

Quaderns de Filologia. Estudis Literaris. Vol. X (2005) 271-283

MYTH AND CENSORSHIP. OSCAR WILDE RE-WRITING THE FRENCH CLASSICS

Ignacio Ramos Gay
Universitat de València

Together with *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Salomé* stands as one of the most original plays in Oscar Wilde's dramaturgy. In both plays, Wilde tried to rid himself of the dramatic tradition in which he had been formed and sought to unearth a personal theatrical formula, despite using convention so as to create characters, situations and speeches easily recognizable for his audience. According to John Hankin, *The Importance of Being Earnest* is the nearest approach to absolute originality that he attained, for "in that play, for the first time, he seemed to be tearing himself away from tradition and to be evolving a dramatic form of his own", and from that moment on,

Wilde would have definitely discarded the machine-made construction of the Scribe-Sardou theatre which had held him too long, and begun to use the drama as an artist should, for the expression of his own personality, not the manufacture of *clever pastiches* (*The Fortnightly Review*, 1 May 1908).

Louis Kronenberg's interpretation of *Salomé* follows Hankin's statement, emphasizing Wilde's detachment as regards his dramatic context. In Kronenberg's words (1967: 117), "it [*Salomé*] stands with *The Importance of Being Earnest* as something Oscar fully created, not only taking very little out of Flaubert or the Bible, but in refusing to revert theatrical formulas". Apart from this oscillation between dramatic influence and original creation within the boundaries of convention, a major part of this originality results from the play being primarily written and published for its first performance in French, and from its consequent interpretative opacity. The choice of language constitutes an evident francophile tribute to his inspirative sources—despite his numerous and reiterated denials of having been influenced by any Parisian playwright—, as well as a subterfuge meant to elude censorship. *Salomé*, owing to the circumstances which surrounded its composition, represents the dramatic reconstruction of Wilde's francophile myth, i.e., the assimilation of the playwright into the idealistic French literary *bohème*. The

aim of this paper is, first, to extract the reverential sense of the play towards the French literary atmosphere, and consequently, to unearth several ulterior meanings derived from its peculiar genesis. These meanings will be construed as Wilde's aim and intention to veil deeper and more hazardous interpretations inherent in the play, transmuting them into theatrical and semic artifices well known and accepted both by the London play-goer and the dramatic conventions of the last decade of the nineteenth century.

If during the period covering 1882 and 1883 Wilde dedicated his stay in Paris to writing *The Duchess of Padua*, his stay in 1891 was completely devoted to the composition of *Salomé*. The playwright's categorical assertion "a play ought to be in French" is symptomatic of an acknowledged debt towards the French literary *bohème* –which he had repeatedly frequented after his return from the United States– and an attempt to conquer the world's cultural epicentre. Moreover, Wilde's personal background anticipated and encouraged his francophile bias. Not only his excellent mastery of the language but also his attitude displayed towards its oral production within society make his manners a sort of living fiction of his works. For instance, the French novelist André Gide relates that Wilde's oral skills were so admirable that he feigned to search for words in order to delay conversation and keep his interlocutor on tenterhooks awaiting for his reply, and that he often tended to affect a sort of British accent when speaking to provide his discourse with an exotic air. Besides, his orientation towards French literature had been ignited by his family background. Wilde's mother had translated into English several of Lamartine's *recueils*, and his own veneration of Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert and Gautier prefigured his dramatic guidance. Moreover, from an early point in his maturity he spent considerable time in France, successfully cultivating the acquaintance of writers and other artists such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Pierre Louÿs, Schwob, Paul Bourget and Coquelin. In fact, *Salomé* itself is dedicated to Louÿs. Thus, France constitutes a formative period essential to Wilde's aesthetics that would allow him to refine and polish the previous image shown in Oxford. "A new wardrobe is needed for each new country", asserts Richard Ellmann (1987: 209), referring to Wilde's first period in France as a man of letters, from which he evolved afterwards so as to consecrate himself from the gentleman who merely wore long hair and carried a sunflower down Picadilly as the renowned dramatist. This period coincides with the publication of the breviary of the *décadence*, J.-K. Huysmans's *A rebours* (1884), which has been traced by critics as the original source of the decadent universe, from Wilde's *Salomé* to Camus's *L'Homme Révolté*. Nineteenth-century Paris, therefore, represents the third act to conquer in Wilde's living stage. After having played himself *-joué-* on the British and American stages, Paris is

considered the ultimate intellectual and artistic dare, as well as the dramatic model for every British playwright of the nineteenth century¹. His arrival in Paris is meant, at first, to shock French society by means of creating a spectacle of his presence. As one of his characters would explain ten years later, Lord Illingworth, “to get into the best society, nowadays, one has either to feed people, amuse people, or shock people” (*A Woman of no Importance*, Act III). Wilde’s Paris is regarded as “an unquestioned world of fashion and society representing tradition and elegance (...) an unfettered bohemia untouched by puritanical hands” (Kronenberg, 1976: 54), a sort of literary myth in which to triumph, as Luis Antonio de Villena puts it (2001: 187), “lo era todo. París resultaba una festiva realidad (mucho más abierta y tolerante que Londres) y además el emblema de todo lo creativo, nuevo y moderno”. The language choice of *Salomé* stands thus as the mimetic element of the playwright and his creative paradigm, providing him with the opportunity of assimilating his piece and his personal fiction with the French myth. Rita Severi (1986: 459) justifies in this sense Wilde’s choice of French when composing *Salomé*, and regards it as the correlative linguistic option of the play’s social meaning and dramatic structure:

The dramatic medium, which at first, had been chosen by Mallarmé for *Hérodiade*, was quickly rejected by him as too complex a form, but Wilde (...) adopted it because it offered to his subject the most spectacular representation. Through drama, the artist could display his talent with different media: language, cynetics, prossemics, and obtain what no other genre could give him: a live

¹ Nineteenth-century British stage was under the domination of France. According to the reviewers of that period, the influence of France upon Victorian dramatists both in terms of translations and adaptations was crucial. Edward Morton described systematic performance of French plays in an article published July 1st, 1887, titled “The French Invasion”, declaring that “at half-a-dozen theatres English translations, versions, or perversions of French plays are now being performed, to say nothing of the French comedians in possession of the Adelphi and the Lyric”. Morton’s article is dated 1887, but such dependence on French plays can be traced back to the turn of the century as Nicoll’s, Wearing’s and De Mullin’s lists of Victorian plays have stated, and has been defined by contemporary historians of English drama as the main reason for the decline of the theatre in England throughout the 19th century. Nevertheless, responsibility for the wholesale borrowing from the French should be mostly attributed to the star-actor manager system which became an established vogue in the second-half of the century. Since these actor-managers, who ruled the leading playhouses in London, were mainly concerned with financial success, they were only attracted to popular pieces and therefore very keen to accept any alteration of the source aimed to increase the play’s popularity and audience reception. Moreover, resorting to favourite box-office French pieces represented the best way to overcome native dramatic failure, as the Kendals’s, the Bancrofts’s and even John Irving’s stage biographies have acknowledged. Thus, the conversion of the stage into a mere commercial transaction encouraged by the systematic adaptation of French stereotyped dramatic formulae –such as the *pièce-bien-faite*’s structure, mistakenly anglicized as “well-made play” as Lawson Taitte (1975) has put it–, is meant to be the principal cause of native playwrights’ drowsiness.

audience and an immediate response to his work. Drama was the means that enabled Wilde to show “a beautiful, coloured, musical thing” to the world. Wilde never underestimated the importance of fame. He wrote *Salomé* in French in homage to the literary tradition, but also with an eye to conquering a niche among the French masters, and in particular Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Laforgue.

According to Severi’s statement, the language choice of *Salomé* gains several ulterior meanings concerning its inspirative sources, which may be identically applied to Beckett’s *En attendant Godot*. At the turn of the century, *Salomé* appeared as a dominant theme in the arts. Maurice Kraft’s erudite study (1912) has listed 2789 French poets who have written *Salomé* from the gospels, and Mireille Dottin’s essay *S comme Salomé. Salomé dans le texte et l’image de 1870 à 1914* (Toulouse, 1985) analysed 338 works dealing with the mythical character. Undoubtedly Wilde knew the many earlier works about *Salomé*, as Aubrey Beardsley made clear in his comic illustration of Wilde seated at his desk surrounded by huge piles of previous works, a caricature extremely similar to that published in *Punch*, February 1892, after Wilde’s first production of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* at the St. James’s theatre, in which the playwright appeared leaning on a pedestal with his elbow propped upon volumes of *Odette*, *Francillon*, and *Le Supplice d’une Femme*—some of the most performed French plays in London during the last decade of the nineteenth century—to make room for which a bust of Shakespeare had been dethroned. As for the origins of Wilde’s *Salomé*, many a French source can be located. Apart from Huysman’s *A Rebours*—two drawings of the myth appeared in the fifth chapter of Moreau’s illustrated edition, as well as a quotation of Mallarmé’s *Hérodiade* in the fourteenth—, sources can be tracked down to Heinrich Heine’s *Atta Troll*, Henri Regnault’s *Salomé*, Mallarmé’s *Hérodiade*, and to the work of that “sinless master whom mortals call Flaubert”², *Hérodias*. Particularly Flaubert has been signalled as one of the main forerunners of Wilde’s play. His *Hérodias*, inserted within *Trois Contes*, is regarded as the most important source of inspiration of Wilde’s mood of *l’empire de la décadence* which he re-created in *Salomé*. The unsigned review in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 27th 1893, pronounced the play “a mosaic” and asserted that Wilde had many masters, including Gautier, Maeterlinck, Anatole France and Marcel Schwob, but the voice of Flaubert seemed to be capital in its composition:

But the voices that breath of life into *Salomé* are dominated by one voice, the voice of Flaubert. If Flaubert had not written *Salammô*, if Flaubert had not

² The French novelist is defined with these words by Wilde in a letter to Justin Huntly McCarthy, May 1889 (Hart Davis, 1985: 82).

written *Hérodiad*, *Salomé* might boast an originality to which she cannot claim. She is the daughter of too many fathers. She is a victim of heredity. Her bones want strength, her flesh wants vitality, her blood is polluted. There is no pulse of passion in her.

All the same, when Will Rothenstein told Wilde that in reading *Salomé* he couldn't help being reminded of Flaubert's *Hérodiad*, Wilde told him "with amusing unction" to remember, "dans la littérature il faut toujours tuer son père". In fact, Wilde shares with Flaubert an identical treatment of History as background for the plot, and similar symbologies associated with antagonistic astrology –the moon, incarnated in *Salomé*, vs the sun, represented by the Baptist. Richard Ellmann's points at a more remote source, J. C. Heywood's dramatic poem *Salomé*, first published February 15th 1888 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and even several parodies have derived from the myth, such as Jules Laforgue's lunatic *Salomé* (1887), which is an ironic pastiche of Flaubert's exotic dancer and of the glacial "reptil inviolé" which was still intriguing Mallarmé. Moreover, intertextual similarities have been traced between Wilde's play and the French and Belgian avant-garde symbolist movements, particularly Maurice Maeterlinck's piece *La princesse Maleine*, with which it shares a vivid and highly mannered style, the accumulation of rich visual images, and the spectacular aestheticism, by which every element of the performance may be harmonically fused together. Apart from pure textual sources, Renaissance pictorial vehicles of the legend such as Rubens, Titian, and Leonardo da Vinci display the establishment of an artistic tradition of the myth that would serve Wilde as historic background for his play. Besides, this literary lineage operates as a "tremplin vers l'illusion", as Flaubert defined History, so as to create a personal piece. For, a dramatist who cannot invent a good plot that is new, does well in falling back upon a good plot that is old. As Wilde declared in his essay on aestheticism, *The Critic as Artist*, "treatment is the test" (Part One). The dominant category in his work is not originality but style. In an interview published in *The Dramatic Review*, May 13th, 1885, Wilde asserted

the originality, I mean, which we ask from the artist, is originality of treatment, not of subject. It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything.

The central question regarding the alleged derivativeness of the play, then, is not much that of the identities of its literary antecedents, for that would deal with originality as understood as a sort of primary creation. Rather, it has to do with the specific kind of response that occurred, the

reasons why, and the deeper question of what sort of originality finally emerged from it, that is, Wilde's treatment of the sources in order to create something new, and his intention to make his sources recognizable by his audience.

The language choice represents a crucial aspect of the genesis of the play. As noted above, it constitutes an homage to the French literary tradition. In his correspondence, Wilde frequently insisted on French as the vehicular language of Art. In a letter dated November 26th, 1898, he asserted that "every artist should know French, and every gentleman" (Hart Davis, 1962: 174). This statement coincides with the dramatic criticism of the time, which maintained French as a superior theatrical vehicle of expression when compared to any other language. The enormous success of the numerous performances of the Comédie Française in London, since 1871, where its cast of *sociétaires* and *pensionnaires* –Sarah Bernhardt, Coquelin, Got, etc.–repeatedly performed French plays such as *Tartuffe*, *L'aventurière*, *Le demi-monde* or *Les caprices de Marianne* in their native language, confirm the bias of the London play-goer towards French as a symbol of cultural transmission and aesthetic refinement. That the plays were unintelligible did not prevent them from being much appreciated by the public. Not knowing the language of the production is no hindrance as the performance deals with sonority, with gestual musicality, and the harmonic consonance of the language and the actor's movement of the stage. All of which derives from that sense of *ensemble*, as reviewers defined the kinesic and linguistic systematic compenetration amongst the French *troupe* which resulted in complete instinctive communication with their English audience, a far more important aspect than mere linguistic comprehension. For instance, one of the most important novelists and critics of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold, analysed in his essay "The French play in London" (1879) the musical advantages of French in comparison with English prosody when performed, concluding that French actors transmitted a complete set of sensations and emotions residing in impressive functions inherent to vocalic production that English lacked. Similarly, the actor-manager Max Beerbohm Tree praised French on the stage for it permitted to vehicle moods and feelings prohibited to the steep and abrupt English language. In Tree's poetical words (1953: 217),

what a perennial delight is in hearing the French language spoken (...) In French, how quickly, how neatly, how gracefully you can say just what you want to say to your interlocutor! How blunt and heavy an old instrument, in comparison, English seems!

French is thus the language of drama. Ellen Terry, one of Wilde's most admired British actresses together with Lily Langtry, acknowledged the failure of *Butterfly*, Meilhac and Halévy's adaptation in English of their French masterpiece *Froufrou*, pointing to the fact that London audience kept in their minds Sarah Bernhardt's earlier performance of the play in French:

Of course it is partly the language. English cannot be phrased as rapidly as French. But I have heard foreign actors, playing in the English tongue, show us this rapidity, this warmth, this fury (...) wondered why we are, most of us, so deficient in it (1933: 126).

Wilde adheres to this interpretation of French as the sublime representation of dramatic expression. In an interview for the *Pall Mall Budget*, he justified his choice of writing *Salomé* in French according to aesthetic principles. In Wilde's words,

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 (Ellmann, 1987: 352).

His perspective is both reverential and experimental, two features that can be traced in the multiplicity of ambiguities and meanings inherent in the numerous symbols Wilde resorted to in its composition. French provided *Salomé* with synaesthetic potentialities of which English was deprived, and moreover, the usage of a foreign language implied resorting to abrupt lexical structures, coherent in their syntactic order but likely to seem bizarre to the native speaker. As the playwright would have it, "there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play" (Ellmann, 1987: 352). Wilde was referring notably to the odd fluency of these compositions that obliges the audience to pay attention more vividly so as to construe the meaning of the textual image. As he pointed out when analysing the theatrical success of the Flemish playwright Maurice Maeterlinck in the above mentioned interview, he insisted on the schism between his mother tongue and the language chosen to compose his works, asserting that

a great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flaming by grace, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament (Ellmann, 1987: 352).

Salomé, as *The Importance of Being Earnest*, is all about form. Wilde's intention is to produce defamiliarisation, a device aiming to awake in the audience feelings never experienced before, by means of a new linguistic code. The choice of French within an English speaking context permits to focus the attention of both the reader and the theatre-goer on the linguistic referent. Writing the play in French entails emphasising the value of the linguistic sign, and obliges the audience to draw their attention to words, and thus rehabilitate their value and their presence on the stage. This is the very function Wilde bestowed on paradox, inversion, epigram and aphorism in his society comedies. The linguistic configuration of his dandies, the most original wildean character, displays his wanting to rehabilitate and revise the traditional dramatic discourse and, thus, to subvert those conventional theatrical situations derived from it. Resorting to French as a medium of expression, Wilde aimed to undermine the basis of the English dramatic establishment from a ludic and burlesque perspective. This profound revision of the theatrical discourse of his time is similar to revision-renovation-revitalization carried out by French symbolist poets of the stagnated nineteenth-century poetic image, by means of deploying *étrangement* in the reader. Discourse becomes an implosion of the linguistic regime, coming from inside the very linguistic system. Words are used against words themselves, a linguistic rupture that in the twentieth century would result in the "-ism" avant-gardes, and would entail the profound revision of the dramatic language carried out by the Nouveau Théâtre.

Nevertheless, apart from the aesthetic axioms that compelled Wilde to write the play in French, and the fact that *Salomé* was meant to be performed by Sarah Bernhardt, it is likely that his intention was to provide the play with hidden meanings intended to elude censorship and the moral bias of the epoch. French would be then interpreted as a linguistic mask, a veiled subterfuge the aim of which was both to obtain the Lord Chamberlain's licence to produce the play and to evade the rule forbidding the dramatization of Scripture. Very likely, as Kerry Powell states, the biblical background of the play would have passed the censor, particularly in a time that Meyerbeer had produced his play *Le prophète* in 1890 at the Covent Garden, and that Arthur Wing Pinero's *The notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1885) had displayed on the stage a Bible thrown to the flames of fire. However, the sexual content of *Salomé* was a decisive factor that prevented the play from being performed. French then is conceived not only as a vehicle of expression, but also as a means of subversion. According to Powell (1990: 37),

If *Salomé* was "half pornographic", as well as "half biblical", its being written in French should have excused both offences. Wilde was too canny to submit such

a play to the Lord Chamberlain's office in the English language, for the signs of the time made its rejection certain. But written in French, *Salomé's* suppression was perhaps not nearly as inevitable (...). The reporter who asked Wilde "how came you to write *Salomé* in French?" was never really answered, but the obscure details of the censor's methods in 1892 suggest that Wilde was availing himself of a well-known loophole. Although not the only comical aspect of the play, *Salomé's* being written in French was from the first, or at some point became an elaborate joke on the censorship of the stage and a practical response to the difficulties it presented to a playwright concerned with forbidden subjects.

The statement regarding French as a means to shroud deeper significations is reinforced when analysing nineteenth century drama reviewers's opinions on censorship. For instance, J. T. Grein's description of London theatres of the 1890s cites the Examiner of Plays, Edward F. S. Pigott's, arguments explaining his arbitrary prohibition of several plays. Dealing with the submission for licensing a Swedish drama, Grein inquired the censor on the parameters justifying his decision as far as foreign plays were concerned. To Grein's assertion "but you have licensed twenty French farces à faire rougir une pomme", Pigott ironically replied

Ah! my young friend, you don't apply a different standard from what I use when I am reading a play in a foreign language. For instance, when there is a French season in London, I consider that the theatre in which it is held is French territory for the time being, and that the audience is not English, but cosmopolitan (Grein, 1898-1903: 240).

In his analysis, Grein highlights Pigott's double-standards when licensing a play, sarcastically emphasising his linguistic competence:

the old licenser was a good linguist. He liked to be looked upon as a bit of a Parisien, and as such he knew full that you can say enormous things in French without provoking anything more than laughter; whereas even a mild approach to suggestiveness would sound absolutely offensive (1898-1903: 241).

Wilde undoubtedly knew about the Lord Chamberlain's constraints to produce his play, and that is why he resorted to French. Similarly, his most subversive play, *The importance of being Earnest*, was written according to dramatic principles belonging much more to farce and *vaudeville* structures, rather than to traditional comedy. In both plays Wilde resorted to liminal genres and to alien compositive elements in order to vehicle *risqué* meanings that "noble" genres were not likely to accept. Already in his essay *The Soul*

of *Man under Socialism* he made explicit his philosophy of composition, declaring that “burlesque and farcical comedy, the two most popular forms, are distinct forms of art. Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions, and in work of this kind the artist in England is allowed a very great freedom” (1891/1997: 909). Alien features such as foreign language or liminal theatrical techniques constitute a *leitmotiv* in Wilde’s dramaturgy permitting him to dare convention. In his plays, foreignness is synonym of transgression as well as of damnation. Native guileless young brides are always opposed to foreign –notably French– *aventurières*. National characters are always confined within the limits of biased and bigoted conventional attitudes, while the adventuress, as a result of her numerous travels and multiple foreign contagions, is synonymous of hazardous attitudes with regard to the patriarchal establishment. In this sense, the novelist Jerome K. Jerome, best known for his timeless comic novel *Three men on a boat* (1889), described with irony the usual French extraction of the adventuress within English fiction, as if the character could not be produced by *la prude Angleterre*. In Jerome’s essay *Stage-Land; curious habits and customs of its inhabitants* (1889: 1), he said

She sits on a table and smokes a cigarette. A cigarette on the stage is always the badge of infamy. (...) The adventuress is generally of foreign extraction. They do not make bad women in England, the article is entirely of continental manufacture, and has to be imported. She speaks English with a charming little French accent, and she makes up for this by speaking French with a good sound English one (...) she has not got a Stage child –if she ever had one, she has left it on somebody else’s doorstep, which, presuming there was no water handy to drown it, seems to be about the most sensible thing she could have done with it.

Frenchness is associated with difference, which went against “sameness”. Foreignness in general, and Frenchness in particular, was a constant accusation at that time. Moreover, critics still hold the view that Wilde’s imprisonment was partly due to his allegiance to France. For instance, Jean Pierrot (1981: 11) claims that the sentence passed on Wilde in 1895 condemning him to two years of hard labours was “the product, in fact, not merely of Victorian puritanism but also of a chauvinist reaction to what were seen as excessive French influences on the nation’s literature”. French culture is thus associated with subversion as well as with moral tolerance. In fact, after the prohibition of his play *Salomé* by the Lord Chamberlain, Wilde expressed his intention to part with England and have himself naturalised as a

Frenchman, and proposed to produce the play in Paris with Sarah Bernhardt in the principal role³.

French language represents a means as well as an end in itself. The obscurity inherent to a foreign language vis-à-vis the London audience provided Wilde with a position advantage. The opacity of the meanings Wilde created through the imagistic word association of *Salomé* compares him to the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, with whom from an early point in his life he spent considerable time. Insofar that Mallarmé's style was composed of cryptic expressions ("le poète parle pour ne pas être compris", claims Friedrich (1999: 169), made up of lexical and grammatical inversions, the aim of which is an endless power of suggestion intended for a reader "ouvert à la compréhension multiple" (*Poèmes en prose: la déclaration foraine*), Wilde's modes of expression in *Salomé* make him an outstanding disciple of the French poet. Some years later, in Dieppe, he would defend his own conception of language both as a weapon and as a shield of the poet:

Mallarmé is a poet, a true poet. But I prefer him when he writes in French, because in that language he is incomprehensible, while in English, unfortunately, he is not. Incomprehensibility is a gift, not everyone has it (Ellmann, 1987: 320).

Wilde's dramatic characters display this same attitude within their discursive construction. As for the dandy, whose identity is configured and determined by his use of language, discourse represents a *non-communicative* vehicle of transmission of meanings. The description of Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband* reflects a conception of linguistic hermetism extremely similar to non-verbal characterisation of Wilde's sexless Salomé, which is the expression of rejection and rebellion towards the social values. The dandy is described as follows:

Thirty-four, but always says he is younger. A well-bred expressionless face. He is clever, *but would not like to be thought so*. A flawless dandy, he would be annoyed if he were considered romantic. He plays with life, and is on perfectly good terms with the world. *He is fond of being misunderstood. It gives him a post of advantage* (Act I).

³ The *Era*, July 2nd 1892, reported his words as follows: "Yes, my resolution is deliberately taken: since it is impossible to have a work of art performed in England, I shall transfer myself to another fatherland, of which I have long ago been enamoured. There is but one Paris, voyez-vous, and Paris is France. It is the abode of artists; nay, it is la ville artiste. I also adore your beautiful language. To me, there are only two languages in the world, French and Greek. Here (in London), people are essentially anti-artistic and narrow-minded. Now, the ostracism of Salomé will give you a fair notion of what people here consider venal and indecorous. To put on the stage any person or persons connected with the Bible is impossible".

Similarly, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, another dandy, Lord Darlington, claimed his right to being misunderstood as an expression of his rupture with a social communicative code anchored in primitive and biased attitudes:

Duchess of Berwick: What does he mean? Do, as a concession to my poor wits,
Lord Darlington, just explain to me what you really mean.

Lord Darlington (rising): I think I had better not, Duchess. Nowadays to be
intelligible is to be found out. Goodbye! (Act I).

To conclude, *Salomé's* non-verbal expression may be associated with these dandyistic claims. The character's silence during the most climactic scenes of the play is due to the fact that she resorts to kinesics in order to refuse convention. The dance gives her the chance to transgress the boundaries of social repression into self-satisfaction and unity. Moreover, she takes her dress off so as to dance, an act which marks her departure from society and her reintegration with nature. Silence and defamiliarisation are synonyms, in Wilde's view, for both expressing a battle between individuals and social forms reflecting the inevitable solipsism and isolation of the artist when confronted to the real world. His use of French displays his intention to base his rebellion, as his dramatic characters do, mainly on inverting the styles, and therefore the identities, imposed on individuals by the ruling classes, rebuilding fiction according to a new paradigm of voiced and silenced features. His deconstruction of social, political and literary standards displays his aim of providing rebellion with an own style derived from the French decadent mood, and seeking, thus predicting the Russian Formalist School, to shock traditional perceptions and recognitions.

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, M. (1903). *The Works of Matthew Arnold*. 15 Vol. Vol. III: *Essays in criticism*. London: Macmillan and Co.
- Pierrot, J. (1981). *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Berbohm Tree, M. (1953). "Comedy in French and in English". In: *Around Theatres*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis. 1953.
- Craig, E. & C. St. John (eds.) (1933). *Ellen Terry's Memoirs*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd.
- De Villena, L. A. (2001). *Wilde Total*. Barcelona: Planeta.
- Ellmann, R. (1987). *Oscar Wilde*. London: Hamilton.
- Friedrich, H. (1999). *Structure de la Poésie Moderne*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française.

- Grein, J. T. (1898-1903). *Dramatic Criticism*. London: John Long.
- Hart Davis, R. (1962). *Letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Hart-Davis.
- Hart Davis, R. (1985). *More letters of Oscar Wilde*. London: Murray.
- Jerome, J. K. (1889). *Stage-land Curious Habits and Customs of its Inhabitants*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Kronenberg, L. (1976). *Oscar Wilde*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Powell, K. (1990). *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taitte, W. Lawson (1975). *The Structural Debt of the English Well-Made Play to the Pièce bien-faite and to Melodrama*. PhD. Dissertation. Princeton University.
- Severi, R. "Oscar Wilde, la femme fatale and the Salomé myth". In: A. Balakian, J. Wilhelm, D.W. Fokkema, E. W. Smith, C. Guillén, P. Escher & M. J. Valdés (eds.) (1985). *Proceedings of the Xth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*. New York: Garland. Vol. II. 1985: 485-463.
- Wilde, O. (1997). *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*. Wordsworth Editions: Ware.