

Miles, Geoffrey, Ed. "Pygmalion." *Classical Mythology in English Literature: A Critical Anthology*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 332-446.

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***Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s*, by Emma Sutton. Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2002. viii, 225 p., 8 p. of plates: ill.; 23 cm. ISBN 0-19-818732-7. £ 40 (cloth).**

Any study broaching the relationships between several and varied artistic media requires a critical focus, which is, thankfully, not lacking to Sutton's analysis of the cultural interaction of art and society at the *fin de siècle*. It is self-situated as neither a work specifically for musicologists, nor for art historians, but as a cultural history, a critical interpretation of Beardsley's manipulation and reverence of Wagner's canon. The text, nevertheless, offers a multitude of stimulating observations of interest to those other disciplines. It is not an evaluative study of Wagner's operas, rather "only in so far as they clarify the strategies and tone of Beardsley's Wagnerism" (17). Sutton's primary concern is with the rehabilitation of Beardsley's work as politically engaged with the social concerns of his time. Rather than traditional criticism's view of a naïve, apolitical aestheticism, Beardsley's work is presented as a focused critique of the concerns of his day: the status of women, anti-semitism, class issues, and the role of the burgeoning commercial possibilities of art across the social spectrum. The cultural lens through which Beardsley focuses on these issues is that of Wagnerism.

What can be called "the Wagner industry" is shown to permeate the late Victorian *zeitgeist*, and Sutton initially focuses upon reactions to the work of Wilde and Beardsley as evidence of the means by which Wagnerism affected the views of the *fin de siècle*, pathologising Decadence as part of the scientific debate about the meaning of Wagner's music and aesthetic reception in general. Presenting an impressive variety of cultural historians and psychological sources of the time, she shows how the use of pathology "to infantilize and depoliticize" Beardsley's work led to his art being seen as symptomatic both of his tubercular condition and the art of the 1890s in general, as being unhealthily introspective (84-5). Focusing on *The Wagnerites*, Beardsley's illustration of a Victorian audience at an operatic performance, Sutton examines the artist's response to the various "pathologies" said to be at play by contemporary scientific opinion. This section of the book is an insightful potted cultural history of the various socio-political concerns of late Victorianism, the scientific studies promulgating those concerns, and Beardsley's own studied response to them. The primarily female audience in the drawing raises the question of the "new woman" in Victorian society and the potentially dangerous emotional affects of Wagner's music upon an audience. Sutton examines Victorian ideas of "crowd theory" and Darwin's ideas of regression as being fundamental to

Beardsley's drawing, along with observations on anti-semitic attitudes and contemporary concerns about the exotic "Other."

Sutton then examines the commercial world of the Wagnerite industry, and its concomitant strategy of self-promotion, along with the similar means of self-publicity employed by *The Savoy* magazine, Beardsley's major publishing vehicle after his expulsion by *The Yellow Book* following the Wilde trials in 1895. Sutton presents Beardsley's use of his Wagnerism as both a means of advertising and also as a critique of the consumerism which had grown up around Bayreuth. An engaging analysis of the "connoisseur" as occupying "a position midway between the aesthete and the consumer" is evidence of Beardsley's ambivalence to the cult of Wagner along with his awareness of commercial exigencies (138-9). The artist is again shown as being acutely responsive to the reality of the Victorian polity: at this juncture the relationship between the economic and aesthetic.

The latter sections of the book detail Beardsley's fidelity to, and subversion of, Wagnerism in his work *Under the Hill* and the drawings for *Das Rheingold*. The first of these texts is studied as a continuation of Beardsley's critique of Wagnerite consumerism, but also as a call to his contemporary artists to renegotiate their relationship to Wagner's aesthetic dominance. By rewriting Wagner's legend of *Tannhäuser* as a frivolous melodrama, wherein aesthetic objects clutter the narrative, Beardsley diminishes the Wagnerian scale of the text to his own aesthetic ends. A similar strategy is employed in the drawings for *Das Rheingold*: the opera is transformed into a comedy, again diminishing the moral weight of Wagner's original composition. Sutton provides a penetrating analysis into the subversive elements of Beardsley's work, suggesting that the drawings offer an implicit critique of, amongst other things, the Germanic elements of Wagner's opera vis-à-vis the southern European tradition, specifically French aspects that Beardsley introduces into his interpretations. The analysis of the *Das Rheingold* drawings also offers an interesting suggestion of the manner in which Beardsley transformed the music of Wagner into pictorial form.

Sutton concludes that Beardsley's premature death was the beginning of attempts to sanitise his work as little more than formal artistic experimentation, leading to a broader construction of the 1890s as being both trivial and flamboyant, rather than politically engaged in the more weighty social concerns of that time. By this point the accumulated evidence and well-detailed examples to the contrary convincingly substantiate Sutton's claims. The text offers an original critique of interpretations of *fin de siècle* aestheticism, a wealth of information for students from a variety of disciplines alike to pursue their own interests, and an overdue reassessment of Beardsley's work as thoroughly engaged in the addressing of the issues of the 1890s.

**Paul Fox**

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