

## INTRODUCTION

It is only in recent decades that Oscar Wilde's one-act drama *Salome* has attained what many see as its rightful degree of prominence in the Wildean canon. More castigated than complimented on its first published appearance in French in 1893 and in English translation the following year,<sup>1</sup> denied public presentation in Britain until 1931, *Salome* frequently suffered during its early existence from being adjudged a work reflecting the extravagant lifestyle and outrageous attitudes of a writer who after May 1895 had to endure the stigma of an exposed and convicted homosexual. The subsequent cult of overt, self-conscious masculinity which dominated the last years of Queen Victoria's reign rejected all art that its adherents characterised as *outré*, decadent, morbid, unnatural, perverted and unwholesome: *Salome* seemed tailor-made for disapprobation on precisely such grounds. Yet even when Wilde's reputation recovered sufficiently to assume that of a 'tragic genius', the instability of *Salome's* critical popularity and the infrequency of its theatrical realisation often left his most experimental play isolated as an apparent aberration among the complete works.

Yet for the more dispassionate observers of his own day, Wilde's exotic symbolist sidelight on a popular biblical incident might not have stood out quite so signally from amongst his dramatic *oeuvre* as a flagrant anomaly, had they examined its stage predecessors more carefully. His two ventures into territories unfamiliar to the average contemporary playgoer, prior to the success of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892, did something to prepare them for the emotional and linguistic intensity, if not the superb theatrical concentration, Wilde achieved in the handling of the traditional

2 · Wilde: *Salome*

scriptural legend of the involvement of the Jewish princess in the martyrdom of St John the Baptist.

His first dramatic essay, *Vera; or the Nihilists*, a spirited if stagey political melodrama written in 1880 and first presented in New York in August 1883, had for its heroine a Russian woman of the people who joins the Nihilists to free her country from the oppression of its detested Tsarist regime. In Vera herself we encounter the pent-up ardour and the unleashed fury of a Salome and this is not the sole anticipation of the later piece. In the elder Tsar's role we meet something of the grim humour, sadism and nervous energy displayed in that of Herod. It has also been claimed that Vera's climactic act of sacrifice in allowing the power of human love to triumph over vindictive desires – or in this instance the desire for liberty in the abstract as opposed to regard for the sentient individual – anticipates future works in which the sovereign potency of love overcomes baser feelings.<sup>2</sup> However, in the case of *Salome* the realisation strikes the heroine too late to save a life.

A similar case can be made for *The Duchess of Padua*, Wilde's grandiose Jacobean-inspired tragedy of revenge subsumed in love, completed in Paris in March 1883 and eventually staged in New York under the title of *Guido Ferranti* early in 1891. Here, too, passion, vengeance and remorse constitute key ingredients in a Shakespearean pastiche which has a certain borrowed lustre, but which lacks true originality of tone or purpose. Although the fervent reciprocal feelings which develop between the youthful revenger Guido and Beatrice, the unhappily married wife of the elderly tyrant Duke, seem far removed from the virginal Salome's abortive wooing of the unresponsive Iokanaan, both relationships founder on incompatibilities of temperament and attitude, which death alone can resolve. Even closer to the heart of *Salome* is the Duchess's terrible reaction to her lover's harsh, judgmental, if temporary repudiation of her, following her murder of the Duke. Like Salome, sexually humiliated by a man's priggish response to her declaration of devotion, Beatrice reacts by denouncing Guido for the killing, and allows

him to go virtually to the scaffold before she acknowledges the fact of their love, and they die together, much as Salome dies cradling the Baptist's severed head in her arms.

Katharine Worth also finds, in both *Vera* and *The Duchess*, devices which anticipate what is usually referred to today as 'total theatre'.<sup>3</sup> Originating in large measure in Richard Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, whose principles were embraced by the French symbolist poets, 'total theatre' strives to orchestrate sound, light, movement, costumes and décor, speech, music, and dance, blending visual and aural effects to create one whole and indivisible staged entity. Wilde was undoubtedly a dedicated proponent of the concept; in his essay 'The Truth of Masks', which, as 'Shakespeare and Stage Costume', first appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* for May 1885, defending the stage as 'the meeting-place of all the arts', he emphasised the importance in the playhouse of such concepts as 'the unity of artistic effect', 'harmony in the scene as a picture', and the necessity for 'one single mind directing the whole production'.<sup>4</sup> But while *Vera* and *The Duchess of Padua* may on occasion employ such devices as symbolic verbal and scenic leitmotifs in embryonic form, they never receive the sustained artistic attention Wilde lavished on *Salome* while modulating in a thoroughgoing and sophisticated way the techniques of what have since become theatrical commonplaces.

This feature of his work was certainly in accordance with Wilde's aim in *Salome* to embody the literary principles evolved and espoused by that anti-realist group of influential French writers and theorists known as the *Symbolistes*, several of whom Wilde knew personally. Richard Aldington once argued that Wilde was writing symbolist verse 'years before the symbolist movement began',<sup>5</sup> and if we apply Edmund Wilson's succinct if narrow definition of symbolism as 'an attempt by carefully studied means – a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors – to communicate unique personal feelings',<sup>6</sup> then Wilde's early sub-Arnoldian poems may be deemed mildly symbolist. But in many

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4 · Wilde: *Salome*

ways Wilde's verse falls far short of the genuine originality of subject and invention, the verbal daring and dexterity, the ability to invest ordinary objects and events with the intangible, indefinable, suggestive mystery of being characteristic of the best work of Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. Only in *Salome* does he truly succeed in matching the highest achievements of his French symbolist mentors.

The ideals of symbolism were less easily achieved on stage than on the printed page: the evocation of delicate personal sensations and emotions, the intimations of other spheres of existence, which the movement desiderated as suitable subjects for treatment, were insubstantial, transient, fragile. Though dedicated to that unification of all the arts in one aesthetic experience which theatre is uniquely capable of delivering, the symbolists found the essential concreteness and tangibility of practical playhouse drama a deterrent to the realisation of dreams which were essentially best animated and experienced in the privacy of the individual consciousness. Thus, of those of the symbolist persuasion, the only playwright to achieve durable success (prior to Paul Claudel to whom fame came much later) was the Flemish writer Maurice Maeterlinck.

Acclaimed since as the precursor of Beckett and of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Maeterlinck, with his strange, disturbing, mystical dramas, was originally greeted with ridicule and suspicion, and even today his plays remain little known to the general public.<sup>7</sup> Yet in June 1898 J. T. Grein, journalist and stage entrepreneur, who was to mount a production of *Salome* in extremely controversial circumstances in 1918, wrote reviewing Mrs Patrick Campbell's production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*: '[t]here is, in fact, no French writer of our days who succeeds, with such simplicity of material, in obtaining such marvellous effects, and there is scarcely a French poet whose verse equals Maeterlinck's prose in the rhythm, the cadence, the music of its language'.<sup>8</sup>

However, Grein begins his review with the observation that

Maeterlinck's style 'lends itself particularly to caricature, and his method in its infantile simplicity is an easy prey to ridicule', and so closely did Wilde capture in *Salome* the terse, repetitious, incantatory, *faux naïf* cadences of Maeterlinck's first published play *La Princesse Maleine* (1889), to whose English translation William Heinemann had invited him to write an introduction, that many have believed it to be little more than straightforward parody.<sup>9</sup> But it seems more likely that Wilde, by mirroring the *Princesse's* hesitant, melodic, patterned prose, conjuring up mysterious invisible forces at work on human lives, and capturing Maeterlinck's brooding atmosphere of menace and anguish, was engaging in the sincerest form of flattery.

Peter Raby and others have demonstrated the links between *La Princesse Maleine* (which never received public production in its author's lifetime) and *Salome*, both in verbal and visual terms.<sup>10</sup> The first scene is set in the moonlit garden of a castle, while a noisy betrothal-feast takes place off-stage; two sentinels comment on various ominous portents seen in the heavens – a comet with a fiery tail, a reddening moon. Soon the bride-to-be, Princess Maleine herself, appears, a child-woman as Salome is often felt to be, though in Maleine's case a far more lost and vulnerable figure, fleeing in fear from the banquet where quarrelling has broken out. Next from the hall erupts her putative father-in-law, a drunken monarch surrounded by his entourage, fiercely forbidding the espousal and promising to wage war on Maleine's people; his son is to marry another. But sadly Maleine has already conceived a deep obsessional passion for the lost bridegroom she has only met fleetingly, and her father imprisons her in a dark tower for her obstinacy. Eventually she escapes, seeks out and finds her beloved, but caught in the web of destiny Maleine's fate, like that of the obsessed Salome, is violent death.

Certainly, aspects of Maeterlinck's first act bring Wilde's play very much to mind despite the considerable differences between the Belgian's medievalised fairy tale and the Irishman's scriptural legend,

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6 · Wilde: *Salome*

but setting aside the points of immediate contact, ‘Maeterlinck’s insistent use of colour, sound, dance, visual description and visual effect offered Wilde a theatrical vocabulary more complete and more innovative than anything the London stage could demonstrate’.<sup>11</sup>

The connection was tacitly acknowledged shortly after Wilde completed *Salome*, when both *La Princesse Maleine* and Wilde’s piece were considered for production by Paul Fort’s Parisian Théâtre d’Art, a short-lived attempt to establish a theatre company dedicated to the performance of stage pieces of a symbolist tendency. Though neither play was presented, their affinities seem recognised in this gesture, even if Wilde’s precise degree of indebtedness to the Belgian master is constantly under review.

There is one other possible link between Wilde, *Salome* and the Théâtre d’Art. Before its premature demise (or transmogrification into Lugné-Poe’s Théâtre de l’Oeuvre), during the period in late 1891 when Wilde was resident in Paris and working on *Salome*, Fort’s group staged on the evening of 11 December a remarkable programme of stage experiments which included a dramatisation based on the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs from the Old Testament by Paul-Napoléon Roinard.<sup>12</sup> Several of his Paris associates being involved with the company, there is at least a possibility that advance discussions of this adaptation reached Wilde’s ears and alerted him to the dramatic relevance of this rich scriptural text with its sharply etched erotic imagery, lyric simplicity of expression, patterned repetitions and periphrastic elaboration. The apocalyptic speeches of Iokanaan often consist of inflated scriptural pastiche of the kind Wilde uses in *Vera* or *The Duchess*, but in the seductive speeches of Salome herself particularly, Wilde deploys the register and cadences of one of the most melodious books of the Bible far more authentically: ‘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’, for example, might easily be a

quotation from the Authorised Version's rendition of the Song of Songs. Wilde's diction has often been labelled as synthetic or derivative, but at such moments it soars away from both its Maeterlinckian and its scriptural origins.<sup>13</sup>

Wilde also contrived to incorporate into the texture of his dialogue entirely characteristic passages of his own, so that neither the elevated nor the plangent becomes monotonous. In the exchanges involving Herod and Herodias, the Jews and the Nazarenes, one finds the brilliantly orchestrated conversational cut-and-thrust of the four social comedies:

HEROD: Concerning whom did he speak?

FIRST NAZARENE: Concerning Messiah who has come.

A JEW: Messiah hath not come.

FIRST NAZARENE: He hath come, and everywhere he worketh miracles.

HERODIAS: Ho! ho! miracles! I do not believe in miracles. I have seen too many. (*To the Page.*) My fan!

Even within a short compass Wilde's theatrical instincts were always alive to the importance of not being too earnest for too long.

Several previous accounts, including that of Gustave Flaubert in 'Hérodiad' (1877), had introduced Salome into the action almost casually or late in its development. By launching forth *in medias res* Wilde not only achieved the attendant increase in concentration and rapidity of action as is customary, but also provided for an immediate focus on his eponymous protagonist with the Young Syrian's opening words, 'How beautiful is the Princess Salome tonight!' As a result her arrival is keenly anticipated from the beginning.

Moreover, the lack of a conventional preliminary exposition, along with the absence of digression or diversion, enables Wilde to give to his treatment of the Salome theme the intense yet brief burst of jewel-like illumination similar to that which the French symbolist painter Gustave Moreau was able to bestow on two of his celebrated portrayals of the princess exhibited at the Paris Spring

8 · Wilde: *Salome*

Salon of 1876. Whatever his Maeterlinckian affiliations in terms of verbal structures and textures, Wilde rarely resorts to the slow trance-like vagueness of the Belgian. Much in *Salome* is dynamic, clear-cut, hard-edged, brilliant: however Wilde intended his princess to be dressed, there is a bejewelled nakedness about the play that bears her name.

Like several of those handling the Salome story, including Jules Laforgue in the posthumous *Moralités Légendaires* (1887), Wilde in some respects can be viewed as debunking its chief figures, much as his fellow-Irishman Shaw deflated the great ones of history (Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte among them) by exposing their human foibles. Wilde reveals his princess to be proud and beautiful but also stubborn and self-willed; Iokanaan is selfless in his denunciations but almost neurotically ascetic; Herod is worldly-wise and shrewd, but superstitious and weak-willed.

Despite the play's brevity Wilde's Salome emerges as a far more complex creation than is the case in other literary treatments in which she features. She begins as the cool, chaste, aloof figure Stéphane Mallarmé had presented in his 'Hérodiade' (1866), self-absorbed until the Baptist awakens her latent sexuality. Evading her stepfather's lustful advances, she also has no time for the devoted Young Syrian except as someone to be exploited in order to obtain a sight of the prophet. At the start of the play she is associated with the moon when Narraboth proleptically speaks of it as 'a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing', and later she herself seems to identify with the planet which 'has never abandoned herself to men'.

Initially seen as an untainted victim of Herod's lust, with her insistence on the appearance of Iokanaan Salome is transformed first into a young woman instantaneously engulfed by sexual desire, and then, finding herself rebuffed, into a cruel and vindictive predator whose destruction of the Baptist is presaged in the suicide of the Young Syrian. Tradition and other versions of the material had postulated a Salome in love with the Baptist, but Wilde's originality lies



in having his princess overcome with pure physical desire for Iokanaan's body rather than moved by admiration for his fine character or fearless preaching. Frustrated, insulted, rejected, Salome exacts the terrible revenge that her wilfulness, in demanding to see the prophet, has precipitated in the first place.

One result is that Wilde's Salome is no longer made the instrument of her mother's destructive designs on the Saint as in many other versions; she pursues her own vendetta, not that of Herodias. Instead of being a mere innocent manipulated by her mother, the daughter relegates the parent to a subordinate role. Now, rather than urging Salome to execute the dance in order to entrap Herod into dispatching Iokanaan, Herodias seeks to prevent the performance for fear it will stimulate the Tetrarch's desire for her daughter even further. Another variation on a familiar theme is Wilde's handling of Herod: here his agreement to grant the dancer anything she asks *precedes* the performance and is quite casually formulated. But some have argued that Wilde erred in having Herod make the 'rash promise' prior to Salome's exhibition, and so deprived the dance of its main motive, namely the seduction of Herod. Wilde's Tetrarch is already 'won over' before the music begins, so that all his step-daughter's dance achieves is to prevent him from renegeing on his sworn oath. We are given no indication of the moods of the dance or of Herod's responses to them. Indeed, in 1906 the American dancer Ruth St-Denis felt the dance to be nothing more than an 'intermezzo' in Wilde's script: she sought to create a far tenser version in which the entire action depended on Herod's response to Salome's gyrations, rather than appear in a dance which in her opinion arose from no more than a *fait accompli*. As an admirer wrote at the time, 'it's necessary that the audience already knows in advance that the resolution of the conflict [between Herodias and John] *depends* on the dance, so that it follows its intensifying stages in a state of *dramatic tension*'.<sup>14</sup>

Down the years Wilde's play has been faulted on a number of other counts; some have even questioned its claim to the title of

play, arguing that there is a better case for treating it as a prose poem. But despite its affinities with certain kinds of verse, to most readers and certainly almost all spectators its dramatic *raison d'être* can scarcely be called in question, for it is rich in those qualities which make for effective drama: colour, contrast, conflict, reversals of expectation, several major *coups de théâtre*. But it may still be argued that these excellences are overlaid by a baroque plethora of elaborate talk, a charge which even some of Wilde's society comedies also had levelled against them.

Some have not even cared for the quality of the talk: W. B. Yeats, who was to follow his fellow-countryman's lead in at least two of his own dramas, had reservations about the piece. In a letter of 6 May 1906 he informed a correspondent, T. Sturge Moore, that in *Salome* '[t]he general construction is all right, is even powerful, but the dialogue is empty, sluggish and pretentious. It has nothing of drama of any kind, never working to any climax but always ending as it began'.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, while there is something self-conscious in the prodigality of effect, it gives to *Salome* an artistic unity hard to accomplish by other means.

Perhaps more sustainable is the charge that so short a piece cannot really afford to indulge in three separate sequential crises – an evocative dance, an impassioned speech of farewell and a visibly violent death. One question for a would-be director to resolve is whether to ensure that each of these high points makes an equal impact, or whether their competition will reduce the force of each one. Does nothing succeed like excess, or is the playwright here not loading every rift with an embarrassment of ore?

Perhaps Wilde should at least be indicted for his failure to make clear his artistic purposes in contriving the Dance of the Seven Veils, to the secret of which he suggested that only his illustrator-friend Aubrey Beardsley was privy.<sup>16</sup> Since in Wilde's case the dance is not the pivot on which the entire dénouement balances, it would have been helpful to know whether Wilde wished it to represent in physical form the apogee of Salome's erotic hold over the male sex in