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SALOMÉ'S VEILS: LANGUAGE, INTERPRETATION AND TRANSLATION

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Abstract

“Salomé’s Veils: Language, Interpretation and Translation” examines the relationship of language, translation, and interpretation in Oscar Wilde’s one-act play *Salomé*. Wilde’s play is both an interpretation and a translation of a large body of source texts, including but not limited to the Bible, cultural-historical interpretations of the Salomé figure, poetry, and painting. As a translation, Wilde’s text focuses on language and medium to articulate the *way* that his sources mean, rather than meaning itself. Rather than concentrating on signification, Wilde considers form, language and medium. Wilde’s interest in form over content is manifest in his attention to the part over the whole, and illustrates his broader connection to the Decadent movement. Havelock Ellis defines literary Decadence as “an anarchistic style in which everything was sacrificed to the development of the individual parts.”¹ Such an interest in the part over the whole is characteristic of many Decadent texts, in which the primacy of the individual word supersedes the sentence. Further, Wilde’s decision to write the play in French enables him to create an idiolect and to focus on language as language. In so doing, Wilde invests in the process of using language as an aesthetic end in itself. Wilde’s engagement with language as language induces his audience to interpret and translate his work, focusing on the individual word. Through this process, his audience experiences language as an aesthetic end as well. Ultimately, Wilde’s investment in the process over the product, and the part over the whole enables his text to produce many, autonomous critical readings of the play.

¹ Regina Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

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Introduction: *Salomé* in Context

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex and vital. When critics disagree the artist is in accord with himself.”

--Oscar Wilde, artist's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

One might say that Wilde's *Salomé* has nothing *but* surface and symbol.

Although Wilde wrote this epigraph as part of his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for many, it has become an *ars poetica* for Wilde. He dares critics to interpret his work, and defies reductionism. In *Salomé*, Wilde's consideration of surface and symbol is most evident in his use of language. For this reason, I focus on Wilde's use of language, translation and interpretation to argue that *Salomé* is primarily about conceptions of language and art. To say that *Salomé* is about a woman whose erotic dance persuades her stepfather to give her a head on a platter, does not really tell us what Wilde's play is about. For in fact, Wilde's play is about language itself. From the start, language was at the forefront of Wilde's mind as he wrote *Salomé*. His choice to write in French—a language that he loved, but that was foreign to him—elevates the role of language in the play. The text is strange, at once abrupt and fluid. Sentences alternate between cropped and flowing rhythms, and repetition and echoes occur throughout the text. The strangeness of the text brings language to the forefront, forcing the reader to focus on the individual word. As the play eludes meaning, language also asserts its primacy. With unresolved conflict and paradox, signification seems to fade into obscurity in the background of the play, leaving only language as a focus.

Following Benjamin, I will argue that Wilde's use of language functions as a veil over his text. As a veil, Wilde's use of language both conceals and attracts attention to

the beauty of his work. Wilde's language is mysterious, both to the Anglophone and the Francophone. Its mysteriousness obscures some of its beauty, allowing only fragments of it to permeate the text. Yet, it is the very mystery of Wilde's language that somehow makes his text more beautiful, attracting our attention to his use of language. We imagine Salomé hypnotizing Herod as she performs "The Dance of the Seven Veils," with veils covering and attracting attention to, even enhancing, her desirability. In this way, we can imagine Wilde's use of language performing a veiled dance for us, simultaneously concealing and flaunting the play's beauty.

Not only does Wilde focus on language, but also he seems to be preoccupied with translation. Writing in French, Wilde must have been translating in his mind as he wrote, turning his artistic ideas into a language that was not his own. Further, Wilde incorporates aspects of other traditions of the Salomé story from art and literature, in an act of intertextual translation. Rather than focusing on the meaning of these sources, however, Wilde explores medium, form, and individual words. With reference to Benjamin, I argue that Wilde translates by concentrating on the "way" that his sources mean, rather than the meaning itself. Much in the same way that Wilde linguistically translates, he seems to be translating and interpreting these traditions' "ways of meaning" as he crafts his representation of Salomé. Finally, Wilde puts the task of translating on the reader, as he or she must decipher and interpret Wilde's strange variety of English-inflected French and paradoxical representation of Salomé.

The onus on the reader to interpret Wilde's *Salomé* has generated a body of conflicting critical opinion. It is possible to approach the play from multiple angles, especially sexuality and religion, given the play's Biblical content and erotic imagery.

However, in my encounters, about no other artist's work is there more diverse opinion than about the work of Oscar Wilde. Immersed in his text, the reader finds herself at one moment utterly convinced of its amorality, and at another persuaded of its moral tendency. With the ambivalence in his work, it seems that as an artist, Wilde took great pleasure in eluding certainty. In Wilde's *Salomé*, this ambivalence appears not only in the text, but also in the criticism surrounding it. One need only scan the diverse body of critical scholarship on *Salomé* to discover the varied, and at times contradictory scholarly opinion regarding the one-act play. For instance, Petra Dierkes-Thrun argues, "Wilde's play unabashedly attacks the Judeo-Christian God," while Nicholas Joost and Franklin E. Court contend that the play is not hostile or satirical toward Christ or the Gospels.² Jane Marcus suggests, "Wilde's play resembles a parody of the whole of the material of the Decadents," though according to Kerry Powell, "Wilde denied any comedic underpinnings in *Salomé*."³ For feminist critics, the play is about an assertion of new womanhood, body and gender, while for queer theorists, it's a triumph of androgyny and an assertion of homoeroticism.⁴

Nick Frankel identifies this contradictory quality of Wilde's *Salomé* when he cautions critics looking to interpret the play. He states, "In searching for a deeper, less

² Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011) 52; Nicholas Joost and Franklin E. Court, "Salome, the Moon, and Oscar Wilde's Aesthetics: A Reading of the Play," *Papers on Language and Literature* 8 (1972): 96-111.

³ Jane Marcus, "Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 78.1 (1974): 95; Kerry Powell, "Salome, the Censor, and the Divine Sarah," in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 41.

⁴ Jane Marcus, "Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, 78.2 (1974), and Regina Gagnier, "Art for Love's Sake: Salome and Reading Gaol," in *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 137-76.

contradictory *Salomé*, the truth-tellers risk losing their heads.”⁵ Wilde himself warns his readers of the dangers of reading into the symbol in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as my epigraph shows. Instead, Frankel argues that *Salomé* is a “work of contradiction,” and in trying to say what the play “means,” critics miss the contradictions of the play that characterize it. In this argument, Frankel suggests that *Salomé* is the sum of “several distinct, autonomous textual moments.”⁶ For Frankel, *Salomé* is composed of autonomous fragments that are oftentimes purposefully in contradiction with each other.

The idea of Wilde’s *Salomé* as multiple texts also suggests a multifaceted quality of Wilde’s character Salomé. For example, if in one reading of *Salomé*, the princess can embody licentiousness, and in another reading she can take the form of chastity (as is seen in the differences exhibited in critical readings of the text), there is some characteristic about her that is ambivalent and multifaceted. Rather than appearing as one artistic rendering of Herodias’ daughter, Wilde’s Salomé seems to be all of them. Here, I will argue that the nature of Wilde’s *Salomé* as the sum of many artistic portrayals of the princess leads to a reading of the play as a work primarily about conceptions of language, translation and interpretation.

Ultimately, *Salomé* is *about* interpretation and translation as much as it *is* an interpretation and a translation. I argue that *Salomé* is more about the act of translation than it is about what an interpretation “means” or signifies in itself. Wilde’s engagement with language and his aesthetic experience of writing *Salomé* are more essential to the text than the meaning of the text. Similarly, the aesthetic experience in which Wilde

⁵ Nick Frankel, "The Dance of Writing: Wilde's Salome as a Work of Contradiction." *Text* 10 (1997): 106.

⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

induces the reader to engage—the deciphering of his English-inflected French and the focus on individual words—is more essential to *Salomé* than understanding what the play “means.” First, I will discuss how Wilde’s play interprets and translates a body of source texts by examining the evolution of the Salomé figure. Next, with reference to Walter Benjamin, I will examine how Wilde’s *Salomé* elevates interpretation and translation as aesthetic ends. I will then analyze Wilde’s reasons for writing in French, as well as the effect writing in French has on his text. Here, I will posit that Wilde’s use of language further justifies the argument that *Salomé* is primarily about language, interpretation and translation.

To argue that *Salomé* is “about” language and translation, I am not, like many critics, reducing the text to a specific meaning. Rather, I am suggesting that this quality of the text enables it to have the paradoxical, autonomous characteristics that Frankel describes. Like Frankel, I argue that *Salomé* consists of many, contradicting and autonomous textual moments. These paradoxes enable so many autonomous critical readings of the play. However, I depart from Frankel’s argument and maintain that the primacy of language as an aesthetic end is both the cause and the effect of the paradoxes in *Salomé*. Wilde’s exploitation of language as language distances his play from signification. This looseness in regard to meaning both facilitates the possibility of paradox and directs attention to the role of language. The number of critical readings of *Salomé*, as well as their contradictory nature, distinguishes Wilde’s play from other, complex literary texts that admit of multiple plausible readings.⁷ First, however, it is

⁷ For instance, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* has generated a diverse body of critical opinion. However, critics do not frequently and overtly disagree with each other, positing that *Hamlet* is essentially “about” opposing poles, as is often the case with Wilde’s work.

necessary for me to clarify the difference between interpretation and translation, for in Wilde's text, both are important.

For the purpose of clarity, I will use *interpretation* to signify "an artistic representation of something." I will use *translation* to signify "the act of turning one language, medium or form into another."⁸ My adaptations of these definitions overlap, and reveal aspects of Wilde's work and philosophy as an artist. *Interpretation* and *translation* can be understood as parts of a spectrum of artistic expression. For Wilde's text, the process of interpretation involves translation, as Wilde renders his interpretation of Salomé in a new language and medium from those of his sources. For example, Wilde translates the Biblical English of the King James Bible to his own "biblical" French, the visual form of Moreau's painting to the dramatic form of a play, and the poetry of Mallarmé and Heine to prose. Likewise, Wilde's translation of Salomé, and each translation previous to his, are autonomous interpretations because each are individual representations of a body of sources. In this sense, the act of translating requires interpretation. Wilde exploits the relationship of language, translation and interpretation in his play, as he translates his native language into French, and visual, poetic and cultural-historic representations of Salomé into a one-act play. As these two processes interact, they become manifestations of Wilde's artistic philosophy. For Wilde, the process of translating and interpreting is an end in itself. Rather than the product as an end, Wilde's objective is the artistic and aesthetic experience of engaging with a body of

⁸ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definitions of *interpretation* and *translation* overlap. *Interpretation*, while meaning, "explaining," "obtaining information," "the representation of a part in a drama according to one's conception of the author's idea," and "the signification or meaning," can also mean "the action of translating, a translation or rendering of a book, word, etc..." *Translation* means, "the action or process of turning one language into another; also the product of this; a version in a different language," and "the expression or rendering of something in another medium or form."

artwork, and a language that fascinates him. Wilde then translates this experience of production to an aesthetic experience of consumption for his audience, inducing us to engage in the same process that he experiences. For instance, Wilde's use of language compels his audience to focus on the individual word, and interpret and translate Wilde's text. The body of artwork with which Wilde engages represents an historic evolution of the figure we now know as Salomé.

Salomé's Evolution

By the time Wilde crafted his Salomé, he was building upon a long tradition of interpretations of this figure. The evolution of the Salomé figure helps us to understand how Wilde's text translates and interprets a body of source texts, as Wilde explores aspects of how the Salomé figure has been represented throughout her evolution. For instance, Wilde incorporates elements of the Biblical interpretation, and of more contemporary interpretations in his representation of the princess. Like the Salomé figure that has changed so drastically over time, Wilde's Salomé exhibits contradictory characteristics. Wilde's choice to translate the Salomé figure, as opposed to other literary figures that artists have interpreted, reveals more than Wilde's concern with intertextuality. Rather, his choice is aesthetic. Salomé is a Decadent ideal because her story and the tradition that has developed from it are purely aesthetic. The very basis of the story—that a man is so entranced by a dance that he offers the dancer anything—is one that hinges on a fascination with art. In the Salomé story, art is both ecstasy and power.

The Salomé figure has evolved since her birth in the Christian Gospel accounts of Mark (6:17-29), Matthew (14:3-12) and indirectly in Luke (3:19-20).⁹ In these accounts, she is not given a name, but referred to simply as “the daughter of Herodias” or “Herodias’ daughter.” The brevity of these accounts is surprising, considering the extent to which the Salomé figure has captivated artists and their audiences. Perhaps it is this brevity—which leaves so much of the story wanting—that has led to an artistic fascination with the Salomé figure. The longest (and most likely the earliest) account of the Salomé story in Mark 6:21-28 reads:

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias’s daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, ‘Ask me for whatever you wish and I will give it to you.’ And he vowed to her, ‘Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom.’ And she went out and said to her mother, ‘For what should I ask?’ And she said, ‘The head of John the Baptist.’ And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, ‘I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter.’ And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.¹⁰

Although this account gives little detail (not even Herodias’ daughter’s name), it does make a few points clear. For instance, the plot centers on the interaction between Herod, his wife, and her daughter. Herodias’ murderous intentions lead to the beheading of John the Baptist. This is an important difference and marker of interpretation for Wilde’s play, in which Salomé independently motivates Jokanaan’s death. Wilde’s text is not the first to alter this detail. Rather, Salomé’s transformation from the obedient daughter of her

⁹ While there is some debate over where the Salomé figure first appears, the issue of textual dating is out of the scope of this thesis. In Biblical scholarship, it is generally argued that Matthew was written between 60-65 CE, Mark between 55-65 CE, and Luke in approximately 60 CE. For more on textual dating, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

¹⁰ The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

source text, to the calculating murderess (taking the place of the Biblical Herodias) of Wilde's text, has occurred in stages, as the figure and her story have been translated and interpreted. Wilde exploits this history of translation and interpretation, and includes innocent characteristics of Salomé along with more sinister traits that were associated with the Salomé figure later. Beginning with the Bible (the most frequently translated of all texts), Wilde crafts a work about translation and interpretation.

Flavius Josephus, the historian and author of *The Antiquities of the Jews* (c. 94 CE) was the first author to give "the daughter of Herodias" a name. He writes,

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, her husband's brother by the father's side, he was tetrarch of Galilee; but her daughter Salome was married to Philip, the son of Herod, and tetrarch of Trachonitis; and as he died childless, Aristobulus, the son of Herod, the brother of Agrippa, married her; they had three sons, Herod, Agrippa, and Aristobulus...¹¹

This account bears little resemblance to the Gospels, both because it is more of a genealogy than a story, and because it gives details about Herodias' daughter. For instance, she is married, and has three sons. Most importantly, she has a name: Salomé. It is ironic that the name Josephus attributes to Herodias' daughter is Salomé, because its root is in the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning "peace" or "a fullness of blessing." In the centuries following these earliest accounts, Salomé is associated with almost everything but peace and blessing. Josephus adds a sexual undertone to the Salomé figure, in that she has been married twice, and has had children. He also adds incestuous elements to Salomé, because both of her husbands are also her stepbrothers and cousins. These sexually taboo elements of Salomé continued to develop after Josephus. Wilde translates,

¹¹ Flavius Josephus, "Book XVIII, Chapter 5, 4," in *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. William Whiston (*Project Gutenberg*), Web, accessed January 10, 2012.

interprets, and expands the process of evolution that Josephus' work begins. His interpretation of Salomé exploits the sexual and incestuous representation of Salomé as he portrays Herod's lasciviousness toward Salomé, and Salomé's own sexual licentiousness toward Jokanaan. Building on a tradition of sexuality that Josephus begins, Wilde's work is about interpretation and the aesthetic experience of imagining aspects of different interpretations to craft his own Salomé.

During the Middle Ages, the Salomé figure appeared in festivals celebrating the birth and death of St. John the Baptist. In these festivals, Salomé figured as a queen of sorceresses and darkness.¹² In the Classical Period (end of the 16th-beginning of the 19th century), the Salomé figure appeared in art and in public discourse, but was not given a name. Referred to as "the daughter of Herodias," she served as a pedagogical example for clergy to warn audiences of the dangers of luxury.¹³ Wilde draws from this representation of Salomé as he depicts her asking for Jokanaan's head on a silver platter and adoring Jokanaan's body using metaphors of luxury. However, Wilde's apparent absence of a moral—or his incorporation of a moral that leaves us empathizing with Salomé—contradicts the moralizing aspect of the Classical interpretation of Salomé.

By the 19th century, the Salomé figure had begun to represent the archetype of the *femme fatale* that we see in Wilde's play. It was during this period that Heinrich Heine in his poem "Atta Troll" (1841) envisioned Salomé kissing the Baptist's disembodied head. Wilde appropriates this action for his own play in order to translate Salomé's sensual, fatal, and grotesque characteristics. In art and in literature of the 19th century, Salomé

¹² Marc Bochet, *Salomé du voile au dévoilé: Métamorphoses littéraires et artistiques d'une figure biblique* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2007), 29.

¹³ *Ibid*, 32.

became an obsession among symbolists, ever gaining more originality and personality. With Mallarmé's poem "Hérodiade," (begun in 1864 and never finished, in which the Salomé figure's name is Hérodiade), Flaubert's poems "Salâambo" (1862) and "Hérodias," (1877, from which Wilde takes the name Iokanaan for John the Baptist) and Huysmans' famous description of Gustav Moreau's (1876) painting in *À Rebours* (1884), it is clear that during this century, Salomé evolved into an artistic figure, separate from her Biblical origins. Wilde's interpretation of Salomé comes as a fantasia on or response to these 19th century interpretations of Salomé, by artists that would have most impacted his philosophy of art and aestheticism.

Wilde's interpretation is particularly unique in that he develops new levels of intensity to the erotic relationship between Salomé and John the Baptist. For example, as scholar Marc Bochet notes, "The idea of a Salomé in love with the Baptist does not come from Wilde; however, Wilde brings it to a state of incandescence never again equaled."¹⁴ Wilde's Salomé is obsessed with Jokanaan. Deconstructing his body, she verbally makes love to his hair and his mouth. Scorned, she asks for his head, and then lovingly kisses it. Because Wilde was conscious of the Salomé figure's omnipresence in the art of his time, he was well aware that his portrayal of Salomé was, above all, an interpretation of a figure already explored in art, literature and history. For Wilde, Salomé is compelling because so many artists have translated and interpreted her. What's more, the essential role of aestheticism in her story captivates Wilde and distinguishes Salomé from other figures that have been frequently adapted. In this sense, Wilde's *Salomé* functions as an interpretation of both a Biblical text, and of a cultural and artistic obsession. Wilde's text

¹⁴ Ibid, 50. My translation

is also a translation, in that it takes a figure from various sources, and translates it into a new medium (the one-act play), in a new language (French, written by an Anglophone). The way that Wilde translates these sources reveals his artistic devotion to form over content and the part over the whole. Havelock Ellis and Nietzsche argue that this artistic philosophy is essential to Decadence, as I will discuss in the next section.

The Challenge of Translation

As he interprets a body of sources and translates on multiple levels, Oscar Wilde employs varied methods of translation. The way that Wilde explores translation reinforces the role of language as an end in his play. Though a native English speaker, Wilde wrote the piece in French, and allowed Lord Alfred “Bosie” Douglas to translate the piece into English for publishing in the United Kingdom. The resulting version of *Salomé* bears marked differences from Wilde’s original French text, and it has been the focus of some scholars to analyze the differences between Douglas’ translation and Wilde’s original.¹⁵ This discussion is interesting, and produces a fruitful analysis both of Wilde’s text and Douglas’ translation. However, it is important to consider how the differences between Wilde’s text and Douglas’ work to highlight the play’s quality of being a translation. The Wilde/Douglas interaction raises questions about translation theory. For instance, Douglas’ translation raises questions about “truth” or “accuracy” in

¹⁵ For more on Wilde’s *Salomé* in translation, see Anne M Daniel, "Lost in Translation: Oscar, Bosie, and 'Salome,'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 68.1-2 (2006): 60-70. Additionally, in many ways Wilde’s text (whether the French original or the English translation accompanied by Aubrey Beardsley’s drawings) has become a piece that has been translated by other artists, such as Richard Strauss, in his opera *Salomé* based on Wilde’s text. For more on the afterlife of Wilde’s text, see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011).

translation. The marked difference between Douglas' words and Wilde's asks whether a translator should attempt a conceptual translation (one with a focus on interpretation) or a more literal translation (one that attempts to reproduce the language as literally as possible). Rather than focusing on Douglas' translation, however, I will address Wilde's text as a translation itself. With reference to Benjamin, I will examine how Wilde translates his sources, focusing on the Bible and Huysmans' description of *Salome Dansant* in *À Rebours*. As I will show, Wilde translates the Bible's "way of meaning" by using the dramatic elements of Biblical verse and transforming them into a piece of theatre. Similarly, Wilde employs *ekphrasis*, translating Huysmans' description of Moreau's painting into the medium of the one-act play.

Walter Benjamin addresses questions of translation in "The Task of the Translator," and helps us to better understand how Wilde translates. Benjamin argues:

The higher the level of a work, the more it remains translatable even if its meaning is touched upon only fleetingly. This, of course, applies to originals only. Translations, in contrast, prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them... It is vouchsafed to Holy Writ alone, in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation... For to some degree, all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true above all of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation.¹⁶

Here, Benjamin argues that sacred writings "contain their potential translation between the lines." For him, this is a result of the primacy of language and the relegation of "meaning" in these texts. If we understand the Bible as one source text of the Salomé figure, then Benjamin's argument helps to explain why Wilde's text has generated so many interpretations; the "potential translation is between the lines." Further, Benjamin's argument helps us to understand Wilde's text as a translation of Scripture.

¹⁶Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1996), 262-263.

For instance, Benjamin argues that translations are untranslatable “because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them.” For him, translations cannot be translated because the bond between the text itself and the meaning is loosened. It follows that as a translation of the Biblical Salomé story, Wilde’s play *should* exhibit some degree of *untranslatability*. Perhaps this helps to explain why Douglas’ translation of Wilde’s play is, as many scholars argue, lacking.¹⁷

However, Benjamin’s argument that all translations are untranslatable is incomplete. This is due to Benjamin’s narrow definition of *translation*. Rather than conceiving of *translation* as “the act of turning one language, medium, or form into another,” Benjamin seems to abide by a narrower definition that applies only to turning the language of one literary text into another. However, I argue that while Douglas does translate Wilde’s work in the narrower sense of *translation*, Wilde translates, in the broader sense of the term, a body of sources when he writes *Salomé*. Some of these sources, such as the Bible, are translations themselves. As the literary history of *Salomé* shows, the figure is already composed of layers of translation when Wilde gets to her. This broader definition of translation allows us to see that translations are translatable, because in a sense, every literary work is a translation and interpretation of its predecessors.

Wilde’s text also functions as an interpretation and translation (of a Biblical text, and of other artists’ visions of *Salomé*), in addition to a source text that has been translated. Benjamin describes the translator’s challenge saying,

...a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation

¹⁷ While Douglas’ translation is often regarded as inadequate, there have been other, more successful attempts at translating Wilde’s play, which I will discuss in my conclusion.

recognizable as fragments of a greater language...For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense...A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully...This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue...¹⁸

Here, Benjamin highlights a theory of translation that (though it post-dates Wilde) accurately describes Wilde's work. If, instead of looking at Wilde's text as an "original," we look at it as a translation of, on the one hand, a Biblical text and on the other, various interpretations of the Salomé figure in art and culture, this theory uncovers two manners of looking at Wilde's work. The first is the idea that translation is not an imitation of meaning, but rather a projection of a "way of meaning." Second, Benjamin cites the primacy of the individual word over the sentence.

To explore the first point—that instead of being an imitation of other versions of the Salomé figure, Wilde's *Salomé* incorporates the *way* the Salomé figure means—it is first necessary to decipher what it means to "incorporate the original's way of meaning." In his essay, Benjamin argues that when the translator orates the original's way of meaning, he makes both the translation and the original "recognizable as fragments of a greater language." For Benjamin, this "greater language" is one that goes *beyond* conveying meaning. The greater or "pure" language that Benjamin describes conveys language as a form, rather than as content. He continues, arguing that a "real" translation is transparent, allowing the pure language evident in the original to fully shine on the original. In this sense, a translation should function as a transparent lens that, while

¹⁸ Ibid, 260, 262.

blocking no light, focuses it, revealing the original in even more fullness. In this passage, Benjamin also stresses the way that the medium of the translation reinforces and makes clearer the pure language. For Benjamin, the medium of the translation reinforces the revelation of the pure language. The importance of medium in translation is evident in Wilde's play as he translates his body of sources to a one-act play. This allows him to incorporate the way of meaning of his sources and reflect the pure language in a clearer light.

In the case of the Salomé figure, "the original," or source for Wilde, is not just the Bible, but also the historical evolution of the figure and other artists' interpretations of Salomé. Wilde's source texts are a Biblical story and a body of different interpretations flowing from it. Rather than the few verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is the sum total of many interpretations of Salomé. In this sense, Wilde's text is a translation of a cultural and historic amalgamation of parts, rather than a single, textual whole. Moreover, rather than looking for ways that Wilde's text imitates what its sources convey, we must look at how Wilde's text embodies the ways that its sources convey meaning. A source can convey meaning in several ways. Benjamin highlights the importance of language and form, but one may also consider the way that Wilde's text interacts with the plot structure, details and media of its sources, as these are ways of meaning, rather than signification alone. Wilde's interaction with ways of meaning as opposed to meaning itself emphasizes his commitment to language as an end in itself. The manner in which Wilde translates the way that some of these texts portray Salomé uncovers how Wilde interacts with his source texts.

In particular, Wilde incorporates the “ways of meaning” of the Biblical account of Huysmans’ account in *Salomé*. Out of the many texts and artistic renderings of Salomé that may have influenced Wilde, these two are the most germane to the analysis of Wilde’s text as a translation. Representing opposite chronological ends of the Salomé figure’s evolution, there is little doubt that Wilde was familiar with both texts when he wrote *Salomé*.

The influence of Biblical account from the book of Mark is evident in Wilde’s text’s plotline and language. It is difficult to determine which translation of the Bible Wilde had in mind as he wrote *Salomé*. He was, no doubt, most familiar with the English King James Version. However, if he was referring to a French translation of the Bible as he wrote *Salomé*, he most likely would have been using the Louis Segond translation. In the verses most relating to the Salomé figure (Mark 6:24-28), the King James Version reads:

And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother.¹⁹

The French Louis Segond version reads:

Étant sortie, elle dit à sa mère: Que demanderais-je? Et sa mère répondit: La tête de Jean Baptiste. Elle s'empessa de rentrer aussitôt vers le roi, et lui fit cette demande: Je veux que tu me donnes à l'instant, sur un plat, la tête de Jean Baptiste. Le roi fut attristé; mais, à cause de ses serments et des convives, il ne voulut pas lui faire un refus. Il envoya sur-le-champ un garde, avec l'ordre d'apporter la tête de Jean Baptiste. Le garde alla décapiter Jean dans la prison, et apporta la tête sur un plat. Il la donna à la jeune fille, et la jeune fille la donna à sa mère.²⁰

¹⁹ The Holy Bible, King James Version.

²⁰ La Sainte Bible, Louis Segond.

Although both accounts are translations of the original manuscript and differ to some degree, it is evident that they impact Wilde's text as he orates the ways of meaning apparent in both. For instance, Wilde's play reflects these texts' ways of meaning at the sentence level. Both texts feature simple, brief sentences that portray statements of fact, usually in the subject-verb pattern. Wilde's text reflects this simplicity of sentence structure. Additionally, the repetition and cropped language seen in the Biblical accounts are pervasive in Wilde's play. For example, in the beginning of the play, the conversation between the Young Syrian, the First Soldier, The Second Soldier, and Herodias' Page overlaps in constant repetition.

Le Page d'Hérodiad:
Vous la regardez toujours. Vous la regardez trop. Il ne faut pas regarder les gens de cette façon...
Il peut arriver un malheur.

Le jeune Syrien :
Elle est très belle ce soir.

Premier Soldat :
Le tétrarque a l'air sombre.

Second Soldat :
Oui, il a l'air sombre.

Premier Soldat :
Il regarde quelque chose.

Second Soldat :
Il regarde quelqu'un.

Premier Soldat :
Qui regard-t-il ?²¹

In this passage, Wilde uses repetition both in the sentence structure and in the vocabulary. Each sentence is a subject-verb construction, and tends to echo the sentence before it. This pattern of repetition is similar to the Gospel account (regardless of whether it is in

²¹ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 11.

French or English), and gives both *Salomé* and the Biblical account an air of anxiety and impending danger. As the story unfolds, the repetition and cropped rhythm of the texts imitate a pacing, ceaseless motion towards the climax of John the Baptist's death.

Moreover, Wilde orates the way that the Biblical account means through his experimentation with medium. In both the French and the English Bibles, this passage seems to read as a play. For instance, as the Bible recounts the story, it uses direct quotes each time a character speaks. Further, it straightforwardly states any information that is not a direct quote, as if it were a stage direction. In this sense, the sentences read as lines, accompanied by narration or stage direction. Wilde seems to exploit the way that the Biblical account means by translating its form to a one-act play. It is as if Wilde uses this passage of the Bible as a source, and then expands it into one act. Wilde's attention to the form of the Biblical account over its content (the content of Wilde's play is embellished) highlights his consideration of its way of meaning, rather than meaning itself.

Furthermore, Wilde captures the way of meaning of the Biblical account through the details that he chooses to employ. Though embellished, Wilde's plot structure seems to follow the form of the Biblical account. For instance, both Wilde's play and the Biblical account begin with the day of the feast, transition to Herod offering Salomé anything she desires if she dances for him, and end with Herod satisfying Salomé's request of the Baptist's head. Additionally, Wilde's one-act play reflects the brevity and choice of detail apparent in the Biblical account. Although both texts are brief, Wilde's choice of what kind of details to incorporate, and what kind to exclude mirror the Bible's use of detail. For example, the Biblical account includes sufficient explanations for

Herodias' motivations (she hates John because he insults her), yet leaves out an explanation of Salomé's willingness to ask for John's head. What's more, the Bible states that Salomé dances for Herod, yet it does not state why or how this dance is so powerful as to motivate Herod to offer Salomé *anything* in anticipation of her dancing.

Similarly, though Wilde alters the Biblical account, he chooses to include some details and to tantalize the audience by leaving out others. For example, Wilde includes a thorough characterization of Herodias (exhibiting her domineering qualities and hate for Jokanaan that are also apparent in the Bible) and of Herod (illustrating the fickleness he displays). However, Wilde shrouds in mystery Salomé's motivation to demand Jokanaan's head. Likewise, Wilde gives no details about Salomé's dance (except that it is called "the dance of the seven veils"). In fact, though Wilde includes opening stage directions for scenery, throughout the majority of the play, stage directions are notably absent. For example, when Salomé performs "the dance of the seven veils," Wilde simply writes, "Salomé danse la danse des sept voiles." This lack of detail creates an element of vagueness and mystery for the reader of the play, and leaves it open to interpretation for performers. After all, a play is always a text meant for performers to interpret. In this sense, both the Biblical account and Wilde's work (due, at least in part, to Wilde's oration of Bible's way of meaning) have leant themselves to interpretation and translation.

When referring to the Bible as a source text, however, Wilde did not restrict himself to the Salomé story. Though Salomé's story is the subject of Wilde's play, Wilde takes much of his language from The Song of Songs. For example, Wilde extensively quotes The Song of Songs as Salomé interacts with Jokanaan.

Salomé :

Iokanaan ! Je suis amoureuse de ton corps. Ton corps est blanc comme le lis d'un pré que le faucheur n'a jamais fauché. Ton corps est blanc comme les neiges qui couchent sur les montagnes, comme les neiges qui couchent sur les montagnes de Judée, et descendent dans les vallées. Les roses du jardin de la reine d'Arabie ne sont pas aussi blanches que ton corps. Ni les roses du jardin de la reine d'Arabie, du jardin parfumé de la reine d'Arabie, ni les pieds de l'aurore qui trépigent sur les feuilles, ni le sein de la lune quand elle couche sur le sein de la mer... Il n'ya rien au monde d'aussi blanc que ton corps. Laisse-moi toucher ton corps !²²

As Salomé and Jokanaan (Iokanaan in French) converse, their discourse is rife with scriptural quotes and allusions. Verbally making love to Jokanaan's body, Salomé quotes the Biblical Song of Solomon (The Song of Songs/*Cantique des Cantiques*). In fact, throughout the entirety of *Salomé*, Wilde references Song of Songs, almost as if he is re-writing the Bible (or translating) the Bible. Wilde's contemporaries noticed this translation-like quality of Wilde's work. For example, Max Beerbohm said of the play, "Wilde should have rewritten the whole Bible. Then there would be no more skeptics."²³

For instance, as the lovers in The Song of Songs verbally adore each other, they use metaphors such as, "Tes yeux sont des colombes" (1:15), and "Comme un pommier au milieu des arbres de la forêt, tel est mon bien-aimé..." (2:3)²⁴. This figurative language parallels the way that Salomé verbally deconstructs Jokanaan's body and adores him using metaphors. Additionally, the lovers urge each other saying, "Fais-moi voir ta figure, fais-moi entendre ta voix..." (2:14), just as Salomé begs Jokanaan to let her touch him. Also, when the female lover in The Song of Songs cannot find her beloved, she laments, "J'ai ouvert à mon bien-aimé, mais mon bien-aimé s'en était allé, il avait disparu. J'étais hors de moi, quand il me parlait. Je l'ai cherché, et je ne l'ai point trouvé ;

²² Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 26. For a fuller representation of Salomé and Jokanaan's discourse, see the appendix.

²³ Jane Marcus, "Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 78.1 (1974): 113.

²⁴ La Sainte Bible, Louis Segond. Henceforward, all citations of the French Bible will refer to this edition, and will be in-text.

je l'ai appelé, et il ne m'a point répondu" (5:6). Salomé echoes this passage as she bemoans her failed attempts to make Jokanaan love her. She says, "Ah! Pourquoi ne m'as-tu pas regardée, Iokanaan ? Derrière tes mains et tes blasphèmes tu as caché ton visage...Moi, je t'ai vu, Iokanaan, et je t'ai aimé"²⁵. As Wilde uses the language from The Song of Songs, he translates the Bible's way of meaning in *Salomé*. His attention to language enables him to craft a translation of the Bible that focuses on the "way of meaning" that Benjamin describes, rather than signification alone.

In addition, Wilde uses motifs from The Song of Songs throughout the rest of the play to capture the Bible's way of meaning. For example, the motif of a veil appears in The Song of Songs when the male lover says, "Tes yeux sont des colombes, derrière ton voile" (4:1). Wilde translates this motif in his play. Not only does Wilde's Herod compare Salomé's feet to doves, but also, he admires her from behind the seven veils. Wilde continues to develop this image through his use of language, which I will further explain in my next section.

Moreover, the male lover in The Song of Songs compares his lover to the moon, noting both her beauty and a certain danger associated with her. He says, "Qui est celle qui apparaît comme l'aurore, belle comme la lune, pure comme le soleil, mais terrible comme des troupes sous leurs bannières?" (6:10). Similarly, Wilde uses this figure to incorporate the Bible's symbolism. The symbol of the moon appears as male characters in *Salomé* compare the princess to the moon, and fear her as much as they are in awe of her. Salomé also compares herself to the moon, but interprets the moon saying, "Elle est froide et chaste, la lune...Je suis sûre qu'elle est vierge. Elle a la beauté d'une vierge...Oui, elle est vierge. Elle ne s'est jamais souillée. Elle ne s'est jamais donnée aux

²⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 69-70.

hommes, comme les autres déesses.”²⁶ Like the male lover from *The Song of Songs*, Salomé associates purity and virginity with the moon (and herself), whereas the male characters see only her beauty and dangerous qualities. Rather than what the moon symbolizes, then, Wilde’s text draws out the *way* it symbolizes. In the way that the male lover from *The Song of Songs* associates his beloved with the moon and notes her paradoxical attributes, Wilde uses each character’s observations about the moon to expand his characterization of Salomé.

Finally, Wilde captures the way that *The Song of Songs* expresses an infatuation with beauty and art. This emphasis on aesthetics enhances Salomé’s position as a decadent ideal and her uniqueness as a purely aesthetic literary/cultural figure. For example, in *The Song of Songs* the male lover says, “Que tes pieds sont beaux dans ta chaussure...œuvre des mains d’un artiste,” (7:1). Throughout *Salomé*, Wilde also seems to envision the princess and the play as art. For Wilde, Salomé is an expression of art brought to life. This can be seen through the language that other characters use to describe her. In the way that the lover in *Song of Songs* admires the artistic beauty of his beloved, Wilde indulges in the literary beauty of his text. As each character adores Salomé, Wilde crafts adulations exalting her. Writing these praises of Salomé seems to be an ecstatic and even worshipful artistic experience for Wilde. For him, the process of translating the Bible and incorporating its way of meaning adds to his artistic appreciation and aesthetic experience of *Salomé*.

Wilde translates Huysmans’ “way of meaning” in *À Rebours*. In particular, Wilde considers Huysmans’ description of Gustav Moreau’s painting, *Salomé Dansant*. In this

²⁶ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 17.

aesthetic experience of translation, Wilde indulges in expressing Huysmans' language and his paradoxical ways of representing Salomé. For example, Huysmans writes,

Surhumaine et étrange, elle n'était plus seulement la baladine qui arrache à un vieillard, par une torsion corrompue de ses reins, un cri de désir et de rut...elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie, la Beauté maudite...la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnant, de même que l'Helene antique, tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qu'elle voit, tout ce qu'elle touche.

Ici, elle était vraiment fille; elle obéissait à son tempérament de femme ardente et cruelle; elle vivait, plus raffinée et plus sauvage, plus exécration et plus exquise; elle réveillait plus énergiquement les sens en léthargie de l'homme, ensorcelait, domptait plus sûrement ses volontés, avec son charme de grande fleur vénérienne, poussée dans des couches sacrilèges, élevée dans des serres impies.²⁷

Here, Huysmans is engaging in ekphrasis, translating Moreau's painting of Salomé into language. In this sense, Huysmans' description of Salomé is a translation, which Wilde then interprets and translates. Huysmans' language provides a stark contrast from that of the Bible. Where the Biblical description is cropped and straightforward, Huysmans uses the language of description, and invests in the aesthetic appreciation of Salomé by crafting phrases that adulate her. Whereas the Bible lists facts in a sequence of events, Huysmans' accounts lists descriptors of Salomé. Although Wilde does imitate the Bible's way of meaning using its abrupt phrasing, he also employs Huysmans' way of meaning, particularly when he is treating aesthetic, rather than plot-focused material. For example, when Salomé admires Jokanaan's body, she verbalizes an aesthetic experience much in the same way that Huysmans does in the above passage. Listing attributes of Jokanaan, Salomé compares him to beautiful, pastoral imagery. The undulating rhythm of her words makes it seem as if she relishes in aesthetic appreciation. As a marked difference from other, more cropped speech throughout the play, here Wilde uses

²⁷ J.K. Huysmans, *A Rebours; Avec Une Pref. De L'auteur Ecrite Vingt Ans Apres Le Roman* (Paris: Fasquelle Editeurs, 1972), 86, 90.

lengthy, descriptive sentences that expand and develop preceding descriptions and imitate Huysmans' list of attributes. For example, Salomé says, "Ton corps est blanc comme les neiges qui couchent sur les montagnes, comme les neiges qui couchent sure les montagnes de Judée, et descendent dans les vallées."²⁸ These phrases, like Huysmans' description of Salomé, describe an object of artistic infatuation in an undulating, even sexual rhythm as Wilde translates Huysmans' way of meaning by focusing on language.

Wilde also incorporates the way that Huysmans' text means by focusing on medium. In Huysmans' text, because he is describing a painting, Salomé is a piece of art. However, by describing her paradoxical nature, and drawing out his descriptions, Huysmans expands the work of art, giving life to the Salomé that he describes. In this sense, Huysmans plays with the medium of a painting, giving it more human depth. His Salomé is both a painting and art made real. Similarly, Wilde captures the way that Huysmans engages with medium and meaning by taking each of Huysmans' descriptors of Salomé, these paradoxical, archetypal images, and expanding them in his play. In this sense, Wilde imitates Huysmans' way of representing Salomé. Wilde's Salomé is both a piece of art (by association with archetypal and artistic figures) and a character, given life and depth through the medium of a play. Wilde expands his representation of Salomé through this medium because the play enables both description (seen best in other characters' verbal adoration of Salomé) and life (as Salomé speaks her lines and engages with other characters).

For example, emphasizing the "femme fatale" quality of Salomé, Huysmans' picture of what is "vraiment fille" or "utterly girlish" is one that is paradoxically beautiful and poisoning, refined and savage, hateful and exquisite, and evidently juvenile. Above

²⁸ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 26.

all, she is powerful, subjugating man and his will. Here, Huysmans starts with a painting, and expands it through ekphrasis, injecting it with life through description. Wilde imitates this way of representing Salomé by capturing the way that Huysmans uses paradox to develop Salomé. For instance, Wilde expands Huysmans' descriptors, giving them life through his theatrical embodiment of Salomé. In particular, Wilde expands the interaction between Salomé and her observers that Huysmans describes. Huysmans' description of "la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnant, de même que l'Helene antique, tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu'elle touche," parallels Wilde's depiction of Salomé, in that Wilde's Salomé also seems to have a poisonous effect on everyone with whom she comes into contact. In this passage, Huysmans compares Salomé both to a femme fatale of antiquity (Helen of Troy) and to a monstrous beast, creating a Salomé that is romanticized and idealized, yet deadly.

Wilde uses his characters to translate this way of representing Salomé. For example, Jokanaan prophesies in an apocalyptic tone, when he rejects Salomé. He says:

Iokanaan :
Arrière, fille de Babylone ! C'est par la femme que le mal est entre dans le monde. Ne me parlez pas. Je ne veux pas t'écouter. Je n'écoute que les paroles du Seigneur Dieu.

Iokanaan :
Arrière, fille de Sodome ! Ne me touchez pas. Il ne faut pas profaner le temple du Seigneur Dieu.²⁹

Continually warning Salomé, the "daughter of Babylon," to "Come not near the chosen of the Lord," Iokanaan references Scripture. When Iokanaan calls Salomé the "fille de Babylon," Wilde uses the tone of Revelation to echo Huysmans' description of Salomé as

²⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 26-7.

a “la Bête monstrueuse.” Almost all of Jokanaan’s utterances are prophetic and speak of a Day of Judgment and doom. For example, Jokanaan says,

En ce jour-là, le soleil deviendra noir comme un sac de poil, et la lune deviendra comme du sang, et les étoiles du ciel tomberont sur la terre comme les figures vertes tombent d’un figuier, et les rois de la terre auront peur.³⁰

This echoes Revelation 6:12-15, which states, in the Louis Segond version,

Je regardai, quand il ouvrit le sixième sceau; et il y eut un grand tremblement de terre, le soleil devint noir comme un sac de crin, la lune entière devint comme du sang, et les étoiles du ciel tombèrent sur la terre, comme lorsqu’un figuier secoué par un vent violent jette ses figes vertes. Le ciel se retira comme un livre qu’on roule; et toutes les montagnes et les îles furent remuées de leurs places. Les rois de la terre, les grands, les chefs militaires, les riches, les puissants, tous les esclaves et les hommes libres, se cachèrent dans les cavernes et dans les rochers des montagnes.

Added to Jokanaan’s apocalyptic rhetoric are the panicked warnings of other characters that “something terrible may happen.” As the Young Syrian looks at Salomé, Herodias’ Page warns him that he looks at her too much, that something terrible may come of it. Similarly, Herod finds omens in events such as slipping in blood, and when he finally agrees to give Salomé the head of Jokanaan, he says, “Je suis sûr qu’il va arriver un malheur.”³¹ These apocalyptic undertones, when translated to the medium of a play, contribute to and expand the image of Salomé as a “bête monstrueuse.” Seeing Salomé in this light, Wilde, with Huysmans’ inspiration, emphasizes her dangerous connection to characters in Revelation. Not only does this connection underline Salomé’s power to usurp, but also it aligns her with a broader tradition of *femmes fatales* with inconceivable power.

Like Huysmans’ description, Wilde’s Salomé is also indifferent, irresponsible, and insensitive, as her interactions with other characters are limited to her own desires.

The Young Syrian speaks to Salomé, warning her about her conversations with Jokanaan,

³⁰ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 46.

³¹Ibid, 70-71.

yet she only acknowledges his presence once, to manipulate him, telling him she will look at him—even smile at him—if he uncovers the cistern so she can look at Jokanaan. Even when the Young Syrian kills himself, Salomé remains transfixed with her desire for Jokanaan. Similarly, Salomé is disjointed from the other characters, and only converses with Herod after she becomes fascinated with Jokanaan. The rest of her interactions are one-sided, and do not involve actual communication between characters. Only when Herod speaks does Salomé respond directly to someone. Salomé’s one-sided interactions with the other characters end poisonously for all who look at her, touch her, and come near her. The Young Syrian kills himself, Jokanaan is beheaded, and Herod must kill Jokanaan, the prophet whom he fears. Even Salomé dies, leaving only Herodias unaffected by Salomé’s influence. Through the dialogue and interaction with other characters that the medium of a play allows, Wilde’s is able to translate Huysmans’ ways of meaning. Wilde’s focus on language and medium enables him to incorporate the way that Huysmans uses ekphrasis to translate the visual into the verbal. Further, Wilde expands the paradoxical descriptors that Huysmans provides to craft his Salomé. Imitating Huysmans’ interest in medium and paradox, Wilde captures Huysmans’ ways of meaning in his play.

The second point of Benjamin’s argument—that the best way to embody a “way of meaning” is to give primacy to individual words—highlights the importance of language in Wilde’s text and its relationship to the Decadent movement in literature. Although scholars debate the exact definition and characteristics of the Decadent movement, it is often argued that Decadent texts use language in a way that is unique.³²

³² See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Regina Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization:*

For example, Havelock Ellis saw a shift in focus from the whole to the parts in the Decadent movement. He argues that in literature, Decadence is “an anarchistic style in which everything was sacrificed to the development of the individual parts.”³³ For him, Decadent texts focus on individual words as opposed to the unity of sentences. Nietzsche echoes this observation when he states that in literary Decadence, “The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentences reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page.”³⁴

Further, Linda Dowling argues that Decadence developed from a “linguistic crisis in Victorian attitudes toward language.”³⁵ She argues that as linguists such as Bopp and Grimm presented language as autonomous from human value, language lost some of its sacredness. During the Victorian era, a new theory of language was emerging, which suggested that language was arbitrary, and void of any inherent value. Rather, this theory suggested that humans ascribed value to language. Moreover, the work of Bopp and Grimm suggested that modern languages (German, French, English) descended from a common, ancient root, Sanskrit. If language was separated from inherent value, where did that leave Shakespeare, Milton, or the King James Bible? Previously, language had seemed to be an inherent, autonomous part of these authors and texts. It was the *language* that gave the text value, not the *user* of language who gave the language value.

On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975); Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. Karl Beckson (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 134-51.

³³Regina Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁵ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siecle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), xi.

Dowling posits that literary Decadence was an attempt to take advantage of “what had otherwise appeared only as one of the incidentally bleak implications of the new literary science” (xv). For Dowling, the Decadent movement was an attempt to exploit this new theory of language—that it is separate from meaning—and use it for artistic purposes.

Wilde also discusses the primacy of language, as opposed to inherent value or meaning, in the Decadent movement in his 1888 review of W.E. Henley’s poetry. He states, “...in the case of any important literary movement, half of its strength resides in its language. If it does not bring with it a rich and novel mode of expression, it is doomed to either sterility or imitation.”³⁶ Henley was not a Decadent, so Wilde is commenting on Henley’s poetry and how his use of language, because it does not bring a “novel mode of expression,” is imitative. For Wilde, Decadent texts (including Wilde’s translation of the Salomé figure) move beyond imitation. In Decadent texts, this “rich and novel mode of expression” is the focus on the individual word.

When reading *Salomé*, the importance of the individual word is obvious:

Le Page d’Hérodias :

Regardez la lune. La lune a l’air très étrange. On dirait une femme qui sort d’un tombeau. Elle ressemble à une femme morte. On dirait qu’elle cherche des morts.

Le Jeune Syrien :

Elle a l’air très étrange. Elle ressemble à une petite princesse qui porte un voile jaune, et a des pieds d’argent. Elle ressemble à une princesse qui a des pieds comme des petites colombes blanches... on dirait qu’elle danse.

Le Page d’Hérodias :

Elle est comme une femme morte. Elle va très lentement.³⁷

In this passage, Herodias’ page is noting the moon, while the Young Syrian at first watches Salomé, and then is either looking at the moon, or remains looking at the

³⁶ Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 160.

³⁷ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 9-10.

princess. The structure of each line, however, conflates the moon and Salomé with its almost stichomythic quality, as both are feminine in the French language, and both possess similar attributes. Wilde writes each sentence in an elementary, subject-verb pattern that is both simple and repetitive, as if a chant. Additionally, the two characters repeat words such as *lune*, *femme*, *morte*, and *étrange*. This repetition focuses attention on individual words. The focus of these lines, and most others throughout the play, are the words themselves and how they rhythmically and phonically compose the text.

Thus, as Wilde focuses both on individual words and on concepts of form and medium, he works to translate “the way of meaning” of a larger body of sources. In so doing, Wilde performs “the task of the translator” as Benjamin describes it. Wilde’s role as a translator allows us to understand *Salomé* as both an interpretation of an artistic figure, and as a translation of source material into a new medium, the one-act play. With his focus on language and form, it seems that Wilde is emphasizing these elements of his text as ends, focusing on the parts rather than the whole. In addition to translating these source texts into a new medium, Wilde also translates them into a new language. Because of its strangeness, Wilde’s English-inflected French further draws our attention to and highlights the importance of language in his text. Moreover, Wilde’s use of a foreign language enables his text to function as a translation, as the exercise of writing in French forced Wilde to translate each word that he wrote from English into French. Yet to understand the effects of writing in French, we must first ask, “Why in French?”

Pourquoi en Français?

Considering that Oscar Wilde was a native English speaker and commanded a limited level of French (as his request to have multiple French authors proofread his manuscript for errors suggests), it is strange that he wrote *Salomé* in French. Wilde, his friends, and scholars all suggest related, but different reasons for the author's choice to write *Salomé* in French. Although none of these theories presents a definite explanation for why Wilde chose to write in French, they all seem to reflect part of a fuller effect, if not an explanation, of his decision to write in a language not his own. Ultimately, Wilde's choice to write *Salomé* in French supports my argument that *Salomé* is about interpretation and translation. Specifically, through writing in French, Wilde seems to emphasize that the aesthetic experience of translation and interpretation—the effort and exercise of it—is an end in itself. For Wilde, the process, and not the product, is ultimate. Wilde's emphasis on language and translation allows critics to read the play as so many autonomous, oftentimes contradictory texts.

Writing in French produces three main effects on Wilde's text: it allows him to engage with the French culture, to use language as a veil, and to focus on language as language. For example, writing in French allows Wilde to interact with French culture. Not only did Wilde adore the culture of France, but also, writing in French gives his *Salomé* a flavor of the French interpretations of the *Salomé* figure. Because *Salomé* was already an artistic obsession in France at this time, Wilde's French-language text more closely aligns his interpretation as a response to other artists' work. This connection highlights how Wilde's piece acts as an expanded translation of the body of artistic versions of *Salomé*. Additionally, writing in French allows Wilde to engage language as

a veil. Because the French language obscures the meaning of Wilde's text for Anglophones, and the Anglicisms of Wilde's French obscure the meaning for Francophones, the language of *Salomé* performs the function of a veil, both attracting attention to and obscuring the text's beauty. Finally, writing in French enables Wilde to engage language as language. The distance from signification that writing in French allows enables Wilde to focus more on the individual word than on the meaning of phrases. Through the effort of writing *Salomé* in French, Wilde also creates his own variety of the language. As an Anglophone, writing in a foreign language enables Wilde to generate an idiolect, or a personal version of the language. These effects of writing in French emphasize my argument that *Salomé* is primarily a play about language. For Wilde, the employment of language is an aesthetic end in itself.

According to Wilde, he wrote *Salomé* during the course of one day, while in France.³⁸ He may have decided to write in French because he admired French authors and poets, who gave birth to the *décadent* movement with which he so identified. French *Décadence* flourished in the 1880's, and in 1885, some younger Decadents (like Mallarmé) began calling themselves "Symbolistes."³⁹ English Decadence began as the Aesthetic Movement, and owed much of its themes and vocabulary (like *ennui*) to its French inspiration. Arthur Symonds defines English Decadence as "the revolt from the

³⁸ Anne M. Daniel, "Lost in Translation: Oscar, Bosie, and 'Salome,'" *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 68.1-2 (2006): 60.

³⁹ Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 99.

ready-made of language, from the bondage of the traditional form.” He describes the ideal of Decadence “to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of the human soul.”⁴⁰

Nick Frankel argues, “Wilde was trying to ingratiate himself with the Symbolists at precisely the moment when *Salomé* was being composed.”⁴¹ He goes on to say that *Salomé* poses as a French *Symboliste* work for social and erotic reasons. Writing a play in French might have been Wilde’s attempt to fit in with the French Symbolist/Decadent “set,” or his homage to the artists who inspired him, like Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Flaubert.⁴² In this sense, Wilde’s decision to write in French could also be an attempt to translate himself as a *Symboliste*.

Additionally, a love of French culture in general probably inspired Wilde to write in French. When Wilde wrote *Salomé* in 1891, he was in Paris, which he considered to be the artistic capital of the world. “J’adore Paris. J’adore aussi votre belle langue française, qui, avec la grecque, sont les deux langues par excellence pour moi du moins,” Wilde said in 1892.⁴³ At the time of this interview, Wilde had already written *Salomé*, and had experienced the rejection of the British censorship. He speaks partially to spite the British saying, “Puisque, en Angleterre, il est impossible de faire jouer une œuvre d’art, je vais entrer dans une nouvelle patrie que j’aime déjà depuis longtemps... Ici, [en

⁴⁰ Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. Karl Beckson (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 139, 151.

⁴¹ Nick Frankel, “The Dance of Writing: Wilde’s *Salomé* as a Work of Contradiction,” *Text* 10 (1997): 74.

⁴² Mallarmé’s poem “Hérodiade,” Huysmans’ *A Rebours*, and Flaubert’s *Salammbô* and “Hérodias” are argued to have greatly influenced Wilde’s *Salomé*. For more on these influences, see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011).

⁴³ Maurice Sisely, “La Salome De M. Oscar Wilde,” *Le Gaulois* (Paris: 29 June 1892).

Angleterre] on a l'esprit essentiellement antiartistique et d'une étroitesse dont les exemples sont malheureusement trop nombreux." This pairing of the anti-artistic, narrow-minded British with their apparent antithesis, the French, unearths an idealistic view Wilde held of the French culture. The French were open to art—even nurtured it. Wilde also reveals an infatuation with the French language. Likening French to the classical Greek ideal, Wilde romanticizes the language as one of art, history, and culture. Wilde's infatuation with the French language and culture would have enhanced his aesthetic experience of writing *Salomé*. As he wrote *Salomé*, his aesthetic engagement with the French language would have emphasized the process of writing and the language itself over the product of the play.

Wilde also admired the French actress, Sarah Bernhardt, who spoke no English. He said in an interview, "The pleasure and pride that I have experienced in the whole affair has been that Madame Sarah Bernhardt who is undoubtedly the greatest artist on any stage, should have been charmed and fascinated by my play and should have wished to act it."⁴⁴ However, Wilde vehemently denied that he wrote his play for Bernhardt, or even with the actress in mind. In a letter to the editor of the London *Times*, Wilde wrote, "My play was in no sense of the words written for this great actress. I have never written a play for any actor or actress, nor shall I ever do so. Such work is for the artisan in literature, not for the artist."⁴⁵ Other critics and friends of Wilde supported his claim. Wilde's choice to write in French seems to have been less about Bernhardt in particular than it was about the French language. For Wilde, the character Salomé seems to have

⁴⁴ E.H Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 187. Extracted from *The Pal Mall Budget* (London), XL (30 June 1892) 947.

⁴⁵ Kerry Powell, "Salome, the Censor, and the Divine Sarah," in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 40.

had little to do with Bernhardt, and everything to do with Wilde's vision of a French-speaking Salomé. With its inherently French roots, the Decadent picture of Salomé for Wilde was, understandably, French. This picture of Salomé (perhaps in Wilde's mind best portrayed by Bernhardt) highlights the way the entire composition of Salomé's character relies on language.

Wilde also seems to have written in French as a reaction against British censorship and "Philistinism," as he would have put it. He believed that the British public and their censorship laws were artistically behind the French, and limiting art's capacity to develop in England. "I do not deny that Englishmen possess certain practical qualities; but, as I am an artist, these qualities are not those which I can admire. Moreover, I am not at present an Englishman. I am an Irishman, which is by no means the same thing," Wilde explained.⁴⁶ Here, Wilde not only explains his decision as a reaction against the censorship that he knew he would face, but also as an assertion of a national identity that is different from the British identity; Wilde asserts an Irish identity separate from the British disdain for his art. As an Irishman and an artist, Wilde distinguishes himself from English philistinism and further alienates himself from English culture in general. This rejection of a British national and cultural identity might have contributed to his desire to write in French, as a means of shirking Englishness altogether and embracing a more liberal French identity. Further, the artistic freedom the French culture allowed him would have enabled Wilde to experiment with translating the Bible more fully, concentrating on the exercise of translating, rather than on the restrictions of the British censor.

⁴⁶ E.H Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 188.

During the time that Wilde was writing *Salomé*, British censorship laws built a conservative fence around what it considered to be art, and therefore acceptable, and what was vulgar smut. Among the strict censorship laws was a statute that forbade even the quoting of Scripture on stage.⁴⁷ The extent of Wilde's exigence to evade censorship by writing in French can be seen in the British reaction to the play. When the British censor banned *Salomé* from the public stage, the play became an avant-garde piece that embodied everything contrary to "Englishness." What's more, because the play was censored on religious grounds, it became a symbol of blasphemy to the British public, and a symbol of resistance to British Puritanism to Wilde. Wilde's inflamed reaction to this censorship contributed to this image of *Salomé* as an incarnation of anti-Englishness.⁴⁸ By publically denouncing British culture and censorship, and even threatening to renounce his British citizenship and become a Frenchman, Wilde fanned the flame of the scandal that was *Salomé*.

Although British censorship was markedly strict, plays written in other languages got away with more. Just as profanities uttered in another language lose their sting, taboo topics written about in different languages become less taboo. Though Wilde flouted British identity following the censoring of *Salomé*, his initial use of French might have been more utilitarian than political. Realizing the degree of British censorship before writing *Salomé*, Wilde might have used French to shield his play from the authorities. In this way, Wilde's use of language functions as a veil over his text.⁴⁹ The idea that

⁴⁷ Kerry Powell, "Salome, the Censor, and the Divine Sarah," in *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 33.

⁴⁸ Nick Frankel, "The Dance of Writing: Wilde's Salome as a Work of Contradiction," *Text* 10 (1997): 80.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 35.

Wilde's use of language could have veiled his text is particularly interesting because Salomé performs "the dance of the seven veils" barefooted for Herod. Although Wilde only gives a single stage direction about this dance ("Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils"), Salomé's dance is a focal point for artists who inspired Wilde (such as Moreau and Huysmans), and one of the few details of the Salomé story that the Gospel account provides.⁵⁰ In productions of Wilde's *Salomé*, actresses have performed the dance wearing very little, and have made the dance a spotlight of their portrayals.⁵¹ Wilde creates this dance of the seven veils, giving Salomé both a sexually explicit and a tantalizingly modest effect. This paradox, as I previously argued, is central to Wilde's interpretation of the Salomé figure, as adapted from Huysmans.

Wilde's use of the veil is double. In part, Wilde uses the French language as a practical veil over his text, in hopes to eschew British censorship. Moreover, Wilde's use of language as a veil is an artistic decision. As Wilde writes in French, he creates a veil over his text that both hides its beauty and reveals it. Walter Benjamin's discussion of the connection between beauty, semblance, and veils helps us to understand Wilde's use of language as a veil. Benjamin states,

For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil. Unveiled, however, it would prove to be infinitely inconspicuous. Here is the basis of the age-old view that that which is veiled is transformed in the unveiling, that it will remain 'like unto itself' only underneath the veiling... Since only the beautiful and outside it nothing—veiling or being veiled—can be essential, the divine ground of the being of beauty lies in the secret. So then the semblance in it is just this: not the

⁵⁰ Matthew 14:6-7 states, "But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask."

⁵¹ For more on performances of *Salomé* and the dance of the seven veils, see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 83-125.

superfluous veiling of things in themselves but rather the necessary veiling of things for us.⁵²

Benjamin argues that the “divine ground” of beauty is in its secretiveness—the way that it eludes meaning. The veil makes beauty more conspicuous. Without the veil, we would not be able to detect the beauty. Veiling is not superfluous, then, but necessary in revealing something beautiful.

Benjamin’s argument becomes more apparent if we understand Wilde’s *Salomé* as veiled beauty. Salomé’s veils simultaneously cover her body and attract attention to it as she dances. Similarly, Wilde’s use of French as a veil both shields his play from the censor, and attracts attention to its beauty. The play eludes meaning for Anglophones because it is in French, and for Francophones because its French is heavily anglicized. Yet it is this linguistic veil over his text that causes us to focus on the play’s beauty. In this sense, Wilde’s language weaves a double-sided veil that eludes meaning for audiences. Arthur Symons speaks of a Decadent tendency to evade meaning when he says, “To express the inexpressible, he speaks of beautiful eyes behind a veil.”⁵³ Ironically, the veil of language seems either not to have worked, or to have attracted more attention than it evaded, as it was the French version, and not the English translation of *Salomé* that British laws censored.

Wilde’s own justification for writing in French was simpler—he loved language.

My idea of writing the play was simply this: I have one instrument that I know that I can command, and that is the English Language. There was another instrument to which I had listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see

⁵²Walter Benjamin, "Goethe's Elective Affinities," trans. Stanley Corngold, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1996), 351.

⁵³ Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. Karl Beckson (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981), 134-51.

whether I could make any beautiful thing out of it. Of course there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used, but they give a certain relief or colour to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he a Flamand by grace, writes in an alien language.⁵⁴

Here, Wilde's explanation for writing in French highlights the value that he places on language and the experience of engaging with it as an end in itself. Although Wilde might be "veiling" the more practical considerations of using language as a veil, his explanation reveals an ultimate concern with the aesthetics of language. Speaking of language as an instrument or medium with which one creates art, Wilde told *The Pall Mall Budget* in 1892, that his choice was an artistic one. He goes on to say that it is the use of a foreign language itself that gives *Salomé* its "colour." When Wilde mentions the "modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not have used," he seems to be insinuating that there is something different about the French that he is using—that something about its foreignness and novelty distinguishes it from the language that a native French writer would use. Furthermore, by arguing that Maeterlinck's writing has a "curious effect" because he writes in an "alien language," Wilde underscores two key points that are relevant to an analysis of his own writing: that writing in a non-native language produces a peculiar effect on a text (in terms of the role of language in the text) and that there is something alien or alienating about writing in another tongue.

Wilde is not the only one who thought that his French text had a curious effect. Philippe Julian writes, "Oscar Wilde writes a flowery French in which anglicisms are welcome, because they give a true naïveté to the babble of *Salomé* and a bizarre majesty to Herod's discourse. It would be necessary to play *Salomé* with the English accent. As

⁵⁴ E.H Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 188. Interview from *The Pall Mall Budget* (London), XL (30 June 1892) 947.

such, certain words take all the relief that the author wished for.”⁵⁵ Again, Julian notes the unique variety of language that Oscar Wilde is using. Here, Julian attributes this singular French to Wilde’s native English. Saying that Wilde’s French is “flowery” and full of anglicisms, Julian’s primary observation about Wilde’s text is its Englishness. He argues that these anglicisms are “welcome” because they give a certain naïveté and strangeness—as if Salomé becomes more childlike and Herod more bizarre *because* of their English-inflected French. These observations are ironic because they assert that *Salomé* is unique because of its Englishness, when Wilde seems to have chosen French because he envisioned Salomé as French. Although Julian seems to attribute incorrectly this strange, *English* “relief” of the play to Wilde’s desires, he does correctly identify the desired strange quality of the play brought about by its unique language.⁵⁶

Adolphe Retté (a French poet who identified with the Symbolist movement, and an acquaintance of Wilde) also reports that Stuart Merrill (an American Symbolist poet who wrote in French and a mutual friend) said to him, “Wilde would like you and me to...read the manuscript of his play *Salomé* to take out those anglicisms which are too explicit. I don’t share his view, for it’s precisely the exotic nature of Wilde’s French which seems to me to be one of the attractions of the play. However, Wilde insists on it.”⁵⁷ Wilde’s request suggests that initially after writing *Salomé*, he might have been less

⁵⁵ Philippe Julian, *Oscar Wilde*, 253. My translation.

⁵⁶ For more on the effects of translanguaging, or the practice or writing in a language that is not one’s native tongue, see Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000).

⁵⁷ E.H Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 190. Extracted from *Le Symbolisme: Anecdotes et Souvenirs* (Paris: Librairie Léon Vanier, 1903), 211-13.

³ Ibid, 191

⁴ Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000), 191.

confident about his English-inflected French than he appears in his interview with the *Pall Mall Budget*. Stuart Merrill, also an Anglophone writing in French, lived in France for 19 years during childhood, received instruction from Mallarmé in school, and then returned to live in France after law school for the rest of his life. As an author of works in a foreign language, Merrill seems to appreciate the “exotic nature” of Wilde’s French. Perhaps because Wilde was writing in a tongue foreign to him, the language of *Salomé* is afforded a certain strangeness or “exoticism” inherent to the text that distinguishes it from the works of native French authors. Retté agreed with Merrill, saying that Wilde seemed “to caress each word with his irresistible way of speaking.”⁵⁸ Wilde’s way of caressing language, as noted by Retté, further highlights the role of language as paramount in Wilde’s work.

In the end, Retté confirms that Wilde’s French copyeditors did not change a great deal of Wilde’s original text. Pointing out a few minor corrections and cutting one “lengthy speech by Herod in which he listed precious stones,” the two authors then passed the manuscript to Pierre Louÿs (to whom Wilde dedicated the French version), who also changed a few sentences. Retté asserts that it is this text, anglicisms and all, that went to print.

Wilde’s engagement of language as language and the particular variant of French that he creates are best explored by looking at the text. The passage I cited in the appendix reveals these mechanisms at work. In this passage, *Salomé* deconstructs Jokanaan’s body, and alternates between adoration and revilement. Aside from the use of

⁵⁸E.H Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 189.

French as a veil over Wilde's Biblical quotes, this passage also shows Wilde's artistic infatuation with language and his engagement of the allowances that the French language gives him. As if playing a new instrument, Wilde is experimenting with language. In this passage (and in Salomé's other praises of Jokanaan), Wilde deliberately uses an abundance of feminine nouns. Describing Jokanaan's body, Salomé uses the feminine nouns, "neiges, montagnes, vallées, roses, reine, aurore, feuilles, and mer," in comparison with the only masculine nouns, "corps, pieds, jardin and sein," which, meaning "body" "feet" "garden" and "breast" have feminine connotations throughout the text, despite their masculine gender in the French language. Herod, for instance, fixates on Salomé's naked feet as she dances. When Jokanaan rejects Salomé, however, her language switches, using mostly masculine nouns:

Salomé :

Ton corps est hideux. Il est comme le corps d'un lépreux. Il est comme un mur de plâtre où les vipères sont passées, comme un mur de plâtre où les scorpions ont fait leur nid. Il est comme un sépulcre blanchi, et qui est plein de choses dégoûtantes. Il est horrible, il est horrible ton corps !...C'est de tes cheveux que je suis amoureuse, Iokanaan. Tes cheveux ressemblent à des grappes de raisins, à des grappes de raisins noirs qui pendent des vignes d'Edom dans le pays des Edomites. Tes cheveux sont comme les cèdres du Liban, comme les grands cèdres du Liban qui donnent de l'ombre aux lions et aux voleurs qui veulent se cacher pendant la journée. Les longues nuits noires, les nuits où la lune ne se montre pas, où les étoiles ont peur, ne sont pas aussi noires. Le silence qui demeure dans les forêts n'est pas aussi noir. Il n'y a rien au monde d'aussi noir que tes cheveux...Laisse-moi toucher tes cheveux.

In this passage, the masculine nouns "corps lépreux, mur, plâtre, scorpions, nid, and sépulcre" contrast with the two feminine nouns "vipères, and choses."

Salomé's feminine language of love, and masculine language of rejection begin to create an image of Salomé's peculiar sense of gender that Wilde manipulates throughout the play. As a translation of multiple versions of the Salomé figure, Wilde's princess embodies multiple characteristics that shape her femininity. These traits are best seen in Huysmans' paradoxical description of *Salomé Dansant*. As I have shown, Wilde

includes and embellishes Huysmans' description of Salomé, and adds some paradox of his own. For example, Wilde's Salomé is both a victim and an agent, an object of the male gaze and an active "looker", and chaste (as the moon) yet erotic (as she dances).

Similarly to the way that Wilde exploits the gendering of the French, Wilde plays with the formal/informal "you" in French. For instance, in the lines where Jokanaan rejects Salomé, Wilde conjugates the verb "approcher" with the formal "vous" subject to refer to Salomé, but then immediately uses the informal "ta" possessive pronoun to refer to her. This mix-up on the part of Jokanaan reveals a mixed feeling about Salomé: on the one hand he sees her as an inferior, while on the other he respects and even fears her.

The ways that Wilde transitions between using "tu" and "vous" and his use of these pronouns when characters address each other veils the discourse in his play. As Wilde transitions between "tu" and vous," (sometimes in the same sentence) he creates a sense of confusion that eludes meaning. However, the subtlety behind these transitions, regardless of the grammatical correctness, attracts attention to his use of language, as a veil attracts attention to the beauty that it obscures. For example, throughout the play, characters tend to change their addresses to each other based on the situation. Herod and Herodias interchangeably address each other as "tu" and vous," and Jokanaan and Herod both alternate between the two pronouns when addressing Salomé. Aside from Jokanaan's addresses to the (unseen) angel of God in the "tu" form, Salomé is the only character to maintain consistency throughout her addresses, always referring to Herod and the servants as "vous" and Jokanaan as "tu." In Wilde's text, Salomé is the only character to demonstrate the stability of a singularly focused and unchanging second person address. All other characters' addresses are mixed and change with different

circumstances. Herod, for instance, refers to Salomé as “tu” when he attempts to entice her to dance for him saying, “Salomé, viens t’asseoir près de moi. Je te donnerai le trône de ta mère.”⁵⁹ Yet when Herod senses that he is not in control, and that Salomé holds power over him, he refers to her as “vous” saying, “Vous ne voulez pas cela. Enfin, écoutez-moi.”⁶⁰ Each time Herod attempts to take back control and entice Salomé, he addresses her as “tu,” but when he pleads with her and senses his impotence, he calls her “vous.”

Salomé, however, maintains a consistent tone with each interaction. Only when she demands the head of Jokanaan does she address Herod using the “tu” form, saying “Donne-moi la tête d’Iokanaan.” Salomé’s consistency, and Herod’s reaction to Salomé’s power through his use of the second person singular add to Wilde’s diverse interpretation of Salomé. While all other characters alternate between usages, Salomé remains fixed and focused. Observing and controlling, Salomé classifies relationships with unchanging terms. To her, Jokanaan always (even in death) has the intimacy of “tu,” and Herod always (except when Salomé demands Jokanaan’s head) is distanced with the formal “vous.” Not only does this reveal her control of both characters and language and add to her strength as a *femme fatale*, but also, it demonstrates consistency in Wilde’s interpretation of Salomé’s, and adds to Wilde’s portrayal of Salomé as not just the object of a male gaze, but a gazer herself. Aside from these impacts on Wilde’s text, at the base, Wilde’s language play shows his love of language and the process of translating and engaging with language as an end in itself.

⁵⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 37.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 63.

Finally, a look at Wilde's text reveals the peculiar variety of French that Wilde creates and employs in *Salomé*. The most immediately evident facet of Wilde's idiolect is the way that it can be translated, nearly directly, into English. Marilyn Gaddis Rose argues that *Salomé* is "linguistically synchronic, for it was written in English with French words."⁶¹ To be linguistically synchronic infers a concern with a language as it exists at one point in time, and not with how it has developed over time (diachronic). Although it seems evident (from original manuscripts of *Salomé*) that Wilde did originally write the play in French, the French he uses is more like a French transcription of an English text, with basic French grammar (adjective following the noun it modifies, etc...) taken into consideration. The phrases are simple, with few native French modes of expression. For instance, the Cappadocian asks, "Quel est son nom?" which translates directly to, "What is his name?"⁶² In standard French, the expression, "Comment s'appelle-t-il?" is more acceptable. Additionally, Herodiade says, "Cet homme vomit toujours des injures contre moi," which is an uncommon way to say "He is always hurling insults at me" in French. Similarly, throughout the text Wilde uses the expression *n'est-ce pas* in bizarre ways. For example, Herod says, "N'est-ce pas qu'il faut être raisonnable?" when "Ne faut-il pas être raisonnable" would be more French-sounding.⁶³ Aside from being the footprints of an Anglophone on a French text, Wilde's unique way of writing French gives *Salomé* a certain other-worldliness. The characters speak French, yet they do so in a disjointed manner. This leaves the characters alienated from each other, adding to the overall sense of estrangement of the play.

⁶¹ Marilyn Gaddis Rose, "The Synchronic Salome," in *The Languages of Theatre* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1980), 148.

⁶² Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 13.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 59.

Not only is alienation a common theme of *Salomé* and the Decadent movement, but also it is common of translingual authors.⁶⁴ Earlier, I argued that in focusing on the individual word (the part as opposed to the whole), Decadent authors experimented with alienation in their texts. They separated the word from its signification, and from its place in a sentence, thus alienating it from everything but itself. Similarly, translingual authors are oftentimes alienated, either as expatriates (as Wilde was) or in their own countries. Outside of physical alienation, translingual authors alienate themselves from their writing by writing in a tongue that is not their own. The distance between the translingual author's immediate consciousness and the effort required to write in a foreign language force the author to focus on the individual word. Thus, translingual texts often have similar characteristics to Decadent texts, in that the focus is on language over meaning.

Further, the alienation in the text supports my argument that *Salomé*'s focus on language lends itself to multiple interpretations. With each character isolated, it seems that they too are focused on the parts rather than the whole. For the reader to piece these parts together, the whole picture comes together looking distorted, asymmetrical, and paradoxical. I argue that this quality of the text enables it to function as so many autonomous interpretations.

Wilde's decision to write *Salomé* in French further emphasizes that his work is primarily about language, interpretation and translation. Wilde suggests that the process of interpreting, translating and engaging language as language is an aesthetic end.

⁶⁴ For more on translingualism, see Steven G Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2000). In this book, Kellman discusses reasons and effects of translingualism, and reviews Wilde specifically.

Writing in a foreign language enables Wilde to identify with many of the French source texts he uses. Furthermore, it allows him more artistic freedom to engage in translating the Bible, as it veils his text from British censorship. Using language as a veil also enables Wilde to “express the inexpressible” as Symons said, and underscore the beauty of his work. Finally, writing in French allows Wilde to engage language as language—to manipulate it, focus on the individual word, and explore it. In doing so, Wilde develops a unique mode of expression, his idiolect of English-inflected French. Wilde’s idiolect is itself a veil: it obscures meaning, yet draws attention to the beauty of Wilde’s work. Because Wilde’s idiolect forces his audience to participate in translation—focusing on the individual word rather than the play’s meaning in total—reading *Salomé* is as much of an aesthetic experience as writing it was for Wilde.

Conclusion: *Salomé*’s Afterlife

The Salomé figure existed long before Wilde’s play, yet Wilde’s interpretation of her has come to characterize the figure of the princess. Wilde’s *Salomé* has an afterlife in that it has become a basis for reinterpretation and has contributed to a theoretical framework for what is art. Since *Salomé*’s publication and the scandal that ensued over its censorship, both Wilde’s play and the Salomé figure have been translated and interpreted. Despite the body of other texts interpreting the Jewish Princess, however, it is most often Wilde’s text that is used as a source text for contemporary interpretations of

Salomé. In fact, Dierkes-Thrun argues that the modern interpretation of Salomé is the one that Wilde envisioned.⁶⁵

The continued scholarship on Wilde's *Salomé*, and modern efforts to interpret and translate it, reflect the text's role in the evolution of the Salomé figure. In addition to Douglas' translation, Wilde's grandson Merlin Holland (1994) has also translated *Salomé* into English. More recently, Joseph Donohue (2011) has produced a translation of *Salomé* that attempts to render Wilde's play in a more colloquial, American English of the 21st century. Wilde's *Salomé* has also been interpreted and translated into new media. For instance, Maude Allan's *Vision of Salomé* (1906) was a dance based on Wilde's play that both earned Allan the epitaph of "The Salomé Dancer" and embroiled her in The Pemberton Billing Trial. The trial (originally Allan's attempt to sue for libel after Pemberton Billing wrote an article accusing her of being a lesbian associated with German conspirators) ended tragically, much resembling Wilde's own trial in 1895. Allan's suit led to accusations against Allan for sexual indecency, including necrophilia, inspired by her dance with Jokanaan's head.⁶⁶

Considering the minimal critical acclaim the play received during Wilde's life, it is surprising that his *Salomé* lives on, continually being interpreted and translated. The immediate reception of the play centered on its censorship, and Wilde's life following his 1895 trial. Further, adaptations of *Salomé* following Wilde's death were seen through the lens of Wilde's life, particularly the tumultuous end of it. Even Wilde's friends readily admitted that *Salomé* was nothing special. For instance, André Gide said of the play,

⁶⁵ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011).

⁶⁶ For more on Maude Allan see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011).

“Those who have heard him [Wilde] speak find it disappointing to read him.”⁶⁷ In light of the play’s negligible acclaim during Wilde’s life, one must ask *why* Wilde’s play has largely come to represent the Salomé figure in general, and why it has generated continued scholarship. I argue that Wilde’s play has inspired new translations and interpretations of Salomé because of the way Wilde uses language.

I have argued that through his play, Wilde treats language as an aesthetic end in itself. This quality of the text enables its paradoxical, autonomous characteristics because content is subordinate to form. Thus, it matters less what the text is saying than *how* the text means. As Wilde focuses both on individual words and on concepts of form and medium, he works to translate “the way of meaning” of a larger body of sources. Wilde’s role as a translator allows us to understand *Salomé* as both an interpretation of an artistic figure, and as a translation of source material into a new medium. In addition to translating these source texts into a new medium, Wilde also translates them into a new language. Because of its strangeness, Wilde’s English-inflected French further draws our attention to and highlights the importance of language in his text. In focusing on the individual word, Wilde separates the word from its signification, and from its place in a sentence, thus alienating it from everything but itself. The distance between Wilde’s immediate consciousness and the effort required of writing in a foreign language force him to focus on the individual word—the part rather than the whole. This quality of the text enables it to function as so many autonomous interpretations.

⁶⁷ E.H. Mikhail, ed., *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 191.

Wilde's investment in process and his focus on the parts over the whole gesture toward literary traditions that follow him. In particular, his concern with fragmentation and alienation foresees literary modernism, and his maintenance of ambivalence anticipates postmodernism. While I acknowledge that I am painting with broad strokes when I argue that Wilde's work is proto-modernist and proto-postmodernist, I find the connection between artistic ideas evident in *Salomé* and those that developed in these two literary movements to be pertinent. Wilde contributes to a theoretical framework for ideas about what is modern and what is art. For example, although scholars debate the definition of modernism, it is generally acknowledged that literary modernism entails a rejection of traditional forms. For instance, the modernist philosopher Theodor Adorno argues that modernity "must turn its back on conventional surface coherence, the appearance of harmony, the order corroborated merely by replication."⁶⁸ Further, Dierkes-Thrun argues that Wilde helped to fuel "modernist aesthetics of transgression."⁶⁹ Wilde anticipates modernism's rejection of traditional forms. Specifically, Wilde's use of an idiolect alienates the reader from meaning, in the same way that Wilde's characters seem to be alienated from each other, and Wilde was alienated from England as he wrote the play in France. This motif of alienation fragments Wilde's play and focuses attention on the individual word. For the reader to piece Wilde's fragments together, the whole picture comes together looking distorted, asymmetrical, and paradoxical, much like a modernist painting.

⁶⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (New York: Verso, 2005), 218.

⁶⁹ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 2.

Salomé's proto-modernism attracted attention from modernist artists and encouraged the plays' translation. For example, Richard Strauss translated Wilde's play into the medium of an "opera in one act." Strauss' opera *Salomé* is a multifaceted translation of Wilde's text. On one hand, the libretto is a nearly verbatim rendering of Hedwig Lachmann's German translation of Wilde's *Salomé*. On the other, Wilde's text inspired Strauss' composition of the music for the opera. Strauss' music, like Wilde's language, is cropped, strange, and oftentimes atonal. Wilde's use of repetition and echoes also inspired Strauss, as he made use of musical echoes throughout his score. As a work of modernist music, the opera reflects Wilde's attention to the part over the whole.

Moreover, Wilde's *Salomé* also exhibits proto-postmodernist qualities. Jonathan Freedman discusses the relationship between aestheticism and post-modernism saying, "British aestheticism most accurately anticipates, and is most rewardingly read through the lens of, 'postmodern' theory and practice...the response of the British aestheticists to the ensuing dilemmas recapitulates perfectly, in advance, the ambivalence of postmodernists... there, too, we find the creation of unstable, often parodic, frequently fragmentary works of art".⁷⁰ Here, Freedman highlights ambivalence and fragmentation as qualities of postmodernism, and justifies connecting the aestheticism and postmodernism. As I have shown, Wilde experiments with fragmentation by focusing on the part over the whole, specifically through his use of language. Wilde also uses language to explore ambivalence in *Salomé*, as he eludes meaning and certainty. Wilde's use of language as language detaches his words from signification. Further, he

⁷⁰ Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 76-7.

incorporates and expands Huysmans' paradoxical descriptors of Salomé, crafting a princess that is both victim and victimizer, gazed upon and gazer, chaste and sensual. The combination of these Salomé's leaves ambiguity as the only sure characterization of Wilde's princess. One reason for the varied translations of and scholarship regarding Wilde's play is this ambiguity. Wilde dares critics and translators to pin Salomé down, but warns them that they do so at their own peril.

The issues of translation and interpretation, especially concerning Wilde's ambiguous *Salomé*, often raise questions regarding accuracy.⁷¹ Surveying only the linguistic translations of Wilde's play (as opposed to intertextual translations or media translations), different theories of translation are at work. From Douglas' archaized version of Wilde's text to Donahue's attempt at a contemporary translation, translators apply different methods of translating and in so doing, necessarily alter Wilde's work. Douglas alters Wilde's text by attempting to replicate Wilde's Biblical language, and incorporating King James English. Douglas also adds and removes phrases, abiding by a theory that interpretation and even editing is the proper role of the translator. Donahue alters Wilde's text by attempting to make it more relevant to a 21st century, American audience, relieving us of "Douglas' verbiage and grammatical obtuseness."⁷² Although his goal is to maintain faithfulness to Wilde's text, he admits that he does not try to imitate the foreignness of Wilde's text, saying, "the only 'good' (faithful) translation would be a 'bad' (grammatically) translation."⁷³ Alteration of a source text to some degree is a requirement of translation, because *change* is central to the definition of

⁷¹ For example, Anne M. Daniel, "Lost in Translation: Oscar, Bosie, and 'Salome,'" in *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 68.1-2 (2006): 60-70.

⁷² Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, translated by Joseph Donohue (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), xi.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

translation. However, asking whether or not a translation of Wilde's *Salomé* is "accurate" may not be the most important question to ask. Rather, given the nature of Wilde's play as a translation, and also as a text that is about translating, a more pertinent question is whether or not a translator is investing in the process of translation. Because Wilde attaches little value to signification and privileges language as an end, it matters less if translators accurately convey Wilde's meaning, and more that they convey his *ways* of meaning. Wilde's play is about language, interpretation and translation. In this sense, a translation that is "true" to Wilde's play (itself a translation) is one that, like Wilde, invests in the process of translation as an aesthetic end.

As I have shown, Wilde translates the Bible (a translation that is the most translated text in the world), cultural-historical representations of *Salomé*, literature, poetry, and paintings. His play incorporates multiple source texts and layers of translation, while its focus is entirely devoted to using and experiencing language as an aesthetic end. In sum, it doesn't matter whether Wilde's text is moral or amoral, theistic or atheistic, heterosexual or homosexual. These questions dance around and veil the larger significance of Wilde's play. Rather than asserting meaning, Wilde's play is about language and the artistic experience of the *ways* it means. The array of art that Wilde's *Salomé* has inspired, many of which are not only interpretations but also translations (such as Strauss' opera), makes the case that it is possible, even necessary to translate Wilde's *Salomé*. Wilde forces the reader of the play, whether Anglophone or Francophone, to translate because he writes in neither English nor French, but his own idiolect. The key to an effective translation of Wilde's text, whether linguistically or through media, is an investment in the process—in form over content, and a focus on the

part over the whole. Wilde's *Salomé* still lives for the very reason that she is still asking to be re-embodied in different ways.

Appendix

Salomé :

Iokanaan ! Je suis amoureuse de ton corps. Ton corps est blanc comme le lis d'un pré que le faucheur n'a jamais fauché. Ton corps est blanc comme les neiges qui couchent sur les montagnes, comme les neiges qui couchent sur les montagnes de Judée, et descendent dans les vallées. Les roses du jardin de la reine d'Arabie ne sont pas aussi blanches que ton corps. Ni les roses du jardin de la reine d'Arabie, du jardin parfumé de la reine d'Arabie, ni les pieds de l'aurore qui trépignent sur les feuilles, ni le sein de la lune quand elle couche sur le sein de la mer... Il n'ya rien au monde d'aussi blanc que ton corps. Laisse-moi toucher ton corps !

Iokanaan :

Arrière, fille de Babylone ! C'est par la femme que le mal est entre dans le monde. Ne me parlez pas. Je ne veux pas t'écouter. Je n'écoute que les paroles du Seigneur Dieu.

Salomé :

Ton corps est hideux. Il est comme le corps d'un lépreux. Il est comme un mur de plâtre où les vipères sont passées, comme un mur de plâtre où les scorpions ont fait leur nid. Il est comme un sépulcre blanchi, et qui est plein de choses dégoûtantes. Il est horrible, il est horrible ton corps !...C'est de tes cheveux que je suis amoureuse, Iokanaan. Tes cheveux ressemblent à des grappes de raisins, à des grappes de raisins noirs qui pendent des vignes d'Edom dans le pays des Edomites. Tes cheveux sont comme les cèdres du Liban, comme les grands cèdres du Liban qui donnent de l'ombre aux lions et aux voleurs qui veulent se cacher pendant la journée. Les longues nuits noires, les nuits où la lune ne se montre pas, où les étoiles ont peur, ne sont pas aussi noires. Le silence qui demeure dans les forêts n'est pas aussi noir. Il n'y a rien au monde d'aussi noir que tes cheveux...Laisse-moi toucher tes cheveux.

Iokanaan :

Arrière, fille de Sodome ! Ne me touchez pas. Il ne faut pas profaner le temple du Seigneur Dieu.

Salomé :

Tes cheveux sont horribles. Ils sont couverts de boue et de poussière. On dirait une couronne d'épines qu'on a placée sur ton front. On dirait un nœud de serpents noirs qui se tortillent autour de ton cou. Je n'aime pas tes cheveux...⁷⁴

⁷⁴Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: Drame En Un Acte* (Paris: Limited Editions Club, 1938), 26-28.

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