THE SALOME LEGEND IN THE ARTS

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CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF
THE SALOME LEGEND

Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her.

For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife.

Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not:

For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly.

And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee;

And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt and I will give it thee.

And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist.

And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist.

And the king was exceedingly sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her.

And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought; and he went and beheaded him in the prison,

And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.
And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb. ¹

The death of John the Baptist, recounted here in verses from the Gospel of St. Mark, was the culminating tragedy in a long series of disastrous occurrences which followed the incestuous marriage of Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, to Herodias, the divorced wife of his half-brother Philip. Herod had become infatuated with his sister-in-law while visiting in Philip's home, and he begged her to leave her husband and marry him. At this time Herodias, a woman of great ambition and enterprise, had rather given up hope that Philip would ever amount to anything in the world; and, regarding her brother-in-law as a man of far more promising prospect than her husband, she found it expedient to transfer her loyalties to him and agree to divorce Philip. She exacted one condition, though: she would not enter his house except as sole mistress of it; and, although polygamy was an accepted custom, she would not become Herod's bride until he had divorced his first wife. It was not at all to Herod's advantage to put away his wife, because she was no less than the daughter of King Aretas of Arabia, and Aretas would surely be offended on seeing the girl submitted to the almost insufferable disgrace of being cast out of her husband's home. But the tetrarch must have been deeply in love, for he chose to risk the consequences, send the

¹Mark 6:17-29.
Arabian princess on her way, and wed Herodias, the woman of his choice.²

With the celebration of the marriage, Herod found himself confronted with the greatest of difficulties. Aretas was furious, of course, and sought to avenge the insult by resuming the ancient warfare between his people and the Jews. At the same time, the unhappy tetrarch encountered a problem of equal seriousness within his own realm, as his subjects, who regarded the adulterous and incestuous marriage as a particularly shameless violation of Hebrew law, were now, after many years of restlessness and discontent, becoming openly rebellious.³

There were many popular leaders to further the spirit of rebellion, among them the prophet John, known as the Baptist, who, envisioning the imminent establishment of the kingdom of God on earth, had no respect at all for any temporal ruler and no hesitation in saying so. The prophet was particularly outspoken against Herod's notorious marriage; and, as he had a considerable popular following, Herod came to regard him as a dangerous enemy—so dangerous, in fact, that he felt obliged to silence his seditious preachings by imprisoning


³Ibid.
him securely and without redress in the castle of Machaerus, over-looking the Dead Sea. 4

There the prophet died (A. D. 30?). The exact circumstance of his death is unknown, but it seems almost certain that he died at the hands of an executioner, probably by beheading. The most detailed account we have of John's death is quoted above from the Gospel of Mark, and substantially the same story is told, in somewhat more condensed form, in Matthew 14:6-12:

. . . When Herod's birthday was kept, the daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herod.
   Whereupon he promised with an oath to give her whatever she would ask.
   And she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger.
   And the king was sorry; nevertheless, for the oath's sake, and them which sat with him at meat, he commanded it to be given her.
   And he sent, and beheaded John in the prison.
   And his head was brought in a charger, and given to the damsel: and she brought it to her mother.
   And his disciples came, and took up the body, and buried it, and went and told Jesus. 5


5There are several accounts of what the vengeful Herodias did with the head. According to one legend, she hacked on it with a scimitar (cf. Emile Mâle, Religious Art in France, p. 302). According to another, she "took her bodkin and thrust it through the prophet's tongue, . . . [silencing] forever . . . the voice that had cried in the wilderness" (cf. Mortimer Steel, "Salome of the Seven Veils," The Mentor, XIV (December, 1926), 15-16). There are also many stories about what became of the head when she was through with it; and
Herod’s marriage to Herodias had already created one of the
great scandals of the ancient world, and the report of the prophet’s
murder increased the scandal to still greater proportions. The daugh-
ter of Herodias, who had demanded the head of the Baptist in a charger,
acquired a particularly infamous reputation; and her ill fame became so
great that it has persisted through the centuries and she remains as
notorious today as she has ever been in the nineteen hundred years
since John died.

Practically nothing is known about the girl. The Bible, referring
to her only as "the damsel" or as "the daughter of Herodias," does not
even record her name; but secular history tells us that Herodias did
have a daughter by Philip, that her name was Salome, and that she
was married twice: first to her paternal uncle Philip, Tetrarch of
Gaulanitis, Trachonitis, Batanea, and Paneas, who died childless,
A. D. 34; and some years later to her cousin Aristobulus, King of
during the Middle Ages countless disfigured skulls were brought into
Europe from the East, every one of which was presented with defini-
tive "proof" that it was the skull of John the Baptist (cf. Mâle, loc. cit.).

6 The Salome mentioned in Mark 15:40 as having been present at
the crucifixion of Jesus and in 16:1 as having accompanied Mary to the
tomb was certainly another woman. Her identity is unknown, but schol-
ars conjecture that she may have been a sister of the Virgin Mary or
the mother of the apostles James the Elder and John the Evangelist
(cf. "Salome," The Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. XXIV, 1942, and

7 Jack Finnegan, Light from the Past, p. 216.
Armenia Minor, by whom she had three sons. 8 Except for this negligible bit of information, though, we have no really well-established facts about her. There is abundant legend, of course, because the Bible has made her notorious. According to one story, she accompanied her mother and the tetrarch into exile, A. D. 39, when the Roman Emperor Gaius deposed him and banished him to Gaul. During the course of their journey, it was said, the outcasts had to cross a frozen river, and Salome fell through the ice, up to her neck, so that when the ice froze together again, she was left with her head above it and her body below, thus suffering, with more justice than poetry, the same death which she had caused to be inflicted upon the prophet. 9 However, this tale is patently untrue, because, although the tetrarch and his wife really were banished to Gaul, it is certainly unlikely that they journeyed on foot or encountered any frozen rivers; and Salome, if she did accompany them, survived the trip well enough to return to the East and still be living with her husband in Armenia Minor as late as the 60's, since she did not marry him until some time after his accession to the throne, A. D. 57. 10 We have no record of what she did during the twenty-five or thirty years between her marriages, or of how she died, or why or where or when. We do not even know

8 Jones, op. cit., pp. 259-260.


10 Jones, loc. cit.
when she was born; and, strangely enough, although all of her fame rests on the story of her dancing before Herod, we do not know for a fact that she ever really danced.

At the time of John's death, there must have been rumors of all sorts coming from Machaerus; and, as we have no eye-witness account of what happened there, any report which presumes to give details of the execution and the circumstances leading up to it must be regarded as merely hearsay and, therefore, unreliable. Matthew himself indicates that he had the story third- or fourth-hand, from Jesus, who heard it from John's disciples, who evidently did not arrive at Machaerus themselves until after the execution. However, this is not to say that the story is false. Matthew and Mark certainly told it in good faith, believing it to be true; and, so far as anyone knows today, it is true—at least, no one can offer conclusive evidence that it is false. For several reasons, though, some scholars do feel extremely doubtful about it. In the first place, there is the curious, though not necessarily significant, fact that, in spite of the prominence of the Baptist and the whole Herodian family and the wide publicity which many of their other actions received, we have no accounts of Salome's dance except those in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Luke does say


that the Baptist was beheaded, but neither he nor John mentions her having any part in the beheading; and contemporary secular history does not connect her with the episode, either. Josephus records Salome's two marriages but does not refer to her in connection with the prophet's death. He says only that "John was sent a prisoner . . . to Machaerus . . . and was there put to death." Moreover, Matthew and Mark betray a degree of uncertainty about the story themselves. They never give the girl's name, and they differ on one rather important point: Matthew tells us that, when Herod "promised with an oath to give her whatsoever she would ask . . ., she, being before instructed of her mother, said, Give me here John Baptist's head in a charger." Mark, however, says nothing of her "being before instructed" but relates that "she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist." Did Salome, then, go in to dance with the premeditated purpose of so enthralling the tetrarch that he would agree to behead whomever she wished? Or did she merely dance, without ulterior motive, and then, as an afterthought, take advantage of the opportunity which presented itself?

In either case the story sounds, to many people, like a somewhat romantic piece of fiction, particularly when one perceives the

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14 Josephus, loc. cit.
similarity between it and innumerable other stories in primitive literature in which a king's rash oath initiates a series of extraordinary occurrences. Even more striking is the similarity of the story to two other tales which had currency at the time and which treated the theme of a beautiful woman who caused an enemy to be beheaded. One of them is the familiar story of Judith and Holofernes; and the other, mentioned in the writings of Seneca, concerns the mistress of a Roman governor, who, having persuaded her lover to imprison a man who had insulted her, "danced at a banquet given for the governor's officers . . . so seductively . . . that [he] granted her request for the prisoner's head." It has been suggested that this story may have somehow become confused with the episode of John's execution and that the deeds of the Roman courtesan may have been falsely attributed to Salome, since the prophet, like the unfortunate man in the story, was imprisoned and beheaded by a regent of the Roman Empire (Herod) for making insulting remarks about his mistress (Herodias). At any rate, the combination of seduction and beheading seems to have been popular in literature of the time. Quite possibly this sort of thing was not uncommon in actual life, either, for the age was both


16Flaig, loc. cit.

sensual and brutal, morals were low, life was cheap, and revenge came fast and bloody.

Even then, however, according to some historians, custom would have forbidden her, as a princess, to stoop so low as to dance before a mixed company at a banquet, but the point has not been really well substantiated; and it is possible to find scholars who will assert that in Galilee such a dance "was not considered ... as unbecoming a distinguished person," although it would have been regarded as most unbecoming in other regions of the East. Anyway, the members of the Herodian family never seemed to worry unduly about what custom might decree or what people might think of them for violating it.

As has been said, none of the evidence which scholars have presented to discredit the Bible story is at all conclusive; and such evidence is recorded here only to show how little we know definitely about Salome. We may conclude, though, that it is at least as likely as not that she did dance before Herod and that she did claim the Baptist's head as her reward. A tetrarch's birthday party, in this depraved era in the history of the Roman Empire, might very well have been a terrific orgy, at which guests and hosts satisfied fully their

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18 Flaig, loc. cit.

19 Ernest Renan, Life of Jesus, p. 222.
appetites for good food, strong drink, and uninhibited sex; and Herod, no doubt as corrupt as a native Roman but perhaps even more gross in his habits, being a provincial, was likely a very swine and could easily have done foolish things and made foolish promises. It would certainly not have been the first time he had allowed a woman to persuade him to do a thing against his better judgment.

However, we do not really know what sort of person Salome was; and, even assuming that she really did dance, we do not know what sort of dance it was or what her motives in it were; but, from our knowledge of the historical period and of her family background, we can make some reasonably sound conjectures. Corruption and debasement were the order of the day throughout the Roman Empire, and the Herodian family adhered strictly to the pattern. They were generally over-sexed, sometimes almost to the point of madness, and their extreme sensuality led them into shocking numbers of adulterous and incestuous relationships. The women, like Herodias, were often highly intelligent, strong-willed, and ambitious; and they did not scruple to use their physical attractions freely as a tool to further their ambitions. Several women in the family managed to attain positions of astonishing prestige and power\(^{20}\) and, utterly ruthless, like their men, took advantage of their situation to perform deeds of the

baldest cruelty. Even with members of their own families they could be atrociously blood-thirsty. They were continually plotting and scheming against each other, and their plots resulted so often in infanticide, fratricide, and like crimes that the Emperor Augustus is said to have made "a Greek pun to the effect that he would feel safer as Herod's swine [hys] than as his son [hyios]." Plain homicide, murder outside the family circle, was almost too common to attract attention. It was the tetrarch's father, Herod the Great, who was responsible for the Massacre of the Innocents; and, as long as the dynasty was in power, heads rolled. John the Baptist's would certainly pass unnoticed among the many, if its owner had not been a man of more than usual prominence.  

Salome, growing up in such an environment, could hardly have lived up to her name, which in Greek and Hebrew means "peaceful"; and she was probably no more circumspect morally than others of her family. Certainly the Biblical story, if it is true, is no recommendation for her. A proper girl does not attempt to seduce her own stepfather; and, even if one wishes to argue, as some people do, rather naively, that her dance might not have been seductive and that she


23Gilman, op. cit., p. 17.
might not have had any improper intentions, a man does not offer to give a dancing girl half of his tetrarchy merely because he admires her dancing.

It is intriguing to speculate about what Salome was; but we can never really know. And it is fortunate, perhaps, that so little is known about her, because the field for speculation remains infinitely broad, and imagination can work with complete freedom. It has worked freely for centuries; and Salome's dance has been re-created in countless works of art—in paintings, etchings, sculpture, plays, novels, short stories, operas, ballets, motion pictures.

The following chapters will consider many of these works and their varied interpretations of Salome, their varied conceptions of her character. For every age, conceiving her in terms of its own prejudices, has formed its peculiar notions of her and assumed its characteristic attitude toward her. In the Middle Ages, a period of intense religious fervor, she was damned as an immoral and irreligious woman. The Renaissance, on the other hand, largely unconcerned about questions of morals, found her fascinating simply as a beautiful woman; and in the last hundred years, during which our literature has often been preoccupied with sex, she has become something of a symbol, an embodiment of sensuality, voluptuousness, of "uncurbed passion" and "boundless desire."
Always, though, she has remained an intriguing figure; and, whether men have despised her or adored her, they have paid her the notable compliment of continuing to think about her, and they have kept her alive in the imagination of the centuries, a woman of eternal fascination.
CHAPTER II

SALOME IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA AND IN THE MIDDLE AGES

John the Baptist was canonized during the first years of the Christian church and soon took his place as one of the most highly venerated of the saints. His death inspired a feeling of profound grief among adherents to the new faith, who were absolutely in earnest about their religion and found every episode of the Christian story as vital and real as personal experience. At this time the softening influences of Christianity were not yet very greatly in evidence; and tolerance, charity, forgiveness had little part in the attitude of the early church toward its enemies. To the Christians, Salome and Herodias must have seemed particularly hateful enemies, because of their part in the death of the lamented martyr saint; and Christians regarded them not only with intense hatred but also with fear, as threats to the salvation of the righteous, for, as St. John Chrysostom (347-407), the famous archbishop of Athens, grimly observed, "Christians do not sacrifice half a kingdom nor a man's life at a dancer's behest, but their own souls do they deliver to destruction."¹

¹"The House of Herod in History and Art," The Edinburgh Review, CCXV (April, 1912), 304.
The Greek church father Origen (185-254) had already invested Salome's dance with allegorical significance, seeing it as a manifestation of "that evil opinion that dances with the world of generation and pleases its ruler, and so kills the prophetic life"; and, by the fourth century, the dancer and her mother had assumed a position beside Delilah and Jezebel as symbols of feminine wickedness. Their very names had taken on such odium that, when St. Ambrose (333? - 397), Bishop of Milan, was seeking a potent insult for Justina, the mother of Emperor Valentinian II, he could do no worse than call her "Herodias." Even Chrysostom, whose eloquence won him the name of "the golden-mouthed" (chrysostomos), could not, with all his rich resources of language, find anything more damning to say about the Empress Eudoxia of the Eastern Empire than that she, too, was an "Herodias." The ill fame of Salome and her mother endured through the greater part of the Middle Ages, for religious feeling remained at a high pitch and the death of St. John retained the seriousness of personal tragedy. Medieval Christians took comfort, though, in a line from the Psalms: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," and they were also pleased to recall that "Whoso sheddeth

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4 Ibid.


6 Psalms 116:15.
man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man." Our oldest extant pictorial representation of Salome's dance is inscribed with both quotations. This little drawing, dating from perhaps as early as the sixth century, occurs in one of the oldest illustrated gospel-books we have preserved, the Codex Sinopsensis, found by a French naval officer in the Black Sea port of Sinope and now housed in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The truncated body of the saint is shown lying in his prison cell, Moses and David mourning over it and displaying scrolls on which the Biblical passages are lettered in Greek. At the left of the prison, Salome stands before Herod's banquet table and disdainfully receives the severed head from the hands of the executioner. She is treated in the drawing with the respect that is her due as a princess, for she is erect and regal of bearing and has a queenly haughtiness of demeanor which makes it unmistakably apparent that she is a personage of the loftiest distinction. However, in spite of her elegance, we can never forget—rather, the medieval Christian never forgot—that John the Baptist lies close by, tragically murdered, and that she, having shed man's blood, must suffer divine retribution for her crime. She is wicked; she is evil; she has sinned monstrously; she is damned; and we are never allowed to lose sight of the fact.

7Genesis 9:6.
8Charles Rufus Morey, Early Christian Art, p. 113.
The Codex Sinopsensis is the only representation of Salome which has been preserved from the early part of the Middle Ages, but we have many works of art from the later centuries. "Salome's Dance" had become an indispensable feature of the repertoire of many female acrobats attached to troupes of wandering minstrels; and their performances so affected the popular imagination that she began to appear in art as a tumbler. Her "well-skilled tumbling . . . tricks," as an anonymous thirteenth-century writer called them, are depicted in, among other places, a misericord at Ely Cathedral, where she performs the most prodigious contortions; in an illuminated window at Bourges Cathedral, where she does a handstand; and in a sculptured frieze over the porch of Rouen Cathedral, where she not only stands on her hands but also bends back her feet to make them touch the top of her head and balances what looks like a large bowl on her knees.

Medieval literature also abounds in references to her tumbling. An ancient translation of the Bible says she "vaulted," and we have

9 Flaig, op. cit., p. 16.  
10 Ibid.  
12 Flaig, loc. cit.  
14 Flaig, op. cit., p. 19.
a middle-English homily telling of how she "was a tumbestere and tumbled before him [Herod] and other grete lorde of that contre."  

The Pepysian Gospel Harmony, dating from about 1400, informs us that "Heroudes wyves doughter so tumbled tofore |e kyng amonges all |e folk, & paied [pleased] so wel |e kyng, |at he swore |at sche schole have what |ing |at sche hym bisougth"; and, as late as the sixteenth century, the English lexicographer John Florio, described her performance as the "salto mortale: the somersault, the deadly leap." 

Aelfric, the eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastic, referred to her in a homily on "The Passion of St. John," as a hoppestre—that is, a dancer who hops or engages in vigorous motions. He alluded to her hleapung, her leaping—her "vaulting," perhaps—and summed up the whole performance as a plega. 

Plega was a word somewhat vague in meaning, used to describe virtually any type of vigorous activity, from "the wagging of Cerberus's tail . . . to the dancing of Salome"; but, knowing what the typical medieval conception of Salome's dance was, we may feel justified in assuming that Aelfric

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18 Rubie D-N. Warner, editor, Early English Homilies, pp. 52-58.

had in mind the same sort of acrobatics and contortions we see represented elsewhere.

In modern times this conception of Salome as a tumbler has been regarded with a certain humorous disdain, as being very naive, since tumbling does not seem to afford the opportunities for tremendous sexual stimulation of the sort Strauss and other contemporary artists have emphasized in their treatments of the story. "Only the medieval mind," we are told, "could have failed to see the absurdity of Salome, whose purpose was seduction, adopting the stunts of a trained bear." But such a remark is altogether unjustified and uninformed. The artists and writers of the Middle Ages did not regard her as an imitator of trained bears but as a high-powered seductress and a depraved hussy, the sort of woman one probably found among the gypsies who impersonated her. Aelfric compared her to Delilah and described her performance as lewd (lypré): and the early church fathers were certainly not insensitive to the erotic qualities of her "hip-swinging," as Juvenecus, the fourth-century Spanish presbyter, called it. St. Ambrose, convinced that any sort of dancing constituted hellish depravity, regarded her as a particularly depraved practitioner and described how she "unveiled the limbs of her body with lascivious

20 Flaig, op. cit., p. 16.

21 Ibid., p. 19.
movements. . . . Her eyes were seductive, she contorted her neck and shook her hair." And St. Peter Chrysologus (406?-450?), the pious Italian orator, imagining "her body so flexible as if freed of all joints, and her viscera in artful motion," must have envisioned a considerable amount of sensual abandon himself. 23

Moreover, if the truth be known, no modern treatment of the Salome legend has ever surpassed—perhaps none has ever equalled—certain relics of Romanesque sculpture in the sheer rawness with which they indicate the sexual excitement implicit in her dance. In the Gargilesse at Indre, she is clad in a transparent, form-fitting skirt to disclose the contours of her legs and hips; her mid-riff is quite bare; her navel is most prominently displayed; and her pelvic regions are thrust far forward. 24 A similar stance is assumed by the Salome in the cloister of St. Etienne at Toulouse, where Herod is shown chucking her under the chin. The girl's mid-riff is covered here; but her gown is so tight that every curve of her body is revealed. 25 This disclosure seems particularly gross, somehow, because she is depicted as a very young, undeveloped girl, no more than thirteen or fourteen; and her extreme youth makes her shamelessness seem all the more unnatural and monstrous.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid., Vol. IV, No. 446.
More sympathetically conceived is a Salome in the Capella San Giovanni in the Cathedral of Genoa. Here she appears youthful (about twenty), slender, graceful, elegant, refined, intelligent, smiling gently, as she hands the platter to Herodias. However, she has a rather sophisticated, quizzical expression; and her stance, abdomen thrust as far forward as possible, is the same obscene pose we have seen before. She wears no garment above the waist; her navel is again prominently exposed; and her skirt, of the very thinnest stuff, hangs low on her hips. Another carving in the same room shows it hanging even lower—so low, in fact, that it almost denies its function of concealment. Again the pelvic region is thrust forward, but the girl holds her hands over her face in a little gesture of coyness that seems, in view of the disposition she makes of other parts of her body, a most preposterous and revolting affectation. Herod observes her performance here with intense interest, staring fixedly at the area of her navel and anxiously holding one hand over his heart.

These carvings certainly reflect no credit on Salome's morals, and they may be regarded as further illustrations of the medieval conception of her as a wicked and despicable character. However, the extreme and altogether unnecessary emphasis which they place on

26 Ibid., Vol. III, No. 248.

27 Ibid.
Intimate anatomical disclosures forces us to conclude that the artists were inspired by something more than righteous indignation at the death of St. John. They were becoming interested in Salome for her own sake and not merely for her part in an ancient religious legend. They were becoming fascinated by her personal attractions; and, in so doing, they anticipated the Renaissance and the great change it was to bring in the world's attitude toward the dancing daughter of Herodias.
CHAPTER III

SALOME IN THE RENAISSANCE

In the later centuries of the medieval period, religious fervor declined somewhat in Europe, and other interests and enthusiasms came to take its place. Life had been hard and cruel in the early years; and men had had to endure present pain by looking forward to a happier future, toward a heavenly salvation; but, as time passed and life became easier, they no longer found it necessary to seek happiness in a future in heaven. There were wonderful things to be enjoyed in the present, on earth; and the immediate earthly pleasures came to have much more meaning and appeal than anything that might be anticipated in a vague and remote future. Religion continued to be important; but it was important now in a new and curiously worldly way, for men who had just learned to appreciate the beauties of earth gloried in earthy and sensuous things. The ritual of the church came to be admired for its spectacular qualities; and the history of the church, its legends, and the stories of the Bible were enjoyed for their picturesque and dramatic qualities.

In the new period, the Renaissance, the story of Salome was regarded with especial interest, because it possessed remarkably
picturesque and dramatic qualities; and, moreover, since there was now comparatively little interest in or even awareness of questions of morals, the daughter of Herodias became an attractive figure to Renaissance eyes. She was a beautiful woman, and that was enough to recommend her now, since men had learned to appreciate the beauty of a woman and to regard beauty as its own excuse for being. Anyway, the story of her dance and the Baptist's death having ceased to be more than a picturesque story, there was no longer any particular emotional reaction to it and there was certainly no feeling of indignation toward the dancing girl. If she was a threat to a Christian's salvation, as the Middle Ages had regarded her, the Renaissance was having too good a time in this world to be much concerned about being saved in another one and simply did not care whether she was a menace or not: she was a beautiful woman, and that was all that mattered.

Artists found that her dance, Herod's feast, and the decapitation served as picturesque and innocuous enough subjects for their sumptuous pictures, which were concerned mainly with being sumptuous—not at all with passing judgment on the girl's character.

Among the first painters to reflect this new tolerance was the Florentine Giotto (1276¿-1337¿), often credited with being the first to introduce the new humanistic spirit into art.¹ He is said to have

¹Henry and Dana Lee Thomas, Living Biographies of Great Painters, p. 7.
been a devoted Franciscan; but he was essentially a worldly person, a peasant by temperament as well as by birth, 2 whose character was "rather distinguished for shrewd and genial strength than for sublimer or more ascetic qualities." 3 His painting, "The Dance of Salome," one of a series of frescoes he executed sometime before 1331 for the Peruzzi Chapel in the church of Santa Croce in Florence, 4 shows the daughter of Herodias playing on a lyre and smiling quietly, calmly, and rather sweetly as an executioner hands the head to Herod, seated at his banquet table. In another compartment of the same picture, she is shown handing the head to her mother, again with a completely guileless, docile, gentle expression which makes it impossible for one to feel any anger at the girl or to take any offense at the murder of the Baptist. Certainly Giotto felt no anger, took no offense. His purpose was "to create a work which appealed to the aesthetic sense, ... [not] to create a work of devotion," 5 and he evidently regarded Salome herself as a mere decorative detail in the dramatic scene, for he tried to present her as decoratively and sympathetically as he could.


4Ibid.

Giotto is credited also with the design from which one of his most distinguished contemporaries, the sculptor and architect Andrea Pisano (1270-1348?), executed a carving in the Baptistery at Florence. \(^6\) This "Salome Before Herod," dating from between 1330 and 1336, \(^7\) showing her dancing before three bearded old men, is similar in spirit to the painting at Santa Croce and represents the dancer again as graceful, quiet, and in every way sympathetic.

After Giotto there were many artists to depict Salome, among them his god-son and pupil Taddeo Gaddi (c. 1300-1366), whose "Salome's Dance," now housed in the Louvre, is strongly reminiscent of the master's work. \(^8\) Two generations later another Florentine, Masolino da Panicale (1383-1447), painting "The Feast of Herod" for the Baptistery of Castiglione d'Olona, emphasized the sumptuousness of the banquet and the spaciousness of the landscape in the background. Salome, placed far in one corner, as if she were an afterthought of the painter, is shown presenting the head to her mother. Although the girl's face lacks something of strength and character, her refined features and her smooth, milky skin are beautiful; and Herodias is attractive, too, assuming a wonderfully sweet, madonna-

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\(^6\) Basil de Selincourt, *Giotto*, p. 221.


\(^8\) Mary Knight Potter, *The Art of the Louvre*, p. 40.
like smile as she receives the gruesome trophy. One forgets the gruesome-ness of it all, though, because both of the women seem altogether pleasant and genteel.  

Although Fra Angelico (1387-1455) was hardly a worldly spirit like his contemporaries, he did share their love of pure beauty; and his Salome in "The Beheading of St. John," in the Louvre, is the "gentle, saintly type" that she never could have been except in the Renaissance. The artist himself, more of the Middle Ages than of the Renaissance in his complete and unquestioning devotion, was a saintly man who was said to have had no thought from early childhood but to consecrate his talents to the Lord and who, according to Vasari, "never took up his brush without first making a prayer." He did, though, take a naive delight in sumptuousness and material splendors and reveled in the magnificence of Herod's banquet table and Salome's opulent rose-colored gown; and he was a joyous soul, with a freshness of spirit that was very much of the Renaissance.

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9Early Italian Art, Series B of The University Prints, No. 130.

10Oliver S. Tonks, A History of Italian Painting, p. 63.


13C. J. Bulliet, Art Masterpieces, Figure 111.

14Potter, op. cit., p. 44.
Indeed, he could harbor no hatred in his childlike heart, even for a cold-blooded murderess and an enemy of the church like Salome; so, in spite of his piety, he treated her sympathetically and did not allow his picture, even with the platter bearing the head, to seem in any way gruesome or horrible. Salome herself is "a flower-like being," with an ethereal smile, placid, spiritual, even saintly, like one of his angels, "a bird . . . of Paradise, whose face . . . glows with beatitude."

Rather more sophisticated is the Salome of one of Angelico's fellow ecclesiastics in Florence, Fra Lippo Lippi (c. 1406-1469). Whereas the saintly Angelico could never draw a woman correctly, Vasari tells us, because, pure as he was, he had never seen a woman in the nude, any ineptness in Lippi's drawing was attributable only to defective technique. His amorous adventures were common talk in his day; and he won particular notoriety for seducing a nun, Lucrezia Buti, whom he later married, after the scandal attendant on the birth of their son forced the church to unfrock them. He had always tried

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16 Potter, op. cit., p. 42.
17 "Angelico," loc. cit.
18 Bulliet, loc. cit.
to take his monastic vows as lightly as possible, supplementing the income from his ecclesiastical benefices by forgery and various swindling enterprises as well as, more legitimately, by his many commissions for painting wealthy Florentines who were glad to serve as models for scenes from the New Testament, in which he regularly drew saints and members of the Holy Family from local persons whose appearance pleased him or whose money convinced him. He was seldom very discriminating about his models, sometimes perversely selecting the lowest characters from the town populace to represent the saintliest personages, but he did exercise some care about the women in his pictures and generally chose the prettiest faces he could find for his madonnas and other female characters. There were, naturally, many beautiful women among his acquaintances, many of them more sensual than saintly in appearance. His Salome, in "The Feast of Herod," painted for the Cathedral of Prato sometime after 1456, struck a happy medium, earthy and rather too lacking in any distinction of features for a saint but also too young and guileless.

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21 Helen Gardner, Art Through the Ages, p. 396.

22 "Lippi," Cyclopedia of Painters and Paintings, Vol. III.

23 Ibid.

24 Bryan, loc. cit.
for a courtesan. She is altogether gracious and charming, wholesome through and through, a little too plain to be really pretty but nevertheless extremely attractive, with a sweet, wistful, almost sad expression. Her figure is graceful, although badly drawn and somewhat misshapen; and she wears the luxurious garments dear to the Renaissance. At any rate, she is an altogether sympathetic person; and, as she dances before Herod's banquet table, one feels no implications of tragedy or crime. The scene is merely pleasant and charming. 25

Unlike Lippi but very much like Angelico, the Flemish painter Hans Memlinc (1430-1495) was a man of profound and genuine religious devotion 26 and also a sweet, sunny soul who delighted in a joyous representation of religious subjects, avoiding all that was painful or unpleasant. 26 Memlinc is said to have been wounded in the battle of Nancy in 1477 and to have been admitted to the Hospital of St. John at Bruges for treatment. He was so grateful for the care he received that he spent the next two years decorating the hospital with scenes from the life of the Baptist, 27 two of which, "Salome's Dance" and "The Execution," depict the dancer as an ethereal, angelic being,

25 Early Italian Art, No. 148.

26 Lorinda Munson Bryant, Pictures and Their Painters, p. 245.

27 "Memlinc," Cyclopedia of Painters and Engravers, Vol. III.
very strongly reminiscent of Angelico's "bird of paradise." She turns her gaze away from the severed head with a gesture of the utmost delicacy, too gentle to allow one to feel that she takes any offense at the sight. The spectator feels no offense, either, for the scene is curiously lacking in any suggestion of the horrible or sordid; and, in spite of the presence of the head, it impresses one only as pleasant and charming.

Memlinc introduces one element into Salome-painting which we have not seen before; he dresses the girl in Dutch costume, ermine-edged brocade gown, and tiny embroidered Dutch cap. The Renaissance never seemed to remember or to care that the real Salome was an Oriental princess. European artists conceived her in terms of their own rather limited experience; if an Italian painted her, she emerged as an unmistakably Italian type, wearing Italian garments, living in an Italian palace, with a bit of sunny Italian landscape in the background; if a German painted her, she would be a thoroughly Teutonic little Hausfrau, wearing a German costume and moving against a German background; or, if a Fleming painted her, she would be depicted as a true daughter of the Netherlands, in Flemish clothes and always with the little cap on her head. No one gave evidence of having considered what the Salome of history must have looked like, must have worn, must have had around her in the castle of Machaerus overlooking the Dead Sea.
This point is illustrated in a painting dating from about 1490, by Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494), in the choir of Santa Maria Novella in Florence, showing an opulent Florentine banquet, much like the wonderful Venetian feast in Veronese's "Marriage at Cana." Ghirlandaio shows a grandly spacious room, richly decorated in the Florentine style, with walnut wainscoting and the most elaborate inlaid work. The room is crowded with magnificently gowned Florentine nobility; and one feels that everyone who is anyone in Florence must have turned out for this elegant soirée, surely one of the most brilliant events of the season. There is a corps of smartly costumed servants darting about the room, offering costly and exotic foods to the guests; and, if one studies the picture carefully, taking time to notice details, he is startled to perceive that one of the servants is carrying a man's head and offering it for the approval of a bejeweled old nobleman seated at the central banquet table. Now it becomes apparent that this party is supposed to represent Herod's famous banquet and that a rather listless young woman standing near the central table is Salome. She is a graceful figure with a sweet, demure, madonna-like, and rather expressionless face; and she is sumptuously gowned. However, she is only one of many attractive

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29 Early Italian Art, No. 196.
women in the throng; and the business of the servant's offering the head to Herod is only a minor episode. The artist plainly took little interest in the Bible story except as an excuse for a picture showing what he found most gracious and beautiful in the life of his city; and Salome, Herod, and John proved to be a comparatively trivial part of the scene as a whole. Anyone seeing the picture without knowing what it is supposed to represent might very well never notice them in it at all.

They were taken no more seriously by an unknown French painter of the late fifteenth century, whose "Salome Presenting to Herod the Head of St. John Baptist" hangs in the Musée of Aix-en-Provence. The artist's only concern seems to have been to portray the splendor of the French nobility of his time; for he lavished much greater effort on painting the costumes, the banquet table, and the ornate banquet hall than on imparting character to any of the personages at the table. Herod is utterly blank, seeming not to be aware of anything that is going on, certainly not to have any reaction to the head which Salome has placed on the table before him. Herodias holds a knife over the head and appears to be about to cut into it, but her face is so passive that she might only be slicing watermelons, for all the emotion she

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30 Pijoan, op. cit., p. 119.

31 Wölfflin, op. cit., p. 28.
registers. She gazes vaguely into space, without fixing her eyes on anything. Salome is equally noncommittal. Her body is badly drawn and distorted but graceful, nevertheless; and her face, though not beautiful, does have patrician refinement. Like her mother, she stares into space, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, thinking nothing, knowing nothing, caring nothing. The scene certainly offers the artist a remarkable opportunity to characterize his personages, make their faces express fear, horror, disgust, hatred, malign triumph, an infinite variety of emotions and shades of feeling; but he lets the opportunity go, drawing the faces carelessly and indifferently and concentrating all his efforts on the opulent costumes, the rich banquet table, and the elegant banquet hall.  

We have seen Salome now as an absent-minded Italian signorina and an absent-minded French demoiselle. In an unsigned illustration for the Passional of Jacobus de Voragine, published at Nuremberg in 1488, we see her as an absent-minded German Mädchen. She is a frightfully gawky woman, with long, spidery legs and a remarkably homely face, which betrays no sign of any emotion at all as she holds a platter to receive the head from the executioner. This worthy, a Tyl Ulenspiegel in appearance, seems rather amused, as if he were wondering why anyone would want a head in a charger. Indeed, Salome

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does not appear really to want it; in fact, she shows no enthusiasm, no pleasure or interest in having it. Herod manifests a slight, vague interest, but without any real conviction, as if he were merely trying to be polite. Herodias, however, is very happy, and holds out her hands eagerly to receive the charger; but her smile is in no way evil or gloating, and she is as pleasant and guileless as if she were only going to examine a pretty new clothing material.

The Flemish Quentin Matsys (1466-1530) took the opportunity to show a group of sumptuously dressed Flemish nobility in his "Martyrdom of John the Baptist," painted in 1508 as the altarpiece for the chapel of the Corporation of Joiners in the Cathedral of Notre Dame at Antwerp and now housed in the galleries of the Antwerp Museum. Matsys did not allow all of the horrific significance of his story to escape him, for he made Herod raise his arms heavenward with an expression of intense dread and he allowed Herodias to avert her glance from the head which Salome has just placed on the table before her and to look at it only out of a corner of one eye, timidly, as if she felt some normal revulsion for the gruesome object. Her revulsion surely is not very great, however, for she is extending her right hand to touch the head, and her expression is placid and rather languorous.

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almost somnolent. Both she and her daughter are dignified, beautiful women, seeming to radiate sweetness and gentleness; and neither of them betrays any emotion. Some critics have detected a hint of deprecation in the gesture with which Salome places the head on the table; but, if the hint is there, it is subtle to the point of imperceptibility, and the artist obviously took greater pains with the costumes and the banquet table than with the emotions of the personages. Even Herod's expressions of horror are rendered carelessly and rather thoughtlessly, as if the painter did not share or comprehend the horror himself but incorporated it into his composition merely to give added drama or motion or something else equally superficial.

Bernardino Luini (1475-1531), the Milanese painter, found Salome a particularly congenial subject, representing her in no less than five pictures, housed now in the Uffizi Gallery at Florence, the Madrid Museum, the Barromeo in Milan, the Louvre, and the Vienna Museum. Luini was the most distinguished of Da Vinci's disciples and all of his Salomes are distinguished by Leonardesque features, deep, enigmatic eyes, sensual lips, and the famous subtle, mysterious smile, lacking only the depth of meaning that it has in the works.
of the master. Sometimes it seems beatific, sometimes a bit mischievous; but it is always languid, gentle, placid, somewhat grave, reticent, refined, self-assured, aloof, mysterious, and fascinating. She is a woman of the noblest beauty; and she is conscious and confident of her beauty, not in a way that implies any conceit, but, rather, in a way that gives her assurance, poise, elegance, distinction of bearing, dignity, and suavity. Luini gowns her, too, in the most magnificent attire; and she wears it superbly, like a queen. The painter, whose "serene, contented, and happy mind . . . naturally express[e] itself in forms of grace and beauty,"\(^{38}\) has spared no effort to make Salome the most beautiful woman he could conceive and to place her in the most magnificent surroundings he could imagine. Sometimes these are not without their gruesome elements; the painting in the Louvre, for example, is a real dramatic shocker, with the Baptist's head draining great streams of blood as it is placed on a platter by a long, hairy arm thrust forth from a curtain which conceals the body of the executioner. But the vivid crimson of the gore has its decorative value; and the spectator feels no more offense than Salome appears to feel. She turns aside her face so that she does not actually have to see the head; but she shows no horror or even distaste, behaving as if it were something mildly unpleasant but quickly and easily

to be forgotten. One feels that she is rather above or beyond ordinary human emotion, with her withdrawn, aloof expression and the "pure, delicate sweetness of countenance which is attained only by the conquest of passion," and that amazing smile, infinitely wise, implying an intimate conversance with mysteries beyond human ken—a smile wistfully disdainful, as if emotion were something rather vulgar and best to be regarded with amusement. This is not to say that she seems in any way hard or cruel. She is neither; she might easily be a madonna if she were not bearing her gruesome trophy. She seems completely gentle and kind, but she retains an Olympian detachment, remains in a realm of pure beauty that will not be clouded by the recognition of anything that is ugly or unpleasant.

It remained for Titian (1477-1576), the great Venetian master, to give what is probably the most completely representative and also, artistically, the most distinguished expression of the Renaissance conception of Salome. Titian has left us two remarkable canvases of the subject, very different in their treatment of the dancer but both typifying the spirit of the Renaissance. The earlier of the two, in the Doria Gallery of Rome, painted between 1512 and 1515, and

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39 Mary Innes, *Schools of Painting*, p. 147.

formerly attributed to Giorgione and Pordenone, represents the madonna type we have often seen before, but never before with such sweetness, purity, and simplicity of expression. The artist has lavished upon her every charm, every beauty he could conceive of; and he, perhaps more than any other artist who ever lived, excelled in the creation of beautiful women. He left innumerable glorious paintings of lovely women; and the Salome of the Doria Gallery is regarded as one of the loveliest of them all —very young, unsophisticated, fresh and glowing with youth and beauty, radiating purity of heart and mind. She is, moreover, a woman of great gentility, nobly born and gently reared. She is rather timid, because she is still very young, just blossoming into womanhood; but she has already acquired a patrician calm, which, when she has attained full maturity, will surely make her a woman of magnificent dignity, queenly poise and assurance.

This adorable creature, by a terrifying paradox, holds in her arms the charger bearing the head of the Baptist; and, although one would expect such a gentle maiden to collapse with horror at the very thought of it, she pays no heed to it at all. The hair from the Baptist's head falls across her naked arm, and one would think the touch

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41R. C. Witt, One Hundred Masterpieces of Painting, p. 115.
42Edith Harwood, Notable Pictures in Rome, p. 240.
43Witt, loc. cit.
of it would be intolerable, but she does not even notice it. She turns her head away from the object in the charger, but the gesture suggests nothing more than timidity or perhaps modesty; she certainly feels no fear or horror, no revulsion or even mild offense. Yet she is not cold or cruel, either. Her face is infinitely sweet, gentle, innocent, honest, and wholesome; and no one could dream of accusing her of any feeling, any motive that is at all unbecoming to a cultivated young woman. Titian would never have thought of clouding her beauty by allowing the presence of the head to make her unhappy; he evidently found nothing horrible about it himself, for he made it a self-portrait and took pains to make himself appear to the best advantage, looking every bit the dignified and distinguished gentleman he was.

By his time the Renaissance was at its height and, with it, the spirit of worldliness, the preoccupation with earthly and earthy things, and any religious significance the story of Salome and John might have retained for some of the earlier painters, like Memlinc and Fra Angelico, was now, in Venice, at least, completely forgotten. Religion itself was no more than "a delightful pastime, an occasion for festivals and pageants," and, to Titian, an excuse for pictures showing "the splendour of beautiful flesh in contrast with draperies".

44 Wölfflin, op. cit., p. 60.

45 Estelle M. Hurll, Titian, p. ix.
and in pleasant landscapes." The earth and the enjoyment of its beauties were all that mattered now; and a man like Titian took profound joy and pride in being alive, in having good health, and simply in being a man, for there was intense awareness that man was a wonderful creature. Titian, therefore, devoted himself to picturing men and women in the most exalted terms, creatures of great physical beauty, idealized types, radiating youth and good health and pride in being alive. He did not bother unduly about the psychology of his subjects, although he could be, on occasion, a great master of characterization; and he painted a beautiful woman simply as a thing of beauty, "a sensuous color scheme," as one critic has put it. Salome was no different from his other subjects: she was a beautiful woman and meant to be admired as such. Moreover, since the object in her hands had ceased to have any significance at all beyond being a traditional accessory of the scene, there was no good reason why she or anyone else should be shocked or offended by its presence. It was only a part of the artist's composition, and as such

46 Haldane Macfall, A History of Painting, II, 120.
47 Ibid., p. 150.
48 Edith Harwood, Notable Pictures in Florence, p. 273.
49 Innes, op. cit., p. 134.
50 Harwood, loc. cit.
ought to be made as attractive as possible—at least this was the atti-
tude of the Renaissance—and since Salome was no longer anything
more than a symbol of feminine beauty, there was no reason why
the artist should not make her a beautiful naive young girl if he
chose, instead of a beautiful sophisticated, mature one.

The second of Titian's Salomes, in the Prado at Madrid,\textsuperscript{51} is
much more sophisticated and mature than the earlier one. She is
richly and darkly clad, like a magnificent courtesan, very voluptuous,
her full sensual lips open, breathless, panting with overwhelming
passion, earthy, carnal almost, yet in no way vulgar or coarse, for
she has a dignity, a patrician elegance that makes her seem like a
passionate goddess whom only a vulgarly unimaginative or a sacri-
legious person could dare to criticize.

The picture has an interesting history. The model was the art-
ist's beloved daughter Lavinia, who served her father as model many
times and for many subjects, from Venus\textsuperscript{52} to the Virgin Mary,\textsuperscript{53} be-
tween whom Titian would have seen little difference, both of them being
beautiful women. Lavinia herself was plump and not really distin-
guished enough in appearance to be called beautiful, perhaps, but she
was rather pretty and certainly very attractive. She had the appearance

\textsuperscript{51}J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, \textit{Titian: His Life and
Times}, II, 141.

\textsuperscript{52}Macfall, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 142.

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., p. 136.
of a girl of good birth and genteel upbringing; and she had a wonderfully sweet, open expression. Moreover, she had a sunny disposition, that bespoke robust health and wholesome mind; and she radiated vitality and cheery good spirits. In 1559 Titian had painted her holding aloft a bowl of fruit and looking back over her shoulder with a smile to see the dish admired. The pose was playful and charming and utterly innocent, and the picture, now in the Berlin Museum, proved so pleasing that virtually the same thing was painted once more, but this time with Lavinia representing Salome and the fruit in the dish being replaced by the head of the Baptist. This revision was purely a matter of art for art's sake; and the picture was no more than a picture, an artistic composition. The artist surely found nothing objectionable about allowing his darling daughter to be represented as the infamous Galilean, because Salome was no longer really infamous and, even if she had been, her ill fame would not have been held against her by Titian, who, although acknowledged by his contemporaries to be completely fastidious where his own morals were concerned, still chose his friends from among people who were always interesting and attractive but sometimes notorious for their moral laxness.

54 Hurll, op. cit., p. 41.  
55 Ibid.  
56 S. S. Bensusan, Titian, p. 61.
When physical beauty and material splendor had become all-important to the Renaissance, the value of deeper qualities was forgotten, and, in the later years of the period, artists were thinking of beauty only in a very superficial way, taking little pains with characterization, making faces beautiful in a conventionalized way, like masks, revealing and implying no mind or thought or feeling behind them. Andrea del Sarto (1486-1531) was guilty of such superficiality in his three pictures of Salome, painted for the Chiostro della Scalzo in Florence in 1522-1523. Del Sarto was not a man of much depth himself, and he spent his life in a round of expensive parties and petty intrigues that involved him in debt so deeply that he had to stoop to embezzlement to recover himself and satisfy the demands of his beautiful but selfish and shallow wife, who deserted him anyway when he fell into disgrace. The wife, Lucrezia, often served as his model, and her delicate but rather soulless beauty was typical of all his work. She did not pose for the Salome, but these pictures present the same general type—languid, graceful, rather beautiful, but with the deadest, dullest expression, conveying nothing but a profound calm, perhaps ennui, but more likely only the complete absence of


59 Pijoan, op. cit., p. 198.
thought or emotion. Salome dances before Herod, receives the head from the executioner, places it on the banquet table, and preserves an attitude of stony, mask-like indifference or absent-mindedness throughout. She arouses no feeling in the spectator, either, no sympathy or pity or revulsion—nothing at all, except perhaps mild wonder that any mind could be so vacant.

Her dancing is curious, by the way, in that the artist represents her standing absolutely still, like a run-down automaton. The Italian painters had always made her dancing rather subdued, partly because they encumbered her with such an overwhelming weight of sumptuous clothing that she would have found movement extremely difficult and also partly because vigorous motion might have detracted from the well-bred calm they tried to impart to her. North of the Alps her dance was conceived in terms familiar to the individual artist’s homeland. The Flemish Karel van Mander (1548-1606), for example, represented her engaged in a stately minuet or pavane with a handsome young partner in velvet doublet; and Hans Sachs (1494-1576), the famous German poet and dramatist, in his play "The Decapitation of St. John," had her doing the gaillarde, a "modish dance."

The Florentine Carlo Dolci (1616-1686) had her weighted down by costly robes again in his painting, now in the Dresden Gallery.

60 "The House of Herod in History and Art," loc. cit.
representing the effort of the very closing years of the Renaissance and carrying the weakness and superficiality of Del Sarto to intolerable extremes. Dolci's figures were always sweet, ethereal, placid, sober, and soulless—beautiful, of course, in their own cloying, sentimental way, but insipid and without any real depth. Salome, in his hands, became like all the others, a bloodless thing, completely drained of any vitality she had ever had. It remained for the nineteenth century to restore her vitality; and, if with it she regained much of the ill fame she had had during the Middle Ages, that was small price to pay.

Actually, she had never lost her notoriety entirely, even in the Renaissance. The Reformation brought a revival of piety reminiscent of the Middle Ages, and at least two leaders of the movement went on record as disapproving of the representation of Salome in art: Erasmus (1466?-1536) feared that it led to "unnecessary nudities," and Jean Molanus, a professor at the University of Louvain, wrote in 1568 that he felt it implied "indecencies" of a sort that ought not to be implied. And even among the artists themselves, there were a few

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64 G. G. Coulton, Art of the Reformation, p. 385.

65 Emile Cammaerts, Rubens: Painter and Diplomat, p. 94.
who treated the dancer in a most unflattering way, making her an altogether unsympathetic figure, not at all like the ravishing creations of Titian and Luini.

The great Florentine sculptor Donatello (1386-1466), in his gilt-bronze relief of "The Banquet of Herod," executed for the font of San Giovanni at Siena in 1425, indicated that he shared the interest of his contemporaries in the spectacle of humanity—but with a notable difference. Donatello did not stand in awe of physical beauty like most others of his day; in fact, beauty as such was a matter of complete indifference to him. He always had to probe beneath, examine the mind of man, ponder his psychology, and expose whatever he found, no matter how ugly or unpleasant that might be. His work was often brutally realistic: his figures misshapen and ugly; his faces, betraying the minds behind them, revolting to see. He represented Herodias as a frowzy, thick-set hyena-type, whose viciousness seems to show in every wrinkle of her tough, old face as she berates Herod for his weakness in shrinking from the frightful, gory thing which has been placed on the table before him. Herod, for his part, is a gouty, stupid, bleary-eyed old sot; and Salome comes off no

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68 Wölflin, op. cit., p. 16.
better herself. Her body is graceful and shapely, and her light, loose
gown displays her charms to excellent advantage; but her face is
harsh and ugly, coarse, hard, with the brutalized look of the seasoned
prostitute who has long since lost all illusions and ideals. She looks
at the Baptist's head with an appearance of complete indifference to
it, suggesting that perhaps she has become indifferent to everything.
Certainly she retains no freshness about her, for she has learned les-
sons that one would be better off not knowing. One of these is how to
keep her place, and her bearing suggests the prostitute's curious blend
of brazen arrogance and menial servility. A most unpleasant person
she is, by any standards.

The Salome in "The Feast of Herod" in the altar of St. Regulus
at the Cathedral of Lucca, carved by the Florentine Matteo Civitali
(1435-1501), is scarcely more sympathetic. Although she is a grace-
ful figure, with particularly exquisite little feet, and does retain some-
thing of youthful attractiveness, her expression is hard, ruthless,
cynical, coarse, and brutalized. She fairly radiates assurance; and
well she may, for she is evidently a powerful personality, who has
long since proved her ability to dominate Herod and his court when
she chooses. 69

As portrayed in two woodcuts by the great German engraver
Albrecht Dürer (1472-1528), she has nothing attractive about her.

69 Early Italian Art, No. 487.
Dürer was a man of unimpeachable piety, something of a leader in the Reformation, and a personal friend of Luther and Melancthon; and he could scarcely have been sympathetic to Salome and her irreligious and destructive impulses. He was never interested in pure beauty as were the Italian painters; he was attracted rather to the weird and grotesque, the quaint or fantastic in life, and actually seemed to prefer the homely to the beautiful. It has been said that no artist ever had less feeling for the voluptuousness of the female figure; and, seeing his women with their fat hips and sagging bellies, one believes that the comment must be altogether justified. Salome proves to be one of the homeliest of his women. She appears in two woodcuts now in the collection of the British Museum, "The Beheading of St. John" (1510) and "Salome Before Herod" (1511). In the first of these, the truncated body of the saint is still leaning against the stone chopping block. The executioner has just picked up the head and is placing it on Salome's platter. She shows no revulsion but actually leans forward to see the thing more closely, staring in a

70 Gardner, op. cit., p. 454.
72 Ibid.
74 Douglas Percy Bliss, A History of Wood-Engraving, p. 117.
75 Albrecht Dürer, Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer, edited by T. D. Barlow, Figure 82.
76 Ibid., Figure 83.
stupid, uncomprehending manner, as if she were at a loss to understand the enormity of the deed she has perpetrated.

In the second engraving, Herod and Herodias are seated at table and Salome places the platter before them. The head of the Baptist seems to grin back at the hideously grinning head of a half-eaten fish in another dish on the table. Herod, old and rather stupid, appears nauseated; and Herodias, too, frowns as if offended, but her frown seems only the coarse woman's grotesquely affected aversion to coarse or unpleasant things. She is coarse, fat, puffy, double-chinned, a brothel queen in appearance, like Maupassant's Ball of Fat. Salome, standing before the table and quietly waiting for further instructions, is even more coarse in appearance than her mother. She smiles gently, with amiable idiocy, and seems to feel no pleasure or pain or anything. Her body is lumpish and ugly in the usual Dürer-esque manner, with huge hips and bosom, too-slim waist, too-thick neck, stooped shoulders; and her face is coarse, nondescript, distinguished mainly by her very long nose, which droops down over her mouth.

The Dutch Jacob Cornelisz (1475?–1553?), on the other hand, made her pretty and very intelligent in his "Salome" (1524) in the Hague Museum. 77 She is a typically Dutch type, full-faced, with

77 David C. Preyer, The Art of the Netherland Galleries, p. 16.
round forehead, small eyes, small mouth, rather chubby figure, attractive, if not striking or beautiful in appearance. She is poised and somewhat haughtily reserved; and somehow she seems hateful, unnatural, and monstrous, because of her horrible coldness and lack of emotion. She does not look at the platter in her hands or at the thing in the platter; but she seems quite aware of what it is and accepts it with perfect calm. She is absolutely ruthless and terribly, searingly cold. One feels that she must have planned with great care and impeccable logic how she would get the head; and, now that she has it, she takes no joy in it, has no strong feeling about it or anything else. If she is prompted by a desire for revenge, it is a cold, joyless revenge that a human being can scarcely understand.

In the later years of the Renaissance, Salome was forgotten to some extent, although she continued to appear in the arts from time to time during the following two hundred years. We have, for example, a record of a court danseuse of eighteenth-century France who brought "Salome's Dance" up to date by the introduction of arabesques, entr'chats, and other clichés of the ballet. But the daughter of Herodias was not to regain anything like her old vogue until the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century found fresh delight in an exotic tale of seduction and murder in the Orient.

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78 Flaig, loc. cit.
CHAPTER IV

SALOME IN MODERN TIMES

After two hundred years of neglect in the arts, Salome regained her popularity during the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century, because then the exotic qualities of her story were appreciated as never before, these being the very qualities the Romantics adored and sought everywhere to find. She found particularly great favor in the later years of the century among the group of Romantic artists who called themselves "Decadents" and strove mightily to live up to the title, affecting the most morbid and perverse tastes in all things, extreme unconventional behavior, dissolute or perverted morals, strange and violent neuroses, desolate ennui, and general maladjustment to the world about them. 1 Somehow they found Salome especially appealing to their perverse tastes. Like true Romantics, they were naturally fascinated by the idea of a woman's fatal beauty holding a mighty ruler in thrall and bringing death to her enemies; and, moreover, they were delighted by the exotic setting of the story, in a period remote in history, "mysterious and swooning in the far-off mist of the

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centuries, and in a far, strange country, where the very air—a sort of distilled incense of opium, so the Romantics must have fancied—was heavy with subtle intrigue, exquisite cruelty, cosmic sensuality. If the cruelty was, in Salome's case, less exquisite than gruesome, with the Baptist's head being exhibited on a platter at Herod's birthday feast, the gruesomeness of it offended no one among the Romantic Decadents, to whom the gruesome and grotesque were really rather beguiling; they adored almost anything that was in any way unusual.

Salome's first appearances in the century were innocent enough, in expanded versions of the Bible story like Gustave Nicolai's libretto for an oratorio, John the Baptist, published at Leipsic in 1835, and the American Joseph Converse Heywood's dramatic poem Salome, the Daughter of Herodias (1862), both of which were merely melodramatic and sentimental dramatizations of the Biblical story, giving some attention to local color and allowing a few minor additions to the Scriptural account, such as, in the Nicolai piece, having Salome and Herodias fall prey to remorse at their iniquitous deeds. 3

The first important representation of Salome in the century, however, was anything but innocent. This was the 'Salomé' of the French painter Alexandre Georges Henri Regnault (1843-1871), a

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2 J. K. Huysmans, Against the Grain, translated by John Howard, p. 94.

3 Lawrence Gilman, Strauss' "Salome": A Guide to the Opera, p. 25.
painting first exhibited in Paris in 1870 and now housed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Curiously enough, Regnault did not think of identifying the girl in the picture as Salome until after he had been at work on the piece for two years, during which time he referred to his subject merely as "An African Girl" and later, more suggestively, as "The Favorite Slave." His only thought, he said, was to express the "caressing ferociousness" of a woman who was a "sort of tame, black panther . . . always savage and cruel." He succeeded well enough to arouse a substantial amount of Romantic excitement in Parisian salons; and one of his most enthusiastic—and voluble—admirers, the poet and art critic Théophile Gautier, was inspired to set down a lengthy and rhapsodic description of the painting:

Salome has just finished her salacious dance, and according to the advice of Herodias, her mother, she claims for her reward the head of St. John the Baptist . . . She is seated on one of those inlaid stools on which in the Orient dishes are placed. The artist has given her the physiognomy of a strange character which does not resemble the Hebraic type, and still less the Grecian regularity. In Spain they would describe her . . . [as] muy gitana, which means endowed with a bizarre and savage grace and a fascination diabolically irresistible, even with a touch of ugliness; for correct beauty is not necessary to these charmers. A forest of coal-black hair in rebellious disorder, all crumpled up, frames her visage and falls in heavy locks on her shoulders. . . . In the abundant hair there is something wild, barbarous, bestial, that contrasts with the delicate and


5 "Regnault's 'Salomé,'" The Literary Digest, LIII (August 26, 1916), 456.
almost infantile features, colored under their amber pallor with a faint pinkish glow. . . . The eyes, cruelly and tranquilly voluptuous, look out and seem to await the sign of consent. Salome holds on her knees a great platter of repoussé copper, on which is a kandjar, a great knife with ivory handle and a scabbard of red velvet with bands of silver. . . . The Oriental indifference to human life has never been better painted than in this girl whose hand plays with the handle of the kandjar while the other rests on her hips.  

To the student of Salome-lore, Regnault's painting is significant as the earliest example of the modern practice of emphasizing the sexual implications of the story, a practice which has sometimes led to remarkable extremes, as in the works of Beardsley and Strauss. Regnault did not go to such extremes; but his sluttish little hoyden, smiling with impudent pride in her sexual powers, is as brazen an animal as any the following decades could create. Salome, in this painting, has already become identified with or, perhaps, symbolic of a sensuality that is vicious, pathological—the product of a culture of immature, over-agitated, and exhausted nervous systems, a culture that would go to any lengths in its despairing effort to avoid having to come to grips with reality.

Although her reputation was already established, it was not until 1876, when Gustave Moreau exhibited his five exotic paintings of Salome, that the dancer really came into her own as the Decadent darling of the Romantic Movement. Moreau showed her dancing clad

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6Ibid., pp. 456-457.
only in a few sequined veils and a gorgeous gem-laden girdle—a slender, graceful, delicate young woman, exquisitely beautiful, but supremely voluptuous and perverse, cruel, and sick unto death with the agony of a great, irresistible passion, an ungovernable and implacable desire.

These paintings made a profound impression upon the artist's contemporaries—profound, alarming, maddening almost, to a degree that is scarcely conceivable today, in a less Romantic climate than that of the nineteenth century. Writers were inspired to describe the paintings in the most lavishly lavandered words at their command; and the descriptions, perhaps even more than the paintings themselves, established Salome's exotic reputation once and for all.

Moreau's biographer, Ary Renan, composed ecstatic phrases in polished French: "Elle entre, et le vent du Desir la suit. ... Dans les plis de ses voiles l'iniquité réside." Even the usually staid Edinburgh Review permitted itself a burst of impassioned verbiage:

She is high priestess of a sensuality that includes but transcends the senses. Her passion is a flame that sears without heat, a corruption cold as the snow, whose ceremonial of seduction bears almost the semblance of a consecrated rite. ... She trenches upon the impersonalities of mystic types and mythical eras: upon the Sphinx, with her inscrutable secret; upon Medusa, with her monstrous beauty and her infection of death. She is a primitive force, distilled in the poison of oriental sensuality, vitiated, isolated, tragic—a leper wearing the death-mask of a Helen.

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7 "The House of Herod in History and Art," The Edinburgh Review, CCXV (April, 1912), 308.

8 Ibid., p. 309.
By far the most famous description, though, as well as the most perceptive and literary, was that which Joris-Karl Huysmans included in his novel _A Rebours_ (Against the Grain, 1884). This volume, the Bible of Decadence, concerns the life of one Jean des Esseintes, a neurasthenic young nobleman, who somehow embodies all of the most salient characteristics of the Romantic Decadent. He is eternally seeking "the rare, the unusual, and the perverse in sensation, which he attempts to find in perfume, jewels, music, paintings, foods, the love of circus acrobats, and Latin literature of the Middle Ages."\(^9\)

And the paintings in which he attempts to find his rare and perverse sensations are, naturally enough, two of Moreau's canvases of Salome:

> At night, [he] used to sink into revery before one of them... conceived in this fashion:... In the perverse odor of the perfumes; in the overheated atmosphere of the temple, Salome, her left arm outstretched in a gesture of command, her right arm drawn back and holding a large lotus on a level with her face, slowly advances on her toes... Her face is meditative, solemn, almost august, as she commences the lascivious dance that will awaken the slumbering senses of old Herod. Diamonds scintillate against her glistening skin. Her bracelets, her girdles, her rings flash. On her triumphal robe, seamed with pearls, flowered with silver and laminated with gold, the breastplate of jewels, each link of which is a precious stone, flash serpents of fire against the pallid flesh, delicate as a tea-rose; its jewels like splendid insects with dazzling elytra, veined with carmine, dotted with yellow gold, diapered with blue steel, speckled with peacock green.

... This conception of Salome, so haunting to artists and poets, had obsessed Des Esseintes for years. How often had he read in the... Bible... of... the beheading of the Baptist! How often had he fallen into reverie, as he read these lines... But neither Saint Matthew, nor Saint Mark... had emphasized the maddening charms and depravities of the dancer... not to be grasped by vulgar and materialistic minds, accessible only to disordered and volcanic intellects made visionaries by their neuroticism.

In Gustave Moreau's work, conceived independently of the Testament themes, Des Esseintes at last saw realized the superhuman and exotic Salome of his dreams. She was no longer the mere performer who wrests a cry of desire and of passion from an old man by a perverted twisting of her loins, who destroys the energy and breaks the will of a king by trembling breasts and quivering belly. She became, in a sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, of accursed Beauty, distinguished from all others by the catalepsy which stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, baneful, like the Helen of antiquity, fatal to all who approach her, all who behold her, all whom she touches...

In this insensate and pitiless image, in this innocent and dangerous idol, the eroticism and terror of mankind were depicted... Refined and savage,... execrable and exquisite, she... energetically awakened the dullest senses of man, ... surely bewitched and subdued his power of will, with the charm of a tall venereal flower, cultivated in sacrilegious beds, in impious hothouses.

With such rhapsodies being composed on the subject of her charms, this tall venereal flower truly blossomed out; and Salome became very much à la mode with artists in all fields of creative endeavor. Even such a determined anti-Romantic as the great French naturalistic writer Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) fell prey to the fascinations of the exotic Orient, as he had done once before (Salammbô, 1862), and

retold Salome's story in "Hérodiade," one of the collection of Trois Contes published in 1877. Flaubert followed the Biblical narrative closely, amplifying it, if not really altering it, with vivid descriptions of Oriental splendors like the rich appointments of Machaerus and the exotic dishes served at Herod's banquet-table, but devoting scarcely any attention to characterization except to create a general impression of exotic Oriental cruelty. Salome herself is represented as a mere automaton, intruding upon the banquet, dancing, demanding the head of the Baptist, receiving it, and departing again without once betraying any feeling or thought whatsoever. Flaubert makes it clear that she is only a tool of the vengeful Herodias ("Hérodiade" in the French), "who for many months . . . had caused [her] to be instructed in dancing and other arts of pleasing, with the sole idea of bringing her to Machaerus and presenting her to the Tetrarch, so that he should fall in love with her fresh young beauty and feminine wiles"\(^\text{11}\) and thus be brought under the girl's sway and, through Salome, under her mother's. The scheme is all the mother's, though, for Salome takes so little interest in it that when she is requesting the head of the Baptist, she has to pause and consider in order to recall the name of the man Herodias has told her to have beheaded. She certainly has no notion of the enormity of the thing she is

\(^{11}\) Gustave Flaubert, "Herodias," The Complete Works of Gustave Flaubert, IV, 47.
doing, for she smiles amiably while she is pronouncing her request and she speaks "with an air of almost childlike naïveté."\(^{12}\)

The Romantics of the nineteenth century often made a great point of Salome's extreme youth, representing her as a very young girl indeed, no older than sixteen, at the most. Somehow they never seemed to be troubled by the rather jarring paradox of this, the child assuming such precocious and extreme sensuality—a grotesque blend of the enfant terrible and the femme fatale. Actually, the very grotesqueness of it was appealing to this mad era, when it was good taste to act in bad taste, so long as one acted with strong conviction.

At any rate, Flaubert emphasizes the extreme youth of the dancer, who retains a certain coltish awkwardness in her motions at times, who takes a childish delight in examining a basket of jewelry and rich clothing-stuffs, and who appears so beguilingly guileless as she orders the Baptist's head off.

Youthful as she is, though, she is already a spectacular beauty, "as graceful in outline as if carved from ivory by Polyclitus,"\(^{13}\) and her beauty enthralles every man who lays eyes on her. The aging Herod, seeing her for the first time, "lean[s] forward, his eyes kindled, his breath quickened."\(^{14}\) And her appearance at the banquet is quite

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 48. \(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 35. \(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 14.
literally devastating in effect, as is indicated in the following excerpt from the description by Flaubert:

A murmur of surprise and admiration swept through the multitude. . . . The tetrarch watched her, lost in a voluptuous reverie, and he thought no more of . . . Herodias. . . . All eyes were fixed upon Salome . . . her whole audience,—the nomads, accustomed to a life of privation and abstinence, the Roman soldiers, expert in debaucheries, the avaricious publicans, and even the crabbed, elderly priests—gazed upon her with dilated nostrils. . . . The tetrarch . . . leaned toward the flying figure, and in a voice half choked with the voluptuous sighs of a mad desire, he sighed: "Come to me! Come!" . . . The burning gaze of that multitude of men was concentrated upon her. 15

And the dance with which she accomplishes this mass dilation of nostrils is perhaps the most curious thing about Flaubert's story, for it recalls the medieval period, with its curious conception of the dance as a series of contortionist stunts. Flaubert was born in Rouen, where he spent most of his life; and he is sometimes thought to have found the inspiration for "Hérodiade" in the stone carvings of Salome above the porch of the cathedral there, showing the dancer engaged in a hand-stand. 16 At any rate, he chose to incorporate similar tricks into his version of the dance:

The damsel began to dance before the tetrarch. Her slender feet took dainty steps to the rhythm of a flute and a pair of Indian bells. Her round white arms seemed ever beckoning and striving to entice to her side some youth who

15 Ibid., pp. 45-48.

16 Gustave Flaubert, Trois Contes, edited by Minnie M. Miller, p. xxii.
was fleeing from her allurements. . . Presently . . . her bosom heaved with sighs, and her whole being expressed profound languor, although it was not clear whether she sighed for an absent swain or was expiring of love in his embrace. With half-closed eyes and quivering form, she caused mysterious undulations to flow downward over her whole body, like rippling waves, while her face remained impassive, and her twinkling feet still moved in their intricate steps. . . . And now the graceful dancer appeared transported with the very delirium of love and passion. . . . Her arms, her feet, her clothing even, seemed to emit streams of magnetism, that set the spectators' blood on fire. Suddenly . . . Salome . . . paused in her rhythmic dance, placed her feet wider apart, and without bending the knees, . . . swayed her little body downward, so that her chin touched the floor. . . . Then, like a flash, she threw herself upon the palms of her hands, while her feet rose straight up in the air. In this bizarre pose she moved about upon the floor like a gigantic beetle; then stood motionless. The nape of her neck formed a right angle with her vertebrae. 17

Flaubert's exotic description proved an especially imposing contribution to the growing wealth of notorious legend surrounding the dancing girl; and the publication of Trois Contes was followed immediately by increased interest in Salome among artists in all mediums. In 1880 Richard Hengist Horne, the British essayist and dramatist, brought forth a tragedy in blank verse entitled John the Baptist, or The Valor of the Soul, adhering closely to the Scriptural story in most details but also giving special attention to the irresistible charms of the dancer, characterized now as "a goddess clad in nought but odorous clouds." 18

More important was the opera Hérodiade, of Jules Massenet (1842-1912), produced at Brussels in 1881. The librettists, Messrs. Milliet, Grémont, and Zanardini, claimed that the piece was based on Flaubert's story; but, although both works feature characters named Salomé, Hérodiade, Hérode, and Jean, and both conclude with the execution of Jean, any resemblance between the opera and the short story is negligible if not absolutely imperceptible. The young Massenet, who later was to make a career of portraying famous courtesans, was thinking only of insuring success for this early work by borrowing the title of Flaubert's recently published tale and in this way, he hoped, capitalizing on the fame of the great novelist. Treated freely, or indeed altered past the point of recognition in order to remove all objectionable features and to contrive striking theatrical effects, the story did provide an opportunity for many picturesque Oriental stage pictures and for exotic choruses and ballets, and in general seemed to be promising material from which to arrange an evening of pleasant, genteel entertainment in the theater; and Massenet did not aspire to do anything more than that. Some of the picturesque effects, like a tableau in which the Holy of Holies is unveiled on the stage, might seem objectionable to thoughtful audiences; but Massenet was not an especially thoughtful composer nor was his work directed at a thoughtful audience. He thought only to entertain and to please. When
he represented Jean le prophète as "an operatic tenor comme il faut, who needs only to be shut up in a subterranean jail . . . with [Salomé] to make love to her in the most approved fashion of the Paris Grand Opera," Massenet surely had no notion that there was anything blasphemous or sacrilegious about the idea: Jean is a tenor, and tenors make love to sopranos; therefore, Jean must also make love to a soprano. Salomé, the soprano in this case, naturally must be a romantic heroine, because sopranos are romantic heroines; and, so that she will be a suitable vis-à-vis for the saintly prophet, she is represented as an altogether sympathetic character. Camille Saint-Saens, a composer who had good ideas of his own about the portrayal of Oriental seductresses, is said to have come away from the premiere of Hérodiade with a sick headache, so distressed was he to see "that the woman he had looked upon as a type of lasciviousness and monstrous cruelty had become metamorphosed into a penitent Magdalen." Indeed, it is not difficult to understand the reasons for his distress, for Salomé, far from being lascivious, is only "a lovesick . . . schoolgirl," the innocent and unwitting agent of the Baptist's downfall. Far from being monstrously cruel, she would not


20 Ibid., p. 92.

think of harming one hair of the man's head, at which "she has howled herself in the desert, the public streets, and kings' palaces." She is a most pious maiden, who walks in religious processions singing Hosannah and waving palm branches; and, except perhaps for her repeated impetuous declarations of love to the Baptist, the propriety of her conduct is above reproach. She does not dance at all in this opera or perform any contortions. Her only interest, besides the Baptist, is in finding her mother, who had abandoned her in the desert when she was a little child and whom she has been vainly seeking all of her life. She naively explains her plight to a sympathetic old astrologer in the first scene of the opera, saying that a mysterious voice within her heart has summoned her here, to the court of Hérode's palace in Jerusalem, where she hopes soon to be reunited with her unknown mother. She speaks of how Jean found her in the desert as an "enfant abandonnée" and befriended her; and, in the famous aria, "Il est doux, il est bon," she sings of her love for her benefactor. As befits the utterance of a pure-hearted maiden, the music is tender and sentimental, rather than passionate or voluptuous.

When Jean arrives on the scene, she greets him "avec joie," impetuously throwing herself at his feet. Smug, in the manner of tenors, he responds to this greeting rather coolly, albeit courteously ("avec bonté"): "Child! What do you want of me?"

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22 Krehbiel, A Book of Operas, II, 90.
"What do I want?" she says coquettishly, as if blushing—"O, Jean!" Then, to a gentle, sentimental melody, lilting in the manner of a Venetian barcarolle, she tells him that what she wants is to tell him that she loves him and belongs to him, that she lives for him alone, that her very being is suspended at the sound of his voice, that she suffers when she is separated from him, and that now her heart quivers with joy. One might find something rather unmaidenly in such a declaration, coming as it does just twelve bars after she is reunited with the man; but such unhesitating frankness is merely a convention of operatic love scenes, and Salome is obviously a good, clean, wholesome girl—an "âme naïve et tendre," as Jean calls her presently. He is somewhat surprised at what she says but takes no offense and gently tries to discourage her, saying that such a beautiful young woman deserves a better fate than to follow in his stony path of dedication and privation. She will not be discouraged, though, and grows increasingly impassioned in her protestations. She becomes overwrought and irrational; but overwrought love scenes, to a composer like Massenet, were merely good stage effects and did not necessarily indicate anything about the character of the personages involved in them. Characterization could hardly have been further from Massenet's mind.

In response to Salomé's repeated importunities, Jean finally says he will permit her to love him ("Aime moi donc alors") if she
will sublimate her passion, as it were ("Bannis tous les transports d'un sentiment profane"), and join him in his devotion to the will of heaven. Swooning, she promises to heed his words, saying, "Yes, the brilliance of your eyes, more resplendent than the dawn, illumines the heavens for me"; and the two join in passionate duet as the curtain falls, he urging her to regard the dawn of immortality and she reassuring him that his eyes are brighter than the dawn. Obviously she does not comprehend what he is talking about; but, be this as it may, whether one is or is not convinced that her ecstasy is purely religious in nature, she seems to take her new-found foi seriously, for, when next we see her, she is joyously waving palm branches and singing Hosannah as she accompanies Jean in a religious procession through the streets of Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, her joie is short-lived, because Jean, for reasons unexplained, is cast into prison in Act III. She goes to the Temple of Jerusalem to express her emotions in an extended scena remarkable for its violent contrasts of mood: she utters fearful curses against those who have imprisoned the Baptist; she half faints with exhaustion; she shrinks with terror at the thought of the fearful tortures which may await her bien-aimé; she tenderly recalls happier days of the past; and finally she cries out in despair that, if Jean must die, she wants to die with him. Massenet's music at this point, although rather conventional and banal, does at least adequately convey the spirit of the words;
but it provides a particularly striking example of one of the salient weaknesses of this opera. There is no transition at all from one mood to another; emotions do not flow into one another but, rather, collide. Interested solely in achieving coups de théâtre, stunning climaxes, brilliant "effects," and interested not at all in characterization, Massenet and his librettist gave no thought to consistency or unity.

The collision evidently is wearing on Salomé, for at the conclusion of her aria she falls épuisée to the floor. Here she is found by Hérode, the king, who, like Salomé, has no particular reason for coming to the Temple except that it makes a picturesque place in which to sing. It would be better for him and her both if he had not chanced along, because, during the preceding two acts, he has been languishing with love for the girl; and by now he is quite beside himself with frustrated passion. He does not know anything of her identity, certainly has no idea that she is his wife's long-lost daughter; and he has seen her only twice, both times only for a moment, from a distance, and in a crowd. These two glimpses, however, have filled his heart with an "exquisite intoxication" ("ivresse ineffable"), and he has been longing to see the girl again, even swearing that he would sacrifice his hopes of salvation in order to see her again—a favorite oath, this, among villainous and unrequited lovers of the Romantic stage.

Now that he does see her again, he exclaims, "avec une explosion de bonheur": "Rêves réalisés!" Salomé, roused from her fainting spell,
asks him what he wants. He assures her that he has everything he wants simply in being allowed to contemplate her gentle and proud beauty ("ta beauté douce et fière") and begs her to accept his love. He makes this declaration in another tenderly sentimental aria, gentle, respectful, and impeccably courteous in tone; and one would think that any woman might feel highly complimented or even flattered to be spoken to in such a manner as this; but Massenet and his librettists evidently cared nothing for Salomé's reacting like a normal woman. Dramatic effect was more important; therefore, she repulses Hérode, "avec horreur": "What are you daring to say to me?" At this juncture, he alters his manner completely and starts to chase her about the Sanctuary, assuring her that he loves her and that she is going to belong to him, body and soul ("ton corps et ton âme"), for he is the king and can have what he wants. "Jamais!" she cries. He threatens, pleads, makes promises; but she will have none of him. She loves another, she tells him at last, and shoves him away from her, screaming, "Tu me fais horreur!"—the very words Gounod had required the dying Marguerite to address to the damned Faust. Overwhelmed, Hérode swears that he will find her lover and put him to death and slinks away into the shadows of the Temple, with a "geste de menace." Salomé falls in a faint.

In the next scene Jean is on trial before Hérode for instilling rebellious sentiments among the Jews. The king is on the point of
setting him free when Salomé inopportune rushes in, throws herself on the floor, and declares that she wants to die with the man she loves. Actually, Jean has been in no danger of dying; but now Hérode, perceiving that the prophet is his rival for the girl's affections, decides not to set him free after all but rather to condemn him to death for being, as he puts it, "l'amant odieux de Salomé la courtisane." It is shocking enough that a man can be sentenced on such a charge as this, but one is even more deeply shocked to find Salomé denounced as a woman of ill fame. She has always seemed to be a proper girl, and until now there has been no suggestion that she has a reputation for being anything but a proper girl. Of course, we have never been told what she was doing out in the desert during the many years she wandered about there, but in the Romantic theater one does not necessarily have to "do" anything. It seems wise not to take Hérode's words too seriously. Massenet has made Salomé behave decently in order to make her a sympathetic character to the highly moral audiences of his day, and she is surely to be thought of as a decent woman. If Hérode implies that she is anything else, that is only because the librettists, knowing that a denunciation which damages someone's reputation is the most sensationally theatrical kind of denunciation, have seen fit to introduce momentarily, the reputation of the Biblical Salome, who was certainly an altogether different sort of person from the Salomé of Massenet's
opera. There is another reason, too, for not taking the matter seriously, for Salomé and Jean themselves seem very happy about the whole affair, bursting forth into joyous song about how glorious it will be for them to die together.

Jean's attitudes have undergone a radical change, we learn in the last act, when we discover him alone in a subterranean prison cell declaring in a passionate aria that, as he awaits death, his one regret is having to be parted, "for a little while," from the radiant being he has learned to love. Presently the radiant being herself emerges from a secret panel to join her lover in a tender duet. He is overjoyed to see her and to "press this intoxicating flower to [his] lips and murmur: I love you!" There is something profoundly shocking about the spectacle of a venerated saint pressing an intoxicating flower-like maiden to his lips and murmuring that he loves her, but Massenet was not shocked: to him, a love scene was a love scene, regardless of who the protagonists were.

Voices are heard off-stage, crying, "Mort au Prophète!" and Jean urges Salomé to escape, but she refuses to live without him. They embrace passionately, rejoicing that their love will be even greater when it attains immortality in heaven, and, rapturously summoning the "transport de l'amour" to envelop them, they wait, enlacés, for the arrival of death. It arrives, in the form of a chorus of priests,
who have come to conduct Jean to the execution chamber. Salomé fights to be allowed to accompany him; but she is forcibly restrained from following as he surrenders himself to the priests and marches away to his doom.

All the music of this scene is voluptuous in the extreme and seems to have little bearing on the high-flown words of the text, about foi and immortal life. This rather paradoxical effect of the martyr saint's going to his death to the accompaniment of impassioned love music tends to strip him of his guise of religiosity and makes his ascension to "immortalité" not a thing of religious implications but rather, somewhat like Tristan's death, a sort of Romantic, nihilistic, sublimated sexual consummation.

Salomé, too, like Isolde, longs for consummation, and is determined to die; but first she will try to save Jean's life if she can. She goes to Hérode's court to plead for clemency. Failing to soften his hard heart, she turns to Hérodiade, the queen: "O Reine, vois mes larmes!" She has not met the queen face to face before and has no idea that the woman is her mother; but Hérodiade knows that Salomé is her daughter. She has not revealed the relationships, however, because she is consumed with jealousy of the girl, who has stolen her husband's love; but now, moved in spite of herself by the spectacle of Salomé's distress, she is on the point of weakening, embracing the
girl as her daughter, and commanding Hérode to stay the executioner.
Before she can speak, though, the executioner himself enters, brandishing a dripping, gory sword, whereupon Salomé whips out a dagger which she has concealed in her bodice and, with savage fury, leaps upon Hérodiade, explaining, "He is dead by your hand, so you must die, too."
Actually, of course, it is Hérode who is responsible for Jean's death: the queen has had nothing to do with it at all; but it is a better stage effect for a girl to attack her mother than it is for her to attack her stepfather, and Hérodiade is the one she chooses to attack.

"Mercy!" the queen implores; "I am your mother!" Salomé is somewhat taken aback at this information, but she recovers countenance in time to deliver a masterful curtain line: "O, abhorred woman, if it is true that your vile womb has borne me, then take back your blood—and my life. . . . Tiens!" she growls and stabs herself. The chorus exclaims, "Jour d'horreur!" and the orchestra delivers a weighty D minor chord. The curtain falls.

Massenet now had made Salomé a respectable woman, in order to render her story acceptable for presentation on the ultra-respectable stage of the Victorian 'eighties; but, a decade later, Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), the next important artist to portray the maddening charms of the dancing girl, was determined to be as little acceptable, respectable, Victorian, and bourgeois as possible, and he managed to imbue his
drama Salome with more sensational details and lurid implications than even this grim story had ever had before. Following Massenet's precedent of treating the story with complete freedom, Wilde gave his imagination full rein and populated his stage with a fantastic collection of neurotics and perverts which the writer's more conservative contemporaries found insufferably shocking to contemplate and which Anglo-Saxon audiences, at least, have learned to view with equanimity only within the last two decades.

Among the many disturbing features of the play, probably the most disturbing of all was Wilde's representation of Salome as a necrophile, obsessed with a mad desire to kiss the mouth of the dead Baptist, and, in the closing scene of the drama, actually satisfying her strange lust on the stage. The first English edition of the drama (1893) was published under rather sensational circumstances, while the author's notorious affair with Alfred Douglas was the talk of all England; and offended readers were quick to denounce the necrophilism as merely one more perverse creation of Wilde's prodigiously perverse brain. However, they were giving Wilde more credit than he deserved, because necrophilism was hardly his personal creation: as he once told the noted French actor Coquelin, "Originality is no longer possible, even in sin."23 And even the idea of making Salome

23 Hesketh Pearson, Oscar Wilde: His Life and Wit, p. 70.
a necrophile was not original with him. It seems to have originated with Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), the German poet, whose ballad "Atta Troll" (1847), recalling a medieval legend in which Herodias was condemned to ride in the Wild Hunt of witches and goblins, represented the wicked queen herself as something of a necrophile, who, for her sins,

... as spectre
Must until the Day of Judgment
Ride among the goblin hunt.
In her hand she carries ever
That sad charger, with the head of
John the Baptist, which she kisses:—
Yes, the head with fervor kisses.
For, time was, she loved the Baptist;
'Tis not in the Bible written,
But there yet exists the legend
Of Herodias' bloody love.
Was perhaps a little peevish
With her swain—had him beheaded;
... Rising up at night she carries
In her hand, as now related,
When she hunts, the bleeding head,
Yet with woman's maniac frenzy,
Sometimes she, with childish laughter,
Whirls it in the air above her
Then again will nimbly catch it
Like a plaything as it falls.


25 Herodias shared in her daughter's popularity in the nineteenth century and found a place in several important literary works, notably Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "Hérodiade," written in the 1860's, which uses the woman as a symbol of emotional and intellectual sterility (cf. A. R. Chisholm, Towards Hérodiade).
Heine says that there was a "legend of Herodias' bloody love," but no one except him seemed to know that the legend existed; and it is generally conceded today that he created it himself. 26

In the years following the publication of "Atta Troll," the "bloody love" gradually came to be attributed to Salome, rather than to her mother; and, by Wilde's day, the story seems to have been rather widely known and even accepted as historical truth in certain "intellectual" circles, who persuaded themselves that the Scriptural version of the story implied such an interpretation of Salome's actions 27 and who found much Romantic delight in the idea of a spurned woman's dancing to win the body of the man she loved and had to possess in death since she could not have him in life. Wilde, then, in making Salome a necrophile, was only giving new and unprecedentedly conspicuous expression to an already established story.

His conception of his heroine was, we are told, developed over a considerable period of time. He became interested in the subject after reading A Rebours; and, no doubt wishing to make himself as fashionable a prototype of Decadence as the Duc Jean des Esseintes himself, Wilde must have felt obliged to spend some time in contemplation of the mysterious daughter of Herodias, she being the prototype


of the Decadent heroine. He read and admired Flaubert and visited the art galleries of the Continent to study the great Renaissance paintings of Salome but rejected them all, declaring that only Gustave Moreau "unveiled the soul of the dancing princess of [his] dreams." It was a matter of deep regret to him that he was never able to go to Madrid to see Titian's "Salome" in the Prado, the painting of which Tintoretto once exclaimed, "Here at last is a man who paints the very quivering flesh!" 28

The actual composition of the drama was accomplished in Paris in 1891, about a month after the completion of Lady Windermere's Fan. 29 Wilde liked to say that the tale "was spontaneously conceived after . . . a performance at the Moulin Rouge, where [he] happened to see a Roumanian girl dance on her hands, as in the tale of Flaubert." 30 Later, however, he acknowledged that the play had been in his mind for some time before he wrote it down. This revised account of the story is recorded by Wilde's biographer Hesketh Pearson:

... Over lunch one day he told [the story] to some French writers in greater detail than usual. Then he returned to his lodgings at 29 Boulevard des Capucins, and, as a blank book happened to be lying on the table, he thought he might as well use it up by writing what he had just been speaking. . . . He wrote with his usual speed and

28 Gilman, op. cit., p. 20.

29 St. John Ervine, Oscar Wilde: A Present Time Appraisal, p. 132.

30 Boris Brasol, Oscar Wilde: The Man, the Artist, the Martyr, p. 216.
concentration . . . and suddenly became aware that it was between ten and eleven at night. He went to get some food at the Grand Café nearby, and asked the leader of the orchestra to play something in harmony with his thoughts, which were centered on a "woman dancing with her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain." The leader of the orchestra, perhaps accustomed to such thoughts, rose to the occasion, and . . . played such terrifying music that the conversation in the restaurant ceased and the listeners "looked at each other with blanched faces."31

Then he went home and finished writing the play. 32

Even this story is a bit too dramatic to be entirely credible, but it is probably true that he wrote the play very rapidly and without a great deal of deep thought about it. He dismissed the piece himself as a mere jeu d'esprit and was fond of ridiculing it and parodying it to his friends. 33 Even when he was trying to interest Sarah Bernhardt in playing Salome on the stage, he spoke of the work with uncharacteristic modesty: "Tout ce que j'ai voulu faire, c'est quelque chose du curieux et de sensuel."34

He might well have said "quelque chose de français"; for at the time he wrote Salome, Wilde's pet affectation was a passionate disdain for the dullness and stodginess of his British compatriots and a

32 Frances Winwar, Oscar Wilde and the Yellow 'Nineties, p. 209.
33 Pearson, op. cit., p. 201.
34 Gilman, op. cit., p. 13.
passionate admiration for the esprit of the French. Especially was he a devoted admirer of the works of Maurice Maeterlinck; and, when he came to the composition of Salome, Wilde not only wrote the play in French, managing a surprisingly convincing imitation of Gallic idiom, but also adopted many of the Belgian writer's mannerisms and technical tricks, especially the device of uttering commonplaces with a mystic reverence that concealed their cheap banality and made them sound like authentic profundities. If Wilde seriously aspired to anything as a writer, it was to avoid the commonplace; and Maeterlinck showed him the easiest way. Salome was certainly not commonplace; and, although it was not profound, either, it was curious and sensual and French and so must be counted a successful work. It was important as one of the most characteristic productions of the Decadent school and certainly the most extreme and characteristic expression of the Decadent conception of Salome, for, although a mystically reverent style was not conducive to sharply defined characterization, Wilde did manage to convey a distressingly vivid impression of the feverish intensity and nervous agitation of the Decadent heroine.

Like Flaubert and Massenet, he made it clear that her beauty was the fatal type, which drives men absolutely and ravingly mad. At the beginning of the play we discover Narraboth, a young Syrian

captain posted on guard on the terrace of Herod's palace, gazing longingly and pantingly into the banquet hall, where Salome sits at the feast with the tetrarch and his court. "How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!" he sighs again and again, although his apprehensive little friend, Herodias' page-boy, implores him not to look at her, insisting that something terrible will come of his looking at her so intently. Anyway, he is frightened by the strange aspect of the moon, which resembles "a woman rising from a tomb . . . looking for dead things." Presently Salome rises from the banquet table and impetuously runs out on to the terrace, where she paces about hectically, as if she were seeking something of desperate importance. She is in something of a trance, "a tinted malarial haze"; and she allows Narraboth's courteous greetings to pass unnoticed as she launches into an hysterical soliloquy. She protests that she can not bear to remain in the banquet hall, with Herod constantly staring at her "with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids"; she wonders why her mother's husband should look at her in such a curious manner; she shudders at the recollection of the vulgarity and coarseness of the drunken revelers at the banquet; and she apostrophizes the moon, her alter ego, apparently, which she sees as "a little silver flower . . . cold and chaste . . . a virgin."

She is really raving in an insane fashion, permitting her mind
to flit about absently from one thought to another; but suddenly she re-
turns to reality, and with a jolt, as she hears for the first time the
voice of Jochanaan (John the Baptist), who, from his prison cell in
an old cistern at the back of the terrace, is heard solemnly annunciating
the imminent arrival of the Son of Man. Strangely excited by his
voice, Salome seems to have found what she was seeking, and her
mind now fastens on one idea, on one desire, which never leaves her
for a moment: she must see the owner of this voice, and she must
possess him. She begs Narraboth, then commands him to have the
prophet brought up from the cistern so that she may speak to him;
but the young captain refuses, explaining that Herod has expressly
forbidden any communication with the prisoner. Salome breaks down
his resistance easily, however, by promising him,

Thou wilt do this thing for me... and tomorrow when
I pass in my litter beneath the gateway of the idol sellers
I will let fall for thee a little flower, a little green
flower... I will look at thee through the muslin veils,
I will look at thee, Narraboth, it may be I will smile at
thee. 37

37 Oscar Wilde, "Salome," The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde,
edited by Arthur Symons, IX, 121-122. The speech about the "little
green flower" was a detail which Wilde himself was particularly fond
of ridiculing to his friends. The choice of a green flower seems par-
ticularly apt for one of Wilde's plays, not only because any green
flower is odd and exotic but also and mainly because, after outgrow-
ing his habit of walking through the streets of London carrying a large
lily or sunflower and gazing at it in ecstatic absorption (cf. Pearson,
Completely demoralized by her offer of a green flower, a glance, and perhaps a smile, Narraboth ignores the ominous appearance of the moon, which now resembles "the head of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud," and has Jochanaan brought up from the cistern. The prophet proves to be a gaunt and ghastly man—rather shroudlike, perhaps—his body diseased and decaying as a result of his own rigorous asceticism. He is, moreover, an hysterical fanatic, screaming madly about the sins of Herodias, a prodigious nymphomaniac, according to his account, and about the approaching vengeance of the Son of Man. Salome is frightened for a moment by the raging maniac who stands before her; but they are kindred souls, and she quickly loses her natural revulsion as she becomes fascinated by his eyes, about which she rhapsodizes with great poetic invention:

They are like black holes burned by torches in a tapestry of Tyre. They are like the black caverns of Egypt in which

loc. cit.)—after passing through this affectation, Wilde took to wearing green carnations, which were something of a trademark of the more élite Parisian homosexuals, who all wore them (cf. The Marquess of Queensberry, Oscar Wilde and the Black Douglas, p. 167). The flowers came to be more or less a trademark of Oscar Wilde, too; and The Green Carnation was the title chosen in 1894 by one Robert Hichens, who published a sensational parody of the notorious playwright, thinly disguised under the absurd name of Esmé Amaranth, Esmé being a fabulous poseur who utters Wildean epigrams with every breath, who affects admiration for France and disdain for England, who is followed everywhere by a sedulous young disciple of questionable manliness (this character modeled on Alfred Douglas), who displays more than normally keen interest in a group of choirboys ("rose white youth, passionate pale"), and who, of course, wears carnations painted green (cf. G. J. Renier, Oscar Wilde, p. 86).
the dragons make their lairs. They are like black lakes troubled by fantastic moons.  

Presently she even begins to take a morbid delight in the ghastliness of his body:

How wasted he is! He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver.  

Jochanaan, startled from his meditations by the remarkable words he hears spoken about him, suddenly becomes terribly distraught:

Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes, under her golden eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not desire to know who she is.  

One may infer that even he, in his peculiar way, is susceptible to Salome's fatal charm. They are kindred souls, and he is perhaps an even greater pervert than she, the principal difference between them being that she, a sadist, is more extroverted than the masochistic Jochanaan and seeks to satisfy her lust by a more obvious, direct method than his, which is to seek satisfaction in a preposterously exaggerated and very physical sort of asceticism and in gloating over the bloody and altogether sadistic vengeance which he fancies the Son of Man will visit on the unchaste, like Herodias, whom the prophet

38 Wilde, op. cit., p. 125.
39 Ibid., p. 126.
40 Ibid.
professes to regard with such cosmic loathing. It was virtually an axiom of Decadent Romanticism that nothing is so sinful as innocence, and Wilde conceived both Salome and Jochanaan as being sinfully innocent. Both are virgins, but their chastity is "an evil chastity, a sin blacker than any lust, . . . chastity rotting at the core," because, to Wilde, lust and its satisfaction were far more natural and wholesome than chastity. Wilde, who, "like some modern psychologists . . . was acutely conscious of the purifying and liberating effect of sin," maintained that "Self-denial is simply a method by which man arrests his progress" and that "the giving way to man's natural instincts . . . was an essential part of the regenerative process." As he expressed the idea in Dorian Gray, "The body sins once and has done with its sin. . . . The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden itself." Thus, Salome, in acknowledging her lust and eventually satisfying it, loses her evil chastity and is purified, whereas the prophet, by stubbornly maintaining his perverse virginity, succeeds only in having himself beheaded and in destroying himself utterly.

41Winwar, loc. cit.
42Ibid.
43George Woodcock, The Paradox of Oscar Wilde, p. 76.
44Ibid., p. 82.
46Ibid., p. 79.
Indeed, Salome is killed, too, in this play, and that shattering inconsistency would seem to expose the whole philosophy as the childish nonsense it is; but the Romantics would never acknowledge themselves to be so easily exposed and, especially when they had nihilistic inclinations of the sort exhibited in some of the works of Richard Wagner, they regarded a death which accompanied or constituted a sexual consummation as the crowning sublimity and, for the creative artist, like Wilde, a splendidly functional device—really the only way to avoid anti-climax.

However, this may be, as the interview between the two perverse virgins progresses, Jochanaan denounces the overwrought woman before him as a "Daughter of Babylon" and angrily commands her to pour ashes upon her head and hasten to the desert, there to meditate and repent for affronting "the chosen of the Lord." Salome is so absorbed in her own emotions that she does not comprehend the meaning of what he says; and, delirious with excitement, she implores him to "Speak again. . . . Thy voice is as music to mine ear," and launches upon a long, passionate, poetic apostrophe, somewhat in the vein of the Song of Solomon, to the beauty of the prophet's emaciated and bleached body:

Jochanaan, I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of the field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains, like the snows that lie on the mountains of
Judaea, and come down into the valleys. The roses in the
garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body.
Neither the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia, the
perfumed garden of the spices of the Queen of Arabia, nor
the feet of the dawn when they light on the leaves, nor the
breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the
sea. . . .

Presently, though, she decides that his body is hideous, "like
the body of a leper. . . . It is thy hair that I am enamoured of,
Jochanaan." Soon she is overcome with loathing for his hair, too
("It is like a knot of serpents"), and realizes that it is his mouth that
she desires: "It is redder than the feet of him who cometh from a
forest where he hath slain a lion, and seen gilded tigers." She im-
plores him, "Suffer me to kiss thy mouth."

At this point, Narraboth, who has been viewing the proceedings
with growing dismay, is so overcome with horror that he draws his
sword, disembowels himself, and falls dead to the ground. Salome
does not even notice him and steps over his body in her pursuit of the
reluctant Baptist, who is overcome with horror himself and, placing
one last blistering curse on the girl, retreats to his cistern. "I will
kiss thy mouth," she screams after him; "I will kiss thy mouth."

Herod now rushes out on to the terrace to find Salome; and
Herodias follows him, urging him to come back inside and leave the
girl alone. Like all other men, though, the tetrarch finds her beauty

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47 Wilde, op. cit., pp. 128-129.
quite irresistible and insists on remaining on the terrace and continuing the banquet there. Moreover, he has become fascinated in looking at the moon and trying to fathom its mysteries:

She is like a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman. . . . I am sure she is looking for lovers. . . . She is like a mad woman, is she not?48

Herodias, a completely vulgar, unimaginative person, answers coldly, "No; the moon is like the moon, that is all."

Salome, meanwhile, has subsided into something of a trance and remains perfectly quiet, staring passively into space. The lecherous old tetrarch, he of the mole's eyes, tries to rouse her from her apathy by offering her a drink of wine; but she is not thirsty, she answers drily. He offers her exotic fruits, desiring, he says, "to see . . . the mark of [her] little white teeth." She is not hungry. He invites her to sit beside him. She is not tired. Herodias begs him to leave the girl alone, and the two argue about the matter at great length; but he can not prevent his thoughts from straying back to his beautiful stepdaughter. He asks her to dance for him; but she has no desire to dance, she says. He pleads with her, finally promising to give her whatever she may ask, if only she will dance. At this point.

48 Ibid., p. 136.
Salome suddenly comes to life and eagerly begins to bargain with the tetrarch, forcing him to swear a solemn and binding oath that he will keep his promise and indeed grant any request if she will dance for him. He almost loses his nerve, frightened by the solemnity of his own oath and by the sight of Salome removing her sandals and preparing to dance on the terrace, still wet with the blood of Narraboth; but his desire to see her dance is by now an overwhelming obsession and he finally permits her to perform "The Dance of the Seven Veils."

There has been a great deal of speculation about what Wilde may have conceived to be the nature of this dance, but it seems likely that he never had any clear idea about it at all. Writing hastily and superficially as he did and engrossed as he was in composing phrases of exotic poetry, Wilde never reached the point of thinking much about the sense of what he was writing or of planning the stage action in practical detail. When he was pressed to give advice for the actual presentation of Salome on the stage, he could think of nothing very definite or enlightening to say. "I should like everyone on the stage to be in yellow," he commented once; and he thought a violet sky would be a good effect, also "braziers of perfume" in place of an orchestra; but, having contributed some curious notion such as this, he would invariably wander off into rhapsodic vagueness about "scented clouds rising and partly veiling the stage from time to time . . . a new
perfume for each motion" or some similar strange conceit. 49 As for Salome’s dance, his only comment was that he envisioned her clad in "veils woven by angels," 50 and that the dance was to "disclose the boundless cruelty of her heart." 51 He also insisted that the spectator must feel "Her splendor... an abyss; her desire, an ocean." 52 He did leave instructions for virtuoso histrionics on the part of her jewelry, though, requiring "the pearls on her breast [to] die of love," her opals to be "paled" and her rubies "fired" by "the bloom of her maidenhood," and "the sapphires on this feverish skin [to] lose the purity of their luster" and to "heighten... with their myriad glittering reflections the unchastity of that unchaste amber flesh." 53

Presently Salome and her jewels complete their performance, and the girl falls breathless at Herod’s feet. The tetrarch is almost hysterical with delight at what he has witnessed and eagerly begs the girl to name her reward. Calmly she tells him that she desires, in a silver charger, the head of Jochanaan. Herod, profoundly shocked to see the trap into which he has fallen, offers Salome anything else—his flock of white peacocks, his collection of fabulous jewels, the mantle of the high priest of Jerusalem, even the veil of the Sanctuary—if she will spare the prophet, whom he fears as a Holy Being and

49 Pearson, loc. cit.
50 Gilman, op. cit., p. 20.
51 Ibid., p. 22.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
whose death he imagines would be avenged by some inconceivably horrible supernatural punishment. Salome remains implacable, though, and Herod finally has to yield and dispatch the executioner to bring her what she wants. He accuses Herodias of persuading her to exact this gruesome reward; but Salome assures him, "It is not my mother's voice that I heed. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jochanaan in a silver charger." Wilde always said, "Of an unknowing Salome, who is a mere tool, I refuse to hear."54

When the head is brought in, Herod sees that indeed it is for Salome's own pleasure, for she pounces upon her trophy greedily, screaming, "Ah! thou wouldst not suffer me to kiss thy mouth, Jochanaan. Well, I will kiss it now. I will bite it with my teeth as one bites a ripe fruit. Yes, I will kiss thy mouth." And, gloating over her triumph, she launches upon a great tirade, addressing herself to the bleeding head which she holds in her hands and regards with insane fervor:

Wherefore dost thou not look at me, Jochanaan? Thine eyes that were so terrible, so full of rage and scorn, are shut now. Wherefore are they shut? Open thine eyes! . . . Wherefore dost thou not look at me? Art thou afraid of me, Jochanaan? . . . And thy tongue, that was like a red snake darting poison, it moves no more, it speaks no words, Jochanaan, that scarlet viper that spat its venom upon me. . . . How is it that the red viper stirs no longer? . . . Thou wouldst have none of me,

54 Ibid., p. 21.
Jochanaan. Thou rejectedst me. . . . Thou didst bear thyself toward me as to a harlot, as to a woman that is a wanton, to me, Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea! Well, I live, but thou art dead, and thy head belongs to me. I can do with it what I will. I can throw it to the dogs and to the birds of the air. That which the dogs leave, the birds of the air shall devour.  

Her mood softens presently as she recalls how she loved him:

Ah, Jochanaan, thou wert the man that I loved alone among men. . . . But thou wert beautiful! Thy body was a column of ivory set upon feet of silver. It was a garden full of doves and lilies of silver. It was a tower of silver decked with shields of ivory. There was nothing in the world so white as thy body. There was nothing in the world so black as thy hair. In the whole world there was nothing so red as thy mouth. Thy voice was a censer that scattered strange perfumes, and when I looked on thee I heard a strange music. Ah, wherefore didst thou not look at me, Jochanaan? . . . If thou hadst seen me thou hadst loved me. I saw thee, and I loved thee. Oh, how I loved thee! I love thee yet, Jochanaan. . . . I am athirst for thy beauty; I am hungry for thy body; and . . . neither the floods nor the great waters can quench my passion. . . . Ah! wherefore didst thou not look at me? If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me. Well I know that thou wouldst have loved me.  

Herod by now has seen and heard enough, and he rises to re-enter his palace; but, as he goes, he hears Salome speak again. She has suddenly become quite calm, as she has not been before during the entire time she has been on stage, and she speaks quietly with a great feeling of repose and inner well-being, for she has made peace with herself: she has kissed the mouth of Jochanaan. She shudders,

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56 Ibid., pp. 180-181.
suddenly, recalling, "There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the
taste of blood? . . . Nay, but perchance it was the taste of love. . . .
They say that love hath a bitter taste." And she becomes calm again,
serene, saying, "What matter? What matter? I have kissed thy
mouth."

Herod, unfeeling earthen clod that he is, can not appreciate the
tender beauty of Salome's catharsis and sees her only as an unnatural
monster; and, because Wilde can think of nothing more to write, now
that his heroine has found fulfillment and purification, he requires
the tetrarch to command the palace guards to kill the wicked girl.
The soldiers crush her beneath their shields, and the curtain falls.

Although Wilde's drama was insufferable to most of the writer's
more respectable and conservative contemporaries, it did find ad-
mirers among other extremely Romantic souls, and it inspired sev-
eral composers to set it to music. The American Henry Hadley con-
tributed a symphonic poem, "Salome," first performed in London in
1909, written appropriately in the style of Dvorák, whose "passion-
ate, curiously-coloured things" Wilde professed to have a special
liking for. Actually, Wilde was never interested in music of any
form; but, because the name of Dvorák was an odd one, he seemed to

57 Ibid., p. 85.
58 Pearson, op. cit., p. 92.
think that a devotion to the Czech master's art would be a particularly
good, quaint pose for him to adopt.

Hadley's opus was followed in 1911 by the Parisian premiere of
an opera, Salomé, by a young French naval officer, one Lieutenant
A. Mariotte, who used an adaptation of Wilde's play as his libretto. 59
Unfortunately, Lieutenant Mariotte had little success, because his
opera, not a very good work, anyway, came as a pitiful anti-climax
after the powerful music drama of Richard Strauss (1864-1949), pro-
duced in Dresden in 1905, the one authentic masterpiece the Romantic
Period was able to contribute on the Salome legend. It is a curious
fact that, although Salome had been a favorite subject in all art
forms during the nineteenth century and had inspired many works, none
of them was truly great. They were often picturesque, and Wilde's
drama was really a strikingly original creation; but Strauss, the
last of the great Romantic composers, was the only artist of the
period who managed to produce a Salome of enough intrinsic merit to
outlive its own generation. For even Wilde's play has long ceased to
have any real importance except for the fact that Strauss used a Ger-
man translation of it as the libretto for his enduring opera.

Germany, in the first years of the twentieth century, had no
Victorian traditions to inhibit artistic expression and was, moreover,
already obsessed with the interest in abnormal psychology which

59Ervine, op. cit., p. 140.
Anglo-Saxons were to take up two generations later; and Wilde's Salome encountered no obstacles to its appreciation by German audiences, who admired the work extravagantly, for a time acclaiming it poetic drama comparable in greatness to the finest works of Shakespeare. Strauss, always a very cunning master of theatrical effect, quickly recognized the operatic potentialities of the play and decided to arrange a great popular success for himself by capitalizing on Wilde's success. 60

Actually, Strauss's opera proved to be even more shocking than Wilde's play; because, whereas the poet's cold insincerity of style tended to give his characters the aspect of lifeless puppets performing stylized gestures which, unnatural and horrible as they were, remained, after all, insincere, lifeless, unreal, and unconvincing, 61 Strauss brought real conviction to his task and contrived to develop a score of such desperate vitality, unflagging nervous intensity, unabashed emotionalism, shattering dissonance (by the standards of 1905), morbid and remorselessly emphatic realism of characterization, and sheer deafening volume of orchestral tone that it could hardly fail to enlist some rather positive response from even the most apathetic listener. The opera was too daringly realistic and its


61 Wilde, op. cit., p. xiv.
musical idiom too boldly revolutionary to win immediate acceptance, of course, and the early performances, especially in America, were often embattled. The Metropolitan Opera, after one dress rehearsal in 1907, which seemed to draw down the wrath of every minister in New York, would not dare to attempt the work again for twenty-six years; and the intrepid Mary Garden, who in the interim insisted on singing Salome both at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House and at the Chicago Civic Opera, had to pay for the strength of her convictions by being picketed, padlocked out of opera houses, denounced in pulpit and press, and generally regarded as a "bad" woman. Even today, with the opera firmly established as a classic of the repertory, a production of it is still regarded as a rather sensational event.

Actually, its scarlet reputation is not entirely deserved, for the music sometimes lapses into trite, vulgar, saccharine, and incongruously naive sentimentality when "venereal abandon" would seem more in order; but, for the most part, Strauss did contrive a remarkably apt setting of his text. He evoked an exotic, Romantic, Oriental atmosphere infinitely more intoxicating than any "scented cloud" Wilde could ever have evoked; he developed detailed musical

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62 Cf. Mary Garden and Louis Biancolli, Mary Garden's Story.
63 Lawrence Gilman, Aspects of Modern Opera, p. 90.
characterizations of the personages of his drama with an imaginative resourcefulness and sophistication of method that is scarcely equalled even in the finest works of masters of the art like Mozart, Verdi, and Puccini; he achieved a lush, full-blown voluptuousness of both orchestral tone and melodic material that befits this tale of delirious passion; and, except for the few lapses into innocuous sentimentality, he managed to clarify and emphasize the horrendous sexual implications of the text with an insistent, physical literalness that one would scarcely think music capable of.

Most significant, though, he somehow summed up the features of Romantic Decadence so fully that he left nothing more to be said on the subject. Even the composer himself, after one more essay in the field, Elektra (1909), realized that, by exploiting them as rigorously as he had done, he had exhausted the artistic possibilities of exquisite perversities of the sort Salome had come to represent and he would henceforth have to direct his talents along somewhat different lines. In his later works, he did write more and more in the neo-classical, intellectualist vein of the characteristic twentieth-century reaction to Romantic emotionalism.

As for Salome herself, she had flourished as Romanticism flourished; and, when Romanticism fell into decline, she, too, had seen her best days; when Romanticism ceased to be a vital force in

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artistic creation, she ceased to be a valid inspiration to artistic creation. Strauss's monumental opera was endowed, though, with the power to survive; and its frequent productions have maintained the bad name and ill fame of Salome at a high level of notoriety for the past half century, with every indication that they will continue to do so for many years to come.

The Wilde-Strauss treatment of her story has had many imitators, who have wished to capitalize on the notoriety of the play and the opera and who have done their share to perpetuate the Romantic conception of the story. Scarcely had Wilde's play been published, indeed, when in 1895 the French ballerina Loie Fuller brought her version of it to the Parisian stage—a "dance-pantomime," with music by Gabriel Pierné. This piece, deriving more from Massenet than from Wilde, nevertheless sought to preserve the unwholesome atmosphere of the latter's drama and emphasized especially the incest motive, showing Salome not only dancing with seven veils but also "consenting" to Herod's importunities in order to save the life of the imprisoned Baptist. Her efforts prove futile, though, for he is executed anyway, whereupon she, regretting the futility of her efforts, drops dead. 65

The production was not very successful; but Mlle. Fuller, undaunted, tried Salome again in Paris in 1907, this time in a ballet

called *La Tragédie de Salomé*, with a scenario adapted from Wilde by Robert d'Humières and a musical score by the American Florent Schmitt. Concurrently the American dancer Maud Allen was touring the Continent in her own choreographic version of Wilde's play, *The Vision of Salome*, which was introduced to New York audiences in 1910. About the same time, America was also enjoying "The Dance of the Seven Veils," as rendered by Gertrude Hoffman, who toured the vaudeville circuit with this act for several seasons. Paris was still the dance capital of the world, though, and there it was that Ida Rubenstein next joined the ranks of unveiled Salomes, in a piece arranged for her by Fokine, to music of Glazounov. There it was also that Serge Diaghileff, recalling Fuller's enactment of *La Tragédie de Salomé*, purchased performance rights to that work and revived it at the Ballet Russe in 1912, with Mlle. Karsovina in the principal role. Twenty years later Salome's dance of depraved desire was still exciting material; and Ruth Sorel selected her version of it for her prize-winning entry in the Warsaw Dance Contest of 1933. At the International Dance Festival of 1936, Mia Slavenská's admired classical technique was employed in a Wildean-Freudian exposition of Salome's libidinous impulses. Martha Graham, a great specialist in the interpretation of pathological subjects, broke from the pattern in 1944, by performing the role of Hérodiade in a modern-
dance interpretation of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, with a musical score by Paul Hindemith.\textsuperscript{66}

Salome has had her place in the spoken drama, too, notably Hermann Sudermann's \textit{Johannes} (\textit{John the Baptist}, 1899), in which the characterization of the dancing princess is such a crude, heavy-handed imitation of Wilde's conception that, if Sudermann could reasonably be suspected of having had a sense of humor, his play could almost be taken for a satire on the earlier drama. Sudermann adopts Wilde's and Maeterlinck's device of making his characters speak incoherently and flit about from one irrelevant subject to another; but, whereas the French dramatist and his English disciple handled the device cleverly, assuming a mystic vagueness of tone that actually fooled many discriminating people into believing that they were, as they pretended, expressing "nuances" of emotion and progressions of thought too subtle for commonplace, coherent words, Sudermann succeeds only in creating an effect of most un-poetic confusion and in making Salome not so much a mysterious and subtle being as a very obvious, garrulous mad woman, with tedious affectations. One of the most distasteful of these affectations is her habit of tirelessly uttering epigrams; this is, of course, a habit one expects to find in a Wildean heroine; but, since Sudermann's epigrams are not at all

\textsuperscript{66} Flaig, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 17.
witty, there seems to be little excuse for them. His Salome, when she
is not making her unfortunate efforts at wit, is bowling herself at
the prophet Johannes, to whom she introduces herself as "a flower
of Sharon and a rose in the valley," who longs to be plucked. Later
she tells him he is a flame and that her heart, like a poor witless
moth, cries out, "Destroy me, flame!" More explicitly, she says,
"I have strewed my couch with myrtle, aloe and cinnamon; I will give
you my young body." And she assures him, "Sweet as Sin am I."
He corrects her, explaining that she is more than a mere sweet,
young, enflamed rose in the valley; for she is a symbol or a per-
sonification: "You," he tells her, "are Sin." The man really has
more serious matters on his mind than gathering roses, and his in-
difference arouses her hatred, so that she readily agrees to her
mother's plan for her to ask the tetrarch to have him beheaded. When
she receives the head on a golden charger, instead of the usual silver
charger, she picks it up and dances with it for a moment, then falls
to the ground in a fit, and is led away completely demented as the
curtain falls.

Another post-Wilde Salome appears in Lloyd Douglas's novel
The Big Fisherman (1948), which allows the girl no pretensions to
poetry at all and represents her simply and un-poetically as a "brazen,
jingling, over-painted . . . little trollop" who includes the tetrarch
among her many lovers. She has one bizarre trait of character, though, which lifts her above the mere cheaply sordid to a superb, imaginative sort of sordidness: in her most intense moments, she is fond of scratching her lovers' faces and drawing blood, the odor of which gives her "a queer little thrill." Her mother is a nymphomaniac, too, but without any superb mannerisms; and it is she who tries to seduce the Baptist in this novel. He spurns her, of course; and she avenges this unaccustomed insult by forcing Salome to take advantage of Herod's infatuation in order to have the prophet beheaded.

The story has been treated in motion pictures, too, notably Alla Nazimova's silent version of Wilde's play (1923), a film which critics hailed as "one of the most extraordinary sidelights on the infirmity of the human mind"; and, at the time of this writing (spring, 1953), Rita Hayworth is preparing to demonstrate her knowledge of Oriental seduction techniques in a new screen play about the daughter of Herodias. The Hayworth Salome comes as a result of a particularly great revival of interest in the story which America has experienced since the historic Metropolitan Opera production of Strauss's music drama on February 4, 1949, when Fritz Reiner conducted for the first time at the Metropolitan and the Bulgarian soprano Ljuba

Welitch effected a uniquely successful American debut in the title role. Subsequent performances by this electric pair have strengthened the original impression; and, largely because of the interest aroused by their performances, Salome, the Romantic Salome of Wilde and Strauss, is enjoying today a greater vogue, probably, than she has had at any time in the last thirty years. One of Mme. Welitch's European appearances deserves special mention—a production at Covent Garden in 1949 with costumes and décor by Salvador Dali, the noted Spanish surrealist, who contrived Freudian symbols of unexplained significance, including a pavilion that moved backward and forward on the stage at various times, sudden gusts of steam emitted from the Baptist's cell, peacock feathers that shot up from the pavilion when Salome danced, a scarlet pomegranate for Herod's throne, a miniature puppet stage carried by Herodias on her back, costumes for the palace guards that made them resemble playing cards. Some of Dali's ideas, like staging the entire opera on a giant bed and using flying hippopotamuses, had to be abandoned, because the theater could not stand the expense.68

However, Dali, Nazimova, Sudermann, Lloyd Douglas, and all the ballerinas have only been gilding the lily. As has been said before, Wilde and Strauss, particularly the latter, developed the

Romantic conception of Salome so fully that they left nothing more to be done with it; and the artists who have tried to add to it have succeeded only in making pale copies of Wilde and Strauss. They have thought of a few extra perversions which Wilde did not happen to think of; but one or two more or less can not make any material difference, and, anyway, the perversions have long since lost their vitality, as a result of being worked over again and again; and they have hardened into cold, perfunctory, conventionalized, and rather meaningless mannerisms. "Originality is no longer possible, even in sin."

And, if the subject has been worked out, it is possible to believe that the material in it never really was anything to work with. Even assuming that the few verses of Scripture which recount the story of Salome had in them the material from which to create great art, one may question whether the Romantic artists who used the story would ever have been capable of fashioning the material into great works of art. In one way or another, these artists were, without exception, violently antagonistic to reality, to good sense; and they admired Salome because they conceived her as a particularly antagonistic opponent of good sense. The qualities which they attributed to her and exploited in their treatments of the story were the exotic, sensual, perverse, and insane—or, perhaps—anti-sane,
qualities; and, although exoticism, sensuality, perversion, and insanity undoubtedly have their place in art, they are rather insubstantial stuff, and a work which takes them for its whole substance is almost certainly doomed to triviality. Though Strauss, in taking them for the substance of his opera, produced a great work of artistry, of craftsmanship, a miracle of theatrical effectiveness, he failed to contribute anything of deeper value, anything that could make his listeners really wiser or better for having heard it. The truly great works of art, in the Romantic Period as in any other time, have always, in one sense or another, been testaments to the god-like dignity of Man, either in that they proclaimed it outright by representing Man as a creature of god-like dignity or in that they implied it by manifesting the sublime intellect of the artist. Salome, on the other hand, was certainly not a creature of god-like dignity, as represented by the Romantics; she was exotic, sensual, perverse, and insane, to be sure, but nothing more. Huysmans identified her as "the goddess of immortal Hysteria"; but, after all, is not hysteria a singularly un-god-like and undignified form of behavior? And the Romantic devotees of Salome could hardly be said to have manifested any sublime intellectuality of their own, for the very essence of what they did was a denial, a wilful rejection of the intellect, of sanity, in favor of the more immediate emotional thrills of insanity. Strauss,
indeed, did manifest a prodigious intellect in contriving his amazingly complex and daringly imaginative score; but, in Salome, he used this great intellect only to embrace and glorify insanity, Hysteria, the anti-intellectual—in short, to deny the intellect more powerfully and completely than his less gifted fellow Romantic Decadents ever were able to deny it.

It is reassuring, though, that there were at least two men who, in the very heyday of Salome's vogue as a goddess of Hysteria and high priestess of Decadence, somehow managed to retain their sane perspective sufficiently to recognize that "disordered and volcanic intellects" were not, as Huysmans claimed, "made visionaries by their neuroticism" but were made only more and more disordered and neurotic. Having made this important discovery, they found it easy to regard Salome herself in a rational manner, not at all characteristic of their generation, and to see this goddess of Hysteria for what she really was, a very trivial woman.

One of these men was Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), the illustrator of the first English edition of Wilde's play. Beardsley was an extreme Decadent himself, utterly fascinated by anything that was morbid, exotic, or perverse. Slowly dying of tuberculosis, he devoted himself to a morbid exploration of medical books and filled his drawings with disease and deformity; and, obsessed by sex, he devoted
himself to the reading of erotic literature and filled his drawings with lust and perversion. He evidently admired Wilde's play very much when he first read it in the French version, for, entirely unsolicited, he created a masterful illustration, in black and white, for the final scene of Salome's triumph: "J'ai baisé ta bouche, Jokanaan." Moreover, he begged Wilde for permission to make the English translation of the drama, insisting that he "felt . . . kinship with the spirit of it." Wilde already had one translation, the brilliant work of Alfred Douglas, but he was dissatisfied with it; and, because he respected the talent of the precocious boy and found something morbidly exotic in the tubercular gauntness of "Dear Aubrey . . . the most monstrous of orchids . . . who has a face like a silver hatchet," Wilde decided to encourage Beardsley's ambition to establish himself as a man of letters and gave his permission for the young man to try his hand at Salome. He found Beardsley's work "utterly hopeless," though; and, despairing of finding anything that could satisfy him, he consented to the publication of Alfred Douglas's translation as the official English version of the play.

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69 Winwar, op. cit., p. 178.  
70 Ibid., p. 213.  
71 Ibid., p. 212.  
72 Pearson, op. cit., p. 204.  
73 Winwar, op. cit., p. 178.  
74 Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions, p. 89.  
75 Winwar, op. cit., p. 212.  
76 Pearson, loc. cit.
Beardsley considered himself to have been grossly insulted. He had always rather disliked Wilde, anyway, because of his shallowness and insincerity; and now, disappointed and resentful, he reconsidered Salome and cried sour grapes. However, in spite of his prejudice or, rather, perhaps, because of it, he managed to evaluate the drama more justly than he had done before, recognizing it as bald sham, perceiving its emptiness, its triviality, its pompous affectations. Thus, when Robert Ross, a mutual friend of Beardsley and Wilde, persuaded the writer, greatly against his will, to give the young artist, as a sort of consolation prize, the commission to illustrate Douglas's translation, Beardsley seized the opportunity to create a series of superbly witty drawings, mercilessly satirizing the play. And the satire was truly devastating, because the contempt which inspired it was fully merited.

Wilde was horrified when he saw the drawings. Beardsley had represented the perversions of the play with obscene frankness; and Wilde found such frankness intensely distasteful. Although he believed that perversion glossed over with poetic words was beautiful and artistic, he found that his poetic perversions became altogether vulgar and distasteful when represented frankly and un-poetically as mere


78 Ervine, op. cit., p. 136.
perversions. 79 "Dear Aubrey's designs," he commented bitterly, "are like the naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes along the margins of his copy books. . . . They are cruel and evil." 80

Beardsley, for his part, indicated his opinion of Wilde in a caricature in one of his sketch books, showing "Oscar Wilde at Work" and sub-titled "The Swine." The dramatist was represented as a huge bloated figure, curiously effeminate, with quadruple chin, two bags under each of his beady, jaded eyes, and a full, sensual, drooling mouth with heavy, thick lips parted in a dissolute smile. He is evidently occupied with the composition of *Salome*, for he is surrounded by source books, among them *Trois Contes*, a *Bible*, *French Verbs at a Glance*, volumes of Swinburne and Gautier, *Dorian Gray*, a French grammar and a French dictionary, the works of Josephus, and a volume labeled simply *Histoire*. 81

Wilde is also caricatured in the first of the published illustrations to the play, "The Woman (or Man) in the Moon." He appears there as the creature of dubious sex who leers down like some overlord of vice at two perverse, lustful-eyed figures on earth. 82

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79 Harris, op. cit., p. 90.

80 Renier, op. cit., p. 83.

81 Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period*, Figure 48.

82 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Best of Beardsley*, edited by R. A. Walker, Figure 2.
second drawing, "The Peacock Skirt," shows Salome clad in a voluminous gown with a train decorated with gorgeous eyes like a peacock's tail. She is trying to tempt a rather timid-looking Narraboth, bearing down on him with a wicked leer. She has a bony face, full, sensual lips, and cruel, lustful eyes, with sharp brows and lashes. One expects to see fangs springing out from the sides of her mouth at any moment. A little peacock with an expression of blissful idiocy happily dangles his tongue in the background of this caricature of Wildean seduction. 83

The third drawing, "The Black Cape," a caricature of women's fashions of the nineties, has no connection with the play at all, 84 but "A Platonic Lament," on the other hand, is one of the most extreme and deadly bits of satire Wilde is exposed to in the entire collection. This shows the little page boy, nude, bending over the corpse of Narraboth, holding his friend's head tenderly between his hands and gazing at it tragically, lustfully, breathlessly, swooningly as he prepares to kiss the mouth. This is bald homosexuality; and the face of Wilde, in the moon, leers down on the scene with a knowing look. A hydrocephalus dwarf giggles hysterically in the foreground. In the play, the perverted nature of the page's friendship for Narraboth is only rather gently implied; but Beardsley, altogether disgusted

83 Ibid., Figure 3. 84 Ibid., Figure 4.
with the affected viciousness of the play, leaves no vice to be inferred and 
seizes on every bit of it that could reasonably be suspected, scrapes 
off its veneer of poetry and mystery, presents it frankly as the horri-
ble, revolting, unpoetic thing it is, and exaggerates its features with 
a sneering, ruthless emphasis that exposes the laughable absurdity, 
the pitiful shallowness, and, one might even say, the sheer stupidity 
of Wilde’s effort to exalt perversion to the level of sublime poetry. 85

Beardsley pursues the same vein of sneering caricature in most 
of the other pictures. "John and Salome" shows the princess gazing 
wonderstruck at the prophet, her nostrils dilated, her lust-parched 
lips hanging open with an expression of complete imbecility, her 
eyes protruding as if she had never seen a man before and were about 
to faint from the excitement of the strange new experience. Her gown 
hangs open, preposterously, to expose her breasts and her navel. 
This illustration was suppressed for a time by the British censors, 
who regarded it as obscene. 86

Wilde appears again, clad in jester’s costume, proudly pointing 
to Herodias in the sketch entitled "Enter Herodias." The woman has 
gigantic proportions and stands in a defiant attitude, with bared 
breasts and navel and a coarse leer. She is attended by a naked young

85 Ibid., Figure 5. 86 Ibid., Figure 6.
hermaphrodite and a grotesque centaur-like being with claws and cloven hoofs. This drawing was suppressed, too. 87

"The Eyes of Herod" is another caricature of Wilde, represented as the gouty old Herod gazing lustfully at Salome, who has the appearance here of a seasoned prostitute. She has an exaggeratedly hard expression that carries the notion of ruthless implacability to ridiculous extremes. In the background of the drawing are a whimsical butterfly, a cross-eyed peacock, and two dirty, evil-eyed, nude little amours flying about carrying a phallic candle-stick. 88

In "The Stomach Dance" Salome, wearing transparent bloomers, is an ugly, distorted creature, whose abdomen is as large as all the rest of her body together and whose odd, rolling motions are anything but seductive. The music for the dance is provided by a guitar-like instrument strummed by a grotesque, inhuman figure with flame-like protuberances growing from the top of his head and with warty face, baggy eyes, drooping, gouty flesh, and a lecherous tongue hanging through his drooling lips and down past his chin. 89

"The Toilette of Salome" shows the dancer seated before a most un-Galilean dressing table, on which are flowers, vases, cosmetics, perfumes, china, and several books, including Fleurs du Mal and

87 Ibid., Figure 7.  
88 Ibid., Figure 8.  
89 Ibid., Figure 9.
Thérèse Racquin, from the recommended reading list of the Decadent school. She has a robe thrown over her knees but otherwise is quite naked. A masked, bewhiskered, bald figure in harlequin costume is powdering her hair; and she is also attended by three naked little boys, who gaze at each other with various attitudes of perverse longing. This drawing was also among those suppressed; and Beardsley replaced it with another version of the same scene, in which Salome wears a voluminous Victorian gown which covers her body with discreet thoroughness. The little boys do not appear at all, but the library has been expanded to include Nana, Les Fêtes Galantes, Manon Lescaut, The Golden Ass, and a volume from the writings of the Marquis de Sade.

Salome has won possession of the head in "The Dancer's Reward," and she stares at it so intensely that one might expect it to crumble to dust at any moment. Her panting mouth hangs open, and two long, sharp teeth shining in the corners have the appearance of fangs ready to tear into the flesh. "The Climax" finds her in a more tender mood, kneeling on a fluffy cloud and dreamily gazing into the eyes of the dead Baptist, which are closed and expressionless, reminding one how very unrewarding it must be to make love to a dead man.

90 Ibid., Figure 10.  
91 Ibid., Figure 11.  
92 Ibid., Figure 12.  
93 Ibid., Figure 13.
bodies would seem to have some appeal, though, Beardsley acknowledges in the final drawing of the series, prosaically entitled "Tailpiece." Here Salome's nude corpse is being placed in a huge powder-box by a centaur, who stares at her limpid young nudity with frenzied interest, and by an idiotic clown in harlequin suit, who smiles with amused indulgence at his overwrought companion. Salome herself, now that she is dead and in repose, has relaxed her affected exotic expressions of lust and breathlessness and eccentricity and looks merely very dissolute, frowzy, and commonplace, after all. Beardsley has seen her for what she is.

The French writer Jules Laforgue (1860-1887) saw her even more clearly and satirized her even more wittily. Profoundly disgusted, apparently, by the shallowness and artificiality of his Roman-tically Decadent contemporaries, he presented a scorching indictment of everything they stood for in his "Salome," one of six "moral tales" published under the title of Moralités Légendaires in 1886.

The tale occurs in a part of the exotic Orient known as the Esoteric White Islands and in a remote age, "two thousand dog-stars ago." The Esoteric White Islands are ruled by a "venerable carcass" called the Tetrarch, a man of "dismantled . . . temper" and "vacant manner," who likes to smoke his midday hookah, contemplate the

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94 Ibid., Figure 14.
sumptuousness of his elaborate Oriental palace, and stroll through his magnificent Oriental hanging gardens, admiring the beauties of his flock of elegantly indolent peacocks; his aviary, in which bulbuls "disgorge . . . distinguished garrulities"; his Menagerie and Aquarium, both housing interesting and educational exhibits of exotic monsters; his endless fields of yellow flowers; his "patriarchal" pines; his "green slopes which [bring] dreams of dancing fauns"; and his "stagnant lakes where swans [are] engulfed in years and in boredom, and weighed down by ear-rings which must undoubtedly . . . be . . . too heavy for their slender throats." Even with all these wonders to delight him, the Tetrarch still finds his greatest pleasure in his beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter Salomé, who fancies herself to be an "intellectual," in the worst sense of the word, and who spends all of her time studying out eccentric whims to act on. Her father, an idiot himself, appreciates the cuteness of her studied eccentricities and takes keen delight in every one of them. She has many of them perfected and does manage to create the appearance of a genuine exotic. She dresses, for example, in "a jonquil yellow cobweb" of muslin—yellow, naturally, like the flowers in the Tetrarch's garden, because yellow was the favorite color of the Decadents; and, when there are

95It will be recalled that Wilde once thought of costuming all the characters in Salome in yellow. On another occasion he said, "Pour écrire il me faut de satin jaune" (cf. Wilde, op. cit., p. xii).
visitors to the palace, she makes herself breathless running about
from chamber to chamber so that she can be always disappearing,
coyly, mysteriously, and enticingly, in a haze of jonquil yellow, just
as the guests enter the room.

Like a true intellectual, she takes a great interest in science
and philosophy. Her room, tiled with "very yellow majolica," is al-
ways cluttered up with the equipment of a chemical laboratory; and
she has succeeded in compounding copper sulphate, lead acetate, and
similarly exotic substances. She takes herself even more seriously
as a student of philosophy; and her father gives her particularly strong
encouragement to pursue this affectation, because he is a devotee of
Thought himself, as he imagines. When he has a grand feast at the
palace, he arranges a floor show in which three clowns impersonate

Yellow was, moreover, the favorite color of Rossetti, Morris,
Burne-Jones, Whistler, Toulouse-Lautrec, Beardsley, and other
prominent artists of this period, when yellow satin evening gowns
represented the height of fashion and a helianthus at the whip hand
of an equipage was considered the proper adornment for young
ladies driving in the park. Posters on bill-boards were also yellow,
and breakfast china was tinted "buttercup yellow." The color came
to represent the spirit of modernity and emancipation, the challenge
that was foreseen in the imminent arrival of a new century. The
last decades of the nineteenth century, indeed, acquired the name of
the "Yellow 'Nineties"; and one of its most distinguished and forward-
looking literary journals, which for a time enjoyed the services of
Beardsley as its art editor, was The Yellow Book. Wilde was off-
fended that no one ever invited him to contribute to the magazine
and took out his vengeance by pronouncing what he must have con-
sidered a withering insult: "It is horrid and not yellow at all."
(Cf. Winwar, op. cit., pp. 239-240.)
"the Idea, the Will, the Unconscious. The Idea chatter[s] about everything-in-itself, the Will [runs] its head against the scenery, and the Unconscious [makes] the large mysterious gestures of one who suspects himself of knowing more things than he can tell, and of knowing them to the very bottom." The main event of the evening's entertainment, however, is provided by Salomé herself, who, instead of performing a divestment number, offers a philosophical recitation, indicating that she is acquainted with a large number of words from the overwrought and rather humorless vocabulary of nineteenth-century German philosophy. She has no idea of what the words mean, but this ignorance only adds to the fluidity, as it were, of her Idea. "How estimable the Void is!" she proclaims; "The Void, that is to say, the latent Life, . . . How estimable it is, absolving, coexisting with the Infinite!" Then, having said everything she has to say about the Void, she goes on to other matters:

Love! Inclusive mania of not wanting to die absolutely. . . . In eternity, things are things. . . . O passengers on this Earth, which is eminently idem with an incalculable number of other planets that are also alone in a life of indefinite and infinite labour! The active Essential loves . . . , loves itself dynamically, and more or less according to its own inclination. Only beautiful souls enjoy playing a bagpipe indefinitely. Be naturally passives, all of you. Automatic as Everything, enter into the Orders of Well-Intentioned Harmony. . . . The Unconscious will function da se . . . [et cetera, et cetera].96

"The little yellow vociferator" accompanies her "garrulously mystic delirium" with a demonstration of her skill at lyre-playing, performing a "fugue which [does] not reintroduce its themes." This exhibition is also enhanced by the contrived and extreme exoticism of her appearance:

Her hair was powdered with unknown pollens. It hung down over her shoulders, but it fluttered down against her forehead under a garland of yellow flowers. . . . Her shoulders were not covered, and her breasts were covered only by the curving mother of pearl which held the spreading young azure, emerald and gold peacock feathers [and which fell off from time to time as she spoke because her bosom was too immature in its development to support them adequately]. . . . She was hermetically cobwebbed in jonquil yellow caught together with fine black threads. But the cobweb was held by clasps which left her arms in their angelic nakedness, and it curved down between the two faint suspicions of breasts whose shells were pierced with a small opening.  

Her appearance is really striking and exciting, and every man at the feast murmurs to himself, "Oh, how single-minded her skirt must feel itself!" The Tetrarch is inexpressibly delighted himself, by the combination of vocabulary and voluptuousness, and, in a very fit of joyous abandonment, throws away the pineapple he has been nibbling at and offers Salomé anything she wants as a reward for her performance. She tells him that she wants "some kind of dish" sent up to her room bearing the head of one Jaokanaan, a seditious and obscene pamphleteer who is imprisoned in the cellars of the palace.

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97 Ibid., pp. 231-232.
The Tetrarch is rather surprised at this particular whim of his daughter's; but he wishes to please her and dispatches the Administrator of Death to the cellar with instructions to send the prisoner's head upstairs to Salomé.

When she receives it, she paints it with phosphorus, bathes it, rouges it, and curls its hair. She sprinkles her own hair with diamonds, dons an evening gown of violet chiffon which she always wears on ceremonial occasions, and carries the head out on to her balcony, where she proudly submits the trophy to the gaze of the twenty-four million stars of the Milky Way. Somehow, it seems, she has conceived the notion that she is the foster-sister of that galaxy—a curious relationship, the nature and origin of which she does not explain but which she believes in completely. She believes also that, in order to be initiated into the Cult of the Stars, she must be "exorcised of her virginity." The problem of thus exorcising herself has been a great one for her, because a stellar being, a foster-sister of the Milky Way, must retain a certain star-like chastity and Salomé, in resisting her loving father's attempts to arrange a noble marriage for her, has indicated a strong natural inclination to remain chaste. Therefore, she has elected to retain her virginity in the commonplace physical sense but to sacrifice it in some devious metaphysical sense, by performing an act of homicide. She does not explain,
however, how this seemingly irrelevant substitution satisfies the conditions for initiation into the Cult of the Stars.

She adds a few ceremonial bits for the benefit of the stars, "her famous post-decapitation experiments" with the head; but these prove strangely unexciting: "Her electric caresses [do] not draw anything from the face except grimaces which [have] no consequences." Despairingly, she unveils her body and for ten minutes stands nude on the terrace waiting for the star-light to ravish her virginity—not in the coarse, physical sense, but in a poetic, metaphysical sense. Presently, though, she notes that the stars are merely shining and, with a vague sense of frustration, she resumes her violet chiffon, "like a reasonable person."

Finally, determined to elicit some response from the stars, determined to receive some sign that her oblation has been accepted, she places an opal in Jaokanaan's mouth and climactically seals it with a kiss. Then she waits another minute, but there is still no sign from the night; and, in a rage of frustration, she grabs the head and throws it from the balcony into the sea below. She forgets to let go, though, and "with a cry that [is] human at last," she falls on to the rocks below, where, "with her sidereal diamonds cutting into her flesh... [and] her skull battered in," she spends the greater part of an hour dying. There is still no sign from the stars. "As for the distant skies, they [are] distant."
The moral of the tale, Laforgue explains, is that Salomé is "less the victim of illiterate chance than of having wished to live in the artificial, instead of simply and honestly, like the rest of us."

He has seen her for what she is; and he has seen Romantic Decadence for what it was, a wish to live in the artificial, instead of simply and honestly. Oscar Wilde, emerging from Reading Gaol in somewhat chastened and disillusioned mood, realized something of the truth of this, as he acknowledged sadly and somewhat wonderingly, "Things are what they are." When Herodias said in his play, "The moon is like the moon, that is all," she was not being merely coarse and unimaginative, as he thought when he wrote the line. She was showing good sense; and, if she was not speaking exotically, she was speaking simply and honestly.

Thus, finally, it becomes apparent that, when one has learned to shun what is artificial and to embrace what is genuine, to live simply and honestly, the artificiality of Romantic Decadence has lost its charms, and the artificiality of the Decadent conception of Salome has lost its charms, too. Therefore, until some time in the future when an artist of distinctive imagination evolves a new conception of Salome and a new, artistically valid manner of treating her story, there is really nothing more to be said about her.

98 Renier, op. cit., p. 147.
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