(De)constructing Salome:

Toward A Dialectical Critique of Transgression

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Introduction: Victorian Aestheticism(s)

“No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything.”¹

-Oscar Wilde

For Wilde and his contemporaries, the question of the artist’s place in society was at the forefront of intellectual discussion. A symptom of the larger cultural discussion around the Aesthetic Movement in England, questions like these addressed the very nature and purpose of art in the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, Wilde’s publication of Salome in 1891 ensured it a place at the center of this conversation. In many, often complicated ways, Salome played an important part in the movement’s vision for a new, provocative era of art.

At its conception, England’s Aesthetic Movement sought to revise and, in some cases, overthrow past approaches to art. It targeted theories from the first half of the nineteenth century when critics defined art’s purpose in largely socio-political terms. Two figures, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, were the most influential proponents of such traditional Victorian aesthetics. Born in 1819 and 1822 respectively, each man viewed art as essentially didactic: existing to teach a lesson, moral or otherwise, to the social reader. Take the 1844 preface to Ruskin’s early work, Modern Painters. In it, he deliberates over the question of whether “art has ever, except in its earliest and rudest stages, possessed anything like efficient moral influence on mankind” (xxiv). This question, for Ruskin, is the art critic’s most essential line of thought. His concern lies notably with art’s “moral” effect. Anything that fails to model the moral good for its viewer (Ruskin points to landscape painting as one such culprit) loses some inherent artistic value. He bemoans, for instance, the art that has “never prompted one holy thought in the minds of nations” – a complaint worded in the deliberately social language of nationhood to underscore his socio-political view of morality (Burgess 78). In the same work, Ruskin argues that one must go so far
as to “attach to the artist the responsibility of a preacher” (Ruskin xlv). Not only must an artist
keep the moral function of art in mind; the stakes of his failure run the same risks as those of a
deviant preacher. Such is the social currency of art, its profound cultural influence and its
political and moral power.

Correspondingly, Matthew Arnold views art as a predominately social act. Artistic
success comes from some beneficial cultural impact. See Arnold’s famous words on culture in
the preface to his 1875 work, *Culture and Anarchy*:

> Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us [... ] to
> conceive of true human perfection as a *harmonious* perfection,
> developing all sides of our humanity; and as a *general* perfection,
> developing all parts of our society. (Arnold 7)

The quotation immediately follows Arnold’s treatment of the “reading man,” his cultured figure
through whom literature has an improving effect. Here, Arnold not only subsumes (literary) art
into the larger social construct of “culture” but understands its purpose to be equally social in
nature. Culture, he argues, is inherently linked to an ideal notion of human “perfection.” This
perfection forms the crux of Arnold’s aestheticism: it is not only the *object* of culture’s study but
the point and purpose of its existence. The degree to which art allows or disallows progress
toward human perfection determines its worth. Good art allows one to first “conceive” and then
“develop” the human self. It also, in a remarkable claim by Arnold, extends outward from the
self in order to perfect “*all* parts of our society” as well. Self-cultivation alone does not good
culture make: broader social improvement must also play an indispensible role. When this
utilitarian approach meets Ruskin’s Christian morality, the two form the essence of the early
Victorian era’s understanding of art. Together, they shape the era’s most prominent aesthetic
philosophies – up to and even past the year of Arnold’s death in 1888.

With Walter Pater and the French Symbolist movement of the 1860s, however, critics
began pushing back against Ruskin and Arnold’s didactic model. Art, the new critics contended, need not be useful or moral; it need only be beautiful, non-utilitarian, existing for itself rather than for moral instruction. See Walter Pater’s concluding note in the 1888 edition of his work, *The Renaissance*: “For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake” (*The Renaissance* 239). In this, the last sentence of the work, Pater establishes a clear link between art and the viewer’s subjective experience. Art, he claims, acts to impart a heightened quality to time – not for any external reason but “simply for those moments’ sake.” In focusing on the *moment* produced by art as beautiful, rather than the art object itself, Pater establishes a vital focus on art’s subjective viewer. Critic Kate Hext describes this focus as an aestheticism built around the concept of the individual – privileging art’s effect on the mind, so to speak, over the art-object itself (1). Pater uses subjectivity to change the way art is both defined and encountered. Art, for instance, suddenly has little to do with anything outside of a personal experience of beauty. Didactic and socio-political concerns fall to the wayside as Pater makes room for his new ethos of beauty. In the deliberate pushback against Arnold and Ruskin, then, Pater and his protégés effectively introduce England to a new aestheticism – one encapsulated by the oft-used phrase, “Art for Art’s sake.” Derived from its French equivalent (*l’art pour l’art*), the phrase seeks to capture a counter-cultural philosophy in which the value of art is – and must be – divorced from any didactic, moral, or utilitarian function.

Oscar Wilde, a mentee of Walter Pater, adopts and expands this aesthetic philosophy into an iconic stance of the late nineteenth century (Chislett 361). Indeed, direct reversals of traditional theory become Wilde’s specialty. Against Ruskin, for instance, Wilde asserts, “There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is
all” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 17). Here, Wilde lifts the priestly burden of responsibility from the artist’s shoulders. Merit in art will be judged not from the moral value it imparts to man but from the quality of its style. Well written or badly written: this alone is Wilde’s revolutionary marker of success in art. In his 1889 essay, “The Decay of Lying,” Wilde elaborates on his aesthetic theory more fully. Its two characters, Vivian and Cyril hold a conversation on the value and purpose of art wherein Vivian, the Wildean aesthete, counters Cyril’s more traditional views. At one point in the dialogue, Cyril argues that art reflects the temper of its age and thus the “moral and social” conditions that surround it. To this, Vivian simply replies: “Certainly not! Art never expresses anything but itself” (“Decay of Lying” 1087). This idea, Vivian goes on to claim, is the principle of his “new aesthetics.” Even outside the context of this playful, faintly ironic essay, Vivian’s sentiment becomes a central tenet of Wildean aestheticism. Art’s self-containment ensures that it occupies a space independent of Ruskin’s moral standards of judgment or Arnold’s social standards of culture. In Wilde, Art relies merely on an internal standard of Beauty.

Enter the audience for Wilde’s new theories: late Victorian England, an era with a booming market-driven culture that had a near hyperbolic focus on production, utility, and commodity exchange (Gagnier 3). In such a setting, any object with no use outside of itself is necessarily rendered culturally provocative. Art, in short, becomes the deliberate space of doing nothing, of serving no purpose, and thus playing no role in a capitalist social structure. “All art,” as Wilde proclaims boldly in a preface to his most famous novel, “is useless” (*Picture of Dorian Gray* 17). A deliberate rejection of Ruskin and Arnold, this new sentiment flies in the face of conventional aesthetics. No longer will art be seen as having a role to play in the betterment of mankind: it will assume a purpose distinct from usefulness altogether. Vivian, in “The Decay of
Lying,” expounds this idea when he says:

As long as a thing is useful or necessary to us, or affects us in any way, either for pain or for pleasure, or appeals strongly to our sympathies, or is a vital part of the environment in which we live, it is outside the proper sphere of Art. (“Decay of Lying” 1077)

So Wilde’s theory rebels against Victorian notions of pragmatism and utility. He divorces art from its social environment and ensures that it contributes nothing to the human community but itself. Victorian Studies scholar Regenia Gagnier too understands this position as one directly opposed to market ideology: Wilde’s aestheticism, she argues, enacts the “art world’s divorce from middle-class life” (Gagnier 11). Indeed, its contrary position to mainstream notions of the “productive” and “purposive,” its explicit rejection of the Victorian natural, and the high value placed on idleness counter the mentality of a consumer-driven, commodity-producing Victorian England (11). Consequently, in the culture for which he wrote, Wilde’s stance stood out as an influential but offensive minority. This much is evident in the negativity of the mainstream press around his most boldly aesthetic works.

While Wilde’s relationship with the Victorian press can take up a book in itself, a brief look at the reactions surrounding Wilde’s novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, can illuminate his position outside middle-class acceptability.⁴ Considered one of his most daringly aesthetic novels, Dorian Gray represents Wilde’s new aestheticism well. It ignores a middle-class setting altogether, dividing characters exclusively between England’s upper and lower class worlds (Gagnier 57). What’s more, its main character, Dorian Gray, abandons any semblance of a moderate lifestyle in favor of a profusely decadent one. With no regard for monetary expenses, spending limits, or self-restraint, Dorian pursues a lavishly expensive quest for human pleasure. Not only does Dorian descend into extraordinary debt; he forsakes Christian virtue in favor of astonishing vice. By the novel’s end, Dorian occupies a highly aestheticized world with no point
or purpose to anybody outside himself. It is, in short, a fundamental refutation of both the middle class and its socio-moral values. In response, many notably middle-class newspapers were quick to deplore Wilde’s novel. The *Daily Chronicle* complained of the immorality of *Dorian Gray’s* protagonists, as well as their “appeal to the senses” as a viable mode of life (Mason 65-66). The *Scots Observer* dubbed the book “nasty;” the *Athenaeum* thought it “sickening” and “vicious;” the *Christian Leader* simply found it psychologically “abnormal” (Gagnier 59; Mason 199-200; Mason 137). In a particularly telling review, the *St. James’s Gazette* accused Wilde of being a “simpleton poseur” who knew “nothing of the life which [he] affects to have explored” in his novel. In this attack in particular, the *Gazette* takes the transgression of Wilde’s literature to reflect the person of the author himself. It implies that Wilde abandons middle-class respectability to merely affect the wealth an upper-class life affords. Whether a fair accusation or not, such reviews confirm Wilde’s conscious separation from a middle-class, market-oriented mentality. Indeed, this pushback from mainstream culture paradoxically confirms Wilde’s stated artistic goals. In the second-edition preface to *Dorian Gray*, for instance, Wilde proclaims not only that “diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex, and vital” but specifically that “when critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 17). Such statements suggest that the negative press, far from reigning Wilde in, pushed him into a more explicit a divorce from mainstream critical culture. The resulting stance placed Wilde in deliberate opposition to both middle-class society and its market ideology. At least it did so in theory – the real-world ramifications of his aesthetic practice, and its complicit role in the market, made such statements more a performative façade than a serious ideology.
Returning, however, to the tenets of the theory itself, Wilde’s aesthetic project can be said to assume an individualist, rather than social, agenda. In its theoretical rejection of purposefulness and productivity, art becomes useless to society – specifically a market-driven, consumer society like Wilde’s own. What’s more, art’s unconcern for morality renders it pointless – and at worst counter-productive – to any Christian didactic agenda. Wilde’s art will not, as Ruskin had hoped, provoke “holy thought in the minds of nations.” While certain religious newspapers, like *Christian World* and *Light*, may have charitably searched for a moral in Wilde’s art, none could ever produce anything truly convincing (Gagnier 58). Hence, any moral value or human betterment fades alongside Arnold’s social aims. What remains in the end is nothing more than the individual. For without a moral, communicative goal, or one of social improvement, art obtains its value solely from subjective principles of beauty and pleasure. Personal, unquantifiable, and arguably irrational, these principles refuse social value in favor of individual satisfaction. Wilde was aware of the individualist implications of his aestheticism. Not only does he place himself, the individual artist, deliberately against mainstream society; he was directly influenced by the individualist projects of French *fin-de-siècle* authors. Among these, Joris-Karl Huysmans and Gustave Flaubert were two figures in late nineteenth-century French aestheticism who influenced Wilde profoundly (Weir 52). Both produced seminal works – Flaubert’s *The Temptation of St. Anthony* and Huysmans’ *A Rebours* – wherein the protagonist leaves society to live a life of radical individualism. Each protagonist pursues this dramatic separation to its tragic or existentialist end. What remains, they ask, when social meaning disappears? Can the individual be a viable being outside social dependency? If so, what radical freedom can he enjoy? Ultimately, these works become a search for meaningful life apart from society and the corresponding fulfillment of the free individual. Gagnier gestures at a matching
impulse in Wilde’s aestheticism when she notes how Wilde’s work “made the notion of an aestheticized, or free, life possible” (Gagnier 14). Art, then, symbolically enables the artist’s freedom: from society, from the market, and from the vice of useful production. Wilde’s art cultivates the image of a true counter-cultural project.  

Into this artistic, existentialist search emerges Salome, the story of the girl who beheads John the Baptist with a dance. Perhaps the most radical individual that can be found in Wilde’s corpus, Salome participates in a dramatic experiment of individualism and Wildean aesthetics. Everything converges in her: Wilde’s challenge to the traditional, his profound amorality, his defiance of social authority, and his push for unfettered individualism. How, the play asks, can an individual ever confront an oppressive society in an effective or meaningful way? Everything – the market, the government, the church, and even other human beings – seems to maintain some inscrutable, unbreakable hold over a person. Can the individual – represented here by Salome – ever find meaning outside these systems? If so, how can she achieve it?

For Wilde, of course, the answer should lie in art and an aestheticized life. But if art is to be the answer, then it must be the kind of art Wilde defines in his new aestheticism. It must be, as he says, amoral, anti-social, individualistic, and utterly useless. It must be the independent space that Wilde establishes outside a social reality. It must, in short, be the successful vision Salome seems to provide. In this thesis, then, I will use Salome as a space through which to explore Wilde’s new aestheticism and its effect on the individual whom it seeks to empower. To what extent does his anti-social, amoral approach to art succeed for this individual – who, incidentally, is a woman? To what extent does it, perhaps unexpectedly, fail? If creating “art for art’s sake” allows an independence of self that society denies, then how does this philosophy fare in a space where society fights back? Such are the questions at the heart of Salome.
I will demonstrate, over the next few chapters, that the results are startlingly imperfect. Existing criticism around the play has found in Salome a perverse icon of individualism, a conqueror of oppressive society. Impressive though this image may be, Wilde’s most transgressive protagonist demands a more complex treatment. Salome calls for a critique that sees past her glossy triumph to understand the social forces against which she engages and, ultimately, the flawed individuality she attains. Exploring her disempowerment alongside her agency – and treating her femininity with the critical attention it demands – moves my portrait of Salome in this direction.

To do so, I will trace two strands of Salome criticism that have, up to this point, been kept separate: the feminist analysis and the aesthetic critique. After exploring the readings of both, I will to bring them together at the end to produce a new, more complex reading of Salome. Chapters 1 and 2 will begin this process by establishing feminist criticism on Salome up to this point. The existing feminist takes, I argue, have established Salome as a powerfully transgressive figure. They are responsible for the essentialist view of Salome as the “powerful individual” that has dominated our understanding of the play for decades. In Chapter 2, then, I will work to deconstruct this image by emphasizing Salome’s deeper social struggle throughout the text. I also introduce the aesthetic critique as an alternative but equally necessary lens for the play. This aesthetic critique will temper the “powerful” feminist narrative by highlighting Salome’s limits as an aesthetic agent. Chapter 3 explores the social limitations around Salome’s art, and Wilde’s aestheticism more generally, to help make this point. Finally, in Chapter 4, I bring the feminist and aesthetic readings together in a productive new approach to Salome. As I will demonstrate, the combination of the two reveals a Salome who, as she moves toward greater feminist agency, also reflexively engages with her aesthetic constraints. This Salome, far from a straightforwardly
“powerful individual,” both resists and affirms her social disempowerment. Understanding this dialectical process, then, allows us to redefine Salome’s agency in the play. More significantly, it defines a critical approach to transgressive characters more generally. Acknowledging their social disempowerment, inner complexity, and resistance to symbolism becomes, beyond Salome, a necessary tool for reading the modern transgressive character at large.
Chapter 1: From Salome to *Salome*

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**A History of Representation**

*But 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 whatsoever 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.* (King James Bible, Matthew 14:1-9)

So goes the Biblical account of the nameless daughter who beheads – or requests the beheading of – John the Baptist. The story appears twice in scripture: Matthew’s version, which is quoted above, and a more detailed version in chapter six of Mark. In both, the young girl who dances for King Herod is never named, acts on the behest of her mother, and speaks only to relay her mother’s request to the king. She exists, then, in two main capacities: as a body for Herod’s visual pleasure and as a token by which Herodias may negotiate the Baptist’s death. And yet, this sparse and passive treatment hardly seems to account for the mythological force the girl eventually attains. For what was once a nameless figure in scriptural accounts becomes over time, “Salome”: the wicked girl, the sexually charged symbol of feminine power and, in Oscar Wilde’s era, the intriguing *femme fatale*.

Salome’s evolution from a Biblical footnote to a modern cultural icon spans centuries. Flavius Josephus, a Romano-Jewish first-century scholar, historian, and hagiographer, is the first to provide the name of this enigmatic daughter. In his work *Jewish Antiquities*, he explains:

> Herodias was married to Herod, the son of Herod the Great, who was born of Mariamne, the daughter of Simon the high priest, who had a daughter, Salome; after whose birth Herodias took upon her to confound the laws of our country, and divorced herself from her husband while he was alive, and was married to Herod. (Josephus 596)
His account of Herodias’ divorce and subsequent remarriage to King Herod establishes the enduring moral atmosphere around the figures. Viewed as somebody who not only catalyzes the beheading of a prophet but offends social law by pursuing another marriage, Herodias, Salome’s mother, is a woman associated with incest and female deviance. As focus shifts over the years from Herodias to Salome (via a succession of artistic representations), this deviance slowly translates onto Salome herself. As early as 1512, for instance, Berruguete illustrates Salome holding the severed head of John the Baptist in a painting simply entitled “Salome.”

Eyes downcast and slightly averted, she clasps the platter with an expression approaching guilt or depression – but the bright red cloth draped over her shoulder intentionally hinders the audience’s complete sympathy for her. The red, with its implications of violence and sexual deviance, visually taints Salome with blame for the dance and request that lead directly to the Baptist’s murder. Indeed, similar paintings and visual representations – from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century – ensure that Salome, the once nameless daughter, begins to accumulate the same symbolism of female deviance once primarily attributed to her mother. In Lucas Cranach the Elder’s “Salome” (1530), we see a regally dressed girl holding the head of the prophet with a notably self-satisfied expression. Caravaggio’s “Salome with the Head of John the Baptist” (1609) shows Salome leaning away from the carnage but standing with her entire body draped in an incriminating bright red cloak. Mattia Preti’s Salome goes so far as to tangle her hand in John the Baptist’s hair. And so on and so forth throughout a slew of Renaissance and early modern depictions that show Salome as somebody caught between the sympathetic and the morally reproachable. The fascinating interplay between a young girl’s innocence and a woman’s deviance fuels representations to the point where artists seem to become almost
obsessed with Salome in the place of her mother. Salome becomes, in short, the story’s moral focus.

By the time Oscar Wilde arrives on the Salome scene, innumerable representations of the girl have been produced – both historically and by his own nineteenth-century contemporaries. Writers and artists made over two thousand versions of her story in the later half of the nineteenth century alone (Janes 98). Of these, Flaubert and Mallarme’s versions of the story, along with the descriptions of Gustave Moreau’s paintings of Salomé in Huysmans’ A Rebours, were the most influential for Wilde. These French takes on Salome portray her deviance in a highly aestheticized light. Flaubert’s Hérodias, for instance, “mixes a decadent opulence and physical sensuality” in descriptions of Salome’s dance, while his novel, Salammbô, blends mystic-religious language with erotic ecstasy (Dierkes-Thrun 26). The blending of eroticism with religion and mysticism with art produced a vision of Salome that challenges her Renaissance-era morality. As the religious is subsumed into the aesthetic, Salome assumes a more boldly transgressive persona that is exhibited more than condemned by the artwork itself. This treatment of Salome resonates with Gustave Moreau’s visually lavish paintings as well: Salome Dancing before Herod (1875) and The Apparition (1876). Huysmans in his novel, A Rebours, describes Moreau’s works as containing “blazing shafts of light” – such “fabulous, blinding displays of fabrics and of flesh” – that watercolors could never achieve the same “brilliancy of hue” again (Huysmans 48-49). The striking visual qualities, emphasized over any moral message, align with Flaubert’s aesthetic approach to Salome’s story. Mallarme’s unfinished poem, “Hérodiade,” mirrors this trend too in depicting its protagonist using Mallarme’s hallmark Symbolist aesthetic: an evocative, imagistic, and synesthetic style. In resisting realistic or organic representations of Hérodiade, Mallarme develops a protagonist who, as he puts it, exists purely “as a creature of
dream, with absolutely no link with history." Allowing the character’s divorce from historical meaning enables Mallarme to create the kind of protagonist Wilde responds to: individualistic, alienated, and transgressive in her search for wholeness. More notably, Mallarme’s protagonist breaks from the tradition of Salome as Herodias’ nameless daughter who acts only according to her mother’s will. In Mallarme’s “Hérodiade,” he portrays the Salome figure as “central” by “putting her inner struggles as well as her search for ideal beauty at the center of the legend” (Dierkes-Thrun 17).

Wilde, inspired by Mallarme, aimed to create an account of Salome where she would be similarly endowed with agency. According to biographer Richard Ellmann, Wilde pointed to the “docility” of the biblical Salome as something he specifically wanted to address (343). It frustrated him that the nameless daughter in Matthew and Mark’s accounts obeys Herodias and, once she receives the head, simply conveys it to her mother. The insufficiency of this account, Wilde said, “has made it necessary for the centuries to heap up dreams and visions at her feet so as to convert her to the cardinal flower of the perverse garden” (344). Heaping visions at Salome’s feet certainly captures the impulse of many visual artists who depicted Salome. Whether by adornment in red cloth, or a guilty tilt of the head, Renaissance artists present Salome as the product of some external moral scrutiny. They capture her in a vice of Christian morality and, when they inevitably find her guilty, push her face into expressions of moral guilt or devious malice. Hence, as the product of some external, moral mind, paintings of Salome project the artist’s own judgment onto the object of Salome’s body. In doing so, Wilde argues, they miss the person of Salome almost entirely. They heap up their small moral visions before Salome’s infinitely more complex personhood. Wilde understands the fundamental disservice
these artistic dreams have done to the character of Salome – and the two-dimensionality into which they have compressed her.

Historically, then, Salome suffers from a Lady of Shalott-esque problem of subjectivity. By this, I mean that Salome experiences the same oppression of the subjective self experienced by the protagonist of Tennyson’s famous poem. In the first half of “The Lady of Shalott”, Tennyson’s female protagonist is shown to have a vibrant inner life. Fully possessed of inner desires, thoughts, and creative ability, the Lady of Shalott weaves artistic tapestries and takes on a rich, real subjectivity in her isolated tower (Tennyson 19). Once she leaves the tower and experiences her downfall, however, the Lady of Shalott’s body becomes nothing more than a beautiful, inert surface. A body, an object, and a shape, she becomes art: merely a beautiful object for the contemplation of others (Psomiades 26). Indeed, upon finding her silent body, Lancelot proclaims: “She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace, / The Lady of Shalott” (Tennyson 19). In this moment, Lancelot assumes the role of the artistic interpreter over the female art-object. He determines her to be aesthetically pleasing, intercedes on her behalf with God and, finally, in an act of supreme interpretive authority, names her. The woman’s previous subjectivity – her private autonomy and rich artistic depth – is suddenly reduced to an aesthetic surface by the male gaze. This gaze, in using the female subject as a canvas for projection, substitutes his own subjectivity for hers. Such is the nature of both the original Salome story and many artistic representations that have followed. Understood only through the lens of an external interpretive gaze, Salome becomes the art object through which others may prove an external morality. She, the mute object, must bear the Christian moral message for her male creators. In having her subjectivity subsumed into an aesthetic surface, Salome must effectively become the Lady of Shalott for the Lancelots of the art world.
For Wilde, such a treatment necessarily misinterprets Salome. Boldly, and in defiance of this treatment, Wilde proclaims: “I do not conceive of her as unconscious, serving as a mute instrument” (Ellmann 343). With Wilde, Salome will not only be named; she will assume a role of active agency. Salome, not Herodias, desires John the Baptist (rendered “Jokanaan”) in Wilde’s play. What’s more, it is Salome, not Herodias, who has the idea to ask for his head. In her behavior and actions, Wilde transforms Salome from the nameless, passive daughter of Herodias to the intriguingly passionate protagonist of the story. As critic Gomez Carrillo puts it, Wilde’s heroine is a woman who loves, suffers, and hates (344). Displaying a spectrum of emotion, Wilde re-imbues Salome with a human subjectivity that she had lost in her years of artistic representation. Perhaps most significant in this regard is also Wilde’s choice of medium. Rather than representing the girl visually, with all the two-dimensionality of a painting, Wilde chooses to render the story verbally. In fact, according to Carrillo, Salome began as pages in prose, before becoming a poem, before finally transforming into a play (344). In each manifestation, the use of language as Salome’s medium remained consistent. After his proclamation that Salome is not a “mute instrument,” it is telling that the final form of the story is one of distilled dialogue. The medium of a play works to privilege characters’ speech above everything – even, at times, the progression of plot. In the resulting interplay between individual expression, Salome can assume the subjective power she loses in other representations.

Verbose and intelligent, then, Salome ascends to a position not previously afforded to her. While still under the creative hand of a male playwright, she at least is crafted by one who grants her a persona beyond both docility and objectification. In fact, Wilde during the writing of Salome was determined to maintain one crucial plot point: Salome, after dancing, demands Jokanaan’s head not to obey her mother but out of unrequited love (344). This simple but
shocking fact turns the history of Salome’s character on its head. Not only does she act as the primary agent, she suddenly acquires a depth of human emotion – one that renders her both a sympathetic and tragic figure for her frustrated love. Whatever moral judgment others have laid on her throughout the years, this one fundamental acknowledgment provides, finally, a rich subjective vantage point on Salome’s situation. It is through this subjectivity that many have entered into an analysis of Wilde’s story.

Feminism and Feminist Critiques

While criticism on Salome has followed several trends, from psychoanalytical to historical, a dominant trend has undoubtedly been feminist. In this section, I will detail the way that, since its publication, Salome has been the subject of feminist-oriented interpretations by both nineteenth-century critics and contemporary scholars. These critics, I argue, have understood Salome as a transgressive figure who, by virtue of her subjectivity and openly sexual desire, assumes the status of a proto-feminist, or even feminist, ideal of her time. While some critics convey this idea more strictly than others, this theme of understanding Salome as a somehow “empowered” woman runs throughout the history of the play’s reception. My goal here, then, will be to outline this critical trend and, in addition, understand how the connection between Salome and women’s empowerment has contributed to the public’s understanding of Wilde’s work.

Published in 1891, Wilde introduced Salome at a time in England when questions around the figure of the “New Woman” had begun to dominate cultural discussion. From 1883 to 1900, more than one hundred novels, along with repeated articles and publications, were published on the subject of the New Woman, with the majority coming into print in the first half of the 1890s.
The term, “New Woman,” at its most basic level was loosely associated with the archetype of a female who, a) wished to be considered as an individual in her own right and, b) wanted the option of a future outside of marriage and motherhood (154). The concept emerged in the late nineteenth century out of the ongoing movement to grant women more political rights, specifically the right to vote. Portrayals of such women varied wildly. Advocates of women’s rights, such as writer Blanche Alethea Crackanthorpe, depicted the New Woman positively: the New Woman, she said, was an explicitly unmarried girl who enjoyed the opportunity for education, travel, and self-development (155). Opponents, on the other hand, associated the New Woman with perverse femininity, or even outright masculinity. They accused her of resembling a “desexualized half-man,” called her the “victim” of an unladylike passion to learn, and revoked her right to a feminine identity (155). In short, the New Woman became as much a journalistic phenomenon in the English press as she was a subject for debate among writers of the time. She had a distinct presence in the periodical press of the 1890s especially, where stereotypes were common and ranged from “mannish” and “over-educated” to dangerously “over-sexed” and “asinine” (154). The development of a New Woman press caricature – one that reflected anxieties around gender identification of the time – only emphasized the pervasiveness of the debate surrounding women’s issues.

Accordingly, it makes sense that Salome’s 1891 arrival onto the literary scene in the midst of this debate would be provocative. Her shamelessly explicit sexual desire for Jokanaan tapped directly into public anxiety around women being “over-sexed” and dangerously unchaste in their push for independence. Wilde’s Salome uses sexual desire like a weapon, exercising a kind of subversive feminine power that, to the eyes of a late Victorian audience, risked horrific consequences to gendered social norms. Such consequences played out before their eyes as, in
the play, Jokanaan loses his head, King Herod’s authority is undermined, and Salome has a necrophillic moment with the head of a prophet. Sally Ledger argues that in each of these acts, Salome not only demonstrates blatant sexual desire but “erotically controls a large male audience” as a “figure of power” (160). This image of a manipulator, she says, is a far cry from the “victimized, subject positions” of more common female modes of the time (160). It is this empowered image that prompts cultural voices of Wilde’s time to push back against such a threat. Eliza Lynn Linton, an anti-feminist proponent of the fin de siècle, wrote a series of articles in 1891 and 1892 in which she characterized the New Woman as a “wild creature” who demanded political rights, opposed marriage, and “sought absolute personal independence coupled with supreme power over men” (154). This hyperbolic notion of the sexual woman exercising a frightening tyranny over men resonates with one of the strongest cultural thrusts of Salome’s story: that of dominating or manipulating male society. Hence, the political and cultural environment into which Salome was published made it all the more likely that criticism of the work would be conducted in a feminist or anti-feminist vein.

Salome’s reception in the years following its print publication only reinforces the feminist understanding of the work. British feminists, after Salome had been published in 1891, published their own satirical publication entitled Salome and the Suffragettes. In the story, female activists hold the actress playing Salome hostage in return for political rights from the men (Glenn 105). The point being, of course, that a male audience will grant women even the right to vote in return for the sexually enticing performances of Salome’s leading lady. This particular threat speaks to the fact that performances of Salome actually helped launch the careers of its lead actresses, despite moral disapproval. The notoriety of the role, as well as the heated debates around its implications, ensured that any woman playing Salome on stage would receive more publicity
than for other, more conventional roles. Certainly Wilde’s own choice for the role of Salome, French actress Sarah Bernhardt, used the character to augment her status as an international symbol of the new culture of spectacle (15).

The influence of *Salome* on the feminist cultural sphere did not stop with its British reception but influenced the American scene as well – arguably in a more direct and explicit way. In her book, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Susan Glenn credits *Salome* with bringing momentum to early twentieth-century American feminism. She focuses on the sexual transgression of *Salome*’s protagonist and what it granted to the American female actresses who took on her role. Portraying Salome, she argues, does not simply pander to the male gaze as an erotic spectacle. Instead, Salome’s sexual transgression was also an important resource for women performers and audiences as “a vehicle for female self-expression and sexualized assertiveness” (98). Take, for instance, her analysis of the way in which *Salome* liberated its actresses:

> In a society that still considered overt female sexual expressiveness a form of scandal and even abnormality, the spectacle of the solo dancer, not to mention the white woman as Oriental erotic dancer, was a radical sight. It was radical too because the right to be sexually expressive along with the right to work and to vote was an off-stage political issue for younger women who, after 1910, would identify themselves as feminists. (Glenn 99)

Glenn highlights both the sexual expressiveness of Salome and the Orientalist aspect of her performance as transgressive. Both depart from more traditional modes of femininity. Glenn suggests that the power of Salome’s character, however, comes largely from the publicity of her displays. In a society where the issues of sexual and political freedom were only discussed “off-stage,” if at all, a theatrical performance of either would mark a significant event. Glenn suggests that this public display of radical sexual desire in Salome on the stage brought a suppressed issue
to the fore of American culture. As the play was performed before 1910 – the year when women would begin identifying themselves as “feminists” according to Glenn – its display of alternate modes of femininity would be an important step in the larger movement toward feminism. This is particularly true given that urban working class women “took cues from popular entertainers” of the stage and screen (98). A story like Salome, with its sexually expressive protagonist, would have thus at least introduced even the idea of such a woman existing, regardless of the idea’s favorability.

The role of Salome proved “powerfully attractive” to the daring women of American theater: specifically, Gertrude Hoffmann, Eva Tanguay, Aida Overton Walker, and Fanny Brice, all of whom played the part (98). The significance of the character lent these actresses a medium through which they could break with mainstream expressions of femininity. Glenn describes the role’s significance in this respect:

Each [actress] creatively manipulated the image of the Salome dancer to call attention to herself. Salome was a symbol, a role, and a mask for women. She was a sign of what society found both terrifying and exciting. She was a figure to be watched and those who seized the image were inviting the public to look at them in new ways. (Glenn 98)

The allegation that people found Salome both “terrifying” and “exciting” speaks to the polarized debate around the proper role for women in society at large. Occupying the role of Salome, then, gave actresses the chance to be publically bold and countercultural. It had the same effect as a “mask”: under ordinary circumstances, sexually expressive behavior would run the risk of the women being labeled deviant or abnormal. Under the façade of a theater role, however, the deviance of sexual behavior could be redirected into the medium of character and performance. The actress must negotiate the blame of having chosen the role of Salome, but some aspect of moral responsibility can be shifted onto the character as well. This in turn allows actresses to
experiment with sexual expressiveness but do so in the controlled social space of art and theater. The value of this social space, according to Glenn, cannot be underestimated. The mere presence of a bold feminine “image” on a public stage has repercussions on what society understands to be possible. Positive or negative, then, the mere fact of exposure for alternate modes of femininity can influence the possibility of a new cultural direction.

Due, perhaps, to this notable impact on a proto-feminist historical moment, several modern critics have continued to approach Salome in a feminist vein. Andrew R. Russ, for instance, examines how Salome’s chastity and promiscuity in the play ultimately functions to use the readers as ‘playthings’ subject to her sexuality (37). Helen Davies looks at the many ways in which the play upsets gender boundaries – to the point where Salome destabilizes the relationship between gender and sex in her favor (55). Joan Navarre turns to the symbol of the Triple White Goddess to explore feminist themes in the play, arguing that investigating woman as symbol in this way enlarges the artistic horizon of the stage (71). Jane Marcus, in her work Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman, actually calls Salome, as the title suggests, “Oscar Wilde’s ‘New Woman,’ the biblical Hedda Gabbler” (13). Even critiques that avoid being this explicitly focused on gender make points with feminist implications. Examples include Tony Garland’s examination of the Dance of the Seven Veils that culminates in a commentary on Salome’s femme fatale status and Kirby Farrell’s examination of the same dance in light of Wilde’s own fears about “the body and death” (Garland 125; Farrell 105).

Overwhelmingly, then, the critical trend surrounding Salome has been geared toward issues of gender, sexuality, and female agency.

Some of the most notable critical discussions on Salome interpret the protagonist as a proto-feminist icon, even outside historical treatments of the play’s performance. Regenia
Gagnier’s account of the play is one such example as she locates feminist themes in the text itself:

Wilde’s *Salome* posits the castration of the forces of law and order by the forces of illicit sexual desire. [. . . ] Wilde’s statement that he ‘took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet,’ also confirms that *Salome* was his personal fantasy of the triumph of sexual love over the repressive forces of society. (Gagnier 169)

In this analysis, Gagnier focuses her attention on the work’s status as a subversive piece of art. The play, she claims, posits a “castration” of political order and moral law. The use of such a provocatively gendered term here both, a) construes the social system as functionally male, or inherently patriarchal and, b) understands Salome as a radical threat to this system of male-oriented power. Her removal from the male-described limits of acceptable behavior, Gagnier seems to suggest, gives Salome’s sexual desire a “force” that would otherwise be under moral and legal control. Salome’s ability to castrate the system, then, arises from her very rebellion against it. With this in mind, Gagnier proceeds to interpret Wilde’s statement on the play as evidence of Salome’s subversive success. It is a “personal” mode of expression – therefore the play must be Wilde’s fantasy of erotic, illicit love triumphing over the ever-repressive force of society. This interpretation of the play, then, understands it as a *victory*. Gagnier establishes two sides: that of the radical individual, Salome, and that of the oppressive society. In her account, the play dramatizes a confrontation between the two. Instead of the more realistic outcome of the social repressing the individual, however, Wilde’s Salome emerges “triumphant” in her holistic “castration” of the social forces arrayed against her. In this understanding of the play, then, Salome does indeed arise as an almost superhumanly powerful figure. More specifically, she
emerges as a provocatively powerful woman – a formidable female figure against a patriarchal system.

In a similar way, other critics have focused less on the gender dynamics of the text but still attribute a radical amount of agency to its female protagonist. Take, for instance, the account Petra Dierkes-Thrun gives of *Salome*:

> In *Salome*, Wilde offers a bold aesthetic and philosophical thought experiment that pushes modern individualism to the extreme [. . . ] In Salome’s final moments, Wilde conjures up a postmetaphysical, self-sufficient self able to satisfy her own needs recklessly and triumphantly. (Dierkes-Thrun 55)

In her analysis of *Salome*, Dierkes-Thrun appeals to ideas inherent in late-nineteenth century modern philosophy: the notion of the individual, self-sufficiency, and the post-metaphysical self. A full treatment of these topics cannot be done here, but a brief summary is useful in grasping this provocative interpretation of Salome. Simply put, the philosophies here come from the combined works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Pater. In Pater’s aesthetic philosophy, he espouses the celebration of the physical, sensual, and aesthetic world over that of the metaphysical or religious sphere. Similarly, Nietzsche’s works, *Human All Too Human* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (published in 1878 and 1885, respectively) put forward a philosophy of radical individualism – one which encourages the individual to break from old religious and moral codes, “scorn human and divine law” and remake oneself in “one’s own image” and to “one’s own liking” (Dierkes-Thrun 47-48). Taken together, these philosophies privilege the individual above society in a subversive way. Dierkes-Thrun, in drawing a parallel between these ideas and Wilde’s Salome, suggests that Salome acts in the spirit of individualism they embody. Salome, however, assumes more than just a strong sense of individualism: she embodies the
“extreme” of individualism in a Nietzschean way. She becomes, in other words, the ideal test case for a modern philosophical experiment of individualism.

Creditng Salome with these hypothetical superlatives – i.e. as the ‘extreme’ figure of modern individualism – renders her character nearly allegorical. She becomes not a human character but a symbol of the Nietzschean or Paterian system. She is a projection, so to speak, of the most extreme individual that can be conceived within these systems. Understanding Salome as a philosophical test case of this sort imbues her with a fantastical and near-superhuman power. In the words of Dierkes-Thrun, Salome triumphantly “savors her own aesthetic and erotic desires and consumes herself in her own pleasure” in a way no other individual achieves (48). Note how perfectly self-centered and cyclical Salome’s actions seem here: they arise out of her individual desires and, once performed, produce “pleasure” for only herself. This continues until, in a self-contained system, Salome ultimately “consumes herself” – acting as both subject and object in the act of doing so. This self-oriented mode of action, and the primacy of the self in both cause and effect, renders Salome a triumphant depiction of the self-sufficient individual. Such is the nature of a philosophical ideal – specifically, of an individualistic philosophical ideal. Unlike Gagnier’s account, this ideal is not limited to the strictly feminine. Rather, Dierkes-Thrun’s Salome assumes a superhuman power that transcends gender and becomes merely the expression of a gender-neutral “self.” Arguably, this depiction grants Salome more authority than does the proto-feminist interpretation.

In either case, Salome emerges victorious. Whether she represents the empowered female who castrates the patriarchy or the philosophical ideal of modern individualism, these critiques grant her a power far beyond the normal. In Dierkes-Thrun’s account, Salome’s power could be called far beyond the realistic. At base, then, these treatments place Wilde’s protagonist in a
position of transcendent ability. She subverts the moral and social forces arrayed against her – seemingly by her own power. At the end of the play, holding the head of Jokanaan and in a state of erotic bliss, Salome dies beneath the soldier’s shields. As Dierkes-Thrun points out, death in this moment means Salome dies at the “absolute height of her ecstasy” which “no earthly experience can match” (45). Seen in this light, even her death ensures Salome’s place above the commonplace. Rather than being brought down to the banality of a mundane death, Wilde ends Salome’s story on a Paterian note of aesthetic and erotic fulfillment. The audience is left only with the image of the female victor.

Such a triumphant treatment of Salome, however, raises a few critical questions. How does Salome’s role as a human character – and disadvantaged woman – fit into these grand titles of the proto-feminist and the philosophical ideal? More significantly, do these treatments of Salome as a “powerful individual” even hold up to closer inspection? Outside of the provocative dance and shocking finale, there are elements and scenes of Salome that would suggest not. A closer examination will reveal a less subversive and more disempowered side to Salome that critics have yet to address. Considering them will, I think, problematize the current treatment of Salome as an empowered figure, reveal it as an essentialist view, and demand a new, more complex reading than has been done in the past.
Chapter 2: Deconstructing the Feminist Icon

The Disempowered Salome

Achieving her perverse and erotic desire to kiss the prophet Jokanaan – at the expense of the moral, political, and religious structures in place to prevent such a thing – would seem to make Salome the very icon of subversion. Yet her success must be qualified. Salome’s victory at the end of the play stands in juxtaposition with an initial struggle at its start. Salome’s opening moments underscore a telling inability to realize her goals unaided, as well as her susceptibility to male authority in Herod’s court. I will take these patriarchal limits into consideration to give a more holistic – and realistic – assessment of Salome’s agency. In this analysis, my focus will be specifically on Salome’s identity as a bodied, sexualized individual. As a young woman in the context of a male social gaze, Salome’s personhood becomes inextricable from her possession of a female body. I argue that this embodied self prevents Salome from achieving the ideal of individualism – and agency – critics have granted her in the past. It also prevents her from achieving the free and abstract individualism necessary to be a Nietzschean ideal. Thus, rather than admiring her status as an individual triumphant over society – and falling prey, so to speak, to the aura of her femme fatale persona – this approach will push criticism toward understanding the socio-political condition against which this persona develops. Doing so will contextualize her transgression and avoid the demonstrable flaws in a straightforwardly “powerful” Salome.

Overwhelmingly, Wilde’s text paints a picture of a Salome who emerges amidst the language of sex and sexual desire. Other characters project this language onto Salome as they gaze at her: the very first line of the play opens with a comment by the Young Syrian on “how beautiful the Princess Salome is” that night (583). Her physical appearance feeds conversations
around the court, as one man praises her beauty and another resists the temptation to look at her. When Salome emerges onto the scene, the first words we hear from her lips are a question: “Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while?” (586). Even the Tetrarch, the supreme male gaze of the court, looks at Salome with a prolonged stare. Her physical presence orients the behavior of those that surround her, and they define her by it. “She is like a dove that has strayed,” proclaims the Young Syrian – “She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind” (586). As men wax poetic over Salome’s body, they lavish it with meaning, understanding its physicality as demure, dove-like, beautiful, and a whole range of identities disconnected from Salome herself. Among these projections, Salome as a sexual being emerges as one of the most prominent. When Salome steps outside, for instance, she remarks on her escape from Herod’s “mole’s eyes” and “shaking eyelids” – an uninhibited trembling that reveals his lust and sexual intent. She remarks too on the strangeness that her mother’s husband should look at her “like that” – a vague phrase that leaves the specifics undefined but, with her mention of Herod’s marital status, gestures at their inappropriateness. Similarly, she acknowledges hidden intent in Herod’s gaze: “I know not what it means. In truth, yes I know it.” The hesitant admittance, her obliquely indirect manner, and the unspoken, even unspeakable, details of the matter all point to the taboo of the sexual and incestuous.

Tellingly, comments around Salome take on an equally sexualized air in scenes with the prophet, Jokanaan. As soon as Salome approaches him, he reacts with a sudden question: “Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids?” (589). His fixation on Salome’s eyes invokes a sense of intimacy, while his attention to their golden color signals her allure. Like gold and precious metal, Salome possesses a magnetic attraction that creates human desire, or lust. Thus, the “mole’s eyes” and “shaking eyelids” of the Tetrarch’s
gaze find their parallel in Salome’s golden and “gilded” eyes – only Salome’s gaze is rendered more appealing by the prophet’s more attractive choice of words. Jokanaan, then, like the males of the court, understands Salome first and foremost through her physicality and sexual allure. Accordingly, Salome becomes something Jokanaan must resist. “Bid her begone,” he demands, in a reflexive defense of his pious chastity. “I do not wish to know who she is” (589). The command is self-protective as Jokanaan, different from the pagan males, seeks to quell bodily lust.

Jokanaan’s reaction, alongside the outright desire of court males for Salome, orients her identity in Herod’s court to one of a bodied individual. Salome’s personhood is inextricably tied to her possession of a female body, which is in turn subject to sexual desire. Observations of her physical beauty construct her into an object of craving, while the male gaze pressures her into a becoming figure of poetic love and sensual lust. Salome is everybody’s figure of allure, from the Young Syrian’s “silver flower,” to Herod’s dancer with “naked feet . . . like white doves,” to even Jokanaan’s “Daughter of Sodom” (568; 599; 590). Her character, socially construed, therefore rests on the very fact of her possession of a female body. In isolation, however, Salome does not conform (at least initially) to these assumptions. In her opening dialogue, she ventures political and even religious opinions wholly separate from matters of love and desire. The Jews, Salome complains, “tear each other into pieces over their foolish ceremonies” while the Romans “give themselves the airs of noble lords” (586). Exasperated and hasty though these words may be, they represent a mode of thought distinct to Salome as an individual separate from her sexualized identity. Recall also that Salome emerges onto the scene trying to escape Herod’s gaze – and by extension the sexual identity his look forces onto her. Salome experiences Herod’s sexualization of her as threatening and unwelcome.¹⁵ Such is the experience, Jane Marcus
argues, of one made “the prisoner of a socially determined sex role” (12).

In the discrepancy between her individuality and social identity, Salome struggles to be recognized on her own terms, as an individual beyond her sexualized femininity. See the effort it takes to command the soldiers to let her see Jokanaan. Salome’s first request takes the form of a simple declarative statement: “I would speak with him” (587). Her tone carries a royal imperative: it is forthright, direct, and offers no justification for her desire. Such is the unqualified command of an individual at court. In response, however, the first soldier replies with the decisive, “It is impossible, Princess” (587). The immediate and unwavering rebuke from the soldier – who, incidentally, Salome outranks – is the first explicit sign of Salome’s lack of agency. An off-stage, unspecified order from the Tetrarch holds more power here than Salome’s boldly spoken command.

When her initial request fails, Salome resorts to repeated commands to obtain what she wants. Again and again, with minor variances, Salome repeats the order to speak with Jokanaan:

I would speak with him.
[ . . . ] I desire to speak with him.
[ . . . ] I will speak with him.
[ . . . ] Bring forth this prophet. (Salome 587)

In each instance, Salome employs the same bare style of speech. She refuses ornamentation or explanation in favor of simple, honest requests. Salome’s approach to language here resembles a masculine mode of speech: it assumes power rather than struggles for it, and is assertive rather than deferential. Tellingly, however, Salome fails in this mode. Despite her pretension of authority, the soldiers refuse her every request. Again and again, they spurn her desire to speak with Jokanaan. Richard Kaye, in analyzing this scene, describes Salome here as having the “arrogant insistence” of a “child-princess” (Kaye 56). The less-than-flattering portrait of Salome he offers aside, Kaye touches on a relevant point: the distinction between a character having
strength of will and a character possessing real power. Certainly, her “arrogant insistence” is a testament to Salome’s obstinate will. But his accusation of “childishness” picks up on Salome’s position as a character subject to a higher authority: she must ask permission; she cannot get what she wants; she must appeal to others to realize her desires. Taking Salome’s commanding tone in this scene as a sign of straightforward strength or simple childishness fails, then, to address the underlying question: why Salome experiences the need to ask at all. Repeated requests do not exist, after all, without repeated refusals. Hence, the fact that, a) Salome must ask, and, b) she must ask several times, speaks to a lack of agency in the court and becomes a sign of powerlessness.  

Meaningfully, success for Salome comes only when she resorts to physical, feminine techniques of persuasion. After her failure to convince the soldiers otherwise, Salome changes tactics. See her appeal to the Young Syrian:

SALOME [smiling]: You will do this thing for me, Narraboth. You know that you will do this thing for me. And tomorrow when I pass in my litter by the bridge of the idol-buyers, I will look at you through the muslin veils, I will look at you Narraboth, it may be I will smile at you. (Salome 588)

Unlike the boldly masculine mode of command used earlier, this speech sees Salome revert to a more feminine method of allure. Not only does she address the Syrian by name, “Narraboth,” she also promises a “smile” in reward. This smile, a symbol of female beauty and sexual invitation, signals Salome persuading in a different mode all together. No longer does she affect masculine power: she uses the Syrian’s male desire for her female body to bargain with authority. It is the presence of male desire – and her act of catering to it – that allows Salome her minor victory. Such is her reliance on an embodied identity. Where the more abstract tactic of language and command fails; acting in her sexual capacity allows Salome to produce results.
Historian and sociologist Joan Wallach Scott understands this sexualized condition as fundamentally opposed to abstract individualism. Women, she argues, are defined by ‘the sex’ and “so cannot be easily abstracted from their sex” (Scott 169). Men, by contrast, are abstracted from their sex by default. They have been historically and philosophically synonymous with “abstract individualism,” where the self is simply equivalent to the mind or soul. For women, however, the self is inherently the body as well. The possession of a bodied, sexualized identity forces them to “strive for abstraction in order to become equal” – as demonstrated by the effort Salome exerts at the beginning of the play (169, emphasis added). Females therefore act from a disadvantaged position. Accordingly, Salome’s femininity forces her to grapple with a disadvantaged and bodied identity in Herod’s court. Her efforts to distance herself from it, via masculine language and commanding behavior, only reveal society’s refusal to respond to her as anything beyond a sexualized female.

It is from this disempowered position that Salome begins her transgressive effort. She does not, as critics have suggested, fit neatly into an image of the individual “triumphant” over the “repressive forces of society” (Gagnier 169). Rather, her feminine identity limits her agency to the body and only by catering to the male sexual gaze does she gain any social traction. Accordingly, Salome makes concessions, turning to seduction over argumentation and sexuality over reason as the play progresses. In these techniques, she relies fundamentally on her female body. Indeed, her later obsession with Jokanaan’s body, rather than the peacocks, jewels, fans, or even sanctuary veil that Herod petitions her to accept instead, reveals the centrality of the body and sexual desire to Salome’s condition in court. No trinket, in Salome’s view, can leverage the power that the body does. Her desire for Jokanaan therefore becomes an apt mirror to her own bodied state of being.
Thus, Salome occupies a place distinct from the ideal of powerful individualism critics have placed her into. Her agency is complicated by its reliance on social perception and her initial inability to transcend those demands. This in turn pushes against the concept of Salome as a Nietzschean figure. Salome is not, as Nietzsche’s ideal free spirit would be, completely self-reliant and unencumbered by human belief systems and codes of behavior (Dierkes-Thrun 48). A Nietzschean ideal demands an uncomplicated individualism that can be philosophically identified with an abstract self. By contrast, Salome’s body weighs her down: she must grapple with her identity defined by sexuality to achieve any effective freedom. As such, her transgressive actions stem directly from a social condition of disempowerment – and are in turn defined by them.

So arises a question: given her status as a young female in Herod’s court without much agency, how and in what way can Salome be considered powerful? Any action Salome takes – and any victories she achieves – must be considered against this background of social limitation. To be fair, Jane Marcus is one of a few critics who have acknowledged such limitations in the play. Yet Marcus emphasizes Salome’s initial disempowerment only to paint a more triumphant picture of Salome at the end. Her aforementioned work, *Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman*, traces a direct trajectory from Salome’s sexual objectification to a decisive victory over men. Citing Salome’s beginning as a woman in a “repressive society,” Marcus argues that her murder of Jokanaan from this place makes her, like Ibsen’s Hiordis, an “anarchist and destroyer of men and societies which had kept [her] prisoner in [her] own body” (13). The victory Marcus presents not only understands Salome’s triumph simplistically – as an easy move from objectification to freedom and justice – it also obscures the methods Salome uses to achieve it. Specifically, it ignores that Salome’s transgressive process is as much defined as it is
provoked by her disempowerment. Considering this fact, as I will argue, raises questions around the idea of “victory” at all for Salome. As a feminist critique, then, Marcus’ approach (authored, perhaps tellingly, in the 1970s) is outdated and one-dimensional. Salome demands a restructured, updated reading that accounts for her more complex condition.

Victorian scholar Angela Leighton offers perhaps a better approach in her discussion of fin-de-siècle criticism on women. She cautions against a certain kind of criticism – like Marcus’ – which risks reducing the meaning of a text into the simple victory of one side over another. Note her critique of this binary logic:

> The problem with these hidden plots of power is that they leave no space for an alternative organization [. . .]. They trap the critic in the very system that is being exposed: man for art, woman for nature, man for transcendence, woman for the body. Such gendered dualisms can close like a vice. But what happens if, for the moment, the idea of beauty, of the aesthetic, remains outside the dualisms of power, of gender, of the conditions of subject and object? (Leighton 2)

Leighton exposes the problem with criticism that centers on ideological power struggles in text. Whether this struggle comes in the form of male against female, individual against society, or even the tension between subject and object, understanding a text as one side of a warring binary stifles the text’s richer interpretations. For a work like Salome in particular, it eclipses what Leighton would refer to as the “idea of beauty” – the aesthetic themes of the play. Understanding the protagonist as the “female triumphant” or as the “individual triumphant” is the result of a binary framework set up between the ‘woman individual’ against the ‘male society,” a tension which is seemingly resolved when the female individual emerges as the clear victor.

It would be more appropriate, however, to analyze the text in with an eye to dialectic. By this I mean namely the process of reasoning or investigation that juxtaposes opposed or even contradictory ideas in order to reach a synthesis. This synthesis will productively combine the
initial oppositional elements at hand. Reasoning in this way will avoid the “vice-like” grip of dualism – gendered or otherwise – that has dictated criticism around Salome for so long. The key, then, is not to reduce a text into binaries, but to understand it as a dialectal interplay between opposites. Incidentally, such an approach aligns well with Wilde’s own love of paradox. As Mr. Erskine says in Picture of Dorian Gray, “The way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When Verities become acrobats we can judge them” (42).

In Wilde’s Salome, then, Salome does not simply “win out” over society in an easy victory. Rather, Salome’s posturing as a powerful individual must be critiqued as a byproduct of – and something necessitated by – a reality of social oppression. One cannot separate these two elements into discrete sides and write a narrative of one’s triumph over the other. Understanding Salome’s social condition in a dialectical, rather than strictly binary way, allows us to treat the text in more realistically. Without these considerations, the existing feminist lens would allow Salome’s provocative behavior to produce an overly progressive interpretation of the play that obscures its more troubling social limitations.

To avoid such over-simplifications, Leighton locates the key to a better examination of the play in the idea of the aesthetic. As a lens that lies more explicitly outside of gendered or political categories, the aesthetic (at least on the surface) seems to avoid the restrictive dualisms of gendered criticism. Fittingly, aesthetic themes abound in Salome: poetic language, an artistic protagonist, and experimental style render it a text that engages closely with ideas of art and aestheticism. In the following section, I will explore these themes and establish the aesthetic as an appropriate, and even necessary, lens for the play. This lens may then work to temper the powerful reputation Salome gains in feminist criticism.
The Aesthetic Salome

In *Salome*, more is at stake than issues of gender and sexuality. Implicit in the dialogue of the play, the characterization of the protagonist, and the style of the language is a central concern with art and aesthetics. Salome is not merely representative of a “woman” — rather, her use of a highly stylized, poetic language and her execution of an artful dance gives her the role of an artist-figure as well. As such, Salome may be interpreted not only as a female agent but as an artistic one as well. The use of artistic acts to negotiate power in Herod’s court casts a new light on Salome as an agent. That is, her role as an artist complicates the vague move from objectification to triumph that critics have presented in the past. Salome, in discovering social power in the aesthetic, becomes beholden both to the process of aesthetic transgression and vulnerable to its limitations. Understanding Salome as an artistic persona, then, beyond simple “woman” or “individual,” gives a more nuanced picture of her agency.

Interpreting Salome as such requires that we establish the play as one deeply concerned with aesthetic questions and themes. Take the formal elements of its language. Repetitious, deliberate, and highly stylized, the language of *Salome* strikes the reader with its departure from natural modes of speech. Salome’s lines in the play emulate this style:

> Thy mouth is like a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea, the coral that they keep for the kings! It is like the vermilion that the Moabites find . . . the vermilion that the kings take from them [. . . ] It is painted with vermilion and is tipped with coral. (*Salome* 592)

Salome adopts Mallarme’s technique of repetitive language and meandering speech. The obsession with symbols, here centered on the mouth, recalls too the Symbolist fixation on evocative images over straightforward messages. Salome’s description of the mouth oscillates between coral and vermilion, not quite settling on one and continually modifying both. This
process suspends the passage of narrative time as Salome’s language dwells on adjectives and nouns, forgoing the verbs associated with plot events and action in the play. The circuitous, exploratory style of the speech, then, treats language as an object of creative enjoyment.

In its use of this style, Salome deliberately echoes Joris-Karl Huysmans’ seminal work, A Rebours. Published in 1884, roughly six years before Wilde penned Salome, A Rebours examines the nature of the aesthetic life and deeply influenced the Aesthetic Movement as a whole. Note how the language of A Rebours mirror’s that of Salome:

[Des Esseintes] fashioned his bouquet of flowers in the following manner: the leaves were set with stones of an intense, unequivocal green: with asparagus-green chrysoberyls; with leek-green peridots; with olive-green olivines; and they stood out against branches made of purplish-red almandine and ouvarovite, sparkling with a dry brilliance like those flakes of scale that shine on the inside of wine-casks. (Huysmans 37)

Physical description dominates over action-based narrative in Huysmans’ writing. Only one action verb, “fashioned,” explicitly belongs to Des Esseintes, while other verbs passively describe the physical arrangement of the bouquet. The proliferation of adjectives and nouns in place of action verbs recalls the linguistic mode Salome uses to describe Jokanaan’s mouth. While Huysmans does not present his descriptions in the form of strict similes as Salome does, the two texts share a fixation on metaphor and repetition. Note, for instance, the anaphora of “with” before each color-descriptor. The word is used four times in this passage alone, and each time it expresses another nuance of the color, green, that had initially been used. The variations on the expression of “green” cannot help but echo Salome’s endless variations of “vermilion”.

Huysmans even displays the same fixation on redundancy: not only are variations on green repeated throughout distinct metaphors, but his “olive-green olivines” brings redundancy into the bounds of a single comparison. David Weir describes these aspects of Huysmans’ language as
creating a “Flaubertian emphasis on style as an end in itself” (Weir 95). The redundancy of language and poetics of style, then, create strong parallels between Salome and A Rebours. Indeed, in his biography of Oscar Wilde, Richard Ellmann credits the fifth chapter of A Rebours with being the principal inspiration for Wilde’s Salome. This claim, along with the critical discussion around Huysmans heavy influence on Wilde’s 1890 novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray, ties Wilde to Huysmans artistically (Waldrep 5). That Wilde deliberately takes inspiration from Huysmans, a self-proclaimed aesthetic writer, requires that we consider Salome as one self-consciously engaged with ideas of aestheticism.

Wilde’s relish for language as an end in itself, rather than as a window to some narrative reality, also echoes the very tenets of Pater’s aestheticism. As Walter Pater puts it:

> A very intimate sense of the expressiveness of outward things, which ponders, listens, penetrates, where the earlier, less developed consciousness passed lightly by is an important element in the general temper of our modern poetry. (Essays from The Guardian 95)

Pater foregrounds the subjectivity of the viewer and the “consciousness” of the mind in the act of appreciating objects. To cultivate an “intimate” sense of such objects reflects, for Pater, nothing less than a poetic sensibility. Indeed, a hyper-sensory awareness of outward things is an essential tenet of aesthetic poetry. Understanding Salome’s intensely sensuous gaze as poetic vision, then, implies that we must understand her uselessly beautiful speech that follows as Paterian in nature. Suspending the progression of narrative time becomes a way of dislocating the observant mind from the distraction of action – and forcing it in turn to “ponder,” “listen,” and “penetrate” the static object at hand. Just as Pater’s poetic viewer must tend to the expressiveness of outward things, so to must Salome’s reader forgo the lure of plot and dwell instead on the expressiveness of Jokanaan’s mouth. For Pater, this expanded, suspended experience of time is the function of
the aesthetic work. What’s more, Salome, as the poetic creator of this moment, becomes the Paterian artist.

It is possible to consider *Salome* not only as a play that engages with aesthetic themes but as the aesthetic work of Wilde’s corpus. In his introduction to *Refiguring Oscar Wilde’s Salome*, Michael Bennett raises the pertinent question: is Wilde’s *Salome* an anomaly within his body of work? (vii). Certainly, considered alongside his comedies of manners such as, *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, *Salome* stands out with its unusual subject matter, ancient setting, and highly stylized language. Even its origins differ from that of his other works. Wilde wrote the first version of *Salome* in French, rather than English, and incorporated a French Symbolist style into the work (Ellmann 340). These qualities, argues Bennett, set the play apart from Wilde’s standard art: it becomes Wilde’s work of daring themes and Symbolist style. With Salome, the pagan figure who unites her lips with Jokanaan’s severed head, Wilde presents a protagonist who surpasses the bold verbal sparring of Cecily Cardew or Lady Windermere. Unlike these women of social comedy, Salome has the audacity to act. She actively challenges everything Jokanaan signifies – morality, Christianity, reserve, restraint – not by verbally renouncing these things, as Wilde’s comedy characters do, but by severing the very head that espouses them. In this, Salome surpasses Cecily and Lady Windermere, taking perversity to the heights of excess.

Dierkes-Thrun understands Salome’s excess in the following way:

In Wilde’s hands, the legend of Salome becomes a thought experiment of taking the pursuit of Beauty to its utter extreme, following it literally into murder and death, while distorting the moral and religious dimensions into aesthetic surfaces, divesting them of their guiding and regulating functions. This is where Wilde’s aestheticism most brightly shines through. (Dierkes-Thrun 29-30)
Dierkes-Thrun underscores Salome’s placement of Beauty, and the experience of Beauty, above any other pursuit. Salome focuses on Jokanaan’s physicality at the expense of morality, religion and, ultimately, even her own self-preservation. This devaluation of these traditional codes of conduct emphasizes the Wildean aesthetic at the heart of the play. Salome understands Jokanaan’s earnest moral warnings as only the simple movements of a beautiful mouth. Her treatment of his prophetic words as mere aesthetic surfaces embodies exactly the “distortion” of the spiritual Dierkes-Thrun addresses. For in becoming an aesthetic object, Jokanaan loses the moral depth and meaning he needs to exercise real semantic power. Instead, in the place of Jokanaan’s moral, semantic language, we have Salome’s stylized aesthetic language. Her speech contains a proliferation of color and images – from vermilion to kings – and its visual sensuousness divests Jokanaan of his ascetic force. The privilege granted to physical beauty, then, works to eclipse the religious and moral dimensions of Salome, making it a markedly aesthetic play.

With Beauty elevated at the expense of the traditionally religious, Salome demonstrates a Paterian understanding of a successful life. In his conclusion to The Renaissance, Walter Pater proclaims that, “to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (The Renaissance 240). Divesting the notion of a meaningful life from a religious or spiritual reality, Pater sets up the aesthetic experience in its place. Hence, if the ecstatic, aesthetic moment constitutes the ideal goal of a Paterian life, then Salome’s erotic union with Jokanaan, her figure of aesthetic contemplation, at the end of the play constitutes the realization of this goal. Salome essentially becomes the one who, in a Wildean spirit, searches for individual satisfaction via art. The play therefore asks: can a protagonist discover a transcendent, transgressive freedom through art?
Salome functions to answer this question. It exists as a work in Wilde’s corpus that places radical aesthetic exploration so strongly the heart of its critique. Its inversion of the physical-spiritual hierarchy and Salome’s role as an artistic agent render it a play with aesthetic questions at stake. As such, it becomes necessary to analyze Salome specifically as a transgressive aesthete. She, like Wilde, pursues a radical, individualist divorce from society via transgressive art. Examining the agency she gains – or loses – in this process, then, will offer an important modification to existing narratives on Salome.
Chapter 3: Deconstructing the Aesthetic Agent

The Realities of Market Aestheticism

A closer examination of the theoretical and historical conditions of Wilde’s aestheticism reveals the necessary flaws in Salome’s aesthetic agency. Like Salome before Herod’s court, Wilde confronted the real-world limits of his aestheticism in life. His theory of art promised independence for the artist from the social forces arrayed against the individual: and not only from the church and state, but from the marketplace itself. As Peter Bürger argues in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Wilde’s era of aestheticism represents the first historical moment in which art simply “wants to be nothing more than art,” with no political or market value attached. He elaborates on the nature of this independence in the following way: “The apartness from the praxis of life that had always constituted the institutional status of art in bourgeois society now becomes the content of works” (Bürger 27). Beyond merely existing apart from political arenas of society, in other words, Bürger argues that art subsumes its “apartness” from life into its very content. A work like Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*, for instance, not only contains but actively flaunts its independence from middle-class society – just as *Salome* defies acceptability in an explicit way. Both works therefore *present* themselves as art divorced from the social sphere in a way Bürger argues is distinct from the art of the past (Psomiades 24). This character of content enables a new breed of art: one that establishes itself firmly in the realm of the apolitical. Individualistic and seemingly free of social oppression, it strives after an autonomous space – a true artistic withdrawal from the everyday that exists beyond the level of institutional status and penetrates into art’s very content.

As in *Salome*, however, the illusion of this freedom crumbles beneath the social reality of
the culture it occupies. This collapse occurs on two distinct levels: the theoretical and the historical. On the theoretical level, tenets of Wilde’s aestheticism fall into a trap of self-contradiction that undermines their claims – a process best represented by the writings of Theodor Adorno. German sociologist, philosopher, and renowned cultural critic, Adorno produced an essay on a-social aestheticism years after Wilde’s death in 1957. Despite the lapse in time, Adorno’s essay – entitled “Lyric Poetry and Society” – offers a relevant and useful critique of Wilde’s type of aesthetic theory (if not Wilde’s theory specifically). Specifically, it subverts the anti-social assumptions that underlie the “art for art’s sake” mentality. In the essay, Adorno does this primarily through examining lyric poetry. Lyric poetry, traditionally thought of as “unaffected by bustle and commotion” of society, operates by “either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment” (“Lyric Poetry and Society” 37). Such is the impulse of several Romantic poets who, by a solitary escape into nature, absented themselves from an increasingly industrialized society. Similarly, Adorno pinpoints Baudelaire, a poet of the French symbolist movement and inspiration to Wilde, as a figure who writes in a particularly lyrical spirit (37). Using these examples, Adorno’s argument demonstrates that, contrary to expectations, a profoundly social element underlies the lyric impulse. Indeed, there is a necessarily social nature to the plea for individualism. Take, for instance, the fact that one experiences lyric poetry as something “opposed to society” and “wholly individual” (39). This enables the illusion of having escaped the “weight of material existence,” of being free from the “coercion of reigning practices, of utility, of the relentless pressures of self-preservation” (39-40). This illusion, Adorno argues, is paradoxically social in nature. In his words, “It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, [and] oppressive” (39). Hence, the more a work displays its
independence from these realities, the greater its protest against society. Lyric art becomes, in essence, an inherently social critique.

Under Adorno’s theory, Wilde’s studied refusal of Victorian values – from social morality to rationality – becomes itself a deeply Victorian position. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way his anti-market aestheticism responds to the growing material culture of late-nineteenth century England. Wilde’s era saw the advent of modern advertisement, the rise of department store shopping, and the growth of a developed commodity culture (Psomiades 12). What’s more, art was always subject to the judgment of the press, which Wilde once described as “the opinions of the uneducated” (Gagnier 59). Journalists subsumed art into a media phenomenon, where articles on artists resembled libel charges, periodicals deplored gallery openings, and literature was commodified into serial magazines. Market mentality invaded every aspect of public life. Artists confirmed this reality with works that addressed it directly. Poet Christina Rossetti, for instance, published her 1862 “Goblin Market” on the perils of consumerism (Tucker 117). Framed as a didactic piece with a moral warning, the poem cautions against sacrificing the authentic for the commodified, and the market’s predatory greed (117). Works like “Goblin Market” reflected the Victorian public’s anxiety about its growing consumerism. In such an atmosphere, it is no wonder that Wilde sought a non-commercialized space for art. Yet, in his quest for one – and with the establishment of “art for art’s sake” – Adorno’s theory gains its relevance, only this time with regards to the market specifically. See, for instance, Adorno’s comments on market culture in his posthumous work, Aesthetic Theory:

With the growth of subjective differentiation and the intensification and expansion of aesthetic stimuli came the shift to market-cultural production. Attuning art to ephemeral individual responses meant allying it with reification. As art became more and more similar to physical subjectivity, it moved more and more away from objectivity, ingratiating itself with the public. To that
extent, the code-word of *l’art pour l’art* is the opposite of what it claims to be. (*Aesthetic Theory* 60)

Adorno here blames art’s increasing focus on subjectivity for creating what can be considered a commodity fetish out of individualism. The more art becomes attuned to “individual responses” and “aesthetic stimuli”, he says, the more it “ingratiaites itself with the public.” Thus, art begins to market the very “apartness” from society it guarded so jealously. When this happens, it reappropriates a market mentality, and the philosophy of “apartness” collapses in on itself. As Adorno eloquently puts it, *l’art pour l’art* comes to mean not itself but “the opposite of what it claims to be.”

This collapse into paradox mirrors the condition of Wilde, historically, as an artist in Victorian society. Scholar Kathy Psomiades treats his condition as plagued by two basic contradictions: that of artistic autonomy and that of art’s necessary commodification. Of the first, she raises the point that the kind of autonomy Wilde seeks—a place outside the means/ends rationality of capitalist culture—ensures any art and criticism produced from such a place will be, as a result, ineffectual (Psomiades 24). If, as Adorno suggests, art gains its power from its status as a rebellion, or critique, against an oppressive society, then the critique will fall on deaf ears with no market audience to appreciate it. Herein lies Psomiades’ second contradiction. Art, she argues, exists in a commercial world where its very autonomy gives it value as a special kind of commodity fetish. Apartness does not exist for apartness’ sake: it also exists to grant an artwork a unique type of “counter-cultural” market power that, for its apartness, becomes all the more appealing to a buying public (25). What, after all, would be the point of an artistic rebellion against capitalism if this rebellion is never noted or noticed? One is left, then, with a problem of relevance. The asocial aesthete produces art for pleasure and beauty. Yet with that isolation comes ineffectiveness. The need for the outside world to validate the artistic project at stake is
something Wilde does not avoid.

Accordingly, Wilde used his works to ensure his own market currency. As Paul Fortunato puts it in his *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture*, Wilde had no intention of becoming a starving artist. He was aware that his work performed best in the commercial metropolis of London and did his best to ensure a prominent place there (5). Wilde networked with everybody: persons from high society, West End actors, Pre-Raphaelite painters, and even leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement (5). Leveraging relationships with these figures, Wilde effectively built his own cosmopolitan celebrity. One need only look at Wilde’s work beyond *Salome* and *Dorian Gray* to see his efforts in this vein. As the editor of *Woman’s World*, Wilde wrote for a middle-class magazine, headed fashion editorials, and even gave advice on home décor (“The House Beautiful” 913; “The Decorative Arts” 926). These alternative modes of writing established a middle-class audience for Wilde. They granted him a social platform that guaranteed his art cultural impact. With a work like *Salome*, then, Wilde offered its provocative drama not only to a highbrow aesthetic community but to a public arena of theatergoers. What’s more, Fortunato points out that the theater scene in Wilde’s time hosted a markedly middle-class demographic, due to factors like rising literacy, expansion in education, and growth in institutionalized public discourse in the press (Fortunato 7). The theater’s popularity – and accessibility – to members of all social classes rendered its scene a true laboratory of mass culture. Accordingly, the impact of Wilde’s *Salome* depends in part on the shock value it would produce amid a middle-class audience.

As such, the “apartness” and scandal of Wilde’s art effectively becomes its market value. *Salome’s* shocking perversity led directly to its censorship – using a law against depicting Biblical figures on stage, British authorities ensured play could not be performed in London
(Gagnier 59). This ban coupled with a series of scandalized reviews that, while they deplored the quality of Wilde’s work, simultaneously granted it both infamy and extensive press coverage. A critic from the *Morning Post* described the play as “a drama of disease,” while an actress associated with it was labeled by other critics as “sadistic” (154). Its reputation for amorality reached the level of spectacle. Take Richard Strauss’ operatic production of Wilde’s *Salome* in 1907. On February 9 of that year, *Harper’s Weekly* ran a cover page depicting a transparently clad Salome being shoved out of the Metropolitan Opera House. The drawing stood over the simple caption, “Discharged Without Honor.” Illustrated like a political cartoon, the cover speaks directly to the infamy of *Salome*’s multiple censorship scandals: first in London and later in Vienna. While such infamy speaks to the public’s moral outrage, it also plays the useful role of expanding the play’s market presence. Certainly, it earned *Salome* a front and center page on the cover of *Harper’s Weekly*. This press exposure, combined with curiosity around the play’s decadence and the allure of its French exoticism, earned *Salome* what can be considered a higher market value. Moreover, these factors explain, in part, why Wilde’s *Salome*, out of the nearly two thousand versions produced at the time, assumed its lasting cultural force.

**Salome’s Social Dependency**

As Salome pursues her radical individualism, apart from society and against its demands, she embarks on the quest Wilde, too, professed to take. Given the inherent tie, both historical and theoretical, between the “apartness” of Wilde’s aesthetics and the market, however, Salome’s aesthetic persona becomes vulnerable to the same complications. Her stance, like Wilde’s, is not everything it appears to be. The theories posited by Adorno, Psomiades, and Gagnier on the nature of art in society gain relevance, then, with respect to Salome as well. Criticism’ failure to
apply these theories to *Salome* thus far has only created a missed opportunity to interrogate her aestheticism more deeply. Bringing these ideas to bear on the play will, as I will show, deconstruct Salome’s aesthetic agency, reveal its social dependency, and thus temper her character’s power in the play.

Salome pursues her radical agenda in two primary artistic moments: an attempt to seduce Jokanaan through language and a dance performed for Herod. Between these two acts, Salome displays a striking discrepancy in success. While she emerges triumphant with Jokanaan’s head after the dance, the poetic seduction of Jokanaan fails to produce any tangible effect. What can account for the difference between these two artistic endeavors – dance and language – for Salome? The answer, I claim, lies in the absence and presence of social structures (both political and economic) around the acts.

Salome’s use of poetic language occurs in a personal and apolitical sphere outside a social setting. As she uses poetic language in an attempt to realize her erotic desire for Jokanaan, Salome confronts the ineffectuality of her asocial art. See her intricate seduction of the prophet:

> Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the garden of Tyre, and are redder than roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets, that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of those who tread the wine in the wine-press. Thy mouth is redder than the feet of the doves who haunt the temples and are fed by the priests. (*Salome* 590)

Her language, borrowing from the Symbolist style, is characterized by largely visual description. Salome spends lines describing the physical details and colors of the Jokanaan’s mouth, and as yet another descriptive clause follows the first – and another and another – the descriptions accumulate until the reader is confronted by the very *fact* of descriptive excess. By remaining in this descriptive mode, Salome’s speech creates a space where plot is no longer the primary
narrative concern. Instead, the artistic, almost playful style of the speech is foregrounded more than the events or content of words themselves.

The character of an “aesthetic” moment here is only exacerbated by Salome’s cascade of poetic similes. From “pomegranates” and “blasts of trumpets” to “doves” and “wine-presses,” Salome’s comparisons become a synesthetic blur of linguistic play. In fact, Salome’s comparison of Jokanaan’s mouth to “a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory,” takes her metaphoric language a step further as she moves from a simple color-association (pomegranate) to a wholly imagined “ivory knife.” The imaginative leap makes it evident that language does not play a strictly representational role here: after all, there is no empirical suggestion of trumpets or knives in Jokanaan’s mouth. Rather, Salome uses language as an object of creative manipulation – as an imaginative end in itself. Accordingly, her excessive repetition becomes deliberately artistic. The profusion of similes never comes to a synthesis on a “correct” shade of red, despite the appearance of testing, again and again, the different ways in which the color “red” can be rendered. Movement from one comparison to the other is irrational rather than logical, and the end product does not actually clarify the image at stake for the reader. Her excessive description is not, so to speak, a “hyper-accurate” portrayal of Jokanaan’s mouth. Rather, its redundancy and verbal excess make Salome’s language more a creative play with words than a sincere attempt at realism.

When Jokanaan, however, rejects her – driving her away with the stark exclamation of “Back!” – it becomes clear that Salomé’s linguistic art has failed in its seductive purpose. Herein lies the switch to negative and ugly comparisons. She suddenly likens Jokanaan’s body to that of a “leper”, raising connotations of disease and pathology, and even links his body with the nesting place of “vipers” and “scorpions.” This abrupt change to distasteful and repulsive imagery
signals Salomé’s frustration with the failure of her seduction. What is more, her perversion of beautiful speech suggests Salomé’s anger comes not only from Jokanaan’s rejection of her but from his rejection of her language and poetic art as well. As a speech made in a moment of personal desire and one largely independent of a social audience, the failure of art here is problematic. It challenges the very notion of the individual artist who produces art independent of society and purely for her own transgression. Nothing about the context she creates in guarantees her success or even results: she simply operates as one individual speaking to another. So long as that space remains apolitical, nothing can coerce Jokanaan to give into her seduction. As such, Salome can be said to reveal the failure of art to realize the goals of the transgressive artist in this moment.

Salome’s comparative success using a public dance, however, reveals the effectiveness art gains when it participates in a political-economic sphere, as opposed to the private one. In contrast to her earlier poetry, Salome does not dance for her own pleasure or to express some inner passion for Jokanaan. Instead, she dances purely to obtain, by means of an indirect contract of exchange, the object of her aesthetic desire. Take the scene in which she and Herod establish the terms of their exchange:

SALOMÉ: Will you indeed give me whatsoever I shall ask, Tetrarch? [. . .]
HEROD: By my life, by my crown, by my gods. whatsoever you desire I will give it you, even to the half of my kingdom, if you will but dance for me. O, Salomé, Salomé, dance for me!
SALOMÉ: You have sworn, Tetrarch.
HEROD: I have sworn, Salomé. (Salome 598)

Salome refers to Herod not by name, but by his official title of “Tetrarch”, thus addressing him as a representative of political power instead of as an individual man. The promise he makes to her under this title, then, goes beyond a mere personal whim and assumes the character of a legal
statement. The official nature of Herod’s promise is both established and enhanced by his appeal to three different sources of authority – his “life”, his “crown”, and his “gods.” Each appeal represents a distinct sector under whose authority the promise is made to Salome: the interpersonal, the political, and the religious. This appeal to explicitly socio-political authorities and external figures makes the agreement between Herod and Salome an official, socially recognized contract. As an exchange of goods and services, it also takes on the character of a market exchange, albeit one premised on physical attraction and sexual fantasy over more neutral economic demand. By offering her dance as bargaining chip with which she can obtain an item of value, Salome participates in an economic trade of goods. As a result, her art becomes a commodity item: it exists for the purpose of trade alongside – or instead of – for its own intrinsic sake.\(^{21}\) It is in putting her art on the market in this way that Salome succeeds where her earlier art failed, for she ultimately obtains the head of Jokanaan by it. It is important to discuss, however, why Salome is successful. It is not because Herod is so moved and overwhelmed by the beauty of the dance that he immediately grants her request – in fact, Herod spends pages resisting her request and trying to convince her to choose differently (600-604). Rather, Herod presents her with Jokanaan’s head because the established market contract – and its public creation – requires it of him. His witnessed oath, and the political capacity in which he made the oath, compel him to grant Salome what he least wants to give her – this much is evident by his regretful lament that, “Kings ought never to pledge their word” (603). This coercion is further emphasized by Herodias’ reminder that “Everybody heard you. You swore it before everybody” (605). Thus, it is the contractual requirements of a market exchange that give Salome what she wants rather than the intrinsic beauty of the dance itself. The beauty of the dance operates only so far as to provoke Herod’s male desire and (economic) demand for it. From Salome’s perspective, then,
any value the dance possesses comes from its commodity status, i.e. the extent to which it lends itself to trade for something of true value. For Herod, perhaps, it may carry a more personal value or even just the social value of proving his ability to get what he wants. Whatever the value Herod attaches to the dance, the point is that Salome takes this value and transforms it into a demand that works for her benefit. Under its new context of a public exchange, then, art assumes a new commodity status and is no longer created purely for its own sake. But it is in this assumption of commodity status that Salome’s art enables her to gain erotic and aesthetic fulfillment.

The need for the socio-political structures to realize Salome’s aesthetic desire complicates her agency as an artist in the play. It is easy to view Salome’s iron obstinacy of will and ultimate success as a provocative representation of a powerful woman. Return, for instance, to Dr. Dierkes-Thrun and her interpretation of Salome’s character:

Whereas [Mallarmé’s] Herodiade remains a passive, artificial figure, Wilde developed a shocking, crashing finish to Salome’s story that suggests the possibility of an individually willed escape route from the deadening ennui of Herod’s court. Wilde grants Salome an awesome, triumphant moment. (Dierkes-Thrun 25)

The strain toward fulfillment, depicted here as a Nietzschean desire for self-actualization, colors Salome’s yearning for Jokanaan. Thus, the actualization of this desire – i.e. the moment in which Salome kisses the mouth of Jokanaan – is representative of a “triumphant moment” when she successfully overcomes her human limits. This erotic union with a figure of beauty, achieved at the expense of religious piety and patriarchal power, results in a Salome who embodies a powerfully “transgressive aesthetic agent” (27). The presence of a market exchange in the drama, however, complicates this notion. Recall that Salome could not achieve her consummation with Jokanaan without the aid of a political-economic contract. Her artistic endeavors, whether dance
or poetry, could not on their own merits actualize her desire. To put it another way, the isolated efforts of Salome’s individual will were not enough to subvert social constraints. Instead, as demonstrated earlier, it is only in Salome’s participation in a social structure – the political court and quasi-market – that she can exercise any effective power. Herein lies the complication of the artist as a subversive agent. Salome, as Dierkes-Thrun points out, certainly subverts conventional gender roles and moral attitudes over the course of the play. But she only does so in so far as she actively takes part in a socially constructed system of exchange. What, then, is the nature of the individual’s power here? It cannot be a binary struggle of the individual against society wherein the individual, by her own will to power, subverts the social. Rather, Salome’s self-actualization happens through a contradictory truth: the individual can only exercise power in society in so far as she participates in it. This, then, is the paradoxical truth of the artist as represented by Salome – and, incidentally, by Wilde himself. The transgressive aesthete, unwillingly or not, relies on the very society he aims to challenge. Salome therefore addresses the contradictions inherent within the late nineteenth century Aesthetic Movement’s counter-cultural exercise.

To end on a note of paradox is, perhaps, most appropriate. As a play that grapples with aesthetic themes, Salome cannot be reduced to what Leighton describes as a “vice-like”, or limiting, interpretation. Wilde’s depiction of Salome as an artist who is unable to realize her goals outside of a social transaction challenges the very purpose and value of art kept separate from the social sphere. In the context of a movement that seeks to imbue art with an amoral, apolitical, and even anti-social quality, this challenge targets the heart of the professed aesthetic agenda. Salome, then, is more than an example of purely transgressive art: it raises deeper and more provocative questions about the nature and cost of transgressive power. By exposing the contradictions inherent in this power, Wilde can be said to unwittingly critique the aesthetic
movement itself. He reveals it to be a largely paradoxical effort that relies more on an appearance of artistic individualism than any achievable reality. Criticism has already acknowledged this paradox in Wilde’s historical aestheticism – it was time the same considerations were applied to Salome as well.
Chapter 4: The Feminist-Aesthetic Alternative

_Salome_ therefore demands a feminist reading tempered by aesthetic considerations. In the combination of the two, a portrait emerges of Salome who both resists and performs her own social limits. In this chapter, I will demonstrate what a feminist-aesthetic reading of _Salome_ looks like and explore its implications for Salome as a transgressive character.

Chris Jenks’ _Transgression_ offers an in-depth look at the contradictory nature of transgressive acts. To transgress, he says, “is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention; it is to violate or infringe” (2). Such is the existing understanding of several critics on Wilde’s _Salome_. But Jenks does not finish his definition here. He continues, adding: “But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks 2). An almost paradoxical tenet, then, lies at the heart of transgression.

At the moment Salome subverts the system she occupies, she simultaneously affirms its power. As her contract with Herod attests, the spectacle of her victory stems directly from a position of political disempowerment. So, while her kiss with the severed head of Jokanaan is undoubtedly a provocative moment of transgression, it is the transgression of Jenks’ variety: contradictory, dialectical, and an affirmation as much as a denial of social constraint.

The _Salome_ critics point to as a victorious figure, then, resists such a straightforward personality on closer analysis. In her engagement with transgressive acts, Salome assumes a more complicated and elusive persona than has been afforded to her in the past. As such, the need for both feminist and aesthetic readings of her transgression emerges. While the feminist interpretation can affirm her move toward greater agency, the aesthetic will highlight the
reflexive, and thus limited, nature of this move. As a demonstration, see a moment from Salome’s seduction of Jokanaan:

I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field. 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. [. . .] Let me touch thy body. (*Salome* 589)

Approaching this passage with a purely feminist lens, one could understand Salome as turning the tables on her own sexual objectification by doing the same to Jokanaan. Assuming the role of the seducer, Salomé rains compliments onto Jokanaan’s body like a frenzied lover. As an artful and persuasive speaker with lustful intent, she occupies the role of a traditionally male poet detailing the merits of a beautiful woman. Certainly the nature of her comparisons – the sensual rose, the alluring and exotic Queen, the suggestive valleys – projects a markedly female identity onto Jokanaan. Through the implicit femininity of roses and her mention of the Queen of Arabia, Salome casts Jokanaan as a bodied, sexualized object. Accordingly, with Jokanaan as the disempowered, sexualized figure, Salome assumes the more powerful role. As masculine seducer, Salome effectively becomes the meaning-maker: she interprets Jokanaan’s body in her own terms and according to her own desires. Such a position for feminist critics constitutes a gain in agency: as Jane Marcus puts it, she “breaks free of being the stereotype of sex object” and escapes her disempowerment (10).

Such is the feminist interpretation. On the other hand is the aesthetic reading, where Salome can be seen as creating an artistic, experimental style of speech. The aesthetic critic would point to the proliferation of similes Salomé uses to describe Jokanaan’s body. She links one to the end of another, creating a stream of comparisons and a sense of linguistic wealth. This excess is only emphasized by her use of repetition: the line, “snows that lie on the mountains,”
occurs twice, with even more detail attached the second time. Repetition, combined with a synesthetic mixing of scent (‘roses’), color (‘white’), and sensation (the feel of ‘snow’), makes Salome’s language both experimental and sensual: a prototypical aesthetic speech. Critics may then draw links from this speech to Pater’s style, as well as his philosophy of the contemplative moment, tying Wilde historically to the late-nineteenth century era of Symbolist art. Any power or social traction Salome gains in this mode is highlighted only in relation to the transgressive style of the Symbolists more generally. David Weir, for instance, sees Wilde’s aesthetic language as emphasizing “syntactic inventiveness,” “highly-textured vocabularies,” and “levels of diction” to create a new kind of textuality. Such an approach, though, gives little attention to the implications of this style on the characters themselves.

Combining aesthetic considerations with a feminist reading in Salome would provide this much-needed nuance to character analysis. Examining the same passage as above, see how applying both a feminist and aesthetic lens modifies both readings. As the feminist analysis suggests, Salome certainly inverts gender roles by assuming a more masculine persona and treating Jokanaan as her female object. Salome’s speech in these moments mirrors the very language projected onto her earlier in the play. The way in which she linguistically adopts a male role, however – the aesthetic formal style of her language – is significant. I argue that this formal aesthetic style in Salome’s language allows her to both deconstruct and affirm female subjectivity. To demonstrate this point, see the following excerpt from her seduction of Jokanaan:

It is thy mouth that I desire, Jokanaan. They mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory. The pomegranate-flowers that blossom in the garden of Tyre, and are redder than roses, are not so red. The red blasts of trumpets, that herald the approach of kings, and make afraid the enemy, are not so red. (Salome 590)
Salome’s speech uses a plethora of similes, each of which carry their own symbolic force. In isolation, any single image can be invested with some literary meaning: the pomegranate cut with a knife can be said to foreshadow Jokanaan’s beheading, say, while the heralding of kings perhaps makes an oblique reference to Herod. All the similes have symbolic potential. This potential is thwarted, however, when Salome heaps one simile on top of another in a Symbolist-style deluge. In the coexistence of several potential symbols at once, it becomes difficult to attribute symbolism to any. Further, as Salome puts one image forward, she replaces it just as quickly with another, disallowing the reader from concentrating on a single one. Their transience, combined with the sensation of excess, overwhelms the reader with metaphoric language. As a result, the style frustrates successful, or even genuine, attempts at interpretation. Salome, in this aesthetic mode, provides no formal signal as to which image is more representative or meaningful than any other. In their jumbled juxtaposition, they all become equally pointless.

Salome exacerbates this effect by actually retracting her language. On the subject of Jokanaan’s hair, Salome first waxes poetic: “Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of the Edomites” (590). Just a few lines later, however, she suddenly inverts her description: “Thy hair is horrible. It is covered with mire and dust” (590). The swing from succulent, juice-filled grapes to the dry and arid dust is a dramatic one. It rescinds the connotative associations readers may have initially attributed to Jokanaan and leaves a contradiction in its place. Which description is correct? There is no clear way to tell. Hence, Salome’s retraction of language, like her descriptive excess, divests language of its representational authority. As she switches from one image to its opposite, there is an implicit suggestion that no simile can be singled out as genuinely describing Jokanaan.
Accordingly, readers cannot claim to understand the prophet through Salome’s language. He becomes a confused, hidden figure.

Salome’s adoption of an aesthetic, Symbolist language, then, performs on Jokanaan the same eclipsing of subjectivity she suffers at court. As an object of the male gaze, Salome is also seen primarily through a proliferation of similes others project onto her: the “silver flower,” the “Daughter of Babylon,” the “dove that has strayed,” the one “fair as a queen” (586; 590; 586; 599). In the midst of these simultaneous images, Salome becomes, like Jokanaan, veiled by language. Her subjectivity is fractured into a multiplicity of male interpretations. Herod, the Young Syrian, Jokanaan, and the court all see and describe her in their own conflicting terms. Yet in their artificial constructions of language, each misses the subjectivity at her core. Being denied this subjectivity and becoming only a sexualized body is a root cause of her disempowerment in the play.

Salome’s appropriation of this aesthetic technique, however, does more than do to Jokanaan what has been done to her. Remember that she uses aesthetic language transgressively, as a protest against her own social condition. As such, her poetic description of Jokanaan takes on multiple functions. First, as mentioned before, it makes her the more powerful masculine interpreter of a feminine object. Second, however, her refusal to settle on any one aesthetic description of Jokanaan can, as I will show, a) deny the power of this male interpretive role and thus, b) paradoxically affirm Jokanaan’s subjectivity – and by extension her own.

As I argued before, Salome’s excessive number of similes and her retractions refuse her language any true representational authority. Accordingly, Salome undermines this language’s claim to capture a subject at all. When Salome compliments Jokanaan only to rescind it and turn the compliment into a perverse insult, she reveals the arbitrary nature of desirous language. This
in turn upholds the idea that the true self – the individual behind projected poetic descriptions – cannot be adequately captured by Symbolist or male language. Certainly both Salome and Jokanaan elude attempts to describe them poetically. In assuming, and exaggerating, the role of the male aesthetic interpreter, then, Salome reveals the impotency of the role. The interpreter’s language fails to present any meaningful representation of its subject. Poetic phrases and similes may surround the subject, but they cannot, on a fundamental level, claim to arrive at any authentic depiction of it. In true Paterian style, then, aesthetic language reveals only the speaker’s *impression* of an object rather than any tangible facts about the object itself. Correspondingly, the attempt to capture a desired person with aesthetic language becomes itself an impotent process.

The playful, cyclical nature of the Symbolist aesthetic therefore affirms, in its very failure to represent, the existence of the characters’ complex subjectivity. Salome and Jokanaan’s inner selves are such that no simile, no matter how artfully constructed, can capture it fully. Adopting the aesthetic style, then, enables Salome to performatively deconstruct her own status as a symbol in Herod’s court. By this, I do not mean that Salome makes it impossible to interpret her – many in Herod’s court, after all, continue do exactly that. Instead I mean she exposes the hollowness of her symbolism. She performatively reveals the impossibility of others looking at her and discovering any correct “meaning” in her through their language of aestheticism and lust. So she affirms her own subjectivity as one distinct from male abstractions.

Salome’s transgressive process in the play is therefore characterized by simultaneous affirmations and denials of her agency. The combined critical lenses reveal this dynamic: how, even as she moves toward greater agency, Salome must engage fundamentally with her aesthetic constraints. Her dance, for instance, is not a straightforward act of power but also a participation
in the social structures she resists. Her poetic language enacts a similar process: as it performs her social limits, it affirms her individual subjectivity. In the dialectical interplay of Salome and society, then, the idea of a winner, or clear victor, becomes unsustainable. Individualist freedom exists only in so far as it is also limited throughout the play.

Salome, then, emerges not as an individualist icon, but a testament to the deeply challenging process of transgression itself. As she grapples with her social universe, her struggle speaks to the reflexive, rather than straightforward, nature of rebellion. Defined by this dynamic, *Salome* demands a corresponding critical approach to the modern transgressive character.

Readers must work to represent the character’s complexity without reducing her into a simplistic or abstracted symbol. Where past criticism, for instance, has understood Salome as the token ‘victor over society,’ it has fallen victim to this very fallacy: tellingly, the same one males in Herod’s court perpetuate against Salome. Both distill her personality into an interpreted meaning, whether it be beauty, sensuality, victory, or power. It is this kind of reductionism Salome seeks to avoid. As her ‘un-interpretable’ self denies males their poetic power, then, so it cautions her readers. They, like Herod, must acknowledge the complexity of Salome beyond her symbolism.

In orienting criticism accordingly, then, we arrive at a more appropriate approach not only to Wilde’s text but to transgressive characters far beyond Salome and her time.
Notes

3 The phrase l’art pour l’art represents a doctrine in France whose origins have been traced to the early nineteenth century. French writer Benjamin Constant used the phrase as early as 1804 in summarizing a discussion of Kantian aesthetics he had heard in Germany, but others point to philosopher Victor Cousin as a more official first user of the phrase (Wilcox 360). The first printed reference to l’art pour l’art, for instance, is in the Garnier edition of Victor Cousin’s Cours de Philosophie published in 1836, although he mentions a similar idea two decades earlier in 1818 (Egan 10-11). Others also point to the 1835 preface to Gautier’s Mademoiselle De Maupin as a place where the idea of l’art pour l’art as Wilde understands it, was expressed. The preface states: “There is nothing truly beautiful but that which can never be of any use whatsoever; everything useful is ugly.” (Genette 228)
4 Wilde published two importantly different versions of Picture of Dorian Gray: the original version, which was published in Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine on June 20, 1890 and a revised version, published as a book in 1891. The first version was itself mildly censored by Wilde’s publisher, J.M. Stoddart, mainly for homoeroticism and promiscuity. Wilde’s second version, however, met much more controversy. In response to negative press and outrage, the 1891 edition further removed objectionable homoerotic language, deleted “vulgar” elements, and added a preface outlining a manifesto on amoral art. The press reactions treated here come largely from responses to Dorian Gray’s first printed version, though similar objections were certainly made against the 1891 version as well (“A Textual History of The Picture of Dorian Gray”).
5 St. James’s Gazette, 24 June 1890, quoted in Gagnier, Regenia. Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public, p. 58
6 The preface that appeared in the second, 1891 edition of Dorian Gray existed first as an independent piece published in the March 1, 1891 issue of the Fortnightly Review. It was only included as a preface in Dorian Gray later that year, suggesting that it was not in Wilde’s original conception of the novel. Rather, he includes it largely as an aesthetic response to market pressure and press reactions around the original text (“A Textual History of The Picture of Dorian Gray”).
7 A fuller discussion of this “real-world” market character of Wilde’s aesthetic theory (and its implications for Salome) will be given in Chapter Three
8 Again, the question of whether this image actually holds up in light of Wilde’s real-world market conduct is one that deserves attention. Chapter Three will examine the discrepancy between his stated ideals and actual practice in this regard.
9 See Figure 1 of Appendix
10 See Figure 2 of Appendix
11 See Figure 3 of Appendix
12 See Figure 4 of Appendix
13 Mallarme, quoted in Dierkes-Thrun, Petra. Salome’s Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression, p. 18
14 Though there were no performances of Wilde’s Salome in England during his lifetime (or even in the years directly following his death), the importance and notoriety of the Salome role persisted in American and, to a lesser extent, French contexts.
15 This is true at least for the beginning of the play. Her relationship to a sexualized identity changes over the course of the plot.
16 It should be noted that repetition is also a hallmark of Symbolist aesthetics Wilde very explicitly works with in Salome.
Hiordis, in Ibsen’s *The Vikings*, triumphantly receives the body of her dead hero, Brünnhilde, by the end of the play.

By this, I do not mean that the aesthetic is truly free of political categories in a definitional sense. I mean only that separating the aesthetic out of political debates will allow us to examine it in its own right as its own category of investigation. Doing so will avoid suppressing the concept of ‘artist’ under the ideas of ‘woman’ or ‘individual’. The complications of this approach (i.e. the very socio-political nature of the aesthetic) will be addressed in Chapter 3.

Wilde also marketed his play to French literary circles – namely his Symbolists contacts in Paris and Belgium – in order to establish himself as the English symbolist.

In this understanding of commodity, I am drawing on the Marxist definition of a commodity as an ‘external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfied human needs of whatever kind.’ The notion also requires that the object be made for social use-value – that is, use-value for others rather than for one’s own self or pleasure. (Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1)

By symbol, I mean the way others treat Salome as a material object that definitively represents something immaterial or abstract. Her personhood becomes subsumed into this abstract idea without regard for the more complex subjectivity outside the symbol’s content.
Works Cited


Appendix

Figure 1

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Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 7