

“A SERIOUSNESS THAT FAILS”: RECONSIDERING SYMBOLISM IN OSCAR WILDE’S *SALOMÉ*

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WRITING AS RECENTLY AS 2011, Michael Bennett asks if *Salomé* is an anomaly in the oeuvre of Oscar Wilde (viii). Read against his witty societal comedies of manners, it certainly appears to be one. *Salomé* has been regarded as a fine example of symbolist drama in the history of British theatre, and few critics would dispute its “seriousness” as such. Its growing significance in recent discourses of gender and sexuality also adds seriousness to the play.¹ Although Feminist and gender critics show little qualms about dubbing the play as symbolist, the final tableau of a young girl kissing the mouth of the severed head seems to me at odds with symbolism, whether *Salomé* is seen as an archetypal femme fatale, a queer man in disguise, or a New Woman as critics argue. Symbolism in Wilde’s *Salomé* is widely different from other specimens of the genre such as Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen*, for instance, which directly deals with a spiritual issue of the salvation of soul. *Salomé* also lacks the fatalistic sense of doom that dominates Maeterlinck’s *Princess Maleine*, with which it is often compared. Wilde’s wayward heroine is not a victim of the invisible forces in the same way Maeterlinck’s characters are. Wilde’s *Salomé* is “monstrous,” as Herod says: she seems to commit “a crime against some unknown God” (*Complete Works* 604).² How can we reconcile her cruel passion of carnal desire with the supposed spirituality of the symbolist tradition? Also problematic in a symbolist reading of the play is the presence of the comic and the parodic, as pointed out by many critics. Is Wilde’s *Salomé* an authentic symbolist drama?

Only a few critics have addressed this issue directly so far: Austin E. Quigley and Joseph Donohue, most notably, in the special issue of *Modern Drama* on Wilde published in 1994. Identifying the element of perversity in *Salomé*, both critics attempt to explain it as an expression of Wilde’s unique symbolism such as sceptical symbolism or dandy-symbolism. I would take their position further to argue that *Salomé*’s symbolism is one refracted with a Camp sensibility. This is not to deny Wilde’s serious engagement as symbolist dramatist. Wilde indeed had an intense longing for spirituality, as is demonstrated in his other works such as the unfinished play *La Sainte Courtisane* and the fairy tales collected in *The House of Pomegranate*. What is unique in Wilde’s symbolism is his drastic inversion of the conventional dichotomy of sacred/profane as well as of serious/frivolous. This inversion is so abrupt in *Salomé* as to render the play almost absurd, preposterous, and Camp. As we will

see later, inversion is one most salient feature of Camp; Camp, in Wayne R. Dyer's words, is an aspiration to "fulfill Friedrich Nietzsche's precept of the reversal of all values," which effectively questions established hierarchies (190).

It may seem hardly original to argue that Wilde's *Salomé* is a work of Camp. As is well-known, Susan Sontag's seminal "Notes on 'Camp'" was famously dedicated to Oscar Wilde. Camp as an expression of queer identity has provided one key concept for understanding gender and performativity in the Wilde canon.³ Broadly speaking, gender-oriented approaches to *Salomé* may be regarded as a Camp reading; both share the same poststructuralist idea that identity is not essential but performative. However, gender studies is concerned more with "content" or what is said (sexuality, gender and identity issues) than "style" or how it is said (frivolity and excess, for instance). Camp, on the other hand, is defined more in terms of style, at least in Sontag's essay. The scarcity of discussion apropos of style and sensibility, I suppose, has something to do with the angry responses Sontag's essay generated among gay intellectuals, who have criticized Sontag for depoliticizing Camp, or, turning Camp into "degayfied taste," as Fabio Cleto puts it (10). We will turn to this issue in more detail later in the essay, when I will try to "justify" my reliance on Sontag's "Notes" as well as clarify my position regarding the relationship of Camp and homosexuality. I should also note the necessity of approaching Camp as style and aesthetics in this essay, which is more a generic intervention on Wilde's *Salomé* in relation to symbolism than a sheer Camp reading. By identifying Camp aesthetics that permeates Wilde's symbolist play, we may claim its originality despite its derivativeness and appreciate it in continuum with Wilde's other dramatic works rather than as an anomaly.

The difficulty of labelling Wilde's *Salomé* arises in part from the instability of symbolism as a category. Symbolism is an elusive concept to pin down, and it overlaps with many other artistic movements at the turn of the century, such as decadence, aestheticism, pre-Raphaelitism, mysticism and impressionism. Symbolism presupposes the existence of the invisible, which can be manifested through the use of symbol. Charles Baudelaire's 1857 poem "Correspondences" laid a foundation for symbolist poetics of synaesthesia, employing symbols to link the earthly with transcendental idea. In his 1886 "Symbolist Manifesto," Jean Morèas defines symbolism as an attempt "to house the Idea in a meaningful form not its own end, but subject to the Idea"; Idea is primary in symbolist art, which nevertheless will not "appear without the sumptuous clothing of analogy" (50). Arthur Symons's definition of symbolist literature later in 1899 is similar to Morèas's. Symbol, which is conventionally defined as "representation of idea by form," is refined according to Thomas Carlyle's definition in *Sartor Resartus*: "embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there" (Symons 2). Adequate form, though indispensable in symbolist literature, is not an end in itself but a means "to spiritualise literature": symbolist literature "becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual" (5). Edmund Wilson's later definition of symbolism as "an attempt by carefully studied means – a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors – to communicate unique personal feelings" (21-22) is modeled on such contemporary theorization, although it dilutes Symons's religious overtone.

Wilde's *Salomé* has been regarded as "the earliest and most complete British example" of symbolist drama (Innes 354), "the only completely successfully symbolist drama to come out of the English theatre" (Worth 7), and "a truly modern symbolist drama" (Raby 119). Wilde's choice of *Salomé* as his subject matter, a popular topos among symbolist artists,

can be seen as his bid to enter the symbolist circle and emulate with French forerunners. *Salomé* adopts a new theatrical vocabulary from the French Symbolists, especially from “Maeterlinck’s insistent use of colour, sound, dance, visual description and visual effect,” as Peter Raby points out (105). John Styan discusses the leitmotifs of color, the symbol of the moon and incantatory repetitions in *Salomé* in the context of Symbolist theatre tradition, inspired and shaped by Richard Wagner’s theory of total theatre, Adolphe Appia and Gordon Craig’s synthetic staging, and Maurice Maeterlinck’s mystical plays (36-37). The visual imagery of colour symbolism is matched by musicality, an aspect that was emphasized by Wilde more than once in *De Profundis*; its “recurring motifs” make *Salomé* “so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad” (1026). Everything in *Salomé* happens in threes, including Salomé’s wooing of Jokanaan, his rejection, Herod’s solicitation of Salomé to dance and his offering of reward. This creates a sense of mystery and fatality in Katherine Worth’s view, as three is a magical number like Hecate’s spell of triple (60). The moon has been recognized as a powerful symbol that dominates the emotional state of characters and the general mood of the play. It seems indisputable that *Salomé* is a symbolist play.

However, it is not easy to determine what kind of “Idea” *Salomé* embodies in its symbolist form. Critics have much to say in regard to its formal aspects of symbolism; when it comes to the “Idea,” scholarly opinions vary. The theme of mystery and spirituality is assumed as a typical symbolist idea of *Salomé*, yet thematic interpretation has been less persuasive than formal analysis. For Christopher Innes, who regards the play as Salomé’s “spiritual vision,” the dance of the seven veils becomes “a metaphor of spiritual revelation” and the play ends with her “spiritual triumph” (355-57). Yet, one may ask, quite literally: what can be Salomé’s “spiritual” triumph over society in destroying the holy prophet Jokanaan? Innes’s “spiritual” has little to do with the conventional meaning of spirit or soul; it is synonymous with decadent aestheticism that defies conventional morality and materialism. Katherine Worth, who praises *Salomé* as a master symbolist work of “a spiritual concept completely realized in a dramatic structure of intense physicality” (73), seeks for its spirituality in the mystery of love. *Salomé* is a play about “the mysterious relation between love, sin and suffering” (55), which is highlighted in the heroine’s last monologue that “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” (604). Describing Salomé’s feeling of cruel passion as love “against all the odds,” Worth believes that “the value of love is proclaimed, even in the savage departure from it” (70-71). However, the “mystery of love” Salomé proclaims can be a perverse desire for other critics like Quigley, who places Salomé in the bestial, monstrous, sub-human realm of human experience (107). Richard Ellmann points out that “Herod’s lust for Salome’s body pales in comparison with Salome’s lust for Iokanaan’s bodiless head” (345). In *Salomé*, Symons’s formula of symbolist art as spiritualization is reversed: love is carnalized, materialized, and aestheticized.

Indeed, the need to explain the decadent side of Wilde’s *Salomé* underlies the two revisionary symbolist readings by Quigley and Donohue mentioned above. For Quigley, the play is an “interrogation of the truth claims of a symbolism that reaches beyond both the physical and the human by anchoring itself firmly in the physical and the human” (108): it questions whether Salomé’s “raw animality” can reach Jokanaan’s “religious transcendence” (117). Donohue attempts to reconcile perversity and symbolism in the play with the notion of “dandy-symbolist”. Wilde’s play is “an authentic symbolist play” that suggests connection between the spiritual and the physical; at the same time Wilde appropriates symbolist materials as his dandiacal mask to express his perversity, thus without the profound meaning

typical of symbolism (91-92). In these articles, Wilde's unique symbolism comes close to decadence, although Quigley and Donohue do not use the term directly.

In fact, early theorists of symbolism stressed the primacy of idea over form in an attempt to disengage it from decadence. According to Symons, the decadents share with symbolists "over-possession by form," yet their "perversity of form" is often matched by "perversity of matter" to scandalize the middle class; decadence was "half a mock-interlude" to "something more serious," i.e., symbolism, a spiritual enterprise that reveals the great mystery of life (4-5). Likewise, Morèas proposes the name of symbolism to dissociate the new poetic art from what is "mistakenly called decadence" (50). There is a great deal of overlap between decadence and symbolism, and many decadent poets were also often symbolists. Yet, if we are to distinguish between these two, lack of spiritual orientation outlined by Symons seems to offer one criterion to separate one from the other. Holbrook Jackson also notes that decadence is characterised not so much by spirituality as "a spiritual and moral perversity" (55). Noting that much of Symons's symbolist treatise repeats his ideas in "The Decadent Movement in Literature" published in 1893, Murray Pittock speculates that Symons's shift from decadence to symbolism "has surely something to do with the Wilde trial and the bad odour that 'Decadence' as a term found itself in in the latter part of the Eighteen Nineties" (71-73).

Along with perversity of matter, what seems incompatible with a symbolist reading of the play is its comic aspect. Katherine Worth, who analyses Wilde's *Salomé* as a symbolist drama, notes "a vein of comedy which is remarkably unexpected in such an intense symbolic drama": Herodias's bickering with her husband creates a scene of "domestic realism," providing a comic relief in the play (67-68). Elliot L. Gilbert, defending Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations as true interpretation of Wilde's text, points out that "the drama itself has its mocking and parodic elements" (139). William Tydeman and Steven Price also defend Beardsley's "allegedly parodic mockery" with the play's "own comic exaggerations" (115). Patricia Kellogg-Dennis makes a similar point that Wilde's *Salomé* is "a brilliant pastiche of turn-of-the-century decadent art, a pastiche which . . . Beardsley's illustrations put into relief," disputing critics' readiness to take it seriously, particularly the Feminist view of *Salomé* as New Woman voiced by Jane Marcus (225-26).

Far from praising it as a symbolist play, early critics deprecated *Salomé* as a pastiche and burlesque of other decadent and symbolist works. A reviewer of *Pall Mall Gazette* (27 February 1893) thought *Salomé* "a mosaic," the "daughter of too many fathers" including Gautier, Maeterlinck, and Flaubert (Beckson 135). Another from New York (12 May 1894) belittled Wilde for "patching up sham monsters"; "A large part of his material he gets from the Bible, a little has once belonged to Flaubert. He borrows from Maeterlinck his trick of repeating stupid phrases until a glimpse of meaning seems almost a flash of genius" (143). The symbolist technique of repetition was mocked in a *Times* review (23 February 1893) as "a page from one of Ollendorff's exercises" (133). Graham Robertson found it funny when Wilde recited the opening passages of his newly composed *Salomé*: "[it] was a burlesque of Maeterlinck, very clever, very delicate, but nevertheless a burlesque" (136). Wilde's *Salomé* is also missing in early discussions on symbolism. Arthur Symons does not mention Oscar Wilde in his famous study *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, neither in 1899 original nor 1919 revised edition, which was dedicated to W. B. Yeats. Yeats for his part disapproved of Wilde's play for its "empty, sluggish and pretentious" dialogue (Worth 72). Edmund Wilson is also silent about Wilde in his influential study of symbolist literature, *Axel's Castle* (1931), while his discussion includes as far as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce.

Mario Praz’s view of Wilde’s *Salomé* as parody is worth quoting at length, as it represents the play’s early reception overall:

It [Wilde’s *Salomé*] is childish, but it is also humoristic, with a humour which one can with difficulty believe to be unintentional, so much does Wilde’s play resemble a parody of the whole of the material used by the Decadents and of the stammering mannerism of Maeterlinck’s dramas – and, as a parody, *Salomé* comes very near to being a masterpiece. Yet it seems that Wilde was not quite aiming at this. . . . (298)

Despite the undue harshness, Praz’s criticism offers some insight about the nature of *Salomé*’s humour. There are certain elements in *Salomé* that make it difficult to take the work altogether seriously, although parody may not be a perfect word to capture them. Parody generally involves authorial intention to mock and ridicule; yet, as Praz also notes, Wilde probably had no such intention. The humour rather comes from irony, or the gap between Wilde’s serious intention and the preposterous way in which it is presented.

We may better explain *Salomé*’s paradox of perverse spirituality and comic side-effect with the concept of Camp. *Salomé* is a symbolist play, which is, I would argue, refracted with a Camp sensibility. Camp is a congested sign that eludes a clear definition. The difficulty of pinning down its signified has been repeatedly stated by many critics, to which I need not add further voice. Nevertheless, critics generally agree on certain features that make something/someone Camp. Susan Sontag’s seminal 1964 essay, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” effectively captures this fugitive sensibility through a series of keywords such as frivolity, style over content, homosexuality, exaggeration and extravagance, artificiality and self-reflexivity, duplicity, androgyny and queerness, all of which are applicable to Wilde’s *Salomé*. Sontag’s “Notes” are echoed by later critics, despite their reservation regarding her political stance. David Bergman agrees that Camp is “a style” marked by “exaggeration,” “artifice,” and “extremity” (5). Jack Babuscio, in his 1999 revision of his classic essay on Camp and gay sensibility, also lists four features of Camp as “irony,” “aestheticism,” “theatricality,” and “humour” (119).

However, Sontag’s emphasis on style also aroused furious responses by gay intellectuals including Bergman, Babuscio and Moe Meyer for “degayfying,” “aestheticizing,” and “domesticating” Camp for bourgeois consumption.⁴ Although Camp and homosexuality are no doubt inextricably related, whether Camp is an exclusively gay phenomenon has been a most contested issue. As a non-gay critic who has arrived at “Camp grounds” in an attempt to explain symbolism in *Salomé*, I should admit my incapacity to add something significantly new to this debate. I find a most sensible view in Fabio Cleto, who proposes the queer instead of gay as the essence of Camp. Queer is a more flexible term than gay; it destabilizes essentialist binarisms, not just of gender but also of non-sexual hierarchies such as natural/artificial or serious/frivolous, “on which bourgeois epistemic and ontological order arranges and perpetuates itself” (Cleto 15). Esther Newton also perceives Camp as “a philosophy of transformations and incongruity,” which is more inclusive than gay that deals with “masculine–feminine transformation” (102). As a destabilizer of hierarchies, Camp is inherently political despite its apparent lack of interest in politics. Bearing in mind such political potential of Camp, we may safely use Sontag’s “Notes” as a guide to explore Camp aspects of Wilde’s *Salomé*.

Sontag defines Camp as “a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous” (276). Distinguishing between naïve and deliberate Camp, Sontag praises the former as more satisfying than the latter, or “camping” that involves intention: “In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails” (282-83). Christopher Isherwood, who is regarded as the first person that wrote on Camp, has already noted the inherent seriousness of Camp before Sontag: “High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously” (51). Wilde probably intended *Salomé* as a serious work. Robertson recalls how he lost favour with Wilde for misunderstanding his “*magnum opus*” as a burlesque (136). In letters Wilde describes the play as “a work of tragic beauty” (328) and *Salomé* as “a tragic daughter of passion” (333). Ewa Kuryluk also assumes from his letter to the *Times* that Wilde regarded *Salomé* as a religious drama (217): “I look forward with delight to seeing Mme Bernhardt present my play in Paris, that vivid centre of art, where religious dramas are often performed” (*Letters* 336). *The Decapitation of Salomé*, the earlier version of the play, clearly indicates Wilde’s religious intention. It was “of how *Salomé* eventually became a saint,” in Ellmann’s words (344). In this version, *Salomé* is banished instead of being crushed to death, goes through Christ-like passion in the desert, encounters and believes in Jesus, until she finally falls into the water and has her head cut by the jagged ice. For some reasons unknown, Wilde dropped the idea, and the end product presents the heroine with more ambiguity. Thus, spiritual interpretations of the play mentioned above are not entirely far-fetched, although we need to approach it via Wilde’s inversion of body-spirit dichotomy, to which I will return at a later stage.

Irony, as Babuscio notes, is one key feature of Camp, which involves “an incongruous contrast” between an individual/thing and its context (119). The irony between *Salomé*’s spirituality and the way it is expressed makes it difficult to perceive the play altogether religiously. When Jokanaan tells *Salomé* to go and “seek out the Son of Man,” she asks, “Who is he, the Son of Man? Is he as beautiful as thou art, Jokanaan?” (588) This may be the moment of her spiritual awakening; nevertheless, the leaps *Salomé* is taking are so dizzy that it is almost impossible to decode her zeal. After hearing Jokanaan speak a few more lines, *Salomé* shouts suddenly, “I am amorous of thy body, Jokanaan!” (589). There is something ludicrous and preposterous in *Salomé*’s instant craze for Jokanaan’s body parts, shifting in adoration and abomination from his white body, the black hair to the red mouth. So is her imperious demand of “the head of Jokanaan” repeated eight times. As Holbrook Jackson points out, it is “not the plot that you think about whilst reading *Salomé*, but the obvious desire of the author to tune the senses and the mind to a preposterous key” (84). *Salomé* touches on the weighty topic of human desire; as Sontag notes of Camp, the play “proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (284). *Salomé* enacts Lord Illingworth’s maxim in *A Woman of No Importance*: “Moderation is a fatal thing. . . . Nothing succeeds like excess” (498).

Excess is a word that defines *Salomé* stylistically as well as thematically; emotional extravagance is matched by over-decorative, artificial style. *Salomé* is like an arabesque textile, with rare things of beauty woven into it; Maeterlinkian repetition of simple phrases creates abstract patterns in it. The play is imbricate with concrete objects that appeal to senses. Chad Bennett draws attention to the ornamental language that constructs desire and the desired body in the play; *Salomé* is “a work in which the decorative or ornamental is a primary means of expression,” an aspect overlooked in criticisms that have focused on plot,

character, theme and the like (302). It creates a world of surfaces bursting with “tumult of images,” like Herod’s long catalogue of precious stones and rare creatures that goes endlessly (601–03). Unlike Symbolist drama that intimates the ineffable and suggests the presence of the absent through the use of symbols, the main mode of trope in *Salomé* is simile, not symbol, which embellishes and multiplies the already present through resemblance. For instance, the moon in the opening is compared to “a woman rising from a tomb,” “a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver,” “a princess who has little white doves for feet” (583). *Salomé* is like “the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver,” her hands “like doves that fly to their dove-cots . . . like white butterflies” (584–85). Also exemplary is *Salomé*’s blazon, which dissects Jokanaan’s body parts into eyes, skin, hair and lips, expanding them in endless similes of “black holes,” “black caverns,” “black lakes,” an “ivory status,” “a moonbeam,” “a shaft of silver,” “the lilies,” “the snow,” “the roses,” “a whited sepulchre,” “clusters of grapes,” “cedars,” “a knot of serpents,” “a pomegranate,” “the red blasts of trumpets,” “the feet of the doves,” and “a branch of coral” (589–90).

Like decorative Camp art, which emphasizes “texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (Sontag 278), décor overrides desire in *Salomé*. In *Salomé*, ornamental language operates like “an engine of desire,” to borrow Bennett’s words (307); it informs and controls reality. The repetitive style in *Salomé*, which is often criticized as a parody of mannerisms of Maeterlinck, adds to its artificiality. The linguistic autonomy renders the world of *Salomé* self-reflexive, existing independently of external reality. Thus, *Salomé* seems to realize Vivian’s words in *The Decay of Lying*: Art “makes and unmakes many worlds” (1081). The play pushes Gayatri Spivak’s definition of Decadent style to the extreme: “A way of writing where the reference seems to be not to a world of nature but always to a world already made into artifice” (229). Again, to quote Sontag: “All Camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice. Nothing in nature can be campy. Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style” (279).

Style in Camp is not a matter of mere aesthetics; as Babuscio points out, it is “a form of consciousness” that helps one to cope with a hostile reality (122). The artificiality and self-reflexivity of *Salomé* alienate the audience from the action, creating a double-consciousness: “Camp sees everything in quotation marks. . . . To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (Sontag 280). The distinction between art and reality is blurred in *Salomé*. Wilde is ever present in his drama, contemplating his creation, as is well captured in Beardsley’s drawings. Beardsley’s “The Woman in the Moon” presents Wilde as the moon, holding a (probably green) flower and gazing at the Princess. In “A Platonic Lament,” we get a glimpse of Wilde under what looks like a cloud dropping a green flower over the dead body of the Young Syrian (Figure 10). In “Enter Herodias,” the author appears as an usher figure, with one hand holding a copy of *Salomé* and the other stretching toward the Queen and her entourage (Figure 11). “The Eyes of Herod” makes a caricature of Wilde in the figure of the Tetrarch, who stands at the back and steals a gaze at his stepdaughter. The boundary between art and reality is blurred again, when *Salomé* promises to Narraboth the Young Syrian a “little green flower” (588), which is an overt allusion to Wilde’s green carnation, the badge of queerness worn among homosexuals in Paris. Rhonda K. Garelick, who interprets *Salomé* as Wilde’s “own modern and unambiguously camp revision” of French Decadents’ aesthetics (146), also notes a blending of the author and the fictive characters in *Salomé* as a trait of Camp (128).⁵ Wilde is often identified with *Salomé*, especially with



Figure 10. "A Platonic Lament." Illustration by Aubrey Beasley from Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (London, 1894).

the prescient ending of the play. Yet, identifying Wilde with one particular character is to betray *Salomé*'s playful spirit. *Salomé* is no slavish imitation of life; as Vivian says in *The Decay of Lying*, "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror" (1081). The world of *Salomé* is porous with outside reality. The author walks in and out of the drama; the characters are likely to step out of their roles at any moment. Like Camp, the

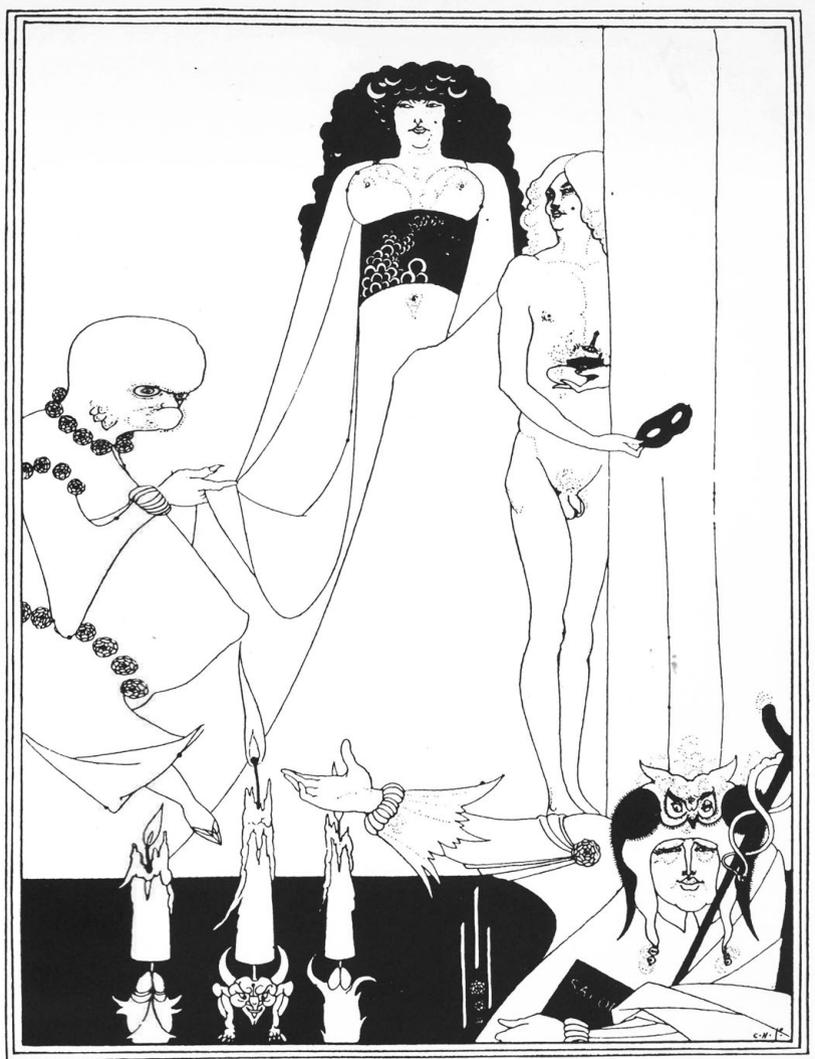


Figure 11. “Enter Herodias.” Illustration by Aubrey Beasley from Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* (London, 1894).

play involves a “duplicity”; “Behind the ‘straight’ public sense in which something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing” (Sontag 281).

Camp duplicity is heightened by the prominence of the actor: “Camp is the glorification of ‘character’” (Sontag 285). A Camp actor is always her- or himself, whatever role s/he plays. As Babuscio says, Camp theatricality highlights the constructiveness of identity: we are what we are not as a matter of fact but as “a matter of style” (123). Wilde declared that the “only person in the world who could act *Salomé* is Sarah Bernhardt,” an actress famous for her artificial vocalization, eerie intonation and incantatory chanting style (Powell



Figure 12. Napoleon Sarony, Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra, 1891.

47). Bernhardt was in her late forties when she went into rehearsal for *Salomé* at the Palace Theatre in 1892, far too old to play the role of the pubescent girl, not to mention the dance of the seven veils. Bernhardt readily accepted the role, probably perceiving “the particular camp appeal of a middle-aged woman portraying (or trying to ‘pass’ as) a nubile princess,” as Garelick also notes (149). By the late 1880s, Bernhardt was notorious for her narcissistic performances without giving proper characterization of her role (Figure 12). The plays were

used as “vehicles for one and the same personality, mere strings of situations conditioned by that personality”; Salomé’s macabre monologue to the dead prophet offers “a delicious parody of the self-regarding Sarah Bernhardt persona as everyone knew it in 1892” (Powell 50–52). Wilde was more likely to be aware of such effect in the casting. As to Wilde’s professed seriousness for *Salomé*, Powell conjectures that he was “lying or merely unaware of his own processes” (53). Such was Wilde’s affectation and “poses” that we can never tell; *Salomé* seems to reflect Wilde’s nature by osmosis.

By way of conclusion, I will now return to Wilde’s intention for this perplexing play. Discussing Wilde’s relation to Catholicism, Ellis Hanson admits that there is ample evidence both for his religious sincerity and for his doubt (232). If Wilde meant *Salomé* as a religious drama, which the history of *The Decapitation of Salomé* mentioned earlier seems to confirm, how can we explain the paradox of Salomé’s “carnal” spirituality? We may turn to *La Sainte Courtisane*, a dramatic fragment written around the same time with *Salomé*, for further clue. The beautiful, sensuous courtesan Myrrha from Alexandria seeks out to tempt the holy hermit Honorius in the desert, and eventually they succeed in persuading each other to follow the opposite path. The saint gives in to earthly pleasure, the prostitute to spiritual life. This short parable reflects Wilde’s belief that body and soul are not opposites but integral part of a whole being, a theme explored more thoroughly in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and short stories like “The Fisherman and his Soul,” as Rita Severi shows in her study. Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan’s body is akin to what Gerald Monsman calls “Platonic Eros”: the beautiful body “mirrors back the preincarnate beauty of the seer-soul, reanimating her with a vision of that half-forgotten, divine beauty after which she thirsts” (34). Critics who interpret the play as an expression of Wilde’s religious impulse ascribe Salomé’s sensuous spirituality to the unresolved Catholic doctrine of the spirit that makes itself known only through the flesh. Ellis Hanson, in his insightful study of the decadents’ fascination with Catholicism, argues that Wilde’s *Salomé* subtly stages a “dialectical reversal of saint and sinner,” in which the soul and the body mirror each other (274-75). Similarly, Katherine Brown Downey argues that Wilde exposes the carnality of faith and the aesthetics of spirituality inherent in the Bible, even suggesting that Salomé’s kissing of the dead Jokanaan amounts to “a Eucharistic act” (111). However, Salomé’s spiritual aspirations, encoded in such a leap of paradox, would be easily lost to the audience.

Is Wilde’s *Salomé* a serious symbolist work? We may answer this question both in the affirmative and in the negative. Although I have suggested a Camp perspective as an alternative way of looking at *Salomé* in this essay, “it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,” as Wilde says in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Camp, like beauty, is largely in the eye of the beholder. Those who are able to crack Wilde’s paradox of body-spirit reversal would take *Salomé* as a sincere symbolist play. To those who find such spirituality too much, *Salomé* still appeals with its Camp sensibility. Regarding *Salomé* as Camp, however, does not negate its seriousness. To quote Babuscio, Camp “allows us to witness ‘serious’ issues with temporary detachment, so that only later, after the event, are we struck by the emotional and moral implications of what we have almost passively absorbed” (128). Wilde’s *Salomé* achieves just the same about the issue of desire and spirituality. Understood as Camp, *Salomé* becomes a most Wildean piece with originality, not an anomaly of his oeuvre or a “mosaic” of other authors’ works.

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NOTES

1. Such approaches include Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture*, Finney's *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*, and Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin De Siècle*.
2. All references to Wilde's works are to *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland, unless noted otherwise, and will be cited parenthetically in the text. Spelling of character names follows this edition, with exceptions when they are cited directly from other secondary sources.
3. Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* is exemplary of this approach. For other gender-focused readings of *Salomé*, see Millet 152-56; Finney 62-68; Showalter 150-79.
4. Meyer, among others, attacks Sontag's notion as spurious Pop camp in contrast to genuine Camp with capital C, or "the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity" (5). Bergman criticizes Sontag's downplay of homosexuality in favour of aesthetics as "emptying camp of content" (8). Defining Camp as "a product of the gay sensibility," Babuscio regrets that even Sontag "virtually edited gays out of her otherwise brilliant 'Notes on Camp'" (117-18). Meyer, who proposes to reclaim Camp as "solely a queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse" (1), even finds it "politically urgent to process Sontag's 'Notes'," to borrow Cleto's words (17).
5. To my knowledge, Garelick's monograph, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin De Siècle*, is the only publication that approaches Wilde's *Salomé* as Camp, although it is focused more on the genealogy of the modern pop star in general than on the play in particular.

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