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The Shulamite of Sodom: Wilde's Subversion of the *Song of Songs* and the Birth of the Monstrous-Feminine

Gerrard Carter

Salomé is a mosaic. Mr Wilde has many masters, and the influence of each master asserts itself in his pages as stripes of different colours assert themselves in stuffs from the East. The reader of *Salomé* seems to stand in the Island of Voices and to hear around him and about the utterances of friends, the whispering of demigods¹.

- 1 When the reader stands in the "Island of Voices" and hears around him "the whispering of demigods", he becomes immersed in Wilde's rich transtextual tapestry of multi-coloured interlocking threads. Just as one would turn over an intricate fabric to discover the hidden tangled workmanship that produced handiwork of such immense depth and beauty, so too, does the *Salomé* reader once he or she discovers the play's coded intertextuality. However, deciphering such coding presents a number of challenges due to the fact that the "intertextual history of the *Salomé* story is so complex as to make any account of Wilde's precise influences highly problematic" (Tydeman and Price 1996, 12). In the case of Wilde's *Salomé* there is more than one hypotext², as illustrated by the rich mosaic of French literary sources and biblical influences residing in the play. Therefore, when presented with this wealth of influences, the reader is confounded by the ambiguity such transtextual practices initiate. The innate ambiguity of the text engenders a literary response, as the reader engages in an intertextual *pas de deux*. This metaphorical dance enables the reader to unlock the text's meaning while enhancing the interpretative experience of Wilde's obscure play.

- 2 The two significant accounts in the Bible that deal with John the Baptist's beheading at the request of Herod's stepdaughter are Matthew 14:6-11 and Mark 6:14-29. However, Wilde was not only inspired by the New Testament, but also, by the Old Testament. In his reinterpretation of the Salomé myth, Wilde was influenced by one biblical book in particular, the *Song of Songs*, and most strikingly by Ernest Renan's French translation from the original Hebrew, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (1860). The rhythm, sound and syntax of the language Wilde used to rewrite the Salomé story, clearly evoke Renan's translation. Furthermore, there are unequivocal borrowings from the *Song of Songs*, which are sharply etched into Wilde's Symbolist language. Wilde's choice to replicate such an erotically charged poetic style borrowed from one of the most sexual books of the Bible caused quite a caustic backlash at the time. The morning after the Paris opening of Richard Strauss' opera by the same name, the critic Pierre Lalo mocked Wilde's literary efforts as a "contrefaçon du Cantique des Cantiques"³. *Contrefaçon* meaning counterfeit, a forgery or even a pirating work demonstrates that by imitating the incantatory styling of the *Song of Songs*, Wilde's transgressed misrepresentation of the biblical text results in an accessible palimpsest (a parchment that has been written on twice).
- 3 In *Salomé*, Wilde takes symbols and subverts them: the dove, for instance, a symbol of virtue is demonized at the hands of Wilde. Wilde takes the image of the Shulamite in the biblical book the *Song of Songs* and subverts it, tailoring it to meet the corrupt and depraved Salomé. Wilde transforms the solar symbol of gold (characteristic of the Shulamite) into a lunar symbol of silver (characteristic of Salomé). As a result, Wilde's Salomé is perverted and frightening; she loses the warmth of her desire to profit from the chilling lunar indifference of the *femme fatale*.
- 4 The *Salomé* text is a result of *bricolage* in every sense of the word, an interwoven tapestry creating something new with something old. Transtextuality provides the reader with a methodology to elucidate the literary transformations Wilde engages in when exploring decadent aesthetics, allowing an analysis of how *Salomé* works as a rewriting of biblical texts. Genette's theory of transtextuality provides an appropriate analysis to understand how Wilde's play exists as an extensive hypertextual work. While it is fascinating to study the rich mosaic of French literary sources residing in Wilde's *Salomé*, too often scholars have limited their analysis by focusing on *fin-de-siècle* writers without expanding their investigation to acknowledge the profound impact administered by the *Song of Songs*. Existing scholarship has certainly signaled the influence of this particular biblical book upon Wilde's play⁴. However, an intertextual analysis of the poetics between the texts of Renan and Wilde has yet to be undertaken. Furthermore, critical significance in negotiating the use of abjection with relation to the demonization of the pure and divine Shulamite deserves further critical attention.
- 5 This study focuses on the biblical impact administered by Renan's translation of the *Song of Songs*, not only to mark the deliberate use of linguistic ambiguity Wilde used in order to create the characteristic obscurity that echoes behind the surface reading of the text, but also to illustrate the transformation of motivation in Wilde's hypertext as it closely resembles the biblical language used in the Old Testament. Furthermore, by employing Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject as it is elucidated in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur: Essai sur l'abjection* (1980) [*Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*] to delineate such transformation of motivation, this study will contribute to a greater understanding of the role that intertextuality plays in Wilde's work.

From the Shadows: Renan's Illumination of the Erotic Song

- 6 Situated in the Old Testament, the *Song of Songs* is considered to be one of the most poetic books of the Bible comprising exquisite poems from ancient Israel whose poetic principles are untypical of biblical verse (Alter 1985, 185). In *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), Robert Alter justifiably describes the *Song of Songs* as “the only surviving instance of purely secular love poetry from ancient Israel” making it “the most consistently secular of all biblical texts” (1985, 185). Renan was clearly attracted to the secular aspect of the *Song of Songs*, his aim was not to detract from the veneration of the holy image provided, but to shed light on its beauty and sensuality or what he eloquently terms this antique work in all its “chaste nudity”. Renan states:

As for me, my aim has not been to detract from the veneration of the image now become holy, but to despoil it for a moment of its wings, in order to show the laymen antique art in its chaste nudity (xxviii)⁵.

- 7 The sensuality, beauty and resonance of Renan's French version of *Le Cantique des Cantiques* furnished Wilde with a rhythm and resonance in order to “play beautiful music” as he so gracefully affirmed in an interview with the Pall Mall Budget⁶. In the preface to his French translation of the *Song of Songs*, Renan states:

An attentive study of these different written data, devoted wholly to religion, reveal to us numerous traces of a profane life, which, not being the most brilliant side of the Jewish people, has naturally been cast into the shade (xviii-xix).

- 8 However, Wilde refused to cast the biblical writings to the shadows and instead illuminated and subsequently transgressed the poetic rendition of the Bien-Aimée (Shulamite) in his creation of *Salomé*. The French translation of the *Song of Songs* not only offered Wilde a melodious poetic tone but also afforded the author a unique and alluring world situated in the same geographical region as his biblical drama, far removed from the puritanical reign of Victorian England during his time. This version was a way to verbalize the required sensual nuances and to discover an exotic world, which harboured all the seductive and erotic fantasies of ancient oriental lovers.
- 9 The *Song of Songs* has been part of the biblical canon since the Hebraic Bible and as such it exists as a work of erotic love without a single mention of God. When the Synagogue and the Church took the erotic and secular poem and turned it into a religious dialogue between man and an anthropomorphic God, the reader was still, nevertheless, confronted with a striking and sexually suggestive text. Considering the fact that such erotic meaning was unable to evade the eyes of the reader, how were the Synagogue and the Church able to formally explain the sexually charged nature of the biblical text? Furthermore, how did both institutions manage to consecutively justify the sexually nuanced words for a relationship with a higher celestial order? Within a patriarchal domain, the Synagogue and the Church influenced Jews and Gentiles alike to align the male lover with an overriding supremacy to enhance the allegorical totalitarianism.
- 10 Following Renan's dismissal of the Christian interpretation, the sensuous writings of the *Song of Songs* had a significant influence on French art and literature during the nineteenth century. For example, it inspired the title for Balzac's *The Lily of the Valley* (1835) and influenced French Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau in his depictions of

biblical and mythological figures⁷. On December 11, 1891, during Wilde's Paris sojourn coinciding with the period of time in which the playwright composed *Salomé*, Lugné-Poe's *Théâtre d'Art* presented a programme of symbolist stage experiments by Paul-Napoléon Roinard that included a dramatization based on the melodious *Song of Songs* (Tydeman and Price 1996, 6).

Illustration 1

Gustave Moreau (1826-1898), *Song of Songs (Cantique des Cantiques)*, 1893
Aquarelle sur papier, 387 mm x 208 mm, Musée Ohara, (Kurashiki, Japon)

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- 11 Besides the possibility of Wilde attending a performance of Roinard's biblical dramatization, the Irish writer was certainly familiar with Ernest Renan's 1860 French translation of *Song of Songs* from the original Hebrew. A passionate and devoted admirer of Renan's scholarly work, Wilde is known to have purchased works by the great nineteenth-century French intellectual. In particular Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863) in which Christ, as Thomas Wright explains in *Built of Books: How Reading Defined the Life of Oscar Wilde* (2008), "is depicted as an entirely human, but utterly mesmerizing, personality" and quotes Wilde's description of Renan's *Life of Jesus* (1863) as "that gracious fifth Gospel, the Gospel according to Saint Thomas" (2008, 126). In fact, Renan's unorthodox *Life of Jesus* (1863) and his *Apostles* (1866) were among the titles that Wilde requested while imprisoned at Reading Gaol.
- 12 If captivated by Renan's original translation of the *Song of Songs* as he was with the author's original and unconventional *oeuvre*, then Wilde's rewriting of the biblical book becomes his quintessential *fait accompli*. The reader may recognize the work's poetic form but nevertheless is startled by Wilde's abject and debased refashioning. When Wilde performed such an abject *imitation* or parody of the biblical love poem in his

creation of *Salomé*, he constructed an abject texture of imitations to demonize the Shulamite making her wretched and contemptible. Such a literary transformation acknowledges the underlying eroticism already present in the scriptures.

- 13 Drawn to the veiled eroticism of the biblical text in a quest to distort the Holy Scriptures, Wilde was presented with a striking element of ambiguity since “Within the limits of its paradoxes the Song is wholly enigmatic. We never know quite what happens or whether anything happens” (Landy 1983, 140). The *Song of Songs* reads as a theatrical scene where the intensity of ambiguity is superimposed on the poetic language due to the fact that there are no discernible characters. It is essentially a poem in dialogue, that is, one can argue, a theatrical poem. This notion is reinforced by Renan’s interpretation of the *Song of Songs*: “If we take the term *dramatic poetry* in its wildest sense to designate a composition in dialogue form with its corresponding action, the *Song of Songs* is a drama” (56). Renan’s astute description of the biblical text being that of a drama helps to emphasize Wilde’s attraction to the *Song of Songs* as a significant influence in the composition of *Salomé*.
- 14 The theatrical aspect of the poem renders the shift of genre, specifically the transition to a play, easy. Wilde’s *Salomé* is a drama where the young princess is the central character and takes the principal role. Although she communicates with other individuals within the play’s dialogue, it is the sacred prophet Iokanaan who is the point of convergence of this fatal love story. Wilde transforms the biblical “poem”, which does not indicate the distinction of characters, into a play, thus passing from one genre to another. This transformation shows how Wilde’s hypertext is formed according to the process that Genette calls *transposition*.
- 15 According to Genette, transposition is considered to be the most important of all hypertextual practices. Genette’s support of such a claim derives “from the scope and variety of the procedures it calls upon” (1997, 212). While pastiche, caricature, and forgery are “only functional inflexions bearing on a single practice: imitation” (1997, 213), transposition, on the contrary:

(c)an give rise to works of vast dimensions [...] whose textual amplitude and aesthetic and/or ideological ambition may mask or even completely obfuscate their hypertextual character, and this very productivity is linked to the diversity of the transformational procedures that it brings into play (1997, 213).
- 16 In this instance, Wilde deliberately sets out to transgress the meaning of his hypotext by enacting thematic changes resulting in a work of profane and sacrilegious dimension.
- 17 As previously mentioned, in the case of Wilde’s text there is more than one hypotext. When Wilde initiates thematic changes to his hypotext, he engages in the ambiguous practice of what Genette terms *transvaluation*. Transvaluation is the substitution of values that “can be roughly described as axiologically homogeneous” (1997, 367). Genette’s definition of transvaluation is the rewriting of a text “as a double movement of devaluation and (counter) valuation bearing on the same character” (1997, 367).
- 18 In Wilde’s *Salomé* the hypertext unquestionably takes the opposite side of its hypotext and thus the transvaluation of devaluing what was valued. The pure ambrosial love present in the *Song of Songs* is *transvalued* into a morbid transgression of the Victorian civilized norms of feminine behavior and ideals. Therefore, there is a clear indication of an inversion of values. Wilde replaces the religious ecstasy that permeates the *Song of*

Songs to create a work that allows the reader the freedom to experience a suspension of the safe, the known and the natural.

- 19 In emulating Genette's concept of transvaluation, the substitution of values presented in the hypotext (*Song of Songs*) can be described as "axiologically homogeneous". Initially Wilde's *Salomé*, like the biblical Shulamite, exhibits characteristics "that involve no real value conflicts" (Genette 1997, 367). Both *Salomé* and the Shulamite profess the same axiological creed: that is professing undying love for the object of their affection. However, when *Salomé* is inflamed with wrath following her rejection by the prophet, there appears an abrupt conflict of values, allowing us "a glimpse into the ways in which transvaluation may operate" (1997, 367) as "the hypertext takes the opposite side of its hypotext, giving value to what was devalued and vice versa" (1997, 367). In Wilde's hands, *Salomé* becomes the Shulamite of Sodom, a paradoxical figure so utterly transgressed that she invites the fascinating and ambiguous desire of abjection.
- 20 The occasion which best illustrates such erotic transgression occurs in *Salomé*'s final monologue when the princess takes possession of the prophet's severed head. The monstrous *femme fatale* tastes his blood upon her lips in an erotic fetishized kiss: "Ah, I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood? ... Nay; but perchance it was the taste of love..." (164)⁸. *Salomé* exerts her morbid desire for Iokanaan and in doing so, shatters the confines of a Victorian puritanical ideal. By eroticizing necrophilia at the hands of the monstrous-feminine constructed within a patriarchal ideology, Wilde is breaking the boundaries of the taboo, and thus releasing his protagonist to savour in her monstrous display as she abandons herself to the ecstasy of intense erotic feeling. For *Salomé*, erotic feeling is manifested in an abject manner, thus displaying the embodiment of the monstrous-feminine.

Illustration 2

Salomé Opera Australia (2012) by courtesy of Opera Australia

PHOTOGRAPHER: JEFF BUSBY

The Birth of the Monstrous-Feminine

- 21 The monstrous-feminine is the embodiment of the patriarchal suppression and distortion of the feminine. Barbara Creed originally conceived the term “monstrous-feminine” to describe the terrifying and abject representations of woman, arguing that:

When woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions. These faces are: the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman (1993, 7).

- 22 For Creed:

The term ‘female monster’ implies a simple reversal of ‘male monster’. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase ‘monstrous-feminine’ emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity (1993, 3).

- 23 Salomé’s literary act of violence represented in her final monologue brings into question Wilde’s motivation for such a sadistic and eroticized take on the biblical myth. Salomé’s calculating seductive power leading to such a transgressive act of desire can be seen in terms of Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject.

- 24 Kristeva’s conceptualization of the abject adds further understanding to the multiplicity at work in Wilde’s play. For instance, Wilde takes beauty and transforms it into its opposite inciting a morbid desire with the horror and fascination that certain physical functions such as blood, severed heads or dead bodies inspire. Furthermore, Wilde engages in the abjection of destabilizing traditional masculine and feminine roles by offering a clear oscillation of gender identities. In doing so, Wilde subverts and rewrites the biblical story of *Salomé*, presenting us with a Judean princess as the monstrous-feminine and situating her in relation to Kristeva’s notion of abjection where she hovers “within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable” (2000, 542).

- 25 Why does Wilde journey into the abject? The lure of the abject is that it is both repulsive and attractive. In using the biblical text of the *Song of Songs*, Wilde interweaves a number of abject themes: beheading, castration, murder, sacrifice and incest to name the most striking. The abject beckons the spectator to its side: “It fascinates desire” (Kristeva 1982, 1). So too, does *Salomé* in developing “the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies” (1982, 209). We, as spectators, have a contract with the abject and journey with the author into the depths of depravity. In adopting Kristeva’s notion of the subject firmly settled in the superego, the ethical component of the personality, Wilde’s writing of *Salomé* “is necessarily implicated in the interspace that characterizes perversion; and for that reason, it gives rise in turn to abjection” (1982, 16). Kristeva explains:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life (2000, 551).

- 26 As the reader moves simultaneously along the arc of Salomé’s character, her macabre act of necrophilia is transformed into one of beauty and intrigue, an ambiguous

abjection of fascinating desire negating the possibility of fear. Toepfer expounds on the aesthetics of such a deceiving display of fear present in *Salomé*:

The basic source of fear is a sense of *impurity*, which the text “aestheticizes” as *ambiguity*. It is language which separates speakers from the Other, from death. [...] The virgin speaker is “monstrous”, yet she feels the thing, which negates the fear that identifies her as monstrous: a stupefying erotic love (1991, 78).

- 27 By transforming the biblical Shulamite to embody a monstrous-feminine that “is constantly beset by abjection which fascinates desire but which must be repelled” (Creed 1993, 10), Wilde illuminates the notion that abjection is always ambiguous. Like Kristeva, Wilde “emphasizes the attraction, as well as horror, of the undifferentiated” (1993, 10). This desire to simultaneously attract yet repel is demonstrated throughout Wilde’s transgression of the biblical text.

Wilde’s Song of Sexual Transgression

- 28 The first line of the *Song of Songs* not only offers us a glimpse into the sensually nuanced manner in which the Shulamite speaks but when we compare the two texts (French and English translations of the *Song of Songs*) there is a striking difference. The richness in the sonic quality and cadence resonating in Renan’s French bombards the reader with a series of alliterations. For example the opening line in French reads: “Qu’il me baise d’un baiser de sa bouche!” (15) [Let him kiss me with a kiss of his mouth!]. The acoustic quality provided by the articulated consonant *b* strikes the reader with a musical element of recurrence, reinforcing its aesthetic quality as a lyrical poem. This fundamental factor reiterates Wilde’s irresistible attraction to the French language as he characterized the composition of *Salomé* to playing beautiful music. However, Wilde takes possession of the French language and subverts its metonymical tint. When the Shulamite first sensually whispers “Let him kiss me with a kiss of his mouth!” (109), Wilde moulds the Shulamite’s words of love to create the perpetual request Salomé profligates upon the prophet to “kiss thy mouth”: “Laisse-moi baiser ta bouche” (85) [Suffer me to kiss thy mouth]. Salomé repeats this request in an incantatory style, a much-repeated refrain as she pursues the sacred prophet’s affection.
- 29 Her repeated demands become hypnotic. Salomé amplifies her repetition to reiterate her steadfast tenacity when her words increase her involvement and commitment to danger: “I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan, I will kiss thy mouth” (86). As Salomé forecasts her sexual determination in a repeated refrain, transgressing the Shulamite’s opening request, she produces an “oscillation of sensation (to) achieve a ‘hypnotic’ effect” (Toepfer 1991, 67-8).
- 30 However, when Iokanaan rejects her, his refusal swiftly transforms Salomé who was once an emblem of virginal purity into a demonic vampire who demands vengeance. Once Salomé engineers the prophet’s execution and holds his severed head in her hands, kissing it passionately and savouring the taste of his blood upon her lips, the transformation into vindictive *femme fatale* and bloodthirsty vampire is complete. Cradling death in her arms, Salomé not only mocks the prophet’s lifeless head but also relishes in her sacrilegious ways, “Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan” (160).

- 31 Although Wilde's depiction of Salomé possesses the same alluring beauty and sensuality as that of the Shulamite, there is a sense of abjection, a diabolical arousal by her words. She is the *femme fatale* of the Orient. Wilde presents us with a Judean princess taken from the same geographical *cadre* of the *Song of Songs* and subverts her to create a princess that is cursed and cruel. Wilde is testing the moral and sexual code of the sacred by transgressing the characteristics of the Shulamite. Wilde commits sacrilege by bringing the profane traits of Salomé into contact with the seraphic qualities of the Shulamite. In doing so, Wilde acquaints himself with the abject to arouse and invert desire. The sensuality of Salomé's voice is only a seduction until she takes possession of what she wants:

Thy hair is like the clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of the Edomites. Thy hair is like cedars of Lebanon, like the great cedars of Lebanon that give their shade to the lions and the robbers who would hide them by day (82-84).

- 32 Salomé's alluring words are reflected in the Shulamite's: "his countenance is as Lebanon, beautiful as the cedars" (118) and "My beloved is to me as a cluster of camphire, from the vineyards of Engedi" (111).
- 33 In this regard, Salomé's monstrousness is directly associated to questions of sexual desire. Wilde derives such monstrousness by transgressing the Shulamite's hunger for her beloved. The Shulamite yearns for her lover when she states: "Let my beloved enter into his garden, and let him taste of its choicest fruits" (116). In *Salomé*, the concept of demarcation is central to the play for "that which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject" (Creed 1997, 11). The Shulamite invites her Lover to the garden "let him taste of its choicest fruits". Comparable to the seduction of Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Shulamite shares in an aesthetically cultivated garden. Wilde takes the harmonious eating of fruit in a safe and harmonious location and monstrously associates this action with the biting of the sacred prophet's bloodied and severed head: "I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit" (160). Salomé embodies the woman as *femme castratrice* as she brings "about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability" (Creed 1997, 11).
- 34 Following the Shulamite's first seductive utterance "Let him kiss me with a kiss of his mouth!" she immediately correlates her lover's caresses to the sweetness of wine. She declares: "Thy caresses are sweeter than wine, when they are mingled with the fragrance of thy exquisite odours" (109). Falk suggests that wine in the *Song of Songs* is emphatically associated with lovemaking (1990, 158). Wine is mentioned a number of times to describe the Bien-Aimé(e) [the Lover]: "Thy navel is as a round goblet, full of aromatic wine" (120), "thy mouth like the most exquisite wine" (120) and "I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine, the juice of my pomegranates" (121). The allegorical signification of the pomegranate offers the reader a compelling insight into the poem's eroticism when we consider that the pomegranate is "recognized as a fertility symbol in ancient culture" and "is mentioned in connection with females several times in the Song" (Falk 1990, 159).
- 35 Wine becomes intoxicating as evident in Renan's French translation of the Shulamite's opening lines: "Tes caresses sont *plus* douces que le vin, quand elles se mêlent à l'odeur de tes parfums exquis" (15). These lines resonate in Salomé's discourse when she lavishes the prophet with a series of adoring declarations: "Ta bouche est *plus* rouge que les pieds de ceux qui foulent le vin dans les pressoirs" (85) [Thy mouth is redder

than the feat of those who tread the wine in the wine-press]. Wilde takes the same superlative “plus” but shifts and displaces the adjective. “Doux” meaning *soft* or *sweet* becomes “rouge”, the colour *red*. Red not only resembles the colour of wine but also the colour of blood. Blood acquires a prominent role in Wilde’s play. For example, Herod slips in the blood of the slain Syrian officer, “I have slipped in blood! It is an ill omen! It is a very ill omen!” (94) And Salomé savours the taste of blood upon her lips as she kisses the prophet’s severed head.

- 36 There is a transgression in the sexual association to the blood of the Syrian officer as it was suicidal blood, which flowed as a result of the soldier’s unrequited love for Salomé. Salomé’s transgressed sexuality caused his blood to flow and her morbid and abject declarations are brought to a crescendo towards the end of the play as Salomé associates the taste of blood with the taste of love when she drinks from Iokanaan’s severed head. Nothing is redder than the mouth of Iokanaan as Salomé fetishizes the prophet’s mouth:

It is redder than the feet of the doves who inhabit the temples and are fed by the priests. It is redder than the feet of him who cometh from a forest where he hath slain a lion, and seen gilded tigers (84).

- 37 Wilde’s French reads:

Elle est plus rouge que les pieds des colombes qui demeurent dans les temples et sont nourries par les prêtres. Elle est plus rouge que les pieds de celui qui revient d’une forêt où il a tué un lion et vu des tigres dorés” (85).

- 38 Once again Wilde utilizes the superlative “plus” to an extreme in order to create a sacrilegious subversion of the Biblical text. The repeated use of “plus” is borrowed directly from the mouth of the Shulamite. Salomé’s obsession with the prophet’s mouth is actively heightened within its sexual intensity.
- 39 Salomé’s attraction to kiss the prophet’s mouth becomes almost enslaving. Imprisoned by her ebullient fascination, Salomé begins to hallucinate as shown by the extravagant profusion of varied images she associates with his mouth to ultimately become crystalized in her obstinate demand to kiss thy mouth: “Je baiserais ta bouche”⁹. Wilde’s Salomé fetishizes and becomes enthralled with the aesthetics of the prophet’s mouth, as each part of the prophet’s body becomes an object: “It is thy mouth that I desire, Iokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory” (84). This presents the reader with a further degree of abjection as we recognize the element of narcissism as the sole ambition of her desire. Taking Salomé’s narcissism into consideration we notice the profound influence of biblical text as the Shulamite worships her lover, “Thy lips are like a thread of purple, and thy mouth is charming. Thy cheek is like the one side of a pomegranate behind thy veil” (114-5). The Shulamite’s adoring words yield to the horror of the narcissistic *femme fatale* while “the ‘likes’ proliferate as Salomé plunders the language of erotic psalmody” (Bernheimer 1993, 74).
- 40 Salomé establishes a border between the divine Shulamite and what Creed refers to as the “abject body, or the body that has lost its form and integrity. The fully symbolic body must bear no indication of its debt to nature” (1997, 11). In this regard, abjection concerns itself with the fascination and horror of the monstrous and moreover *menstruous* sexuality since blood and the moon are dominant images in Wilde’s play. The lunar element is pushed to the extreme in *Salomé*, all the more reason that the

moon is the feminine element/component *par excellence*. She is the symbol of the woman by her cycles, her curve in the night's sky.

- 41 In *Salomé*, we are reminded that the moon is not only a dominant icon throughout the discourse of the play representing fear, foreboding and death but there is also a sense of vampirism and a correlation to blood which again arises in the numerous descriptions of the moon. For example, the moon evokes terror and dread within the Page of Herodias as illustrated by his opening lines: "Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things" (44). Wilde brings a predatory element to the seductive characteristics of *Salomé*. She is like a vampire who feasts on the living and her alluring qualities ensnare those who "look too much" at a moon that appears to be "strange": "Oh! How strange the moon looks! Like the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud" (72). The perfect time for one of the undead, such as a vampire, to suck blood from the living was on the night of a full moon (Creed 1993, 64). The Greek word for vampire was *sarcomens*, meaning 'flesh made by the moon' (1993, 64). *Salomé* is indeed looking for dead things as she admires the beauty of the moon: "How good to see the moon" (62). She is a sexual predator who dances on blood: "No, no, she is going to dance on blood!" (138) And as the moon turns red, *Salomé's* allegorical identification with the feminine image becomes apparent: "Ah! Look at the moon! She has become red. She has become red as blood" (138).

- 42 Menstrual blood figures metaphorically in *Salomé's* rapid change from ethereal girlhood into demonic destructive womanhood. As a result the entire play can be seen as the metaphoric representation of the menarche, a girl's first menstruation. According to Kristeva:

Blood, indicating the impure, takes on the 'animal' seme of the previous opposition and inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection, where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, *cessation of life* and *vitality* all come together" (1982, 96).

- 43 The reader's encounter with *Salomé's* blood, as "monstrous in relation to her reproductive functions" (Creed 1993, 151), initiates an ideological descent into "the phallogocentric notion that female sexuality is abject" (1993, 151).

- 44 The moon is an omnipresent motif in the drama and she is the unique symbol of *Salomé*. *Salomé* watches and admires the moon with whom she identifies:

How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses" (62).

- 45 A peculiar and curious moon, the allegorical references incite the reader's interest. Identifying the moon as female, cold, chaste, and virginal, veils the moon in seductive ambiguity. The moon as a source of fear is illuminated in Herod's description:

The moon has a strange look tonight. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman...I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is like a mad woman, is she not? (94).

- 46 The image of the moon has long been considered symbolic of dangerous pagan ritual worship, specifically within the teachings of a patriarchal Christian church. In Wilde's transgression of the *Song of Songs*, we notice that the author dismisses the Christian interpretation of biblical writings that the church "had transformed into allegories of divine and spiritual love" (Kuryluk 1987, 226) and subverts the images used to create "metaphors for sexual topography" (1987, 226).
- 47 In Wilde's *Salomé*, the Young Syrian describes the princess as "thou who art the dove of all doves" (86). The dove is a symbol of immaculateness and is depicted as a symbol for the incarnation of the Holy Spirit in the book of Matthew in the New Testament. The dove is also prevalent in Greek mythology. For instance it is the favorite animal of Aphrodite, Goddess of love. However, Kuryluk explains, in antiquity doves were birds not of the divine but of sensual love and belonged to Aphrodite, whose carriage was drawn by them and by sparrows" (1987, 226). In *Salomé*, the divine and sacred meaning is reversed as Wilde "changed the dove into a symbol not of purity full of promise but one pregnant with moral threat" (1987, 226).
- 48 The image of the dove is frequently used in *Song of Songs*: "Thy eyes are as doves' eyes" (111), "My dove, nestled in the clefts of the rock, concealed on the summit of the high places, show me thy countenance, make me hear thy voice; for thy voice is sweet, and thy countenance is lovely" (112), "Thy eyes are as doves' eyes, under the folds of thy veil" (114), "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled" (116), "His eyes are as doves' eyes reflected in streams of running water, like pigeons bathing themselves in milk, perched on the rim of a full vase" (S117), "But the jewel is my dove, my undefiled; she is the only one of her mother, the chosen one of her who gave her birth" (119). Although the *Song of Songs* concerns the Shulamite, it is interesting to note that the word "colombe" [dove] is mentioned seven times in the *Le Cantique des Cantiques/Song of Songs*.
- 49 Correspondingly to the lovers in the biblical text, Wilde's characters use the image of the dove: "Her little white hands are fluttering like doves that fly to their dove-cots" (56), "She is like a dove that has strayed. She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind. She is like a silver flower" (60). However, Wilde alludes to the dove for the final time when Salomé holds the bloodied head of John the Baptist in her hands: "Thy body was a column of ivory set upon feet of silver. It was a garden full of doves and lilies of silver. It was a tower of silver decked with shields of ivory" (160-2). The phrase is recaptured in almost identical fashion from the *Song of Songs*: "His legs are as pillars of marble set upon pedestals of gold" (118). The durable pillar symbolises "the tree of life" and is often associated with the erected phallus (Chevalier & Gheerbrant 1982, 311). Erected upon a fortified pedestal of gold, Wilde transforms the solar symbol of gold (characteristic of the Shulamite) into a lunar symbol of silver (characteristic of Salomé).
- 50 The lunar indifference is also illustrated by the metallic element of silver. For example, "each repetition consists of an exclusively metaphorical use" (Toepfer 1991, 76). Herod requests that Herodias "fill with wine the great goblets of silver" (120) and he delights at what he perceives to be Salomé's simple request: "In a silver charger? Surely yes, in a silver charger. She is charming, is she not?" (142) The recurrent use of the word "silver" seems "pervasive in the text (because it is recurrent); yet it rarifies all identities into which speakers transform it" (Toepfer 1991, 76). Toepfer explains:
- 'Silver' ambiguates the categories of enunciated phenomena by attributing to them an unseen quality which (as silverness) makes them precious, beautiful, formed by

some unnatural ('artistic') will, yet 'cold' (inorganic), increasingly impenetrable, and softened only by very intense concentrations of heat 'passion' (1991, 77).

- 51 This recurrent use of language that Wilde adopts is richly intensified during Salomé's final monologue as she lavishes the prophet with romantic blazons reminiscent of the Petrarchan conceit. The princess uses elaborate and exaggerated comparisons to praise Iokanaan's physical attributes. She describes his body not only as a "column of ivory set upon feet of silver" (162), "a garden full of doves and lilies of silver" (162) but also as "a tower of silver decked with shields of ivory" (162).

- 52 Wilde's choice of colour and texture to describe Salomé's depiction of Iokanaan's "ivory" body is quite compelling. In the *Dictionnaire des Symboles* (1969), Chevalier & Gheerbrant characterize the colour ivory by:

Its whiteness, symbol of purity. Its use in the making of Solomon's throne could also associate it to the symbolism of power, in that the hardness of ivory renders it almost unbreakable and incorruptible (1982, 605 *my translation*)¹⁰.

- 53 However, within the context of *Salomé*'s final monologue in which the princess holds the severed head, now removed from the soon to be decaying body, the metaphorical description of Iokanaan adopts a sinister and murderous characterization. Wilde employs the notion of the abject by offering the ultimate in abjection, the corpse (Creed 1993, 9). Creed states:

Within a biblical context, the corpse is also utterly abject. It signifies one of the most basic forms of pollution – the body without a soul. As a form of waste it represents the opposite of the spiritual, the religious symbolic (1993, 10).

- 54 At this moment in the play, the sacred prophet is without a soul, murdered; his lifeless body merely a headless corpse awaiting decay.

- 55 The whiteness of the durable and opaque ivory is mirrored in the paleness of Salomé. In Wilde's hands she becomes the antithesis of the golden Shulamite. The goodness of the Bien-Aimée becomes monstrous in *Salomé*, cold and sterile. Salomé is no longer pure but cruel, strange and morbid. She is diseased as Herod states: "I am not ill. It is your daughter who is sick to death. Never have I seen her so pale" (100).

- 56 On the contrary, the sun inundates the Shulamite as she is black and "scorched" by the sun:

I am black, but I am comely, O daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar, like the pavilions of Solomon. Despise me not, because I am a little black, because the sun has scorched me (109-10).

- 57 In contrast, the moon's rays illuminate Wilde's Salomé: "How pale the Princess is! Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver" (50). Her beauty is white but this coldness is sterile. She is virgin but her purity is defiled by her diabolical soul. Salomé is as pale as the moon she observes. The Shulamite of *Song of Songs* is a solar and luminous heroine, "regardée" [watched] or "brûlée" [burnt] by the sun, according to the translations. Wilde diverts the axiology by creating a fatal contra-heroine watched and faded by the moon. Salomé is the perverted and frightening Shulamite as Wilde explores the notion of "female chastity as a deadly trap - a kind of *vagina dentata*, a lunar wasteland" (Kuryluk 1987, 227). Kuryluk states:

Through the constant repetition of "white," "silver," and "cold," Wilde creates in Salomé an inner landscape that is at once moon-like, wintry, and apocalyptic: frost flowers eat away the substance of life, and seven lunar veils sweep the earth clean (1987, 227).

- 58 When Wilde transgressed the spiritual and holy sanctuary of the *Song of Songs*, he remodeled the heavenly and unadulterated Shulamite to ultimately become the Shulamite of Sodom.
- 59 Ernest Renan's French translation of the *Song of Songs* from the original Hebrew, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (1860) was the catalyst for Wilde's exploration into the poetics of desire. By focusing on this one single hypotext, the reader is able to highlight the biblical book's relationship with Wilde's *Salomé* in order to elucidate the author's choice in generating thematic transformations and ideological reversals. This study has shown that, by transgressing the biblical book of *Song of Songs* and injecting a vivid reality of sex, murder and death, Wilde created a distinct narrative to indulge in the aesthetics of abjection. In rewriting the sensual poetics of the *Song of Songs*, Wilde was able to extract the biblical book's raw sexual themes and expose them with a newfound reality that at the time was extremely challenging for Victorian audiences.
- 60 Genette's theory of transtextuality provides the analytical approach when examining the literary transformations Wilde used as inspiration for such a bold rewriting of the biblical myth. *Salomé* provides the reader with an engaging literary tapestry as one is compelled to explore the play's foundation. The sensuality, beauty and resonance of Renan's French translation of the *Song of Songs* implicitly remains under the surface of Wilde's text as it highlights *Salomé*'s sexually carnal and transgressive themes. Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject also proves very relevant to understand this transformation. A symbolist tragedy highly charged with eroticism and entangled with the horrors of abjection, Wilde's *Salomé* continues to inspire countless artists to delve into the depraved universe of the deformed Judean princess. As a result, they essentially become intertwined with the raw sexuality of the *Song of Songs*.

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NOTES

1. Unsigned review, *Pall Mall Gazette* 27 February 1893 (Quoted in Beckson 1970, 135-6).
2. Genette refers to the *hypotext* as an earlier text, which another text, the *hypertext*, is grafted. Genette describes such a relationship as *hypertextuality* (See Genette 1997, 5).
3. *Le Temps*, 15 May 1907.
4. See Ellmann (1988), Kuryluk (1987), Powell (2009), Amadiou (2014).
5. « Pour moi, mon but n'a pas été de soustraire à la vénération l'image devenue sainte, mais de la dépouiller un moment de ses voiles pour la montrer aux amateurs de l'art antique dans sa chaste

nudité » (14). It is interesting to note that Thomson substitutes Renan's "voiles" for "wings" in his English translation. Subsequent In-Text citations used when referring to the *Song of Songs* are taken from Thomson's English translation of Renan's *Le Cantique du Cantiques* (1860). Renan's original text is used when citing from the original French (See References).

6. When asked how he came to write *Salomé* in French, Wilde responded, "My idea of writing the play was simply this: I have one instrument that I know I can command, and that is the English Language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it" *The Pall Mall Budget* (London, 30 June 1892) Quoted in *Oscar Wilde: Interviews & Recollections*. Ed. E. H. Mikhail. Volume 1. London: Macmillan, 1979.

7. "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys!" (111). Apart from the obvious borrowing from the *Song of Songs* in the naming of the title, Balzac refers to the *Song of Songs* in the following passage: "One evening I found her pensively watching a sunset which reddened the summits with so ravishing a glow that it was impossible not to listen to that voice of the eternal Song of Songs by which Nature herself bids all her creatures love" (Prescott Wormeley, Balzac 2011, 63).

8. Subsequent In-Text citations used when referring to Wilde's *Salomé* are taken from Flammarion's bi-lingual edition (2006). See References.

9. See Pierobon (2009, 90).

10. Par sa blancheur, symbole de pureté. Son usage dans la confection du trône de Salomon pourrait en outre l'associer au symbolisme de la puissance, en ce sens que la dureté de l'ivoire le rend quasi incassable et incorruptible.

ABSTRACTS

Oscar Wilde's symbolist tragedy *Salomé* (1891) possesses a rich and complex intertextual history incorporating a number of French literary sources and biblical influences. The two significant accounts in the Bible that deal with John the Baptist's beheading at the request of Herod's stepdaughter are Matthew 14:6-11 and Mark 6:14-29. However, Wilde was not only inspired by the *New Testament*, but also, by the *Old Testament*. In his reinterpretation of the biblical text, Wilde was influenced by one biblical book in particular, the *Song of Songs*, and most strikingly by Ernest Renan's French translation from the original Hebrew, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (1860). This study demonstrates the importance of the *Song of Songs* as a biblical hypotext that Wilde inverted to create a daring departure from his success as a renowned Victorian playwright of satirical humour. In rewriting the sensual poetics of the *Song of Songs*, Wilde was able to extract its raw sexual themes and expose them with a newfound reality. This study explores the subversion of the *Song of Songs* and the author's motivating desire to represent the monstrous-feminine.

La tragédie symboliste d'Oscar Wilde, *Salomé* (1891) bénéficie d'une intertextualité riche et complexe intégrant de nombreuses sources littéraires françaises et d'influences bibliques. Les deux passages bibliques significatifs évoquant importants qui traitent de la décapitation de Jean Baptiste à la demande de la belle-fille d'Hérode sont Matthieu 14: 6-11 et Marc 6: 14-29. Cependant, Wilde n'était pas seulement inspiré par le *Nouveau Testament*, mais aussi par l'*Ancien Testament*. Dans sa réinterprétation du texte biblique, Wilde est influencé en particulier par le *Cantique des cantiques*, et en particulier par la traduction française d'Ernest Renan en 1860. Cette étude démontre l'importance du *Cantique des cantiques* comme un hypotexte biblique que Wilde a

inverti pour se départir de sa réputation de dramaturge victorien à l'humour satirique. En réécrivant la poétique sensuelle du *Cantique des cantiques*, Wilde a pu en extraire les thèmes sexuels et les exposer avec une réalité nouvelle. Cette étude explore la subversion du *Cantique des cantiques* et le désir de l'auteur de représenter le « monstrueux-féminin ».

INDEX

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Salomé, Song of Songs, Ernest Renan, the Bible, intertextuality, abjection, subversion

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