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The Fallen Woman:

An Exploration of the Voiceless Women in Victorian England through Three Plays of Oscar Wilde

A Thesis by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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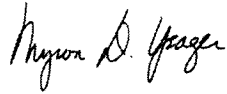
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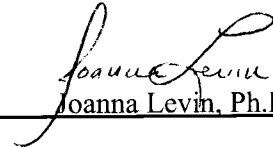
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May 2020

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Wilde

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ABSTRACT

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Wilde

by Marco Randazzo

This essay establishes the Christian myth within Wilde's three plays, calling attention to the gender politics that he fought against in the Victorian era. Through *Salomé*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband* I will prove the Christological myth that each play adopts and establish Wilde's ability to make the religion "transformational." Wilde's productions of characters like Salomé, Mrs. Allonby, Mrs. Arbuthnot, and Hester are examples of the "fallen woman" of Victorian England. The treatment of women by women will illuminate the passiveness of the Victorian Woman and their compliance with the patriarchal norm. This norm continues through the two "society plays": *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*, where aspects of progressive women versus married ones is concentrated on. Wilde uses his ability of language to show societal norms to convey Christological backgrounds. These plays portray multiple types of women: those who comply with the patriarchy and those who do everything in their power to usurp it. Wilde displays these differences through his storytelling, manipulating certain aspects of the Victorian era to expose negative traits of a patriarchal society.

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The Fallen Woman:
An Exploration of the Voiceless Women in Victorian England through Three Plays of
Oscar Wilde

Introduction

Late nineteenth-century British literature was characterized by experimentation and exploration of accepted moralities. Oscar Wilde's writing could be seen reflecting the life of the world around him focusing on the human condition and human interaction at different levels of society based on Christian myth. Whether it was forefront in his plays or only a presence in the background, the Christian tradition was something that he and his characters were influenced by. In *Salomé*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde experiments with biblical myth and societal norms to question the treatment of Victorian women and gender. These depictions are exemplary of the patriarchy and Christian belief which he utilizes to challenge the community, pointing to women that falter and lose their status within society. Women of Victorian England, with its conformity to Christian belief, are both ridiculed and alienated by society for creating ripples in the norm. This essay will explore how Wilde utilizes Christian tropes to explore Victorian moralities and patriarchal views of women.

Research of Wilde's works through a Christology critical frame illuminates the social premises of Christianity within the plays. John Allen Quintus in his essay "Christ, Christianity, and Oscar Wilde" examines the comparisons between Wilde's short stories and the Christ character of the Bible. Quintus points out Wilde's own relationship to the religion, "Wilde goes

beyond biblical authority to assert an interpretative view... perhaps because—it departs from orthodoxy... to Wilde religion—like art—is culturally, socially transformational” (Quintus 518). Quintus’ exploration proves that Wilde’s control of his language and interpretation of religion, manipulates storylines and characters into reflections of his own ideals. To Wilde religion is “transformational,” or malleable, and he utilizes this aspect to develop modern-day stories that illustrate social constructs based on the religion of his audience. In her essay, “The Fifth Gospel of Oscar Wilde,” Jennifer Stevens develops Quintus’ concept of transformational writing. Wilde deconstructs Victorian fact into fiction, creating a more palatable story the audience can relate to. Stevens suggests Wilde’s style serves his mythopoeic intent, “Wilde’s resurrection tale [*Le Ressuscité*] demonstrates his own predisposition to mix the palettes of the literary with the popular, the bawdy with the refined, the canonical with the marginal, creating a hybrid that encourages first laughter and then quiet contemplation from the listener” (Stevens 154). Quintus and Stevens establish Wilde as a “transformational” writer through his mythic short stories. Their analyses of the prose offer a useful lens for a Christological study on Wilde’s short stories and essays but miss an opportunity to explore the plays that are representative of a Victorian society.

By developing the ideas of “transformational” writing and gender norms we discover Wilde’s attitude toward the treatment of Victorian women. In “Demythologizing the Femme Fatale,” Gail Finney refers to theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s book *Madwoman in the Attic*: “Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate the ways in which these women writers create subversive, passionate, or melodramatic doubles in their fiction to act out the anger and rebellion that their lives deny them, but dutifully kill these characters off to assuage their guilt at harboring such feelings” (Finney 66). The characterizations that Wilde develops are a mimesis of the Victorian English woman. The feelings that he holds about women, gender, and the progressive movement

reflects in these characters who he either kills off or allows to subject themselves to the lives they were combatting.

With the Bible comes myth and metaphor that writers and artists of the Victorian era interpret to convey certain messages to their audiences. Northrop Frye defines the mythic process of the Bible in his book *The Great Code*, “As a literary critic I want to anchor the word in its literary context; so myth to me means, first of all, *mythos*, plot, narrative, or in general the sequential ordering of words” (31). Christian literary critics do not point out fallacies of the Bible or Christianity but treat it as a plot device that artists utilize to develop an idea. The understanding that Wilde was not attempting to misconstrue the teachings of the Bible, but only acknowledge its moralities helps situate the interpretations of his plays.

The three plays: *Salomé*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, are examples of Wilde’s writing on societal standards and their connection with Christian tradition. Christianity established “normalcies”: such as, men being the heads of the household and women forced to be subordinate to them. Their lives were predicated on this belief system; any attempt to combat this system left women as the “other,” defined by Jacques Derrida in, “The Self, the Other, and the Many,” as a person other than the self and the group. The personality and individuality of women in writing was indistinguishable compared to their male counterparts. Wilde, instead, instilled within his plays women who combatted the social norm. His plays encompassed women in all aspects of life, showing both the harmful abuse and misconception that society enacted on them. Women like, *Salomé*, Mrs. Allonby, and Mrs. Cheveley, are representations of active women in Wilde’s plays, that when put through hardship because of their sexuality, combat those issues with individuality and a voice. Because they exhibit attributes connected to men, they are judged and/or “othered” by different characters of the

plays. Their choices challenge the patriarchal norm of society, but their inactive behavior keeps them in a debilitating state subservient to the patriarchy. These three plays reveal the handlings of gender in Victorian England and are what Wilde uses to contest the systematic oppression. Wilde creates instances where women are criticized for certain sexual practices as well as societal choices they make. His observance of specific women and their views illuminates the ramifications that critical characters and societal norms can have on their progressive outlooks.

Emma Liggins in *Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction* suggest that nonconforming women were treated negatively in the late nineteenth-century. She focuses on the nonconformists that were considered sexually promiscuous at the time, but the premise of progressive women is indicated. Liggins writes,

Those outside the normative ideal of Victorian heterosexual marriage could be seen to disrupt the sex gender system by their nonconformity and “incoherence”, rather than being always constrained by cultural myths about the old maid or redundant woman. The achievements of pioneering middle-class women in the world of work meant that it was becoming increasingly acceptable to argue that the single life, or the rejection of heterosexual marriage, might be an attractive option. (Liggins 30)

Nonconformity in Liggins' essay suggests those women who do not conform to society and take on life in their own way. Working women with voices started to increase because of the realization that gender norms were a “cultural myth” that only furthered the downfall of the modern woman. Oscar Wilde's transgression of these “cultural myths” can be seen in his editorship of *Women's World* as Michèle Mendelssohn writes in “Notes on Oscar Wilde's Transatlantic Gender Politics,” “One of Wilde's first decisions as editor of the *Ladies' World* was to modify the name to the *Woman's World*. The former title was ‘too feminine, and not

sufficiently womanly,' he said. The magazine needed to become more serious and responsible, to reflect 'a high standpoint, and deal not merely with what women wear, but with what they think, and what they feel'" (Mendelssohn 157). He was a transgressor of gender politics and did what he could through his editing of this journal and the production of his plays.

This essay will establish the Christian myth within Wilde's three plays and call attention to the gender politics that he fought against. Through *Salomé* the Christological narrative that this play was based off of establishes Wilde's ability to make the religion "transformational." *Salomé*, the character, will be the basis of the active woman showing the importance of voice and power-brokering in a female character. *A Woman of No Importance* will continue this thought through characters like Mrs. Allonby and Mrs. Arbuthnot. Their opinions and nonconformist lives will be exemplative of the "fallen woman" of Victorian England. Through this play Wilde exemplifies the underlying belief that women are secondhand characters, not only in art, but life as well. The treatment of women by women will illuminate the passiveness of the Victorian Woman and their compliance with the patriarchal norm. This norm continues through *An Ideal Husband* where the different treatment of two women, with the same upbringing, based off the lives they now hold is representative of the kind of thought process that was held during this time. Wilde uses his ability of language to show the societal norm while conveying a Christological background based on the importance of marriage. These plays portray multiple types of women: those who comply with the patriarchy and those who do everything in their power to usurp it. Wilde displays these differences through his storytelling, manipulating certain aspects of the Victorian era to expose negative traits of a patriarchal society.

Salomé

Salomé is Wilde's adaptation of a biblical myth for a Victorian audience. The play is set during a time when a messiah and Jokanaan, the prophet, are traveling and delivering prophecies. This play is a reinvention of the Gospel of Mark, a biblical narrative where King Herod is fearful of the prophet, John the Baptist. Herod's treatment of John the Baptist connects the relationship of Herod and Jokanaan in *Salomé*, as well. Herod fears John the Baptist because of his connection to Christ and his belief in an unseen God. His fear leads him to arrest John the Baptist, holding him hostage in prison, but leaving him unharmed because he knew him to be a "holy and righteous man" (Mark 6:20). Queen Herodias develops a grudge against John the Baptist because in the gospel account her relationship to Herod is constantly criticized by John the Baptist, "For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife" (6:18). Like the Gospel of Mark, Wilde shows Herod defending Jokanaan in *Salomé*, while Jokanaan condemns the marriage of Herod and Herodias. The main difference between the play and the Gospel is the reason for the beheading. The daughter of Herod, in the gospel account, does not play such an integral role as she does in Wilde's interpretation. In both the mythic account and the play, Herod offers his stepdaughter half of his kingdom for a dance, but in the gospel narrative Queen Herodias asks for the beheading of John the Baptist.

Herod's fear of John the Baptist comes from his feeling threatened by Christ, the King of the Jews and his usurpation of power if Christ's following continues to grow. We know from Mark that Herod and his family are Philistines who are indifferent to the different cultures around them. Therefore Herod, though curious, does not accept the unseen God as the one true

one. This hatefulness toward the other comes up in *Salomé* when the princess enters, “Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies...barbarians who drink and drink...and Romans brutal and coarse... They are rough and common, and they give themselves the airs of noble lords” (*Salomé* 586). Wilde is establishing the Philistine attributes that Herod and his family follow. Herod fears Christ in both accounts because of his leadership of the Jews, which Jokanaan only makes a reality by being there to close the gap of his rule. Wilde’s establishment of this tension between the earthly and heavenly shows the tensions of women in society between progressive achievements in work and life and Christian belief.

Wilde’s appropriation of the Bible can be seen from the beginning of the play starting with the title, *Salomé*. Salomé is not only the name of the daughter of Herodias in the play but can be seen in the canonical gospels as one of the women not only present at Christ’s crucifixion but at the tomb where he is resurrected. This fact makes the exchange of the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias more revealing, “like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman... she was looking for dead things” (583). In this instance Salomé is said to rise from a tomb comparing her to Christ who rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion in the Bible. Therefore, Wilde makes the connection of Christ and Salomé, a woman, who is Philistine at King Herod’s birthday party, but achieves spirituality after being “resurrected” from the gathering. The Page also says “she is *like* a dead woman” which is a foreshadowing of the circumstances that Salomé will endure at the end of the play due to the choices made. Wilde establishes Salomé as a mythic character before the audience has even seen her by defining her in mythic terms.

When Salomé finally enters the play, Jokanaan's voice draws her attention. Jokanaan prophesizes, while condemning the marriage between her mother and King Herod, but Salomé still stays consumed by his rhetoric, "What a strange voice! I would speak with him... I desire to speak with him... I will speak with him" (587). Jokanaan resembles the idea of an unseen God by being a disembodied voice that King Herod and the other Philistines have feared up to this point. After being raised to disapprove this God that Jokanaan follows, Salomé has found herself interested in the word that comes from the depths beneath her feet. She does not heed the instructions of the soldiers, but instead finds herself interested in the voice of Jokanaan which disrupts her Philistine upbringing. Wilde also establishes a conflation between Jokanaan, who represents John the Baptist, and Christ himself when Salomé says, "How black it is down there! It must be terrible to be in so black a pit! It is like a tomb" (587). Jokanaan is not only the prophet that King Herod fears, but he has also become a representation of Christ that Salomé waits by the tomb for just as she does in the gospel writings.

While Jokanaan embodies the spiritual and Herod the physical, Salomé is forced to make a choice. Jokanaan represents spiritual empowerment because of his connection with Christ as well as his prophecies, "Get thee behind me! I hear in the palace the beating of the wings of the angel of death" (589). Jokanaan, being a figure of John the Baptist, speaks constantly throughout the play. King Herod and Salomé's ignorance is due to their indifference to this religion that they believe is being forced upon them by the King of the Jews, Jesus Christ. By alluding to Christ's response to Peter "Get thee behind me," Wilde identifies Salomé with Peter, the disciple of God, and Herod with Satan, a being who values control (Matthew 16:23). Wilde recognizes the unavoidable issue that Salomé is faced with regarding the conflation of the physical and spiritual.

Wilde utilizes his knowledge of the Bible with this allegory to bring forth Salomé's struggle between Jokanaan's physicality and his connection to the spiritual.

"Angel of death" is a foreshadowing that Wilde introduces, indicating the inevitable death that looms over the meeting of Salomé and Jokanaan. Their companionship can only end one way because of Salomé's unfortunate conflation of the physical and spiritual. This conflation stems from the introduction of Jokanaan to Salomé, where she was attracted to the unseen, just as the Christian faith, unlike Herod's pagan faith, assumes an unseen God. Their beliefs develop from the stories told by the prophets or disciples, like John the Baptist. Salomé has now fallen for this type of belief, but her attitude changes when the physical meets the spiritual, "Jokanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that mower hath never moved. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains... There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Let me touch thy body" (589-590). Wilde has now established the dynamic with which Salomé struggles: a choice between the spiritual and physical. This dynamic recurring throughout shows Salomé confusing the spiritual and physical by describing Jokanaan in a cannibalistic way. Wilde has conflated these different subjects (spiritual and physical) into one character. The "body is white" illuminates the holy being that Jokanaan still holds being a prophet of Christ (589). Salomé sees this holiness and reflects on it by comparing it to the nature that surrounds her, but comes only after she has already fallen subject to its beauty. "I am amorous" is how Wilde introduces this excerpt, which creates the sexual attraction that Salomé feels toward this spiritual being. Sexual attraction toward the physical body of a spiritual being is the conflation of dynamics that lead to the "angel of death" that Jokanaan refers to earlier in the play.

This struggle between the physical and spiritual continues when Herod enters the scene. His persona is a representation of an earthly empowerment, a king who has rule of a physical kingdom. He also thirsts for Salomé to dance for him throughout the play which is another sexual desire that only furthers the claim that he represents the physical. After Salomé leaves the party and spends time with Jokanaan, King Herod enters, “Where is Salomé? Where is the Princess? Why did she not return to the banquet as I commanded her? Ah! There she is” (591-592). The entrance of King Herod, followed by Queen Herodias, is accompanied by his interest in finding Salomé. He left his own party to find the princess, leaving behind the party attendants to follow Salomé to the terrace to find her enamored with the prophet Jokanaan. After Salomé continues to ignore his pleas to dance, Herod says:

Salomé, Salomé, dance for me. I pray thee dance for me. I am sad to-night. Yes, I am passing sad to-night... Therefore dance for me. Dance for me, Salomé, I beseech you. If you dance for me you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it you, even unto half of my kingdom (*Salomé* 598).

His wants and needs can only be subdued by physical gratification which can be seen by his need of this dance and his ruling over a kingdom. This “power brokering” exemplifies the kind of dynamic between Herod and Salomé. In this instance Salomé buys back into the play with Herod’s offer. She has kept her ground by denying Herod just up to the point where half of his kingdom is offered in exchange for her dance. Wilde is showcasing here the power-hungry woman of Victorian England, Salomé, a representation of the modern-day woman has achieved the ultimate deal: power. That power is defined in terms of the physical, or half a kingdom. Herod, a male, has been broken down by both Salomé’s beauty and her distancing of herself from him.

The ending of this play situates Salomé in two relationships: one with Jokanaan and the other with Herod. Salomé finds in Jokanaan a sexual allure once she sees his body, a sexual tension that starts as a spiritual yearning but turns physical. When we acknowledge the representations of who Jokanaan and Herod are in a biblical sense we can see Wilde's connection to the Christian tradition. Jokanaan is the mythopoeic representation of the divine power figure, or in this case, the forerunner to Christ in the story. Jokanaan is viewed as the spiritual power, while Herod takes on the physical and political power. This struggle we see Salomé having throughout the play is her decision of whether to choose the physical or the spiritual, the earthly or the divine. Kissing Jokanaan's decapitated head signals her choice of the divine, but a decision fed by limited physical gratification. Salomé still chooses the divine power, or the connection with Christ, over the promise of King Herod's kingdom. This leads to Herod commanding she die, showing that the abandonment of earthly power, by denying Herod's wishes, brings her closer to the Christ-like figure of the play, Jokanaan, and the divine power. *Salomé* brings up this issue of choice between spiritual and earthly empowerment. Salomé's choice of Jokanaan is Wilde's attempt to show viewers that spiritual empowerment is what is most yearned for, but if conflated with earthly gain leads to a detrimental cost.

Though this reinterpretation of myth serves as a way for Wilde to show off his ability to create paradoxes within his writing and that of the Bible, it also establishes prevalent power dynamics between genders that are situated throughout *Salomé*. The issue of a powerful woman, Salomé, who belittles men and has control over the other gender becomes common instance in *Salomé*. The way Wilde handles gender in this play, specifically, depicts Victorian practices for Wilde. Salomé is presented as a sexual character from the beginning of the play, where characters, such as the Young Syrian and King Herod, can be seen pining over every move she

makes. When we remember her introduction as a representation of the moon and think about the relevance of this quote, “rising from a tomb,” we see Wilde setting Salomé apart from the other characters. By “rising” she is breaking the bounds of normality that is custom to Victorian women.

When Salomé enters, she explains, “I will not stay. I cannot stay... It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes I know it” (586). Her first action of the play is to remove herself from King Herod’s birthday party, which sets this play different from others. Salomé steps out of view of a man to separate herself from the physical obsession her stepfather has over her. When she says “in truth, yes I know it,” we can assume her previous statement of not knowing why he stares at her is false. Salomé is quite aware of the sexual grasp that she has over the individuals of this play. She is aware of the feelings attributed with her looks and does well to escape this gawking, but in turn puts herself in a similar situation when she falls for Jokanaan. Her beauty is what we are led to believe is the cause of this infatuation, but her establishment as a thoughtful individual sets her apart from other female characters.

The superficiality of these opening lines is crucial to the character of Salomé because Wilde illuminates to the audience the shallowness of the other characters of the play. Salomé is only judged by her appearance, giving no insight into her characteristics besides the physical womanly attributes. They describe her as the moon; which not only is a correlation to her white skin, but also a relation to death which foreshadows the ending of the play. Her character and personality throughout the play reflects differently compared to how the men in the play interact with her and describe her. Her beauty and the beauty of the moon are constantly talked about simultaneously, but Salomé is not just outward beauty:

The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin's beauty. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses (586).

Wilde here offers two ideas in conflict: Salomé is first acknowledging the beauty of the moon, which connects to her own physicality using "cold and chaste." She is also elaborating to the audience that, not only is she a virgin but also someone who has not "abandoned herself to men." Wilde is showing us the connection to biblical belief by informing the audience that this woman is a virgin and has not "defiled" herself, making her a Christian character. "Defiled" being a desecration or a spoiling of a certain thing is harsh language that Wilde utilizes to relate to the audience the importance of chasteness in Christianity. "Abandoned herself to men" is Salomé expressing that the act of abandoning oneself to a man is a result of defilement.

Salomé's monologues and vocal nature differentiate her from women during the Victorian Era and even her mother, Herodias. This ability to think on her own and speak up to not only King Herod, but Jokanaan as well, classifies Salomé as the progressive woman. Like Mrs. Allonby, from *A Woman of No Importance*, and Mrs. Cheveley, from *An Ideal Husband*, Salomé is an outspoken woman who acts. These women are opposite to the normative Victorian women by having strong, defined beliefs and the actions they take to benefit themselves in these plays. When Salomé requests to see Jokanaan, she says to the Young Syrian, "You will do this thing for me, will you not, Narraboth? You will do this thing for me. I have always been kind to you" (587). After asking the Young Syrian persistently, he does as he is told, and Salomé confronts Jokanaan. The Young Syrian kills himself for her love in the process, proving Salomé's power over men in the most drastic way possible. To have Salomé requesting physical touch and "sexual" favors seems to be a reversal of the gender normative that would have been

common in those periods. Salomé defies the typical gender role of a woman (passive, complacent, and compliant) and takes on the male role of the relationship (aggressive, outspoken, and persistent).

After this confrontation between Jokanaan and Salomé, we are introduced to King Herod who says this of the moon:

The moon has a strange look to-night. 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 (592).

Again, we are given this description of the moon; which Wilde has made to represent Salomé. In this excerpt King Herod repeats multiple times that the moon is naked, pointing out the clouds that are trying to clothe it. When viewing Salomé as the moon, one can see that Wilde is acknowledging her “naked” behavior, naked meaning active or against the normalcy within the play while also enhancing her sensuality as a character. Salomé is portrayed as this vocal individual who the men, like the clouds that cover the moon, attempt to quell or demotivate from going through with the decisions she makes.

After Jokanaan is beheaded and Salomé dances in his blood, she is judged by the other characters of the play. This action symbolizes a woman’s loss of virginity because of the blood beneath her feet after having physically touched a man for the first time. King Herod labels this dance as an omen which only furthers the negative stigma that surrounds women and premarital sex of this day. Her wanting Jokanaan and her ability to obtain what she has been asking for characterizes her licentiously. She goes on to say, “I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for

thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire. What shall I do now, Jokanaan? ... I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire” (604). This interaction between Jokanaan and Salomé throughout the play is peculiar when compared with the other dandy women of Wilde’s plays. She is the one pursuing the man, pushing Jokanaan, King Herod, and other men of the play to do things for her. Jokanaan, unfortunately, perishes because he does not comply with her authoritative behavior.

A Woman of No Importance

Salomé offers a model for Mrs. Allonby and Hester in *A Woman of No Importance*. Their willingness to go against the normative of Victorian England is representative of what Wilde does with Salomé in her own play. *A Woman of No Importance* is considered one of four “society plays” that Wilde wrote immediately after the completion of *Salomé* and where the intricacies of society in Victorian England are explored and performed. These “society plays” took satirical stances on the English upper-class, developing characters and plots that audience members might relate to, while learning something about this tier of society. Wilde introduces different members of gentry, like Lord Illingworth and Lady Caroline, who interact with one another for the purpose of furthering their own reputation in the community. Lord Illingworth, for example, is one character whose characterization separates him from the rest of the characters but continues utilizing his own dandyism to progress his standing within that community. When first hearing Lord Illingworth was attending the party she was hosting, Lady Caroline says, “He must be quite respectable. One has never heard his name before in the whole course of one’s life, which speaks volumes for a man, nowadays. But Mrs. Allonby is hardly a very suitable person” (*A Woman of No Importance* 465). Lady Caroline represents a voice of the society and its

feelings toward men, such as Lord Illingworth. Mrs. Allonby, who holds the same characteristics as Lord Illingworth, is treated differently by the other characters because of her gender. Mrs. Allonby, an outspoken character, realizes the reputation she holds, “Curious thing, plain women are always jealous of their husbands, beautiful women never are!” (474). Wilde uses the treatment of these gender roles to mirror to the audience the real-life tendencies of the public. Mrs. Allonby, being the character that she is, is unapologetic about her dandy predispositions allowing her to relate to Lord Illingworth throughout the play while infuriating the other women.

Wilde transforms society around him, creating satire within his language that calls to attention the gender norms of the period. Such characters as Illingworth and Allonby are developed to represent individuals who go against established gender roles of society, contradicting the Christian tradition that surrounds them. The idea that men were the heads of the household allowed to live the way they wanted shows in Wilde’s plays, stemming from England’s patriarchal Christian belief. Wilde fights against those beliefs so his audience members can experience the humor in his writing while understanding meaning behind it. Lady Caroline is Wilde’s physical representation of society’s structures and beliefs. With her constant commentary on the rest of the characters, Wilde develops a humorous tone and presents the standard he sets out to rebuff. Throughout the play Lady Caroline focuses on the other women, Mrs. Allonby primarily, and says, “Is that the only thing, Jane, Mrs. Allonby allows to run away with her?” (472). This is in response to Allonby’s “clever tongue;” which Caroline turns into a comment about promiscuity. Here, Lady Caroline discusses with Lady Hunstanton the dynamic she observes between Lord Illingworth and Mrs. Allonby. Their likeness confuses Lady Caroline pushing her further into the hateful characterization she adopts. Her views on the standards of women in the patriarchal society are exemplified when she says to Hester:

It is not customary in England, Miss Worsley, for a young lady to speak with such enthusiasm of any person of the opposite sex. English women conceal their feelings till after they are married. They show them then. (466)

This generalization, “English women,” serves only to alienate women, like Mrs. Allonby, who are different or place an individual in a situated role within society. This separation of male and female is felt throughout the play, most intently in this moment when the conversation and relationship between Illingworth and Allonby is looked down upon because it violates the social norm.

Mrs. Arbuthnot is the central figure of the play and in Wilde’s narrative, the most cheated. The ridicule that she receives from the other women is judgment from misconception, “A little lacking in femininity, Jane. Femininity is the quality I admire most in women” (474). Lady Caroline responds in this way to a letter received by Mrs. Arbuthnot that indicates she will not be arriving at the dinner. Mrs. Arbuthnot is known by only a few for having a child, Gerald, out of wedlock and most negative preconceived notions are based on her being an older single woman. In relation to this attribute Liggins writes, “At a time when motherhood was still validated as the proper woman’s mission in life, singleness was perceived to be ‘alien’ to middleclass femininity, and accepting the position of old maid was seen as a sign of failure, a ‘falling short’ of a woman’s dreams” (Liggins 31). Arbuthnot is automatically evaluated as “falling short” because of her being unwed and with a child. Now, Mrs. Arbuthnot is not only belittled by society England, but also the past only the audience knows is judged by Hester:

Set a mark, if you wish, on each, but don’t punish the one and let the other go free. Don’t have one law for men and another for women. You are unjust to women in England. And till you count what is a shame in a woman to be infamy in a man, you will always be

unjust, and Right, that pillar of fire, and Wrong, that pillar of cloud, will be made dim to your eyes, or be not seen at all. (483-484)

The foil of Mrs. Allonby, Hester, wants a life without sin. Her devotion is to Gerald and presumably God, based on her reliance to biblical allegory. The issue of genders presents itself in this scene, and Hester complains about the inequality of men and women: “If a man and woman have sinned, let them both go forth into the desert to love or loathe each other there. Let them both be branded” (483). In *A Woman of No Importance* Hester is Wilde’s representation of the Christian mythic standard because of her incessant need to bring up God or his teachings. When she is discussing the inequalities of gender, she litters her discussion with allusions to the Bible like sins and the desert. The desert recalls Mark 4:1, when Christ was tempted by Satan in the Judaeen desert after being baptized by John the Baptist. Though Hester allows herself to follow Christianity, her progressive American mindset separates her from the other women of the play. Mrs. Allonby holds a different opinion toward women in marriage from Hester. Wilde reiterates the claim that Allonby and Hester, though similar in a progressive standpoint, come from different backgrounds. Allonby from England, stays true to her belief that women should be treated as royalty when she says:

Oh, the Ideal Man should talk to us as if we were goddesses, and treat us as if we were children. He should refuse all our serious request, and gratify every one of our whims. He should encourage us to have caprices, and forbid us to have missions. He should always say much more than he means, and always mean much more than he says. (481)

Wilde has developed Allonby in a peculiar way here based on, not only, this statement but also the relationship she holds with Illingworth. Allonby, being a member of the English society, has a stunted growth in her progressive movement. She has a voice, which establishes her as an

active character in the Wilde canon, but her voice only goes so far until it reaches the usual bounds of Victorian women of keeping silent and following their male counterparts. Allonby asks for better treatment of women by men but does so by invoking a royal quality in women. Her desire is, therefore, not for an equality but a usurping of the patriarchy while still feeding the belief that women should not have ambition.

In *A Woman of No Importance* Wilde illustrates the societal mishaps that are happening within Victorian England. His exploration of women and their interaction with each other illuminates the mistreatment of the “other” or the women who veer from the normal path. Characters such as Mrs. Allonby and Hester resemble the development of progressive thought that Salomé depicts as well. All three characters, though their endings are different, share similar views on the patriarchal society that surrounds them. Their resistance to such normative behavior differs in strength resulting in the way they are viewed or treated throughout the plays. Allonby and Hester are different sides of the same coin that believe in a progressive woman’s rights, but the ways those rights are conveyed result in their characterization by other individuals within the play. Salomé, on the other hand, takes an extreme stance against the patriarchy, forcing her outcome to be her inevitable death. This radical action for power that she takes is replicated in a character such as, Mrs. Cheveley in *An Ideal Husband*, who desires political power and does so by force, resulting in her ultimate downfall as well.

An Ideal Husband

In *An Ideal Husband* Wilde utilizes satire to convey a plot riddled with mistakes and power struggles. Mrs. Marchmont and Lady Basildon are having a conversation about attending parties when Lady Basildon goes on to say, “Ah! I hate being educated” (*An Ideal Husband*

515). Wilde satirizes the upper-class views on the educated with women, like Lady Basildon, showing women's compliance with the societal norm of undereducated women. Mrs. Marchmont responds, "It puts one almost on a level with the commercial classes, doesn't it? But dear Gertrude Chiltern is always telling me that I should have some serious purpose in life" (516). The idea of being educated is looked down upon because it puts them "on a level with the commercial classes." Wilde instills two inconsistencies here; the educated are among the lower class, and the wealthier women of the Victorian Era prefer their uneducated selves over the educated. Such a process recalls the theory that Dustin Griffin explains in his book *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*; he writes, "Horace provides his own implicit theory of satire: that the satirist, speaking out freely, seeks to laugh men out of their follies" (Griffin 7). This satirical language is Wilde insinuating that the wealthier women who have obtained physical power have become inactive women, therefore giving their chances of being progressive up. Their drive to learn and contribute to society is no longer an issue because of their willingness to give up their own ambitions to complete the "cultural myth." Later Cheveley says:

I don't know that women are always rewarded for being charming. I think they are usually punished for it! Certainly, more women grow old nowadays through the faithfulness of their admirers than through anything else! At least that is the only way I can account for the terribly haggard look of most of your pretty women in London. (*An Ideal Husband* 519)

This excerpt recalls Mrs. Allonby of *A Woman of No Importance*. Both women are characterizations of the dandy, "defined largely by [their] alienation from the social world in which [they] live," Wilde employed in the society dramas (*Comedy and Oscar Wilde* 502). Their lives were ridiculed and judged because of their attempts to combat the "norm" and go against

the patriarchal society that governed their lives. Wilde's characterization of Mrs. Cheveley is peculiar because she is obviously an educated and well-off woman who is, from the start, criticized and judged because of her interaction with Sir Robert Chiltern. Wilde decidedly makes her the antagonist of the play, but does so for what reason, if not to show the separation between her and the other women because of her worldly-wise education and her growth as a businesswoman in society. Gertrude and Mrs. Cheveley each have gone through the same type of education, but because Gertrude has chosen the life of an ideal wife she is accepted by the culture around her, while Mrs. Cheveley is criticized for the strides that she takes. Mrs. Cheveley is the Salomé of this play because of her thirst to achieve what no other woman has on her own accord.

After Gertrude and Mrs. Cheveley discuss their schooling, Mrs. Cheveley says, "Ah! The strength of women comes from the fact that psychology cannot explain us. Men can be analyzed, women... merely adored" (519). Mrs. Cheveley establishes herself as an individual who knows that women are separate from men and they cannot be as easily explained or categorized as the men in their lives. Wilde establishes women with progressive attributes that only serve to be snubbed in the end and treated as villains throughout the play. Wilde is showing the movement of women like Mrs. Cheveley and illustrating the strides that women can make, only to be met with discouragement and conflict. Mrs. Cheveley uses the information she holds to her benefit, something that Sir Robert has done as well, but is instead treated as the victim who is taken advantage of. Wilde is showing his audience this issue in an *An Ideal Husband* to show different characterizations of women, the rejection of the educated, and the fear of that powerful women instill in men.

When Lady Chiltern is introduced, we can draw a line to the women, Allonby and Hester, from the other plays. Her characterization resembles Hester's devotion to her husband and her determination for women's equality which can be seen when Lady Markby comments on Gertrude's club:

Really, this horrid House of Commons quite ruins our husbands for us. I think the Lower House by far the greatest blow to a happy married life that there has been since that terrible thing called the Higher Education of Women was invented. (548)

Gertrude is taken aback by this comment because of her participation in this club and praises her husband for supporting it. Her immediate retort connects herself and the club to Sir Robert, the man of the relationship. Gertrude participates in this "Higher Education of Women" club but does so only because Sir Robert says he supports it. Wilde uses this moment to convey a discussion about higher education for women held between two women with opposing views. Though both women are successful in a manner of speaking their views on whether the higher education of women is necessary is different. Gertrude stands out as an active Wildean woman in this play because of this attribute, but her individuality can only be obtained with her husband's allowance of it.

Gertrude, a progressive Victorian woman living in a fool's paradise, distinguishes herself from others, but this separation is overturned when faced with Sir Robert's dilemma, "Oh, my ambition! I have none now, but that we two may love each other. It was your ambition that led you astray. Let us not talk about ambition" (576). After hearing Sir Robert's idea to move away from London and abandon their political life, Gertrude gives up her ambitions and focus solely on their love for each other. Being the ideal wife, she gives up any dreams she held before to allow her husband to achieve his. Gertrude is another one of Wilde's female characters who fails

her progressive outlook on life by submitting to the patriarchy that surrounds her. Her values are convoluted throughout the play and misshapen by other characters like Lord Goring. When Sir Robert agrees to back out of politics to alleviate himself and Gertrude from any further problems, she responds by tearing up the letter and says,

A man's life is of more value than a woman's. It has larger issues, wider scope, greater ambitions. Our lives revolve in curves of emotions. It is upon lines of intellect that a man's life progresses. I have just learnt this, and much else with it, from Lord Goring (579).

Gertrude is technically the "woman of no importance" in this instance because she is not only throwing out her own ambitions but decides to further advocate the patriarchal thought process that society has beaten into her. Her own intellect has been reduced to something that can only be utilized to raise the patriarchy. Gertrude is related to Hester from *A Woman of No Importance* here because they represent the women who are in place to support the man that they marry and follow *his* ambitions to the bitter end.

Though *An Ideal Husband* has less reference to Christian myth than the other two plays, the underlying morality of the play assumes those beliefs. Sir Robert's main issue from the start of the play was that his career was based off a lie going against his own morality which results in the conflict between him and Mrs. Cheveley wanting to blackmail him. The idea of marriage is discussed multiple times throughout the play, specifically between Lord Goring and Mabel Chiltern. Lord Goring being thirty-four years old is pushed by his father Lord Caversham to pursue marriage:

You have got to get married, and at once... Damme, sir, it is your duty to get married. You can't be always living for pleasure. Every man of position is married nowadays.

Bachelors are not fashionable any more. They are a damaged lot. Too much is known about them. You must get a wife, sir. (556)

Lord Caversham's constant plea for Lord Goring to be wed like his friend Sir Robert instills the Christological background of the society in which they live. With "living for pleasure" Wilde is insinuating Lord Goring's connection to the Victorian dandy. His passion for life and continuous charm relate him to the dandy or the "other," which infers the connection between him, Mrs. Cheveley, and Wilde. The cultural myth against the "other" shows that one must be married to be considered "normal," forcing those like Wilde or Goring into relationships that are bonded forever under the sacrament of marriage in the Christian religion. Caversham is the old world that is pushing the new world to conform to his and society's belief. He, like Lady Caroline, is a physical representation of the old ways of the Victorian era that continues to push its "rules" on the individuality of certain dandies.

Conclusion

Both *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* end with the "progressive" females, like Hester or Lady Chiltern, who realize the faults of the men around them and grow as characters, but their own conformist faults are what subject them to the Victorian lives they are destined to live. Salomé, on the other hand, goes against the norm until the very end. Her active behavior is drastic, but she continues to be persistent, pushing the boundaries of gender norms within society until she is sentenced to death by her own stepfather. This brings up the question that Wilde attempts to present to his audience: how they, as a society, treat women and the gender normative of Victorian Europe. In Wilde's works women are either passive individuals who at most push the men in their lives forward or active characters who are feared and annexed

because of the behavior that sets them apart. Salomé is that woman, feared for her openness and ability to control the men of her life. Wilde presents the ending in this way to illuminate to his audience the measures taken to silence a woman of this caliber. Though her actions of beheading Jokanaan are hostile, her agency and thirst for power is what the men in the play fear. Her “nakedness” pushes King Herod, to realize what little control he has over her. Hester and Lady Chiltern have succeeded in being active women, but Wilde stops their development and ends the plays with their being subjected to the mediocrity imposed on Victorian women. Salomé has succumbed to ennui her whole life but her actions from the beginning of the play to the very end show her as a woman with a voice and the activeness to set her apart from the everyday norm.

In *Salomé* Wilde has shown himself to be knowledgeable of biblical myth. With this biblical background we can understand the moralities that Wilde portrays in the other two plays: *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*. Characters like Salomé, Hester, and Lady Chiltern are subjected to moral standards in Victorian England, which Wilde challenges with their need to reach equality with men. Wilde’s representation of these women, Hester and Lady Chiltern, are satirical versions of the women in the audience. Their voice for equality but their inconsistent ambitions label them as women who are comfortable with the society they inhabit. The constant belittlement and ridicule of these women by the society that has raised them holds them back from progressing. Characters like Lady Caroline and Lady Markby disenfranchise the movement of these women to eliminate any change in the society that they inhabit. Therefore, Wilde’s characterization of Salomé is most important because of her difference from the Victorian English women. Though she is sentenced to death she achieves what she was pursuing the entire time. She has overstepped the gender norms to a point of no return and gained the spiritual power she desired.

If we consider *Madwoman in the Attic*'s idea that women writers create "melodramatic doubles" and compare it to Wilde's writing, we see this enacted in his characters. Wilde utilizes this "transformational" writing, discussed in Quintus and Stevens, to develop characters that share similar attributes to himself. Being a known dandy and an unknown gay man in Victorian England, Wilde was alienated by society or pressured into a conforming state. Through his writing we can see that Wilde's characters, both male and female, are representations of himself. The powerful women exemplified in Wilde's three plays: *Salomé*, *A Woman of No Importance*, and *An Ideal Husband*, are Wilde combatting the old Victorian ways that are based off of Christian mythology. Both their successes and faults are exemplified through the actions that they take within the plays. The outcomes that each female character receives is Wilde's reiteration of the punishments or ridicule he believes himself to have received for his expressive behavior. His writing illustrates common instances that occur in the world around him, but his acknowledgement of these facts must be silenced or else negative repercussions to his writing would be had.

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