Aubrey Beardsley’s Drawings of Tristan und Isolde

During the 1880s and 1890s, the growing fame of Richard Wagner’s music dramas prompted a number of leading visual artists across Europe to interpret these works. These artists varied in their knowledge of Wagner’s operas, though some were genuine enthusiasts. In the work of many prominent artists, the tendency to depict realistic, everyday subjects, characteristic of avant-garde art from 1850 to 1880, began to be replaced by a return to imaginary or literary subjects. The remote, legendary, and highly dramatic content of Wagner’s operas made them ideal subjects for visual interpretation, though artists realized that the qualities of Wagner’s music could not be directly reproduced in other media. This interest in Wagner’s operas, at a time when they still were relatively new and controversial, resulted in some outstanding works in visual media until the years after 1900, when a growing trend toward abstraction, as well as new currents in music, began to make “literary” subjects, including Wagner’s operas, unfashionable in the avant-garde of the visual arts for many decades to come.¹

One of the most exceptional artists working on material of this kind was the English draftsman Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898). Although according to the traditional hierarchies of academic art, accepted throughout Europe, painting and sculpture were considered vastly superior to drawing, Beardsley was quickly recognized as the most original young artist in England. Lacking an academic education in art, Beardsley felt free to ignore many time-honored expectations. He died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, and like some other artists with life-threatening illnesses, was extremely prolific until his health gave out. In a career lasting little more than five years, he produced over five hundred finished drawings, not including preliminary sketches.² Most of these were designed for reproduction in illustrated books or journals. The artist’s Wagnerian pictures, though relatively few in number, had an outsize importance within his work. Beardsley also harbored literary ambitions and, as we shall see, virtually all of his efforts in this area were directed toward works inspired by or reacting against Wagner.

Beardsley belonged to the first generation of artists who were too young to have seen Wagner’s own productions of his operas. Some influential older artists working on Wagnerian themes, such as Eugène Delacroix and Henri Fantin-Latour, saw or may have seen one of Wagner’s productions (Tannhäuser, Paris, 1861, or the Ring operas, Bayreuth, 1876). Although Wagner was not completely satisfied with these presentations, they nevertheless gave an idea of his dramatic intentions beyond what could be gleaned from studying the scores of the operas. Beardsley was fortunate, however, to live in London during the early 1890s, when most of Wagner’s operas were performed, often with excellent casts and musical direction. With an early background in music and acting in plays before he decided to become an artist, Beardsley retained an interest in all aspects of theatrical opera production, most evident in his pictures relating to Tristan und Isolde.

Beardsley made over twenty Wagnerian drawings for books or magazines. Most of these are equally divided among three of his favorite operas: Tannhäuser; the Ring operas, particularly Das Rheingold; and Tristan und Isolde. Though he illustrated plays by many authors, Beardsley did not treat subjects from operas by any other composer. Beardsley’s work has been analyzed in detail by art historians and, more recently, by literary critics.³ Some critics have played a Freudian game of finding sexual symbolism in every straight line or curve of Beardsley’s designs; though such observations are sometimes illuminating, they are not subject to proof or disproof. In addition, Beardsley was a celebrity as the most famous, or notorious, young artist of the “decadence” of the 1890s in England, and he has been the subject of a number

¹ The artist’s Wagnerian pictures, though relatively few in number, had an outsize importance within his work.
of full-length biographies. Rather than trying to recapitulate this material, we will concentrate on the Wagnerian subjects and where they fit into Beardsley’s life and work.

Most of Beardsley’s Wagnerian drawings were published during his brief lifetime, and these works have not escaped the scholarly attention devoted to Beardsley’s art. He planned full-scale projects, to be discussed below, for both Tannhäuser and Das Rheingold, though because of ill health he was unable to complete the first project or to advance very far with the second. The Tannhäuser project, involving both text and illustrations, was published and analyzed after Beardsley’s death, while several studies have been devoted to his drawings for Das Rheingold and the Ring. A book has even been devoted to Beardsley’s Wagnerism, mainly in the context of the “decadence” or neuroticism that some perceived in Wagner’s music (a view already expressed in the 1880s by Wagner’s former disciple, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche) and in Beardsley’s art. On the other hand, Beardsley’s drawings of Tristan und Isolde have not been studied as a group. This is not surprising: unlike the drawings for the other two operas, which were completed in relatively short periods and meant to be published together, the Tristan drawings were scattered throughout Beardsley’s career, and there is no evidence that he intended to present them as a group. All were published at different times and in diverse journals and books. Nevertheless, Beardsley was careful to title some drawings as relating to Tristan und Isolde, even when initially they seem to have no obvious connection to that opera. Discussing them together may throw some light on Beardsley’s attitude toward Wagner’s celebrated work and to opera in general. We will focus on the drawings, rather than the printed illustrations, since they are closer to Beardsley’s intentions.

We may only speculate about the reasons for Beardsley’s devotion to the three Wagner operas. He may have identified with Tannhäuser, an outsider like himself, an artist whose work was rejected by many of his contemporaries as indecent. In Das Rheingold Beardsley seems to have been most intrigued by the trickster god, Loge, another outsider: surrounded by flames, he spectacularly upstages Wotan in two of Beardsley’s drawings. As for Tristan und Isolde, Beardsley, despite a reputation in some quarters for frivolity, was devoted to this most serious of Wagnerian operas. He probably was attracted by the beauty of the music—he owned a vocal score of the opera, for which he drew a title page with two floral decorations (Princeton University Library). Among other items of Wagneriana in Beardsley’s library were a French translation of some of the librettos, including Tristan, and four volumes of English translations of Wagner’s prose works and of the composer’s biography by Houston Stewart Chamberlain, Wagner’s son-in-law.

Gleeson White, former editor of The Studio, which had published some of Beardsley’s work, reminiscing about the artist’s attendance at a London performance of Tristan, described Beardsley’s “transparent hands clutching the rail in front, and thrilling with the emotion of the music. . . . No instrument in the orchestra vibrated more instantly in accord with the changes of the music, from love-passion to despair.” If we speculated again, we might see Beardsley’s interest in a story of love that cannot be fully realized in the world, finding consummation only in death, as an analogy to his personal situation as an invalid.

Beardsley entitled his two large Wagnerian projects The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser: A Romantic Novel and The Comedy of the Rheingold. In each case he planned to supply both the illustrations and the text, creating a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk for which he would provide the story and its (visual, rather than musical) accompaniment. Beardsley may also have intended to participate in the design of the books, like Wagner in his theatrical settings, though this is not certain. Projects of this nature by prominent artists were rare, though not unknown: Beardsley was aware of William Blake’s books of poetry, illustrated with Blake’s hand-colored engravings. Beardsley’s texts were to be drastic revisions or interpretations of the librettos of Wagner’s two operas.

As an artist, Beardsley had the reputation of favoring sexually charged subjects. While his designs for the partly completed Venus and Tannhäuser were relatively demure, this was not the case with the text.

As summarized by Colette Colligan, Beardsley had “published a highly metaphorical work of obscenity,
The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser: A Romantic Novel, which includes stylized descriptions of masturbation, bestiality, coprophilia and pederasty. Clearly Beardsley envisions activities on the Venusberg that never would have occurred to Wagner. Though there are many sources for the Tannhäuser story, Beardsley makes specific references to Wagner and his operas. Colligan’s catalogue of sexual practices probably does not represent Beardsley’s fantasies, much less the ailing artist’s sexual life, if any. The intention of the rather oblique text may be partly satirical, in keeping with Beardsley’s dominant mode: his drawings sometimes caricature people he admired, even close friends. Throughout his career Beardsley also showed a desire to épater le bourgeois, to shock his Victorian readership. His physical disability left him feeling an outsider, and he did not share the widespread national mood of “imperial triumphalism” and self-satisfaction. The story was published in installments (as Under the Hill) in 1896 in The Savoy magazine, of which Beardsley was art editor; needless to say, the text was heavily expurgated.

Though Beardsley depicts readily identifiable scenes from Wagner in his drawings of Tannhäuser and in particular of the Rheingold story, this is much less true of the images he relates to Tristan und Isolde. Musicologists generally agree that this is Wagner’s most “advanced” opera and has had the greatest influence on music history. Even the opera’s most fervent admirers would admit, however, that it does not have the same variety of picturesque settings, characters, and actions as Das Rheingold, with the gods, dwarves, Rhinemaidens, and so on, depicted by Beardsley. Much of the action in Tristan takes place in the main characters’ minds. The only identifiable scene from Wagner’s Tristan by Beardsley is in an illustration for a book that is not by Wagner.

Beardsley’s first large commission as a professional artist was for illustrations to a new edition of Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte Darthur (c. 1470). This book was a late-medieval English collection of stories about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. There was a revival of interest in the book in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the publisher J. M. Dent planned to issue a new edition, complete with archaic spellings and Gothic type. Between 1892 and 1894 Beardsley produced more than three hundred drawings for this enormous volume, ranging from double-page compositions to small vignettes and decorative elements. There is a substantial overlap between the legends utilized by Malory and Wagner: Malory includes a long, incident-filled account of the story of Tristan and Isolde, as well as the tale of Sir Percival, the only knight pure enough to find the Holy Grail; the analogies to the story of Parsifal are evident. These stories were in widespread circulation throughout medieval Europe. While Wagner’s main source for Tristan und Isolde was Gottfried von Strassburg’s epic Tristan (c. 1215), Malory (as he freely admits) adapted his tales from French sources.

Of a half-dozen full-page illustrations of the Tristan story by Beardsley for the Malory book, only two relate to Wagner’s telling of the story. The first story is described in Tristan und Isolde but not enacted on the stage: before the action of the opera begins, Isolde had nursed the wounded Tristan in her native Ireland. Malory’s version of this incident differs considerably from Wagner’s in that Isolde is not aware that Tristan had killed her betrothed, and Beardsley in this case follows Malory. In How La Beale Isoud Nursed Sir Tris tram (Harvard University Art Museums), a kneeling Isolde is shown looking up anxiously at the bedridden, semiconscious Tristan. The sword mentioned in Wagner is not present, and Isolde shows empathy rather than hostile intentions toward Tristan. The reverse side of this drawing contains a rare pencil sketch in which Beardsley tentatively blocks out the forms of the composition with near-abstract looseness.

Malory’s telling of the story of the love potion also differs considerably from Wagner’s. In Malory the scene takes place in a ship’s cabin below decks
and is a lighthearted affair. Tristan and Isolde find the cup prepared by Brangäne and help themselves to it, thinking it is ordinary wine; Isolde again has no intention of killing Tristan. In How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink (Harvard University Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Scofield Thayer, 1986.681), on the other hand, Beardsley follows the scenario of Wagner’s opera, which he had first seen at the Drury Lane Theatre in the summer of 1892. The scene takes place in a curtained-off area on the ship’s deck and, as in Wagner, Tristan toasts Isolde with the cup both believe to be poisoned. Such independence in illustrating even well-known texts like Malory’s was characteristic of Beardsley throughout his career.

The image is one of the earliest in Beardsley’s advanced, “modern” style, and it reveals the many influences he had absorbed. The tall, thin figures recall the enervated personages of English Pre-Raphaelite painting, particularly those of Sir Edward Burne-Jones, who had encouraged Beardsley in entering a career as an artist. The riotous floral and vegetal motifs of the wide border, perhaps symbols of erotic attraction, recall with more energy the designs of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. Isolde’s Medusa-like hair is familiar in depictions by Beardsley and others of the femme fatale, that ubiquitous figure of the 1890s, an era of a heightened war between the sexes. But the dominant mode is that of Japanese prints, which Beardsley enthusiastically collected. This is evident in the flattened figures, defined by outlines, Isolde’s spectacular mantle, and the tall curtains, resembling Japanese screens, each pane decorated with an enormous clematis flower. The flowers hovering above the figures’ heads symbolize romantic passion, though this seems contradicted by the sinister scene enacted below. In the opening between the curtains, separating the figures, we can make out a ship’s railing and stylized waves, again in the Japanese manner. On the other hand, the central placement of the figures, and the receding boards of the ship’s deck that still give some sense of depth through traditional perspective, are Western conventions that Beardsley later was often to ignore.

Tristan and Isolde display the androgyny characteristic of many of Beardsley’s figures: wrapped in voluminous clothing, they resemble each other at least as much as Siegmund resembles Sieglinde in Die Walküre. The only demonstration of emotion is by Isolde: taller than Tristan, with one shoulder raised, her hands hidden, she leans back as if recoiling from him and from the supposedly poisoned cup. Beardsley’s drawing does not tell us anything about Wagner’s intentions when he wrote Tristan und Isolde in the 1850s: like all good later interpretations, it embodies attitudes of the artist’s own time toward Wagner’s work. Beardsley must have been fond of the composition, since he repeated it three years later, this time entitled Tristan und Isolde, in a smaller, simplified version published in The Savoy.

From a technical viewpoint, How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink is characteristic of Beardsley’s best work. His first drawing for the Morte Darthur project, The Achieving of the Sangreal (by Sir Percival), was done in a traditional technique using pen and watercolor washes to create shading and a greater
illusion of depth. Such drawings had to be reproduced in books by photogravure, and the publisher, Dent, wished to use less expensive line blocks. In this procedure the artist uses only black and white, without shading, relying on line to define figures and objects. The drawing is photographed and transferred to a zinc plate covered with light-sensitive gelatin. The plate is printed after a process resembling that of traditional etching. Beardsley quickly adapted to the new technique, which fitted well with his aesthetic: unlike some other master draftsmen, he was generally satisfied with the quality of the reproductions of his designs, even though they are not always faithful to the originals.

Turning to Beardsley’s other drawings relating to Tristan und Isolde, it may be beneficial to discuss them not in the usual chronological order of their composition, but in an iconographic or subject-matter order as they relate to the stages of a production of Tristan, or indeed of any opera.

Beardsley’s background would have predisposed him to an interest in the practicalities of a musical theater production. He and his sister had performed music publicly as children, and Aubrey acted in amateur theatricals both during and after his school days. His sister, with whom he lived for much of his life, became a professional actress; though such a career was not feasible for Beardsley, his involvement with the theater as a spectator continued. The Tristan drawings demonstrate that Beardsley was thinking about this opera throughout his career, from some of his earliest works to the latest.

The only work in color among all of Beardsley’s Wagnerian pictures is Isolde, first completed as a drawing with watercolor (Harvard University Art Museums, figure 2), then published in The Studio in 1895 as a color lithograph. Though we think of Beardsley as an artist working only in black and white, he often, working only for himself, added colors to his drawings when they were returned to him after transfer to the line block. He was not averse to issuing works in color when commissions arose: in 1894 he published three posters in color lithography, all considerably larger than his drawings and advertising theatrical productions or new books. Isolde is the only one of Beardsley’s surviving drawings for lithographs that is not specifically an advertisement. The Isolde has similarities to posters: the figure is pushed to the left side, with the right side largely empty except for lettering. In this case it shows only the title, in a green matching parts of Isolde’s hat, necklace, and elaborate bracelet. The Isolde, then, might be regarded as an advertisement for the opera, though no particular production is specified. Advertising is one of the first steps in an opera production, sometimes preceding rehearsals, in order to generate advance ticket sales. Beardsley had no problem doing work of this kind, since, as he wrote, “advertisement is an absolute necessity of modern life, and if it can be made beautiful as well as obvious, so much the better.”

Figure 2. Aubrey Beardsley, Isolde, ink and watercolor, 1895, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.656
Beardsley here depicts Isolde in a hybrid of medieval and “modern dress,” a production concept familiar in our own time, though not in the 1890s. (He had already, however, shown biblical-era figures in modern dress in some of his drawings for Oscar Wilde’s play Salome, Beardsley’s most notorious commission.) Isolde’s elaborate hat is nearly identical to that worn by one of two women in his Black Coffee, a contemporary café scene not unlike those by Edgar Degas. Isolde leans forward with determination to drink the poisoned cup; Tristan, however, is absent, and the lack of décor in the picture gives it an almost abstract flatness. The curtain behind Isolde is a deep red, indicative of fiery passions. Though the lithograph differs considerably from Beardsley’s drawing with its loose brushwork, the artist most likely approved the lithograph before publication. At this period he was living in London and could discuss this face to face with the publisher or the lithographer. Later, living in a coastal resort in hopes of restoring his health, he had to deal with such matters by correspondence. In regard to a small lithograph advertising a set of books, Beardsley asked to see color proofs and set out in detail the colors he wished to be used. The design and brilliant colors of the Isolde have analogies to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s famous lithographic advertising posters of the 1890s, which Beardsley easily could have seen on his regular trips to Paris. In Beardsley’s work, Wagner’s tragic heroine curiously shares the visual world of Jane Avril, La Goulue, and the other denizens of Lautrec’s Montmartre. Characteristically, Beardsley did not explain why he chose to depict Isolde in this way.

Beardsley depicts another aspect of opera production, the rehearsal, in A Répétition of “Tristan und Isolde” (Victoria and Albert Museum, London, figure 3). This was published in December 1896, in the final issue of The Savoy. Though dealing with one of the earliest stages of an opera production, it is actually the last published image of Beardsley’s Tristan. It is in his late style, first seen in some of the illustrations for The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser, published in the same journal earlier that year. Instead of the open spaces and spare, sweeping lines of How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink, the entire surface here is covered with a dense web of lines, with white appearing only in the reserved open spaces of the upper bodies, hands, and feet of the figures. The background is filled with a mass of black dots, making it difficult to identify the location of the scene, which might be outdoors at night.

Mixing several languages in the title, Beardsley uses the French word for “rehearsal.” The longhaired figure with a raised hand is the rehearsal coach, though he wears the formal tails usually associated with an orchestra conductor. Given the work being rehearsed, the two young women might be the singers playing the roles of Isolde (on the left) and Brangâne. Leaning close together, they wear elaborate modern dresses, possibly opera costumes, showing considerable décolletage. Like many compositions by Beardsley, this one relates to one of his other works, in this case a wash drawing of 1895 entitled Frontispiece to Chopin’s “Nocturnes,” referencing another group of musical works that he admired. That scene, like some of Beardsley’s other depictions of music making,
unaccountably takes place outdoors in an open field. The conductor or coach in that work leans sharply toward the two women, who are dressed more demurely and maintain a greater distance from each other.

The rehearsal scene from *The Savoy* has some of the strangeness of Beardsley’s other *Tristan* illustrations. Suggestions about the identity of the male figure (Tristan?) or the relationship between the two women remain in the realm of speculation. The standing figure leans against an ornate pillar entwined with flowers; this might be the column of a harp, an instrument Wagner used to great effect in works such as *Die Meistersinger*, though a piano would be a more usual rehearsal instrument. Although the women watch him closely, he looks away, as if conducting unseen musicians. A rehearsal is a fairly mundane event, often taking place in nondescript surroundings, yet Beardsley again gives the scene a mysterious, unexplained quality. This brings to mind Kenneth Clark’s view of Beardsley: “He was essentially a visionary and an ideal artist.” Beardsley was not given to realistic reportage of everyday scenes, and the indeterminate, dreamlike quality of much of *Tristan*’s plot and music would have been exceptionally appealing to him.

In regard to the action of the opera itself, we have seen that Beardsley inserted the love potion scene from *Tristan und Isolde* into his early illustrations for Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*. Another important type of depiction of an opera production, in Beardsley’s time and today, is in publicity portraits of the “stars” or lead players. Beardsley essays this genre in his image of the Hungarian soprano Katharina Klavsky, an early work of 1892 (Princeton University Library, figure 4). Beardsley sought a portrait-like depiction of Klavsky, judging from contemporary photographs of the singer in newspapers and magazines, though modified to his own svelte beauty ideals. He depicts her in the role of Isolde, which he had seen her portray at the Drury Lane Theatre in the summer opera season of 1892. Her Tristan was the German tenor Max Alvary; Gustav Mahler conducted. All of these artists had reached adulthood during Wagner’s lifetime and presumably had some idea of the Master’s musical and dramatic intentions; Mahler had heard Wagner conduct

![Figure 4. Aubrey Beardsley, Katharina Klavsky as Isolde, ink and watercolor, c. 1892, Aubrey Beardsley Collection, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library](image-url)
Though Beardsley was more enthusiastic about Klavsky, he also drew a profile portrait of Alvary in vaguely medieval costume.\textsuperscript{19} The tenor had performed both Tristan and Tannhäuser in London that year, however, and a role is not specified.

The image is tall and narrow in format, suggesting the influence on Beardsley at this stage of his career of Japanese prints, especially the category of *kakemono*, or pillar prints, which had been known in France and England for some time.\textsuperscript{20} Isolde’s long strands of hair and sweeping cloak anticipate her appearance in the slightly later *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink*. Her back to us, with one shoulder raised, she leans on a ship’s railing and looks ahead toward a mountainous shoreline. This is probably the Isolde of Act 1, looking toward the approaching Cornwall of King Marke as she broods about Tristan’s supposed indifference. Alternatively, it could represent her sea voyage from Cornwall to Brittany and the dying Tristan, though this action is not depicted in the opera. Klavsky’s name (perhaps in its Germanic pronunciation) appears above, while the title of her role is written below amid stylized Japanese waves and weeds.

Modern criticism in the arts pays considerable attention to the reception of an artwork: that is, how it is perceived by critics and its audience at the time of its introduction and later. This perception may or may not correspond to the artist’s own view of his work. The remaining two *Tristan* subjects by Beardsley may both be described as “reception pictures.” The most famous of all Beardsley’s Wagnerian images, a drawing largely in black and white ink entitled *The Wagnerites* (Victoria and Albert Museum, figure 5), published in *The Yellow Book* in 1894, does not show any dramatic action at all; instead it focuses only on the audience. As such, it is highly unusual among nineteenth-century depictions of theatrical performances. Though small (about eight by six inches), *The Wagnerites* has been the subject of a surprising number of different interpretations.

In an ornate, darkened theater an audience in the orchestra stalls faces the stage. Whatever may be happening there is not visible to us; however, a theatrical program discarded on the floor at the lower right informs us that the evening’s program is *Tristan und Isolde*. There has been much speculation about the attitude of the audience toward the performance. With one exception, the orchestra stalls, the most expensive seats in the theater, are filled entirely with women. Most have elaborate coiffures and wear off-the-shoulder dresses, their upper bodies highlighted by the reserved areas of white paper in a largely black ink drawing. Their faces, seen mostly in profile, are particularly difficult to read. The standard interpretation of the picture, proposed by Kenneth Clark, Brian Reade, and others, is that Beardsley’s intention, as so often, is satirical.\textsuperscript{21} The women’s expressions may be seen as hard and oversophisticated, even decadent; as such, they make an ironic contrast with Wagner’s idealistic tale of romantic love that is being presented on the stage.

This is not the only possible interpretation, however. The literary critic Emma Sutton discusses the widespread conservative opinion in England and elsewhere that Wagner’s music was “decadent.”\textsuperscript{22} If so, then having a sensual, decadent audience would be entirely appropriate. Beardsley’s view of the scene therefore could be considered objective, or at least
nonjudgmental, rather than satirical. Beardsley himself, it will be recalled, was regarded by many, perhaps unfairly, as a prominent Decadent, largely due to the notoriety of his illustrations for Wilde’s *Salome* and to his emaciated yet fastidious appearance. More recently, the French critic Xavier Lacavalerie, in an extended discussion of this image, finds in it no evidence of decadence.23 Instead he sees the audience members as concentrating intensely on Wagner’s music drama; the principal effect of *Tristan und Isolde* takes place within their minds, as Wagner intended. In this interpretation, Beardsley’s attitude toward the audience in *The Wagnerites* is sympathetic and approving.

The lone male figure in the orchestra stalls, balding and timid-looking, probably would have been understood at the time as a caricature of a Jew. Again Beardsley’s attitude is by no means clear. He is known to have been friendly with a number of Jews from London’s artistic community, such as the young satirist and caricaturist Max Beerbohm. During the last two years of his life, Beardsley was heavily under the influence of Marc-André Raffalovich, a Jewish emigré poet and Roman Catholic convert who helped steer Beardsley’s conversion to Catholicism. Is the male figure a reference, satirical or not, to Wagner’s well-known anti-Semitism? The subject is never mentioned in Beardsley’s extensive correspondence.

In his notorious essay *Judaism in Music* (1850), Wagner had written that Jews were not a suitable subject for representation in the visual arts. Perhaps here, as in *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, Beardsley is showing signs of rebelliousness against Wagner, a revered authority figure. He does not hesitate to depict a Jewish subject, who moreover has a central place at a performance of Wagner’s opera.24

Beardsley again deals with audience response to *Tristan und Isolde* in a little-known drawing of circa 1892, now in a private collection (figure 6). The work is entitled *Les revenants de musique* (*The Ghosts of Music*); it is one of a number of works to which Beardsley gave French titles, perhaps influenced by his simultaneous involvement with Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. The drawing is tall and narrow and surrounded by a triple-lined border, as in his nearly contemporaneous portrait of Katharina Klavsky. As in that picture, the bottom of the composition is filled with motifs from nature, in this case sketchy tree limbs. It was one of Beardsley’s group of four drawings
reproduced as line-block illustrations in *The Studio* in April 1893.

At the left a thin young man with long hair is seated in profile on a chair, evidently before a curtain and on an empty stage. He is slumped as if exhausted, looking downward, his right hand open and limply supported by the chair. His costume is unusual: a jacket buttoned up to the neck, baggy trousers, and pointed shoes. The costume resembles that traditionally worn by Pierrot, the French version of a hapless character of the *commedia dell’arte*. Beardsley used the Pierrot figure elsewhere and seems to have identified with it; thus the subject shown here takes on the aspect of a self-portrait.25

Facing the young man are three somewhat smaller figures, the ghosts of the title. A standing young man and woman look at him, though he does not seem to notice them. Sutton plausibly suggests that these are Tristan and Isolde, recognizable by their unruly hair, also seen in *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink* and in *Klavsky*. A robed female figure seen from the back below them may represent Brangäne.26 The young man, then, has just seen and heard *Tristan und Isolde*, the work that, according to the account of his friend Gleeson White, had such an intense effect on Beardsley in the theater. Beardsley also would have known Burne-Jones’s large painting *Le chant d’amour* (*The Song of Love*; 1868 – 1877; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), based in part on a French folk song, in which a young knight in armor sits at the left, spellbound and drained of energy, as he listens to a musician.27 In Beardsley’s image the young man’s musical experience is based not on listening but on recollection. In an age before recordings and videotapes, when one could experience works fully only through infrequent live performances, a devoted Wagnerian might well replay an opera in his imagination. The drawing may suggest the enervating, “decadent” effect some critics of the time thought Wagner’s music had on its audience.

Beardsley did not attempt to imitate the effects of music or a leitmotif in any of the *Tristan und Isolde* images: the visual arts and music were not directly comparable, at least before the advent of abstract art in the twentieth century. Nor, for the most part, did he seek to emulate the intense emotions of the opera, except perhaps in the strange watercolor *Isolde*. His other groups of Wagnerian drawings had consistent styles: decorous for *Tannhäuser*, lively and picturesque for *Das Rheingold*. On the other hand, the *Tristan* drawings, made throughout his career, show the rapid evolution of his technique: from the linearism of *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink* to the horror vacui of the late *A Répétition de “Tristan und Isolde.”* Beginning in Beardsley’s lifetime, a few critics have suggested the possible stylistic influence on the British artist of the French painter and lithographer Odilon Redon,28 though the effect could have been mutual. (On Redon and Wagner, see *Wagneriana* [Spring – Summer 2014.]) The extent of Beardsley’s knowledge of Redon’s work is uncertain, though members of his immediate circle certainly were familiar with it: Arthur Symons, later Beardsley’s editor at *The Savoy* and his biographer, had published an article on Redon as early as 1890.29 Recently Rachel Sloan has proposed that Redon’s influence was specifically on Beardsley’s Wagnerian works;30 if so, then in the *Tristan* drawings this might be evident in the quality of arrested motion in some of the compositions, notably *How Sir Tristram Drank of the Love Drink* and *Isolde*.

Although Beardsley drew caricatures of such composers as Carl Maria von Weber and Felix Mendelssohn, and a portrait of the still-active Giuseppe Verdi, he never depicted Wagner. Without work and short of money, Beardsley contemplated selling his extensive library, but he excluded a few books: religious texts and the volumes of Wagner’s prose works. A photograph taken late in Beardsley’s life shows the artist in the hotel room in Menton, France, where he died.31 Wearing a suit, he is seated facing a wall of photographs of Italian Renaissance figural compositions, including many religious and mythological subjects by Andrea Mantegna. Arranged on the top of a bookcase, in the manner of an altar, are photographs of Beardsley’s sister — and Richard Wagner. Aubrey Beardsley remained faithful to the Master of Bayreuth to the end.

Notes
1. There is still no monographic treatment of Wagner’s influence on the visual arts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Good color reproductions of paintings on Wagnerian subjects

Many general studies deal with the relationship between art and music in the early modern period. A recent book on this subject, with extensive bibliography, is James H. Rubin with Olivia Mattis, eds., Rival Sisters, Art and Music at the Birth of Modernism, 1815 – 1915 (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014).


9. Reade, Aubrey Beardsley, fig. 100.

10. These observations have been made by various authors. See Chris Snodgrass, Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 83.


12. Reade, Aubrey Beardsley, fig. 33.

13. Ibid., 16.


15. Reade, Aubrey Beardsley, fig. 393.


19. Reade, Aubrey Beardsley, fig. 29.


22. Sutton, Aubrey Beardsley, 100.


26. Ibid., 63.


31. Illustrated in Colvin, Aubrey Beardsley, 106.

— Donald Rosenthal

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