

Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s by Emma Sutton. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. x, 225 pp. + 16 b/w illus. ISBN 0-19-818732-7. \$65.00.

It was not surprising that Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) – that notorious excoriation of *fin-de-siècle* 'decadence' – labelled Wagnerism "the most momentous aberration of the present time." As Emma Sutton points out in her admirable study, in many ways Wagnerism "epitomized the *Zeitgeist* of the [1890s]," being a pervasive and multifaceted force that many commentators believed had shaped the "fundamental cultural conditions and values" of the age. Moreover, since Beardsley was "at the forefront" of British Wagnerism in the nineties, his treatment of Wagnerian subjects – which remained "constant and conspicuous" and "became increasingly prominent" even as he moved rapidly through several different styles – is important for understanding not only Wagner's significance to Beardsley but also the power Wagnerism exercised "within the broader cultural context of 1890s Britain." Sutton's book, which was in an earlier incarnation her dissertation at Cambridge, is a very solid piece of scholarship that will be a valuable contribution to the cultural history of the *fin de siècle* as well as to Beardsley studies.

In addition to establishing why Wagnerism was "so important to Beardsley," Sutton attempts "to draw out some of the ways in which Beardsley's Wagnerian texts negotiate political contingencies and function as political discourse – of gender and commodification, but also of race, class, and nationality." In this respect, her study is more nimble and discerning than several other treatments of Beardsley, which have often characterized him as apolitical despite the fact that his art clearly had political impact, a dimension that Beardsley not only recognized but did much to accentuate.

After an extensive "Introduction," Sutton establishes in Chapter 1 how "Wagnerism played a significant, and previously unacknowledged, role in the political history of decadent art," one that made the "personal" and the "private" inseparable in British "constructions of decadence." Her next chapter explores constructions of "decadent" emotionalism and the extent to which "the pathologizing of decadence" was an important part of contemporary scientific debates about Wagner's "coercive" and "feminizing" music. She also begins here to establish one of her more subtle but telling arguments, that *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism (including Beardsley's art) "was part of a self-conscious demarcation of 'modernity' – and of aesthetic, 'temperamental', and ideological difference" – that not only imperiled the "ancient ideal of music as a unifying, socially cohesive force" but also undercut the idea of a stable, integrated self. Sutton's third chapter focuses on Beardsley's *The Wagnerites* (1894), examining how Wagner's audiences were viewed and the accounts given of Wagnerian "exoticism." The following chapter establishes how *The*