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PERFORMATIVE BETRAYALS:
CHRISTIAN GENDER POLITICS
OR
CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL
IN
OSCAR WILDE'S
SALOMÉ

In the present essay Myth is understood to mean "ideology in narrative form" (Lincoln XII); "a narrative which is considered socially important, and told in such a way as to allow the entire social collective to share a sense of this importance" (Csapo 9). In this context, myth can be a classic, modern or contemporary narrative of religious, literary or social origin, standing alone or embedded within text, image or performance. Csapo'sideological understanding of myth will be paired with Judith Butler's work on gender as performance as explained in *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* is a symbolist drama written in French in 1891, while Salomé was still an excessively fashionable character in France (Aquien 9) among writers and artists, apreeminent femme fatale figure (Praz 293, Dottin-Orsini 12) that had becomea myth of her own (ZagonaIV,Dijkstra 397). The phenomenal popularity of its heroinebut alsothe Biblical ground of its action,which relates the beheading of John the Baptist (Marc VI 14-29, Mat. XIV, 3-12),account for the play's deep rootedness in myth.

Drawing on ancient and modern literature, Babylonian, Egyptian and Greek myths, the Bible, Plato's Symposium, fairy tales and the femme fatale nineteenth century literary myth, Wilde's French drama sets out

mythical, philosophical and literary patriarchal constructs and scripts of gender. Various gender crossings emerge through the ways Wilde questions these scripts, trying tofind a loophole in the system.

The premises of the present article are as follows. As a character, Wilde's Salomé is conceived as a compilation of statements and performances. The ones are made by the male characters who quote or unquestionably evoke significant authoritative texts from the Western canon. The others are made by Salomé who misquotes the canon, quotes from archetypal lesbian literature and produces silent performances of matriarchal myths. The first texts aim to inscribe Salomé within the "heteronormative patriarchal script of gender" (Butler 177), one based on the principle that a character is subject to an inherited discourse entailing repeated performance of his or her gender roles (Butler 43-44). The script's aim is to make Salomé repeat the set of acts that make of her "her mother's daughter,"-a femme fatale. Salomé's quotes, misquotes and silent performances aim to illustrate her own perception of self. By so doing, by the end of the play Salomé disengages herself from the tradition her myth has been shaped by and redefines herself by obeying her own idiosyncratic sexuality - her "pleasure". Her new definition of self is gradual and radical as it pertains to myths that illustrate either an altogether feminine view-point or a mind-set which questions or challenges patriarchal values. The myths are not merely rewritten but silently re-enacted, thus translated into performance through Salomé's dance of the seven veils, her kissing the prophet's severed head in the mouth and her on-stage execution. The heroine's change from grace to disgrace, from happiness to unhappiness, from a worshipper to an apostate and from a vestal to a ghoul comes swiftly; like a metamorphosis. The present paper looks at the discursive and plastic on-stage uses of gender related myths through the motive of metamorphosis.

According to Bruno Bettelheim, metamorphoses in myth and children's fiction represent the profound changes a person must undergo on the journey from childhood to adulthood (Bettelheim 286-291). Hardly older than a child at the rise of the curtain, Salomé dances herself to femininity and by virtue of the emblematic metamorphic fairy-tale motive of the kiss, reaches full womanhood for her to be killed as “woman”.

Salomé’s first lines show her like a vestal virgin. She worships the moon and identifies with the moon-goddess, Selene, imagining a gender related scenario about the latter’s feels, “... The moon is ... chaste... has a virgin's beauty... She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men" (Wilde 1988, 90-91).Selene rejects men in Salomé’s mind. Salomé seems to feel the same way since, in the same breath, she exposes her own discomfort with men whose presence and gaze suffocate her as it were and make her flee from the banquet-hall.

> I will not stay. I cannot stay… How sweet is the air here! I can breathe here! Within there are Jews from Jerusalem …Greeks from Smyrna … Egyptians…and Romans brutal and coarse. Ah !how I loathe the Romans ! (Wilde 1988, 90)

Salome seems, therefore, to privilege female beauty and company, a point corroborated on the level of her "intertextual lineage" by her quoting from Sappho’s fragment81:"They say that love hath a bitter taste" (Wilde 1988, 124). In the original French “Taste” is "*saveur*", “bitter taste” is Wilde's translation of "Glykypikros”, “sweet-bitter”, hence the all Greek lettered title to one of his early (1881) poems, “ΓΛΥΚΥΠΙΚΡΟΣ ΕΡΩΣ” (Wilde 2007, 126-127). Salome’s lines show then that the young princess perceives herself as a Sapphic-oriented vestal.

This image is however altered from the moment the prophet takes notice of her and comments on her looks. Iokanaan, as Wilde calls John the Baptist, portrays Salomé by recycling significant quotations from the Bible: He calls her "daughter of Babylon" (Isaiah 47), rebuffs her saying to her"Touch me not!"(John XX, 17) and informs her that "By woman came evil into the world!"; thus seeing in her the Babylonian matriarchal

goddess Ishtar, great enemy of both Jehovah and Christ (Walker 450), the Biblical sinner Mary-Magdalene whom, using the same words, Christ prevented from touching him (John XX, 17) and Eve, mother to all femmes fatales because of the fall of man(Gen. III, 1-17). Intensified twofold by the impact of his voice which, as we know from the New Testament, is incomparable(John I, 23, Mat. III, 3, Mark I, 3, Luke III, 4), Iokanaan's gaze upon Salomé influences the audience's perception of her. From that point on Salomé's maidenhood gives way to a more elaborate, gender-oriented construction of self.

Besides the easily detectable selections from the Bible, Iokanaan resorts to even shorter and less perceptible bits of quotes which participate in aperformative construction of Salomé's gender.

> "Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes under her gilded eyelids.(Wilde 1988, 95).

These words align the title of Balzac's novel, *La Fille aux Yeux d'Or* (Balzac, 7-176)and a phrase by Gautier describing the eponymous heroine of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* who, indeed, has gilded eyelids (Gautier 10). In keeping with the above Biblical heritage, the heroines of both novels are notorious embodiments of the femme fatale 19th century myth; but they are also endowed with cross-sexual traits because they have had intimate relations with both male and female characters. Hereupon, if the quotation tips are identified, the heroines of Balzac and Gautier find themselves 'squeezed' into the physical structure of Salomé, leaving the prophet to annunciate their presence by synecdoche, from the eyes of the one and the eyelids of the other. Salomé's inclination for chasteness, then, gives way to desire for the body. Her own feminine perception of the self is therefore altered by an all male oriented perspective as both the Bible and the femme fatale motive point to.

In terms of pragmatics, Jiokanaan's use of the above quotes, introduces Salomé's metamorphosis. His statements are endowed with

illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions and therefore have performative value of the type ‘saying is doing’ (Loxley 18). By delivering it Iokanaan performs the illocutionary act of proving his prophetic nature. Had he not been a prophet, he would not have discerned Salomé's specifically-oriented genre. The effect produced by the issued utterance i.e., its perlocutionary dimension, intervenes in the definition Salomé’s identity: from that moment on she becomes, for the spectator as well, what Iokanaan has recognised within her : a character who combines fallen womanhood (Eve) and disquieting androgyny (the Girl with the Golden Eyes, Mademoiselle de Maupin) in the accursed body (daughter of Babylon) of a sinner (Magdalene).

The prophet's blunt portrait of the princess finishes with a mythical recuperation from Plutarch which turns Salomé also into a *traitress*. Insulted by Salomé's desire for his person, Iokanaan demands her execution by crushing: “Let the war captains (...) crush her beneath their shields” (554), he says. The model of such execution is Tarpeia, daughter of a guard of the Capitol stronghold who, out of love for the king of the Sabines, then at war with the Romans, betrayed her own people by delivering the stronghold to the enemy. After the battle, the king gave the order to his soldiers to crush the *traitress* under their shields. Tarpeia has given her name to the Tarpeian rock, execution place for capital punishment, the Roman Golgotha.

Be that as it may, Salomé's discourse distorts the hegemonic texts Iokanaan resorts to in order to describe her. Her quotations from the "Song of Songs", from which she borrows her tone as well as her metaphorical turns of phraseto declare her love for Iokanaan, inverse the male and female roles of the poem’s bride and the bridegroom (Ellmann 1974 ___). Iokanaan's body is compared to “the lilies of a field”, his hair to the “cedars of Lebanon”, his lips to “a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory”. In their biblical context, the above images are used by a man to extol the beauty of his fiancée. In passing from poetry to the stage, the

images call for an inversion from masculine to feminine with the same objective in sight as the quote tips from Balzac and Gautier: to act on the definition of gender of the two characters.

Although Salomé is not a prophet, she sees in Iokanaan a latent gender-identity which otherwise would have remained concealed to all. In fact each recognises in the other each other's androgynous nature. Whereupon the characters that look as if explicitly opposed prove to be implicitly complementary and aware of the complementarities. As Catherine Clément among others has remarked, Salomé and Iokanaan are alike as if they were twins (Clément 47-48).[1] If we refer to Plato's *Symposium* which informs the poetics of the play in many respects (_____), we may add they are like the two halves, recognized but not united, of one of those beings cut into two on the order of Zeus, and who could have reconstituted their original completeness as mentioned by Aristophanes in his discourse, also known as "the myth of the androgynous". Aristophanes' myth allows us to reconstitute the dramatic value of a miscarried recognition: Iokanaan, who refuses to look at Salomé[2] and to unite with her, rejects the restitution of the original completeness and, with regards to the cosmic order implicated by that myth, defines himself as the begetter of a new order in which there is no place for his other half-Salomé. Severed from Iokanan, hence from any prospective fulfillment of wholesome completeness Salomé can only head for Hell to dance herself to womanhood.

The name Wilde has chosen for the dance of the seven veils betrays the age old source it was inspired by. The dance is a plastic translation of Ishtar's descent into hell to ask for her husband's dead body. On her way there Ishtar stops at each of the seven gates to take off one part of her ornaments, the seven insignia[3]and eventually presents herself naked

1 Catherine Clément, ' Amour de Sainte', *L'avantscèneopéra*(47-48) January-February 1983, Salomé, p.123

2 IOKANAAN: 'I do not wish to look at thee. I will not look at thee' (p. 539) and SALOMÉ: Ah! Ah! Wherefore didst thou not look at me (...) If thou hadst looked at me thou hadst loved me.' (p.553)

3 For an edition of the complete text of Ishtar's descent into hell see: *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia,* London: Penguin Classics, 1971, pp.135-165. One might compare the following verse: 'She took the signs in her hands, put the sandals on her feet, the seven insignia' (p. 136) and the reply of Salomé 'I am waiting for my slaves to bring me perfume, the seven veils and to remove my sandals'.

before her sister, Ereshkigal, the Queen of the underworld. Salomé and Ishtar follow the same itinerary; but Ishtar aims at achieving renewal on the earth and the return of spring through Tammuz/Adonis' resurrection while Salomé's dance calls for Iokanaan's death-and the advent of Christianity which at least historically may be seen at variance with the symbolism of spring breaking. Moreover to Ereshkigal and the social collective who believed in this myth, Ishtar's nakedness represents the generative power of the female body and evokes sacredness; to Herod and the spectator of Wilde's play, Salome's nakedness evokes only wantonness and turns the princess into a courtesan.

Salomé's metamorphosis is completed with a kiss. In the fairy-tale, the kiss serves as antidote to inauspicious effects induced by apples or distaffs. In order to introduce the world of fairy-tale before perverting it, earlier in the play Wilde causes Herod to compare Salomé with Snow-White: "Salomé, come and eat fruit with me (...) Bite but a little of this fruit and then I will eat what is left". Contrary to Snow-White who ate half the apple offered her by the witch, Salomé answers: "I am not hungry, Tetrarch", which however does not remove the metamorphosing power of the kiss. In the closing scene, the prophet's mouth becomes a consumable item. Salomé ends Herod's banquet by devouring Iokanaan's lips, a dainty dish, in a scene of a primitive nature which, however, we cannot see as it takes place in complete darkness and silence.Two other emblematic meals collate themselves by synecdoche toHerod's banquet, in order to amplify the metamorphosing power of the kiss: Plato's Symposium, of which it has already been question, and the Last Supper. In the context of the Symposium, we can perceive a sequel to Aristophanes' myth of the androgynous: the aborted meeting of the prophet and the princess echoes of Alcibiades' rejection by Socrates in the episode which closes the Symposium. Both, Wilde's Salomé and Plato's Symposium tell of the mind's rejection of the body. This rejection feeds the desire and the spite

of the kiss, increasing its transforming power brought about by the secondmeal.

The Last Supper is called to mind by the words Salomé pronounces in the darkness after the kiss: "There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood...?"[4]The communion where the wine offered by Christ to his disciples is trans-substantiated into the blood that is shed for the love of man[5] is here represented before its transformation from real stuff to symbol and its symbolism inverted. By kissing Iokanaan's mouth, Salomé represents the old world, the empire of Eros, of love as desire, as against agape, love as charity, purified of desire. The two loves, represented respectively by Salomé and Iokanaan could have functioned together, according to Wilde, like the complementary beings in the discourse of Aristophanes. This however, is not the case. Iokanaan, who was the pre-founder of Christianity, betrays the love as charity of Christ. Salomé in turn betrays her goddess Selene and her principles of chastity. So the kiss of Iokanaan and of Salomé announces Judas' kiss and seals the beginning of a sphere of betrayals, where the metamorphosis of Eros into agape passes through the execution of beauty and the death of the other. The Last Super turns out to be a lust super opening up for a gothic enactment of the advent of Christianity, a world in which myth was strong enough to make each man kill the thing he loved, strong enough to send Wilde to prison.

Reprise and recuperation in Salomé are part of a creative strategy which extenuates the relative mastery of Wilde's French. Textual fragments and non-discursive images cross several semiotic systems and once organized, take root in an empty space within the text.[6] There they weave fragments of reflection articulated around gender and its relationship with love, creation and death. Decoded and placed end to end, these fragments denounce the coarse definition of gender since the beginning of our era. They make us go back (to paraphrase Mircea Eliade) "to the primordial time of the beginnings," to the origins of the History of

4 Salomé, p.554
5 Matthew XXVI, 28
6 As indicated by suspension dots and typographical blanks.

the Christian world, when the founders of Christianity (re)defined Western man and his relationship with the other.

The conversion of the empty spaces into ideological matrixes and the silence into signs cannot be accomplished without the complicity of the audience. Their role is essential in the exploration and decoding of signs encrusted in the empty spaces, a process that could be defined as inter-medial performance-related transformation. As children descended from that historical moment, the spectators of Salomé inevitably know the 'outcome' of the history presented here. Wilde turns his spectators into witnesses, victims and judges of the events as told in his play. On several levels, Salomé functions as a work that is both modernist and post-modern before its time, by activating rather than just announcing the theatre of the next century. This theatre displays the reprises, recuperations and the "déjà vu" in a philosophical perspective which ties the individuality of the author and of the spectator together in a resolutely modern creation obstinately based on otherness.

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