Hysterics and Prophets:  
Gender Fluidity and Sexual Transgression in Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*  

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Introduction

While living in Paris during the winter of 1891, Oscar Wilde composed the symbolist drama *Salomé*. Wilde wrote the drama in French yet planned to premiere the production of the play in London, June 1892 with the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Salomé. However, the play never premiered and was censured during rehearsals. John Donohue has written about the censoring of the production of Salomé and describes how the Lord Chamberlain’s Examiner of Plays, E.F.S Pigott, denied the play a license on the grounds that it portrayed biblical characters, a reason that most probably only served as an excuse to stop the production (Donohue 118). Donohue further argues that Pigott’s decision to censor the play was to be expected, because though he might be officially relying on Henry VIII’s somewhat outdated prohibition of mystery plays, his genuine issue was a concern for the plays violent and sexual content (118). Pigott was both concerned about, and interested in, the explicit sexuality depicted in the play, a contradictory interest that he appeared to share with the general public. He described the play to a friend as “half Biblical, half pornographic” and added that he would send his friend a copy for his “private edification and amusement” (118). The polemic combination of concern for and interest towards, sexuality and moral deprivation could arguably have benefitted the play commercially, yet resulted in its prohibition.

The play finally premiered for the first time in France 1896, during which Wilde himself was serving a two year sentence of imprisonment and hard labor for “gross indecency”, as a result of having had homosexual relations. Even though a production of Salomé never premiered in England during the years after Wilde’s death in 1900, the play was a considerable commercial success on the continent and was translated into Swedish,
German and Spanish amongst other languages. In 1905 Richard Strauss adapted the German translation of the play into an opera, an event which can be seen as the height of the play’s success on the continent (Donohue 119).

The play Salomé tells the story from the Gospel of Matthew about King Herod’s beheading of John the Baptist and focuses on Herod’s step daughter Salomé who, after dancing for the King, could ask for anything she wanted and asked for the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter. This thesis’ aim is to place Wilde’s Salomé in a historical and cultural context and through that context analyze the construction of gender, sexuality and madness in the play.

John Stokes explains that Wilde’s Salomé was only one of many representations of this particular biblical story during the 19th century, and further argues that the story and the character Salomé held considerable interest amongst western artists due to a fascination for the theme of the Orient, exotic decadence, and otherness, components which Salomé fully embodied (Stokes). Her sensual otherness, beauty and the element of danger associated with her persona, established her as a true femme fatale, who is per definition a destructive and erotized young woman with dangerous sexual appetites. Stokes explains that Oscar Wilde was inspired to write about this story due to its fashionable status in contemporary artistic circles and more specifically amongst the French Symbolists, with whom he associated during his stay in Paris in the 1890s. Writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé and painter Gustave Moreau, have all used Salomé as a subject and in addition, illustrator Aubrey Beardsley made illustrations for Wilde’s play (Stokes). Salomé appears to have had a particular esthetic relevance for the symbolist artists, who primarily sought to explore decadence and depravity in their art.
However, to place Salomé within a specific literary category is complex, since it simultaneously both prescribes to and rejects, those literary traditions that the story is usually associated with. Stokes argues that Wilde’s drama draws on the Symbolist artistic tradition, due to Wilde’s use of a poetic and sensual language and imagery. However, he also suggests that the play can be associated with the Decadent literary tradition as a part of the Aesthetic artistic movement during the late 19th century. For Stokes, Wilde was conscious about the possibility of the play being labeled as decadent; partially because of the story’s inherent themes and partially because of Beardsley’s illustrations, yet that Wilde himself was ambivalent toward the implications of such a definition. According to Stokes, Wilde’s saw the importance of decadence. “He may have even welcomed the appellation because, like the critic Arthur Symons, he was able to view decadence not simply as a pleasurable, if risky, way of life, but as a necessary precondition for a cultural renaissance” (Stokes). So regardless of whether Wilde intended the play as a contribution to the Decadent literary tradition, he was conscious of the necessity of such a literary movement, and of such plays as Salomé, which he viewed as a reaction towards the puritanism of the Victorian cultural discourse.

This combination of symbolism and decadence allows Salomé to claim a unique position in British theatrical history. Furthermore Stokes discusses the role of Salomé as a *femme fatale*, identifies the misogynic demonizing of female characters as a common practice in the 19th century, and argues that it could be a reaction towards an increasing demand for women’s liberation and independence: “fatal women proliferated in plays, poems and paintings, a misogynistic tendency that can also be seen as a fearful
tribute to the increasing visibility of female independence” (Stokes). Stokes refrains from further investigating Wilde’s role in relation to these misogynic tendencies.

Regenia Gagnier analyzes *Salomé* in relation to Oscar Wilde’s life and draws parallels between the transgressional nature of Salomé’s sexual expression in the play and Oscar Wilde’s homosexuality. Gagnier argues that the text is an expression of sex for sex’s sake as an extension of the idea art for art’s sake, which was central to the Aesthetic movement. Gagnier further argues that the destructiveness in Salomé and Iokanaan’s relationship reflects the destructiveness of an illicit homosexual relationship, where both have the power to destroy the life of the other (173).

In this thesis the representation of sexuality and gender in *Salomé* will be analyzed through its particular historicized discourse, relating its thematic development to the Victorian fascination for sexual transgression and the Aesthetic narrative of the fallen woman. It will argue that Wilde both operates within, and challenges the dominating cultural discourse of the 19th century. This thesis will draw on a New Historicist perspective to further understand Wilde’s representation of gender and sexuality in *Salomé*. New Historicism argues that every text belongs to a specific historicized discourse and that to understand the meaning of a text it must be read in relation to this particular discourse. Peter Barry further describes New Historicism as accepting “Derrida’s view that there is nothing outside the text” (Barry 169) and that a text is “thrice possessed” (169) firstly by ideology, secondly by the discourse of the time and thirdly by the discourse of the reader.

Furthermore, Petra Dierkes-Thrun points out that Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* has up to this point, only been examined in relation to the writer’s artistic association with
French Symbolist and Decadent drama and their use for the story (2). Dierkes-Thrun however, focuses on how the character Salomé has influenced the modernist artists, and argues that Wilde’s authorship and revealed homosexuality was crucial in the formation of the modernist aesthetic of the first decades of the 20th century and that Salomé, by having its roots in the Symbolist and Decadent literary tradition, forms part of the evolution of radical thought from that time. She further argues that Salomé can be mentioned in the same aesthetic tradition as Nietzsche and later both Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault with regards to their theories on transgression (2) and describes Salomé as a “iconic rebel” who rather than obeying the rules of religion “devotes herself to a secular gospel of erotic and aesthetic ecstasy” (3). Salomé’s act of rebellion against a religious and patriarchal dominance can, according to Dierkes-Thrun, serve as a forerunner for the modernist rejection of grand narratives and the rise of individualism and transgression within art and philosophical thought in the beginning of the 20th century (3).

The idea of Salomé as a sexually and aesthetically transgressive heroine rejects the misogynist and demonizing label of her as the femme fatale, a label that has been a defining feature in almost all representations of Salomé, particularly during the 19th century. Helen Davies discusses Wilde’s complex representation of the female subject as a sexually transgressive subject; she focuses on the construction of gender through language in Salomé from a queer theoretical perspective, using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. Furthermore, Davies argues that Wilde challenges this gendered discourse by giving Salomé control of the language in her description of the prophet Iokanaan, where she uses the same feminized language to describe him as was
used previously to describe her (61.) Thus she opens up the possibility of challenging the so far stable categories of gender and provides an alternative where identification and gender are more fluid and mostly constructed through language (64).

This thesis will further elaborate Davies analysis of Wilde’s construction of gender and sexuality in Salomé and will analyze the characters Salomé, Iokanaan and Herod according to the idea based on queer theory, that both gender and sex are not stable binary dichotomized categories such as male and female, but rather fluid entities that are constantly under negotiation through language. This thesis will show that the destabilization and transgression of gender categories is punished in the play in order to maintain a hegemonic patriarchal power structure.

Finally, in relation to the construction of gender and the Decadent narrative of the fallen woman this thesis will analyze the construction of madness in Salomé in relation to the Victorian idea of feminized madness in the form of hysteria. The thesis will show that Wilde’s use of mystical and religious imagery in his portrayal of hysterical madness further accentuates the feminine transgressive aspect of madness which can be detected in both the male and female characters.

*Salomé in Discourse – Victorian Sexualities and Aesthetic Perversion*

Oscar Wilde wrote the play Salomé in the late 19th century, during the rule of Queen Victoria. The Victorian era has been known in history as the era of sexual repression and of strict rules about decency and sexual conduct. Historically the Victorians are regarded as prudes who repressed and rejected anything sexual. However, some would argue that
the sexuality of the Victorians is more complex than that. According to French philosopher Michel Foucault there was a particular interest in sexuality during the 19th century and he argues that the Victorians were responsible for the categorization of sexuality and formulation of sexual discourse that we still recognize in today’s discussion about sex. This section will examine how the sexual discourse of the Victorians and the 19th century’s obsession with sexual transgression is reflected in Oscar Wilde’s representation of Salomé and his depiction of sexuality and perversion in the play. To further understand the depiction of sexuality in Salomé it will be analyzed in regards to the dominant cultural and sexual discourse of the 19th century.

The caricature-like image of the Victorian upper class as a sexless bourgeoisie is not entirely representative of the views on sexuality of that time. Holly Fourneaux discusses the myth of Victorian sexualities and argues that the construction of our idea about Victorians as sexually repressed comes from the beginning of the 20th century, when authors such as Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey, who were both anti-Victorian, took issue with what they regarded as the repressive sexual and cultural politics of the previous century (Fourneaux). Yet even though the conception of the Victorians as sexually repressed might be simplified, the era did deal with many sexual double-standards, especially concerning female sexuality. Victorians perceived female sexuality as dichotomized, dividing women into two categories, one being a married woman who experienced no sexual desires whatsoever, the other being a woman who experienced sexual desires that she could not control and thus leading to her becoming a fallen woman (Fourneaux).
An ideal of the ‘angel in the house’, though, was counter-balanced by a cultural fascination with her opposite, the ‘fallen woman’ (a broad definition encompassing any women who had, or appeared to have, sexual experience outside of marriage, including adulteresses and prostitutes) who appears in so much Victorian literature and art. (Fourneaux)

It is possible to see the cultural interest in the idea of the fallen woman and the scientific interest in sexual pathology in Victorian society as two aspects of the same social and cultural discourse, a discourse that was fascinated by otherness.

Additionally, it is possible to speak of two dominant positions in the discourse of sexual politics during the Victorian period, where one position served to enforce and define the other as its opposite. One position was the displacement of heterosexual monogamous sexuality into the private sphere, which resulted in it becoming almost invisible in public society. The other position was the scientific interest in pathological sexuality, which in turn received a lot of public attention, culturally and scientifically. The scientific interest in the sexual deviant resulted in a complex and diverse categorization of transgressive sexualities. Michel Foucault argues that the “Nineteenth-century “bourgeois” society … was a society of blatant and fragmented perversion” (Foucault 47) and that sexuality was completely overtaken by discourse and institutions that while trying to construct a clear definition of sexual normality, provoked a “perverse outbreak and a long pathology of sexual instinct” (47). While sexual normality was displaced into the private sphere all other forms of sexual expression became a medical issue that was to be studied and understood; “… what came under scrutiny was the sexuality of children, mad men and women, and criminals; the sensuality
of those who did not like the opposite sex: reveries, obsession, petty manias, or great
transports of rage” (Foucault 38). A person’s sexuality thus became a dominating feature
of a person’s identity and all his/her actions were in turn determined by this sexuality. As
Fourneaux argues, this interest in sexual deviancy and specifically, that of the female
sexual deviant or “the fallen woman” was reflected in both art and literature during the
Victorian period (Fourneaux).

Subsequently, this fascination for the fallen woman within the Victorian
artistic community was primarily to be found within the Aesthetic Movement. Carolyn
Burdett describes this artistic movement as not being a clearly defined artistic group, yet
one that shared a set of influences that dealt with themes such as sensuality, mysticism,
v Violence, and transgression. The Aesthetic tradition was foremost anti-establishment in
the sense that they rejected the didacticism that generally dominated Victorian art. In
Victorian society art was supposed to function as a moral compass, which provided a
moral lesson and showed right conduct (Burdett). For the Aesthetic movement however,
morality and objectivity was replaced by a focus on subjectivity and sensation. The
rejection of objectivity and the focus on individuality are important aspects of the
Aesthetic movement’s fascination for deviancy. As Burdett notes “Themes of perverse
sexuality or cruelty and violence shockingly dismantled what many Victorians felt were
necessary or even natural lines drawn between aesthetic beauty and repellent or ‘ugly’
morality” (Burdett). Oscar Wilde is regarded as an affiliate of the Aesthetic Movement
and Salomé’s subject matter corresponds with the ideals of the Movement, dealing as it
does with themes such as sensuality, religion and particularly decadence. Salomé also
challenges the Victorian conception of aesthetic beauty as being the binary opposite to
ugly morality by depicting Salomé as young, beautiful, both innocent and morally depraved. The Aesthetic Movement evolved into an artistic tradition called the Decadent Movement. Burdett argues that the two artistic movements can be seen as interchangeable, dealing with subjects such as decay or depravity which were often related to transgressive sexuality and madness (Burdett).

According to Burdett, Oscar Wilde was concerned with the Aesthetic and Decadent idea of art for art’s sake, which rejected the Victorian idea of utility and morality in art (Burdett). However, his rejection of the established artistic preferences of the time does not mean that Wilde was disconnected to the historicized discourse of the 19th century in his writing, but rather showed, through choosing Salomé as a subject, that he was aware of decadence and aesthetic influence in art. His rejection of the Victorian morality in relation to art does not place Salomé outside Victorian discourse, but rather places the play in a sexual and artistic dialectic, where several forces operated simultaneously, negotiating the framework of artistic expression. Salomé fits in the artistic counter-culture which reacted towards the repressive limitations of artistic expression in Victorian England. There is a connection between the Aesthetic and Decadent Movement’s fascination with depravity and individuality and the general scientific inclination to explore and categorize transgressive sexuality during the 19th century, sharing a will to explore and define difference and otherness. Therefore the thematic concerns in Oscar Wilde’s Salomé must be understood in relation to the fascination for perversion within the Victorian sexual discourse, both from a scientific and artistic perspective. However, in a modern reading of the play, the representation of gender and sexuality in Salomé can be understood as complex and subversive and even
though it thematically fits within the esthetic preference of the time, Wilde is able to challenge the simplistic and objectifying trope of the fallen woman.

**Re-signifying Gender – Construction of Gender in *Salomé***

In many of the other 19th century representations of Salomé, she is usually depicted as a *femme fatale*, an epitomized fallen woman who manipulates men by using her femininity and sexuality. This representation of the over-erotized female subject functions well in accordance with the idea of sexually perverted female of the 19th century who is unavoidably defined by her gender and by her sexuality. Whereas many of the other 19th century representations of the character fail to depict Salomé beyond the objectifying cliché of a man-eater, Oscar Wilde’s allows his Salomé to transgress the limitations of gendered discourse of his time and provides a multifaceted and transgressive representation of gender and sex in his play. Dierkes-Thrun argues that Wilde makes a “radical departure from his predecessors” (2) and tells a story that challenges the problematic implications of the theme, such as Otherness, misogyny and Orientalism: “Wilde’s *Salomé* defines a complex cultural tradition of ideas about aesthetics, eroticism, and transgression, a tradition that forms an important undercurrent in the development of twentieth-century modernism and modernist aesthetics” (2).

Furthermore, Helen Davies argues that the gender performance enacted in *Salomé* challenges traditional gender roles by focusing on Salomé’s appropriation of a feminized language to describe the male character Iokanaan. Davies approaches gendering in *Salomé* by using Judith Butler’s theory on gender performativity. Gender as performative means that both sex and gender are socially constructed categories that are
reproduced in society within a cultural discourse until they reach a status of indisputable truths (Davies 57). This section will analyze the depiction of gender and sex in Salomé in relation to Butler’s theory about gender and sex as socially constructed categories in light of Davies analysis. The focus will be on how Salomé’s appropriation of a masculinized language in her description of the prophet Iokanaan destabilizes established gender categories and how the play, through the characters Salomé, Iokanaan and Herod challenges binary gender representation. Furthermore, as an elaboration of Davies analysis, this section will look at the consequences of Salomé’s gendered transgression and the destabilization of gender roles in relation to the dominant patriarchal hegemony of King Herod’s court.

In her theory on sex and gender as socially constructed categories, Butler argues that the feminist criticism that made the distinction between sex as biological and gender as socially constructed opened the possibility of seeing gender as not being determined by biological sex. “The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.” (Butler 7) Butler argues that the distinction between sex and gender results in a “radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and the culturally constructed gender” (7). Consequently, the deconstruction of the naturalized correlation between gender and sex provides a possibility for the categories “men” and “women” to not be determined by their sexed bodies. Butler asks the question of why there is a distinction between what we understand as sex and what we understand as gender. She challenges the biological determination of sex by understanding it through the scientific discourse that established it as fact. “Are the ostensibly natural facts about sex discursively produced by various
scientific discourses in service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender…” (7) However, Butler contends the fact that biological sex being culturally constructed does not imply that gender and sex can be constructed or deconstructed freely within discourse, but that they are determined and marked in accordance to a “hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (9). Sex is, according to Butler, constructed to be perceived as “prediscursive”, that is as something essentially true and stable. There is no sex prior to discourse, rather it is constructed and reproduced discursively yet in the disguise of essential truth. Butler sees sex as the primary marker of the subject, however in a phallocentric linguistic discourse that builds on a hegemonic binary dichotomy of sexual categories the woman becomes the eternal non-subject, or the other (9).

Subsequently, Butler’s theory about the possible distinction and separation between body and identity can be applied to Salomé and Oscar Wilde has provided an alternative to the obligatory heteronormative gender identification in his depiction of Iokanaan and Salomé. However, Salomé has, according to Davies, been read as a masculine character in previous analyses of gender and sexual representation in the play. She has been understood as a stand-in for the male homosexual subject. This approach is usually based upon the idea that Oscar Wilde used Salomé, the sexually transgressive subject, as a vessel that could serve as an embodiment of his own illicit homosexual desires. Davies explains that Gail Finney, who argues that Salomé functions as symbolically male and therefore represents homosexual desires, insists on fixing the gender fluidity of the play’s character “within a finite authorial agenda” (63).
The argument that Salomé is a symbolic representation of Oscar Wilde and his homosexual desires reduces Salomé to the carrier of male desire and, rather than allowing her subjectivity, cements her position as the female other.

Salomé uses a masculinized position when describing Iokanaan by describing him in a similar ways that have previously been used to describe her: “The transgression of the boundaries between feminine and masculine subjectivity is continued by Salomé’s profuse praise of Iokanaan’s physical attractions” (Davies 64). Salomé transgresses the boundaries between feminine and masculine when she approaches Iokanaan. However, Davies refrains from elaborating on the consequences of Salomé’s transgression. When Salomé appropriates a masculinized position, she is still perceived and treated as a woman in King Herod’s court, and thus her transgression is soon punished in order to maintain the patriarchal dominance. Salomé’s transgression is unstable and fragile and she is constantly pushed back to a feminine and subordinate position by the male characters. The destabilization of gender representation makes Salomé dangerous; a threat to the compulsory order of patriarchal dominance, thus her transgression cannot go unpunished.

The play begins with two men at King Herod’s court discussing the similar chaste and morbid beauty of Salomé and the moon.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN: How beautiful is the Princess Salomé tonight!

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.
THE YOUNG SYRIAN: She has a strange look. 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. You would fancy she was dancing. (Wilde 135)

In this dialogue, the Page’s description of the moon and the young Syrian’s description of Salomé can be read as interchangeable, both representing an image of morbid femininity. Davies explains that the moon is an “archetypical feminine image” and its description in relation to Salomé, positions her as a woman in a gendered discourse. Furthermore, the moon and Salomé are described as deathlike and pale “a woman rising from the tomb”, thereby introducing a clear element of danger and strangeness in the representation. Davies argues that the reference to death places Salomé as “the female other in a masculine discourse (61)”. However, when Salomé meets Iokanaan, Davies points to several similarities in her description of him and the Page and the Syrians description of her. Salomé challenges the traditional gender representations by claiming right of articulation and by describing Iokanaan using traditionally female signifiers, “Salomé’s articulation of desire thus feminizes the prophet, reappropriating their respective gender roles using a mythical trope of female sexuality” (63). Iokanaan does not only possess a feminized beauty but is also described as being chaste, just like her.

SAalomé: I am sure he is chaste as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver. (Wilde 141)

Salomé appropriates the feminized language to describe him, comparing him to the moon as a way to accentuate his chastity and also his femininity. Salomé describes the moon as a goddess:
SALOMÉ: 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 other goddesses? (138)

The moon symbolizes feminized otherness and it becomes a shared point of identification for Iokanaan and Salomé, a pale virgin that is mirroring the similarities between the characters.

Consequently, Salomé assimilates the language that is used to describe her in order to describe Iokanaan which. According to Davies, this challenges the dichotomy of male subject and female other. Yet this act can be regarded not only as a destabilization of gender roles but also as a reformulation of the production of meaning. This suggests that when Salomé claims agency in the production of meaning by assimilating a traditional masculine position she does not claim the position of the male subject, as previous research argues, but rather challenges the phallocentric linguistic discourse that builds on a binary construction of male as subject and female as the other. She becomes a transgressive agent who affects the production of meaning within her cultural discourse. Butler explains that gender and sex are always perceived within a cultural discourse and that there is no subject that can “… access a sexuality that is in some sense “outside,” “before,” or “after” power itself” (29). Furthermore, she argues that power covers both prohibitive and the productive aspect of the construction of meaning. However, this production of meaning is not stable, but shifts and thereby the limitations of meaning can be expanded and challenged. “The productions swerve from their original purposes and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of ‘subjects’ that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries
of what is, in fact culturally intelligible” (29). In regards to this it is possible to see Salomé as exceeding or expanding the boundaries of a normative gender representation when she describes Iokanaan, as both she and he are shifting the rules within the binary gender categories and transgressing the limitations of what is perceived as masculine and feminine within a phallocentric hegemony.

Additionally, there is a destabilization of gender roles in regards to all the characters in the play and a representation of gender and sexuality that is, according to Davies, “consistently queered” (64). There is a disruption in the traditional order of gender representation where masculinity is represented by the male characters and femininity is represented by the female characters. The fluidity of gender is not limited to the case of Salomé and Iokanaan. Herod is a superstitious and paranoid king who sees omens and signs wherever he goes; subsequently Davies argues that Herod is a feminized character, describing him as being “quasi-hysterical, vulnerable and consequently occupying a typically feminine subject position” (64).

However, as an elaboration of Davies argument, it is possible to detect a difference in how female characters that transgress the gender norm and occupy a masculinized position are received, in relation to the male characters that occupy a feminized position, due to the phallocentric order where women are subordinate to men. In a scenario where a male character becomes feminized, as in the case of Herod, he does not lose his hegemonic position as a male. Yet when Salomé claims a masculine position she is subsequently punished by the patriarchal power structure. As mentioned earlier, punishment plays an important part in the preservation of a specific hegemonic power structure, thus Salomé can destabilize the gender roles but her attempt to challenge the
patriarchal power structure is temporary and results in her being punished. The gender roles become fluid due to Salomé’s appropriation of a masculinized language as Davies argues. Yet it is possible to see that the gender fluidity primarily benefits the male characters, who in their dominant position, are allowed to transgress the boundaries more freely, as in the case of Herod. The male characters also try to reduce Salomé to a sexualized object in relation to her attempts to gain agency as a subject and when she challenges the patriarchal domination of Iokanaan and Herod she ends up losing her life.

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde seems to challenge the idea of Salomé as a character that prescribes to the clichéd narrative of the fallen woman by allowing her the possibility to reformulate the traditional mode of representation in relation to gender. Wilde’s Salomé struggles for agency in a masculinized discourse and challenges its dominance on every level by appropriating a right of interpretation and is because of this punished by the dominant patriarchal power structure.

**The Dance of Salomé - Sexual Transgression and Gendered Madness in *Salomé***

One of the more important themes of *Salomé* is that of madness in the form of sexual transgression. As established in the first section, the narrative of gendered madness and sexual deprivation was an important aspect of the Aesthetic and Decadent artistic movements of the late 19th century. The Victorians appeared to show a particular interest in the connections between madness and sexuality on both an artistic and scientific level. What in literature was called *femme fatale* was for Psychoanalysts called hysteric, both being transgressive and thoroughly sexualized. Oscar Wilde can appear to prescribe to
the misogynic representation of the young female subject in his portrayal of Salomé, but as Petra Dierkes-Thrun argues, he also challenges and departs from the themes that normally figure in the other interpretations of the story (2). In light of the interpretation of Wilde’s representation of gender as complex and fluid which was established in section two, this section will analyze madness in the characters Herod, Salomé and Iokanaan in relation to the 19th century concept of hysteria. To further understand the hysterical madness in Salomé this section will also analyze Wilde’s portrayal of religious and mystic imagery as being closely linked to sexuality and madness.

Cristina Mazzoni describes hysteria as a gendered “disease”, placing disease within quotation marks because she argues that hysteria is both “more and less than a disease”. She describes the ailment as “hovering between body and spirit/mind”, implying that the condition is perceived as being connected to both the biological and the mental disposition of womanhood (Mazzoni 2). Even though hysteria was traditionally perceived as predominantly affecting women, the definitions of the ailment expanded due to the research of Jean-Martin Charcot, the famous theorist on hysteria. According to Elaine Showalter, Charcot elaborated the studies on hysteria and showed that it could also occur in men. Yet she further points out that regardless of the inclusion of males, hysteria remained a “symbolically female malady” (Showalter 148). In regards to the work of Charcot, which showed that hysteria could also affect men yet that it was a feminized condition, this can be related to the interpretation of Herod as a male hysteric and of Salomé as a female hysteric. In a way the two characters are a double representation of the neurosis of feminized subjects. Charcot is most famously known for his lectures on hysteria in the Salpêtrière in Paris; it was there that he provoked a hysterical seizure
through hypnosis. Charcot also identified similarities between that which in the 19th century’s scientific discourse was understood as hysteria and what in the pre-enlightenment society been recognized as divine or demoniac possession, thus showing that sexual and mystical hysteria are the same condition interpreted through different perspectives. According to Mazzoni there is no clear distinction between sexual gendered madness and religious or mystical madness, as they are frequently related to each other and sometimes portrayed as the same thing (5). She further argues that both sexual and mystical hysteria are considered to be feminized conditions. Mazzoni points out that this is apparent in the Decadent literature of the 19th century.

For the pronounced ambivalence with respect to the erotic, to the body as pleasure seeking and pleasure giving, which defines the language of and about hysteria, has traditionally been seen a colluding with the nuptial metaphors of much (especially feminine) mystical discourse. This collusion is particularly clear in the literature of “decadence,” with its frequent and unmistakable mixture of religion and sensuality. (Mazzoni 5)

In regards to the different representations of madness in Victorian discourse, the representation of madness in Salomé shows a complex intermingling of different types of madness. The expressions of madness vary, from Iokanaan’s prophetic and divine madness to the hysterical and sexualized madness of Salomé and Herod. Mazzoni argues that in a Christian discourse it has always been difficult to distinguish the evil madness from the good: “The differences between negative forms of madness and the always-desirable divine ecstasy are deceptively subtle, so that it is only with much difficulty that the Christians can learn to distinguish the two” (Mazzoni 10). Similarly Wilde provides
an ambiguous representation of madness where Iokanaan’s prophetic ravings are equally possessed and deranged as Salomé’s compulsory and diabolic desire and Herod’s neurotic hysteria.

As previously established, the interplay between sexuality, madness and religion is an overarching theme in *Salomé*, and even though Wilde uses plenty of Christian imagery in the play’s narrative there are certain elements that relate more to a Classic Greek representation of mystical madness and transgression. The story of King Herod and John the Baptist might be a Biblical story, yet in Wilde’s adaptation the story shares a particular resemblance with the Greek tragedies such as Sophocles *Oedipus the King* or Euripides *Bacchae*, both of which dealing with the combined theme of religion, madness and sexuality. John Stokes comments that Wilde was acquainted with Classical texts. “As an experienced scholar, Wilde knew his way around the Classical and Biblical texts” (Stokes). In *Salomé* Wilde portrays the dialectic of Christianity and Classical mythology and incorporates elements from both in his depiction of mystic madness and sexual transgression. Wilde constructs a scenario where madness and sexual transgression are interchangeable with mysticism; madness becomes the means through which the characters transgress the boundaries of normality and simultaneously also the divine punishment for this transgression. The interchangeable relations of religion, madness and sexual transgression in *Salomé* can be further understood in relation to the Greek concept of hubris, a condition which according to Helen Morales features in many Greek myths and tragedies (44). Hubris is when humans or other mortals transgress the boundaries that separate mortals from deities and therefore insult or dishonor the gods. To transgress these limitations usually has devastating consequences for the mortals
The theme of hubris can be seen as the driving force of the narrative in *Salomé*. Salomé, when approaching the prophet Iokanaan, displays a form of hubris, just as Herod does by acting on his incestuous feelings towards his step-daughter. Both are displaying a hysterical lack of control over themselves which eventually leads to their inevitable decline and fall. In Salomé hysteria can thus be understood as both the expression and consequence of hubris.

Furthermore, the depiction of sexuality in Salomé becomes particularly interesting when read with regard to a Classical, or primarily Greek, conception of femininity and sexuality. The moon is a symbolic representation of Salomé and Iokanaan, whose primary traits are chastity and femininity, but as a result of Salomé’s sexual awakening the moon also becomes a symbol for sensuousness.

HEROD: The moon has a strange look tonight… She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too. She is quite naked. (Wilde 145)

Salomé can thus be seen as an embodiment of the Classic female sexuality, a contradictory reconciliation of virginity and sensuousness combined in one figure. Monica S. Cyrino writes about the duality of femininity in Greek representation. “In a classical Greek conception, the idea of the feminine is an enigmatic “double sign,” a constant and not always successful attempt at reconciling these categories; the female image is often used by the ancient Greek authors to represent the world of ambiguity and conflict” (236). Herod regards the moon as a sensuous yet mad goddess and the transformation of Salomé from chaste to sexual is also her transformation into what is understood as a madwoman.
Moreover, Iokanaan is the character who provokes the hysterical outbreak amongst the other characters and he is depicted as a terrible yet seductive prophet who can be understood as a Dionysian figure rather than a saint. In her introduction to *Salomé* Anne Varty describes the prophecies of Iokanaan as a “chthonic force, a disruptive Dionysian power from his cistern-prison beneath the earth” (x) and the idea of Iokanaan as a Dionysian figure is not farfetched, both in relation to the ambiguity of his gender representation and in relation to the madness and sexual transgression that he provokes. In relation to Varty’s definition of Iokanaan as Dionysian, Helen Davies claims that “the chthonic dimensions of the prophecies is represented as feminized” (62), thus arguing that the Dionysian aspect of Iokanaan positions him as a feminized character. Salomé’s description of Iokanaan also connotes to a Dionysian figure:

SALOMÉ: “It is his eyes above all that are terrible…They are like black lakes troubled by the fantastic moon” (141).

SALOMÉ: “Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine tree of Edom… (143)

Dionysus, the Greek god of ecstasy and intoxication is traditionally depicted as having dark eyes and surrounds himself with vines and grapes, as symbols of intoxication (Morales 42). In this sense Iokanaan represents a Christian prophet, who punishes the sinful pagans while himself appearing in the form of a pagan deity.

Furthermore, the dance of the seven veils can be understood as the culmination of the cultic Dionysian imagery in *Salomé* and also the culmination of hysterical madness. The dance is the act which leads up to Salomé asking for Iokanaan’s head on a silver platter. Herod begs Salomé to dance for him, and thereby gives in to his
transgressive and incestuous desire for his step-daughter and Salomé in turn engages in this desire by accepting his offer. The dance is also a way for Salomé to engage her sexual desires for Iokanaan, for by dancing for Herod she may ask for anything she wants (Wilde 153). It appears as if Salomé’s wish to decapitate Iokanaan is partially due to his rejection of her and partially because she regards it as a way to consume him and thereby get what she desires.

SALOMÉ: Thou didst reject me. Thou didst speak evil words against me… I still live but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me… I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; neither wine nor fruits can appease my desire. (Wilde 160)

Salomé is like a Maenadic figure, the madwomen that according to Greek myth are devoted to the worship of Dionysus. Scott Scullion describes the maenads as mythological “women who dance their way into an ecstatic frenzy for the god Dionysus; in their frenzy they rip apart and eat animals raw, and if attacked by men … can retaliate with overwhelming violence” (Scullion 1). The maenad is a mythological figure that embodies feminized madness, a madness that like hysteria has both religious and sexual dimensions. The Maenadic dance epitomizes Salomé’s sensuality and also her hysterical madness.

In relation to the Victorian construction idea of hysteria, the dance of the seven veils, as a culmination of the mystical and sexual madness, can also be compared to symptoms and treatments of hysteria during the 19th century. According to Mazzoni, Charcot argued that the convulsions of the hysterical patient could be compared to the
dancing processions amongst nuns in convents during the Renaissance. Charcot further argued that the convulsion or dance were both the symptom and the cure for the ailment.

…the dancing processions of Saint Vius and Saint Guy, those forms of chorea or mass hysteria or both which developed and spread through Europe during the Renaissance and which demonstrated how dance (identified by Charcot with convulsions) can be at once illness and treatment, organic affect and the intervention of the divine, just as the Convulsionaries’ body movement were both symptom and cure. (Mazzoni 13)

Thus Salomé’s dance, if read as a sexual convulsion or religious expression, can be seen as both the ailment and the cure for her hysteria, as it is the point where her transgressive desire can be channeled through her body and become unveiled.

The madness in Salomé seems to derive from both mystical and sexual transgression; however the two should not be regarded as separate entities, but rather as entangled and deeply implicated in one another, functioning as an equally paradoxical reconciliation of the two opposites of virginity and sensuousness. Furthermore, the representation of madness appears to be thoroughly gendered, where transgression of the characters result in a hysterical feminized frenzy.

**Conclusion**

The thematic and symbolic potency of Salomé makes an analysis of the play a complex process. There are a myriad of themes and cultural or historical references that Oscar Wilde has included in his interpretation of this Biblical story. This thesis has provided a reading of Salomé where religious motives are understood in relation to a transgressive
representation of gender and sexual madness. By choosing the story of Salomé Oscar Wilde engaged in an artistic counterculture that challenged the artistic establishment of the late 19th century. The character Salomé was enormously popular at the time within an artistic counter culture that rejected the Victorian idea of art serving as a moral compass in society. This was because Salomé was regarded as the incarnation of the fallen woman, a character that through lack of sexual control loses her morality and becomes depraved.

The Aesthetic Movement and the Decadent Movement did not reject morality as a theme, but rather rejected the idea of didacticism, meaning that they wanted to explore moral depravity and the loss of morality instead of depicting only positive representations that were supposed to instruct people how to behave. Salomé thus became a character that embodied the transgressive ideals of the Aesthetic and Decadent Movements. Even though the artistic establishment in the 19th century refused to depict immoral subjects there was a general fascination for depravity in both scientific and cultural discourses of the time. The scientific interest in depravity, as a part of the study of sexuality, resulted in a vast categorization of perversions. The Aesthetic and Decadent Movement’s fascination for perversion and sexual transgression can in this regard be related back to the widespread interest for sexuality and deprivation which is detectable on multiple levels within Victorian society. Therefore it is relevant to understand Oscar Wilde’s representation of Salomé in regards to this general interest in perversions, a theme that is of outmost importance in the play.

However, Oscar Wilde also challenges the dominant mode of representation of the 19th century by providing a fluid and transgressive representation of gender in the play. When read in relation to Judith Butler’s theory on gender and sex as socially
constructed, the characters Salomé, Herod and Iokanaan can be seen to transgress the normative way of performing gender. Salomé challenges the patriarchal production of meaning by appropriating a masculinized position when describing Iokanaan. Iokanaan is in turn described as a mirrored image of Salomé and therefore becomes feminized. By sharing signifiers they are both represented as androgynous and their gender identity becomes fluid. Herod’s gender identity is also not exclusively masculine but becomes unstable when he is depicted as hysterical, a traditionally feminized trait. However, the fluidity of the gender representation does not dismantle the patriarchal dominance in the play, but rather shows that the fluidity of gender representation does not challenge the hegemonic power structure that prioritizes men over women.

Additionally the representation of gender in Salomé is linked to the theme of madness and sexual transgression. The representation of madness in Salomé, being a play that engages in the Victorian sexual discourse, can be understood in relation to the 19th century notion of hysteria. Hysteria is historically understood as a predominantly female malady. However in Salomé all the characters, regardless of sex, show symptoms of this feminized form of sexual madness. Furthermore, the madness that the characters in Salomé display is both sexual and religious, combining elements of both Christian and Classic Greek perception of religious madness in relation to sexuality. Wilde’s portrayal of Iokanaan connotes to a Dionysian figure that provokes a deranged adoration in those around him which eventually leads to Salomé decapitating him in an attempt to possess that which she desires. The sexually transgressive elements in the play are epitomized when Salomé dances for Herod, which in turn culminates in the madness that leads to both Iokanaan and Salomé’s death. Salomé’s dance can also be understood in relation to
the convulsions of the hysterical subject, which were regarded as both a symptom and a cure for the ailment. In the same sense Salomé, by dancing, embodies the transgressive sexual desires that she has been feeling. Salomé dances for her step-father Herod and thereby engages in his incestuous feelings for her and is in turn able to express her mad desire for Iokanaan.

In conclusion, Oscar Wilde’s portrayal of Salomé and King Herod’s court explores the limitations of normality and challenges the simplified moralistic representation of the female seductress and the male tyrant. Salomé defies the restrictions of her gendered position and thus destabilizes the whole patriarchal power structure that the court relies upon. Salomé does not only depart from the artistic discourse of the 19th century but also challenges contemporary artistic discourses in regards to gender representation.

Works Cited


