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Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*: Disorienting Orientalism

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Oscar Wilde's one-act play *Salomé* occupies a puzzling place in the late nineteenth-century discourse of Orientalism. One sign of Orientalism, according to Edward Said, is "the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient—its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness—into a separate and unchallenged coherence,"¹ all of which seem to characterize Wilde's drama of excess. In *Salomé*, we have familiar binary oppositions: sensuality/spirituality, the Jew/the Christian, Salomé/Jokanaan, the Orient/the Occident. The Jewish royal family embodies Oriental sensuality and irrationality; the outrageousness of Salomé's desire and cruelty upstages the lascivious tyrant and his promiscuous wife. Religious disputes among Jews are belittled as meaningless babble. Herod's kingdom of Judaea is like a treasure island full of perfume and incense, jewels and exotica. The "Oriental clichés" Said speaks of in Gustave Flaubert's novels—"harems, princesses, princes, slaves, veils, dancing girls and boys, sherbets, ointments, and so on"—hold equally true for Wilde's play.² *Salomé* seems to be every inch an Orientalist work.

Given all its Orientalist characteristics, it is odd that Wilde's *Salomé* has seldom been regarded as such. Largely dismissed in earlier criticism as a mere pastiche of previous *Salomé* materials from the Bible to French symbolist works,³ the play has gained "its rightful degree of prominence in the Wildean canon" only in recent decades.⁴ The re-evaluation of the play has mainly to do with the ascendancy of feminism and queer studies since the 1970s, and with the rehabilitation of Wilde as sexual martyr for "the love that dare not speak its name." Critical opinions vary as to the

nature of Salomé's sexuality and Wilde's attitude toward it. Undeniably, the play reveals a great deal about late Victorian constructions of gender and sexuality, in comparison to which, Orientalism seems to be a minor issue. Furthermore, it may sound out of place to speak of Orientalism for such an iconoclastic work, hailed by some critics as an audacious expression of female or gay sexuality. Wilde's marginal status as sexual dissident and Irish in imperial London further complicates the matter, as discourses of gender and race share the logic of an inferiority/superiority binarism. If *Salomé* were charged with Orientalism, which has not happened so far to my knowledge, then the ready defense would be Wilde's positioning himself with the "subaltern" Salomé.

The complex relationship of Wilde's *Salomé* and Orientalism remains to be explored. *Salomé* is rather an anomaly in the works of Wilde, whose forte was in the comedy of manners set in high society of Victorian aristocracy. Wilde was in no sense an Orientalist, who "teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient."⁵ Yet the images and ideas of the Orient in *Salomé* rely on common assumptions and prejudices about this exotic land current at the time. As sacrilegious as it may sound to the apostles of "Saint Oscar," *Salomé* is Orientalist in its makeup. To adopt Said's categorization, *Salomé* operates on "latent Orientalism," or shared ideas about the Orient at an unconscious level as the Other of Europe that informed any European living in the period.⁶ As Said asserts, influenced by Michel Foucault's idea of the subject as social construct, a Westerner "comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second."⁷ Thus in his study of Orientalism, Said prioritizes the author's historicity over his or her individuality. In the case of Wilde studies, the importance of the playwright's individuality tends to overshadow his share as a European; Orientalism in *Salomé* has not been properly considered. It is this dynamic of Wilde as both a European and an individual that makes *Salomé* Orientalist, *but not quite*. Wilde's position as a gay playwright unsettles the Orientalist discourse that the play reinforces at the surface level, conditioned by Wilde's subjection to latent Orientalism and English patronage. *Salomé*, I would argue, is an Orientalist play that questions the very premises of Oriental discourse.

I. Facade: Othering the Orient

Salomé is a play about desire. As Joseph Donohue asserts in his survey of *Salomé* studies, the central theme of the play is insatiable desire itself, be it straight or gay, defiant or guilt-ridden.⁸ Yet, the choice of the Jewish princess as the symbol of excessive sexual desire is not fortuitous, whatever Wilde's relationship to the heroine. Nor is it Wilde alone who turned to the image of the Orient to represent excessive sexuality. Novels, poems, and paintings on the subject of *Salomé* and Judith were legion in the nineteenth century. As Nadine Sine has pointed out, their images converge in the turn-of-the-century imagination as a sensual and dangerous being, despite the fundamental difference of *Salomé* the seductress and Judith the God-chosen savior of the country.⁹ In *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra identifies two opposite but equally negative icons of "Woman" in late Victorian culture: one the pure, chaste, submissive, and invalid "household nun," and the other the lustful, promiscuous, bestial, and predatory "head-huntress."¹⁰ In the paintings that Dijkstra examines, the negative fantasy of Woman as the destroyer of men is often projected in exotic images from classical mythology, the Bible, and the East, all a safe distance by time and space from "civilized" European women. The connection between misogyny and racism was well established in the late Victorian imagination, both drawing on the belief in inequality speciously extrapolated from the Darwinian theory of the evolution of species.¹¹ The monstrosity of women was displaced into racial degeneracy, a point made manifest in late Victorian paintings. With growing knowledge of the Orient, *Salomé*'s "racial nuances" and "Semitic origins" began to be reflected in French paintings of the late nineteenth century on the subject, a desirable development commended by contemporary art historian Friedrich Fuchs.¹²

It is not fortuitous that Wilde's original *Salomé* in the aborted London premiere was a French actress of Jewish descent, Sarah Bernhardt. Critics generally dismiss the idea that *Salomé* was initially "written for Mme. Sarah Bernhardt," yet Wilde did regard Bernhardt as a perfect cast for the role.¹³ That Bernhardt was in her late forties was no obstacle for Wilde, who wrote: "What has age to do with acting? The only person in the world who could act *Salomé* is Sarah Bernhardt, that 'serpent of old Nile,' older than the pyramids."¹⁴ Her signature style of "priestly chanting" with "an

artificial, musical quality” and “an eerie intonation” must have influenced Wilde’s casting of Bernhardt for his Symbolist play;¹⁵ Wilde’s association of Bernhardt with the East is unmistakable. Bernhardt’s exaggerated and histrionic style negated her “Europeanness.” As Kerry Powell notes, Bernhardt “embodied an Oriental exoticism which reminded him [Wilde] of women in Baudelaire, Swinburne, and Pater.”¹⁶ The “anti-Semitic overtones” of Sarah Bernhardt in the imagination of the French and the German is well documented by Sander L. Gilman: Bernhardt “is as dangerous as she is seductive—she is the essential *belle juive*.”¹⁷ Gilman further associates the stereotypical image of the “yellow” Jew with a deliberate degeneracy of the *fin de siècle* aestheticism exemplified in *The Yellow Book*.¹⁸

That Wilde planned to costume the Jewish characters in yellow indicates a similar logic of association at work in his mind. The dress for Salomé, designed by Graham Robertson and described as “a golden robe with long fringes of gold, sustained on the shoulders by bands of gilt and painted leather which also held in place a golden breastplate set with jewels,” was also in this category.¹⁹ Wilde’s stage direction evokes the atmosphere of the Orient, a dreamlike space distant from reality: “A great terrace,” “a gigantic staircase,” and “an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze” all by “moonlight.”²⁰ The play’s stage design for the London Premiere was to be Oriental, either a “rich turquoise green” sky “cut by the perpendicular fall of strips of Japanese matting, forming an aerial tent above the terraces,” according to Charles Ricketts,²¹ or “a violet sky and then, in place of an orchestra, braziers of perfume ... the scented clouds rising and partly veiling the stage from time to time—a new perfume for each new emotion!” according to Graham Robertson.²² Apparently, “archaeological” accuracy was a matter of less importance; Wilde’s Symbolist aesthetics appropriates the Orient as the opposite of Victorian utilitarianism and realism.

The otherness of *Salomé* is accentuated by the whole cosmopolitan population from the Mediterranean that inhabits the Kingdom of Judaea. Wilde marks characters according to their origin in the “persons of the play”: Herod Antipas (Tetrarch of Judaea), The Young Syrian (Captain of the Guard), Tigellinus (A Young Roman), A Cappadocian, A Nubian, Jews, Nazarenes, etc. (583). Wilde’s meticulous construction of Mediterranean geography is surprising, especially in consideration of the play’s fairytale-

like simplistic characterization and repetitive language that made some critics ridicule the play as “a nursery tale,” or “Ollendorff’s exercises,” a method of language learning acquired through repetition.²³ The regional diversity of the play is reiterated by Salomé’s speech at the time of her first entrance onstage: “Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies, and barbarians who drink and drink, and spill their wine on the pavement, and Greeks from Smyrna with painted eyes and painted cheeks, and frizzed hair curled in twisted coils, and silent, subtle Egyptians, with long nails of jade and russet cloaks, and Romans brutal and coarse, with their uncouth jargon” (586). The similes in which Salomé courts Jokanaan also evoke mysterious and exotic landscape: Jokanaan’s eyes “like black holes burned by torches in a Tyrian tapestry.... They are like the black caverns of Egypt in which the dragons make their lairs” (589), his white skin as “lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed, ... the snows that lie on the mountains, like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea ... the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia” (589), his hair “like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom ... the great cedars of Lebanon” (590), his mouth like “pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the garden of Tyre ... the bow of the King of the Persians, that is painted with vermilion, and is tipped with coral” (590).

Indeed, artificial language is the mainstay of the Oriental fabric of Herod’s kingdom. The plethora of images in the text contributes to the construction of the other world. The long catalogue of exotica Herod offers in reward for Salomé’s dance is exemplary:

a great round emerald, which Caesar’s minion has sent me ... beautiful white peacocks, that walk in the garden between the myrtles and the tall cypress-trees ... jewels that are marvelous to look at. A collar of pearls, set in four rows ... amethysts of two kinds, one that is black like wine, and one that is red like wine which has been coloured with water.... topazes, yellow as are the eyes of tigers, and topazes that are pink as the eyes of a wood-pigeon, and green topazes that are as the eyes of cats. ... opals that burn always ... onyxes like the eyeballs of a dead woman ... moonstones that change when the moon changes ... sapphires big like eggs, and as blue as blue flowers ... chrysolites and beryls and chrysoprases and rubies ... a garment of ostrich feathers ... a crystal ... three wonderous turquoises ... two cups of amber, that are like apples of gold, ... sandals incrustated with glass ... bracelets... the mantle of the high priest.... the veil of the sanctuary. (601–3)

Salomé's blazon of Jokanaan quoted above creates a similar effect, dissecting the body into fetishized objects of desire. Ornamental language through which desire is controlled is one salient feature of *Salomé*.²⁴ The play approximates a Byzantine painting with its rich imagery and repetitive musical pattern. Gilbert also notes Wilde's linguistic innovation in *Salomé*, which "seek[s] to escape its traditional obligation to order, abstraction, and hierarchy and aspir[es] instead to the physicality and simultaneity of graphic art."²⁵ No wonder that the corporeality of *Salomé* was depreciated as a "Philistine" taste in the *Pall Mall Gazette* review: "it [the play] might tickle [the audience's] untempered palates with suggestions of voluptuousness; it might please their sluggishness with its catalogues of objects of price, with its largesse of adjectives, with its tricks of colour and odour and simile."²⁶

Wilde follows his sources in setting *Salomé* in the palace of "Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Judaea"; his characterization is filtered through latent Orientalism. Herod is a typical Oriental tyrant, one who strangles his elder brother after twelve years' imprisonment in a cistern to satisfy his incestuous lust for his sister-in-law, as the Second Soldier reveals (585). Herodias, in turn, is depicted as a licentious harlot, who "gave herself up unto the lust of her eyes" (588). Promiscuity was a quality not attributed to Herodias in *Salomé* materials before Wilde's play. Wilde makes Herodias licentious as well as incestuous, as is revealed in Jokanaan's reproaches: "Where is she who gave herself unto the Captains of Assyria, who have baldricks on their loins, and tiaras of divers colours on their heads? Where is she who hath given herself to the young men of Egypt, who are clothed in fine linen and purple, whose shields are of gold, whose helmets are of silver, whose bodies are mighty?" (588). *Salomé*, whom Jokanaan insults as "daughter of Babylon" and "daughter of Sodom," lives up to the name, sporting exorbitant lust for the prophet's body, cruelty in his decapitation, and perverse necrophilia in kissing the severed head. The Jewish royal family embodies the stereotypes of Oriental sensuality and irrationality to be overcome by civilization.

The Jews in *Salomé* also refer to believers in Judaism. *Salomé* depicts a world of religious anarchy at the inception of Christianity. Indeed, the theme of God and vision recurs persistently throughout the play, which is often overlooked in the strong presence of the heroine. The characters'

obsession with Salomé is intertwined with religious disputes among the Jews and apocalyptic words from Jokanaan. The Jews are disparaged as “those wild beasts howling,” who are always “disputing about their religion” in vain (583). The Second Soldier’s speech that “[t]he Pharisees, for instance, say that there are angels, and the Sadducees declare that angels do not exist” (583) offers a simplified caricature of the Jews, which is repeated later in their dialogue:

A Sadducee: Angels do not exist.

A Pharisee: Angels exist, but I do not believe that this Man has talked with them.

First Nazarene: He was seen by a great multitude of people talking with angels.

A Sadducee: Not with angels. (595)

The Jews “worship a God that you cannot see” and “only believe in things that you cannot see,” which is “altogether ridiculous,” according to the Cappadocian (584). In another scene the Jews wrangle about religious issues such as the visibility of God or existence of angels (594). Throughout these religious caricatures, the Jews are represented as childish and obstinate people who waste their words on futile and improvable issues; as the First Soldier sneers, it is “ridiculous to dispute about such things” (584).

Ironically, the characters who belittle the Jews are the people of Judaea, and thus can be themselves categorized as “Jews.” The Jews are presented in *Salomé* doubly as the Other of Europe, religiously as well as racially. *Jewishness* is a contentious term, which disrupts and blurs the category of national, genealogical, and religious identity. The Jews as believers of Judaism are segregated in the kingdom of Judaea from the beginning, when the two soldiers complain of the “uproar” the Jews make in the banqueting hall: “The Jews. They are always like that. They are disputing about their religion” (583). The otherness of the Jews is highlighted by the presence of the Nazarenes, early Christians who believe in the miracle of the Incarnated Son of God, “Messias,” such as changing water into wine, healing lepers and the blind, talking with angels and raising the dead (595–96). The confusion of the terminology in *Salomé* exemplifies Slavoj Žižek’s observation that the word *Jew* “refers again to that unattainable X, to what is ‘in Jew more than Jew’” rather than certain properties.²⁷ The concept of Jewishness in the play operates like a Lacanian master-signifier, the signifier without the signified.

II. Disorientalism, Destabilization, Ambivalence

The Oriental facade of *Salomé* is self-evident, with its dreamlike atmosphere, plethora of exotic objects, stereotypical characters, and ideas all conveyed through the dazzling corporeality of language. It offers a stage where transgressive desire can take shape and express itself to the extreme. The kingdom of Herod is set up as a dream place “where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe”; like Flaubert, Wilde “associates the Orient with the escapism of sexual fantasy.”²⁸ Yet, to complete Said’s definition that “Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West,”²⁹ *Salomé* needs a strong presence of the West in the kingdom of Judaea to enact a superior/inferior binarism. While Flaubert’s novels perform this binarism through the narrator, *Salomé* as drama, the “most objective form known to art,” lacks a differentiating authorial perspective.³⁰ Far from remaining objective, *Salomé*’s playwright seems to identify with the Orient.

Wilde’s case demonstrates how one’s identity is symbolically determined rather than biologically inherited. As a European male, Wilde was one of “us,” or biologically one of the “superior white men”; his queer sexuality and Irishness placed him near “them,” or “inferior” Others in the margin of Victorian culture. With the racial inequality of Darwinism extended into biological, moral, and social spheres, as Said reminds us, “the Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien.”³¹ And Wilde was “alien” in many ways, “an adjunct to Victorian imperial, commercial, and polite society,” according to Regenia Gagnier, with his Irish parentage, Oxonian education and homosexual penchant.³² “What captivity was to the Jews, exile has been to the Irish,” Wilde wrote once, revealing his acute sense of marginality.³³

Thus, Wilde appropriates Orientalism to perform his own version of marginality. Wildean Orientalism approximates what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms “disorientalism,” or “a disidentification with Orientalism” as a strategy of visual alliance among minority groups against a dominant ideology.³⁴ Mirzoeff’s article “Disorientalism: Minority and Visuality in Imperial London” is the only publication that discusses Wilde in relation to Orientalism; it deserves a close examination apropos of *Salomé*,

although it covers Wilde and fin de siècle Victorian culture in general rather than focusing exclusively on the play.³⁵ Orientalism takes a visual turn in Mirzoeff's discussion of Victorian culture. It links Jews, the colonized, same-sex desire, and theatricality through the mechanisms of dream-work: displacement and analogy.³⁶ Victorian subalterns deliberately misidentified with the Orient in their strategy to camouflage their identity in displaced symbols and images. It was a strategy of excess that "pushed the indexical language of taxonomy to the visualized point of failure," resulting in the destabilization of boundaries of gender, class, and race.³⁷ Those marginalized appropriate the image of the Orient as the Other in dominant Victorian culture, but their affiliation with the Orient blurs the typical binary opposition between us and them, West and East. Thus, Mirzoeff concerns himself little with Orientalism on the West/East axis, or "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" as Said defines it.³⁸ Mirzoeff's brief analysis of *Salomé* focuses on "disoriental arcade of decorative art" and "a catalogue of exotica," as part of "a rhizomatic network of Orientalism" that runs through the oeuvre of Wilde.³⁹ Wilde's Orientalism is not so much an attempt to represent the Other as a visual correlative for his own marginality.

The Oriental in *Salomé* provides Wilde with an interstitial space to express and un-express his queer sexuality. The androgynous and ambivalent nature of characters in *Salomé* can be read as Wilde's disidentifying strategy. Salomé exists in an interstice between girl and woman, chastity and voluptuousness, and even man and woman, as "a little green flower" Salomé promises to Narraboth (588) connects her to the green carnation, the shared sign of homosexuality in Wilde's coterie.⁴⁰ The inversion of gender roles in Salomé's courting of Jokanaan as well as the feminine features of Jokanaan complicates the confusion further. The androgyny of characters is best captured in Aubrey Beardsley's black-and-white illustrations that accompanied the first English version of *Salomé* in 1894. While Beardsley's work was criticized as irrelevant to and misrepresenting of the texts in the past, it is now accepted as an authentic visualization of the play, "one of the most successful collaborations of poet and illustrator in history."⁴¹ Wilde also praised Beardsley as "the only artist who, besides [Wilde himself], knows what the dance of the seven veils is, and can see

that invisible dance.”⁴² Beardsley’s illustrations abound with overly ornate images associated with genital organs, such as eyelike feathers, thick foliage and roses, layers of semicircles imitating the structure of blood cells, and snaky hair. Elliott Gilbert draws attention to the characters’ androgyny in the drawings, quoting Mario Praz’s observation that “men have the faces of virgins, virgins the faces of youths.”⁴³ For instance, in “The Dancer’s Reward” and “The Climax,” Salomé and Jokanaan look almost indistinguishable, with the same hairstyle and facial features. The boundary between male and female is blurred and questioned. Elaine Showalter also notes “Beardsley’s conflation of Wilde and Salome, of female corrosive desire and male homosexual love,” which “brings to the surface the play’s buried and coded messages.”⁴⁴ Gilbert regards such androgyny as the artist’s attack on objective reality.⁴⁵ In other words, androgyny is Wilde’s detour to reality. The excessive incoherence in the illustrations captures Wilde’s strategy to defy taxonomy.

Wilde’s disidentification in *Salomé*, a strategy that destabilizes gender difference, may also be extended to the destabilization of racial difference. However, neither text nor image corroborates the view. A transracial analogy should be sought in the relationship between text and reality, that is, between character and author. Knowing Wilde’s tragic fall after the fact, many critics identify the playwright with Salomé. Wilde’s strategic identification with the Jewish princess unsettles the Orientalist structure of the play, for Orientalism is not just “a distillation of ideas” about the Orient but also a form of Western hegemony over the East through the superior/inferior binarism between “us” and “them.”⁴⁶ What is intriguing about *Salomé* is the ambiguous position of the playwright in the configuration of “us” and “them.” Wilde’s identification with Salomé is only tenuous, conditioned more by his need for outing than by genuine sympathy with the Orient. As Emily Apter notes, one of the ways turn-of-the-century homosexual identity could perform itself was through “its mediation by the culturally exotic stereotype.”⁴⁷ Wilde is deliberately ambivalent toward his heroine.

Wilde’s ambiguity accommodates contradictory interpretations of Salomé’s sexuality whether construed as homosexual guilt, the murderous vagina dentata, or the liberating power of the New Woman. Salomé has been regarded as Wilde’s mouthpiece by many, especially those who read

the play in the context of Wilde's life. Kate Millet's reading of the play as "a drama of homosexual guilt and rejection" is echoed by Gail Finney's view of it as "a masked depiction of one man's prohibited longing for another," or Showalter's as a "closet drama ... [with] a gay sexual subtext."⁴⁸ Feminist critics have taken *Salomé* as the expression of repressed female sexuality. Jane Marcus famously declares in an essay of 1974: "The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman";⁴⁹ Gilberts reads the play as "a devastating *fin-de-siècle* attack on the conventions of patriarchal culture."⁵⁰ Intriguingly, the opposite view is equally compelling. For many others, Wilde's play consolidates the misogynistic view that ran through a series of *Salomé* materials in the nineteenth century: *Salomé* is, according to Katherine Brown Downey, "an archetype of the *femme fatale*."⁵¹ Wilde's play is the pinnacle of Victorian misogynistic literature that expresses collective male fear of, and obsession with, feminine sexual perversity.⁵² What defines Wilde's attitude toward *Salomé* is an ambivalence that is part of his disidentifying strategy.

Wilde may be sympathetic to the heroine, but he maintains his distance from her. That Wilde endows *Salomé* with "a subjectivity and an interiority which is signally absent from the sources"⁵³ or "a real person" quality that separates her from the Decadent Icon of the destructive *femme fatale*⁵⁴ does not necessarily demonstrate his sympathy toward the heroine; she could be made more monstrous *because of* her subjectivity. *Salomé* is given agency, as critics point out; she demands the head of Jokanaan "for [her] own pleasure" (600), unsolicited by her mother. *Salomé*'s long speech about love at the end of the play, often interpreted as evidence of her interiority, can be viewed differently. Not all would agree with Gilbert that the final scene can be "unaccountably touching" if one sees it sympathetically from the perspective of the heroine.⁵⁵ To examiner Edward F. S. Pigott, who refused to license *Salomé* for public performance in 1892, this scene provided one extreme example of the play's obscenity: "[I]n the last scene, where she brings in his head—if you please—on a 'charger'—she *does* kiss his mouth, in a paroxysm of sexual despair. This piece is written in French—half Biblical, half pornographic—by Oscar Wilde himself. Imagine the average British public's reception of it."⁵⁶ Wilde never fully identifies with the eponymous heroine; rather, he *disidentifies* with her, appropriating the Orient to reveal and conceal himself at the same time.

Racial destabilization in *Salomé* comes as a byproduct of rupture in the network of gender identity. Relying on the stereotype of the Orient, which, Homi Bhabha argues, operates like fetishism that recognizes and negates difference at the same time, *Salomé* both affirms and questions sexual and racial difference.⁵⁷

III. Herod and Caesar

Critics often overlook that Wilde himself gives *Salomé* a tragic ending. Indeed, what is most original in Wilde's *Salomé* is its ending: Herod's convulsive command, "Kill that woman!" followed by the brutal stage direction, "The soldiers rush forward and crush beneath their shields SALOMÉ, daughter of HERODIAS, Princess of Judaea" (605). No previous versions have this "femme fatale" killed. *Salomé* does die in some earlier versions: in Heinrich Heine's *Atta Troll* "of love's distraction" or as in Jules Laforgue's *Salomé* "as a result of losing her balance while throwing the head of Jokanaan from a promontory into the sea."⁵⁸ In no works, other than Wilde's, is she deliberately put to death. Wilde's earlier version of *Salomé*, tentatively entitled *The Decapitation of Salomé*, goes so far as to make her a saint before she falls into the lake and gets decapitated by the broken ice.⁵⁹ Wilde eventually abandoned the idea, but its moralistic and religious timber survives with *Salomé*. In this vein, Marcus's view that *Salomé* is "a primitive Christian precursor" who "wants to share [Jokanaan's] spiritual life" is not altogether groundless, if somewhat far-fetched.⁶⁰ Similarly, Downey argues that *Salomé* expressed "a real and powerful religious impulse" of Wilde, "[w]ho had contracted syphilis, who desired the peace of Catholicism, who conflated the aesthetic, sexual, and spiritual."⁶¹ *Salomé*, "[t]his daughter of Babylon, product of the heathen and fallen world, desires Iokanaan first aesthetically, then sexually, and finally spiritually," and thus, her kissing the head of Jokanaan may be interpreted as "a Eucharistic act."⁶² The transformation of *Salomé*'s lust into religious zeal is not entirely convincing, nor is Wilde's seriousness in Christian salvation. Yet, Wilde certainly gave the play an ending that fit the moral and religious standard of the time.

The relationship of the Decadent and aesthete to the New Woman is also illuminating in understanding Wilde's final verdict on *Salomé*. Both

the Decadent (feminized man) and the New Woman (manly woman) were regarded as unnatural in late Victorian society. However, they were not necessarily allies, as Showalter points out when she identifies two models of homosexuality in late nineteenth-century gender discourse: “intermediate sex,” as Edward Carpenter terms it, and homosexuality as the “highest, most perfect evolutionary stage of gender differentiation.”⁶³ Wilde belonged to the latter, although he might have been said to support the woman’s cause in some ways, such as serving as the editor for the *Woman’s World*. The aestheticization of male-male love had as its premise “an escalating contempt for women, whose bodies seem to stand in the way of philosophical beauty.”⁶⁴ It is not surprising that Wilde finally turns his back on Salomé like Herod at the end of the play. Having pointed out Wilde’s sympathetic treatment of Salomé, Gilbert concedes that Herod is “Wilde’s alter ego” who eventually recognizes the danger of unleashed female sexuality and rejects it.⁶⁵

Gilbert is not the only critic who regards Herod as Wilde’s alter ego. For Richard Ellmann, the central character in *Salomé* was neither the titular princess nor Iokanaan, but Herod.⁶⁶ Herod represents Wilde’s *tertium quid* between the two extremes of his two Oxonian mentors, Walter Pater’s aestheticism and John Ruskin’s ethics.⁶⁷ Wilde’s contemporaries also detected the significance of Herod in the play. Aubrey Beardsley caricatures Wilde’s facial features in the figure of the tetrarch in one of his illustrations, “The Eyes of Herod,” perceiving the connection between Herod and the playwright. Sarah Bernhardt, asked to take the role of Salomé for the London premiere, thought that the principal figure was not so much the eponymous heroine as Herod.⁶⁸

Wilde’s comment on the characters of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in a letter provides further clues to understanding the playwright’s ambivalence toward Salomé: “I am so glad you like that strange coloured book of mine: it contains much of me in it. Basil Hallward is what I think I am: Lord Henry what the world thinks me: Dorian what I would like to be—in other ages, perhaps.”⁶⁹ Despite his image as a rebel in the world, Wilde knew that he was no transgressive hedonist and amoralist like Lord Henry Wotton. Instead, he identifies himself with Basil Hallward, good-hearted painter with conventional morality. As Michael Patrick Gillespie notes, Wilde, like his dandy characters, “can sustain dandiacal

notoriety by giving the appearance of living outside the power of public restraint as long as one does not in fact attempt to make appearance reality.”⁷⁰ Wilde presents a series of transgressive desires in *Salomé*. The same-sex desire of Herodias’s page for Narraboth has been noted by critics, which is hinted in their exchange of gifts like a “little box of perfumes and ear-rings wrought in silver,” and “a ring of agate” (591). Narraboth’s obsession with the princess also transgresses class codes. Herod’s desire for his stepdaughter Salomé is incestuous; Salomé’s lust for the prophet’s body sacrilegious. The possibility that Salomé may be a man in disguise entangles these circles of desire further. Reading *Salomé* vis-à-vis a Girardian model of mimetic desire, Rhonda K. Garelick imagines that a “graphic representation of *Salomé* would resemble widening concentric circles, indicating ever more encompassing levels of desire.”⁷¹ Yet, Wilde does put an end to the ever-expanding desire through Herod’s restoration of order. Some critics regard Herod as the opposite of Salomé, but these two figures have more in common than is usually thought: unquenchable desire, love of beauty, and cruelty that destroys their object of desire. The difference is that Herod knows the limit. Herod toys with transgressive desire in the way that Salomé does, but he knows when to stop. She does not. Having presented Salomé’s desire and her dance of the seven veils as an Oriental pageant to the Victorian public, Wilde uses the authority of Herod to dispatch Salomé offhand. Salomé’s final destruction, like the moralistic ending of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, reasserts the moral order as the Victorian society would espouse it. As James Joyce observes, Wilde was a “court jester to the English”;⁷² he could commit transgressions only with the connivance of English patrons.

Feminist critics often regard Herod as the spokesman of patriarchal culture; yet the tetrarch is not an entirely free agent. Herod’s subjection to the Roman Empire ironically mirrors the playwright’s relationship to the English public that grants Wilde his literary “Tetrarchy.” The presence of the Roman Empire is reiterated several times in *Salomé*, establishing Rome as the source of Herod’s authority. References to Rome abound; the characters are conscious of the power and influence that the Roman Empire wields over its neighboring countries. The Second Soldier knows that the “cloak of Caesar” is purple like wine; the Cappadocian, who “[has] never seen Caesar,” has suffered the colonization of the country by the

Romans, who “have driven [the gods] out” of Cappadocia (584). Salomé loathes the Romans, who “give themselves the airs of noble lords” (586). Herod knows that they “must show all honours to the ambassadors of Caesar” (592). Herod and his guests indeed drink a toast to the Roman Emperor (Herod: “I will drink to Caesar. There are Romans here, we must drink to Caesar. All: Caesar! Caesar!” [596]). Herodias recalls Herod to his duty to Rome in order to take her husband back to the palace away from her daughter: “All honours must be shown to Caesar’s ambassadors, must they not?” (598). Herod feels complacent about his tetrarchy under Roman control and protection: “Wherefore should I not be happy? Caesar, who is lord of the world, who is lord of all things, loves me well. He has just sent me most precious gifts. Also he has promised me to summon to Rome the King of Cappadocia, who is my enemy. It may be that at Rome he will crucify him, for he is able to do all things that he wishes. Verily, Caesar is lord. Thus you see I have a right to be happy” (597). To Herod, Caesar is as almighty and omnipotent, as “Messias” is to Nazarenes: “Caesar is wonderful. He can do everything” (592), like Jesus working miracles. Knowing that Caesar is ever-present in Herod’s consciousness like an ego-ideal, Herodias only has to evoke Rome to warn his raving husband: “They will say at Rome that you are mad” (600). The Roman Empire, like the name of the father, keeps Herod’s libidinal energy in check. Herod’s sudden destruction of Salomé, for which no clear reason is given, can be read as the subjection of the playwright to the censoring eye of the English.

Thus, Ellmann’s statement that “at the play’s end the emphasis shifts suddenly to Herod, who is seen to have yielded to Salomé’s sensuality, and then to the moral revulsion of Jokanaan from that sensuality, and to have survived them both” is only half true.⁷³ Herod does not overcome Jokanaan’s morality; he succumbs to it. The execution of Jokanaan is not in tandem with Herod’s will. Rather, he regrets it and fears its outcome; he “begin[s] to be afraid” (605). If we place the tetrarch at the center of action, the play may be read as the “conversion” of Herod. Herod’s uncertainty about the invisible God of Nazarenes earlier in the play turns into a kind of acknowledgment of Christianity. Herod is reluctant to grant Salomé’s wish, as he believes that Jokanaan “comes perchance from God” (602): “He is a holy man. The finger of god has touched him. God has put into

his mouth terrible words. In the palace as in the desert God is always with him.... At least it is possible. One does not know. It is possible that God is for him and with him" (602). Having decapitated Jokanaan, Herod's "perchance" and "possible" become certainty: "In truth, what she has done is a great crime. I am sure that it was a crime against an unknown God" (604). In a campy moment when "a moonbeam falls on SALOMÉ," kissing the mouth of Jokanaan (s.d., 605), Herod compulsively orders her death. The Western value of spiritual purity and Christianity is consolidated through Herod's reformation at the end.

To Wilde's dismay, *Salomé* was denied a license for its performance. Wilde was so sure of getting official permission that he was already rehearsing the play with Bernhardt in the title role. Measures had been taken to avoid censorship for this drama of biblical characters and sexual perversity. Written in French, the play was to evade censorship, which was lenient for plays in foreign tongues. Likewise, Oriental trappings would attenuate the shock of monstrous desire and sexuality. Structurally, it has a moralistic ending that re-establishes patriarchal order under the auspices of the Roman Empire. The affiliation among "Jews, the colonized, and the subjects and objects of same-sex desire" in imperial London would be perceived only "if [one] knew how to look for such connections."⁷⁴ Disorientation operates in the form of dream-work—in condensation and displacement. On the surface, at a conscious level, *Salomé* conforms to the dominant ideology of Victorian society. Wilde offers *Salomé* as a negative mirror to the British audience, as the Other of Victorian morality. "That tragic daughter of passion appeared on Thursday last, and is now dancing for the head of the English public," writes Wilde in a letter on the publication of *Salomé's* English edition in 1894.⁷⁵ The (hypocritical) Victorians were to align themselves with Jokanaan, Wilde assumed, redefining their civilized identity against the monstrous heroine and relieved at the final destruction of Oriental vices.

The censorship of *Salomé* reveals its power to shock, its power to destabilize gender and racial identities. Wilde's "lush, exotic pageant" engages the audience as its participant: "[S]ubtly, slowly, and perhaps with some alarm, the bourgeoisie would come to distinguish its own image."⁷⁶ Herod feels revulsion toward Salomé precisely because he recognizes in her his own potential transgression. And so does the audience. Sin is "the

pulse of Wilde's art," observes James Joyce, citing Wilde's comment on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them."⁷⁷ Wilde's ambiguity in *Salomé* makes us "recognize in the 'excesses' attributed to 'Jews' the truth about ourselves."⁷⁸

That Wilde turns to the image of the Orient to stage sin and sexuality demonstrates the latent Orientalism that he was subject to. As Said points out, "the works of even the most eccentric artist are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries, and governments."⁷⁹ "For any European during the nineteenth century," asserts Said, "Orientalism was such a system of truths, truths in Nietzsche's sense of the word."⁸⁰ Wilde could not but choose the Orient as the *anderer Schauplatz*, or the other showplace, to stage monstrous energy of sexuality, displacing anxieties and fantasies onto the image of the Oriental woman. Borrowing the image of the Orient, Wilde presents us our own repressed desire and momentary catharsis of its explosion, followed by social containment. Like avant-garde primitivism at the turn of the century, Wilde looks to the East to express what lies beneath. In a Saidian formula of Orientalism, the West strengthens its "identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even *underground self*."⁸¹ The power of *Salomé* lies in Wilde's tacit acknowledgment of proximity between us and them.

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NOTES

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, repr. with a new afterword (London: Penguin, 1995), 205.

² *Ibid.*, 190.

³ See the early reviews collected in *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Karl Beckson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 132–43. Mario Praz also disparages the play as "a parody of the whole material used by the Decadents." Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 298.

⁴ William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salomé*, Plays in Production Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

⁵ Said, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 206 (*italics original*).

- ⁷ Ibid., 11.
- ⁸ Joseph Donohue, "Distance, Death and Desire in Salomé," in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 130.
- ⁹ Nadine Sine, "Cases of Mistaken Identity: Salomé and Judith at the Turn of the Century," *German Studies Review* 11 (1988): 9–29 (14–16).
- ¹⁰ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- ¹¹ Ibid., 209.
- ¹² Ibid., 386.
- ¹³ Unsigned notice of *Salomé*, *Times* (London), 23 February 1893, reproduced in Beckson, 133.
- ¹⁴ As quoted by Peter Raby, *Oscar Wilde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 116.
- ¹⁵ Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 47.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 50.
- ¹⁷ Sander L. Gilman, "Salomé, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt, and the 'Modern Jewess,'" *German Quarterly* 66 (1993): 195–211 (204).
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 204.
- ¹⁹ W. Graham Robertson, *Life Was Worth Living: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), 126
- ²⁰ *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland, 5th ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), 583. All subsequent references to Wilde's works are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number, unless noted otherwise. Spelling of character names follows this edition, with exceptions when they are in direct quotations cited from other secondary sources.
- ²¹ Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1987), 372.
- ²² Robertson, 126.
- ²³ Praz, 298, and the *Times* review of *Salomé* (Beckson, 133).
- ²⁴ For discussion of the relationship of body, desire, and decoration, see Chad Bennett, "Oscar Wilde's *Salome: Décor, Des Corp, Desire*," *ELH* 77 (2010): 297–324.
- ²⁵ Elliott L. Gilbert, "'Tumult of Images': Wilde, Beardsley, and *Salome*," *Victorian Studies* 26 (1983): 133–59 (154).
- ²⁶ Unsigned review of *Salomé*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 February 1893, reproduced in Beckson, 135–37 (137).
- ²⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 97.
- ²⁸ Said, 190.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 204.
- ³⁰ Wilde, *De profundis*, in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 980–1059 (1017).
- ³¹ Said, 207.
- ³² Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 7.

³³ Wilde, "Ireland and the Irish during the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century," in *The Prose of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Bonibooks, 1935 [1889]), 530, as quoted by Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Disorientation: Minority and Visuality in Imperial London," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50 (2006): 52–69 (53).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁵ Mirzoeff traces Wilde's disorientation from his epigram that compresses the verbal into Orientalized images; aestheticism or "an inverted effeminacy that was figured as racial degeneration"; the reception of Wilde in America that ridiculed him as a blackface minstrel and the "Wild Man of Borneo"; Wilde's willful connection of the Irish to Africans and Jews; his Jewish friends and *The Yellow Book*; decorative art and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and finally to *Salomé*, "the culmination of Wilde's Orientalism." The quotations are from Mirzoeff, 55 and 64 respectively.

³⁶ Mirzoeff, 53.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁸ Said, 2.

³⁹ Mirzoeff, 64.

⁴⁰ Donohue suggests that the "little green flower" is "a coded significance identifying *Salomé's* sexuality as perversely and clandestinely male" (127).

⁴¹ Gilbert, 159. For the brief summary of critical receptions of Beardsley's illustrations, see Gilbert, 134–35, and Tydeman, 117.

⁴² *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 348n3.

⁴³ Gilbert, 152.

⁴⁴ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 156.

⁴⁵ Gilbert, 152–53.

⁴⁶ Said, 7.

⁴⁷ Emily Apter, "Acting Out Orientalism: Sapphic Theatricality in Turn-of-the-Century Paris," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond (London: Routledge, 1996), 15–34 (17).

⁴⁸ See Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 153; Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), 65; Showalter, 150.

⁴⁹ Jane Marcus, "Salomé: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 78 (1974): 95–113 (95).

⁵⁰ Gilbert, 133–34.

⁵¹ Katherine Brown Downey, *Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 98. See also Praz, 298.

⁵² Dijkstra, 379.

⁵³ Gilbert, 142.

⁵⁴ Marcus, 99.

⁵⁵ Gilbert, 144.

⁵⁶ Pigott's letter to Spencer Ponsonby as quoted in Gagnier, 170–71.

- ⁵⁷ Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture*, repr. with a new preface by the author (London: Routledge, 2004), 94–120.
- ⁵⁸ See Praz, 300 and 302.
- ⁵⁹ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 344–45.
- ⁶⁰ Marcus, 100 and 102.
- ⁶¹ Downey, 114.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁶³ Showalter, 170–73.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ⁶⁵ Gilbert, 154.
- ⁶⁶ Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 345.
- ⁶⁷ Richard Ellmann, "Overtures to *Salome*," in *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 73–91 (89).
- ⁶⁸ Tydeman, 20.
- ⁶⁹ Wilde, *Letters*, 352.
- ⁷⁰ Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), 117–18.
- ⁷¹ Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 141.
- ⁷² James Joyce, "Oscar Wilde: The Poet of *Salomé*," in *Oscar Wilde*, ed. Ellmann, 56–60 (58).
- ⁷³ Ellmann, "Overtures to *Salomé*," 90.
- ⁷⁴ Mirzoeff, 53.
- ⁷⁵ Wilde, *Letters*, 333.
- ⁷⁶ Garelick, 150.
- ⁷⁷ "Mr. Wilde's Rejoinder," *Scots Observer*, 4, no. 86 (12 July 1890), as quoted by Joyce, 59n6.
- ⁷⁸ Žižek, 128.
- ⁷⁹ Said, 201.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 203–4.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3 (my italics).