

## Deprivation of Symbolic Verbalization in *Salomé*

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### Introduction

Believing that Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1893) explores the wavering of the borderline between genders, many critics assert that there is a battle in the play between the visual sphere, where woman is compelled to reside, and the verbal sphere, where man is allowed to reside.<sup>1</sup> Donald Lawler demonstrates that *Salomé* finally acquires "the lips of the prophet as the symbol of his power and prophetic office" which belongs to the verbal sphere (255–56). I admit that there is a battle between the two spheres, as shown in Herodias's reference, "The moon is like the moon, that is all" (592),<sup>2</sup> and in the beating of wings only Jokanaan and Herod are allowed to hear.

However, these arguments are not based on a sufficient textual analysis of the lines to make clear the gradual process of *Salomé*'s invasion of the verbal sphere. Her intrusion is not only proven by her fatal acquisition of the ultimate head, but by her speech and action itself. Therefore, the aim in this paper is to enumerate the signs of *Salomé*'s intrusion in terms of symbolic verbalization. Comparing her symbolic verbalization with that of male characters, I will reveal her mimicry and illustrate the transition of the language activity from men to *Salomé*. First of all, I should point out the absence of descriptions of the dance scene. The absence contributes to her liberation from the spell of dance-description, since the dance-description would limit her as an object in the visual sphere.

### 1. Significance of the Lost Description: An Intention Hidden behind Male Symbolic Verbalization

In the *fin de siècle* Salomé is described as a typical femme fatale in numerous works. Not a few authors condense her charm into her dance by concentrating on elaborate descriptions of the dance to show how seductive it looks to male voyeurs.<sup>3</sup> A similarity among these works is that a voyeur always narrates the scene in the third person. For instance, the excerpt from “Ballet” (1898) by Stuart Merrill consists of two stanzas: the first half is the description of Salomé’s dance, but the latter half is her monologue:

Toisons fauves sur leurs lèvres incarnadines,  
Bras lourds de bracelets barbares, en essors  
Moelleux vers la lueur lunaire des décors,  
Elles murmurent en malveillantes sourdines:

“Nous sommes ô mortels, danseuses du Désir,  
Salomés dont les corps tordus par le plaisir  
Leurrent vos heurs d’amour vers nos pervers arcanes. (5–11)

Merrill describes the first half in the third person. It explores his recognition of her body at a dancing moment as an object to be observed and described by others.

Wilde’s *Salomé*, on the contrary, has no describer of the dance scene, except for a simple stage direction: “Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils” (600). On condition that every character can speak with his own words in the form of drama, Wilde emphasizes the male characters’ gazing upon Salomé and descriptions of her from their subjective images. In spite of their roles, in this scene their dance-description is excluded. How does the deletion function in the text? If a third person depicts the dance, the scene is absolutely expressed through his eyes and it falls under his control. Besides the dominant viewpoint belonging to his lust, Salomé must be framed in his definitive expressions such as “like the Bacchantes” and “like a flower” (Flaubert 102). In *Salomé*, however, the absence of the voyeur’s subjective

descriptions enables Salomé to liberate herself from the spell upon her described body. If *Salomé* was written in the form of prose, verse or tale, Salomé’s dance would be covered with the male voyeur’s words again, and the dance could not function as her own expression. Dramatization prevents Salomé’s visual expression and man’s verbal expression from falling into disorder, and enables the body-expressionist Salomé to be a proprietor of the dance scene.

Besides Salomé’s recovery of independence from describers, the deprivation of man’s verbalization is gradually realized by her invasive crossing of the boundary between the two spheres. Its method is just the mimicry of the male characters’ verbalizing the visual and defining its essence subjectively. Let us consider male characters’ lines before Salomé’s, to make Salomé’s mimicry apparent.

The play opens with a scene where Syrian and Page as observers describe the moon. Their speeches are deliberately formulated so that the moon signifies Salomé. She is reflected on it by the binary images that belong to the contemporary dominant discourse on women; one is that of a vampire and the other is of an angel. Page fancies the moon: “How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman” (583). On the contrary, Syrian dreams: “She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet” (583). Page repeats the phrase “dead woman,” meanwhile Syrian frequently refers to a “dove”.

These contrasting impressions situate Salomé between a dreadful vampire and an innocent angel. “As regards women, don’t you think it’s rather hard of them to divide them into angels and vampires only?” (Dijkstra 333) This is a man’s dialogue with Victorian values in “A Frivolous Conversation” (1911) written by Vernon Lee. The “angels” undoubtedly derive from “The Angel in the House,” which is established among the Victorians.<sup>4</sup> The representation as dove stands for purity and innocence in Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Bible, too, the dove stands for obedience: “be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (*Matt.* 10, 16). Therefore, Syrian’s symbolic verbalization is interpreted as an attempt to categorize

Salomé as an angelic woman. The “dead woman,” on the other hand, comes from the numerous works of the fin de siècle.<sup>5</sup> We can state that the vampire stories in fashion induce Wilde to create Page’s fancy. It follows that Syrian’s and Page’s experiments of applying either image to Salomé reflect the contemporary tendency that sharply divides women into two. As Henry states in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that words can “give a plastic form to formless things” (29), words compulsorily fit formless human beings into some framework. Mitsuko Hirabayashi argues that women sometimes claim that men have killed women with various symbols, using the same symbols and images as male poets do. Women protest against the “erasure” done by male representation in the same way. Through the act, they reveal the process of the cultural representation in which they are torn off from their life, and abstracted, and possessed (Hirabayashi v). These explanations reveal the connotation Syrian’s and Page’s symbolic verbalizations have; that is, the abstraction and possession of Salomé. In conclusion, symbolic verbalization confers an advantage on subjects by enabling them to define the object by the power of words.

## 2. Salomé’s Mimicry and Symbolic Verbalization

We now come to the point at which it is necessary to deal with Salomé’s mimicry and invasion into the verbal sphere. Here we should pay attention to the significance of three spaces Wilde elaborately constructs. The stage is divided into the banquet hall, the old cistern and the terrace. The banquet hall is under Herod’s government, where his eyes mentally smother Salomé. The cistern functions as Jokanaan’s “tomb” (587), which metaphorically signifies the death of his body, in other words, his negation of the material comforts. The terrace, where Salomé confesses, “I can breathe here” (586), belongs to her beyond Herod’s rule. It is Roland Barthes who suggests the antithesis of the garden and the salon as outside and inside. The terrace that connects the garden with the salon [banquet hall] functions as a boundary between the inside and outside of the house. Hirabayashi’s opinion about Victorian fictions is explanatory of this idea: the spaces inside and outside of

the house metaphorically stand for the opposition of inside and outside of the house as social system. She argues that woman in the house is in an unstable existence on the threshold boundary, rather than in a stable and peaceful existence in the house as an angel in the house (1–2). Accordingly, Salomé’s running into the terrace accounts for her present position of existing on the threshold. On the terrace, Salomé develops all her actions, refusing anyone’s entreaty to retreat to the banquet hall. It is because the terrace that adjoins the external world enables Salomé to regain the independence and subjectivity of which she has been deprived.

Salomé’s narration on the terrace exposes her inner feelings:

I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole’s eyes under his shaking eyelids? 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)

This harmless and moral thinking draws her near to the image of “a dove that has strayed into the sinful palace.” (586). The speech reveals her weakness and passivity at this point. Mimicking the conventional male habit, Salomé, in private, compares her femininity to the moon:

She is like a little piece of money, you would think she was a little silver flower. The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin’s beauty. . . . She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses. (586)

The speech clarifies that she praises herself for tradeworthy virginity while she despises Herodias’s degeneration; for the embodiment of “the other goddesses” is Herodias. Salomé remains an “angel” here as Syrian believes, and she is indisputably independent of her mother.

Wilde highlights Salomé’s independence by contrasting it with Herodias’s dependence on Herod. Herodias’s words are compared to a cry of “a beast of prey” (602). “Bid him be silent” (593). “Command him to be silent” (596). Though she repeatedly counts on Herod’s help to grant her desires, it proves fruitless. In addition, no reply from Salomé to Herodias manifests a

silent discord between them. Herodias cannot influence anyone. Salomé's liberation and language activity become distinct in contrast with Herodias, who is buried in a patriarchal system.

Salomé's encounter with Jokanaan empowers her to be a much stronger subject. She symbolizes the male object by slipping out of the visual sphere where she has been observed only as a material existence. Her verbalization of Jokanaan transfers the aesthetic objects of stylization, such as white body, black hair and red mouth, from female to Jokanaan. Mimicking male describers' way of speaking, Salomé tears off Jokanaan from his life, and abstracts him, and possesses him. Instead of writing down the exquisite description of Salomé's seductive dance, Wilde details Jokanaan's beauty to justify the heroine's desire, which can be stirred up by looking, in the same way as male characters' desire.

Another mimicry is shown in her speech when she obtains Jokanaan's head. Biting his mouth with her "teeth as one bites a ripe fruit" (604) reminds us of the previous scene in which she is asked to bite a fruit to please Herod. Far from being an object for his pleasure, she ironically executes the request for her pleasure. The work adds to Herod's fear; for it is a parody of his action, which proves that she mimics even the means of his pleasure.

Moreover, Salomé's extreme mimicry is executed by taking the form of her way of thinking. She blames Jokanaan: "thou didst take my virginity from me" (604). Contrastively, Jokanaan previously damns Salomé: "By woman came evil into the world" (590). His belief that he can wipe out all wickedness by her death is undoubtedly based on Genesis. By mimicry of Jokanaan's justification of condemning women, which originates from the Christian creed, Salomé shifts the responsibility of her losing virginity onto the passive Jokanaan. From this viewpoint, it is concluded that Salomé's objection is just the reverse of Christianity and the patriarchal society Christianity tries to keep.

If we read *Salomé* as a struggle between Christianity and its heresy, Salomé's seven veils possibly mean the seven deadly sins, and her striptease might imply that under the seven deadly sins hides a woman. It seems to me that Salomé is designed to wear all the wickedness of this world on herself as

the prophet suggests, for Salomé's love and desire is defined as being against Christian patriarchal society.

In the patriarchal society Herod admires her feet, using such metaphors as "white doves" and "white flowers," which reveal his expectation of her innocence (599). She is expected to be "sweet" and "fairer than all the daughters of Judaea" (600), just as Syrian calls her "dove of doves" (590). When she decides to dance, however, her feet become red with blood. In his works, Wilde frequently describes silver or white feet related to innocence, meanwhile he sometimes depicts red feet associated with hedonists or Death, namely, a man of experience.<sup>6</sup> Feet are for Wilde the representations that can be directly associated with either innocence or experience.

It is not only Wilde who connects woman's feet with her identity. Beardsley draws Salomé's slippers, taken off behind her, in his work titled "The Dancer's Reward." These slippers suggest her naked feet. Another work by Beardsley, entitled "The slippers of Cinderella,"<sup>7</sup> depicts a girl wearing transparent high heels. In *Cinderella*, sisters slice off their heels causing bleeding, for the little feet fitting into the little shoes function as the heroine's identity. The little white feet that fit the prince's status are a symbol of the obedient and passive heroine who is worthy of patriarchy. Salomé's silver feet also represent innocence. The transition of the color implies the disappearance of her angelic side and appearance of her whore-side. It is why the red feet of women represent her forbidden experience. Salomé's red feet have the same connotation as "The Red Shoes" (1845) by Andersen, in terms of the heroines giving themselves up to an excessive desire. Red feet associate with fanaticism causing both pain and death in these stories.

Nevertheless, we must not conclude that innocent Salomé is false and ferocious Salomé is true, for both are latent in her even at the final stage. In the final speech she still wanders between an innocent girl who cannot understand death, and a monstrous woman who desires Jokanaan's love. We cannot categorize Salomé as an angel in the house or as a vampire out of the house. We should rather conclude that both are immanent in a woman. In spite of not comprehending what death is like, Salomé intrinsically knows

love profoundly enough to assert, “the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death” (604).

Salomé’s language activity expands into the realization of her verbalism. Her imploration for love, “Let me kiss thy mouth” (591), is transformed to a more prophetic sentence, “I will kiss thy mouth” (591). The latter diction augments the speaker’s subjectivity. When she realizes her “oath,” she speaks to Jokanaan proudly: “I said it. Did I not say it? I said it” (604). She schemes to make use of the power of Herod’s words, for she is acquainted with the powerlessness of her own in the patriarchal society. She elaborately confirms four times that Herod will give whatever she wants: “You swear it, Tetrarch?” (598) “By what will you swear, Tetrarch?” (598) “You have sworn, Tetrarch” (598). “You have sworn it, Tetrarch” (599). She plots to transform his words to empower them into a chain to bind him. Under the circumstance, we should interpret her dance as her active presentation not to be looked at but to make one look at her intention.

After the dance, she exposes her intimacy with Herod as well as her triumph over him. “You have sworn, Herod. Forget not that you have sworn at oath” (600). The form of address, “Tetrarch,” before her dance is transformed into “Herod” after it. Calling him by his first name would be a sign of intimacy and her escape from the inferior status. After Salomé materializes her desire, her verbalization and confession of her subjective view increase in exchange for Herod’s loss of his male gift.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. Transition of the Symbolic Verbalization

A chain of Salomé’s aggressions results in Herod’s negation of male symbolic verbalization. Leaving Salomé, who discovers a large number of symbols in Jokanaan, Herod, who loses the courage to stay on the terrace, flies away to the banquet hall of his governable space with his submissive Herodias. What celebrates his authority nearly smothers him:

I am choking. Pour water on my hands. Give me snow to eat.  
Loosen my mantle. Quick, quick! Loosen my mantle. Nay, but

leave it. It is my garland of roses. The flowers are like fire. They have burned my forehead. (He tears the wreath from his head and throws it on the table.) Ah! I can breathe now. (599)

Herod tears the symbol of desire, for he foresees the disastrous return of symbolization which the desire to see and possess produces: “You must not find symbols in everything you see. It makes life impossible” (599). Though he has been contented with his superiority as the ultimate voyeur and describer, a fear of symbolization results in him. It is a noteworthy change in the drama, for his restlessness further disorders the boundary between the two spheres. His retirement from symbolic verbalization occurs because Salomé exactly mimics his ways of looking for subjective images in whatever he looks at and possessing the objects. Herod says, “I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me” (604). The sentence betrays the terror of Herod who learns that a man is possibly castrated — physically in the case of Jokanaan, but mentally in the case of Herod — for not only men but also women actually possesses the right to throw a look full of desire. Seeing it with his own eyes makes him desist from looking at and describing them.

In addition, Herod lastly discloses his fear, which has been denied under any circumstances. “I begin to be afraid” (605) is in contrast to “I am afraid of no man” (593). The utterance strips his mask as a powerful ruler. Deprived of all superiorities, Herod completely changes his sense of values. When we take notice of his serious change, we admire the dramaturgy that deletes the description of the dance and Salomé’s deliberate scheme that finally subverts Herod’s monarchy.

### Conclusion

Through careful textual examination from the viewpoint of symbolic verbalizations, we arrive at the following conclusions. The deletion of the dance-description enables Salomé to liberate herself from man’s description, and protects her visual self-expression from violation by some verbal expres-

sion based on male fancy. Being in a boundary existence, Salomé does not conform to the binary discourse among the Victorians. She protests against man's invasion on the female body by mimicry and the same representation. Her speech and act draw Herod's renunciation of symbolic verbalization, which has been the synonym of male power.

This is how *Salomé* can be thought of as one of the cultural products that reflect the end of the Victorian Age; for in the real world, too, women take up their pens to verbalize their thoughts. In addition to *The Woman's World* (1887–1890) which Wilde takes part in as an editor, *The Woman's Gazette* (1881–1891), *The Woman's Herald* (1891–1893) that invented the word “New Woman,” and *The Woman's Signal* (1894–1899) illuminate women's words. It is possible to assert that Salomé's verbalization reflects the increasing number of women who try to acquire the means of description. These women, who sometimes emphasize the need for female sexual liberation, struggle to disorganize or unite the two types of womanhood that Syrian and Page distinguish.

(This is a revised version of the paper read at the 23rd General Meeting of the Oscar Wilde Society of Japan, May 12, 2001.)

#### Notes

- (1) See, for example, Bucknell, Wallen, and Dijkstra.
- (2) I quote Wilde here and subsequently from *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, and page numbers are included parenthetically in the text.
- (3) The following works also exemplify it: *Herodias* (1877) by Flaubert and *À Rebour* (1884) by Huysmans.
- (4) The expression, “The Angel in the House,” derives from a poem with the same title (1854–62) by Coventry Patmore.
- (5) For vampish heroines in the fin de siècle, see Dijkstra.
- (6) See, for example, *Complete Works* 119, 867, 1113, and 1123.
- (7) *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly* 2 (1894): 95.
- (8) “But it is also language which, as Gerard Manley Hopkins argued, permits ‘the

begetting of one's thought on paper’ and so — according to the poet — is a kind of male gift” (Gilbert 153).

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