

*Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* by Linda Gertner Zatlin. Clarendon Studies in the History of Art. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990. Pp. xiv + 234. \$79.00. ISBN 0-19-817506-X.

In this lavishly illustrated and beautifully produced book, Linda Zatlin presents Aubrey Beardsley as "the most daring artist of the nineties," not so much for the sexual explicitness of his drawings as for the ways in which he took a stand for "the advancements made by the women's movement" and against Victorian men's "sexism" (4,8). According to Zatlin, the enduring iconoclasm of Beardsley's art lies in its open representation of the power of female sexual desire and pleasure. Beardsley's importance as an artist emerges above all from his championing of the New Woman against the voices of Victorian patriarchy raised against her. Maintaining that several of his title-page drawings "expose the hypocritical stance towards women" adopted in the very novels for which they were designed, Zatlin finds Beardsley in full "accord with women's emancipation" (32).

In the brief "Introduction," Zatlin outlines her methodology. Deploring our lack of information about "the mind of the artist," she proposes to "rely solely on Beardsley's art, and in particular the treatment he gives his subject matter, to arrive at an accurate evaluation" of his "sympathies and philosophy" (7-8). At the same time, Zatlin pursues a contemporary feminist agenda: her "thematic analysis" of the art subserves her intention of proving that Beardsley held liberated views on women in general and on women's sexuality in particular (9). Unfortunately, Zatlin's vision of Beardsley as a feminist does not always fit the evidence, which she too often either passes over or reduces in order to promote her thesis.

In Chapter 1, "Sexual Politics of the 1890s," Zatlin surveys the misogynistic comments made about the New Woman in periodical literature of the day as background for appreciating the boldness of Beardsley's drawings of strong, sexually independent women. Much of this material will be familiar to specialists in the period. Apparently unsure that her readers will know the basic concepts of feminism, Zatlin peppers this and subsequent chapters with general statements, such as this one on patriarchy: "Male rule, therefore, refers not just to a state of gender relations . . . but also to a definition of masculinity contingent upon female dependence" (13).

Overall, Chapters 2-4 offer a fund of information about Beardsley's art and its Victorian context. However, in interpreting individual drawings, Zatlin tends to perceive important visual details and then tailor them, sometimes quite drastically, when they do not bear out the notion of Beardsley's feminism. Thus, in Chapter 2, "Beardsley and Male Supremacy," Zatlin argues that the grotesqueness of the men depicted in Beardsley's art, and especially the hyperbolic size of their genitals, amounts to a critique of masculinity. But what about the effeminacy of the male figures in such drawings as "Ali Baba" and the front cover prospectus design for *The Savoy*? For Zatlin, these "create double laughter" because the hugely fat Ali Baba and the prancing impresario are improbable mixtures of both masculine and feminine features (54). Here, as in other discussions of the ambiguity of Beardsley's art, Zatlin is trammled by her exclusive focus on male-female sexuality; male-male desire remains absent in her analysis. Similarly, she sees the large, anatomically undetailed figure flagellated by a grimacing man in "Juvenal Scourging Woman," in which the female privates are respectfully not shown, as an exposé of men's cruelty to women. But could not this drawing be read otherwise, perhaps as an erotic scenario in which an effeminate man (note that s/he is very fat) is being whipped for mutual pleasure by another man in a virile role?

The narrowness of Zatlin's feminist interpretation of Beardsley's art is especially salient in Chapter 3, "The Beardsley Woman," where she discusses his illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé*. This is well trodden ground, and Zatlin's reading pales by comparison with recent ones exploring the complicated sexual politics between Beardsley and Wilde (see Richard Dellamora, "Traversing the Feminine in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*," in my *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* [Rutgers UP, 1990], 246-264), or the equally complicated intertextuality of visual and verbal modes. Beardsley, Zatlin argues, picks up on the misogyny in Wilde's text and turns it into a series of portraits of supreme female power (107). But lending female figures "attributes stereotypically associated with male virility" does not make Beardsley a feminist (107). Likewise, the foetuses that Zatlin locates in many of Beardsley's drawings do not necessarily mean that he was sympathetic toward "the dynamics of pregnancy and the varied maternal emotions" (113). On the contrary, as