Title of Paper: **Forgiving Salome: Oscar Wilde’s Tragic Heroine**  
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Abstract:

Critics such as Christopher S. Nassaar and Nataly Shaheen have read Salome “as a symbol of pure evil, Wilde associates her with the vampire, the siren, and the werewolf,” (132). Bram Dijkstra has identified Wilde’s *Salome* as “a very carefully designed dramatization of the struggle between the bestial hunger of woman and the idealistic yearnings of man” (396). I find that Dijkstra’s identification of Salome as a sexual beast takes into account the ways Wilde is drawing on, and changing, the Salome myth. Chris Snodgrass has disagreed with this reading as well: “In fact, Wilde goes to considerable lengths to turn Huysmans’ ‘monstrous beast’ into a classically tragic victim,” (Wilde’s Salome 183). I agree with Snodgrass’s reading of Salome as a tragic figure meant to evoke sympathy, not revulsion. By analyzing the ways which Wilde drew on earlier sources of this myth, it becomes clear that he created a tragic love story with the strong, sympathetic character of Salome at the center of an ill-fated passion. My argument will not only work to displace the reading of Salome as a “beast,” but it will envision the ways that Wilde was creating a figure for the New Woman that he could appreciate and work into the Decadent tradition.

Keywords: Oscar Wilde; Salome; New Woman; Fin-de-siècle; Bible

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Thirty-eight years ago, Joseph Stein wrote that, “In his plays and poetry, Oscar Wilde composed variations on the basic theme of the antagonism between modern women and the dandy. Wilde’s females seem to fall into two broad categories: the diseased femme fatal and the all too healthy new woman.” Stein uses Salome as an example of the monstrous, deadly woman who destroys the men around her. More recent critics such as Christopher S. Nassaar and Nataly Shaheen have read Salome “as a symbol of pure evil” arguing that “Wilde associates her with the vampire, the siren, and the werewolf,” (132). Bram Dijkstra has identified Wilde’s Salome as “a very carefully designed dramatization of the struggle between the bestial hunger of woman and the idealistic yearnings of man” (396). Richard A. Kaye links Salome to larger themes of devilish women in Decadent fiction, explaining that she is “a belligerent she-devil who consumes men, joins other craven creatures of debauched, imperious femaleness in animating fin-de-siècle culture” (119). While he doesn’t spell out the link between this “she-devil” to the new women, both were seen as threats to the Decadent men. I don’t think that these identifications of Salome as a sexual beast takes into account the ways Wilde is drawing on, and changing, the Salome myth. Chris Snodgrass has disagreed with this reading as well. “In fact,” he says, “Wilde goes to considerable lengths to turn Huysmans’ ‘monstrous beast’ into a classically tragic victim,” (Wilde’s Salome 183). I agree with Snodgrass’s reading of Salome as a tragic figure meant to evoke sympathy, not revulsion. The argument for reading Salome as a tragedy can be enhanced by placing it in context with previous iconic tragedies such as Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. By analyzing the ways which Wilde drew on these sources it becomes clear that he created a tragic love story with a strong, sympathetic character at the center of an ill-fated passion. By forgiving Salome, we can see that Wilde was compassionate towards this strong, sexual, “New Woman.”

Wilde’s Salome is vastly different from the versions which came before, and his revisions of the actual Biblical story deserve attention. The story is brought up twice in the Bible, once in Matthew and once in Mark. The version in Mark is somewhat more extensive, and the story climaxes 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 to thee…And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist…” (King James Version, Mark 6:22-24, 26). Wilde drastically changed the original story to give Salome much more of a voice. In this Biblical version, she is a virtually silent unnamed figure who comes out to entertain Herod and his friends, and does not even have the agency to ask Herod for something she herself desires. Nor, in fact, does she seem to have any knowledge of John other than that her mother despises him. Wilde’s Salome is radically different from this Robert Combs also finds that “Salome disrupts not by becoming the tool of her evil mother, but by simply being herself, an inexperienced young woman with a voracious hunger for life” (186). Wilde revises Salome into a heroine who speaks, acts, and chooses – but is young enough to not fully understand the power of her own agency.

In Wilde’s play we have the culmination of the Decadent obsession with Salome. By writing about Salome, Wilde was able to both draw comparisons with
other authors who had taken up her tale, and surpass any previous story of her. The Decadent author who is said to have most inspired Wilde is Joris Karl Huysmans in his *A Rebours*. Huysmans describes in great detail paintings of Salome by Gustave Moreau. While comparisons of Wilde’s Salome and Huysmans’ Salome abound, I do not believe that they are relevant here other than displaying the Decadent fascination with Salome. Oscar Wilde created a character more real and full of life than any that came before, while Huysmans described paintings. Wilde may have built his story upon previous conceptions, but he still altered much more than he ever used. In his *Salome*, Wilde created a unique and active individual that was absent in previous manifestations of her, and was thus writing not the ultimate “femme fatale” but rather a realistic person full of life and love.

From Salome’s first entrance in Wilde’s play there is an agency and activity that is absent in previous visions of her. She leaves the party to go out into the fresh air of the balcony, “I will not stay, I cannot stay” she says “It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. Of a truth I know it too well,” (10). From the first encounter with this Salome we can see that she acts on her own wishes, not those of another. We can also see that she has an undesired wisdom of sexuality which has been forced on her by the lust of the men that surround her. Wilde has in this move also subtly put forth the power of Salome over everything around her. Instead of the central action following the banquet inside, she has moved the location of the play outdoors. After Salome’s absence from the party, and her refusal to rejoin it, Herod moves the entire celebration outdoors. Immediately before Herod makes his entrance onto the terrace, the first soldier says: “The Tetrarch will not come to this place. He never comes on the terrace. He is too much afraid of the prophet” (27). Thus from the beginning we see Herod bending his entire will to Salome. Joseph Donohue also notes the way Salome has taken control of her settings:

This remarkable enlargement of a character who begins as an ostensibly weak, waif-like pubescent girl occurs partly through Wilde’s brilliant use of the potential of the physical theatre[…]Salome resolutely makes this central point her own resting place, delineating a space that mentally excludes all traces of the exterior setting and so achieving ‘a subjectivity and interiority’, as Gilbert explains, notably absent from Wilde’s sources. Salome has been instinctively intent on establishing this interiority almost from her entrance. Her strong will to gain what she wants – initially, the presence of the prophet on Herod’s private terrace and, later, the head of the prophet himself – makes her singularly able to ignore whatever might distract from her purpose.

(134)

Salome’s strength of will is not only necessary to gain her desires, but also for her to remain unfeeling to Herod’s advances. Throughout the play, Salome exercises her agency in everything she does; all of her actions express her own desires. This is not a Salome who would go to her mother asking what she ought to demand of Herod. In this way, through Salome, we are seeing Wilde giving power back to women; he has
even said “I cannot conceive of a Salome who is unconscious of what she does, a Salome who is but a silent and passive instrument,” (qtd. Snodgrass, Wilde’s Salome 184-185). Wilde did not give Salome back her voice and actions in order to punish her for using this same voice. Nor do I believe that the similarities of the New Women, who sought to gain more agency and control over their physical spaces (forcing them “out” of the house as well), would have been lost on Wilde. The New Woman and Salome are also similar in their particularly un-Victorian responses to love and sexuality.

While Salome does have an epiphany at the end of the play where she experiences love, she has already been corrupted by all of those around her. The male characters, with the notable exception of the Page, seem to be continually looking and lusting after her. The world she has grown up in has taught her that any desire she may have can be granted if she so much as smiles or dances for the right man. She has no visible examples of relationships based on love, they are all based on lust or power. It is Narraboth’s lust which first allows her to encounter Iokanaan, and it is Herod’s lust that lets her receive his head. That said, while her visions of love and reality have been corrupted, her soul has remained intact. Lamenting Iokanaan’s death she wails: “What shall I do now, Iokanaan? […] I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste and thou didst fill my veins with fire” (Wilde 65). She was previously able to remain emotionally untouched by those who only looked and lusted after her. Even though her vision of love has been distorted by her surroundings, she has managed to keep her heart uninvolved until Iokanaan.

Iokanaan’s refusal to look at Salome the way everyone around her does inspires both her love and her consternation. He is the only male figure to not value her status and beauty above all else. Instead of being tempted by her, he sticks to his moral ground. This lack of objectification is what makes Salome fall so immediately in love with him. Unfortunately for Salome, he refuses to see Salome not only in a sexual way, but in any way whatsoever. Iokanaan’s ability to see deeply into the people around him is noticeably absent when it comes to Salome. He can see and comment on Herodias’s incest, Herod’s moral weakness, while making supposedly insightful predictions. Yet, he avoids all sight of Salome – he literally turns back to his cistern. This leads to Salome’s tragic plea to him after his death, “Well, thou has seen thy God, Iokanaan, but me, me, thou never didst see. If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me. I saw thee, and I loved thee. Oh, how I loved thee! I love thee yet, Iokanaan” (Wilde 65). In this passage Salome is expressing her wish that Iokanaan had looked deeply inside her and seen who she was at her core. The men around Salome “see” her, but instead of loving, they merely lust after her. Iokanaan was Salome’s one real chance to find someone who would truly love her. This last monologue brings to the forefront the tragedy of this failed love affair and is where Salome is most explicit about her true love for this strange man.

One of the major changes Wilde made on the Salome myth is Salome’s death at the end of the play, and I believe he did this to cement the play as a tragedy. Critics such as Bram Dijkstra have read the ending of Salome somewhat differently: “The play works up to a conclusion in which the masculine mind is led[…]to an understanding of the need for woman’s immediate physical destruction[…]As such
the work climaxes in a categorical renunciation of any communication between male and female, and, in effect, becomes a call to gynecide” (396).

I think that this reading does not at all take into account the sympathy that is given to Salome throughout the whole of the play. Salome is not even seen as monstrous until the end of the play, where she demands the head of Iokanaan and then kisses his mouth. It is, in fact, the kiss that has been called out as the most morbid moment of the play, and perhaps it is, but Wilde is using this moment to do more than upset the middle class.

The ending of the play, I believe is actually making a subtle reference to one of the most iconic love tragedies in British history – *Romeo and Juliet*. Repeatedly throughout the play Salome tells Iokanaan “[s]uffer me to kiss thy mouth,” (24, 25, 26) and “I will kiss thy mouth,” (24, 26, 64). When comparing this to the final act of *Romeo and Juliet*, what is immediately noticeable is Juliet’s line: “I will kiss thy lips,” (V:III:176). Wilde was very well-versed in Shakespeare, and I do not believe it possible that in his own tragedy he would so closely mimic this line accidentally. As this line occurs right before Juliet kisses her dead lover, Wilde is accomplishing two distinct things in his own play. He is asking the audience to have the same consideration and sympathy for Salome as they did for Juliet; and he is commenting on the “forgivable” morbidity of love. Other scholars have also commented on the similarity of *Salome* to other more “traditional” romances. Kirby Farrell found a similarity to *Romeo and Juliet*, however he only finds that, “[l]ike Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the word ‘death’ occurs more often than anywhere else in the canon, *Salome* mingles desire, dread, and aggression” (109-110). Robert Combs argues that “Salome, herself, is a parody of the Romantic lover who discovers his/her Transcendental Self in a love greater than life or death. The image of Salome kissing the dead lips of a severed head is a grotesque fusion of ecstasy and ghoulish horror that parodies the love/death theme occurring in the tragic endings of many nineteenth century operas” (186). What both scholars fail to account for is the way Wilde was combining these themes of romantic lovers and death and desire.

Wilde took his idea of morbid love farther by having Salome’s kiss appear to sexually satisfy Salome. Yet he still maintained the romantic aspect of this couple by returning Salome to her former adulations of Iokanaan’s body. Again we have Wilde mimicking Shakespeare in the post-mortem kiss; after kissing the deceased Romeo’s lips, Juliet comments, “[thy] lips are warm,” (V:iii:180). Salome also makes a comment on her departed lover’s lips, “[there] was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?...Nay; but perchance it was the taste of love,” (66). Both comments bring forward the recent death of the male lover, although Wilde forefronts the active role Salome played in Iokanaan’s death. In Salome’s comment on the bitter taste of her lover’s lips, Wilde is clearly exceeding the morbidity of *Romeo and Juliet*. While I do believe that he intends to assert the natural and tragic love of Salome, I think he is also making a larger comment on love. He is making his heroine more gruesome to indicate the nature of tragic love stories as being inherently gruesome. This can actually be seen as functioning similarly to New Woman fiction, in which the “typical” Victorian love story is shown to be already perverse or harmful for the woman.
Wilde was also bringing forward the youth of Salome at the end of this play by showing her vacillating confusion of Iokanaan's death. Once she has his head she seems unable to combine her idea of the man that she had loved with this now lifeless visage; “But wherefore dost thou not look at me, Iokanaan?...And thy tongue, that was like a red snake darting poison, it moves no more, it speaks no words, Iokanaan, that scarlet viper that spat its venom upon me. It is strange, is it not? How is it that the red viper stirs no longer?” (64). Salome then continues trying to incorporate how she can still love this now dead man. She reverts to all of the language of love that she had used earlier; again idolizing his body, hair, and of course lips. In this long monologue she tries to come to terms with why this man could not love her, and why they had to be separated by death. This youthful, almost innocent, confusion about the mysteries of death is completely absent from Bram Dijkstra’s reading of the play.

Dijkstra turns Wilde’s Salome into the ultimate battle of the sexes. He interprets the play as “the struggle between the bestial hunger of woman and the idealistic yearnings of man,” and as “the battle between sight and sound […] the struggle between materialism and idealism, between the feminine and the masculine,” (396). The play then becomes, to Dijkstra, about the degrading materialistic desires of women which debase the pure idealistic natures of men. Herod is put in the middle as the protagonist who is torn, and lured by woman’s evil nature into doing evil. However, he realizes his grave error and saves his own soul by killing the monstrous Salome. To me, this reading could not be further from Wilde’s depiction; Herod is not the central figure going through a psychological evolution. He is an asinine comic figure ruled by his own lust. Salome is clearly the sympathetic character who goes through a major transition. Joseph Donohue rejects Dijkstra’s reading as well:

What Dijkstra’s male-oriented reading misses, then is that it is Salome’s own desires, supplanting those of Herod, that become the central motive of the action of the play. She will have none of the usual female self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, urged upon her by Herod. She has defiantly eroticized the prophet Iokanaan and counted the charms of his body – his hair, his mouth, his head- making the male body openly an object of desire. (Salome and the Wildean Art 98).

Dijkstra has over-used his tendency to analyze works in terms of the male character in the case of Salome. His preoccupation with the character of Herod has caused him to overlook Salome’s strength of will that Donohue has pointed out. Nor does he take into account the artistic aspect of Wilde’s play. The tragedy of the deaths of Salome and Iokanaan creates a beauty unequalled in any previous Salome tale. Wilde’s ultimate goal was not to make a story demonizing women, but rather to make a beautiful story that would affect everyone who read it.

Diane Long Hoeveler has also interpreted Salome as Wilde’s assault on women. In her essay “A Reading of the Emotions of Salome: Sympathy for the Devil, or Fear and Loathing,” she makes the broad generalization that all men are threatened by the power of Salome and thus create her as a monstrous figure to be destroyed, and all women sympathize with Salome and make her into a tragic figure:
For women artists, Salome was a victim because of her religious difference, but for male artists, Salome was a victimizer because of those differences all of which had to be eradicated before society would be safe from her pernicious and potentially anarchic influence. (89)

While she refers to many different incarnations of Salome, Oscar Wilde’s Salome is her main point of reference in emphasizing the male resentment of Salome. However, she fails to realize that Wilde is in fact the mediating author between the extremes of Salome as an innocent uninvolved victim and as a seductive siren causing the death of men. Wilde’s Salome is both innocent, and powerful; she has agency to enact her own desires, yet does not fully comprehend the repercussions of her actions. Hoeveler believes that the death of Salome in Wilde’s play serves to reinforce patriarchal values. Most of Hoeveler’s interpretation comes from the drawings done by Aubrey Beardsley. In fact, the “first hint” that reinforces this reading of Wilde’s condemnation of Salome, she finds in these drawings (98). Her main defense for seeing Wilde’s Salome as an antifeminist text is in the enigmatic drawings that Wilde himself did not appreciate as representative of his work.

It would be easy to comment that Wilde was far from thoroughly pleased with Beardsley’s drawings, and then promptly write them off as irrelevant. Yet, I think that the play can not be completely understood without them, and Wilde did in fact enjoy the first drawing that Beardsley created, “J’ai Baisé ta Bouche Iokanaan.” In this first drawing we still have the elements present that critics have been so confused by – a monstrous overbearing woman leering at the decapitated Iokanaan. Elliot L. Gilbert reads all of the drawings as being relevant to the play as they both portray “the demonic and perverse sexuality that is one of the chief elements of Wilde’s drama” (Gilbert 138). As I do not believe that perversity is the main element in Salome, I think instead that Wilde was drawn to the fantastic elements in this first drawing. The floating Salome creates an illusion, drawing attention to the mythic components of this story. Also the monstrous elements that Beardsley was highlighting only add to a reading of this play as a criticism of reading tragic love stories without considering their “morbid” tendencies.

While Salome may be seen as exhibiting morbid love fantasies, she is in fact a tragic character. In looking at the previous Salome stories, we can see all of the changes that Wilde made on this story. His alterations did not work to create a monstrous over-sexed woman who needed and deserved to be killed at the end of the play. Rather he turned Salome into a person who had agency and voice, and who died tragically for a love that was seen as gruesome by those around her. He was thus creating a character similar to the New Women in terms of agency, overt sexuality, and a story that critiqued familiar romantic narratives. The sympathy that he gives this character, and the emphasis on the tragedy of the story tends to suggest that he was not as hostile to the New Women as he has often been painted. In consequence, the gender politics that are troublesome in many of the other works of Wilde perhaps deserve to be analyzed through a more sympathetic lens to see if this potential sympathy for the New Woman is present more generally in Wilde’s writings.
References


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The Victorian
