

## “Wilde’s *Salomé* : Survival in a Hothouse”

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In June of 1892—when *Salomé* was undergoing rehearsals for production at the Palace Theatre in London with Sarah Bernhardt in the title role and Albert Darmont as Hérode—the Lord Chamberlain withheld his permission for performance on the grounds that the play dealt with biblical characters. Such a censure, of course, was not the exclusive prerogative of English manners. Across the channel, Racine’s biblical plays, Gounod’s *La Reine de Saba*, Saint-Saëns’ *Samson et Dalila* and Mossonet’s *Hérodiade* suffered a similar fate, but the controversy associated with these works was of a less vehement nature. The works, not the artiste, were singled out for special attention.

In the case of *Salomé*, however, the integrity of the writer was the issue at hand : not artistic integrity but moral probity. Wilde countered the censure by an appeal to the doctrine of art for art’s sake and by a defense of the inviolability of works meant to be performed on the stage.<sup>1</sup>

I care very little about the refusal of the Lord Chamberlain to allow my play to be produced. what I do care about is this Censorship apparently regards the stage as the lowest of all the arts, and looks on acting as a vulgar thing. The painter is allowed to take his subjects where he chooses. He can go to the great Hebrew and Hebrew-Greek literature of the Bible and can paint *Salomé* dancing or Christ on the Cross or the Virgin with her Child. Nobody interferes with the painter. Nobody says, ‘Painting is such a vulgar art that you must not paint sacred things.’ The sculptor is equally free. He can carve.

St. John the Baptist in his camel hair, and fashion the Madonna or Christ in bronze or in marble as he wills. Yet nobody says to him, 'Sculpture is such a vulgar art that you must not carve sacred things.' And the writer, the poet—he also is quite free. I can write about any subject that I choose. For me there is no Censorship. I can take any incident I like out of sacred literature and treat it as I choose and there is no one to say to the poet, 'Poetry is such a vulgar art that you must not use it in treating sacred subjects.' But there is a Censorship over the stage and acting; and the basis of that Censorship is that, while vulgar subjects may be put on the stage and acted, while everything that is mean and low and shameful in life can be portrayed by actors, no actor is to be permitted to present under artistic conditions the great and ennobling subjects taken from the Bible. The insult is the suppression of *Salomé* is an insult to the stage as a form of art and not to me.<sup>2</sup>

Wilde's justification is ostensibly based upon the appeal of his work as an art form and not as a vendetta against the artist qua person. The eloquence of the language, though, does not completely disguise the unsavory atmosphere in which *Salomé* was born, grew and finally came to maturity. This was not a natural flower that was characterized by spontaneity, but rather a hothouse blossom that depended for its existence upon artificial nurturing.

Wilde's aesthetic sentiments were echoed by William Archer, probably the only critic of the time to take issue with the Lord Chamberlain's censure of the play :

It is by methods borrowed from music that Mr. Wilde, without sacrificing its suppleness, imparts to his prose the firm texture, so to speak, of verse. Borrowed from music—may I conjecture?—through the intermediation of Maeterlinck. Certain it is that the brief phrases, the chiming repetitions, the fugal effects beloved by the Belgian poet, are no less characteristic of Mr. Wilde's method. I am quite willing to believe if necessary, that the two artists invented their similar devices independently, to meet a common need; but if, as a matter of fact the one had taken a hint from the other, I do not see that his essential originality is thereby impaired. There is far more depth and body in Mr. Wilde's work than in Maeterlinck's. His characters are men and women, not filmy shapes of mist and moonshine. His properties, so to speak, are far more various and less conventional. His palette—I recur, in spite of myself to the pictorial analogy—is infinitely

richer. Maeterlinck paints in washes of water colour ; Mr. Wilde attains the depth and brilliancy of oils.<sup>3</sup>

One might easily take issue with Archer for praising Wilde to the detriment of Maeterlinck. Certainly the Belgian *Pelléas* has, since its literary creation, stood for the embodiment of the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement. Wilde's play can lay claim to no such direct lineage ; its greatness lies elsewhere.

One topic that is frequently neglected in an analysis of *Salomé*—and one that accounts in small measure for its success—is the version of the text to which the critic might refer. One must not forget that the play underwent a rather unusual form of genesis in terms of linguistic development and adaptation. In the first place, there is a question as to the actual language in which the drama was originally conceived, even though the language in which it first appeared was French. According to one of the standard biographical accounts, the work came into being in a somewhat flamboyant manner :

over lunch one day Oscar told the story in detail to a group of French writers. When he returned to his apartment, he noticed a blank book lying upon a table whereupon he began to write out his play. He wrote steadily until ten or eleven at night. Finding himself in need of some nourishment, he interrupted his composition and went to a nearby cafe. He asked the orchestra leader to play music in harmony with a play he was writing about 'a woman dancing with her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain.' The orchestra leader played such strange and terrifying music that all conversation in the restaurant ceased and the listeners 'looked at each other with blanched faces.'<sup>4</sup>

The play was written in 1891 ; the first published version in French did not appear until two years later ; finally, the English "translation" by Lord Alfred Douglas, which Wilde found unsatisfactory, was published in 1894. But in spite of this historical information, we cannot be absolutely certain as to the "real" language of *Salomé*. And therein lies part of the attraction, part of the seductiveness of the ambiguous literary text. Wilde himself provided only a partial answer :

My idea of writing the play was simply this : I have one instrument that I know that I can command, and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it. The play was written in Paris some six months ago, where I read it to some young poets who admired it

immensely. of course there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by race, writes in an alien language. The same thing is true of Rossetti who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament.<sup>5</sup>

Both Maeterlinck and Rossetti do not quite fit into the same category as Wilde, for they commanded French and English in a way that somehow escaped the Irish poet.

As a hypothetical speculation, one wonders why Wilde did not make his own translation from French into English. As one critic put it, "*Salomé* "does credit to Mr. Wilde's command of the French language, but we must say that the opening scene reads to us very much like a page from one of Ollendorff's exercises."<sup>6</sup> One cannot but sense that the playwright's linguistic idiom is an acquired rather than a natural form of expression. In order to be more authentic in this matter, Wilde sent his manuscript to some French critics—among them Pierre Louys and André Gide—for their suggestions, corrections, and English locutions that had slipped into French. The text remains a quizzical document to which the inevitable question mark adheres. As a result, the problem of which remains the authentic text—the French, the English or the pre-linguistic creative surge—will probably never be known in its entirety.

What does appear to be less complicated is the difference that obtains between Wilde's French and the idiom of a native-born master of the language. One need only consider a sonnet entitled "*La Danse*" by Pierre Louys. This poem was officially a gesture of thanks sent to Wilde who had dedicated the original French play to the French poet.

A travers le brouillard lumineux des sept voiles  
La courbe de son corps se cambre vers la lune.  
Elle se touche avec sa chevelure brune  
Et ses doigts caressants ou luisent des étoiles.  
Le rêve d'être un paon qui déploierait sa queue  
La fait sourire sous son éventail de plumes.  
Elle danse au milieu d'un tourbillon d'écumes  
Ou flotte l'arc léger de son écharpe bleue.

Prèsque nue, avec son dernier voile, flot jaune,  
Elle fuit, revient, tourne, et passe. Au bord du trône  
Le tétrarque tremblant la supplie et l'appelle,

Fugitive, qui danse avec des roses rares  
 Et traîne dans le sang sous ses beaux pieds barbares  
 L'ombre terrible de la lune derrière elle.<sup>7</sup>

What is unique, and, of course, perfectly understandable, is the thoroughly natural flow of language that characterizes Louys' dedication. Within the confines of this rather stringent form of fourteen lines, he has created a fascinating cameo of one of the most provocative women to be found in the disciplines of art, literature and music. Without the least trace of self-consciousness, the poet unfolds th the developing wantonness of this daughter of Herodias. The culmination of this dramatic process may be found in a scene which has, beyond all others, become the trademark of the Salomé legend. More often than not, the "Dance of the Seven Veils" is performed as an entity unto itself and is thereby removed from the context of the drama. It is merely a sensually erotic experience. There is a tendency on the part of the artist to forget the *ambiance* out of which the dance emerges. Furthermore, many of the translations of the Vulgate from the original Greek into Latin and other languages have been incorrect as far as the historical accuracy of the real Salomé of the Gospels is concerned, a woman of "high ethical character, moral sensibility, and refined social dignity"<sup>8</sup>

From the first stanza to the last, one experiences though the poetry of Louys the inevitability of what has befallen the characters : the suicide of Narraboth, Captain of the Guard ; the horrible fate that has befallen Iokanaan ; the equally merciless death in store for Salome at the hands of Herode's soldiers, The marvelous flow of the language, infinitely more suggestive than any literal description of the experience, is one of pure symbolism.

Though Wilde is cited as one of the exemplars of the doctrine of art for arts' sake, his relationship to Naeterlinck and the Symbolists, is not, as far as I can discern conclusive. Wide's poetry in this play is not so much mysterious of nebulous or gauzy as it is brilliant and sensational and highly colored ; a hothouse blossom. The effect of the language depends primarily upon the cumulative tension and weight of special grammatical constructions. It is perhaps in Herode's exhortation to Salome to accept his gifts for the dance that Wilde's technique shows itself most distinctly, especially the repetition of the subject verb-object sequence that has a forceful, relentless concatenation :

Ecoutez. J' ai des bijoux cachés ici que meme votre mère n'a jamais vus, et des bijoux tout a fait extraordinaires. J' ai un collier de perles a quatre rangées. On dirait des lunes enchainées de rayons d'argent. On dirait cinquante lunes captives dans un filet d'or. Une reine l'a porté sur l'ivoire de ses seins. Toi. quand tu le porteras, tu seras aussi belle

qu' une reine. J'ai des améthystes de deux espèces. Une qui est noire comme le vin. L' autre qui est rouge comme du vin qu'on a colore avec de l'eau. J'ai des topazes jaunes comme les yeux des tigres, et des topazes rases comme les yeux des pigeons- et des topazes vertes comme les yeux des chats. J'ai des opales qui attristent les esprits et ont peur des ténèbres. J'ai des onyx semblables aux prunelles d'une morte. J'ai des selénites qui changent quand la lune change et deviennent pales quand elles voient le soleil. J'ai des saphirs grands comme des oeufs et bleus comme des fleurs bleues. La mer erre dedans et la lune ne vient jamais troubler le bleu de ses flots. J'ai des chrysolithes et des bérils, j'ai des chrysoprases et des rubis, j'ai des sardonix et des hyacinthes, et des calcedoines, je vous les donnerai tous, mais tous, et j'y ajouterai d'autres choses. Le roi des Indes vient justement de m'envoyer quatre éventails faits de plumes d'autruche. J'ai un crystal qui n'est pas permis aux femmes de voir et que meme les jaunes hommes ne doivent regarder qu' après avoir été flagelles de verges. Dans un coffret de nacre, j'ai trois turquoises merveilleuses. Quand on les porte sur le front on peut imaginer des choses qu'il n'existent pas, et quand on les porte dans la main on peut rendre les femmes steriles. Ce sont des tresors de grande valeur.<sup>9</sup>

Evidently the earlier, uncorrected manuscript must have contained an even greater number of repetitions, a fact attested to be Adolphe Rette, the author of *Le Symbolisme, Anecdotes et Souvenirs* : "Je fis supprimer a Wilde une trop longue enumeration de pierreries mise dans la bouche d'Hérode."<sup>10</sup> Another editor of the text, Stuart Merrill, was less enthusiastic about Wilde's French. "Il ecrivait le francais comme il le parlait, c'est-a-dire avec une fantaisie qui, si elle etait savoureuse dans la conversation aurait produit, au theatre, une deplorable impression Je corrigea donc comme je pus *Salomé*. II

The English "version", which seems to run a trifle more smoothly, also maintains the effect of cumulative repetition :

Listen. I have jewels hidden in this place—jewels that thy mother even has never seen : jewels that are marvellous to look at. I have a collar of pearls, set in four rows. They are like unto moons chained with rays of silver. They are even as half a hundred moons caught in a golden net. On the ivory breast of a queen they have rested. Thou shalt be as fair as a queen when thou wearest them. I have amethysts of two kinds ; one that is black like wine, and one that is red like wine that one has coloured with water. I have topazes yellow as are the eyes of tigers, and topazes that are pink as the eyes of a

wood-pigeon, and green topazes that are as the eyes of cats. I have opals that burn always, with a flame that is cold as ice, opals that make sad men's minds, and are afraid of the shadows. I have onyxes like the eyeballs of a dead woman. I have moonstones that change when the moon changes, and are wan when they see the sun. I have sapphires big like eggs, and as blue as blue flowers. The sea wanders within them, and the moon comes never to trouble the blue of their waves. I have chrysolites and beryls, and chrysoprases and rubies; I have sardonyx and hyacinth stones, and stones of chalcedony, and I will give them all unto thee, and other things will I add to them. The king of the Indies has but even now sent me four fans fashioned from the feathers of parrots, and the king of Numidia a garment of ostrich feathers. I have a crystal, into which it is not lawful for a woman to look, nor may young men behold it until they have been beaten with rods. In a coffer of nacre I have three wondrous turquoises. He who wears them on his forehead can imagine things which are not, and he who carries them in his hand can turn the fruitful woman into a woman that is barren. These are great treasures.<sup>12</sup>

What differentiates the English from the French text is the exploitation of a biblical style by a "principle of implied relations analogous to the technique of Hebrew poetry. The syntax of the Scriptures is essentially artificial and 'constructive', as scholars have pointed out. It consists of a mode of juxtaposing ideas whereby relations are expressed with hardly of the connectives that usually bind thought-units in a normal sentence, . . . This effect is produced through accumulation by the parallel placement of syntactical members."<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly enough, it is not the French of Wilde or the English of Douglas that has proved the most durable. Richard Strauss's libretto to his opera *Salome* goes beyond the tenets of *fin-de-siècle* art and quasi-biblical rhetoric.

Hore, In habe an diesem Ort Juwelen versteckt, Juwelen die selbst deine Mutter nie gesehen hat. Ich habe ein Halsband mit vier Reihen Perlen, Topase, gelb wie die Augen der Tiger. Topase, hellrot wie die Augen der Waldtaube, and grüne Topase, wie Katzenaugen. Ich habe Opale, die immer fulkeln, mit einem Feuer, kalt wie Eis. Ich will dir alle geben, alle! Ich habe Chrysolithe und Berylle, Chrysoprase und Rubine. Ich habe sardonyx und Hyacinthsteine und Steine von Chalcedon. Ich will sie dir alle geben alle und noch andre Dinge. Ich habe einen Kristall in den zu schaun keinem Weibe vergonnt ist. In einem Perlenmutterkastchen habe ich drei wunderbare Turkise

Wer sie an seiner Stirne tragt, kann Dinge sehn, die nicht wirklich sind. Es sind uabeanlbara Schatza.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, Strauss has, in this parallel passage, pruned some of the original dialogue and retained only what was necessary for his own mode of expression. It must be remembered that he has added a new dimension to the traditional experience, the traditional *muthos*. That significant dimension, out of which his text springs, is that of music. That which is incapable of being expressed in words is given renewed verification by the appeal of another medium. The atmosphere of mysteria that reflects the action and the characters receives its fullest expression in this *dramma per musica*, a unique blending of tone and text.<sup>15</sup> It is here that Wilde's hothouse flower finds its most congenial abode, for both the French and English texts are fulfilled in a way that could not have been possible in a single art form. But that is another story.

### Notes and References

1. For a discussion of this work in relation to the doctrine of art for art's sake, see Helen Grace Zagora, *The Legend of Salome and the principle of Art for Art's Sake* (Geneva: E. Droz, 1960), especially pp. 121-135.
2. A published interview by Wilde in Stuart Mason, *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: Bertram Rota, 1967), pp. 371-72.
3. William Archer, "Mr. Wilde's New Play," *Black and White*, 4 (May 11, 1893), p. 209—quoted by Donald H. Ericksen, *Oscar Wilde* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 124.
4. Ericksen, pp. 122-23: See also Michael Hardwick, *The Drake Guide to Oscar Wilde* (New York: Drake Publishers, Inc.), p. 167.
5. Mason, pp. 372-73.
6. Review in the *Times*, February 23, 1893, in Mason, p. 376.
7. Pierre Louys, *Poemes*, ed. Yves-Gérard le Dantect (Paris: Albin Michel, 1945), I, p. 87. The variants to this text which appear on p. 341 reflect the alternate text of the poem (entitled "Salomé") which appears in Mason' p. 375.
8. Blaise Hospodar de Kornitz, *Salome: Virgin or Prostitute?* (New York: Pageant Press, 1953), p. 12. See also pp. 9, 44, 60, 61, 64.
9. The 1893 text of *Salomé* (Paris: Editions du Colombier, 1966), pp. 77-78.
10. Oscar Wilde, *Letters*, ed. Robert Hart-Davis (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World), p. 305, note 1.
11. *Ibid.*



12. *Salome*, in Oscar Wilde, *Works* (New York : Lam Publishing Co., 1909), VII, 79-81 ; rpt. AMS Press, Inc., New York, 1972.
13. Epifanio San Juan, Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton : University Press, 1967), p. 114.
14. The 1905 text of Richard Strauss, *Salome*, trans. Hedwig Lachmann (New York : Boosey and Hawkes, 1968), p. 20.
15. For a discussion of Strauss's opera see Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 249-286.

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