



## A DELINEATION OF OSCAR WILDE'S *SALOMÉ*, THE GOLDEN-EYED WANTON

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### ABSTRACT

This article offers an analysis of Oscar Wilde's eponymous character Salomé, the archetype of the monstrous feminine. It explores the representation of female sexuality viewed in the context of rigid Victorian patriarchal norms and focuses on how Salomé, the protagonist, challenges these conventional notions. Further, the article examines Salomé's articulation and expression of her blatant sexuality before the male characters in the play. Fundamental to this discussion is the exploration of her attempt to negotiate her strong feminine presence in relation to these men. The aim of the article is to expose the ideological battle between spirituality and sexuality and to demonstrate the complex power struggles between the Medusan woman and the dominant masculine. Finally the article analyses the complexity and ambiguity of the binaries of the female gaze/male gaze, virgin/whore, object/subject and spirituality/sexuality.

**Keywords:** sexuality, spirituality, Victorian, binaries

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### INTRODUCTION

The late nineteenth century play, *Salomé* written by Oscar Wilde depicts the Biblical story of Salomé, the stepdaughter of Herod, Tetrarch of Judaea. Herod feared Jokanaan, the prophet knowing that he was just and holy and imprisoned him in a deep cistern as he had condemned his marriage to Herodias, wife of his brother Philip. Driven by her desire to touch and kiss Jokanaan who shuns her because she is Herodias's daughter, Salomé yields to her stepfather's wishes and dances the dance of the seven veils in return for Jokanaan's head on a silver platter. Seeing Salomé kiss Jokanaan's lips, Herod orders his soldiers to kill her.

Nineteenth century Victorian concepts of sexuality and virginity of the play are examined through a Biblical context. Though the play is inherently misogynistic, the boundaries of dominant

patriarchy and religion are transcended in order to underscore feminine rebellion and transgression. Wilde sympathised with the women of the Victorian period and this tragic play can be viewed as an attack on rigid Victorian norms that condemned an overt expression of female sexuality. This article which revolves around the danger of forcing a woman to subjugate her sexuality to the mechanism of social propriety charts Salomé's metamorphosis from a virgin, the object of male desire to a demonic nymphomaniac who exploits her sexuality to manipulate the male characters in the play.

### **Salomé's Beauty: Grievously Troubling the Men**

Victorian society perceived a woman's sexual body both as a site of danger and defilement and an object which provoked male desire and fascination. Wilde demonstrates this ambivalence associated with a woman's body in his Biblical and

literary representations of Salomé who is described in dichotomous terms as the virgin-whore. Salomé's beauty is commended from the beginning of the play when The Young Syrian, Narraboth exclaims: "How beautiful is the princess Salomé to-night!" (1.22-23) However, Salomé transgresses the ideal of an innocent virgin to become a sexually-awakened woman conscious of Herod's gaze. Her question reveals her powerlessness against his gaze and her blossoming sexuality:

SALOMÉ. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes I know it. (1. 126-129)

Being subjected to Herod's desire and gaze, Salomé leaves the banquet hall to stand on the balcony and look at the moon. She identifies herself with the moon by projecting her own sexual purity onto it to prevent herself from being perceived as an object of sexual lust. She likens the moon to her own virginity describing it as a "cold and chaste" virgin who has "never defiled herself" nor "abandoned herself to men." (1. 146-148) The moon, of symbolic and dual importance in the play, reflects Salomé's chastity and sexuality as well as the male characters' responses and attitudes towards her. Referred to in feminine terms, the moon is described as a "little silver flower," associating Salomé's chastity and burgeoning sexuality with the moon's unsullied beauty. (1. 145)

Jokanaan's cry from the black cistern marks a turning point in the play. Heard immediately after Salomé's description of the chaste moon, Jokanaan's cry invokes "the power of Christ to banish all signs of sexuality." (Tabak 164) Though Salomé has never seen Jokanaan before, it is the spiritual control that he exerts over Herod, the Tetrarch and his kingdom that initially lures Salomé towards him.

Nina Auerbach's book *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* explains the pernicious myths and images of women which deeply permeated the Victorian cultural imagination. Women of the nineteenth century were forced to conform to the Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house," a phrase eponymous with

Coventry Patmore's poem "Angel in the House." The myth of the angelic woman reverberated throughout the nineteenth century and women, expected to be chaste, silent and submissive, were trained not to have opinions of their own. However, Auerbach argues that these angelic specimens had the power to become demons and wreak havoc on society. Salomé's metamorphic power is intrinsic to her sexuality and she transcends the position of being a mere object of male desire. She deliberately transgresses the Victorian ideal of femininity when she exploits her sexual power over Narraboth, The Young Syrian forcing him to disobey Herod's orders and allow Jokanaan the prophet out of the cistern so that she could gaze at him.

The statement "You will do this thing" is repeated several times to emphasise Salomé's manipulative sexual power over Narraboth and her strong desire to look at this strange prophet. In exchange for this deed, Salomé promises to look at Narraboth through her muslin veils when she passes in her litter by the bridge of the idol buyers. Powerless and succumbing helplessly to Salomé's beauty and sensuality, Narraboth allows the prophet to come forth. When Jokanaan emerges from the cistern, Salomé who is deeply fascinated and desirous of his body subverts the norm of being the objectified female. Positioned as Salomé's chaste other, Jokanaan is also symbolically associated with the moon. Salomé remarks that she is "sure he is chaste as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver." (1. 271-272)

In the book *Totem and Taboo*, Freud states that men are afraid of being weakened by female sexuality and this fear of being subjected to women established various constraints on a woman's behaviour. Salomé uses her golden eyes to exert a certain power over Jokanaan's body but unlike The Young Syrian and Herod, Jokanaan represses his sexual desire for Salomé by refusing to look at her and acknowledge her sexual power over him. Looking askance at Salomé, Jokanaan vehemently repudiates her gaze when he asks:

JOKANAAN. Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids? I

know not who she is. I do not wish to know who she is. (1. 277-280)

Wishing to be Jokanaan's disciple, Salomé asks for spiritual guidance begging him to: "Speak again! Speak again, Jokanaan, and tell me what I must do." (1.289-90) *Femina Sensualis*, the temptation to sinful indulgence is a Victorian model of feminine nature that can be applied to Salomé's actions. In the book *Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, Peter T. Cominos explains this model as the conflict between the noblest part of human nature, a person's conscience and the baser aspect of human nature, the sexual instinct or desire. The spiritual guidance that Salomé asks of Jokanaan, a final attempt to preserve her chastity, represents her own inner battle waged between her desire for the prophet and her duty to conform to prescribed rules of female behaviour laid down by Victorian society.

Though a seer, Jokanaan defies the Christian ideal of forgiveness as stated by Christ. Contrary to Christ's teaching in the Gospel according to Saint John that "He that is without sin," "let him first cast a stone" at the woman taken in adultery, Jokanaan advocates that there should "come against" Salomé "a multitude of men. Let the people take stones and stone her..." (1. 645-646) Rebuking Salomé and condemning her temptation to yield to sexual indulgence, Jokanaan answers her in the most violent manner:

JOKANAAN. "Daughter of Sodom, come not near me! But cover thy face with a veil, and scatter ashes upon thine head, and get thee to the desert and seek out the Son of Man." (1. 291-293)

He positions Salomé's uncontained fecund body as the abject body because it is essentially associated with the feminine and stands as the antithesis to his own pure masculine, spiritual body. His harsh and cruel words can be interpreted as a means to neutralise the threat of feminine excess and diminish Salomé's power which sought to threaten phallogocentric dominance and masculine potency.

Salomé's inner battle is expressed verbally when her words of praise for Jokanaan's body and hair are quickly replaced by grotesque repulsion. However, Salomé submits completely to her

sexuality and acts upon her wanton desire when she finally decides that it is Jokanaan's mouth that she yearns to kiss. Jokanaan makes an unsuccessful attempt to redeem Salomé's soul, exhorting and admonishing her to shed her sexuality and embrace the spirituality of Christ, the only one who can save her from her iniquities:

JOKANAAN. Daughter of adultery, there is but one who can save thee, it is He of whom I spake. Go seek Him. He is in a boat on the sea of Galilee, and He talketh with His disciples. (1. 378-80)

The only way Salomé can redeem herself to become truly spiritual and remain a virgin is to forfeit her sensuality and fecundity altogether. Jokanaan draws a parallel between Salomé and the Virgin Mary who gave birth to Jesus without succumbing to the baseness of carnal desire. Undeterred by Jokanaan's attempts to suppress her sexuality by hurling imprecations at her, Salomé persists stating: "I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan." (1.359)

Wilde emphasises the importance of the external gaze which objectifies both female and male bodies. Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" discusses Freud's concept of scopophilia. Mulvey states that a person derives pleasure both in looking at and by being looked at. This pleasure of looking converts women into passive sexual objects by subjecting them to the active male gaze. The play opens with the Page of Herodias warning The Young Syrian, Narraboth not to look at Salomé: "You are always looking at her. You look at her too much. It is dangerous to look at people in such a fashion. Something terrible may happen." (1.24-26) The Page's repeated warning and premonition that "something terrible may happen" comes true when Narraboth kills himself as a result of looking at Salomé and being tormented by the manner in which she lusts after Jokanaan. This admonition is further reinforced by Herodias who expresses her uneasiness when Herod gazes lewdly at her daughter, Salomé: "You must not look at her! You are always looking at her." (1.408-09)

Unable to control his wanton desire for Salomé, Herod invites her to share some fruit and drink some wine with him and even contemplates offering Herodias's throne to her. This perverse

relationship between stepfather and stepdaughter unravels when Herod first requests and later commands Salomé to dance for him, promising to give her whatever she wanted:

HEROD. Dance for me, Salomé, I beseech you. If you dance for me you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it to you, even unto the half of my kingdom. (1.774-776)

Finally, Salomé yields to her stepfather's request exploiting her sexual power in order to fulfil her own desire. She celebrates her sexual prowess when she defies her mother's opposition and dances the dance of the seven veils. According to Patricia L. Moran, women speak a complex "vocabulary of discomfort." (Moran 29) In the play, Salomé uses her body to protest against the social and political constraints of the Victorian era and voices her "unspeakable desires for sexuality and power." (Moran 29) No longer a passive object of desire, she uses her body as a text or medium to voice her female subjectivity and creativity.

Salomé's dance becomes a sexual spectacle in which she offers her body to Herod in exchange for a promise that will satisfy a sexual aberration: "It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan in a silver charger." (1.889-890) Not content with what Herod offered in lieu of Jokanaan's head, Salomé's mind is tainted by carnal desire.

In the book *Madness and Civilisation*, Foucault remarks that "the savage danger of madness is related to the danger of the passions and to their fatal concatenation." (Foucault 80) Salomé's blind surrender to her overwhelming sexuality and her incapacity to moderate her passions transform her into a raging nymphomaniac reinforced by Herod's description of the moon which is no longer described as a chaste virgin but a drunken woman: "Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not?" (1.416-417) Terrified that some evil may strike him and his kingdom if he killed Jokanaan, the man who has been touched by the "finger of God," Herod tries to make amends but to no avail. His distraught emotional state is further aggravated by his guilt of looking at Salomé:

HEROD. It is true, I have looked at you all evening. Your beauty troubled me. Your

beauty has grievously troubled me, and I have looked at you too much. (1.924-927)

### **The Bitter Taste of Love: More Enduring than the Mystery of Death**

Herod's power as the sole authoritative male is further weakened when he accedes to Salomé's demand. He acknowledges her sexual power when he says: "Let her be given what she asks! Of a truth she is her mother's child." (1.1012-13) Jokanaan's death and spiritual annihilation cause the blurring of the dual aspects of Salomé's nature: Jokanaan's description of her as the monstrous feminine and the position Herod designates to her as a chaste virgin. (Tabak 167) With these disparate elements submerged, Salomé emerges as a truly powerful Medusian woman who has not only transcended the bounds of a rigid, patriarchal society but her own sexuality.

Hélène Cixous alludes to the imagery of the Medusa in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" to describe her theory of *écriture féminine* or feminine writing. This cyclical and non-linear form of writing glorifies the female body, female sexuality and feminine difference shattering the more linear, rational phallogocentric writing. Cixous remarks that "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her (...)" (Cixous 880)

Salomé's final words to the severed head of Jokanaan, a triumphant celebration of her sexual power and her feminine desires and emotions can be viewed as Wilde's successful employment of the theory of *écriture féminine*. Though exultant and vengeful her words convey deep sorrow at being spurned by Jokanaan. Gazing on the decapitated head of Jokanaan, Salomé remarks:

SALOMÉ. Thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well! I kiss it now. (...) Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I said it. Did I not say it? I said it. (1. 1041-1044)

Exploiting her new-found power, Salomé scathingly declares: "Well Jokanaan, I still live, but thou, thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me." (1. 1056-1057) However, as her monologue progresses, her poignant words reveal her ambiguous emotional state stemming from her deep seated anger at being

rejected and "treated as a harlot, as a wanton." (1.1055) Salomé is still a virgin but her unbridled passion for Jokanaan has sullied her purity and chastity. She remorsefully remarks that she "was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire." (1.1079-108)

The metaphor of the Medusa is rife in nineteenth century literature and the symbolic association between Salomé and the Greek myth of the Medusa is fascinating. Of the Gorgons, the Medusa was the most feared and Wilde appropriates this Greek legend of the Medusa's power to turn a man to stone by attributing some of these Medusian traits to Salomé. This mythological creature epitomised the monstrous feminine as well as the sexually attractive woman like Salomé. Herod and The Young Syrian are enchanted by Salomé's beauty and are accordingly punished for gazing at her. Though Jokanaan can also be described in Medusian terms, he is the only man who refrains from looking at Salomé. Earlier in the play, Salomé first describes his hair as clusters of black grapes that hung from the vine trees of Edom and later as "a knot of black serpents writhing round" his neck" alluding to the image of Medusa who had the power to lure and repulse onlookers. (1.334)

#### Conclusion

The play ends with the destruction of Salomé's chaste, abstinent self and her transformation into a voracious, threatening man-eater who fulfils her desire of kissing the dead mouth of the feared prophet, Jokanaan. She is no longer a passive sexual object but an active sexual subject and Herod realises that Salomé has toppled the scales of power in her favour by using her sexuality to force him to commit a grave sin against "an unknown God."

Repulsed by Salomé's act of necrophilia, Herod abandons his fetish of treating her as an idealised or sexualized object and orders his soldiers to kill her. Though she is portrayed as powerful, monstrous woman, instrumental in the death of both Jokanaan and The Young Syrian, Wilde reconstructs the notion of the repressed Victorian woman and the sexually repressed culture of the

nineteenth century when he accords to Herod the power to kill Salomé.

Wilde does not denigrate Salomé or even venerate Jokanaan but urges the readers to empathise with rather than condemn Salomé. He portrays Jokanaan as a rigid, spiritualist whose cold demeanour is contrasted with the compassion of Christ who is depicted as a miracle worker and benign saviour. The article raises the question of whether Salomé as the monstrous feminine deserves to be stoned to death even as it provokes the realisation that the readers as sinners themselves have no right to cast the first stone.

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