

AUBREY BEARDSLEY'S BLUE AND WHITE

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From the autumn and winter of 1892 to June 1894 Aubrey Beardsley was engaged on the first major commission of his life, the illustration of the J.M. Dent edition of Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. This work, which Beardsley started with such enthusiasm and was to finish disillusioned and weary, spanned the period during which he developed his own distinctive style. This was the period of the *Bon Mots* (Dent's sweetener to ease the arduous burden of medieval drudgery on the young artist), of *The Studio*, of the first two *Keynotes* volumes, and significantly of *Salome*. The development of Beardsley's style can be charted graphically as the twelve parts of the *Morte Darthur* were published. This rapid development did not on the whole, with a handful of wonderfully incongruous exceptions, divert Beardsley from the task at hand, namely to provide illustrations and decorations broadly in keeping with the text, in the manner of William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones. Although the temptation to stray stylistically and literally from his publisher's brief must have been great, nonetheless Lorraine Janzen Kooistra has shown that, contrary to popular notion, Beardsley's drawings were indeed firmly grounded in Malory's narrative (55-72).

At face value Beardsley seems to restrict his vocabulary to the medieval. This, as we shall see, is not entirely the case, for in several of his illustrations he is unable to suppress an underlying oriental influence from percolating to the surface. On the whole his drawings reflect a rich mix of influences, from the obvious and well recorded to the esoteric. The general style of his early *Morte Darthur* drawings betrays the all-pervading influence of the Pre-Raphaelites, and Burne-Jones in particular. There are numerous references to Beardsley's first mentor, evidenced in the physiognomy, pose, and dress of his principal figures. And occasionally we can see examples of Beardsley borrowing a particular design or motif virtually unchanged, one example being the design for the chapter heading of Book 8, chapter 23 (fig. 1).

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