoral research is in the area of “Reception of Aubrey Beardsley in Russia and Ukraine.”

Author email: sasha.dovzhyk@gmail.com
The public image of a Victorian fin de siècle artist Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) is inseparably linked with the “succès de scandale” implying a distinctly sexual flavour. In academic discussions, he has been constituted as a romantic rebel figure in the era of militant Philistine hypocrisy and, alongside Oscar Wilde, has come to emblematize “the notorious ‘yellow nineties’ ” (Snodgrass 4). His “passionate perversities” (Jackson 102) have been seen as an assault against sexual reticence of the period, or as Linda Zatlin puts it, as “the artist’s gauntlet flung in the face of Victorian sexual mores” (205). Focusing on the sophisticated subversive strategies in Beardsley’s art and explicating the logic of Beardsley’s gender and sexual transgression that went against bourgeois processes of normalization, the so-called “Beardsley industry” (Desmarais) has paid less attention to the reconstruction of the diversity of recipients at the moment of Beardsley’s work appearance at the end of the Victorian era. This article will argue against the uniformity and homogeneity of the given image of Beardsley’s contemporary addressee and seek to answer how and for whom Beardsley sexualized his own art.

The main theoretical premise behind the inquiry is that there can be no ultimate late-Victorian audience perceiving the work in a single way and documenting the effect. Instead, one has to take into account different social groups whose reactions, as art historians Bal and Bryson put it, are conditioned by specific “codes” of perception and whose members have different “degrees of access” to those codes (186). The theme of the author’s intention is doubtless problematic, so it is necessary to mention that, first, the section is not concerned with a discovery of the artist’s “true” design, and, second, that the author is not considered to play a determinative role in construction of the work’s meaning. Closely examining performed techniques and applied vocabularies, I attempt to suggest what groups of viewers and readers they could be meant for and how they could shape those groups.

An attempt to reconstruct the contemporary addressee of Beardsley’s output inevitably leads to a split between possible target audiences of the artist. On one hand, there is no need to deny Beardsley’s eagerness after large-scale publicity and instant popularity. On the other hand, the artist posed as a cultivated dandy in the avant-garde cultural milieu that operated exclusive artistic and behavioral codes. Even those of his works that were seen by the general public, for example, by a relatively wide readership of the art periodical Savoy, preserved particular meanings and subcultural references for a limited cognizant community. Therefore, this chapter will argue that Beardsley’s sexualization of his own work was structured by the coexistence of differing levels of knowledge available to different publics.

Examination of the elitist cultural circle of the decadent nineties, to which Beardsley became accustomed, can put forward probable intended receivers of the sexual “message” of certain works, for, as Pierre Bourdieu shows, one of the
purposes of the community of cultural producers is “to be its own market” (58). In his study (1996) of the art field’s struggle for autonomy in the nineteenth century, Bourdieu demonstrates that power over the assignment of meaning could be only achieved by cultural producers through rejection of the economically prevailing bourgeoisie as a consumer (81). Likewise, the circle of British artists and authors with whom Beardsley allied also claimed distancing from the middle class demands of utility. The defenders of the “art for art’s sake” undertook independent setting of the criteria of value for their output. However, before concentrating on the Beardsley’s elect target audience within his own milieu, one has to address a more thoroughly researched but, after all, inevitable study of Beardsley’s orientation towards a greater and more inclusive public.

Undoubtedly, Beardsley sought to achieve contemporary fame by all means including the overfamiliar tool of shocking the “Philistine.” As Chris Snodgrass remarks, even his technique, which relied on the innovative photomechanical copying, was meant for mass reproduction and wider distribution of his work (249–250). In a brilliant article on the importance of advertising (1894), Beardsley developed democratic rhetoric defending “déclassé” art of poster design. He was evidently fascinated with possibilities of “a thing” gaining “publicity without a frame, and beauty without modelling” (54). As a poet and editor of the Savoy Arthur Symons put it, Beardsley had a “desire to fill his working years with the immediate echo of a great notoriety” (25). Max Beerbohm added that the artist “tried [...] in a spirit of sheer mischief, to scandalize the public” (“Ex Cathedra” 3) and “revelled in his unfavourable press-cuttings” (“Aubrey Beardsley” 544). In 1895, Beardsley confessed to an interviewer that he “suffer[ed] his critics gladly” and that “their inconsistencies and hypocrisies fill[ed] him with amusement” (“An Apostle of the Grotesque” 561). For an illustration of such inconsistencies, one can refer to a journalist’s claim that Beardsley’s poster “Girl and a Bookshop” was typical of a “libidinous” and simultaneously “asexual” school. In a letter to Ross, habitually inlayed with quotations from press rustling, Beardsley called the statement an “amusing notice” (Maas 58). Furthermore, while failing health kept the consumptive out of London during the short lifetime of the Savoy, Beardsley’s letters to the publisher evidenced his agitation about the critical reception of the magazine. In fact, almost every letter of the summer of 1896 contained a piece of impatient interrogation: “What of No. 3? Is the Philistine yearning for it?,” “How goes the Savoy, and what are the wild reviews saying?” (Maas 136, 146). To sum up, Beardsley was deeply interested in promoting his art into wider publicity and considered sexual scandal a way of achieving this aim. At the same time, while sexualizing his work, he also exploited subtle elitist codes of the avant-garde community of peers. In order to approach the two-fold message of his output, it is necessary to contextualize Beardsley amidst the Decadent milieu of the yellow nineties.

In Publisher to the Decadents, James Nelson argues that eroticism was a crucial tool of the early modernist movement generated by “the early feminists, the Aesthetes, the Decadents, and the rapidly emergent gay community” (57).
Aubrey Beardsley stood at an intersection of those circuits and was apt at adopting their values, methods, and argot. To a considerable degree, it was due to the key figures of his social surrounding that particular sexual connotations were imposed on his art during the course of his career.

To begin with, soon after entering the artistic profession, Beardsley was drawn to Oscar Wilde’s coterie of brilliant and dissolute young dandies. He became friends with a young London art critic Robert Ross, the one who introduced Wilde to the capital’s “homosexual underworld” (Calloway 38). Before long, Beardsley became a frequent visitor of such primal artistic sites of the city as Domino Room in Café Royal favoured by Wilde and his witty friends, “the Vale” house of artists and lifelong partners Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon, old public house Cheshire Cheese where young generation of poets, including W. B. Yeats and Arthur Symons gathered, and disreputable St James’s Restaurant at Piccadilly (Jimmie’s) where Beardsley once intended to go “dressed up as a tart and [...] have a regular spree” (Maas 53). Aubrey also enjoyed competitive company of a young artist William Rothenstein and “incomparable” Max Beerbohm, then an undergraduate at Oxford with already prominent talent for caricatures and witticisms. It was a “charmed circle” of friends, as Sturgis notes, penetrated by “the feeling of camaraderie, the sense of shared enthusiasm and ambition” (147).

In the years that followed Beardsley’s expulsion from the Yellow Book, his circle was structured by the presence of two key figures, Leonard Smithers and Marc-André Raffalovich. Smithers was a marginal publisher and the last employee of the artist. He also turned Beardsley’s intimate friend as their correspondence proves. The man characterized by Wilde as “the most learned erotomaniac in Europe” started his career in the rare book trade and printing business as a co-founder of the Erotika Biblion Society (Holland 924). Under this imprint, he issued books of facetiae, often in his own translation. After Wilde’s prosecution and the hypocritical reaction, Smithers became the only man in London who dared to publish what “the others [were] afraid of,” that is, works of discarded avant-garde authors and artists such as Symons, Dowson, O’Sullivan, and Beardsley (Beckson 225). The influential persona of the publisher and their relationship with Beardsley will be discussed further in the paper. As for Raffalovich, he was a Russian Jew born in Paris and settled in London since 1882. Being a member of the smartest Aesthetic circuits of the city, he chiefly directed his literary ambitions at what he believed to be a “ground-breaking” study of “congenital sexual inversion” (Calloway 130). Besides, he was a devotee for life of John Gray, a former Decadent poet, later a Catholic priest, and probably a visual prototype for Wilde’s Dorian. Raffalovich was highly responsible for Beardsley’s growing coldness to Wilde. “You cannot be Oscar’s friend and mine’ marked a certain stage in my friendships”, confessed Raffalovich in a pseudonymous reminiscence about the notorious playwright almost three decades after the latter’s death (Michaelson 112). A well-off son of an internationally renowned banker, Raffalovich supplied Beardsley with luxurious gifts, flowers, chocolates, and books, including editions from his comprehensive
library of erotic literature. He also ensured considerable and much-needed financial support to the artist during the last years of his life (Calloway 130).

Various mystifications were habitual within Beardsley’s highly self-conscious milieu. The climate of the Decadent hothouse inspired continuous playful insinuations inside the group. For instance, in a letter to Ross, Beardsley depicted a hectic atmosphere of Salome production: “I can tell you I had a warm time of it between Lane and Oscar and Co. For one week the numbers of telegraph and messenger boys who came to the door was simply scandalous” (Maas 58). The remark ceases to be innocuous taking into account that ‘telegraph boys’ operated in Cleveland Street male brothel that had been exposed a few years earlier, producing a great scandal. Besides, Ross was hiding in Switzerland at that moment trying to evade consequences of an affair that also involved Alfred Douglas and “a schoolboy” (Maas 59). Allusions to homosexual subculture went far beyond private correspondence. Beardsley suggested the name “Savoy” for the magazine that Leonard Smithers launched after the artist’s dismissal from the Yellow Book. The title referred to an elegant London hotel of the same name that was featured during Wilde’s trial and became associated with the writer’s male “liaisons” (Nelson 366).

Furthermore, homosexual references leaked into some of the artist’s well-known drawings. The last issue of the Savoy included a number of explicitly scandalous pictures, for instance, an image of hermaphrodite goddess Erda from Das Rheingold (which even Smithers considered “outspoken”) and a “trio of notable literary libertines” (Don Juan, Count Valmont, and transvestite adventuress Mrs Pinchwife from The Country Wife by Wycherley) (Sturgis 301-302). Alongside this hazardous set, Beardsley contributed a less overtly transgressive drawing. “Et in Arcadia Ego” depicts an ageing and effeminate dandy who approaches a tomb with an inscription in Latin on it (Figure 1). Popularized by two pastoral paintings by Poussin, the phrase “Et in Arcadia ego” has usually been understood as a memento mori. Accordingly, the drawing has been commonly understood as Beardsley’s “farewell” to the Savoy. The interpretation is reinforced by the fact that the title is consonant to the address of Smithers’s business premises in the Royal Arcade (Nelson 83).

However, the work also contained a message to the erudite “circle of friends” with an Oxbridge background, for whom Hellenic culture served as a common point of reference. The significance of classical studies for the fashioning of an affirmative “homosexual counterdiscourse” in Oxford was explicated, among others, by Linda Dowling (xiii). To give just one example of the tendency, a disciple of this university policy classicist John Addington Symonds in his critique of pathologization of same-sex desire constantly referred to the history of “Hellas” where the passion “flourished under the light of day and bore good fruits for society” (34). The pamphlet was issued in 1896 and circulated privately. It appears that Beardsley was acquainted with it through Raffalovich
who supplied him with literature on the theme; the artist also mentioned Symonds in his letters.¹

Figure 1. Aubrey Beardsley, “Et in Arcadia Ego.” Savoy, December 1896, p. 89

¹ In a letter to Smithers dated 6 July 1896, Beardsley intentionally confused Arthur Symons with John Addington Symonds which indicates that the artist had been aware of Symonds’ studies by the time of the Savoy drawings’ preparation (Maas 142). He also mentioned Symonds’ works in a letter to Raffalovich in 1897 (Maas 416).
As Matt Cook explains, the image of rural Arcadia was associated with pure and “natural” comradeship of men; it was one of the ways to escape the stigma of urban “degenerates” and to justify same-sex relations for certain homosexual figures of the period, John Symonds, Edward Carpenter, George Ives, and also late Oscar Wilde among them (Cook 34). Therefore, depicting intervention of the effeminate dandy, the “type” implicated with deviant pleasures of the decadent city, into the world of idyllic Arcadia, Beardsley’s design also presented an ironic collation of urban and pastoral images as two different ways of thinking about homosexual identities in the late nineteenth century. In other words, “Et in Arcadia Ego” suggested different levels of interpretation for a general readership of the periodical and the homophile friends of the artist. It was not a singular instance that Beardsley referred to the Arcadian dream of the developing “homosexual” community on the pages of the Savoy.

The first two issues of the journal contained fragments from his literary tour de force, a “romantic novel” Under the Hill with illustrations by the author.\(^2\) The original text, as Calloway notes, reveals Beardsley’s “growing fascination with some of the more bizarre aspects of sexuality” and “suggests how very well-read Aubrey must have been by this stage” in the pornographic tradition of the past two centuries (137). Explicated in the original “bizarre aspects of sexuality” included, to name but a few, child rape, bestiality, and masturbation of a unicorn. It allowed only the first three chapters to be printed with considerable removals in the first number, and original Chapter VII, in the second number of the Savoy. However, the last publication was supplied with a lengthy footnote absorbing a part of unpublished Chapter V. The footnote will be the subject of the further analysis.

This portion of the text describes a ballet Les Bacchanales de Sporion performed by servants of the goddess Venus after the supper. The scenery represents “a remote Arcadian valley” where “rustic creatures,” shepherds and shepherdesses, participate in Priapic worship (188) and show their “dainty skill” in dances (191). Immediately after their departure from the scene, Sporion, a “tall, slim, depraved young man,” appears, “followed by a brilliant rout of dandies and smart women”. The description of the “superb and insolent” crowd and their well-groomed appearances establishes an association with the aesthetes and decadents of the nineties. Moreover, Beardsley calls the gathering “those subtle souls,” thus relating the participants to the circle of Oscar Wilde’s friends (191).

\(^2\) The novel was advertised under the original title, The Story of Venus and Tanhauser, in John Lane’s prospectus dated 1894. After the change of the publisher, Beardsley transformed the title into Under the Hill, and the names of the main characters, into Helen and Abbat Fanfreluche. Some fragments with illustrations were printed in the Savoy. Beardsley did not manage to finish the project. Lane reprinted the expurgated chapters from the Savoy in posthumous collection of Beardsley’s writings Under the Hill and Other Essays in Prose and Verse (London: Bodley Head, 1904). The complete manuscript was published privately by Smithers in an edition of 300 copies (1907). Here I refer to the fragments in the Savoy and compare them with the unexpurgated text published by Smithers.
“Your slim gilt soul walks between passion and poetry,” wrote Wilde in a well-known letter to Alfred Douglas which was publicized during the libel trial in April 1895 (Coates 26-27). As the correspondence of the period demonstrates, Beardsley kept up with the proceedings and knew the details, so the conscious allusion in Under the Hill is highly probable. 3 Other references to Wilde’s entourage follow. Although Sporion’s costume accords with the eighteenth century fashion, certain elements remind of Wilde’s aesthetic sartorial habit: Beardsley’s inventory of “ruched” trousers and stockings allude to the playwright’s memorable breeches of the aesthetic days, “long black ribands untied and floating around his body” associate with Wilde’s long locks, and a “sea-green coat” recalls the idea of decadent green carnations worn by Parisian homosexuals (and also Wilde’s circle of friends at the premiere of Lady Windermere’s Fan). A “coronet” broidered on the dandy’s handkerchief can hint at the circle’s elitist haunt, Café Royal.

Sporion explains to the Arcadians, “He and his friends were tired of the amusements, weared with the poor pleasure offered by the civil world, and had invaded the Arcadian valley hoping to experience a new frisson in the destruction of some shepherd’s or some satyr’s naïveté, and the infusion of their venom among the dwellers of the woods” (191). This passage decisively connects Sporion and his “crowd” with the fin de siècle decadents, both literary and living characters, who regarded themselves as explorers of sensual pleasures. One can recall Dorian Gray’s mysterious rambles through the downcast labyrinth of East London, as well as Wilde’s liaisons with young working-class men who were featured during the trials. After depicting a risqué dance lesson taught by the beaux to the “pastoral folk,” Beardsley sketches a scene that highly resembles putative amusements in the private rooms of Café Royal: the champagne is brought and Sporion’s servants “ply [...] those Arcadian mouths that never before tasted such a royal drink” (192). It is the closing sentence of the footnote published in the Savoy. Further in the manuscript, Beardsley depicts an orgy between the rustics and the exquisites, thereby parodying the notion of rural male camaraderie nourished by some representatives of the emerging gay community during his time. As the analyses attempted to suggest, those in the knowledge could read the unfolding of the story into the abstract published in the periodical, even though the available text did not contain any direct erotic particulars.

In the second number of the Savoy, the chapter of Under the Hill with the discussed textual footnote was preceded by an illustration also titled “A Footnote” (Figure 2). The localization of the abstract established an unexpected link between the image and the text and enabled a new angle of interpretation of the drawing’s hidden message and addressee. The picture represented a fancy self-portrait of Beardsley tied with a slack leash to a statue of terminal god. At

---

3 Beardsley discussed the trials in correspondence with Ada Leverson and Andre Raffalovich (Maas 82, 88).
this point, it is possible to identify at least one of the obscene texts that inspired the creation of Under the Hill. Beardsley’s description of the bacchanalia pays a tribute to Smithers’s edition of Priapeia, a collection of Latin poems “of jocose nature,” which the publisher issued under the imprint of Erotika Biblion Society (Priapeia ix). Smithers made prose translation of the verses and provided the text with a scholarly introduction which was partly dedicated to the festivities in honor of Bacchus. As Smithers acknowledged, the notes and “excursus” exceeded the length of the text more than four times (Priapeia xxx). This preoccupation with the phallic cult was a subject of sexual jokes in Beardsley’s correspondence with the notorious publisher. For example, the artist recommended that a statue to Smithers should have been erected in front of his house in Bedford Square, and the base, “adorned with the choicest things out of the Priapeia” (Maas 408). The association of Smithers with the terminal god reinforces the suggestion that the publisher was a tacit addressee of “A Footnote” (the drawing).

Figure 2. Aubrey Beardsley, ‘A Footnote’, Savoy, April 1896, p. 185
In fact, the illustration can stand for a complete account of the artist-publisher relationship. The cord which fastens Beardsley to the terminal god can be interpreted as a bond of shared interest in sexual themes. Besides, the crisscross leash at the statue's pedestal can also point out Smithers's censorial functions: however permissive, the publisher nevertheless considered the complete text of Under the Hill unprintable and squeezed the lovingly elaborated pornographic story into a set of unrepresentative abstracts and “footnotes.” Nonetheless, there are details that subvert power relations within the picture. For instance, “Beardsley's” impudent smirk and a riding switch which traverses his body at the groin and protrudes behind his back. The accessory can connote flagellation, an emblematic practice of the Victorian pornography, and reassert Beardsley in the structural position of dominance. Besides, the rendering of the terminal god (“Smithers”) requires consideration. By modestly averting his face from both the viewer and the artist, the personification of the publisher allows a breach in the censorial surveillance. Moreover, placing of the illustration titled “A Footnote” before the chapter directs the readers’ attention to the textual footnote. The gesture underscores the significance of the element which otherwise can be easily neglected by readers.

Using such minor details, Beardsley sexualized his work for the benefit of a choice knowledgeable coterie. The image created a clue for those groups who were used to communicate their meanings in conspiracy, connoisseurs of pornography, homosexual men, and Decadent peers among them. This preferred mode of communication was, perhaps, specified by the author in a description of Helen’s intimacies with her confidante Mrs. Marsuple (the second chapter, January issue of the Savoy): “The talk that passed between Mrs. Marsuple and her mistress was of that excellent kind that passes between old friends, a perfect understanding giving to scraps of phrases their full meaning, and to the merest reference a point” (163).

Another allusion to the circle of friends, and one friend in particular, can be found in Beardsley's mischievous “dedication” of his story to “The Most Eminent and Reverend Prince, Guilio Poldo Pezzoli, Cardinal of the Holly Roman Church [...], A Reformer of Ecclesiastical Discipline, A Pattern of Learning, A Father to the Poor, Wisdom and Holiness of Life,” etc. (153). The tone of this rococo dedication resembles that of Beardsley's stylish and consciously affected letters to his patron Raffalovich. For a period of several months in 1895, Beardsley, for instance, adopted signature “Télémaque” and differentially addressed his friend “Mentor” (Maas 84-110). Besides, in a letter to Smithers, Beardsley mockingly called Raffalovich “Russian Prince” (Maas 254). Considering André's growing fascination with the Catholic tradition, his social standing, and implacable aristocratic manners, it is probable that he was the addressee of the high-flown foreword. As Beardsley’s benefactor, Raffalovich might be also legitimately considered “a father to the poor.” Thus, one can assume that, by way of compliment, Beardsley inscribed his pornographic romance to his friend, the known student of “sexual inversion.” Moreover, Snodgrass subtly points out that the title of the story, apart from being an obvious allusion to mons veneris, can
The Victorian

refer to the name of More Adey's family home, Under-the-Hill in Wotton-Under-Edge. Adey was a prominent member of Wilde's entourage and had a long term relationship with Robert Ross (Snodgrass 65).

To sum up, one may assume that Beardsley's work in the Savoy was intended to acquire a specific set of meanings for members of his social surrounding. Beardsley filled his output with sexual in-jokes and subcultural references that remained opaque to the general public. However, the earlier discussed desire to be accepted by the larger society induced Beardsley's attempt to involve extensive middle-class readership into his play of sexual innuendos as well. Another parallel with Wilde's strategy is again inevitable. According to Regenia Gagnier, with his play Salome and its "jeweled" language, Wilde "move[d] beyond a community of select young men to try to seduce a general audience" (169). By appropriating what Snodgrass calls "hide-and-seek sexual iconography," Beardsley also tried to "seduce" and sexualize a wider public. It is well-known that the artist inscribed sexual puns into seemingly neutral structural elements of his drawings. As John Lane complained in a widely quoted statement, one had "to place his drawings under a microscope, and look at them upside down" in order to prevent a scandal (viii). By confronting his viewers with defiantly sexual but playfully disguised details, Beardsley made the public participate in deciphering procedures and thus acknowledge their own sexualized perception.

To illustrate this assertion, I am going to analyze the title page of the first number of the Savoy (Figure 3). It depicts two veiled figures in fancy dresses in front of a half-curtained room. They look directly at the viewer and invite to join them in a space behind the curtains. Significance of Beardsley's characters which make eye-contact with the viewer is noted, among others, by Dennis Dennisoff. By returning the gaze, these knowledgeable personages expose the audience's presence and intense attention to the "sexual performance" inside the drawing (45). At the Savoy's title page, the figure of unspecified gender on the right is rendered with particular wit. Drapes of the garb's bottom mask and simultaneously reveal the shape of erected penis. At the same time, folds on the back conspicuously resemble female breasts. It is necessary to emphasize that, by taking notice of such peculiarities of the treatment, viewers become aware of their own voyeuristic desire and are turned into "accomplices" as Snodgrass puts it, "in the drawing's narrative" (230). Vague androgyny of the suggestive personage is transformed into arresting hermaphroditism. As Ian Fletcher clarifies, in the nineteenth century there was an essential division between the two. Preferred by the Pre-Raphaelite artists and poets-symbolists androgyn with its indistinct genitals inclined to disembodiment and spirituality, while hermaphrodite with the prominent organs of both sexes became an emblem of lust, "'cerebral lechery' where the soul 'masturbates' the body" (155).

Furthermore, a masturbator also features in the drawing. Indeed, the ambivalent character's hand is concealed in the drapes hinting at the much-discussed throughout the nineteenth century "solitary vice." During the period, the middle classes became highly preoccupied with adolescent masturbation
which was believed to do irremediable harm to health and life of an individual. The list of ills masturbation could cause was exhaustive (it included blindness, kleptomania, tuberculosis, imbecility, etc.). The preventative measures were also extreme and ranged from acetic ointments for private parts to surgery. The bourgeois anxiety bordered on moral panic in this question and produced a “rash of texts,” including handbooks for parents and adolescents about the fatal consequences of the “bad habit” and tracts by doctors promising a cure (Foucault 233).

Figure 3. Aubrey Beardsley, Title Page, Savoy, January 1896

Apparently, Beardsley shared his Victorian contemporaries’ interest and never failed to mock the sexual phobia of the middle classes. He portrayed masturbators in privately distributed and semi-clandestine works such as unexpurgated version of Under the Hill and illustrations to the Lysistrata of
Aristophanes. Besides, he drew them, although more discreetly, in widely accessible drawings, for instance, in illustrations for *Salome, Morte D’Arthur,* and the discussed drawing for the Savoy. A potential buyer of the periodical needed not to look any further than the title page to face manifestations of “abnormal” sexuality.

To conclude, Aubrey Beardsley realized the potential of sexually transgressive art to produce a scandal and prompt the author’s name into fame. However, as this essay attempted to demonstrate, the artist was far from a cohesive aspiration in his art. To stress his position of an insider amidst the coterie of advanced authors and artists, he exploited elitist dandiacal codes that necessarily excluded general public from grasping the works’ sexual meaning. Nevertheless, whether conscious or not, he appropriated the seductive strategy, that was also practised by Wilde, and tried to draw the larger audience into awareness of its own desires. The perspective developed in the essay helps to elude from the idea of homogeneous Victorian public and conceptualize Beardsley’s art as a multilayered message which functioned in a number of ways for different social groups.

Works Cited

---.“Under the Hill.” *Savoy* Apr 1896: 187–196
---. “Under the Hill.” *Savoy* Jan 1896: 151–170
Beerbohm, Max. “Ex Cathedra V: Mr. Beardsley’s Fifty Drawings.” *To–morrow* 3 Jan 1897: 33


