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“Passion, Salomé”: Decadent Transformations and Transgressions of Feminine Sensuality in Huysmans, Wilde, and Strauss¹

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Representations of Salomé have been hued in the paradoxical characterisations of the beautifully seductive and evil femme fatale. While some artists closely aligned their depictions to this Pandorian stereotype in collusion with narrative traditions of the oppressive male gaze, others challenged it through inventive reimaginings of Salomé, unveiling glimpses of the character’s complex emotive, psychological, and sensual universe that still manages to leave spectators ambivalent and discombobulated today. This article explores the transformations of Salomé in artistic representations of the Decadence across a range of media through a comparative reading of Huysmans’ novel À Rebours (1884), Wilde’s play Salomé (1891) and Strauss’ opera Salomé (1905). The interpretive changes in her characterisations – the femme fatale par excellence, the tragically fated heroine, the transgressive Decadent artist, the self-fulfilled hedonist – uncover a weaponisation of Salomé, transforming her oppressive patriarchal environmental conditions and the sexually objectifying male gaze that have often confined her, to reveal an empowered aesthetic of Decadent transgression that questions and subverts traditional gender and power dynamics, gender identities, and sensual feminine subjectivities.

And wonder gripped the immortal gods and the mortal human beings when they saw the steep deception, intractable for human beings. For from her [Pandora] comes the race of female women: for of her is the deadly race and tribe of women, a great woe for mortals, dwelling with men, no companions of baneful poverty but only of luxury.

– Hesiod. Theogony, ll. 585-593 (transl. Most)

Salomé, the mysterious dancing princess demanding the head of John the Baptiste, was born as one of many figurative daughters of the iconic ur-femme fatale Pandora who first released evil and sickness into the world – an impersonation of beautiful evil, a deceivingly seductive creature with an excessive thirst for luxury, an insatiable curiosity, and sickly wicked mind.² Throughout the nineteenth century, the Salomé mytheme inspired profound fascination and a

remarkable variety of visual, literary, and musical representations, blooming especially throughout the Decadence imagination of the fin de siècle. While some artists aligned their depiction with hyper-masculinist fantasies, others challenged and reimagined the character. These reimaginings reveal glimpses into Salomé's complex emotive, psychological, and sensual universe, which still manages to leave spectators ambivalent and discombobulated today, allowing us to reflect on transgressive gender identities, sexualities, and sensual subjectivities. This article traces the different interpretative transfigurations in Huysmans' novel *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*; 1884), Wilde's tragedy *Salomé* (1891) and Strauss' opera of the same name (1905) to explore tensions and differences and reflect on Salomé's evolution throughout the artistic and literary movement, and critical concept, of Decadence.³

Following patristic and patriarchal traditions, popular iconology of the *femme fatale* justified the suppression of feminine desires for agency and independence as a necessity for human survival and the preservation of moral good (cf. Stott 1992). As Moog-Grünewald assesses, notions of fatality were grounded in elements of the disastrous, ominous, and deadly, as well as in notions of the divinely ordained (2). It was particularly in combination with Salomé's historical or mythical characterisation, stressing "the universal or archetypal nature of her appeal", arousing "in her beholder fear along with attraction, terror along with desire" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 210), that the mytheme appealed to artists like Joris-Karl Huysmans, who transformed her into the *femme fatale* epitome in his breviary of the Decadence. *À Rebours* follows the eccentric aristocrat Des Esseintes, who withdraws to a remote villa to escape the *ennui* of contemporary life. Indulging in ecstatic mysticisms, excessive luxury, and artificiality, he engulfs his sensory appetites by entrancing himself in two Salomé paintings by Gustave Moreau, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* (1876) and *L'Apparition* (1876). It is a much-cited passage, congenial for the imagination and expression of the Decadence and the cliché of Salomé as the erotic, 'exotic' ideal.

As Hudson Jones and Kingsley note, both Moreau's and Huysmans' style can be described as Decadent: "The texture of [the] description, like that of the painting, is built up by accretions of layers of verbal detail as thickly encrusted as Moreau's paint. All senses are aroused" (347). The sumptuous layers of painted detail create a sensuous richness of carefully repetitive details and motifs fusing into a mosaic of exoticism,⁴ paralleled in dense adjective phrases and repetitions of the endings with "é".⁵ Moving far beyond a mere description of Moreau's paintings, the

protagonist's imagination heavily feeds into them, adding movement and detail that transcend the paintings and live through his imagination:

Amid the heady *odour of these perfumes*, in the *overheated* atmosphere of the basilica, Salome slowly *glides forward* of the points of her toes [...], she begins the lascivious dance which is to rouse Herod's dormant senses; her breasts *rise and fall*, the nipples *hardening* at the *touch* of her *whirling* necklaces; the strings of diamond glitter against her *moist* flesh; her bracelets, her belts, her rings, all *spit out fiery sparks* [...]. In Gustave Moreau's work, which in conception went far beyond the data supplied by the New Testament, Des Esseintes saw realized at long last *the weird and superhuman Salome of his dreams*. Here she was *no longer just the dancing girl who extorts a cry of lust and lechery from an old man by the lascivious movements of her loins; who saps the morale and breaks the will of a king with the heaving of her breasts, the twitching of her belly, the quivering of her thighs*. She had become, as it were, the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust, the Goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed Beauty, [...] the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that approaches her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches. (Huysmans 1974, 65f., emphasis mine)

As Bernheimer aptly discerns, Huysmans' use of language presents an expression and control of the "female sexual body" in an "obsessive phantasmic economy" (312). Salomé's static position in Moreau's painting, peculiarly balanced on the tips of her toes with heavy garments anchoring her appearance, becomes a fetishistic dissection of male desire, flooded with seductive movements and added sensory, heavily sexualised details of body parts that can be seen as representing a "disfigure[ment of] the woman's body" (ibid.).⁶

Des Esseintes' fantasy of Salomé is not only projected onto Moreau's paintings; he also alters earlier mythemes. The Biblical Salomé originally appears as an unfortunate instrument of her vengeful mother Herodias's anti-Christian malfeasance, and the dance demanded by the king is not described. The protagonist presumes a significant shift in the Biblical 'data', which is, in fact, only added in later narrations: her self-conscious, independent beguiling and indifference that transforms her into the destructive, deadly seducer and *femme fatale* par excellence. His true

fascination thus lies in his fantasy of her depravity, her artificial and superhuman nature; mythical and transcending that which is natural, which is simultaneously bound to and contrasted by human existence.⁷ This characterisation is reinforced by the intermedial network drawn to other figures of demonic seduction, echoing Moreau's other depictions of femme fatale mythemes and influences.⁸ Solidified within this hyper-masculinist narrative tradition, with a newly acquired self-consciousness and an objectified, lecherous appearance, Salomé's character and the readership's image of her are imprisoned within the protagonist's obsessive sexually objectifying gaze. Huysmans' turning away from naturalism and abolishment of narrative tradition find form in the suppression of "passion, woman" (Bernheimer, 312).⁹ Salomé's demonisation is realised through the combined effort of multi-sensory fetishistic voyeurism, the amputation of her mind, and the renunciation of her inner voice, which were indeed required for the author's denial of the 'real', including the denial of her character as an authentic human being.

This meditation on Moreau's representations and fascination for Salomé is absorbed by Oscar Wilde, who significantly transforms the mytheme. Wilde's use of intermedially-layered successive symbolic images and verbal repetitions, with an almost mystical effect, announces and leads towards a fatal escalation, creating an atmosphere of obsession and fatality. These impressions unite in the symbolic use and catalyst function of the moon, which mirrors the progressive action:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN: She [the moon] has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing.

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly.
[...]

SALOMÉ: How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, you would think she was a little silver flower. The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin.
[...]

HEROD: Ah, you are going to dance with naked feet. 'Tis well!—"Tis well. Your little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees.... No, no, she is going to dance on blood.

[...]

Ah! Look at the moon! She has become red. She has become red as blood.

(Wilde 2013, 7, 9, 10, 24; emphasis mine)

Fusing in the feminine gendering with her corporeal extension of the moon,¹⁰ Salomé transforms from a silver-white virginal state through her agreement to dance as a form of blood-staining intercourse¹¹ into a matured, menstruating blood-soaked stage that foredooms death and fatality. This development echoes contemporary perceptions of women's sexuality as threatening and pathological, particularly regarding their libido¹² during menstruation, which was claimed to be "neurotic and imbalanced" (Ellis 256), mounding in abnormal sexual appetites, moral perversion, criminality, and insanity (cf. *Ibid.*, 255ff.).

Wilde's attention is drawn less to Salomé's superhuman nature than to the change from the untouchable, holy goddess to the whore, and the dramatic realisation of this transformation within the grounds and reasons for the fatality – a significant shift in the portrayal of Salomé that was to some extent also registered by Wilde's contemporaries.¹³ His dramatic composition traces and questions the origins of the equation of sensuality with guilt, lust with perversity, and the dichotomy of good and evil in the collision of Christianity and paganism, represented by the encounter of Salomé and Jokanaan. Kierkegaard remarks that sensuality or eroticism as a principle, as power and an independent system, is only determined, and thus born into the world by Christianity, under the command of the spirit (74). It is this appearance that brings consciousness and sets values, exposing the sensual Salomé as a prostitute. However, it is also the command of the spirit that excludes and therefore prohibits sensuality from life as a principle, power, or system. This is expressed in the contrast between Salomé's chaste yet highly sensual behaviour and Jokanaan's fanaticism for Christianity:

SALOMÉ: Jokanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed [...] ... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Let me touch thy body.

JOKANAAN: Back! daughter of Babylon! By woman came evil into the world. Speak not to me. I will not listen to thee. I listen but to the voice of the Lord God.

[...]

Ah! the wanton! The harlot! Ah! the daughter of Babylon with her golden eyes and her gilded eyelids!—Thus saith the Lord God, Let there come up against her a multitude of men. Let the people take stones and stone her... (23)

Echoing the Young Syrian's words of admiration (7), Salomé feels close, even similar to Jokanaan. Her pure, sensual pagan desire, rejected and condemned by the curse of the Jesus-successor, develops into increasingly desperate, obsessive actions until disembodying into the consumingly passionate act of kissing Jokanaan's decapitated head – sensuality wins. From a Christian viewpoint, it is a victory for the sinful part of human nature, and for the hedonist, a victory for pleasure.

Moog-Grünewald's assessment of Wilde's play reveals an awareness of these transformations. However, their interpretation and conceptualisation of the *femme déterminée* fail to grasp the depth of Salomé's metamorphosis, considering only the artists' retreat into artificiality (246). Their redefined term still carries connotations of the mother term with an element of determinism added, the implications of which strongly reverberate throughout their interpretations of the ending being, first and foremost, an "effective" aesthetic one (253f.). Salomé's death is viewed as a form of punishment by the patriarch, as a repressive act of female sensual emancipation, which portrays the inability of the spirit to tame the flesh – an experience of fatality that defines human existence. Yet in this light, Wilde's aestheticism and artificiality become a mere expression of liberation from guilt for sinful sexuality: the degradation of love as a sin becomes a "religious-mystical variation of nature as morally inferior" (ibid.), which finds its parallel in the perception of women as a fatal existence that needs to be defeated by artistic and religious-mystical means. Wilde consciously plays with the historical influences and mythemes surrounding Salomé, including her perception as a *femme fatale*. The ending, however, is all but a clear reaffirmation of this position. Wilde emphasises the tragic insufficiency and incompatibility of Salomé's life within a patriarchal environment in which her desires, sensuality, and sexuality are condemned and degraded by a deeply ingrained Christian morality, even within a societal

environment that is itself deeply corrupted. The incestuous, adulterous man in power has the last say and, unable to accept Salomé's desires, but also his own perversity, without the potential to be saved by the Jesus-successor, he orders for her to be killed. In so doing, patriarchal order is restored. Yet Wilde's embrace of artificiality heightens the tragic impossibility of life for Salomé and her 'unnatural' desires under 'natural' circumstances. This is yet another kind of fatality since the focus lies not on Jokanaan but on Salomé's tragedy. Empathy gravitates towards the one condemned to death for experiencing the highest pleasure according to her own designs. The paradoxical *femme fatale* characterisations here also offer a reflection of the distorted, mystified perceptions of (female, feminine, or otherwise 'abnormal') sensuality and contradictory morality determined by Christianity, guarded under patriarchal authority.

While in Huysmans' novel, Des Esseintes is the establisher of a hierarchy that feeds his fantasies of a destructive, depraved Salomé, Wilde antagonises the vision of her "purely as a sign of the sexually [or otherwise] threatening Other" (Fernbach 214). Salomé's discovery of her sexuality empowers her to win over what would have been condemned as pathological: it is precisely her undisguised sensual desires, her growing self-awareness over her body and sexuality, and the discovery of using these attributes as powers of her own against male authority¹⁴ and oppressive gazes that challenge contemporary norms of feminine (a)sexuality,¹⁵ making her character so transgressive in Wilde's play. This change of power dynamics transforms Salomé from the helpless object of the male gaze, which she has been ever since Biblical accounts, into the subject holding power over it. Her mastery in controlling it turns into a kind of empowered "being-gazed-at", as Hutcheon and Hutcheon propose; it is the "power of the gazed upon" that Jokanaan refuses to give to Salomé, knowing that "the power is in the beheld and not the beholder" (219). This weaponisation of feminine sexuality against the king's oppressive gaze also becomes a symbolic act of vengeance against the confinement and 'disfigurement' (as above) as a victim of suffocatingly voyeuristic male gazes from past narratives; the 'multitude of men' (Jokanaan, as above) that fetishised and/or judged her body and femininity, prohibiting any potential of voicing either thoughts, feelings, or desires.

Met with disapprobation and outrage in England and France, Wilde's play gained great popularity in the avant-garde audience in Germany, where it left a lasting impression on Richard Strauss, who attended a performance in Berlin in 1906.¹⁶ His operatic adaptation embraces the depiction of Salomé as a tragic figure, "defeat[ed] by the miracle of a great world" that arouses

“sympathy” over “terror and disgust” (Strauss 1953, 151).¹⁷ Dierkes-Thrun observes that both play and opera grant Salomé (and her audience) a moment of “quasi-transcendental grace and utter perversity, an aesthetic atonement of erotic bliss, paradoxically lined with love, vengeance, and true tragedy” (383). Indeed, Strauss’ adaptation has been described as endorsing the character’s transgressive desires as a “musical glorification” and “deeply moving tragedy” with a “purifying” effect (Hartmann, 10 December 1905, qtd. in Messmer 50; translation mine) that resulted in a better understanding of the play.¹⁸ This also accounts for Salomé’s psyche: Strauss’ musical characterisation visualised “what Wilde leaves open as an unsolved mystery in Salomé’s soul. Through the composer’s musical language we gaze more deeply into the soul of this woman,” as she becomes “humanly understandable” (Luzstig, 01 January 1906, qtd. in Messmer 32f.).

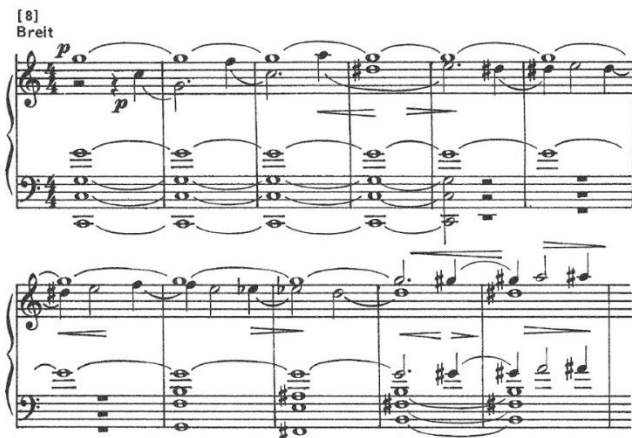
Interestingly, these impressions stand in contrast to contemporary scholarly opinion that viewed Strauss’ rendering as an “unwitting” appropriation (Steinberg 633).¹⁹ This interpretative abyss of Symbolist-Decadent literary and artistic works can be attributed to the antagonistic perception of modernist musical aesthetics as “direct, brutal,” opposed to “the dark allure” (Schmidgall 286, 266) of “the delicate text” (Hutcheon 209) of fin-de siècle drama. Dierkes-Thrun suggests that “contrary to the perception that Strauss’ modernism is very different from Wilde’s symbolism and decadence, [both] have important formal stylistic and thematic elements in common” (370), arguing for an inherently Decadent aesthetic and compatibility. Different to scholarship, many contemporary reviewers appear to have at least sensed this aesthetic relationship. In what Dierkes-Thrun names “the corporealization of affect” (372), Wilde’s use of syntactic and rhetoric repetitions²⁰ that erupt into Salomé’s fanatically insistent appeals²¹ provokes a fetishistic, ritualistic effect of excess that centralises a sensual and highly stylised emotional experience, evoking a likewise emotional, instinctive response in the audience:

Symbolist evocation and synaesthesia and sexual decadent and sensual excess were intended to produce erotic fullness in the here and now. [...] Symbolist theatre [...] sought to provoke a cumulative overflow of sensational impressions [...], transport[ing] the audience into a strange, fascinating aesthetic universe of emotional excess. Similarly, Wilde’s achievement in *Salomé* was the creation of intense, overpowering affect in the audience – the corporealization of art. (Dierkes-Thrun 373, 375)

Wilde's verbal corporealization of affect meets Strauss' musical interpretation and response. Echoing the Symbolist-Decadent cumulative sensory overflow, the first monograph on the opera describes the experience as "a harmonic tour de force – a practically uninterrupted texture of new and constantly varied sequences and chord formations" (Gilman 55). The orchestra created "sheer noise, intentional cacophony, [...] literally divided against itself, thunder[ing] simultaneously in two violently antagonistic keys." (Ibid.) The composition teems with inventive techniques of gleaming dissonances and chromatism, dramatic orchestral contrasts and responses, and bitonal and neo-tonal turmoil that abandons conventional melodic and harmonic means, creating an "exhausting" (Zschorlich 1905, qtd. in Messmer 53), stimulating sensation in the audience.

Strauss' abdication of a clear central tonality parallels extreme emotional and psychological states and situations: in Salomé's attempt to seduce Jokanaan, she approaches him first "tenderly" (stage directions, Strauss 2011, 36) in fascination for his white body, but is violently rejected "with great excitement" (ibid.), which provokes her forceful repudiation in the following stanza: "Your flesh is horrible" (ibid.). Her yearnings become increasingly passionate, overwhelming, and even despairing as if intoxicated, juxtaposed with Jokanaan's growing horror and sobriety.²² The restless rhythm and tonality that characterise Salomé become heightened by the harmonically dissonant, heterogeneous orchestral response, implying threat, agitation, and extreme foreboding.²³ At the end of the scene, the "bitonal racket [...] greets the appearance of the head (Fig. 314)," announcing Salomé's will to be obeyed as it "boils down to a C# minor statement" (Puffett 390), the chord (C#) that Salomé is associated with in the opera. The explosive directness, expressivity, and force of Strauss' music reveal an aesthetic that embraces Wilde's thematic composition while stressing the inner contrasts and conflicts of the characters and the tensions that their different worldviews and desires create between them.

A brief look at the characterisation of Jokanaan offers an example of how innovatively Strauss comments on these contrasts and tensions. He is introduced under various themes when he is heard prophesying from the cistern and in conversations about him (cf. themes 4, 4a and 4b). His musical movements and diatonic outlining are slow and broad, comprehensively homogeneous with the tonic chord of the opening's theme 8 (below).



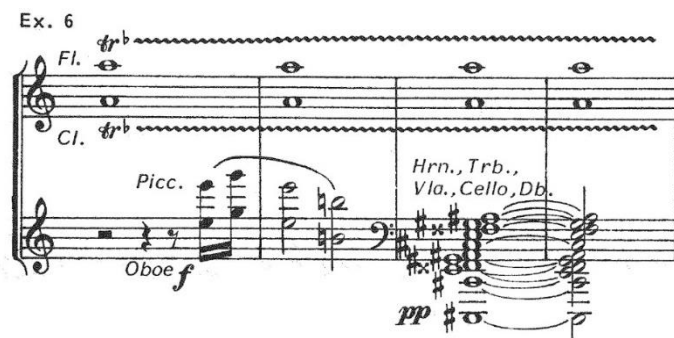
(Theme 8, Strauss 2011, p.23)

However, when he is brought to be seen by Salomé, the orchestra thematises his appearance with a new, unexpected idea, proceeding in a highly ambiguous D# that can be perceived as an enharmonic Eb. As it suggests a chromic appoggiatura that antagonises the diatonic features,²⁴ the melody takes an entirely different direction and convulses as its semitones slur into the

dominant seventh chords, progressing in B major. This presents a highly unstable melodic, tonal, and chromatic characterisation that greatly differs from (and appears even unsuitable to) the previously steady establishment of Jokanaan.²⁵ This suggests that theme 8 does not describe Jokanaan's nature; we are instead presented with Salomé's perspective, who is not interested in him as a prophet but as the corporeal object of her desire. For instance, theme 8 also accompanies her observations of his ivory appearance (cf. Strauss 2011, 33/ 1905, 60f.). When she sings the theme "tenderly", it forms a cadence on her dominant key of association, C# major. Instead of being faced with an objective characterisation, Strauss encourages the audience to follow Salomé's subjective experience, guided along her emotional and psychological journey, evoking sympathy towards her – very similar to the way that Wilde's verbal aesthetics are led by Salomé's emotional evocations, if not even more distinctly transformed into a musical embodiment of her emotional landscapes.

This impression builds towards a significant shift in the ending of the opera. Wilde and Strauss both present their protagonist as willing to pay anything, including death, as the price for her feverish, necrophiliac desires, her repudiation of conventional societal (Christian) morality, and her challenging of male authority. Wilde leaves his audience with Salomé's last words in deliberate ambivalence, fragmentary and unmitigated, uttered elusively, unable to properly encapsulate her emotional, ecstatic state (cf. Wilde 2003, 30). Strauss presents a remarkable imaginative transformation as an interpretative response that echoes previous important passages, heightening Salomé's three different developmental stages on her journey of self-discovery and self-fulfilment:

A harmonic clash abandons triadic convention: the orchestra reveals a fragmentary part of theme 11 in the melody of the woodwinds that is introduced by an eerie semitone trill, referring to Salomé's growing obsessive desire for Jokanaan. The woodwinds are superseded by bass and strings in a low



(Ex. 6, Strauss 2011, p.18)

dissonant sonority, which is set forth when she gleams into the darkness of the cistern that “looks like a grave” (31); an announcement of death with the lowest key of a C that rises a chromatic semitone into the C# as she meditates on her own darkness within. The third element, however, does not link to the kiss of Jokanaan’s decapitated head but to the realisation of the fulfilment of her wish that yielded (erotic) satisfaction.²⁶ The non-tonal dissonance here transforms into a C# major tonal cadence in a slow, protracted manner. Strauss’ echoing of Salomé’s journey emphasises the ending in her fulfilment and encourages the audience’s compassion. As the C major²⁷ collides with the C# minor and closes in C# major in the climax of her final aria, it unleashes the theme’s full cadential force before it transitions into the opera’s ending in C minor (Strauss 1905, 350ff.). The extreme cumulating tensions foreshadow the incompatibility, indeed, the impossibility of a harmonic reconciliation. Salomé dies at the height of this excess of charged triumphal pleasure: “Yes, now I have kissed your mouth” (Strauss 2011, 54; Strauss 1905, 350).

Differing from Wilde’s emphasis on Salomé’s tragedy, Strauss heightens Salomé’s triumph and erotic fulfilment, even if still working within the tragical framework. Like in Wilde’s play, patriarchal order is restored. However, neither version implies a reassuring return to the former state of things: the tetrarch and Herodias retreat to their palace, but Herod trembles in fear and the kingdom is left in darkness (Wilde 2003, 30). There is no hope for metaphysical justice as Jokanaan’s religious agency is cynically irrelevant and impotent, having been abhorred by Herodias, misunderstood by the king, and violently defiled by Salomé, which emerges as a morbidly ironic inversion of the male gaze’s “disfigurement”.²⁸ Strauss’ opera suggests that having discovered, nourished, and fulfilled her obsessive desire, Salomé is also released from her incompatible desires and an oppressive world in disarray that condemns her sensuality and sexuality. Wilde’s play deliberately provoked his contemporary audience by intensifying “Paterian

aestheticism's rebellion against the moral and utilitarian functions of art," as Dierkes-Thrun observes. They continue: "In Salomé's final moments, Wilde conjures up a post-metaphysical, self-sufficient self, able to satisfy its needs recklessly and triumphantly by savouring its own aesthetic and erotic desires" (382).

In this Nietzschean anarchic light, Salomé becomes a modern, independent, and rebellious figure. Blackmer sees in Salomé's manipulation of the rules and satiation of her desires an embodiment of the Decadent artist, who transgressed from the Symbolist art of containment, spiritual, ritual, and metaphorical meaning into the transgressive Decadent artistry of sacrifice and martyrdom for her desires, which also draws reference from Wilde's biography (8-11). Viewing Salomé's transgressive sexuality as symbolic of Wilde's own sexuality and rebellion against the hypocritical morale of Victorian society as the mythical persona²⁹ of the persecuted, subversive Decadent artist,³⁰ Strauss' emphasis on themes of rebellious independence and triumph may well have been intended as a statement of compassion for the Wilde.³¹ As many reviewers and critics observed, the scandalous "perversity" that was affiliated with the author both degraded and elevated Strauss and his opera (Dierkes-Thrun 387). It certainly did serve as a suitably scandalous sub-narrative and convenient promotion that ended up earning him, besides commercial success, his avant-garde status.

Throughout fictional, historical, and Biblical renditions, from visual to literary, and from dramatic to musical transformations, the Salomé of the Decadence remains a deeply paradoxical, complex, and equivocal mytheme. The insatiable interest in her, resulting in such an abundance of Decadent reimaginings, may well be encapsulated by Hudson Jones and Kingsley's observation: "Salome is the ideal choice for Decadent artists and writers [...]. Salome's character, nature and motivation are unknown; she can become anything" (351). Huysmans' disinterest in Salomé's inner world and its irrelevance to Des Esseintes' imagination of her character reflect on how her motifs must, in fact, remain obscured to taint her in hues of dangerous, fatal unpredictability and justify the masculinist suppressive narrative.³² Wilde and Strauss invite their audiences to experience Salomé's emotional, psychological, and sensual development along with her "in the here and now", allowing the character's radical actions to become understandable and accounted for in narrative and musical terms: "The monstrosity of Salomé's sexual and chromatic transgressions is such that extreme violence seems justified – even demanded – for the sake of social and tonal order" (McClary 100). Her ancient and obscure nature and motives, but also her

very contradictoriness as the “deadly young dancer [who] was as much a degenerate object of misogynist fears as a sadomasochistic erotic ideal” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 221), invite transformation, challenge, and rediscovery of her inner character, journey, and desires.³³ In light of current intersectional feminist discourses, where new explorations of representative and identitary potentialities allow us to move beyond the gaze of white cisgender men on the authorial level, *Salomé* remains a fascinating site of fecund dissonance that continues to insist on challenging and transgressing hyper-masculinist bigotries.

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Notes

¹ Scholarly authors have been referred to in gender-neutral language (they/ them) to avoid making assumptions based on their names and to promote context-informed language grounded in contextual relevance.

² In *Works and Days*, the element of fatal curiosity is added when Pandora opens a jar that releases all ills into the world.

³ Along with Symbolism and Aestheticism, the movement of the Decadence responded to dismay with technological and social advances in the late 1800s with new artistic visions in the form of provocative metaphorical modes of anti-traditionalist expression of artificiality and degeneration. Even if “often apprehended as a male-defined coterie of upper- and upper-middle-class aesthetes and followers of high art”, as Ledger asserts (and the present discussion indeed introduces narratives that fall into the hyper-masculinist tradition), it can also be embraced as a critical concept. Within a broader and diverse playfield of discursive femininity, Decadence stretches into the avant-garde corners of impressionism, feminism, naturalism, dandyism, symbolism, and classicism (Ledger 2007, 7; see also Hughes 2004).

⁴ The painting reveals a plethora of cultural influences, including Egyptian, Moroccan, Indian, Chinese, and Ancient Roman.

⁵ “La figure était jaune, parcheminée, annelée de rides, décimée...” (Huysmans 1910, 71).

⁶ While Bernheimer’s quote refers to a different passage, these assessments can confidently be applied to the accounts discussed. See also their Freudian reading of the fetishization and suppression of women (Bernheimer 312ff; 322ff.).

⁷ In another description, Salomé’s depravity is contrasted with her gestures and facial expressions of horror (elements added by Des Esseintes), accompanied by an appearance that invites touch and suggests death, emphasising her human corporeality and mortality (cf. Hudson Jones and Kingsley 350f.).

⁸ Particularly echoing Flaubert’s Salammbô, the figure after which Moreau designed his depictions of Salomé, Helen, and Cleopatra (Cf. Huysmans 1883, 136f.).

⁹ As noted in the 1903 preface, Huysmans’ desire was “to shake off prejudices, to break apart the limits of the novel [...]; in a word, no longer to use that form except as a frame into which more important undertakings might be inserted” (Huysmans qtd. in Porter, xxiii).

¹⁰ Also referencing Flaubert's Salammbô, the idol of the moon-goddess Tanit, Moreau's *Cleopatra* (1887) and *Hélène sur les remparts de Troie* (1870), both painted under the shine of a full moon.

¹¹ "How red those petals are! They are like stains of blood on the cloth." (Wilde 2003, 23)

¹² The feminine libido was believed to be "volatile, capricious, even rampaging ... inherently dysfunctional, dangerous, even" (Lombroso 51).

¹³ "[Salomé] is no longer the disturbing and mysterious virgin of legend [but transformed] into a temperamental, vicious and sadistic little one" (Lazare 383, translation mine).

¹⁴ Salomé manages to bend the rules, convincing her infatuated admirer to break Herod's orders to get closer to Jokanaan.

¹⁵ "Wom[e]n [...], if physically and mentally normal, and properly educated, ha[ve] but little sensual desire" (Krafft-Ebing 14; cf. Trudgrill 50-63, and Hutcheon and Hutcheon 211ff.).

¹⁶ French and English critics and press widely condemned the play as "stupid" and "vulgar" (Unsigned notice, *Critic*, 12 May 1894, xxiv in Beckson 161), "morbid, bizarre, repulsive" (Unsigned notice, *The Times*, 23 Feb 1893 in Beckson 151), a "handbook [...] for the Philistine" (Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 Feb 1893 in Beckson 156). A production in 1892 was banned by the Lord Chamberlain's licenser, allegedly due to its portrayal of Biblical characters, which was prohibited.

¹⁷ Strauss kept Lachmann's German translation of the play as the textual basis for his opera.

¹⁸ "I admit that through your music you have made me understand for the first time what Wilde's play is all about" (Mahler to Strauss, 11 October 1905, qtd. in Dierkes-Thrun 367).

¹⁹ "Neither *Salomé* the opera, nor Salomé the character claims to have any truths to tell" (Steinberg 633).

²⁰ "Thy body is hideous. *It is like* the body of a leper. *It is like* a plastered wall where vipers have crawled [...]. *It is horrible, thy body is horrible. It is of thy hair* that I am enamoured, Jokanaan. Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes ..." (Wilde 2003, 13f.).

²¹ "Let me kiss thy mouth. [...] Let me kiss thy mouth. [...] I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan," and again, "I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan; I will kiss thy mouth" (Wilde 2003, 16).

²² Stage directions: Salome: "with utmost passion, [...] beside herself, [...] as though in despair"; Jokanaan: "low, in voiceless horror, [...] fervently, [...] most solemnly" (Strauss 2011, 36f.).

²³ The thematic growing forcefulness is also emphasised by Strauss' use of a minor third, which charges the melody with an obsessive sensation (cf. themes 4c, 14b, 11).

²⁴ It could also be heard as stressing the antagonism, or C minor and C major, connecting it to the opera's ending in C minor, representing irresolvable conflict.

²⁵ Strauss includes infrequent, minor dissonances in Jokanaan's previous appearances. They do not, however, become emblematic of his characterisation or forebode such extreme instability.

²⁶ This non-tonal passage of the kiss is, in fact, presented as an empty experience. (Strauss, 1905, 345ff.)

²⁷ C major, associated with Jokanaan, also represents difference, opposed to the incestuous ‘sameness’ of Herod and Herodias, and Herod’s desire towards Salomé. C major lies on a scale exclusively of naturals while Salomé, unable to identify or express herself through ‘natural’ means, is associated with the key C#, with a scale of no naturals at all, embracing Symbolist-Decadent notions of excessive artificiality.

²⁸ “Paradoxically, [the] woman becomes phallic through the power she derives from her violent mutilation” (Bernheimer on the dream passage, 315). This irony is emphasised in its mirroring of the deadly gaze in reference also to the decapitation of Medusa by Perseus: “[Salomé to Jokanaan]: [Thy hair] is like a knot of black serpents writhing round thy neck” (Wilde 2003, 14).

²⁹ Even though he was indeed persecuted and imprisoned for his sexuality, it is important to recall that he still profited profoundly from his privileged Irish upbringing and academic prowess (as well as from being a white cisgender man), thus not quite living up to some of the mythical perceptions of his rebellious martyrdom.

³⁰ Wilde’s association with Salomé is indeed very popular. The play and Aubrey Beardley’s drawings offer various references supporting a reading in respect of homosexual desire (see Fernbach, as above), such as the green flower that Salomé gives to the Young Syrian, which is said to be a reference to the green carnation, the badge of identification among homosexual Parisians that Wilde had adopted. Often this finds erroneous graphic confirmation in a photograph, confusing Wilde with the Hungarian soprano singer Alice Guszalewicz, who performed the role of Salomé in 1906 (cf. Holland 1994 and Showalter 1990).

³¹ Strauss did, however, subtract parts of the homoerotic references present in Wilde’s play in his insistence that the Page “must be [sung by] a woman, not a tenor” (Strauss to Erich Engel, qtd. in Dierkes-Thrun 387).

³² “Mystery is never more than a mirage; it vanishes as soon as one tries to approach it. Thus we see that myths are explained in large part by the use man makes of them. The myth of the woman is a luxury. [...] These dreams [of black-and-white statues of femininity] were imperiously guided by interests. [...] It is [...] a matter of replacing lived experience and the free judgments of experience it requires by a static idol. The myth of Woman substitutes for an authentic relationship with an autonomous existent the immobile contemplation of a mirage” (De Beauvoir 321-22).

³³ Hutcheon and Hutcheon on Klimt’s inspirations by Strauss’ opera (cf. Dottin-Orsini 14).