

Misogyny in the Decadence: A Study of *Salomé*

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The writers and artists of the late nineteenth century, exploring manifestations of an anti-Christian and anti-heroic world in their works, resurrected the diabolical and awe-inspiring women of the past. Among these women was the biblical villainess who won the head of John the Baptist, the infamous Princess Salomé. Most representations of Salomé during the Victorian period are the grotesque archetype of a dark, threatening femininity, a *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*.

Writing his play, *Salomé* (1891), Oscar Wilde establishes mysterious scenes; the moon is ubiquitous — it is present in all scenes at all times and nothing escapes its celestial light. The biblical text, the source to which Wilde owes literary inspiration has no reference to the moon. We shall consider the reason why he inserted this unmentioned “moon” into his play. In Western culture, from ancient times, women have always been associated with the cycle of the moon; and the moon is identified with the nature. The cycle of the nature is compared to woman’s cycle as the moon waxes and wanes regularly. Every biologic femaleness has the sequence of circular returns beginning and ending at the same point. This centrality of woman provides her a stability of identity. She does not have to become “something” but only to be.¹ In many cultures, the moon provides us with such hidden abstruseness. Wilde’s identification of woman and the moon in his play is derived primarily from this fact, but there is other factor, that is, mythology’s identification of woman with the moon.² One may notice that Salomé and Herodias share the two aspects of cruelty as it represents their perceived notion of sinful womanhood. After Salomé does the dance of seven veils, she asks Herod for the head of Jokanaan, but the tetrarch recants on his promise

and severely refuses her request. Herod, and the other male character in the play, haunted by vivid recollections of the death of Syrian soldier, wish to see no more bloodshed on the other hand, Herodias willingly becomes a conspirator in her daughter's scheme to make Herod decapitate the prophet.³

SALOMÉ. I ask of you the head of Jokanaan.
 HEROD. No, no, I do not wish it.
 SALOMÉ. You have sworn, Herod.
 HERODIAS. Yes, you have sworn, Herod. Everybody heard you.
 You swore it before everybody.
 HEROD. Be silent! It is not to you I speak.
 HERODIAS. My daughter has done well to ask the head of
 Jokanaan.

 Do not yield, my daughter. He has sworn, he has
 sworn. (pp.600-601)⁴

This obsessive repetition of Herodias' "swore", mirrors Salomé's famous repetitive lines "kiss thy mouth". As in Wilde's play, every person is subject to the female nature, the ubiquitous celestial light illuminating the earth. Woman's perfidious lust for man's blood and head emerges. Herod orders the executioner the beheading of the prophet, helplessly "Let her be given what she asks! Of a truth she is her mother's child!" (p.603).

Mario Praz remarks on Salomé's Medusan charm.⁵ Like Hecate, Medusa is one of the surrogate submanifestations of female horrors which derived from the Great Mother. Medusa, though she was once a lovely maiden, was transformed by Minerva into a female monster with snake hair, after the goddess had witnessed her being raped. But her fearsome snaky hair is also the writhing vegetable growth of nature. Medusa who is always immersed with blood has hidden dangerous face of menstrual taboo. The monthly evidence of woman in synchronicity with the cycles of the moon, manifestly represents that woman is a proxy of nature. In many early cultures, it was believed that the look of menstruating woman can turn man to stone. Salomé stares at Jokanaan with a horrible Medusan eye. Herod and

his soldiers cannot help turning their eyes from her. As in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Salomé really appreciates the head of the prophet removed from his body as her decadent works of art.⁶ Wilde wrote this play in an age when respectable women were forbidden from turning their eyes on an object of fascination at will.⁷

Salomé's desire to possess the prophet sexually is escalated to the desire to drink and devour his body. "I love thee only. . . . I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire . . ." (p.604). Herod sees Salomé as an image of a *vagina dentata*, or toothed vagina. According to North American Indian myth, metaphorically, every female vagina has secret sharp teeth within; this is a classical symbol of Great Mother Goddess devouring male. Salomé is to capture and consume the male away. She asks for the head of Jokanaan to be brought to the banqueting-hall "in a silver charger" (p.600). Medusa-Salomé leads the male to the horrible entrance into a fleshly hell, an underworld out of which there is no escape; the snakes of her head are ready to coil around a man and to drag him into the dreadful mouth — a symbol of *vagina dentata*.⁸ Herod feels a tremor of apprehension to the tremendous daemonic power of Salomé's chthonian nature. His fear of being overpowered by the female nature mirrors that of the aesthete Wilde. The North American Indian myth of *vagina dentata* provides gruesome and direct representation of female power and male fear.⁹ The primal image is one of the *femme fatale*, the woman fatal to men.

At the end, *femme fatale* is defeated, crushed beneath the shields of the soldiers. Paglia acutely pointed out that this can be interpreted as a symbol of Salomé's loss of perceptual control.¹⁰ I consider the death of Salomé a male rebellion against avaricious mother earth. Men's genuine disgust toward the *femme fatale* can be interpreted as understandable response to the immensity of the procreative female nature. Male homosexuality may be the most valorous attempt to evade the *femme fatale* and to defeat nature.¹¹

What brought the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* into prevalence? In the Western civilization, with the advent of patriarchal societies, women were regarded as mysterious and threatening entities and were excluded as evil.

Furthermore, we cannot deny the existence of stoicism in Christianity that condemned sensual pleasures. In the middle of the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution rapidly brought on a change of social structure by which women were prompted to participate in labour. Consequently, as the women's rights movement gained momentum, absolute faith in patriarchal society began to sway. Chauvinistic idea that men are inherently superior to women both morally and socially over women still existed in the late nineteenth century,¹² ironically, while housewife's chastity was regarded as the highest virtue, a lot of brothels were doing a flourishing trade. That woman have this dichotomy in this age such as virtuous and evil, sacred and secular, is an interesting paradox worth noting. However, under the above social circumstances during the *fin-de-siècle*, such a dichotomy instigated hatred and fear for women in men's imagination. The more hatred and fear men have for women, the more strongly and unresistingly men are attracted by women. The unreasonable secret of decadent beauty of *femme fatale* exists, it seems to me, in this paradoxical psychology.

It is my assertion that Wilde, the idealistic young poet perceives *Salomé* as the incarnation of female evil, likening her to a disgusting object of chthonian nature. A Great Mother Goddess like *Salomé* is akin to Medusa who ruins and devours men and makes them exhaust their energy, or a *vagina dentata* incarnate — she acts boldly and unabashedly in the play, and eventually gains the head of the prophet Jokanaan, but is crushed to death beneath the soldiers' shields. I would like to interpret *Salomé*'s rather gruesome death as Wilde's attempt to banish chthonian feminine darkness. Aestheticism is based on the exclusion of nature. In *The Decay of Lying* (1889) Wilde denies the superiority of nature, "Nature is no great mother who has borne us" (p.1086). It takes some years indeed for Wilde to change his view of nature, but his view does change. Like Herod and Jokanaan alike, it seems Wilde too eventually submits to feminine will. In his *De Profundis* (1897) he emphatically proclaims his surrender and defeat: "... the Earth is mother to us all" (p.1057).

Notes

- (1) Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p.563.
- (2) Kuryluk repetitively emphasizes it; there cannot be any doubt that Wilde, in his creating *Salomé*, must have had some recollection of lunar divinities like Hecate or Kali. See Ewa Kuryluk, *Salomé and Judas in the Cave of Sex* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1987), p. 214.
- (3) In the Bible, the name of the schemer who desires to decapitate the prophet's head is specified "Herodias". The destructive confusion of the name of *Salomé* with her mother, Herodias came from the medieval history and this mixing had continued for centuries later; Heine and Mallarme describe *Salomé* as Herodia in their works even when they are clearly alluding to *Salomé* herself.
- (4) All citations from Oscar Wilde are taken from *The Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Ed. Merlin Holland, centenary edition (Glasgow: HarperCollins 1999).
- (5) See Mario Praz, "Byzantium", *The Romantic Agony* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1956), pp.289-389.
- (6) In Beardsley's illustration dedicated to *Salomé, The Climax*, male decapitated and female seem Medusan mirror-image.
- (7) Paglia, *op.cit.*, p.563
- (8) Kuryluk, *op.cit.*, p.232.
- (9) The *vagina dentata* is a part of the Romantic revival of pagan myth.
- (10) Paglia, *op.cit.*, p.565.
- (11) *ibid.*, pp.14-15
- (12) Cf. Bram Dijkstra. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.3-15.