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Subverting the Gaze, Seducing with the Bible: A Study of Oscar Wilde's Salomé

The present article engages with the eponymous character of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and focuses on her subversion of the patriarchal rules, and on her attempts at seducing the prophet Jokanaan. Wilde's *Salomé* becomes "an erotic symbol of daring, transgression, and perversity" (Sloan 112). She wants to look at Jokanaan, as well as to be touched by him and openly states her great desire for him, using the imagery taken from the biblical *Song of Songs* to express her passion. Moreover, the Princess skillfully adopts and reverses the male gaze to manipulate others and go beyond the patriarchal constraints at Herod's court. She becomes aware that the only way to reach her goals is to look actively and evade being a mere object of the male gaze. The article shows that the imagery employed in the eponymous character's speeches contributes to her portrayal as a seductress, also accentuating her rebellion, and analyzes how the Princess transgresses the patriarchal constraints through appropriating the male gaze.

key words: Oscar Wilde, the Bible, Salomé, the male gaze

Oscar Wilde was not only the author of a prominent novel, stories, poems and essays but also a man of the theatre. Unfortunately, one of his plays suffered from censorship as it not only dramatized a biblical story, but also "represented a radical challenge to Victorian concepts of womanhood and sexuality" (Sloan 111). Obviously, the play in question is *Salomé*. As opposed to the character's biblical versions from the gospels of Mark and Matthew, Wilde's *Salomé* is referred to as "perverse, monstrous in her desire to control her own sexuality, and so challenge a repressive patriarchal culture" (Sloan 113-14). She is aware of her step-father constantly looking lustfully at her, and, to show her disapproval, she adopts the stance of a usurper and wants to look at the Prophet – Jokanaan. She first engages in a solitary stare by gazing at the moon, but then she subverts Herod's patriarchal gaze and yearns for looking at the mysterious Prophet captured by her step-father. *Salomé's* fascination with Jokanaan is so overpowering that she praises him with her lengthy speeches. In her book *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, Alice Bach convincingly shows the similarities between *Salomé's* monologues praising Jokanaan and the biblical *Song of Songs*. However, she does not reach any conclusions concerning how these similarities work with regard to *Salomé*. The present article will try to show that the imagery employed in the eponymous character's speeches contributes to her portrayal as a seductress and also analyze how she transgresses the patriarchal constraints through appropriating the male gaze.

In certain respects, Wilde's play seems faithful to the Bible. This is most visible in the presentation of Jokanaan, who is fashioned after the biblical figure of John the Baptist, the emissary of God. However, the fragments of biblical gospels concerning the beheading of John the Baptist have nothing in common with Wilde's *Salomé* as far as the depiction of its main character is concerned – the heroine flourishes only in the text of the play. In the Bible the name

of Herod's step daughter is not even mentioned, whereas in the play, she is made the eponymous character and plays a major role in the course of the events. In the play it is Salomé who uses the Tetrarch to have Jokanaan killed, partially because the latter condemns her words of praise directed towards him: "[b]ack! Daughter of Babylon! Come not near the chosen of the Lord" (Wilde 725). By contrast, in St. Matthew it is Herodias who tells her daughter to demand Prophet's head: "[a]nd she, *being before instructed of her mother*, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger" (*King James Bible*, Mt. 14.8; emphasis added). St. Mark also mentions the beheading and gives evidence of Herodias' role in instructing her daughter and finally having John the Baptist decapitated: "[a]nd she went forth, *and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist*" (Mk. 6.24; emphasis added). In the gospel of Luke this story is mentioned only briefly; however, the fact that the daughter of Herodias wanted the Prophet to be beheaded is overtly absent. Unlike the Evangelists, Wilde endows Salomé with her own independent agency.

The article will use the biblical references and the concept of the male gaze to demonstrate that Wilde's Salomé may be viewed as a seductress. This interpretation may prove to be particularly interesting since such a unique depiction of the character is only to be found in Wilde's play in spite of the fact that the gospel of Mark, where Salomé is only a tool of her mother and has no personality of her own, appealed to the writer most firmly (Bucknell 504). In his play "she becomes a goddess-like symbol of violent love" (Ellmann qtd. in Bach 239). The Princess is a victim of both Herod's gaze and her own gaze directed at Jokanaan, but, on the other hand, she also uses her look to manipulate others. As Bach observes, "[a]ll . . . characters in *Salomé* are described through their attempts to see, a combination of vision and insight, except the prophet, who defines himself by language; his sense is hearing and listening" (235).

Salomé is aware of the looks of others who gaze at her, but strikingly the one who is the most attractive for her is Jokanaan, who avoids looking as well as being looked at and decidedly does not want her to stare at him. In order to seduce the Prophet, the eponymous character subverts the male gaze and follows Herod's example by engaging in the act of lustful looking. By staring at the Prophet Salomé uses the gaze in a way similar to that in which Herod uses it and reverses the patriarchal rules. It can be claimed that imitating the Tetrarch is Salomé's way of appropriating his power and manipulating Jokanaan in order to make him yield to her charms.

From the very beginning of the play one may observe that princess Salomé is lonely, and, in a way, abandoned by others. She flies from the banquet as she does not want to "socialize" with other guests. She is clearly withdrawn and chooses a kind of self-imposed solitude:

SALOMÉ: How sweet the air is here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem who are tearing each other in pieces over their foolish ceremonies, and barbarians who drink and drink, and spill their wine on the pavement, . . . and Romans, brutal and coarse, with their uncouth jargon. Ah! How I loathe the Romans! They are rough and common. (Wilde 721-22)

It can be argued that she is bored with what surrounds her and that she yearns for a change, for something new. She despises the numerous feasts that Herod and her mother love so much. She disdains the vain people celebrating, eating, drinking and focusing only on bodily pleasures. It is clear that she hankers after something quite different but, unfortunately, having been bred in such an environment, the Princess does not know what spirituality is. The only form of resistance she is capable of consists in engaging in some kind of a gaze, similar to that of the Tetrarch, which serves as a means of manifesting her potential, latent power. At the beginning of the play one may notice such a rebellious look being exercised by Salomé:

[h]ow good to see the moon. She is like a little piece of money, you would think she is a little silver flower. The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin's beauty. (Wilde 722)

As Bucknell argues, "she escapes the gaze of Herod in order to engage in a view of her own" (517).

Salomé knows that she is an object of Herod's gaze, but she is also aware that she can look at something on her own and thus experience pleasure. Initially, it is the moon that becomes the object of her stare. Salomé compares her own features to those of the moon. What is worth noticing is the fact that Salomé is surrounded by earthly things and her similes pertaining to the moon are also of this kind. The moon in Wilde's play resembles a coin and a silver flower, i.e. precious items which the Princess has in excess. On the other hand, she sees the moon as a virgin, and thus, as one may argue, she identifies with it, because she is also chaste. Bearing these similarities in mind, one may notice the emergence of Salomé's great desire for spirituality in her speech. She is aware of the debauchery that takes place at Herod's court, but she wants to oppose it by asserting her virginity and showing her loathing for the banquets.

When referring to the lustful gaze of Herod and its subversion traced in Salomé's actions, it is important to turn to the concept of the male gaze. By reversing and adopting this kind of look, the eponymous character shows her liberation and freedom, as she demonstrates that she is capable of the look usually associated with the other sex. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey identified this way of looking and coined the term "male gaze" to describe it. She developed this concept to convey the idea that only men take the active role while gazing at the representatives of the opposite sex, who are, in consequence, objectified and passive. Invoking Mulvey, Shohini Chaudhuri states that "spectators are encouraged to identify with the look of the male hero and make the heroine a passive object of erotic spectacle" (31). Moreover, in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey herself suggests that the patriarchal society deprives women of the right to function on their own, and subjects them to male actions:

[w]oman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (747)

One may, however, argue that, from the theoretical standpoint, it is not the medium that is important but the relation between the viewer – a man – and the object – a woman. Despite the fact that Mulvey writes about the cinema and the audience looking at a woman on the screen, the concept can also be applied to Wilde's play, since, for Herod, Salomé's dance of the seven veils is, in fact, a kind of a performance. Moreover, her very presence at the court is a peculiar spectacle which definitely places Herod in the position of a member of the audience. Thus, the use of the concept of the male gaze may be justified in the case of the Tetrarch's look.

The objectifying power discussed by Mulvey imprisons Salomé by the force of its patriarchal constraints and, as Marcovitch claims, "Salome's actions turn destructive because her limited ability to exert her will causes her power to be perverted" (93). Salomé is held captive at the court and is only "a figure of iconic beauty and an object of sexual desire" (93), especially Herod's. In this context, one may refer to the term "scopophilia" or "pleasure in looking" coined by Freud. Chaudhuri explains this concept in the following way: "scopophilia involves taking people as objects for sexual stimulation through sight" (34). Thus, a woman is possessed by a man who, by staring continuously at her, makes her an object of his sexual desire. In Wilde's

play, the eponymous character is aware of being a victim of this kind of scopophilic male gaze and of the fact that the only way to flee from the patriarchal constraints and to become a seductress rather than an object, is to adopt the male gaze, despite being a woman.

Garland-Thomson points out that “the male gaze is men doing something to women” (41). Thus, we can say that Salomé is oppressed by the lascivious gaze of Herod and that his “[l]ooking at Salome is an attempt to own Salome, to turn her into the Salome each one who looks at her wants her to be” (Marcovitch 94). However, we should also bear in mind that the eponymous character is partially aware of the fact that Herod feels lust for her and uses this to her advantage. Marcovitch explains that “[b]y treating Salome as an object, Herod neglects the fact that Salome too can see, can desire and can use the power she possesses as princess of the court to her own ends” (96).

Herod is unable to foresee that his lust may be turned against him and, consequently, used to destroy him. As Garland-Thomson argues, the gaze as performed by men does something to women, decidedly something harmful. A powerful woman who does not want to be captured by patriarchal constraints can subvert this look and use the male gaze from a female perspective; this is exactly what Salomé does. What helps her in trying to achieve a position of power and dominance is the imagery alluding to the biblical *Song of Songs* which she uses in her words addressed to Jokanaan.

The opportunity for a rebellion comes when Salomé hears sounds from the cistern. They are made by Jokanaan, who immediately captures Salomé’s attention. She is aware that the Tetrarch is afraid of him, so she wants to know who this extraordinary man is: “[a]h, the prophet! He of whom the Tetrarch is afraid?” (Wilde 722). She wants to see him, and here for the second time she exercises the act of looking when she induces the Young Syrian to bring Jokanaan from the cistern:

SALOMÉ: You will do this for me, Narraboth. You know that you will do this thing for me. And tomorrow when I pass in my litter by the bridge of the idol-buyers, I will look at you through the muslin veils; I will look at you, Narraboth. (Wilde 723)

Salomé becomes aware that her look can be as powerful as Herod’s, and that she can achieve something with it. She calls the Young Syrian by his name, thus condescending to him while apparently trying to befriend him. The Princess begins to understand that she can manipulate others with her gaze, and, having realized this, she promises Narraboth that she will look at him, at the same time being aware that because of her gaze he will do whatever she wants. Bach states that:

[l]ooking is an aggressive maneuver, seeking to hold the object in its view. Looking must be controlled by the male. Driving the aggressive ownership of the gaze is the fear of becoming an object, that is, a fear of being looked at. I need to look so as not to be looked at. I must control the gaze, lest the gaze control me and engulf me. (167)

As was said previously, Salomé fears Herod’s intense look and wants to escape it. Then, she becomes aware that the best way to flee is to adopt a stance of the usurper and look actively. By doing this, the protagonist subverts and challenges the traditional order of the gaze within which it is men who look at women. Salomé transgresses this constraint, thus reversing power relations and even gender roles. By looking, she adopts the male position. As Tookey contends, the reader “find[s] this confusion – or, at least, a slippery quality to the notions of subject and object, an oscillation between ‘looker’ and ‘looked-at’” (30).

When Salomé encounters Jokanaan for the first time, she “*looks at him and steps slowly back*” (Wilde 724). She is afraid of him and, at the same time, aware of his oddity. Salomé’s negative attitude deepens when she acknowledges the fact that Jokanaan is speaking a lot of abusive words about her mother. She then exclaims: “[b]ut he is terrible, he is terrible!” (Wilde 724). Notwithstanding her fear or even hatred, she begins to be interested in this strange man and says: “I must look at him closer” (Wilde 725). She wants to come nearer, to look at him from a smaller distance. Jokanaan’s accusations of Herodias’ incest and blasphemy are now for Salomé a proof that the Prophet also objects to the pervading depravity of the court. As Janicka-Świdorska argues, “she instinctively draws near to somebody who stands against the court, of whom her step-father is afraid and who is a severe judge of her mother” (120). What is more, Salomé is attracted to Jokanaan also because of the fact that he is unknown to her, that he represents the spirituality which she yearns for, and it is at the moment of their first encounter that she realizes that the Prophet embodies this particular quality which she lacks. As Janicka-Świdorska aptly states, “Jokanaan, who is near, appears to her as a model of masculine and spiritual beauty, and consequently becomes the object of her physical and spiritual yearning” (120), and it is evident that in the person of Jokanaan Salomé has finally found what she has been looking for and what has been lacking in her existence. Her yearning for the spiritual world and the sphere of sacrum that Jokanaan represents is later signalled by her use of biblical imagery to praise the Prophet who is, obviously, an envoy of God. Moreover, Salomé “through her longing and desire for him . . . subconsciously expresses her longing for a mystic life” (Janicka-Świdorska 123). At this point, the reader/audience are likely to notice that Salomé is much different from her incestuous mother and lustful step-father.

During the first encounter with the Prophet, Salomé starts to praise Jokanaan with her lengthy speeches as she becomes enchanted with what was heretofore so fearful to her, and now she “gets attracted to what is monstrous and terrifying, as in fairy tale” (Janicka-Świdorska 120). She wants to establish a closer relationship with Jokanaan, and to achieve this she describes him as similar to herself. As Bucknell argues, “Salomé’s gaze seems to cause a shift in Jokanaan’s gender, and subsequently, she identifies Jokanaan with herself” (517). She uses virginal similes when talking about him: “[t]hy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains” (Wilde 725). The use of the colour white as well as the allusions to a never-mowed field, and snow lying very high, never touched by anybody, immediately draw attention to Salomé herself. As was argued before, despite the fact that she is surrounded by iniquities of the court, Salomé is a chaste virgin and describes the Prophet in precisely the same way.

The protagonist’s paeans are not met with approval, nonetheless. Salomé is full of the passion to look, touch and be close to Jokanaan, but he withdraws, even throwing calumnies at her. Salomé praises Jokanaan’s body and hair, but when she notices the rejection on his part, she automatically speaks in derogative terms about the earlier-glorified body parts. Interestingly, it is “only his mouth [that] escapes her ambivalence” (Finney 183). She praises his lips: “[t]hy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory” (Wilde 726), but when she wants to kiss them, and this obviously meets with a rebuke from Jokanaan, she does not verbally disgrace this part of the Prophet’s body. It can be claimed that Salomé is subconsciously aware that the mouth is a sacred part of Jokanaan’s body, because he is a vessel for the words of God. Such a claim may also be supported by the fact that the tower of ivory invoked by Salomé should, as will later be argued, be viewed as a reference to the biblical Tower of David, one of the most important buildings in the Holy City of Jerusalem. Thus, given her craving for spirituality, Salomé intuitively refrains from attacking and profaning it.

The most interesting aspect of the confrontation between Salomé and Jokanaan is the imagery that the former employs to speak about the latter. Here her lustful look towards the Prophet is very visible and the emotions burst. It is the imagery that she uses that makes her passion so conspicuous. Bach observes: “[a] number of scholars have noted the linguistic parallels between the figure of Salomé and the female lover in the English version of Song of Songs” (Bach 236). However, she immediately notes that, in fact, “Wilde expresses his fondness for character inversion by reassigning the male lover’s descriptions of the female lover in the Song to Salomé’s musings about the beauty of Iohanaan” (236). One may notice that Salomé transgresses gender roles and takes the position of the male lover from the Song of Songs when expressing her desire. However, as was shown before, Salomé’s yearning for intimacy with Jokanaan is unreciprocated. Perhaps, as Bach observes, Salomé wants to kiss Jokanaan without actually desiring to be kissed (236). She thus adopts a stance of the active leader in this strange relationship. What is ironic, though, is the fact that one may observe a “total absence of mutuality” (Bach 236).

As for the similarities between the imagery used by the protagonist and the biblical Song, they are so prominent that Bach easily collates them in the form of a table (237-38). She draws attention to the fact that Salomé compares Jokanaan’s body to lilies and roses, whereas the female lover from the Song of Songs talks about herself as a rose and lily (237).¹ At this point, it is very clear that the Princess presents Jokanaan in feminine terms, and uses the imagery from the biblical Song. What is more, Bach also shows that Salomé’s praises are very similar to those of the male lover from the Song when she collates his animalistic imagery (eyes like doves, hair like goats)² with Salomé’s comparison of Jokanaan’s body to a garden of doves.³ Moreover, as Bach presents it, the male lover describes his lover’s cheeks as halves of pomegranate behind the veil,⁴ and Salomé uses exactly the same simile while talking about Jokanaan’s mouth.⁵ The muslin veils are also present, but in *Salomé* it is the title character who will look at the Young Syrian through them, while in the Song the male lover is talking about his beloved’s veils (237). It can be argued that without the biblical imagery taken from the Song, Salomé’s imagery would be far cruder and her sexuality and desire would not be seen as overflowing with such power. Comparing Salomé and the male lover from the Song, Bach also draws attention to the similarity between the uses of the imagery of the tower and fruits. When the male lover is praising his lover’s neck, he talks about the tower of David,⁶ whereas for Salomé Jokanaan’s mouth is like a “band of scarlet on a tower of ivory” (Wilde 726).⁷ Additionally, the lover from the Bible talks about coming to his garden (to his beloved), eating and drinking wine and milk,⁸ and in Salomé’s speeches it is easy to perceive the importance of wine and fruits when she states that they cannot satisfy her desire (Wilde 741).⁹ One may conclude that Salomé wanted to render Jokanaan feminine in her eyes, to make him the object of the male gaze, one that may, at the same time, be contemplated (tower of ivory, lilies or doves) and consumed (pomegranate, grapes or wine), and

¹ This may also be found in Song of Sg. 2.1-2

² Song of Sg. 4.1

³ “Thy body was a column of ivory set on a silver socket. It was a garden full of doves and of silver lilies” (Wilde 741).

⁴ Song of Sg. 4.3

⁵ “It is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory” (Wilde 726).

⁶ Song of Sg. 4.4

⁷ Cf. Bach 237

⁸ Song of Sg. 5.1

⁹ Cf. Bach 237

all the similes the Princess adopts from the speeches of the male lover in the Song of Songs strongly suggest this.

On the other hand, it is worth observing that, when it comes to talking about love and its infinity, Salomé uses the words of the female lover. In her careful considerations of the similarities between Salomé's speeches and those from the Song of Songs, Bach compares at one point the female lover to Salomé,¹⁰ and she does so when taking into account not only the imagery, but also love and its strength. In her last monologue Salomé says that love is stronger than death and that nothing can destroy it: "[n]either the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion . . . Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me, and the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death" (Wilde 741).¹¹ The heroine's statement resembles that of the female lover from the Song, who says that love is as firm and powerful as death and that floods cannot drown it.¹² Upon noticing that in this passage Salomé does not use the words of the male lover from the Song but those of the female one, one may argue that Salomé is thus not confined by the patriarchal constraints, but strenuously resists them; by speaking the language of not only the male, but also the female lover from the Song of Songs she proves her defiance. She does not allow for the binary opposition of male versus female to limit her; she subverts this dichotomy, being able to take on the language of either lover from the Song. Thus, as Bach aptly observes, she sees herself in the role of both lovers: male and female (236).

What is more, with the help of the biblical Song, it may be argued that Salomé is more than an object of the gaze, and becomes a brilliant seductress who knows what she has to do in order to fulfil her great desire. It is through the similarities with the Song of Songs that this passion is created in the character. These similarities help the protagonist to express herself. Bach has traced some of them but more analogies with the Song than those that she mentions can be observed. When Salomé says: "[s]peak again, Jokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me" (Wilde 725) and when she wants to see him, this is indubitably similar to what the male lover from the Song tells his beloved: "let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely" (Song of Sg. 2.14). Subsequently, Salomé expresses her admiration for Jokanaan's hair: "[t]hy hair is like the cedars of Lebanon, like the great cedars of Lebanon that give their shade to the lions" (Wilde 726). Again, her speech is analogous to that of the male lover from the Bible: "[c]ome with me from Lebanon, my spouse, with me from Lebanon: look from the top of Amana, from the top of Shenir and Hermon, from the lions' dens, from the mountains of the leopards" (Song of Sg. 4.8). The passage includes animal imagery: the lions are a symbol of great power, a kingly one, and Salomé may be invoking them in order to show that she reverses the gender hierarchy at the court and is an independent woman, fully aware of her female power.

Furthermore, one may trace some similarities to Herod's verbal advances towards Salomé in her speech. When the Tetrarch wants to dissuade the Princess from demanding the head of Jokanaan, he offers to give her his greatest treasures: "I have jewels hidden in this place . . . jewels that are marvellous" (Wilde 739). He then talks about amethysts, topazes, moonstones and other precious gems. Like Salomé did earlier, Herod uses the Song of Songs' imagery: "[t]hy

¹⁰ Jay C. Treat notes that "[i]n the Song of Songs, gender-neutral language can confuse the reader . . . Without a[n] . . . aid for the reader in English, it is sometimes difficult to tell who is speaking to whom at various points in the text" (661). Here, the Polish translation of the Bible is of a great help, as it makes it possible to determine the gender of the speakers in the Song of Songs.

¹¹ Bach also uses this quote in her table, but she does not say anything about the particulars of Salomé's similarity to the female lover from the Song.

¹² Song of Sg. 8.6, 8.7

cheeks are comely with rows *of jewels*, thy neck with chains *of gold*”(Song of Sg. 1.10; emphasis original). It can be argued that Salomé “desires Jokanaan first aesthetically, then sexually, and finally spiritually” (Im 372), and that, in the first two cases, her desire is similar to Herod’s passion towards her. Thus, she is seen to use imagery comparable not only to that from the biblical Song, but also to that used by Herod, which, most interestingly, is similar to the Song of Songs in some aspects. Yet, it needs to be stressed that Herod uses the abovementioned similes to talk about jewellery which serves as a gift for Salomé that could discourage her from having Jokanaan killed, whereas for Salomé the similes are a means of presenting her emotions, spiritual yearning and desires, which is much closer to the idea behind the Song of Songs which is often interpreted as an expression of the love of God towards the people of Israel.

Moreover, as Marcovitch posits, “[s]ince she [i.e. Salomé] is seen as an object of desire, the only actions she knows how to perform are those that stem from desire” (94). Bearing this in mind, it is clear that Salomé’s wooing is firmly connected with her background and with what she has experienced herself. Pursuing this argument further, it may be observed that Jokanaan, being the envoy of God, is a man who longs for truly spiritual experience. Salomé, who in fact wants something more than bodily sensations, is so much governed by them that she does not know how to express her yearning and gives Jokanaan the wrong signals. Furthermore, Marcovitch states that “Salomé’s attempted seduction of Jokanaan is an endeavour to find power outside of the court and particularly to find a form of subjective power, one in which her power is not dependent on the gazes of others” (98). As was argued before, Salomé’s seduction is also a way to flee from patriarchal constraints and to show how independent she wants to be. Thus, the claim that she is both a seductress and an object of Herod’s gaze is justified.

Ultimately, Salomé’s desire cannot be fulfilled and the only way for her to reach her goal is to demand the head of the man with whom she is so enchanted. As the play shows, she succeeds in enforcing the killing of Jokanaan on Herod, and she can finally kiss his now dead lips: “[a]h! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. Well! I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit” (Wilde 740). Notwithstanding the fact that her beloved is dead, she is still full of passion and insatiable desire. Although one can suspect Salomé of being ruthless and devoid of feelings, she admits defeat on her part: “I was a princess, and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire” (Wilde 741). Bucknell points out: “Salomé’s last speeches repeat her earlier blazon. She tells the head, the icon of castration, that it is *she* who has lost” (523; emphasis original). Thus, she knows that she has failed and that her desire will never be fulfilled. She is aware of her tragic situation, and she does not attempt to hide it. At this point one can argue that she does not succeed as a seductress, because she finally admits her failure; on the other hand, however, it is worth remembering that at this moment it is too late – Jokanaan is dead and it is Salomé’s passion that caused it.

All the aforementioned arguments lead to the conclusion that Salomé looks at Jokanaan lustfully and that her behaviour is, in fact, very similar to what Herod does to her. Her passionate gaze, which acquires the characteristics of the male gaze, subverts the traditional patriarchal order in which it is the men who look at women. She causes the death of the Young Syrian also by promising to gaze at him and she does so in order to look at what she desires most, that is the Prophet. Salomé wants something more than the bodily revels of the court, but she does not fully know how to express it. The imagery that she uses is very similar to that of the Song of Songs and her lengthy speeches, characterized by great sensuality, help her to express herself. On the other hand, however, Salomé’s words to Jokanaan prove that she is a seductress rather than a guiltless object of Herod’s sexual desire and lustful look. The similarities between her

monologues and the biblical Song of Songs help Salomé in being a perfect wooer, but it is her desire that causes the death of the Young Syrian, Jokanaan and finally her own. As Marcovitch claims, “Salome’s desire, breaking free from the limits her persona imposed on it, ends up consuming her as well” (100). She admits at the end that she is not a winner but a loser, one who killed her beloved by desiring him too much.

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