

Face(t)s of British Wagnerism: Aubrey Beardsley's drawing *The Wagnerites* (1894) and George Bernard Shaw's essay *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898)

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Abstract: In the 1890s British Wagnerism was at its height. The works of Richard Wagner were admired and condemned equally for their daring musical innovations and unusual subject matter; namely, the artist's precarious position in society in Tannhäuser, eternal love against all conventions in *Tristan und Isolde*, the end of divine rule and man's ascent in the *Ring of the Nibelung* tetralogy. The Decadent movement reacted strongly to Wagner's portrayals of eroticism, morbidity and suffering, as apparent in Aubrey Beardsley's oeuvre (1872-98). Other artists, such as George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), rejected these aspects in favour of socio-political readings of the operas. Through their works, this essay will explore some of the debates about Wagnerism and the implications of being a 'Wagnerite' in late 19th-century Britain.

When Richard Wagner's operas were performed in England from the 1870s onwards, many heard in them 'the voice of the future, especially as it announced itself as such'.¹ What came to be known as 'Wagnerism' did not only denote enthusiasm for Wagner's musical innovations but also for his theoretical writings, which aimed at opera as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) in which poetry and music no longer competed for attention but formed an organic whole. The realisation of these ideas in Wagner's music dramas seemed artificial and tedious to many who believed that Wagner the artist stifled his creativity by trying to make his works conform to the preconceived ideology of Wagner the thinker.² It was, however, precisely this artificiality that appealed to those who, like Oscar Wilde, believed that 'to be natural ... is such a very difficult pose to keep up'³ and that personality, like an artwork, was actively constructed by each individual. In this essay I explore the discussions Wagnerism triggered in *fin-de-siècle* Britain and how these were reflected in two works by major artists of the period: Aubrey Beardsley (1872-98) and George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950).

When Beardsley published his drawing *The Wagnerites* in 1894, he had already become a leading figure of the British Aesthetic (or 'Decadent') movement, whose members reacted to the perceived 'philistine hypocrisy'⁴ of the Victorian era by works that valued the artificial instead of the naïve, emphasising poses and mannerisms and drawing attention to issues outside the mainstream, such as gender and (deviant) sexuality. Simultaneously, the term 'decadent' was used in morally charged discourses to denote degeneration, homosexuality, and 'effete' aesthetic sensitivity.⁵ Many British Decadents were Wagnerites, such as Wilde, Beardsley and the poet John Gray, who was considered by contemporaries to have been the inspiration for Wilde's character Dorian Gray (himself a Wagnerite).⁶ Their enthusiasm for Wagner's music and writings contributed to Wagnerism being identified with and suspected of causing 'degeneration' by scientists such as Max Nordau, who in his

¹ Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), p. 99.

² Magee, p. 100.

³ Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*, 2nd ed. (London: A & C Black, 1993), p. 16.

⁴ Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 23.

⁵ Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 26 and passim.

⁶ 'Ten Famed Literary Figures Based on Real-Life People', *Smithsonian Magazine* <<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/Ten-Famed-Literary-Figures-Based-On-Real-Life-People-169666976.html>> [accessed 04 January 2013].

magnum opus *Entartung* (*Degeneration*, 1892), accused Wagner of ‘megalomania and mysticism; ... anarchism, a craving for revolt and contradiction’.⁷

It was in this socio-cultural climate that Aubrey Beardsley, in 1894, co-founded the quarterly periodical *The Yellow Book*, featuring contemporary literature (e.g. stories by Henry James) and art (e.g. Beardsley’s own works). The title left no doubt about the magazine’s intended audience and programme as ‘yellow was ... the decor ... of the allegedly wicked and decadent French novel’.⁸ *The Wagnerites* (fig. 1) was part of a group of four works by Beardsley (*Portrait of Himself*, *Lady Gold’s Escort*, *The Wagnerites*, and *La Dame aux Camélias*) which appeared in *The Yellow Book*’s third volume in October 1894.

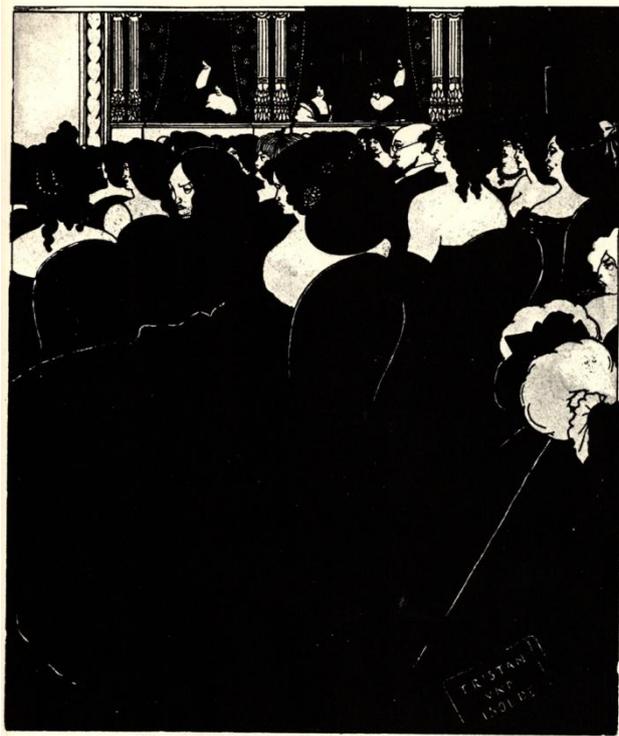


Figure 1: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Wagnerites*, 1894 (Indian ink touched with white, 20.7 x 17.8 cm).

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The drawing presents the audience during a performance of *Tristan und Isolde*. We only see the stalls and two boxes in the background; as these are among the most expensive seats in a theatre, we are looking at a wealthy audience. Surprisingly, it consists almost exclusively of women, most of whom are wearing very *décolleté* dresses. A few women have grotesque facial features. Only one figure in the stalls and two in the boxes can be identified as male, so most of the women are un-chaperoned. The drawing’s style shows the influence of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s portrayals of the Parisian *demi-monde*, which Beardsley absorbed during his 1892 stay in the French capital.¹⁰ This fact, together with the theme of theatricality or self-presentation that also dominates the other three drawings in the series and the allusion to high-class prostitution which is made by the topic of *La Dame aux Camélias*, suggests that some of the *Wagnerites* may actually be prostitutes, a jibe at the transcendent, eternal love

⁷ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, transl. anon. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 171.

⁸ Stanley Weintraub, *The Yellow Book: Quintessence of the Nineties* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 99.

⁹ ‘Drawing | V&A Search the Collections’ <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O746771/drawing/>> [accessed 04 January 2013].

¹⁰ Brian Reade, *Aubrey Beardsley*, revised ed. (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1987), p. 16.

idealized by Wagner in *Tristan und Isolde*. In this reading, the alleged ‘purity’ of high art (Wagnerian opera) clashes with the demimondaine aspects of popular culture (prostitution as a common feature of, for example, music halls), fulfilling Beardsley’s intention of blurring the distinction between those two types of art in *The Yellow Book*.¹¹

Furthermore, a drawing of a female Wagnerian audience attending a performance of this particular opera necessarily invites comment on gendered aspects of Wagnerism. On one hand, Wagner’s female admirers and protagonists figured prominently in the debate about New Women and female independence in *fin-de-siècle* Britain.¹² On the other hand, women were supposed to be particularly susceptible to what musicologist Elliott Zuckerman calls ‘Tristanism’: an implicitly inferior form of Wagnerism which is ‘the result of a personal infatuation rather than an ideological commitment. ... The Wagnerite must learn theories and cultivate habits. The Tristanite only has to be overwhelmed.’¹³ The strong appeal of Wagner’s works to women was considered to be due to both female sentimentality and lack of rational analytical ability in musical theory. In this context Beardsley’s portrayal of independent, wealthy female Wagnerites may show the solidarity of an aesthete whose own response to *Tristan* was intensely emotional rather than rational.¹⁴

Brigid Brophy suggests that the women in *The Wagnerites* ‘are collectively Isolde; and they are an Isolde who is *gulping* the love potion’.¹⁵ Thus the drawing also comments on female sensuality: these women do not blush watching Tristan and Isolde give in to their passionate love but may even be savouring the erotic tension. In this context the grotesque facial expressions could be Beardsley’s ironic comment on his contemporaries’ belief that Wagner’s music, appealing to women because of the ‘erotic romanticism’ it offered, caused them to lose their self-control and ‘degenerate’ into ‘hysterics’.¹⁶ It is significant that the only man in the audience has been identified as a ‘Jew’ by his facial features, which conform to common racial stereotypes. This might be an allusion to the contemporary anti-Semitic perception of Jewish men, especially those involved in musical and theatrical life, as effeminate and thus ‘degenerate’.¹⁷

To sum up, Beardsley’s view of Wagnerism confronts us with an audience of wealthy females independent of male control, watching an explicitly erotic opera that, when first performed in London, caused critics to ‘protest against the worship of animal passion’.¹⁸ The artist comments on the various public discourses of which Wagnerism was a part. These range from gendered perception of art, to female sexuality, to racial theory. Whether he is sympathetic or antipathetic to the women portrayed remains ambiguous; Beardsley makes no open statement as to who or what is the ‘perfect Wagnerite’ and leaves the observer to form their own ideas of the image.

Conversely, George Bernard Shaw was characteristically outspoken in this respect. His reading of Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung* tetralogy in his essay *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) was informed by his musical expertise as well as by his socialist ideals. The son of a singer, Shaw had taken voice lessons from his mother and later earned some money as an accompanist in London.¹⁹ He also wrote musical critiques for several newspapers. In 1882 a lecture by the American economist Henry George induced Shaw to read the works of Karl

¹¹ Snodgrass, p. 96.

¹² Sutton, pp. 94–7.

¹³ Elliott Zuckerman, *The First Hundred Years of Wagner’s Tristan* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 30.

¹⁴ Gleeson White, ‘Aubrey Beardsley. In Memoriam’, *Studio*, 13 (May 1898), 252–63 (p. 260).

¹⁵ Brigid Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: Cape, 1968), p. 32 (Brophy’s emphasis).

¹⁶ Hans-Peter Söder, *That Way Madness Lies: Max Nordau on Fin-de-siècle Genius* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2009), pp. 163–4.

¹⁷ Sutton, pp. 111–2; her close reading of *The Wagnerites* explores this and other aspects of the drawing in detail.

¹⁸ Quoted in Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, *The Wagner Companion* (London: W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 120.

¹⁹ Eldon C. Hill, *George Bernard Shaw* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), p. 22.

Marx, which were to influence the author profoundly. Among the many socialist groups in London, the Fabian Society (founded in 1884), which advocated a gradual transformation of society instead of socialist revolution, became Shaw's ideological home.²⁰

Fabian reserve, however, is not a feature of *The Perfect Wagnerite*. In the preface to the first edition Shaw throws down the gauntlet, declaring his intention to write on 'the ideas of the revolutionary Wagner of 1848'. These 'are taught neither by the education nor the experience of English and American gentlemen-amateurs, who are almost always political mugwumps, and hardly ever associate with revolutionists'.²¹ Shaw argues that a combination of musical expertise and political insight is what the average gentleman Wagnerite lacks, but that the *Ring* can only be understood as a political allegory. He considers himself one of the few to have realised the *Ring*'s significance, both politically and musically, writing for 'those who wish to be introduced to the work on equal terms with that inner circle of adepts.' (168) Wagnerism is thus presented as akin to a secret society, a circle of 'initiated' people who have deciphered signs in the music and libretti of 'the Meister',²² that others, due to their ignorance, have been unable to read:

[A]ny person who... attempts to persuade you that my interpretation of The Rhine Gold is only 'my socialism' read into the works of a dilettantist who borrowed an idle tale from an old saga to make an opera book with, may safely be dismissed from your consideration as an ignoramus. (188)

Shaw's reading of the *Ring* cycle focuses mainly on three characters. First, there is Alberich,²³ the dwarf who renounces love, steals the Rhine Gold and forges a ring that gives its possessor the power to rule the world; he embodies the 'Plutonic power' (171) of capitalism, which makes human beings strive for wealth above everything else. Second, there is Wotan, the head god who steals the ring from Alberich to pay for the building of Valhalla, the castle that projects his divinity; he represents religious and secular power. This power is restricted by contracts and laws – Alberich's capitalism, however, is unbridled as long as he owns the ring. Only Man can destroy the capitalist stranglehold as well as the compromised alliance of religion and statecraft. This third character is the liberator Siegfried, born out of the illicit union of the siblings Siegmund and Sieglinde, Wotan's illegitimate children:

... a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakoonin [sic], an anticipation of the 'overman' of Nietzsche. He is enormously strong, full of life and fun, dangerous and destructive to what he dislikes, and affectionate to what he likes; so that it is fortunate that his likes and dislikes are sane and healthy. (200)

Shaw's emphasis on Siegfried's strength and health suggests that he is trying to defend Wagner's creation against any accusation of 'degeneration' or 'decadence', linking Siegfried with Nietzsche (who had, at this time, become highly critical of Wagner, having at first been an ardent admirer)²⁴ and his dreams of human superiority rather than with the aesthetes'

²⁰ Stanley Weintraub, 'Introduction to Shaw', in *George Bernard Shaw*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987), pp. 27–45 (p. 30).

²¹ Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays: The Quintessence of Ibsenism. The Perfect Wagnerite. The Sanity of Art* (London: Constable and Co., 1932), p. 165 (all further references follow this edition and are given as page numbers after quotations).

²² This phrase, still used by some modern-day Wagnerites, was also the title of the London Wagner Society's quarterly journal from 1888 to 1895.

²³ This is Wagner's original spelling of the name; Shaw's spelling differs, probably to reflect English pronunciation.

²⁴ cf. Nietzsche's change of attitude towards Wagner from *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) to *The Case of Wagner* (1888).

sensitivity and ‘effete’ reactions to Wagner’s work. The passage almost seems like a direct response to the feminine, pensive, inert Siegfried that Aubrey Beardsley portrayed in an earlier drawing (fig. 2):



Figure 2: Aubrey Beardsley, *Siegfried*, Act II, ca. 1892-93 (pen, ink and wash on paper). © Victoria and Albert Museum, London²⁵

Siegfried, having slain the dragon Fafner, owner of the treasure once hoarded by Alberich, and having shown no interest whatsoever in wealth, confronts Wotan and breaks his spear, the symbol of his divine power. Before this overthrow of the old order in favour of anarchy can take place in reality, however, a rejection of *fin-de-siècle* decadence and morbidity is essential, as Shaw implies in another Nietzschean fantasy:

The majority of men at present in Europe have no business to be alive; and no serious progress will be made until we ... breed a race of men *in whom the life-giving impulses predominate*... (215, author’s emphasis)

The last part of the tetralogy, *Götterdämmerung*, is condemned by Shaw as Wagner’s return to operatic conventions and ‘the holding up of Love as the remedy for all evils and the solvent of all social difficulties’ (219). Wagner’s focus on the redeeming force of love in *Götterdämmerung* is apolitical and thus does not fit the Shavian interpretation of the *Ring* cycle. It also hovers close to the romanticism of *Tristan* or *Tannhäuser* and to the ‘female’, emotional approach to Wagner which an initiated ‘perfect Wagnerite’ such as Shaw has to reject.²⁶ Although Shaw does mention the fact that the *leitmotif* which accompanies Brünnhilde’s renunciation of the ring and her glorification of Siegfried’s love during the apocalyptic ending of the opera is the same as that which we hear when Siegfried’s birth is

²⁵ ‘Siegfried, Act II | Beardsley, Aubrey Vincent | V&A Search the Collections’

<<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O88300/siegfried-act-ii-drawing-beardsley-aubrey-vincent/>> [accessed 13 January 2013].

²⁶ Stoddard Martin, *Wagner to ‘The Waste Land’: A Study of the Relationship of Wagner to English Literature* (London: Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 87.

predicted in *Die Walküre*, he sees no particular sense in this. It was no coincidence, however, that Wagner, a composer renowned for his masterful use of the *leitmotif* technique, linked Shaw's anarchic liberator and the revelatory power of love (which leads to the renunciation of worldly power and capitalism, symbolised by the ring) in this way. The strength that was able to break Wotan's spear and reject Alberich's riches is incomplete without the wisdom of love.

At this point Shaw's essay turns towards Wagner's musical merits and again tries to draw the line between the 'perfect Wagnerites' and 'the ignorant' by defending Wagner against those who complain about his 'abandonment of melody'; for this 'is to confess oneself an ignoramus conversant only with dance tunes and ballads' (261). Pre-Wagnerian opera, Shaw states, is mainly based on the invention of one nice melody and '[a]ll the rest follows more or less mechanically to fill up the pattern, an air being very like a wall-paper design in this respect', denoting the composer's inferior musicianship (260). The derogatory reference to wallpaper design was probably aimed at William Morris, a leading figure of the British Arts and Crafts movement (among the characteristic products of which were wallpaper designs) and a vocal critic of Wagner's dramatisation of Norse mythology in the framework of an art form as 'degraded' as opera.²⁷ Moreover, the *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889), which Shaw had contributed to, had met with an unfavourable review from Morris, who criticised them for 'pushing a theory of tactics, which could not be carried out in practice'.²⁸

The focal point for perfect and 'imperfect' Wagnerites alike is Bayreuth, whose Wagner festival had firmly established itself among British aesthetes as *the* site of Wagnerian 'pilgrimage' at the end of the 19th century.²⁹ According to Shaw, Wagner's intention of seeing Bayreuth performances attended mainly by his 'earnest disciples' has been thwarted. In their place are sitting 'just the sort of idle globe-trotting tourists against whom the temple was to have been strictly closed' (271). The religious terminology – which Shaw may have used ironically here – is characteristic of much Wagnerian writing³⁰ and reinforces the dogmatic aspect also apparent in Shaw's own Wagnerism. Shaw calls for a new festival playhouse in England which will stage Wagner for 'the people' and 'raise [the workers of England] from pious respectability to a happy consciousness of and interest in fine art' (279). By contributing to popular education, art can become a means of the struggle towards a classless society in which education is no longer the privilege of the upper classes.

If Beardsley's Wagnerism may be characterised as taking the female point of view, Shaw's perspective is male. Beardsley's heroes are Tristan and Isolde, longing for unity in death; Shaw's Wagnerian paragon is Siegfried, very much alive and guided only by his own free will. Whilst Beardsley comments on the contemporary debates surrounding 'decadent' Wagnerism, the feminine and the sensual, Shaw focuses on socialist ideas and their potential for anarchistic upheaval. Far from being the romantically morbid 'silk-dressing-gowned version of Wagner generally offered by the popular press' Shaw's Wagner is the man who took an active part in the 1849 May Uprising in Dresden.³¹ In *The Perfect Wagnerite* the rejection of 'decadent' or 'effete' sensitivity and a rational analysis of Wagner's political message predominate, and the clarity of Shaw's language leaves the reader in no doubt as to the author's intentions. Beardsley, on the other hand, relies on the various interpretations, allusions and associations which the ambiguity of an image offers. Neither of these

²⁷ Quoted in Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979), pp. 90–1.

²⁸ 'Fabian Essays in Socialism (Review)' <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1890/commonweal/01-fabian-essays.htm>> [accessed 17 February 2013].

²⁹ Sutton, p. 21.

³⁰ Anne Dzamba Sessa, 'At Wagner's Shrine: British and American Wagnerians', in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. by David Clay Large and William Weber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 246–277 (pp. 246–7).

³¹ Martin, p. 82.

Wagnerites would probably have considered the other ‘perfect’, but together they show the multifaceted phenomenon that was British *fin-de-siècle* Wagnerism.

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