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'Queer Reverence': Aubrey Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*

« Queer Reverence » : Venus and Tannhäuser d'Aubrey Beardsley

Nicole Fluhr

- 1 Despite his deplorably abbreviated career, Aubrey Beardsley achieved such prominence before dying of consumption at twenty-five that Max Beerbohm famously dubbed their era 'the Beardsley Period' two years before his friend's death in 1898 (160). Even before quitting his teens, Beardsley began to cultivate the reputation for mannered excess that helped establish him as a leading member of the aesthetes and decadents whose works he illustrated and whose company he kept. His 1895 illustrations for *Salomé* made him famous and linked his reputation to that of Oscar Wilde, whose arrest two months later cost Beardsley his job as art editor for *The Yellow Book* and the tenuous financial security he enjoyed for only the briefest phase of his brief career. During the course of that career, he was not content merely to stretch conventions, preferring deliberately to outrage them by peppering his drawings with dirty jokes and cruel caricatures; redecorating his rooms after the violent style adopted by the decadent protagonist of Huysmans's *À Rebours* (Weintraub 66); and devoting his art to explorations of the unnatural, the uncanny, and the grotesque.
- 2 His illustrated account of the tale of Venus and Tannhäuser, which Stanley Weintraub calls 'a triumph of excess' (171), exhibits to the full Beardsley's penchant for shocking readers and mocking aesthetic conventions. Its nominal source is the medieval legend featuring a troubadour who sins by visiting the subterranean kingdom to which Venus has been exiled by Christianity. After sojourning there awhile (the legend makes it seven years, Wagner, only one), Tannhäuser's conscience revolts, prompting him to quit the Venusberg in moral revulsion and journey to Rome, where he petitions the pope for forgiveness. The pontiff's disappointing response is that only when his own wooden staff buds may the penitent bard win God's pardon. In despair, Tannhäuser returns to Venus, accepting that he is damned. The staff then miraculously blossoms, but though the pope has Tannhäuser sought across the land, the troubadour cannot be found.

- 3 Enormously popular in the 15th century, the story faded from view for a few hundred years, when it was rediscovered by Romantic writers and repeatedly reworked over the course of the nineteenth century.¹ In these retellings, both the constituent elements of the tale and its moral are flexibly adapted and, often, grafted on to other narratives, as in the singing contest featured in Wagner's opera, itself a historically distinct legend. Many nineteenth-century iterations are mocking, or critical, or both (*i.e.* Heinrich Heine's poem), yet even within the context of this centuries-long tradition of tinkering with the tale, Beardsley's revisions are calculated to shock.² His *Venus and Tannhäuser* recasts the Christian bard who seeks to renounce pagan pleasures as a sexually adventurous if somewhat enervated dandy—one critic likens him to 'an English Regency buck' (Eastman 135)—while transforming Venus's realm into a rococo paradise. Peopled by decadent courtiers who picnic, gamble in an on-site casino, watch titillating theatricals, and enjoy all manner of erotic delights, it's equal parts *Alice in Wonderland* and *My Secret Life*. Critics have read the text as an autobiographical reckoning with mortality; as authorial wish-fulfillment; as a self-reflexive satire of Decadence; as an exposé of excess; as a critique of nationalism generally; and as a parodic rewriting of Wagner that seeks to undercut his political and aesthetic legacies in particular.³ My analysis here focuses on its rejection of the source legend's central themes of guilt and redemption, both of which are not only absent from but unimaginable in the world of the novel, and the radical consequences of this rejection.
- 4 Though this essay speaks of 'the' novel, this terminology is perhaps misleading, since the narrative exists in different forms in different places. Beardsley began work on the tale in 1894 (*Letters* 72); though originally promised to John Lane, who advertised it in *The Yellow Book* in 1895, it first appeared, in four expurgated chapters with the new title *Under the Hill*, in *The Savoy* in nos. 1 and 2 in January and April of 1896. It remained unfinished when Beardsley died in 1898, but nine years later, his friend and publisher Leonard Smithers privately brought out a limited edition of a longer—though still unfinished—novel he titled *Venus and Tannhäuser*, assembled from Beardsley's manuscript, sent to him piecemeal in the years after *Under the Hill* appeared. This 1907 edition did not include any of Beardsley's illustrations, and it also omits two passages that had already appeared in chapter 4 of *Under the Hill*. Further complicating the issue of what should be considered part of this work, Beardsley's letters indicate that he had originally intended his poem 'The Ballad of a Barber', published in *The Savoy* no. 3 in July 1896, to serve as a stand-alone chapter of the novel.⁴ Understandably, then, the question of which text to use is one different critics have answered differently. I find Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's approach the most satisfactory; she speaks of a 'dialogue between the censored *Under the Hill* and the unexpurgated *Venus and Tannhäuser*', which, she argues, 'are not two texts with different titles . . . but rather a single manuscript which appears in varying published forms' (227); this essay adopts that view.
- 5 Though which text to use may be open to debate, it's indisputable that in both its published and draft forms, Beardsley's narrative depicts only Venus's realm. All versions of his tale thus exclude sin by drastically truncating the familiar narrative promised by the title, which engages to 'set forth an exact account of the manner of state held by Madam Venus, Goddess and Meretrix, under the famous Hörselberg, and containing the Adventures of Tannhäuser in that Place, his Repentance, his Journeying to Rome and Return to the Loving Mountain' (9).⁵ This 'radical cropping'⁶ of the tale

seems to support Malcolm Eastman's claim that 'Aubrey had intended the triumph to be, not Christ's but Venus's' (134); the novel then comes into focus as not merely revising but reversing the Tannhäuser legend's moral in its preference for pagan values over Christian.⁷

- 6 In excising the physical journey to Rome along with the guilt-induced repentance that sends Tannhäuser there, Beardsley's text denies the pope the power to condemn or to save; at the same time, it refuses the troubadour the identity of sinner. Ellis Hanson argues in *Decadence and Catholicism* that 'one of the essential paradoxes that made . . . the spiritual aspirations of all decadents . . . offensive to their age [was] . . . the ritual celebration of sin and shame as the distinguishing feature of the faith' (36), but Beardsley cannot be made to fit this paradigm, although he converted a full year before his death.⁸ *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* celebrates neither sin nor shame, but the 'inexhaustible license' of a world where all desires are licit; in the Venusberg, taboos cannot be broken, because there are none to break: 'everything is allowed', as Annette Lavers puts it (257). The decision to restrict the setting to 'the cramped confines of the Venusberg' (Potolsky 153) thus effects a dramatic shift in the significance of both this erotic playground and the narrative as a whole; the former is no longer the sinful 'before' that must be renounced to achieve the penitent 'after' and, as a result, Beardsley's Tannhäuser doesn't need to be redeemed and his story ceases to be a (re)conversion narrative. Instead, the land 'under the hill' is constituted as a genuinely alternative paradise, a counterpublic of perverts who communally flout the dictates of heteronormativity, together constructing a world that does not simply exclude shame, guilt, and sin but disavows them entirely.⁹
- 7 This interpretation depends on reading the exclusion of Rome and repentance from this narrative as deliberate choices, rather than the effect of Beardsley's abandoning the project as his illness progressed, so let me explain why I view them this way. Beardsley spent a longer span of time on *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* than on any other project, and this investment reflects his sense that the work could earn him the literary credibility that Arthur Symons suggested he craved (9–10) perhaps even as early as June 1894, when we find his earliest references to the project (*Letters* 72).¹⁰ Although its explicit eroticism can only mean that the story was never designed for a general audience, Beardsley's desire to make it known was strong enough that he himself delicately bowdlerized it for publication in *The Savoy* in early 1896 while continuing to work on an unexpurgated draft.¹¹ During the summer of that year, his letters frequently advert to his anxiety to resume this work, as his progress was repeatedly interrupted by a series of medical setbacks. But while there is ample evidence of his clear drive to work on the novel, I want to distinguish that desire from the wish to finish it.
- 8 Although Beardsley was ill enough in the year prior to his death in March 1898 to find sustained work difficult, his poor health did not stop him from conceiving and embarking on new projects with undiminished enthusiasm almost until his final days.¹² Had he been anxious to complete his *Venus and Tannhäuser*; he might have done so—or at least shown some indication that he was interested in attempting to do so. The length of time he spent on it, as well as his considerable investment in the work, only make it more likely, then, that the choice to leave it alone after 1896 was a conscious decision. His own account of his inability to complete a projected illustration suggests one explanation: 'the will alone is wanting' (*Letters* 129).

9 And yet, in spite of its fragmentary and incomplete state, critics have not hesitated to speculate about the text’s intended trajectory. A surprising number confidently opine that Beardsley planned to complete it along the lines indicated in the title. But such claims are undermined by the fact that everything Beardsley published, wrote, or drew relative to this work belongs to Venus’s realm. There is no text, and there are no drawings (either completed or projected in his letters) that represent Tannhäuser’s repentance or his trip to Rome. Several critics cite an 1896 drawing, ‘Return of Tannhäuser to the Venusberg’, completed months after the other material, as evidence of his intention to finish it in conformity with the legend (Dowling 39; Eastman 134; Gardner 4–6; Lavers 254; Prickett 111).¹³ Here, however, is Beardsley discussing the drawing in a letter to Smithers:

About a fortnight ago I did a small pen and ink and wash drawing for Dent, as a sort of recognition of his generosity in lending drawings for the album, and in payment of a long-standing debt. I took for my subject *The Return of Tannhäuser to the Venusberg*. It was a very beautiful drawing and Dent gushed over it hugely. I didn’t like to ask permission to bring it out in the album [then under preparation—the largest collection of Beardsley’s work to be published in his lifetime] as I did not want him to think I had any *arrière pensée* in doing it for him. (*Letters* 177)

10 What Beardsley does *not* say here is as significant as what he does; the letter not only offers a specific, plausible, and pragmatic reason for drafting the picture that has nothing to do with the novel, but it also fails to link the two in any way. Moreover, the letter that is silent about any *Venus and Tannhäuser* connections is addressed to the recipient of those additional chapters of the novel that Beardsley went on to write, and which Smithers ultimately published. This letter, then, seems to rule out the possibility that *The Return of Tannhäuser* formed part of the ‘romantic novel’, either in Beardsley’s conception of the work or in the estimate of those of his contemporaries who saw it. (And in her comprehensive *Catalogue Raisonné*, Linda Zatlin confidently asserts that this drawing was never linked to the text [373–374]).

11 The question then becomes what might be gained by allowing the novel to remain unfinished, and here, the critical debate about how to classify this text is illuminating. Joseph Gardner contends that *Venus and Tannhäuser* cannot be considered pornography precisely because it eschews the genre’s defining purpose of serving as an auxiliary to masturbation.¹⁴ Instead of the one-handed reader’s orgasm, he argues, ‘the end toward which the fantasy moves is always the unfolding of its own inherent beauty’ (8). I wouldn’t insist that the narrative doesn’t ‘move’ at all (Tannhäuser explores Venus’s realm and tastes its pleasures), but it seems significant that, while it may *move*, it never *arrives* anywhere. As an unfinished novel, it doesn’t achieve narrative closure any more than it aids readers to reach orgasm, and this refusal on the text’s part ever to ‘finish’ suggests its slantwise relation to pornography’s conventions. Ian Fletcher argues that ‘the narrative voice defers, and so enacts and subverts, the pornographic’ (237), representing bodies engaged in erotic play while insisting that there is at least as much pleasure in delaying as in achieving the ‘end’ of climax.

12 This dilatory mode of moving can be seen to characterize not only the narrative itself, but also Beardsley’s creative process. Steven Calloway suggests that ‘drafting and redrafting and the continual honing of his phrases and sentences seems to have become for Aubrey pleasures in themselves’ (141). The autoeroticism Calloway locates in the act of writing is not only detached from but even antithetical to *jouissance*; Beardsley’s pleasure, in this reading, inheres in continually delaying, rather than

arriving. And this indifference to finishing that marks both the author's approach to writing and the text's plot is equally apparent in the sexuality of its central figure.

- 13 Beardsley's putative pleasure in deferral must be speculative; however, it is indisputable that Tannhäuser is the antithesis of the inexhaustible protagonist of conventional pornography: 'It is, I know, the custom of all romancers to paint heroes who can give a lady proof of their dalliance at least twenty times a night. Now, Tannhäuser had no such Gargantuan facility, and was rather relieved' to have his paramour taken off his hands an hour after their first tryst, when 'some others . . . claimed Venus for themselves' (34). Penetrative heterosexual intercourse is certainly one feature of this venereal paradise—it's what Tannhäuser and Venus enjoy the evening he arrives—but it is not the only or even the main feature of the text or its protagonist's sexual repertoire.
- 14 Indeed, Tannhäuser is figured early and often in ways that depart from conventional representations of straight masculinity. When he is first described, his hand is 'slim and gracious as La Marquise du Deffand's in the drawing by Carmontelle' (14), and while he willingly plays the part of Venus's ravisher, he also happily adopts a passive role, as when he 'lay down on the cushions and let Julia do whatever she liked' (27). His amorous encounter with the 'beautiful boys' (36) who attend him in the bath next morning involves mouths and butts, and he takes voyeuristic pleasure in watching Venus bring her pet unicorn to orgasm. Though I argued that Beardsley refuses him the role of sinner, Tannhäuser does at one point appear as a pilgrim of sorts; upon his arrival, he pays 'queer reverence . . . to the statue of the God of all gardens, kissing that deity with a pilgrim's devotion' (19–20). The deity in question, Priapus, appears in gardens as a 'herm'—an armless, legless pillar whose prominent genitalia indicate his role in promoting fecundity (Beckson 210). Far from seeking Christian redemption, Tannhäuser, whose devotional 'kiss' clearly suggests fellatio, figures here as a pagan pilgrim in a distinctively queer Venusberg.
- 15 One marker of this queerness is the cultivation of an aesthetic that privileges artifice, blurs boundaries of all kinds, and values the shocking, the uncanny, and the unnatural. This is evident in the party scenes, where feasting, fucking, and fetishism are all on the menu; women don 'delightful little moustaches dyed in purples and bright greens', 'w[ear] great white beards after the manner of Saint Wilgeforte' (24), or sport 'spotted veils that seemed to stain the skin with some exquisite and august disease' (23). Even the party-goers' bodies are decorated, and in similarly discomfiting fashion: 'about a wrist, a wreath of pale, unconscious babes . . . at the corners of a mouth, tiny red spots But most wonderful of all were the black silhouettes painted upon the legs, and which showed through a white silk stocking like a sumptuous bruise' (24). The costumes and ornamentation adopted here are equally notable for their celebration of the grotesque and their indifference to the conventions of gender.
- 16 The refusal to adhere to these conventions, along with its inclusive acceptance of a broad spectrum of sexual tastes, signal the Venusberg's queer heterogeneity. For in spite of the devotion Tannhäuser pays to Priapus upon his arrival, the world he is entering is, literally, not phallogocentric. Priapus is one deity among many in this realm, and the pleasures of the penis are just one element in a set of erotic practices marked by profusion and diversity, rather than the center around which eroticism is organized. Its inhabitants get sexual satisfaction from wine bottles, from shoes, from all of the products of Venus's body, and, perhaps above all, from 'the ornament and luxury of

transvestite fantasy’ (Kooistra 228). Tannhäuser’s outfits move from dandified elegance as he enters the Venusberg; to the ‘dear little coat of pigeon rose silk that hung loosely about his hips, and showed off the jut of his behind to perfection’ and ‘trousers of black lace in flounces, falling—almost like a petticoat—as far as the knee’ (37) that he puts on the next day; to the novel’s final image of him departing for a dinner party ‘dressed as a woman and look[ing] like a goddess’ (46). What does this penchant for cross-dressing, together with his refusal of phallocentrism, tell us about Tannhäuser? Though critics have been quick to speculate about Beardsley’s sexual proclivities and practices,¹⁵ there has been relatively little analysis of Tannhäuser’s, though certainly the text discourages the assumption that he is, ‘simply’, straight.

- 17 In their essay ‘Divinity’, Michael Moon and Eve Sedgwick examine what critics talk about when they talk about cross-dressing; it argues that ‘the virtual erasure of the connection between transvestism and . . . homosexuality’ (220) is grounded in critics’ belief that, in talking about cross-dressing, ‘they *are* talking about homosexuality[, because] . . . After all, ‘everyone already knows’ that cross-dressing usually at least alludes to homosexuality’ (221). I am trying here not to be one of those

critics [who] . . . feel that the rubric ‘cross-dressing’ gives them . . . a way of tapping into this shared knowingness without . . . incurring the *theoretical* risks of essentializing homosexual identity, of presuming a given set of relations between gender identity and sexual object choice, or of ignoring how little coextensive the population of cross-dressers actually may be with the population of gay men or lesbians. (222)

- 18 While Tannhäuser’s cross-dressing does not authorize a reading of him as gay, it fits with his resistance to heteronormative conventions, marking him as a comfortable practitioner of what Kooistra terms ‘sexual border-crossing’ (228). In this, he has plenty of company in the Venusberg.
- 19 Beardsley playfully refigures the phallic ‘god of all gardens’ to whom Tannhäuser pays appropriately carnal homage in the form of Priapusa, Venus’s intimate ‘old friend’ (19).¹⁶ Though feminized with the addition of a terminal ‘a’, she nevertheless has ‘an androgynous appearance’ (Fletcher 234) and her desire is equally roused by Venus and Tannhäuser, whom she accosts ‘by turns’ (28). Lavers denominates her ‘the real divinity of the Venusberg’ (260), but she can appear as a rather domestic goddess: when one evening’s orgies have concluded, she carries Venus to bed ‘in her arms in a nice, motherly way’ (35).
- 20 The conjunction of divinity and maternity suggested here is strongly in evidence during the later scene in which Venus’s subjects gather for a performance of Rossini’s ‘Stabat Mater’. The eponymous role of the Virgin grieving for her dead son is sung by Spiridion, that soft incomparable alto. A miraculous virgin, too, he made of her. To begin with, he dressed the rôle most effectively. His plump legs up to the feminine hips of him, were in very white stockings, clocked with a false pink. He wore brown kid boots, buttoned to mid-calf, and his whorish thighs had thin scarlet garters around them . . . His hair, dyed green, was curled into ringlets, such as the smooth Madonnas of Morales are made lovely with . . . (44)
- 21 The performance culminates in the singer’s male admirers tearing away his feminine garments to ravish the body they only partially conceal. Like Priapusa’s, Spiridion’s body is described in terms that emphasize its excesses (in addition to his ‘plump legs’ he has ‘cheeks . . . inclining to fatness’ [44]) and also like Venus’s confidante, his extravagant corporeality is figured as simultaneously repellent and fascinating. This

paradox anticipates what Sedgwick and Moon analyze under the rubric of ‘divinity’: ‘a certain interface between abjection and defiance . . . constitut[ing] a subjectivity of glamor itself’ (218). Spiridion’s performance and its aftermath exemplify what Sedgwick and Moon (in their discussion of Divine) denominate ‘a chunky and funky Mariolatry’ (244)—one that claims the power of the supernatural figure while freely adapting it to support radically unorthodox values.

- 22 Spiridion typifies the proliferation of ambiguously gendered figures in the novel; his exaggerated embodiment (like that of Priapusa; the orchestra master Titurel de Schentfleurl; the dance master Sporion; and the hairdresser Cosmé) marks him as abject, defiant, and—thus—glamorous. Significantly, this dynamic is not limited to minor characters, but, as we’ve seen, also extends to Tannhäuser, who unites in his person the dissimilar identities of the romantic hero of the legend, apotheosis of straight masculinity, and the cross-dressing fop whose polymorphous perversity seems to mark him as genderqueer *avant la lettre*. Fletcher observes that his reference to playing ‘the lute[,] in “underground” language . . . “the female pudendum[,]” . . . underscores, along with the drawing for the episode of Tannhäuser’s entry, the ambiguous sexuality of the hero’ (234). It’s notable that such ambiguity is typical in the Venusberg as Beardsley imagines it, rather than exceptional. And in rendering such ambiguity ordinary, the text paves the way for another kind of reversal.
- 23 The use that Beardsley makes of religious iconography, here and elsewhere in this text, is elucidated by Michael Warner’s argument that ‘religion makes available a language of ecstasy, a horizon of significance within which transgressions against the normal order of the world and the boundaries of the self *can be seen as good things*’ (‘Tongues’ 221). This kind of ecstatic transgression is clearly evident in the frenzy that engulfs Spiridion-as-Stabat-Mater after his performance, as ‘the men almost pulled him to bits’; during this scene, one admirer ‘thrust in bravely up to the hilt’ while others ‘of the egoistic cult . . . stood and crouched round, saturating the lovers with warm douches’ (44–45). As a sexual subject here, the cross-dressing singer incarnates an ambiguity that transgresses both the literal boundaries of the self and the intangible boundaries between masculinity and femininity, human and divine, desirable and abject, in ways that come together in the text’s declaration that ‘he *made* of’ Mary ‘a most miraculous Virgin’. The ‘miracle’ here, in other words, is both real and ironized; the OED defines *miraculous* as ‘not explicable by natural laws; supernatural’, and this Virgin is typically decadent in her unnatural artifice. Indeed, Beardsley underscores this point when he deliberately mischaracterizes Rossini’s work as a ‘delicious *démodé pièce de décadence*’ (44).¹⁷
- 24 In Spiridion’s clearly eroticized and distinctively queer performance as the Virgin Mary, we see one of Beardsley’s most subtle and provocative revisions of the legend that furnishes his source material. Both the medieval ballad and Heine’s and Wagner’s versions begin with Tannhäuser quarreling with Venus over his wish to leave her realm and appealing to the Virgin to help him do so. In contrast, Beardsley opens with Tannhäuser’s decision to enter the Venusberg, legibly marked as a choice to quit the Christian world: “Adieu”, he ‘exclaimed . . . ‘Good-bye, Madonna’ (16). In this telling substitution, Beardsley has his protagonist bid the Virgin farewell in order to seek out Venus; it’s fitting, then, that this bard is preoccupied not with his soul but with his toilet, as evidenced by his deliciously ironic ‘prayer’: “would to heaven”, he sighed, “I might receive the assurance of a looking-glass before I make my *début*” (26). The

beau’s anxiety about his appearance displaces the Christian’s fear of damnation with which the tale generally begins; the nature of his petition amply demonstrates the tenets of his true faith.

- 25 Although Tannhäuser’s ‘Good-bye, Madonna’ sets the tone for Beardsley’s substantive revision of the tale’s religious significance, the figure of the Virgin is not excluded from this narrative; instead, as Spiridion’s performance illustrates, she is (re)admitted in allusive or fractured form in order to authorize deviant desires. A telling instance of the text invoking Mary in this way occurs when Tannhäuser daydreams about St. Rose of Lima. This Peruvian girl had ‘vowed herself to perpetual virginity’ and is saved on the day of her wedding from breaking that vow when, in answer to her prayers, ‘Saint Mary descended and kissed Rose upon the forehead and carried her up swiftly into heaven’ (*Under* 63). Beardsley’s drawing of the Virgin embracing the girl as they ascend, which he published in *The Savoy* to accompany *Under the Hill* in illustration of this reverie, clearly figures her as a participant in the kind of amorous play that characterizes life in the Venusberg. Hanson suggests that this picture alludes to ‘the scandal that ensued when the Tractarians attempted to publish an English life of the saint, whose ascetic sensuality and hysterical self-lacerations struck not a few Victorians as the very embodiment of Catholic decadence’ (33), and Kooistra notes that to read the image as ‘a depiction of lesbian sexual ecstasy is a critical commonplace in Beardsley scholarship’ (240 fn 37). Disrupting the girl’s trajectory toward marriage, displacing the prospective husband, Beardsley’s Virgin claims Rose for herself.
- 26 Beardsley’s gloss itself suggests that the saint’s life constitutes a rejection of heteronormative conventions, but elsewhere he leaves it to his readers to connect the dots, as in the allusion cited above to Saint Wilgeforte, whose beard is imitated by the Venusberg’s inhabitants and whom Fletcher identifies as:
- A fabulous female saint . . . the Christian daughter of a pagan king . . . [who,] to preserve her vow of chastity when commanded by her father to marry . . . prayed God to disfigure her body. God caused a beard to grow on her chin, and her father, distinctly piqued, had her crucified. (235)
- 27 Like Rose, Wilgeforte resists the marriage plot assigned her, though we must know her story to glean this significance from the text’s allusion. Both Christian saints use their faith to sanction their non-(hetero)normative desires and when Beardsley references their stories in his text he repurposes them to simultaneously queer Catholicism and to bring it under the aegis of the Venusberg’s pagan polytheism.
- 28 If it queers Catholicism by celebrating the eroticism of Mary’s relation to her devoteé, Beardsley’s novel brings it under the aegis of the Venusberg’s pagan polytheism by presenting Mary as another of the Venusberg’s deities, alongside Priapus(a) and Venus herself. In doing so, this narrative teasingly refuses to maintain the legend’s careful opposition of paganism and Christianity. Instead of stressing the competition between these faiths’ beliefs and values, the novel conflates them, undoing the legend’s counterpoint of erring pagan sin and Christian grace by repeatedly equating Venus and the Virgin Mary, rather than casting them as rivals for Tannhäuser’s body and soul. The figure of a Virgin who is variously cross-dressed, ‘whorish’, and lesbian, who loves virgins yet can herself be ravished, is regularly confounded in Beardsley’s text with the Venus meretrix of the title, whom Lavers describes as a ‘universal prostitute without being divested of . . . radiant sovereignty’ (260). And we’ve already seen how the terms

that link Venus and Virgin to prostitution, far from derogatory, establish these figures within the category of the licit, the welcome—the *divine*.

- 29 Beardsley’s promiscuous mixing of Christian, particularly Catholic, and pagan imagery and narrative combines conventionally decadent appropriations of classical paganism and what critics have recently begun to denominate the neo-paganism of the *fin de siècle*.¹⁸ The Venus who rules ‘under the hill’ in Beardsley’s text smiles indulgently on (when not participating in) the most heterogeneous practices, and this catholicity with regard to erotic preferences not only befits her role as the goddess of love,¹⁹ but also marks her as a distinctively *fin de siècle* pagan. Dennis Denisoff has shown how late-Victorian neo-paganism celebrated the principle of heterogeneity, in part by ‘reject[ing]... a single, coherent discourse with which to articulate its value systems’ (434) as an ethical good. Building on the body of criticism that has established how Decadent writers use allusions to paganism to engage with and authorize non-normative desire, Denisoff locates a political dimension within these allusions that coexists with the aesthetic concerns we are more used to finding there.
- 30 The prevailing ethos of this world establishes its queerness not only (though perhaps most legibly) via its hospitality to cross-dressing, same-sex eroticism, and the cultivation of an aesthetic that privileges artifice and blurs boundaries of all kinds—but also in its constitution as a counterpublic in Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s terms: ‘an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation’ (558). What better description of Venus’s court-in-exile than as precisely this kind of ‘counterpublic’, indefinitely accessible and conscious of its literally sub-ordinate position ‘under the hill’ and after the establishment of Christian hegemony?
- 31 The process of ‘making a queer world’ as Berlant and Warner describe it, ‘require[s] the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relationship to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation’ (558). In one sense, this is precisely the Venusberg delineated by Beardsley, where ‘couple’ is always a verb, never a stable noun, and Venus alternates between the roles of den mother and childish charge. The highly performative space of Venus’s realm is hardly immune from jealousy and competition, but its denizens seem united in the project of not simply permitting but inciting the exploration of the forms of intimacy proscribed elsewhere.
- 32 This space may also be the text’s elaboration of what Elizabeth Freeman’s essay ‘Queer Belongings’ calls ‘a different sense of what kinship might be’. Detached from biology and instead understood as the ineluctably constructed process of cultural reproduction, its ‘terrain lies in its status as a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being’s body can be vulnerable and hence dependent on that of another’ (298). This vulnerability is evident in Tannhäuser’s sexual enervation, in the jealous dependence of Venus’s admirers on all the products of her body, and in an overarching assent to Warner’s claim that, ‘in those circles where queerness has been most cultivated, the ground rule is that one doesn’t pretend to be above the indignity of sex. And although this usually isn’t announced as an ethical vision, that’s what it perversely is’ (35).
- 33 This ethical vision grounded in vulnerability is reminiscent of Leo Bersani’s argument for the underestimated yet ‘strong appeal of powerlessness’ (‘Rectum’ 217). To admit this appeal, he contends, is to eschew phallocentrism, which this essay has sought to show Beardsley’s text does. The decision to do so appears as at once erotic, aesthetic

and—perhaps—ethical when read through the lens of Bersani's definition of phallogocentrism as 'above all the denial of the value of powerlessness in both men and women. I don't mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self' ('Rectum' 217). We see this kind of disintegration and humiliation in Spiridion, in Venus's admirers, and in Tannhäuser's fluid eroticism. Bersani, indeed, might be describing Beardsley's novel (instead of mid-twentieth-century critiques of Freud) when he praises texts that 'sketch the outlines of an Arcadia of polymorphous perversity' and imagines them ushering in an age in which 'the desiring self might even disappear as we learn to multiply our discontinuous and partial desiring selves' (*Future* 7).

- 34 The vulnerability that Freeman sees as constitutive of kinship and that Bersani imagines as a heuristic for disaggregating the self can be seen to meet in Dennis Denisoff's work on late-Victorian neo-paganism. Building on scholarship that shows how Decadent writers use classical paganism to legitimate queer desire, Denisoff argues that pagan Decadence may be more usefully read via 'the notion of dissipation than dissent' (432), pace Dollimore. His notion of 'dissipation' grows out of paganism's historical skepticism regarding singularity—'a single logic, a single symbol system' (434); he suggests that 'a dissipative model' might help us articulate forms of subjectivity that run counter to 'normative identity models' (432). I find in the 'dissipative model' he articulates a way to mediate between the radical vulnerability and dependence that ground Freeman's queer kinship and the disintegration of self that Bersani advocates.
- 35 The pagan inhabitants of Beardsley's polymorphously perverse²⁰ paradise are never 'above the indignity of sex', instead cultivating the sublime humiliations the text figures as both intensely pleasurable and utterly unremarkable. Together, they construct a world that disavows shame via what we might read as a doubly inflected form of 'dissipation': one that is as happy to celebrate the construction of tenuous selves in the name of desire as it is to witness their subsequent dissolution.

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NOTES

1. Joseph Gardner notes 'the nineteenth century's fascination with the Tannhäuser legend', tracing the 'genealogy [of Beardsley's Venus] . . . through Heine . . . Wagner . . . Baudelaire . . . Pater . . . Swinburne' (3-4). Indeed, there are debates on into the late twentieth century about both the origins and the argument of the 1515 ballad that is the earliest widely reproduced version constituting a source for Heine, and thus for Wagner; some scholars argue that Tannhäuser is actually damned when he returns, while others posit that he is saved and, thus gets to enjoy both the pleasures of the Venusberg and the prospect of spiritual salvation (see i.e. J.M. Clifton-Everest and J.W. Thomas).
2. It is interesting to consider what Beardsley made of Heine's 1837 poem, which provided a key source for Wagner; and tantalizing to speculate that he had it in mind when he wrote, 'Heine certainly cuts a poor figure beside Pascal. If Heine is the great warning, Pascal is the great example to all artists and thinkers. He understood that, to become a Christian, the man of letters must sacrifice his gifts, just as Magdalen must sacrifice her beauty' (*Letters* 249).
3. See Beckson, Dowling, Fletcher, Gardner, Heyd, Kooistra, Lavers, Potolsky, and Sutton.

4. When Beardsley sent the poem to Smithers, he wrote: 'Herewith Chapter 9th of *Under the Hill*' (*Letters* 120). But when told that Arthur Symons had questioned its merit, Beardsley instructed Smithers to 'print the poem under a pseudonym and separately from *Under the Hill*' (*Letters* 122).
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations refer to *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*.
6. Andrew Lambirth describes Beardsley's predilection for 'radical cropping of the image' (13)—an inclination that has intriguing parallels with the author's dramatic curtailment of his source materials for this novel.
7. Walter Pater suggests such a preference is already evident in the early legend (25–26).
8. Hanson points to Beardsley as a prototypically decadent Catholic artist, though he doesn't address the ways Beardsley's work eludes the explanatory power of what I find to be an otherwise astute and fruitful interpretive paradigm. It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else, that we can start to make sense of the divide between Beardsley and his fellow decadents (and fellow Catholic converts) Wilde, Symons, Raffalovich, and Gray; it was not simply the unabashed portrayal of erotic pleasures ranging from cross-dressing to bestiality that made *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* unpublishable, except in expurgated form, but also its cavalier dismissal of what Hanson terms 'the dialectic of shame and grace', neither of which seem remotely interesting to or in this text.
9. Matthew Potolsky uses the notion of the 'counterpublic' as Michael Warner elaborates it in his 2005 book *Publics and Counterpublics* to read Beardsley's novel; I first encountered the term in Lauren Berlant and Warner's 1998 essay 'Sex in Public' and while I've benefitted greatly from Potolsky's analysis of the novel as both imagining and enacting the formation of a counterpublic, I use this earlier iteration of the term to read not the text's readers, as Potolsky so effectively does, but the fictional community it creates in its *Venusberg*.
10. Margaret Stetz and Mark Lasner argue that *Venus and Tannhäuser* 'supplies the most convincing evidence of Aubrey Beardsley's determination to be a major force in the literary world' (299).
11. Fletcher says it 'belongs to the 'hidden' world of pornography and the limited, or clandestine, edition typical of Smithers' activities as a publisher' (233). I follow Fletcher and Annette Lavers in seeing these cuts as Beardsley's, although Robert Oresko attributes them to Leonard Smithers and Arthur Symons.
12. For instance, Beardsley wrote to Smithers, 'I have made up my mind to illustrate *Mdlle de Maupin*, come what may' in March 1897 (*Letters* 286); the *Letters*' editors note that he 'completed six pictures. . . . The plan to illustrate the book was abandoned in October 1897, when it became clear that the cost of publication was beyond Smithers's resources' (286–87). In other words, he chose and worked on this new project through the spring and summer and left it incomplete because of considerations unrelated to his health. In the final month of 1897 and the first of 1898, he embarked on illustrations for Ben Jonson's *Volpone*—the last thing he tackled in the final months of his life.
13. Gardner, however, is 'convinced . . . [Beardsley] planned it as a fragment' (14), while Lavers suggests he may have 'discontinue[d] his novel' when his 'psychological evolution . . . made him bring his story to a conclusion in his own life' (246–47).
14. See also Colligan, Fletcher, Hanson, Trail and Zatlín, several of whom readily denominate Beardsley's text 'pornographic' (*i.e.* Hanson 33).
15. Miriam Benkovitz asserts he was heterosexual, with a 'thoroughgoing knowledge of sex and near-obsession with it' (106); Michael Oresko and Anthony Powell agree he was 'probably not homosexual' (Oresko 7); Malcom Eastman denominates him a latent homosexual, transsexual, and cross-dresser; Karl Beckson reads the 'sexlessness' of his hermaphroditic figures 'as defense against the body's needs' (211); Ian Fletcher suggests 'that Beardsley's attitude toward his own deprivation was not by any means always one of exorcism or regret. It is not infrequently one of amused resignation, or . . . counting one's blessings' (258); Eastman and Benkovitz retail the

theory that Beardsley and his sister were lovers, and Benkovitz suggests a representation of pedophilia in the text may reflect the author's own desires (111)

16. Priapusa is frequently pointed to as a send up of Oscar Wilde, as is Spiridion (see for instance Dowling, Fletcher, and Kingston).

17. Emma Sutton notes that 'Tannhäuser's account of the *Stabat Mater* desacralizes Rossini's text, to which the characters respond as if it were part of an erotic cabaret. The passage is . . . a misreading of the *Stabat Mater*' that serves 'as a means of undercutting Wagner' (159).

18. See Dennis Denisoff and the special issue of *Cahier Victoriens et Édouardiens* (80 Automne 2014) dedicated to 'Paganism in Late Victorian Britain'.

19. Stephen Prickett makes the case that 'the Court of Venus is, logically, the place of every kind of venereal pleasure, and therefore of every kind of perversion. In that sense the fantasy is not escapist, but strongly realistic' (111).

20. Beckson (219) and others apply this apt phrase to Beardsley's text.

ABSTRACTS

During his short career, the writer and artist Aubrey Beardsley, who rose to prominence in the 1890s, cultivated a reputation for mannered excess that helped establish him as one of the aesthetes and decadents whose company he kept and whose works he illustrated. His unfinished novel *Venus and Tannhäuser*, which Stanley Weintraub calls 'a triumph of excess,' exhibits to the full Beardsley's penchant for shocking readers and mocking aesthetic conventions. Its nominal source is the medieval legend featuring a troubadour who sins by visiting the subterranean kingdom to which Venus has been exiled by Christianity. After sojourning there awhile, Tannhäuser's conscience revolts, prompting him to quit the Venusberg in moral revulsion and journey to Rome, where he petitions the pope for forgiveness. The pontiff's disappointing response is that only when his own wooden staff buds may the penitent bard win God's pardon. In despair, Tannhäuser returns to Venus, accepting that he is damned. The staff then miraculously blossoms, but though the pope has Tannhäuser sought across the land, the troubadour cannot be found. Enormously popular in the 15th century, the story faded from view for a few hundred years, when it was rediscovered by Romantic writers and repeatedly reworked over the course of the nineteenth century, yet even within the context of this centuries-long tradition of tinkering with the tale, Beardsley's revisions are calculated to shock. It recasts the legendary Christian bard who tries and fails to renounce pagan pleasures as a sexually adventurous dandy; visiting the underground realm of the exiled goddess Venus, he finds it equal parts *Alice in Wonderland* and *My Secret Life*, peopled by decadent courtiers who feast, gamble, and gambol together. Critics have read the text as an autobiographical reckoning with mortality; as authorial wish-fulfillment; as a self-reflexive satire of Decadence; as an exposé of excess; as a 'decadent counterpublic' that critiques nationalism; and as a parodic rewriting of Wagner that seeks to undercut his political and aesthetic legacies. My analysis focuses on its rejection of the source legend's central themes of guilt and redemption, both of which are not only absent from but unimaginable in the world of the novel. In both its published and draft forms, Beardsley's narrative depicts only Venus's realm. The text thus excludes sin by drastically truncating the familiar narrative promised by its title, which engages to 'set forth an exact account of the manner of state held by Madam Venus, Goddess and Meretrix, under the famous Hörselberg, and containing the Adventures of Tannhäuser in that Place, his Repentance, his Journeying to Rome

and Return to the Loving Mountain.' This radical cropping of the tale has the effect of not merely revising but reversing the Tannhäuser legend's moral in its preference of pagan values over Christian. In excising the physical journey to Rome along with the guilt-induced repentance that sends Tannhäuser there, Beardsley's text denies the pope the power to condemn or to save; at the same time, it refuses the troubadour the identity of sinner. Indeed, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* celebrates neither sin nor shame, but the 'inexhaustible license' of a world where all desires are licit; in the Venusberg, taboos cannot be broken, because there are none to break. The decision to restrict the setting to the Venusberg thus effects a dramatic shift in the significance of both this erotic playground and the narrative as a whole; the former is no longer the sinful 'before' that must be renounced to achieve the penitent 'after' and, as a result, Beardsley's Tannhäuser doesn't need to be redeemed and his story ceases to be a conversion narrative. Instead, the land 'under the hill' is constituted as a genuinely alternative paradise, a counterpublic of perverts who communally flout the dictates of heteronormativity, together constructing a world that does not simply exclude shame, guilt, and sin but disavows them entirely.

Durant sa brève carrière, l'artiste et auteur Aubrey Beardsley qui vit son heure de gloire dans les années 1890, a cultivé une réputation de maniériste excessif qui l'a aidé à s'établir comme l'un des esthètes et des décadents dont il appréciait la compagnie et illustrait les œuvres. Son roman inachevé *Vénus et Tannhäuser*, qualifié par Stanley Weintraub de « triomphe de l'excès », apporte la démonstration pleine et entière que Beardsley adorait choquer les lecteurs et se moquer des conventions esthétiques. La source dont il s'inspire est la légende médiévale où s'illustre un troubadour qui commet le péché de visiter le royaume souterrain où Vénus a été exilée par le Christianisme. Après y avoir séjourné quelque temps, la conscience de Tannhäuser se révolte, le poussant à quitter Venusberg et à voyager vers Rome, où il demande officiellement au pape de l'absoudre de ses péchés. Le souverain pontife le déçoit dans sa réponse : c'est seulement lorsque son propre bâton fleurira que le barde pénitent obtiendra le pardon de Dieu. De désespoir, Tannhäuser retourne auprès de Vénus, acceptant sa damnation. Puis le bâton miraculeusement fleurit, mais alors que le pape fait chercher Tannhäuser dans tout le pays, le troubadour ne peut être trouvé. Très populaire au XV^e siècle, l'histoire tomba dans l'oubli pendant quelques centaines d'années, jusqu'à ce qu'elle fût redécouverte par les auteurs romantiques et retravaillée régulièrement au cours du XIX^e siècle. Pourtant, même dans le contexte d'une longue tradition de révisions de cette légende, celles de Beardsley sont calculées pour choquer. Sa version modifie la personnalité du légendaire barde chrétien qui tente en vain de renoncer aux plaisirs païens en tant que dandy aux goûts sexuels aventureux ; lors de sa visite du royaume souterrain de la déesse exilée Vénus, il le considère comme un mélange d'*Alice au pays des merveilles* et de *Ma vie secrète*, peuplé de courtisans décadents qui festoient, jouent et s'amuse ensemble. Les critiques ont lu ce texte tour à tour comme une acceptation autobiographique de la mort ; comme la réalisation des souhaits de l'auteur ; comme une satire auto-réflexive du mouvement décadent ; comme un exposé de l'excès ; comme un contre-public décadent qui critique le nationalisme ou bien comme une réécriture parodique de Wagner qui chercherait à contrecarrer son héritage politique et esthétique. Mon analyse se concentre sur son rejet de la légende initiale et de ses thèmes centraux de la culpabilité et de la rédemption, tous deux non seulement absents mais inimaginables dans le monde du roman. Dans sa forme définitive ainsi que dans ses brouillons, le récit de Beardsley décrit seulement le royaume de Vénus. Le texte exclut ainsi le péché de l'histoire en tronquant radicalement le récit habituel promis par son titre, qui s'engage à « proposer un récit exact sur le genre d'état dirigé par Madame Vénus, Déesse et Mérétrix, sous la célèbre montagne Hörselberg, et contenant les aventures de Tannhäuser en cet endroit, sa repentance, son voyage à Rome et son retour vers la montagne de l'amour ». Cette réduction drastique du conte a pour effet non seulement de revoir mais d'inverser la morale de la légende

de Tannhäuser par sa préférence pour les valeurs païennes par rapport aux valeurs chrétiennes. En excisant le voyage à Rome ainsi que la repentance induite par la culpabilité qui envoie Tannhäuser là-bas, le texte de Beardsley dénie au pape le pouvoir de condamner ou de sauver ; en même temps, il refuse de qualifier le troubadour de pécheur. En effet, *l'Histoire de Vénus et de Tannhäuser* ne célèbre ni le péché ni la honte, mais la « licence inépuisable » d'un monde où tous les désirs sont permis ; dans le Vénusberg, les tabous ne peuvent être enfreints, car il n'y en a aucun à enfreindre. La décision de restreindre le lieu du récit au Vénusberg opère ainsi un décalage dramatique quant à la signification de ce terrain de jeu érotique et du récit dans sa totalité ; ce premier n'est plus « l'avant » de la culpabilité auquel il faut renoncer afin de réaliser « l'après » de la pénitence. Par conséquent, le Tannhäuser de Beardsley n'a pas besoin d'être racheté et son histoire cesse d'être un récit de la conversion. En fait, le pays « sous la colline » se constitue en véritable alternative paradisiaque, un contre-public de pervers qui ensemble font fi des obligations d'hétéronormativité, tout en construisant un monde qui non seulement exclut la honte, la culpabilité et le péché mais les désavoue entièrement.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Beardsley (Aubrey), Venus, Tannhäuser, excès, tabous, Christianisme, Paganisme, pape, décadence, culpabilité, rédemption, honte, péché

Keywords: Beardsley (Aubrey), Venus, Tannhäuser, excess, taboos, Christianity, Paganism, pope, decadence, guilt, redemption, shame, sin

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Transition), Caroline Norton (*Tulsa Studies*), Vernon Lee (*Victorian Studies*), Mary Seacole (*Victorian Literature and Culture*), et George Egerton (*Texas Studies*).