



## Daughter of Eve, *Femme Fatale*, and Persecuted Artist: The Mythic Transgressive Woman in Oscar Wilde's and Richard Strauss' *Salome*

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Recibido: 1 de febrero de 2016 / Aceptado: 3 de julio de 2016

**Abstract.** Historically, Salome was a mundane figure who never catalyzed John the Baptist's death. However, in Christian Scripture, she becomes the seductress and fallen daughter of Eve. Her stepfather Herod promises Salome his kingdom if she dances for him, but she follows her mother's wish to have John beheaded. In Strauss's opera, after Wilde's Symbolist-Decadent play, Salome becomes independent of Herodias' will, and the mythic avatar of the *femme fatale* and persecuted artist who Herod has killed after she kisses John's severed head. Her signature key of C# major, resolving to the C major sung by Herod and Jokanaan at her death, represents her tragic fate musically.

**Keywords:** Salome; Herod; John the Baptist; *femme fatale*; Oscar Wilde; Richard Strauss; Symbolism; Decadence.

## Fille d'Ève, Femme Fatale, et l'Artiste Persécutée: La Femme Transgressive Mythique dans la Salome d'Oscar Wilde et de Richard Strauss

**Résumé.** Selon l'histoire, Salomé était une personnalité banale qui n'a jamais précipité la mort de Jean le Baptiste. En revanche, dans les textes chrétiens, elle devient la séductrice et la fille déchue d'Ève. Son beau-père Hérode promet à Salomé son royaume si elle danse pour lui, mais elle suit le souhait de sa mère qui exige la décapitation de Jean. Dans l'opéra de Strauss, après la pièce décadente-symboliste de Wilde, Salomé se libère (devient indépendante) de la volonté d'Hérodiade, et l'avatar mythique de la femme fatale et l'artiste persécutée qu'Hérode assassine après qu'elle embrasse la tête coupée de Jean. Sa note indicative de do# majeur, se transformant en do majeur chantée par Hérodiade et Jokanaan lors de sa mort, représente d'une manière musicale son destin. Historically, Salome was a mundane figure who never catalyzed John the Baptist's death. However, in Christian Scripture, she becomes the seductress and fallen daughter of Eve. Her stepfather Herod promises Salome his kingdom if she dances for him, but she follows her mother's wish to have John beheaded. In Strauss's opera, after Wilde's Symbolist-Decadent play, Salome becomes independent of Herodias' will, and the mythic avatar of the *femme fatale* and persecuted artist who Herod has killed after she kisses John's severed head. Her signature key of C# major, resolving to the C major sung by Herod and Jokanaan at her death, represents her tragic fate musically.

**Mots-clés:** Salomé; Hérode; Jean-Baptiste; femme fatale; Oscar Wilde; Richard Strauss; Symbolisme; Décadence.

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**Summary.** 1. The Biblical Myth of Salome. 2. Mythologizing the Herodian Jewish Princess in Oscar Wilde's Play. 3. Mythic Divas and Modernist Musical Representation in Strauss' Salome. 4. Works Cited.

**Cómo citar:** Blackmer, Corinne E. (2016) Daughter of Eve, Femme Fatale, and Persecuted Artist: The Mythic Transgressive Woman in Oscar Wilde's and Richard Strauss' Salome, en *Amaltea. Revista de Mitocrítica* 8, 1-15.

## 1. The Biblical Myth of Salome

Salome, the modern variant of the original Aramaic name *Sholomit*, derives from the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*. However, the mythical as opposed to historical record of Salome has been anything but peaceful. She appears as the unnamed daughter of adulterous, incestuous parents—her mother Herodias and stepfather Herod Antipas—in the accounts of Matthew (14.11-13), Luke (9.7-9) and, in greatest detail, Mark (6.17-29), where Herod tells Salome she can have half of his kingdom if he dances for her. These Gospel stories of Salome and her perverse Hellenized Jewish family take place in the 1st century CE, but have the ambience of earlier Hebrew Bible narrative, especially the Book of Esther, where King Ahasuerus also tells his new Jewish Queen Esther that she can have anything she wants, “even to half the kingdom” (Esther 5.3). While presenting themselves as historical, these stories give her the atemporal, synchronic mythic status of a nymph-like virgin turned cold-hearted dancing seductress who, along with her mother, represents the mythos of the fallen daughter of Eve (Negitsky 3-10) who brought death into the world by seducing Adam into eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad (Gen. 2-3).

Flavius Josephus, a generally reliable ancient Jewish historian who kept extensive records of the Herodian dynasty, first mentions Salome by name (*Antiquities* 18.136-37) as the royal daughter of Herodias and Herod Philip I, the half-brother of Herodias' future husband, Herod Antipas (ca. 27 BCE - 34 CE). Antipas appears to have suffered from a less acute form of the major depression and paranoia that afflicted his father, King Herod the Great. The historical record reveals Salome as an ordinary, respectable figure who first married Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra of Jerusalem and, when Philip died in 34 CE, her maternal cousin, Aristobulus, whereupon she became the Queen of Chalcis and Armenia Minor, and bore three children. Josephus states that Salome was the stepdaughter of Herod II (i.e., Herod Antipas), but never mentions any connection between Salome and John the Baptist, or her dancing in public as an adolescent, an act that was in all events then forbidden for respectable women to perform<sup>2</sup> Later, however, flouting Jewish law, which proscribed engraved

<sup>2</sup> But see Florence Morgan Gillman, *Herodias: At Home in that Fox's Den*, which argues that “the dance of Salome has been cited as major evidence that the story is fictitious, since some dismiss the possibility that a Herodian princess would have performed an erotic dance before a group of men. To do so would have placed Salome in the role of courtesan or prostitute, the type of woman who typically provided entertainment at

representations as idolatrous, her image appeared on royal coins in 56-57 CE, so perhaps Salome or her family disregarded Jewish legal and moral customs in the former case as well.

As against this *quotidian* historical existence, the Gospel of Mark, mixing facts and misstatements with oral myths and legends, as well as misogynistic fabrication in order to paint the picture of a lascivious, corrupt, female-dominated Herodian dynasty and to tell a more dramatic, succinct and compelling tale than the convoluted, male-centered political facts would allow, provides the most complete and fictionalized diachronic *parole*. The narrative represents Salome as an innocent accomplice in anti-Christian crime and, through guilt by association with her mother Herodias, a symbolic myth of the dangerous, corrupting, and seductive woman who, once allowed access to social power, destroys sexually feckless and effete men. Mark relates the following *histoire*:

And king Herod heard *of him*: (for his name was spread abroad;) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him. Others said, That is Elijah. And others said, That is a prophet, or one of the prophets. But when Herod heard *thereof*, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him for prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife; for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore, Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and a holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief *estates* of Galilee; and when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give *it* thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give *it* thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; *yet* for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in prison, and brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel; and the damsel gave it to her mother (Matt. 14 1.12)

Ironically, this narrative, which underwent modifications through the vagaries of oral transmission, models itself not only on the Book of Esther but also on an earlier 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE story about a Roman senator, Lucius Quintus Flaminius, who at a dinner had a prisoner beheaded to impress a paid male (or, in some

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banquets . . . Furthermore, if it was a sensual performance the loose moral history of the Herodians would not preclude one of their princesses dancing in public" (39).

versions, female) courtesan, whereupon the Senate censured Flaminius (Negitsky 3). The Markan story represents the fame or “spreading abroad” of the name of John the Baptist through the rumor-like supernatural conjectures formed around him: he is risen from the dead, he is one of the prophets, or he is Elijah. However, Herod the Tetrarch interjects himself anxiously to definitively name John the Baptist as the man who rose from the dead before he had him beheaded. The uneasy conjecture floats that Herod, a superstitious and paranoid man, has had murdered an authentically holy man. Worse still, Herod Antipas, here represented as a weak man inordinately influenced by women, imprisons John the Baptist at the putative behest of his wife Herodias, who took exception to his characterization of her marriage to Herod as “unlawful.” This has the effect of shifting the blame from the masculine political machinations of Antipas to the vengefulness of his corrupt wife and his stepdaughter (“Salome” 14.689-691), a shift that characterizes myths of seductive, deadly women from Pandora and Medusa to Eve (Kirk 58).

Ironically, the Baptist’s condemnation of this marriage actually originates historically in the rivalrous relationship between Antipas and his half-brother Herod Philip II, which in turn articulates the myth, so prominent in the Hebrew Bible, as well as in Egyptian and Roman mythology (Kirk 97-107), of the adversarial bonds between brothers. Antipas had divorced his first wife, Phasaelis, the daughter of Aretas VI, King of Arabia (i.e., Nabatea) in order to marry Herodias, who was then still wedded to Herod Philip II. In the struggle over the same woman between these two half-brothers, Antipas, who had been visiting Herod II and Herodias in Rome, prevailed. As Herodias was also Antipas’ half-niece, theirs was not only an incestuous but also an adulterous bond that contravened Jewish divorce law. Josephus states that Herodias had a daughter, Salome, after whose birth “Herodias, taking it into her head to flout the ways of our fathers, married Herod the Tetrarch, her husband’s brother by the same father” and “divorced herself from her husband while he was still alive” (*Antiquities* 18.5.3 136).<sup>3</sup> This was prohibited since a husband had to give his wife leave to divorce him. Since ancient Jewish custom defined women as the property of men, they seldom received leave to remarry, and normatively did so only upon the death of their first husbands.

Further, the marriage between Herodias and Antipas was ill-starred and aroused much retributive enmity. It led to an unmitigated military disaster for King Herod at the hands of King Aretas. Phasaelis fled to her father to complain that Antipas had divorced her. Her father, angered by her abandonment and seeking a pretext to settle long standing border disputes between them, engaged in an uneven battle that destroyed Antipas’ army. Josephus notes that the Jews of Galilee associated King Herod’s military defeat with his earlier treatment of John the Baptist, while Josephus regarded his debacle as retribution for his beheading of John. Josephus

<sup>3</sup> See Lev. 18.16a, “Do not uncover the nakedness of your brother’s wife; it is the nakedness of your brother,” and Lev. 20.21, “If a man marries the wife of his brother, it is indecency. It is the nakedness of his brother that he has uncovered; they shall remain childless.” Regarding Jewish divorce laws, Deut. 24.1 notes that if a wife fails to please her husband “because he finds something obnoxious about her,” he has the power to write her a bill of divorcement and send her away from his house.

was sympathetic towards John, who exercised a more powerful influence over the people than Jesus. He describes John as “a good man” who had “urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue.” Many were moved by his words and deeds, and King Herod, fearing that his strong influence over the people “might carry to a revolt—for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise” (*Antiquities* 18.5.2 116-119), had John the Baptist sent in chains to Macherus, a desert cistern overlooking the Dead Sea near his palace in Galilee, and subjected him to death by beheading. As against the Markan narrative, which presents Herodias as insisting that Antipas imprison John the Baptist, and Salome as the catalyst for his beheading, Josephus’ detailed account does not substantiate that either woman was in any fashion implicated in John the Baptist’s death. Further, rather than depicting Herod as an empathetic man fearful of beheading John the Baptist, Josephus represents him as cruel, impetuous, and prepared to crush all threats to his power, real or imagined. Thus, in line with his overriding belief in the misogynistic myth of Eve, which held that women brought sin and death into the world, Mark, as well as Matthew and Luke, ignores the historical account.

Thus, following chronological order, John the Baptist first criticized the marriage between Antipas and Herodias, telling Herod that “it is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife” (*Antiquities* 17.341). Then Herod who, according to James Crossley, was “hostile and in his actions ruthless” to John the Baptist, had him imprisoned and beheaded on charges of inciting domestic rebellion against him.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Aretas, the father of his first wife, crushed him in battle. The Jews of Galilee perceived this defeat as divine retribution for his beheading of John. Indeed, Josephus writes that John was executed in 36 CE—after the time indicated in the Gospels—but still within the governorship of Pontius Pilate, who handed over adjudication of the charges of sedition against John to the Roman client state in Galilee under King Herod. Since Antipas was answerable to Rome for his power, he could not, as Mark reports, have realistically offered his stepdaughter Salome half of his kingdom. The account represents—either implausibly or quite lewdly--the dancing of this “damsel” (*korasin* or young girl) as exerting an overpowering seductive effect on Antipas (Day 2-21).<sup>5</sup> Salome, an inexperienced innocent who does not know what to request from her lascivious stepfather, asks her mother. Herodias uses her daughter as the instrument of her revenge, and tells her to demand the head of John the Baptist because he has insulted her. Antipas, superstitious and fearful of the repercussions of killing the Baptist, accedes in anguish because he has given his intemperate oath in public, much like Jephthah the warrior in the Hebrew Bible comes to regret a rash vow he has made to the Lord that forces him to sacrifice his virgin daughter (Judges 11). Herodias stands as the apparent victor in this sordid mythological tale that projects

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<sup>4</sup>See James Crossley, *Jesus and the Chaos of History* for an account of Antipas’ ruthless attitude toward John the Baptist, which is also recorded in Mark 1.14, 6.14-16; Matt. 14.5; and Luke 3.19-20 and 9.7-9.

<sup>5</sup>In compelling Salome, against her will and the will of her mother, to abandon her modesty and dance for him and his guests in public, Antipas also violates the prohibition of Lev. 17, which states, “Do not uncover the nakedness of a woman and her daughter . . . they are kindred; it is depravity.”

onto her and her daughter Salome the consequences of intemperate, rash, violent male behavior and transgressive desire.

## 2. Mythologizing the Herodian Jewish Princess in Oscar Wilde's Play

The myth of Salome remained alive within Western culture, and became particularly predominant in the works of late 19th century French artists, writers, and musicians who influenced Wilde's development of his drama and who developed the mythos of Salome considerably. However much of her legend was further fictionalized. Lawrence Danson astutely calls Wilde's French Symbolist-Decadent tragic drama *Salomé* (1891), "an archeologist's nightmare of historical inaccuracy" (317). This remarkable work transforms the biblical mytheme of Salome as the bewitching ingénue whose public dancing serves as the catalyst for the beheading of John the Baptist at the behest of her mother Herodias into an elaborate mythos about her as an *independent*, self-consciously beguiling, seductive, deadly woman in the mold of Eve, Jezebel, and Medusa. In his hands, and in the libretto and music Strauss created after his play, Salome becomes a fallen daughter of Eve, an acolyte of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, a *femme fatale* and, most important, a decadent, transgressive, persecuted artist in the mold of her martyred queer re-creator Oscar Wilde (Robinson 203). His name, like the loves to which he alluded during his trials, became unspeakable in polite society after his conviction on charges of gross indecency with men in 1895, followed by his later incarceration in the prison Reading Gaol (Snodgrass 85). His early death at the age of 46 of syphilitic meningitis, caused indirectly by the rupture of his ear drum in prison (Ellman 243), posthumously transformed his life into the mythic embodiment—as with the ancient Greek tale of the Dionysian Orpheus—of the great artist persecuted for his transgressive sexuality and his defiance of hypocritical Victorian bourgeois moral standards (Gilman 311). Thus, the fate of Salome at the hands of her lascivious stepfather and spurning paramour prefigures the tragic destiny of the mythologized Wilde at the hands of Philistine, homophobic, patriarchal authority. In writing *Salomé*, Wilde not only prefigures his own demise but also gives a biblical analogue for the tragic death of a woman at the hands of masculine power.

Wilde converts his tragic heroine Salome from the unknowing adolescent seductress found in the Markan account into a desiring and designing young woman no younger than 18 to 20 years old. Jokanaan (i.e., John the Baptist) helps provide Salome with these mythic dimensions in his savage denunciations of her as a pagan, perverse, sinful, and wanton woman. He punishes her for her association with her mother Herodias and stepfather King Herod, and because she dares to *look* at him with interest and sexual desire. Near the beginning of the play, Salome goes outside to escape from the banquet within and the desiring looks of her stepfather Herod the Tetrarch (i.e., Herod Antipas). "Why does the Tetrarch look at me like

that,” she wonders out loud. “It’s odd that my mother’s husband should look at me like that” (8-9). Mirroring her initial conception of herself as a chaste virgin, Salome does not at first fully understand the sexual nature of the looks her stepfather gives her, but her misery and discomfort over them arouse her suspicions, then later spark her full comprehension.

Herod has had Jokanaan imprisoned for putatively inciting domestic rebellion against his rule, but Herodias, depicted as a mundane woman who does not share the Symbolist imagination of the other major characters, wants him beheaded for insulting her and taking exception to her dubious marriage. The opening of the drama, in which Narraboth, the handsome Syrian Captain of the Guard who is enraptured of Salome, stands with his Page and the soldiers on an outdoor terrace, turns around three major Symbolist motifs: the full *moon*, onto whose visage the various characters project their subjective desires, self-perceptions and apprehensions, the act of *looking* or *gazing*, and the sounds of *voices*. The French Symbolist movement exerted extensive influence on Wilde's play. Symbolists believed in art as a sublime contemplative refuge, evocation rather than plain description, representing the absolute truth of dreams and imagination in a metaphorical, suggestive, and ambiguous fashion, and that spiritual forces controlled and predestined individual existence (Varty 11). Narraboth cannot restrain himself from *looking* at the moon or, more particularly, at Salome, despite the warnings of his Page, who understands that such looks are both dangerous and taboo. Narraboth remarks that the moon has a “strange *look* (italics mine). She is like a Princess who has little white doves as feet. You would fancy that she is dancing” (5). The Guard, who also employs the elaborate symbolic language of the Song of Songs, thus prefiguring the Dance of the Seven Veils, even as the Page, who also believes that the moon wears a “strange” (5) look, anticipates the violence and death that will occur, noting that the moon is “like a pale, dead woman” who “glides along slowly up there” (5). Salome emerges from indoors disturbed by how her stepfather has *looked* at her, which mirrors the Page’s foreboding dis-ease with how the love-stricken Narraboth *looks* at Salome. Meanwhile, to escape these acts of *looking*, Salome gazes at the moon, and her representation of this symbol indicates her virginal self-conception at this juncture of the action. The moon “is like a silver flower, cold and chaste. Yes, there is a youthful beauty about the moon, a virgin’s beauty” (9), she reflects.

After Salome enters the scene, there are two competing sources of symbol-laden *voices*: the five Jewish males whose disputations about religious ritual the soldiers find tiresome and nonsensical, and Jokanaan, who gives voice to figurative prophecies mixed with moral condemnations that the soldiers, representing Hellenistic culture, do not comprehend. To symbolize them in Jewish and Christian fashion, respectively, Strauss has the men sing in cacophonous tones that echo the nonsensical and annoying sound of their voices to which the play alludes, whereas Jokanaan sings in the baritone register (Strauss' favorite) in the highly melodious and morally straight-forward key of C major. Salome decides that she wants to *look* at Jokanaan after she hears his compelling voice and his condemnation of her mother and father, which arouses both her desire and curiosity. Tragically, she

evidently wants separation from her parents and union with Jokanaan, but Jokanaan repels her desires for intimacy. However, Narraboth tells Salome that Herod has forbidden anyone to *look* upon Jokanaan, perhaps fearing the proven persuasive power of his speech and beauty of person to incite people.

As against the biblical account, which includes nothing of this kind, Wilde creates an extended scene in which Salome attempts and fails to sexually seduce Jokanaan by lavishing praise alternating with deprecations on his symbolic white skin, black hair, and red lips, the latter which follow his harsh denunciations of her. In the opera, Strauss transforms the sharply dissonant and polemical nature of the dialogue between them into transcendently beautiful music, in the keys of C # major and C major, respectively. Their harmonious duets represent a union of their two souls in a world beyond the obdurate sexual repression, religious observation, and perversion that governs the one in which they live and interact. These harmonic melodies, an intriguing choice for Strauss, suggest that Jokanaan has severely repressed affective desires for Salome. Jokanaan berates Salome by telling her, “daughter of Sodom, daughter of Babylon! Evil came into the world by woman” (17-18). Jokanaan stands as the myth of the unbending religious fanatic compelled to control and demean the fearful sexuality of women, towards whom he has fiercely repressed desire. Wilde balances his Christian fanaticism, centered on his sexual revulsion for women, against the five quarrelsome Jewish men he introduces into his drama, who represent the traditional stereotype of the crabbed, religiously literalist, and faction-mongering Jew against which Christian discourse rebelled. In anti-Semitic mythic fashion, both musically and linguistically, the Jewish men sound harsh and dissonant while the Christian Jokanaan is melodious and prophetic.

Wilde liberates Salome altogether from the will of her mother Herodias, so that her decisions are wholly her own. Salome does not repair for counsel or advice on the proper course of action she should take in the face of her stepfather’s nakedly incestuous desire for her, which causes him to rashly offer an oath that he will give her anything she desires if she dances for him. She does not do so because, after her scene of her failed seduction of Jokanaan, she has silently conceived the plan, which informs her willingness to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils for her lascivious stepfather, to ask for the head of Jokanaan so that she can possess him by indulging her necrophiliac desire to kiss him. While necrophilia, as an unspeakable form of transgression of societal norms, would appear motivated by opposite extremes of a fear of rejection coupled with a desire for a partner incapable of rejection, and a fear of death coupled with a transformation of such fear into desire, Salome has, I would argue, additional motives for her abjectly aggressive act. Her powerlessness in the face of Herod the Tetrarch’s perverse desire for her has oppressed her since the beginning of the play-opera and, arguably, stolen and symbolically destroyed the virginity that she prizes. Her self-repression is vacated by the symbolic loss of her virginity.

Soon after the opening of the play, Salome comes to possess tragically plain knowledge of why her stepfather looks at her so intently and longingly, and her knowledge introduces into the play the symbolic motif of the malign power of



sexuality (Rix 49). Salome *knows* his gaze is sexual, and that he objectifies her. In order to rebel against this incestuous outrage and escape from his imprisoning gaze, she weaponizes her awakening sexuality. She first turns her new-found power on Narraboth in order to force him to break Herod's orders against permitting anyone to look at Jokanaan. She confidently tells him, "You know that you will do this for me. And tomorrow morning, when I glance at you through my veil . . . I shall look at you, and perhaps, even give you a smile" (12). Narraboth relents, and does her will. Having succeeded with Narraboth, Salome turns to conquer Jokanaan, but he refuses to look at her and objects that she looks at him. Just as Salome had wondered why Herod looked at her, so does Jokanaan ask why she looks "at him with her golden eyes under those gilded lids" (13). At this juncture, during their extended exchange, Salome transforms from a Symbolist into a Decadent artist of the sexual. She *internalizes* the desirable exoticism with which she has been *externally* associated by Herod and Jokanaan (Danson 32). Like an aesthete Decadent, she espouses "art for art's sake," prefers the part over the whole, ignores the moralistic and prophetic discourse of Jokanaan, and decides to live in the present and dwell on "superficial" surfaces to which she gives meaning through her obsessive desire. She therefore focuses on the white skin, black hair, and red lips of Jokanaan, praising or denouncing them depending on his reaction to her.

Fatefully, however, Jokanaan denounces her, which causes her to vigorously deprecate his body while, in a very "masculine" dissociative and reductive manner, ignoring his mind and words. During this extended interlude, Narraboth commits suicide in despair over his desire for Salome, and his blood, which Herod slips on when he emerges looking for Salome to dance for him, strikes him as an evil omen. However, Salome has become so fixated on Jokanaan that she does not even notice her former paramour's suicide, which indicates the strength of her compulsive desire. When her stepfather and Herodias enter, along with the Jews who now argue over the nature and purpose of Jokanaan, the motif of transgressive *looking* and the myth of the criminally perverse and religiously obsessed Jew returns. Herodias does not want her husband looking at Salome, and Salome finds herself frustrated by Jokanaan and once again trapped by the lustful Herod, who beseeches her to dance for him, promising to give her "everything, everything that you ask for, even half of my kingdom" (31).

She turns the Decadent seductive *arts* she has used throughout the action to create an ultimately transgressive *artistry* that can manipulate the desires of her stepfather and satiate her desire for Jokanaan. Her recourse, as an artist of the sublimely transgressive erotic, to this decadent form of art, nonetheless ensnares her. Just as Wilde became the mythic embodiment of the martyred Decadent artist, so too does Salome exchange a Symbolist art of control, containment, and spiritual ritual and metaphorical meaning for a Decadent art that sacrifices and extirpates itself for obsessive desire.

According to this interpretation, Salome only partially embodies the myth of the *femme fatale*, or the irresistibly alluring woman who seduces men into difficult, dangerous, compromising, or deadly situations (Kirk 213). Jokanaan, through his persistent, inhuman rejection of Salome, provokes her extreme reaction. She orders

the destruction of Jokanaan because his religious fanaticism leads him to spurn her sexual *artistry* while her stepfather has her crushed by the shields of his soldiers because her transgressive *artistry* proves too much for him--she cannot be contained or silenced by his unlawful incestuous desires for her. Like a hypocritical Victorian patriarch, he needs her eliminated despite his unlawful desires for her, which have caused the entire action. Obsessively and relentlessly, Salome proves willing to tragically *lose* herself in order to *gain* the distinction and difference Jokanaan represents at any cost. Ultimately, the drama and opera explore how *obsession*—Herod’s for Salome, and Salome’s for Jokanaan—lead to unyielding destruction through perversion: incest, suicidal ideation, revenge, repugnance, and necrophilia. These actions and symbols repudiate the wars of religion, dogma, and doctrine that the drama represents through Jokanaan and the male Jews, both of whom are obdurate in their allegiances to moral abstractions and absolutes.

Wilde has this more mature and self-knowing Salome, who also embodies the Jezebel myth of the hyper-sexual non-European and “Orientalist” pagan woman (Hazelton 207), dance the infamous Dance of the Seven Veils, which he introduces into the stage directions for the play (33). This dance, which gave birth to the modern strip tease and the Salome “dancing craze” (Simonson 124) originated in the mythic narrative surrounding Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love, sex, and war. She descended to the underworld in search of her lover Tammuz, the god of the harvest (Black and Green 169-170). In order to complete her journey, Ishtar must relinquish her jewels and robes at each of the seven gates to the underworld until she stands naked in the land of no return (Kirk 78). Like the nakedness of Salome when she has completed removing her veils during her dance, the nakedness of Ishtar represents the unconscious truth and the ultimate unveiling. In brief, unveiled nakedness—both in the myth of Ishtar and the mythicized dance of Salome—is co-extensive with close, quasi-sexualized awareness of and contact with the very *face* of death. Further, Wilde changes the audience for the Dance of the Seven Veils. While in Mark, Salome dances for Antipas and his guests in a public performance, in the play she does a private dance for the Tetrarch himself, which heightens the intimate atmosphere, and the incestuous, transgressive, violating nature of his desire for Salome.

Her unveiling therefore prefigures Salome’s abject breaking of the unspeakable taboo against necrophilia, which causes her horrified stepfather to order her crushed beneath the soldiers’ shields on which she has earlier asked for the head of Jokanaan.<sup>6</sup> The play thus comes full circle, from the transgressive sexuality that characterizes Salome’s “wooing” of Jokanaan and which, in Wilde’s world,

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<sup>6</sup> Despite its extensive moral and ritualistic legislation, the Hebrew Bible does not adumbrate a prohibition against necrophilia *per se*. Necrophilia therefore represents an unspeakable, unthinkable evil that exceeds even the biblical moral imagination. The only given prohibition involves one against touching a corpse, which states, “He who touches the corpse of any human being shall be unclean for seven days. He shall cleanse himself with it [i.e., ashes] on the third day and on the seventh day . . . Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the Lord’s Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel” (Num. 19.11-13). Also see Lev. 21.1, Num. 5.2, 6.6, and 9.6.

signifies rebellion against hypocritical Victorian bourgeois moral “principles,” to the perversion of Antipas’ incestuous and Salome’s necrophiliac desires that dominate the latter half of the action. The drama therefore moves from flouting normative morality to enacting perverse desires that, like rape, draw others into experiences against their wills. Such decadent transgression allegorizes the terror of strangeness and the misery of the damaging, driven, destructive life.

### 3. Mythic Divas and Modernist Musical Representation in Strauss’ *Salome*

At the world premiere in Dresden, Germany (1905), Schoenberg, Mahler, Berg, and Puccini sat in the audience for this revolutionary opera, which became a *succès de scandale* and among the most important and popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist repertoire. The score for *Salome* calls for a 105-piece orchestra with 49 instruments, including a 15-piece brass section, an expanded first and second string ensemble, and a hecklephone and kettledrums. The role of Salome requires the heaviest dramatic soprano (*hochdramatischersopran*) to carry past this orchestral wall of sound—a powerful and stentorian voice, uniform across the full register from low G minor (3<sup>rd</sup>) to high B (5<sup>th</sup>), or the contralto-mezzo soprano to the coloratura soprano ranges. This voice must have the volume, endurance and stamina, in this one-act opera, for 90 minutes of excruciatingly tense music without the reprieve of gentle lyrical melodies. In addition to these significant musical demands, which only the rare singer can satisfy successfully, *Salome* requires, under ideal circumstances, an artist who can also perform the Dance of the Seven Veils, and have the prima ballerina skill to move in seductive, gracious, decadently stylized fashion to the chromatic Oriental melodies that Strauss uses to figure exotic Middle Eastern dance. Finally, the Dance of the Seven Veils is based on the myth of the underworld descent of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Thus, most performers have interpreted this dance to call for unveiling either to complete nakedness or to a transparent body stocking, which means that the role requires agile dancing skill as well as compelling beauty of voice *and* body.

The female opera singers who have attained such success have therefore earned fabled status as stellar artistic divas who match the mythos surrounding the character of Salome herself.<sup>7</sup> This is particularly true of the great singers Olive Fremstad and Mary Garden, who established the contours of the role artistically. Olive Fremstad, who premiered *Salome* at the Metropolitan Opera on January 22, 1907, was a legendary Wagnerian diva who went into a virtual trance before performing a role. In preparation for singing *Salome*, she visited a morgue to discover the actual weight (quite heavy) of a severed human head. In her dramatic interpretation of the role, she therefore *staggered* under the weight of the charger bearing the head of Jokanaan (Yohalem 3). Having a heroic tessitura that extended

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<sup>7</sup> The famous dramatic coloratura sopranos who have assayed the role of Salome include Maria Cebotari, Ljuba Welitsch, Birgit Nilsson, Maria Ewing, Leonie Rysanek, Éva Marton, Radmila Bakočević, Monserrat Caballé, Anja Silija, Karan Armstrong, Nancy Shade, Dame Gwyneth Jones, Catherine Malfitano, and Hildegard Behrens. Among these singers, Catherine Malfitano, Maria Ewing, Mary Garden, and Karita Mattila have also danced the Dance of the Seven Veils.

from the contralto-mezzo to the coloratura soprano registers, she became the object of adoration—and the very image of the sublimely dedicated artist—for the renowned lesbian American writer, Willa Cather, an opera lover who wrote an accomplished novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915) about the course of Fremstad's development as an artist.

Like Mary Garden, the lyric dramatic soprano whose gorgeous melodic voice was famous for its coloration, and who premiered the opera in French at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House in 1909, Fremstad was in the most capacious fashion *queer*--not only in the sense of being unique, bohemian, and *outré*—but also in being anything but a conventional heterosexual woman. Fremstad was twice very briefly married and divorced, but her most enduring relationship, which can best be described as a romantic lesbian friendship, was with her secretary, Mary Watkins Cushing, with whom she lived as a couple for decades (Castle 30). Garden, for her part, performed to perfection the role of a young man in Massenet's *Le jongleur de Notre Dame* and famously said, "I wanted liberty and I want my own way . . . I had a fondness for men, yes, but very little passion and no need" (Garden 134). Indeed, both Garden and Fremstad understood themselves as operatic artists who premiered and created the role of Salome in the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century, to be working in the transgressive mold of Wilde himself by performing a work and embodying a role that violated heteronormative bourgeois codes of moral propriety (Toepfer 169).<sup>8</sup>

The opera in which they sang was thoroughly Modernist in musical conception. *Salome* has no overture. The opera opens with a scalar run for clarinet in the key of C sharp—which serves as the signature key for Salome—and immediately establishes her as the dominant presence in the work. The opera then introduces the love-sick Narraboth, his page, the soldiers, and the alternating melodious and dissonant music of Jokanaan and the Jews, respectively. The music, featuring dissonance and chromaticism that moves jarringly between distant keys, has no clear tonal center and uses polytonality to represent the extreme psychological situations caused by the two drastic demands Salome makes that break the otherwise tableau-like Symbolist atmosphere: to look on Jokanaan and to have him beheaded. The opening uses a series of unrelated harmonies whose coloristic sounds help to create an ominous sense of ambiguous meaning and unmoored context. This establishes the pattern of fluctuating leitmotifs, and a heightened sense of the supernatural also suited to creating the dire feelings of terror, desire, hatred, and obsession that dominate the opera. For instance, Herod the Tetrarch, an *extremely* challenging role for a high character tenor, combines the aspects of self-

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<sup>8</sup> At the premiere at the Metropolitan Opera, Louise Morgan, the daughter of John Pierpont Morgan, succeeded in having further performances of *Salome* cancelled, while the show went on uninterrupted with Mary Garden at Oscar Hammerstein's far more liberal and artistically experimental Manhattan Opera House. Marie Wittich, who gave the world premiere of the opera in Desden, had a wonderfully powerful Wagnerian voice, but it cannot be said that she entered into the spirit of the role. She and most of the cast nearly withdrew from the production, but she eventually relented and continued with the rehearsals. However, Wittich, who was 37 with a somewhat matronly figure, refused to perform Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils, or to kiss the severed head of Jokanaan, Her oft-quoted remark to Strauss in this respect was: "I won't do it; I'm a decent woman" (Fisher 33).

abandoned decadence and symbolist self-restraint, for he sings in a sensual, florid fashion yet also has deep respect for the asceticism and spirituality embodied in persons such as Jokanaan. As Salome indicates in her opening aria, in which she emerges from the hothouse incestuous atmosphere of Herod Antipas' banquet hall to admire a full moon that seems to her chaste and virginal, the opera inhabits multiple worlds—Jewish, Egyptian, and Roman—all of which Salome finds objectionable. The Jews wrangle incessantly over religious ritual, the Egyptians are crafty, and the Romans are “brutal and barbarian” people who speak an “uncouth language” (9). In the luxurious ambience of Hellenistic antiquity in which she resides, and which aspired to culturally unify the civilized world, *Salome* represents the impossibility of continuity and legible communication between the disparate domains of Judaism and Christianity. In his German libretto, Strauss followed Wilde's drama closely, while eliminating the lengthy philosophical debates over morals and religion, and shortening some lines to enable the play to accommodate the arc of the music. Salome, who has been the object of the prohibited *looks* of Narraboth and, in particular, Herod Antipas, first *hears* the prophecies of Jokanaan welling up through the floor from the cistern. She feels attracted to Jokanaan not so much because of his intrinsic merits, but because he represents *difference* in an environment of incestuous *sameness*, dares to condemn her perversely immoral parents, and inspires fear in the stepfather she fears and loathes.

In the final analysis, *Salome* represents the mythic machinations of the *femme fatale* on the one hand, and the socially subversive and persecuted female artist in the manner of Wilde on the other. Both Wilde and Strauss represent death as the price Salome must pay for her feminine usurpation of male authority and flouting of conventional social mores. The ending therefore not only critiques but also reasserts patriarchal power. Strauss emphasizes the tragic fall of this mythic Jewish princess through a musical setting for the final stage direction Wilde provides that signals the death of Salome. Her music allegorizes her complete loss of agency, individual subjectivity, and *difference* from the men who have oppressed or rejected her. She sings in C major—the key associated with Jokanaan and Herod—and slips downward after she has reached C sharp Major in the climax of her final aria. This final tonal reconfiguration indicates that Jokanaan in his bitter sexual denunciation and Herod in his wanton sexual lust, *foredoom* and *summon* her death. As the soldiers' chargers close in to crush the fated Salome, Strauss implies that C Major shall never again sound consonant but rather triumphantly sinister, harsh, and deadly.

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