Beardsley Before The Yellow Book

A very young and rather mad young man....
—Colette Willy

What was the pre-Yellow Book Beardsley like? In his case we’re talking about all but the last four years of his short life.

For one’s reputation, at least, it’s often a good thing to die young. It’s also helpful to the biographer, although there have been some very long biographies of Keats, whose life span paralleled Beardsley’s twenty-six years. Most young geniuses begin setting themselves apart from other creative people when very young indeed. Mozart was writing operas and symphonies when Beardsley was a struggling, directionless schoolboy with little more than a talent for drawing place cards for his mother and contributing cartoons to the school magazine. One Beardsley biographer declares that Beardsley’s real genius was for music, and adds, absurdly: “Perhaps one of the things that made Aubrey Beardsley give precedence to his talent for drawing over his other talents was that visual art seems to have been the only art about which his mother had little to say.” Because of his invalidism his mother was a powerful influence on his life—he could rarely escape being her child, whatever his age. Yet one doesn’t choose one’s genius, which, if really that, overwhelms reasonable choices—or silly ones.

Like Keats he compressed his artistic career into a very few years beginning at twenty. Beardsley told one acquaintance, Penrhyn Stanlaws: “I shall not live longer than did Keats”—and the realization drove him obsessively.

None of Beardsley’s schoolboy drawings from the Brighton Grammar School foreshadows the explosion of genius that would occur when he was nineteen—drawings like his Hamlet (Fig. 1) or his first Siegfried (perhaps drawn when he was 20). The early cartoons and caricatures are in the Victorian comic tradition for illustrated papers, books and magazines. There may be a relationship between his lengthier spells of illness and the rapidly chang-
ing nature of his work, as he found himself with more time in bed to study
the neomediaevalism of Burne-Jones and William Morris, Japanese prints,
Whistler, and the centuries of serious black-and-white art. The metamorpho-
sis in his work was explosive. One can recall Arthur Symons here, who lat-
er wrote, possibly thinking of Beardsley: “One creates one’s images out of
the body’s discontent.”

For all his genius, Beardsley remained emotionally immature. When he
wrote, in March 1894, at twenty-one, “Yes, my dear Lane, I shall assured-
ly commit suicide if the Fat Woman does not appear in No. 1 of The Yellow
Book,” he was not planning to cut off a life already doomed to be brief. The Fat Woman was an unflattering portrait of J. M. Whistler’s wife, Trixie, done
in Beardsley’s boyish spirit of cocking a snook at the artist he most admired
in England but who, reports to Beardsley had it, did not think much of
his work. At nineteen he had wangled an invitation to see the famous Pea-
cock Room at Prince’s Gate, and at the Society of English Portrait Paint-
ers exhibition Beardsley had seen Whistler’s Miss Alexander and the Mother,
and wrote his friend G. F. Scotson-Clark that the Miss Alexander was “a
truly glorious, indescribable, mysterious and evasive picture.” He liked the
Mother even more, and drew a sketch of it for Scotson-Clark that appears
to have put Mrs. Beardsley into the frame, a younger Mother with a more
modern bonnet.

Further, Aubrey wrote, he had just bought an 1859 Billingsgate by Whistler,
“a gem in the shape of an etching.” Why make fun two years later of the Mas-
ter’s plump wife? He would not identify the subject, he assured Lane. He’d call the picture A Study in Major Lines.

When Whistler finally saw a portfolio of Beardsley’s drawings—the illus-
trations for The Rape of the Lock—Whistler in effect confessed earlier sins.
“Aubrey,” he said, “I have made a very great mistake—you are a very
great artist.” Beardsley wept openly, and Whistler, worried that Aubrey had
thought it was a joke and meant in irony, consoled him: “I mean it—I mean
it—I mean it.” Beardsley was still emotionally a boy. John Lane, by the way,
would not chance angering Whistler. The picture of Trixie Whistler never
appeared in The Yellow Book and Beardsley did not commit suicide.

After leaving school in Brighton, Beardsley wrote to a former master: “I am
now eighteen years old, with a vile constitution, a yellow face and sunken eyes,
long red hair, a shuffling gait and a stoop.” It would have been impossible
to see in him then the artist who so epitomized his age as to have Max Beer-
bohm write: “I belong to the Beardsley period.”

Two early drawings encapsulate him, one the drab reality, the other the self
he may have only dimly perceived. In The Wreck of a Poet (Fig. 2) we see in a
Japonesque narrow panel a thin young man on a clerk’s high stool, bent over a
Fig. 1  *Hamlet Patris Manem Sequitur*  1891
ledger, with files and bundles of papers as a backdrop. In the foreground is a carpet with a design of symbolically beckoning sunflowers—possibly the attractive external world inaccessible to a poor, marginally educated, insurance company clerk. A footnote to the clerk's-stool drawing deserves a place here. In an undated letter to the Count de Montesquiou, the young French novelist Colette Willy, having seen some of Beardsley's pictures, wrote: "I have an almost guilty passion [for Beardsley]; the drawings of this very young and rather mad young man correspond so closely to what is hidden in me. I have so longed to live, if only for an hour, in front of that garlanded dressing table." When one of her earliest stories was published, the advertisement for it showed Colette on a high stool in front of a writing desk, pencil in hand—a very obvious bow, even in style, to the "mad" young man she would know only through his art.

In the other drawing (Fig. 1), pencilled a year earlier, Hamlet is seen as a gaunt, frightened consumptive—as was Beardsley—his clothes the wrappings of a entombed mummy, his hand clapped to his hollow chest, following the unseen ghost of his father into a nightmare forest. The affliction was Beardsley's, not the Prince of Denmark's, and Vincent Beardsley was indeed a ghostly figure to his son, largely disappearing from his life in the year of the drawing. Beardsley's mother, Ellen, hardly ever mentioned him, and he appears only once thereafter in Aubrey's published letters. Vincent worked for a London brewery in Vauxhall and apparently wasn't home much. In fact William Rothenstein, remembering visiting Aubrey in 1893, wrote: "He lived with his mother and sister." Vincent Beardsley was already gone.

In trying to establish who the young Aubrey was, we need to look further at his family, at his schooling, and those who came to marvel at his art. There was nothing else. He was too sickly to have close friends, other than a few epistolary ones, and his formal education was abbreviated. One biographer tries to make something of his relationship to his father, which is hard to do. He owed his middle name, Vincent, and his tendency toward tuberculosis to his father—not much of a legacy. His father may have been the one to force Aubrey to leave school early, and may have arranged his first job. Neither was much help to a sick child. His mother was close all Aubrey's life. He needed care, and she provided it, perhaps more smotheringly than he liked. And she took credit for a lot about Aubrey after his death, as was natural when all she had left of him was his brief fame and her martyr-like mothering.

His sister Mabel, a year older, was with him when she could be, but she became a teacher, then an actress, and was often unavailable. Yet there seems little doubt that he put her into some of his pictures, although she has been identified in more pictures than she actually appears in. That there was real
affection between the two is unquestionable. A poignant drawing exists in which Aubrey shows the pair as teenagers going to visit the Peacock Room in Prince’s Gate, Mabel smartly dressed below a broad-brimmed hat and the frail Aubrey with broomstick legs and carrying a wispy walking stick hardly more thin than his body.

A biographer writes that his drawings “owe their erotic force to the fact that, thanks to [Mrs. Beardsley] continuing in the central place in his mental world, he was able to keep intact the fierce son-to-mother eroticism of childhood.” One would be hard-pressed to find a single drawing of Beardsley’s that suggests son-to-mother eroticism. Another expert writes that Beardsley’s relationship to his sister became so overheated that they were guilty of incest, and that Mabel aborted the fetus, which was Aubrey’s covert reason for obsessive interest in fetuses. The source of the revelation is ascribed to private knowledge, which is a safe source for nonsense.

Another story about Beardsley’s sexuality that went the rounds for a while was that he did have an illegitimate son, who looked strikingly like him, who was also of indeterminate sex, who was an artist, who was tubercular, and who died young. This was Alan Odle, husband of stream-of-consciousness writer Dorothy Richardson. It was a good story, but Odle had traceable parents and was born in 1888 when Aubrey was sixteen.

Beardsley’s religion has received a lot of attention because of his deathbed conversion and his plethora of pictures mocking religion—which suggest the real Beardsley. But what is to be made of his comment to Yeats, “All my life I have been fascinated by the spiritual life—when a child I saw a vision of a Bleeding Christ over the mantelpiece—but after all, to do one’s work when there are other things one wants to do so much more, is a kind of religion.” What did Beardsley mean? Did he want to have it both ways? For a child already immersed in art, who long had accompanied his mother on her obsessive sermon-tastings, as she called it, and who already recognized death in his labored breathing, a vision out of religious art was unsurprising. His own religion, however, was to do his own work—a vision of himself he saw beyond the clerk’s stool in the insurance office. After all, boys who drop out of school to take boring jobs at low pay rather than scholarships at Oxbridge are not supposed to have ambitions over their heads. But his genius drove him.

Robert Ross recalled first meeting Beardsley in Aymer Vallance’s rooms in February 1892, when Aubrey had published nothing except in school magazines. His Hamlet (Fig. 1)—the first work of his to demonstrate authentic genius—had just appeared in the Brighton school magazine The Bee. Still, Vallance had assured Ross that Beardsley was capable of doing things
Fig. 2  *The Wreck of a Poet*  1892
on a perfectly plain white piece of paper that no one had ever done before. “Though prepared for an extraordinary personality,” Ross recalled,

I never expected the youthful apparition which glided into the room. He was shy, nervous and self-conscious, without any of the intellectual assurance and ease so characteristic of him eighteen months later when his success was unquestioned. He brought a portfolio of his marvellous drawings, in themselves an earnest of genius; but I hardly paid any attention to them at first, so overshadowed were they by the strange and fascinating originality of their author. In two hours it was not hard to discover that Beardsley’s appearance did not belie him. He was an intellectual Marcellus suddenly matured.

Ross’s Marcellus was the nephew of the Emperor Augustus, chosen as his heir, later celebrated for his brilliance by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. He died at nineteen—the age Beardsley then was.

Beardsley cultivated contradictions about himself, and many of them were true. He was a pure artist, who could create a thing of beauty in a few lines. He was an intuitive artist: “I make a blot upon the paper and begin to shove the ink about and something comes.” Yet he also worked unemotionally and by intellect alone—and would have applauded Ezra Pound’s observation (in 1912), “With the art of Beardsley we enter the realm of pure intellect; the beauty of the work is wholly independent of the appearance of the thing portrayed.”

Oscar Wilde, who had never heard of Sigmund Freud, told Frank Harris—if we can believe Frank Harris—that Beardsley’s art “has about it the seduction of strange sins … and brings out the subconscious self in man.” His images in word and line were often of leering, twisted dwarfs; of aborted abnormal animals; of nightmare landscapes and grotesque interiors. These contrasted with the elegant figures he drew in splendid, often eighteenth-century, settings. And while he could draw a Madonna and Child of innocent sweetness, he could also draw scenes of ironic, even macabre, sacrilege. Gelett Burgess of *Purple Cow* fame wrote, in an alphabet litany in Beardsley’s lifetime (1896): “B is for Beardsley, the idol supreme, / Whose drawings are not half so bad as they seem.”

Despite the sheer beauty of line in Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings, and an abundance of elegant images that establish his reputation as one of the greatest artists in black-and-white, the paradox is his other side. A preoccupation, probably ironic, with human depravity. The blackness in his work is in a way a reflection of how he saw the world, which from his birth had treated him badly. The symbol most associated with him is the human embryo—the aborted fetus. Why? Is it how Beardsley, from his boyhood, saw his life?

At seventeen he wrote to a former schoolmaster about his tuberculosis—a death sentence in the nineteenth century—that his doctor, the well-known
tuberculosis specialist, Symes Thompson, wondered “how I had existed in such a worn-out condition.” It would be a short, incomplete life, and he knew it before a single drawing of his had been commercially reproduced. His aborted fetuses, which often look like withered old men, suggest the beginning and end of life compressed into a symbol of incompleteness (Fig. 3). Possibly the most outrageous of all of Beardsley’s embryo-and-fetus drawings is one he did in 1894 for St. Paul’s magazine. Very Japanese-inspired, it shows a pretty young woman (a young, or aspiring, mother, perhaps) sitting, kimono-clad, facing a small table on which is a bell jar used to display objects inside. She is smiling contentedly at it. What is in the bell jar? An aborted fetus.

It was urgent for Beardsley to compress his artistic development into a very few years, and he worked when he could at a literally feverish pace. A friend who saw Beardsley coatless on the outside steps of Covent Garden opera house on a winter night exclaimed, “Aubrey, you will kill yourself!” “Oh, no,” said Beardsley. “I am always burning.” And he was. Tuberculars often ran a chronic low-grade fever.

The advantages of being bedridden are dubious, but for Beardsley they were less of a handicap than for an easel artist. He drew, with pencil and pen, in bed—and in bed he relentlessly pursued his self-education. He read voraciously, especially eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century French literature. He read all of Dickens. He consumed books of prints and engravings. To volume III of The Yellow Book he would contribute a Portrait of Himself in bed, under a fanciful canopy from which hangs a chain-pull of a sour-faced full-breasted woman with horns and cleft hooves. Much later he would draw a deathbed scene he called The Death of Pierrot, with Pierrot’s commedia dell’arte companions quietly tiptoeing in to bid farewell to the corpse. The figure is not Beardsley but one pictures him as constantly reimagining his death. Possibly the deathbed scene of Louis Dubedat, Shaw’s roguish artist in The Doctor’s Dilemma, a tubercular like Beardsley, is based in part on Beardsley (as well as Rossetti), whom Shaw knew. Even the name of Dubedat’s wife, Jennifer (Guenevere), suggests Beardsley’s Morte Darthur.

When he was able, Beardsley haunted the museums, artists’ studios, and the commercial galleries, self-education that would supplement his brief experience of Frederick Brown’s night classes at the Westminster School of Art, to which he went only briefly and intermittently because of illness. He would learn, largely self-taught, the useful essences of one artist after another—French, Italian, English, Japanese, German—and race through derivative phases that in others might encompass years, but in Beardsley, only months or even weeks, until he found his own styles. As he would write to
Fig. 3  Design for St. Paul’s  1894
E. J. Marshall, headmaster of his former school, after describing his latest bout of illnesses:

All my drawing ... was stopped for the time. However I soon got much stronger and I was able to forge ahead with the drawing with renewed vigour. I struck out a new style and method of work which was founded on Japanese art but quite original in the main. In certain points of technique I achieved something like perfection at once and produced about twenty drawings in the new style in about a couple of months.

This happened when he was only nineteen, and he was not exaggerating about either originality or perfection.

“Discovered” by Aymer Vallance, Robert Ross and Joseph Pennell, Beardsley made his crucial public appearance in April 1893 in Pennell’s article, “A New Illustrator,” in the Studio. “It is most interesting,” Pennell wrote, “that though Mr. Beardsley has drawn his motifs from every age, and founded his styles—for it is quite impossible to say what his style may be—on all schools, he has not been carried back to the fifteenth century or succumbed to the [artistic] limits of Japan; he has recognised that he is living in the last decade of the nineteenth century.” The promotion in print was priceless for Beardsley, as the Studio got into all the right hands—but the eleven drawings reproduced earned him nothing. The publisher did not pay artists.

A few months earlier—Beardsley was now twenty—knowing that the article was in preparation, he wrote to A. M. King, a former master who had encouraged him, again prefacing his chronicle with accounts of illness, that he was working for a fee on illustrations for publisher J. M. Dent’s new edition of Malory’s Morte Darthur (Fig. 4), and that his work had been praised in Paris. Further, he added, he had developed “an entirely new method of drawing: fantastic impressions treated in the finest possible outline with patches of black blot.”

When he wrote to his friend G. F. Scotson-Clark in mid-February 1893—he was still twenty—he headed the letter “In bed” and then mentioned nothing more about his illness. Instead he spoke of himself happily as “the coming man, the rage of artistic London.” And in pride more than brag he wrote of his new work: “Words fail to describe the quality of workmanship. The subjects are quite mad and a little indecent. Strange hermaphroditic creatures”—some were also fetuses—“wandering about in Pierrot costumes or modern dress; quite a new world of my own creation.” What he didn’t note is that although he was still working on his nearly 550 borders, ornaments, chapter headings, initial letters, tail-pieces and brilliant full-page and double-page drawings for the Morte Darthur, he had progressed artistically so far beyond them that one morning his mother came to Aubrey’s bedroom and urged him to get out of bed and do more work for Dent, as the publish-
Fig. 4  Merlin and Nimue  Le Morte Darthur  1893–1894
er had been nagging about delays in the *Morte Darthur* designs. Beardsley admitted he was tired of them and improvised a rhyme for her,

A youth for a very small salary,  
Did a cartload of drawings for Malory;  
When they asked him for more  
He only said: “Sure,  
[But] they’ve already enough for a gallery.”

“Better than the *Morte Darthur*,” he boasted to Scotson-Clark, were illustrations he was doing for the *True History of Lucian*: “I am illustrating this entirely in my new manner, or, rather, a development of it. The drawings are most certainly the most extraordinary things that have ever appeared in a book both in respect to technique and conception. They are also the most indecent.” He was to do thirty drawings but produced only five, and two of those were censored out of the book. One that was published, *A Snare of Vintage*, shows men in an erotic state apparently produced by wine—the “vintage” of the title—engaging in intercourse with women whose bodies fade into grape vines. The second, *Birth from the Calf of the Leg*, shows a child being born not from woman, but from the calf of a man’s leg—an emerging fetus. The third, *Dreams*, is a grotesque Nativity scene with the divine child more a miscarried fetus than a child taken to term. It appears to be an ironic inversion of the Adoration of the baby Jesus. One not used, perhaps more perverse than the others, was *Lucian’s Strange Creatures*, suggesting another Adoration of the Child, with a fetus as the Madonna’s child, below which is a masked Pierrot figure grasping for the naked breast of a heavy, bald woman. Other strange figures are in the picture, including an Oscar Wilde figure with Dionysiac grapes for hair, horns, and earring, a single female breast, and a cleft hoof.

If, as Beardsley began his notorious *Salomé* drawings—Oscar was obviously already on his mind—it appeared that he was obsessed by images of sexuality, the reasons may have been complex, but they began and ended with his illness. He was so frail from birth that his mother recalled Aubrey’s helping himself up a flight of stairs as a toddler using the stem of a large fern leaf as a walking stick. At seven his tuberculosis was confirmed. As he matured, the disease left him forever feverish, and impotent. “Once a eunuch always a eunuch,” he wrote to Leonard Smithers several years later. But as Philip Sandblom, a Swedish physician and art historian, has written about tuberculosis, “As so often occurs, the unsatisfied desire nourishes erotic fantasies which in their feverish intensity resemble the dreams of puberty in which there is no end.” In Beardsley, Sandblom sees “both sexual hunger and defiance…, haunted by feverish, erotic fantasies, arising from illness and from sexual repression and concealment.” He notes Yeats recol-
lecting that Beardsley’s desire under the pressure of disease became insatiable, and one sees Beardsley’s confession in a self-portrait in which he is tied to Priapus, in the picture a penis-like post. “With progressing disease and weakness,” writes Sandblom, Beardsley’s art “became increasingly obscene—but it also reached new heights of elegance, artistry and skill.” And Sandblom quotes the German turn-of-the-century poet Christian Morgenstern, a dying tubercular, explaining about the mordant view of life he reflected in his work: “From the gallows hill you see the world differently and you see different things than others do.”

Cultivating that reputation, Beardsley was pleased with a book that young William Rothenstein picked up in Paris and decided, since it was too outrageous to keep for himself, to offer it to Aubrey. It was a collection of explicitly sexual Japanese _shunga_ pictures. Beardsley removed the most indecent prints and hung them in his bedroom, which, given his condition, was regularly visited by his mother and sister. “I was rather taken aback,” Rothenstein recalled. “[But] he affected an extreme cynicism … which was startling at times. He spoke enormities.”

He drew them, too. The _London Figaro_ in April 1893 described his art as “the quaintest things I ever saw. His men and things”—“things” may have been a polite reference to embryos—“are like nothing (I hope) that is in heaven above, or the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth…. The drawings are flat blasphemies against art…. When a man mixes up impotent imitations of Burne-Jones at his worst with pseudo-Japanese effects, and serves up the whole with a sauce of lilies and peacock feathers, I think it is only charitable to think that the author of all this rococo business has a twist in his intellect.” Yes, one must agree, Beardsley did have a twist in his intellect, and he exploited it in his art.

Although Beardsley’s erotic fantasies often made sexuality grotesque through the aborted fetuses and strange dwarfs, anatomical parts and an air of cruelty about sex, he could draw, and drew, some of the most beautiful women in linear art, as can be seen in some of the _Morte Darthur_ drawings and in the lovely cover of volume III of _The Yellow Book_. Later, in real reverence for eighteenth-century French _élégance_ in toying with eroticism he drew some of the most graceful of his feminine images in the series for _The Rape of the Lock_. He would draw beautiful women all his short life, and at the same time draw ugly, grotesque, depraved women.

But while his mind and art ripened at a furious pace, Beardsley’s body decayed. Sexual deprivation only made more morbidly obsessive his intellectual interest in such matters. Writing once about a painful dental extraction he had submitted to, he drew the tooth for Leonard Smithers, with three long roots, and added: “You see, even my teeth are a little phallic.” Herbert
Horne privately wrote of Beardsley in the artist’s own time (in a letter to Edgar Jepson) that on the evidence of his work Beardsley was “a sixth-form boy who is still virginal of the other sex.”

Making wry fun of his inadequacies, Aubrey noted a mistaken newspaper reference to “The Rape of the Lock by Mrs. Beardsley, illustrated by herself.” “You see,” he quipped, “how widely spread is the doubt about my sex.” It was no doubt reinforced by the apparent evidence as to who were his friends. He had little choice but to accept and cultivate the approbation of aggressively homosexual men in the literary and artistic circles of the Nineties who influenced contemporary taste, especially as he grew too ill to earn a living by his pen and pencil. Yet at the start he rejected the corrupt vulgarity of Oscar Wilde and even as he used Wilde’s Salomé to further his—Beardsley’s—career he described Wilde in his drawings in his most sardonic wit—as, for example, The Woman in the Moon (Fig. 5).

Beardsley’s animus toward Wilde appears to have had no homophobia attached to it. Beardsley contemplated in his art all sorts of sexual combinations, however much he wished he could complete a heterosexual act—and apparently couldn’t. If he drew a flagellation scene, as in the frontispiece to A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender (Fig. 6), showing an elegant woman in fashionable dress—below the breasts, at least—raising a delicate whip over a kneeling figure, naked to the waist, he would also draw its opposite, in Juvenal, his sexual parts exposed, scourging a rather unattractive plump woman in frumpy dress perched upon a phallic pedestal. All sexual arrangements were part of the human comedy—and tragedy. Later he would regret to a friend about his inability to make an evening party, probably because of illness, joking, “Yesterday I had an unpleasant experience with a Planchette. I feel quite a wreck after it. No longer the same woman.” A planchette, a device used in seances for automatic writing, was not a clinical instrument but Beardsley may have been pleading, however lightly, his debility.

What Beardsley could, and couldn’t, do seems more honestly described in his early, rather innocent letters, before he began to perform for an audience. Biographers quickly learn that letter writers write for audiences even when the audience is an apparently private audience of one. Just as, later, Beardsley wrote piously to André Raffalovich, who gave Aubrey money to live on when he was seldom able to work and sponsored his conversion, so he wrote sexually to Leonard Smithers, who appreciated talk of pictures so pornographic that they stimulated the artist who drew them—he claimed—into masturbatory fantasies or wet dreams. Both confessions may have been fiction. But the younger Beardsley emerging into fame as a marvellous boy
Fig. 5 The Woman in the Moon 1894
is real even in his brag, and real especially in his pictures. He was not yet
drawing in search of an audience but drawing to please himself.

Beardsley’s pictures for Wilde’s Salomé had more in them than naughti-
ness and more in them than the artist’s strong hints about Wilde’s sexual-
ity. We see in them Beardsley’s replacement signature for the omnipresent
embryos of his earliest work. The fetuses would fade out as, perhaps, too
obvious and unsophisticated a signature image. He seems to have been seek-
ing something to parallel Whistler’s famous butterfly, which derived from
the wings of the letter W. While Beardsley continued to use his initials on
many drawings to the end, he often included in his drawings a tall candle or
a three-stemmed candelabra, and he confessed to drawing by candlelight:
“If I want to work in the daylight I have to pull the blinds down and get my
candles in order before I begin.” In his last years when he traveled constantly
looking for a salubrious climate, one of his few possessions that turned every
hotel room into his own room was his favorite candelabra. It materializes in
many of the Salomé drawings and some later ones in the form of three styl-
ized candles in parallel, the middle one raised.

One can attribute the signature to his reflection of his working setting, or
even to the baroque candlelit splendor of the Brighton Pavilion, the most
memorable architectural landmark of his boyhood. The candles were prob-
ably no more phallic than the roots of Aubrey’s teeth, for there was anoth-
er, more hidden, message in the candle symbolism of his signature. Candles
flame and gutter out. Like the aborted fetus, the lives of candles, however
extravagantly designed, are short. Candlesticks, candelabras and the candle
signature would appear in many of his later pictures where their presence
would not be absurd. The stylized signature would disappear but never the
candles. Shakespeare’s “brief candle” became Beardsley’s reminder of his
mortality.

The Beardsley the public expected to see in volume I of The Yellow Book
(April 1894) was the dark genius of Salomé and other decadent drawings
inspired by Satan, or sex. That nothing of the sort appeared in it would not
quiet Beardsley’s detractors. Even the mild mockery of Mrs. Whistler had
been excluded by John Lane, and the closest thing to Satanism in the vol-
ume was Beardsley’s cover, with two unexceptional figures but for their
masked eyes, which suggested something sinister to those looking for evil.
The title page showed an attractive young woman seated at a piano, play-
ing by candlelight—at least a candle in a stick was perched on the piano.
(Almost every Beardsley picture had a candle in it, including the back-cov-
er decoration.) However, anticipating the Surrealists, Beardsley had set the
lady’s piano in a grassy meadow, and two trees in the background swayed in
the breeze. The press called it an “unpardonable affectation,” and Beards-
Fig. 6  Frontispiece to *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender*  1898
Farewell, Victoria!

Ley explained that the composer Gluck had moved his own piano outdoors when composing three of his operas. But no one seems to have observed that the feathers in the pretty pianist’s wide-brimmed hat on close inspection resembled embryos.

Inside The Yellow Book was a full-length portrait, with the slender, elongated body of Mrs. Patrick Campbell, and, finally, to outrage the moralists, there was Beardsley’s L’Education Sentimentale, ironically echoing Flaubert. Here seemed the naughtiness everyone was looking for, yet the two women, a cynical and ugly old one and a pert young lady presumably eager to learn how to be bad, were fully clothed and but for Beardsley’s witty title hardly any different from the offerings of the London stage. Some of The Yellow Book stories were grimly realistic in a fashionable manner, and the long lead fiction was a thoroughly respectable Henry James novella, “The Death of the Lion.” And the art was led by a Royal Academician, Sir Frederic Leighton. Yet readers and critics saw in The Yellow Book the outrageous Beardsley who wasn’t there. One could sympathize with him if he thought that he might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb.

Creative lives are seldom fulfilled at twenty-one. Beardsley had a very few more years of fame and achievement. Some of his work at twenty-three would surpass what he had already done, yet his situation as The Yellow Book emerged was already remarkable. In April 1894 one of the most influential and creative talents of his time was twenty-one years old, immature for his age, erratically educated, obsessively interested in sex (which he couldn’t perform) and in religion (about which he was largely a cynic), intermittently bedridden with a wasting disease that would soon kill him, and living from hand to mouth on earnings that were dependent on his being healthy enough to hold his pen. When Max Beerbohm wrote “I belong to the Beardsley Period” it was half in irony. Beardsley did not even live out his own period. The tag doesn’t seem ironic at all now.