

Caroline Z. Krzakowski
Notes on *Salome*
February 2023

Born in Dublin in 1854, Oscar Wilde was already an established writer and well-known cultural figure when he wrote *Salome* in 1891, while living in Paris. Originally written in French, the play was later translated into English by Wilde's lover, Sir Alfred Douglas, and corrected by Wilde and other editors (Douglas' French apparently left much to be desired) before its publication in Britain. Wilde's earlier work such his satire *Lady Windermere's Fan* and his novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, managed to poke fun at Victorian morality and made him an international celebrity. Nonetheless, the British censors deemed *Salome* unfit for public performance, and it was banned in England until 1931. The play was staged in Paris in 1896 to wide acclaim, but Wilde never saw his play performed.

The 1890s were a turbulent decade in England. A crisis of faith, partly driven by the ills of industrialisation and a wider knowledge of Darwin's theory of evolution, contributed to a sense that a period of prosperity and progress was coming to an end. But the 1890s were also a period of lively debate about art and gender, two themes which come in Wilde's play. Whereas Victorian England (1819-1901) thought that art should be useful and moralistic, Oscar Wilde and the "art for art's sake" movement held that art exists only for itself, and that beauty is more important than ethics. In Wilde's view, art should not be judged according to its message, but on the basis of its artistic value. Critics of this view deemed the art for art's sake movement "decadent." The debate between the usefulness and autonomy of art is still with us in the early 21st century.

Questions of gender, too, are central to the play. How is the viewer meant to see the character of Salome? In the 1890s, the image of the "New Woman" emerged both in literature and in society. The historical "new women" were educated, independent women who rode bicycles, wore pants, smoked cigarettes, and agitated for greater gender equity. They were widely caricatured in newspapers and periodicals, but left their mark on British feminism. Fiction written by New Woman writers probed the "terra incognita" or "unknown land" of female sexuality and desire and deliberately shocked some segments of Victorian society. The character of Salome could also be seen as a dandy, or a detached aesthete for whom beauty is more important than anything else. Like the New Woman, the dandy was seen by nineteenth century British society as an eccentric character who deliberately played with the conventions of gender and masculinity. Wilde's public persona was modeled on that of the dandy. Wearing a green carnation, Wilde incited public scrutiny and fascination. His playful approach to gender and his 'performativity,' (to borrow a term from Judith Butler) would be better understood a century later as a resistance to heteronormative conventions.

Wilde's *Salome* re-writes its biblical source material to transform its title character into a subversive, rebellious, and sexual woman. In Wilde's vision, Salome is no longer a dutiful daughter who helps her mother, Herodias, get rid of the bothersome John the Baptist (Iokanaan) who opposes her incestuous union with Herod. Instead, Salome is driven to violence by her own desire for Iokanaan. In Wilde's play, the sense of sight is everywhere. Characters observe other

characters looking. Salome is attracted to Iokkonan's physical, rather than his spiritual, beauty. She is also a spectacle for those who pine for her. She chooses to become an erotic and aesthetic spectacle when she dances for Herod despite her mother's disapproval. In her exchanges with Herod, she is granted agency: she speaks for herself and insists on the object of her desire despite Herod's offers of riches and jewels. Wilde's Salome is ultimately triumphant as she bestows a kiss on the severed head of Iokanaan.

Oscar Wilde's life took a tragic turn in the later 1890s. Wilde's sensational trial made his relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas public. Homosexuality was illegal in the United Kingdom until the 1960s, and Wilde was convicted, imprisoned, and sentenced to hard labor for two years. After his release from prison he never set foot in England again, but lived in France, where, penniless, he wrote his last works, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, and *De Profundis* and died in 1900. In 2023, *Salome* reminds us again that art can show us how to imagine and desire the impossible.