SYMBOLISM, DECADENCE, AND SEXUALITY
IN STRAUSS’S MUSICAL RENDERING OF WILDE’S SALOME

A Thesis in
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by
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ABSTRACT

In 1901, a decade after Oscar Wilde began writing *Salome*, Anton Lindner sent Richard Strauss a copy of the completed play, and Strauss, so thrilled by what he found there, began sketching what would become one of his most celebrated and most controversial operas. Fully appreciating the dramatic force of Strauss’s work requires relating the musical setting to the aesthetic principles that inspired Wilde’s work. Three themes recur in the body of literary criticism on the play: its relationship to the French Symbolist style, its place in the Decadent Movement, and its complex representation of sexuality. Yet while Wilde scholars have considered these themes exhaustively, Strauss scholars have only hinted at them, despite the wide-ranging research on the opera. In this thesis, I combine the analytical approaches of scholars in the music field with interpretations by literary critics to reveal Strauss’s sensitivity to the nuances of Wilde’s drama. Ultimately, this project seeks to advance our understanding of what remains Strauss’s best-known and most influential work, by considering issues that, for all their relevance to the play, have yet to be dealt with in studies of the opera.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations ............................................................................................................... v

List of Musical Examples ....................................................................................................... vi

Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter One: Strauss and Wilde’s Symbolist Dialogue ......................................................... 8

I. Symbolist Theory and the Function of Symbols .............................................................. 9

II. The Relevance of Other Symbolist Methods ............................................................... 12

III. Structural Symbols in Wilde’s Work and the Impact on Form .................................... 17

IV. Strauss’s Musical Rendering of Wilde’s Symbolism ....................................................... 21

Chapter Two: Differing Views of Decadent Morality ......................................................... 35

I. Symbolism Yielding to Decadence .................................................................................. 36

II. Decadent Eroticism and the Decadent Duality ............................................................ 41

III. Failed Decadents and the Tragedy of Salome .............................................................. 43

IV. Strauss’s Musical Commentary on Decadence ............................................................... 45

Chapter Three: Treating Sexuality: Mere Perversion or Full Transgression? ............... 58

I. Salome as *Femme Fatale* ............................................................................................... 59

II. Decadence and Homosexuality ..................................................................................... 63

III. *Salome* and the Transgressive Aesthetic .................................................................. 65

IV. Strauss’s Sensitivity to the Sexual Complexity in Wilde’s Work ............................... 69

Appendix: Images for Wilde’s *Salome* by Aubrey Beardsley ....................................... 79

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................... 82
ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1  Aubrey Beardsley, *The Woman in the Moon*..........................................................79

Figure 2  Aubrey Beardsley, *A Platonic Lament*.................................................................80

Figure 3  Aubrey Beardsley, *The Dancer’s Reward*............................................................81
MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Example 1.1 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, mm. 1-8 (Vocal Score)..........................22

Example 1.2 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, eight mm. after rehearsal 354 [or 354/8] to 359/3 (Vocal Score).................................................................24

Example 1.3 “Den Kopf des Jokanaan” motive; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 153/5 to 154/2, First Horn (Full Score).................................27

Example 2.1 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 91/6 to 93/10 (Vocal Score)..................47

Example 2.2 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 358/5 to 361/1 (Vocal Score)..............50

Example 2.3 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 268/5 to 269/4 (Vocal Score).............51

Example 2.4 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 286/3 to 288/1 (Vocal Score).............52

Example 2.5 Salome’s first leitmotif; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, opening, mm. 1-4, Clarinet (Full Score).................................55

Example 2.6 “Waltz” motive; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 24, mm. 1-7 (Vocal Score).................................................................56

Example 3.1 Variation of Salome’s first leitmotif; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 83, mm. 4-7, Violin Solo (Full Score)....................71

Example 3.2 “Ich will deinen Mund küssen” motive; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 122, mm. 10-13, Salome (Full Score)....................73

Example 3.3a Jokanaan’s original leitmotif; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 66, mm. 1-4, First Horn (Full Score)..................74

Example 3.3b Salome’s Variation of Jokanaan’s leitmotif; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 90/3 to 91/4, First Violin (Full Score)......................74
INTRODUCTION

[Opera’s] genius lies in the potentiality for an enriching contradiction between its elements. Rather than a sedate marriage between text and music, it proposes a relationship of unremitting, invigorating tension.

– Peter Conrad

Most scholarly discussions of Richard Strauss’s *Salome* (1905) generally assume Conrad’s premise that musical and textual meaning do not have to – indeed, often do not – coincide in the operatic genre. Much of the academic writing on the opera thus disregards the prevailing debates in literary circles of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (1891), from which Strauss fashioned a libretto. While many music scholars ignore the structural thematic elements of Wilde’s work altogether, the few who mention these issues often claim, too hastily, that Strauss’s setting dismisses these literary aspects.

Yet, these scholars must agree that an opera cannot succeed if a complete disjunction exists between the music and text. Even Conrad’s study of opera and literature has this assumption at its core: with the exception of *Salome*, the works he chooses are ones that undeniably demonstrate a general union between music and text, thus allowing Conrad to point out the variance. Indeed, I would argue that the tension between text and music in an effective opera seems “invigorating” precisely because a resolution to this conflict exists on some level.

The success of Strauss’s *Salome* is not a matter of debate. Indeed, the opera enjoys far more performances today than the play. Even contemporary audiences favored

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*Salome*, as the royalties from that opera alone furnished the funds for Strauss’s villa in Garmisch,² while the critical acclaim established his name as a distinguished opera composer. Though the scandal it created certainly must have added to its appeal for the public, many of Strauss’s contemporaries celebrated the opera (notwithstanding those disgusted by the subject matter or the disgrace surrounding Wilde, such as Romain Rolland who famously wrote to the composer, “Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* was not worthy of you.”³). Most notably, Gustav Mahler declared to Strauss, “I confess that it is only through your music that Wilde’s work has become comprehensible to me.”⁴

Compared to the other operas Conrad discusses, however, *Salome* poses numerous problems that inhibit scholars and audiences alike from recognizing the inherent concurrence between text and music. The play itself is an anomaly in the oeuvre of a renowned playwright in terms of subject matter, stylistic treatment, and even original language of composition (Wilde wrote it in French, not English). Consequently, few literary critics have discussed the work: only one book-length study of *Salome* exists, which addresses some of its structural themes but presents little analysis, focusing mostly on reception and performance history instead. Additionally, because of its abstract style and complex elements, the literary critics that have offered readings of the play often disagree in their interpretations, so no clear statement outlining the purpose and meaning of Wilde’s work can be made. Finally, due to the text’s ambiguity and nuances, which mask the play’s intrinsic themes, the text and music do seem incongruent on the surface: one critic, for instance, referred to the component parts of the opera as “the brutal music

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and the delicate text.” But ultimately, Strauss’s opera succeeds because it engages with many of the underlying ideas that add depth and coherence to the play.

In the body of literature on Wilde’s Salome three important themes recur: its adaptation of the French Symbolist style, its representation of Decadent aesthetics, and its depiction of perverted or transgressive sexuality. Yet the play poses a challenge to literary critics precisely because Wilde uses each of these three elements – Symbolism, Decadence, and sexuality – in a complex, layered manner. Wilde’s work features the surface-level hallmarks of the Symbolist style – textual repetition, extended metaphors, and limited action – while also engaging with the deeper philosophical roots of Symbolism that aim for dramatic unity and, more importantly, seek to uncover a universal spiritual meaning. At the same time, due to the subject and Wilde’s treatment of it, Salome stands as one of the author’s most Decadent works not only because of the obviously Decadent language but also because the play manifests abstract Decadent qualities by presenting a commentary on conventional morality and redefining notions of individuality. Even the sexuality depicted in Wilde’s play eludes a single clear interpretation for it reflects not only the perversion of a femme fatale but also suggests homosexual transgression.

In addition to the prominence of these three themes in scholarly discussions of Wilde’s work, their relevance to the playwright’s historical context reinforces their importance for an effective reading of Salome. Many scholars describe Wilde as an avid Francophile, and Salome features several French qualities. The subject itself was treated by numerous French writers before Wilde approached it, and countless critics point out

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the impact of these works on Wilde’s play; one reviewer from 1893, criticizing the author’s reliance on pre-existing literature, wrote,

If Flaubert had not written *Salammbô*, if Flaubert had not written *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* – above all, if Flaubert had not written *Hérodias, Salome* might boast an originality to which she cannot now lay claim.⁶

Recent criticism, however, has done much to eradicate the image of derivativeness surrounding Wilde’s work, though even modern reviewers cannot deny the obvious French influence. Considering Wilde’s interest in and knowledge of French literature, moreover, it is unsurprising that his play engages with the Symbolist and Decadent styles. Furthermore, Wilde’s roots as a student of Walter Pater at Oxford and his active participation in a Dandy lifestyle make him an obvious advocate for the Decadent mentality. The unique conception of Individuality that Wilde formed as a result of his Decadent beliefs relates directly to his personal acts of sexual transgression and the transgression apparent in his works.⁷ Additionally, the homosexual associations of Decadent artists, revealed most brutally for Wilde in the trials of 1895, directly affected Wilde’s own life and, consequently, his writing. Indeed, countless scholars have remarked on the author’s various comments that would suggest that *Salome* was among his most personal compositions.

Particularly striking is how little interest music scholars have taken in the prevailing discussions and interpretations of Wilde, his works at large, and this play in particular. Most recently, Bryan Gilliam offered a brief comparison of Wilde and Strauss’s differing views of religion in a larger essay on sexuality and eroticism in

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Strauss operas in *The Cambridge Companion to Strauss*, that ignored the complex and factionalized discussions of sexuality surrounding Wilde’s *Salome* (sexuality being one of the most prominent topics in Wilde scholarship at large) and avoided the important themes in the play, which is by no means a clear promotion of Christianity.\(^8\) Indeed, musicologists seem to underestimate Strauss’s own comprehension of the play by ignoring these important aspects of the dramatic work that, as I will argue, directly influence the musical setting itself.

A thorough study of the Symbolist, Decadent, and sexual aspects of Strauss’s source would allow music scholars to understand the dramatic force of the text and thus further explore the complexity of the musical setting that resulted from its engagement with the rich themes in Wilde’s work. This type of study would not only assist musicians in their appreciation of Strauss’s composition but would also allow music researchers to address conflicting issues that pervade Strauss’s score. Currently, the few detailed analyses by musicologists and theorists alike focus almost exclusively on the last scene of the opera, particularly on Salome’s final monologue. The notable exceptions, by Tethys Carpenter and Derrick Puffett, both consider larger structures in the opera as a whole,\(^9\) yet this work could be augmented by a discussion of the relationship between Strauss’s use of form and leitmotifs in *Salome* and the themes and structures of the literary source. Even the remarkable interpretations of the final monologue itself, such as the analysis

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\(^8\) Bryan Gilliam, “Strauss and the Sexual Body: The Erotics of Humor, Philosophy, and Ego-assertion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Strauss*, ed. Charles Youmans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 276. Even Gilliam’s discussion of Wilde’s religious views oversimplifies this difficult topic. Wilde seemed to favor Christ not as an advocate of the religion but as a representative of the type of Individuality that Wilde constructed and in which he believed.

done by Craig Ayery,\textsuperscript{10} would only benefit from a contextualization of the final monologue within the progress of the play, thus demonstrating how Strauss’s setting further emphasizes the dramatic tension inherent in Wilde’s work. Alex Ross’s recurring commentary on the bitonal opening of the opera and its other forward-looking qualities\textsuperscript{11} as well as Gilliam’s observation that Strauss used contrasting musical language in \textit{Salome} and \textit{Der Rosenkavalier} to capture the dramatic differences between the two\textsuperscript{12} both avoid the question as to why Strauss chose a dissonant idiom for \textit{Salome}; ultimately the answer lies in Wilde’s play. Carolyn Abbate and Lawrence Kramer come the closest to integrative studies of the opera,\textsuperscript{13} yet neither author presents an argument that takes a clear stance vis-à-vis the prevailing literary discussions, and both rely on superficial musical analyses that lack rigor. The countless remaining scholars that either address \textit{Salome} briefly in their works or discuss the reception and performance history of the opera again either disregard the literary criticism and its relationship to Strauss’s music or dismiss it without looking deeply into the underlying processes at work in Wilde’s play.

Ironically, a literary critic has done more work towards an interdisciplinary study of the opera than any musicologist. Petra Dierkes-Thrun emphasizes this gap in Strauss scholarship when she writes,

\begin{quote}
The familiar view of Strauss’s music drama, established through decades of scholarship and commentary, is that his revolutionary modernist score,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12}Gilliam, \textit{Life of Strauss}, 88-9.
with its spectacular orchestral effects and jarring bitonality, fails as an artistically sensitive adaptation of Wilde’s 1891 symbolist-decadent tragedy.¹⁴

Yet Dierkes-Thrun’s goal in pointing out this disparity is to encourage scholars in both fields to reconsider the way they view modernism and its relationship to the Symbolist-Decadent movements that directly preceded it. Coming from the literary standpoint, however, Dierkes-Thrun focuses more on contemporary criticism and reception of the opera and only offers a cursory analysis of musical texture and orchestration.

Taking on Dierkes-Thrun’s challenge, I present an analysis of Strauss’s opera based exclusively on the relationship between the music and the textual devices at work in Wilde’s play. Each chapter is devoted to one of the three thematic elements mentioned above and begins with a summary of the relevant discussion of how this element operates in the play. Musical analysis of various sections of the opera follows, with the correlations between the textual devices and the musical structures clearly explained. The first chapter focuses on harmonic usage and formal design in the opera, relying heavily on the work done by Carpenter and Ayery. The second addresses chromaticism, orchestration, and some precursory leitmotivic analysis. The final chapter presents a deeper look at the use of leitmotifs, addressing some issues raised by Puffett, with some final thoughts on Strauss’s choice of musical language for his setting of Salome.

CHAPTER ONE
STRAUSS AND WILDE’S SYMBOLIST DIALOGUE

Wilde’s contemporaries viewed *Salome* as engaging with the Symbolist Movement, although they differed on whether this influence had a positive effect. What English critics pejoratively called derivative pastiche, notable French writers including Stéphane Mallarmé and Maurice Maeterlinck praised emphatically for its effective characterization.¹ Literary critic Joseph Donohue observes that Wilde had cast his English audience and reviewers out of their element with *Salome*, largely due to its Symbolist qualities, causing many to denounce the Symbolist aspect of the work and complain that the play had been influenced by the French literary movement.² Yet those familiar with the idiom understood that Wilde had done more than merely imitate Maeterlinck’s dramas. Indeed, Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats, who experimented with Symbolism in his own works, greatly admired Wilde’s adaptation of Symbolist techniques in his treatment of the popular Biblical narrative.³

Strauss’s musical interpretation of the play, however, often has evoked negative or guarded responses to its engagement with the Symbolist aesthetic of Wilde’s play, generally because music scholars view Symbolism literally and ignore its theoretical foundations. Yet a study of the opera in terms of the philosophical context of Symbolism

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¹ Petra Dierkes-Thrun, “‘The Brutal Music and the Delicate Text?’,” 374.
demonstrates that Strauss did in fact provide a musical response to the Symbolist aspects of Wilde’s work.

I. Symbolist Theory and the Function of Symbols

The theoretical basis of Symbolism provides the justification for the movement’s characteristic abstract features. In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, nineteenth-century English poet and critic Arthur Symons argues that every word, since the origin of language, serves as a symbol to express an idea. Similarly, the literary Symbolism of the late nineteenth century functions as

a form of expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness. It is sometimes permitted to us to hope that our convention is indeed the reflection rather than merely the sign of that unseen reality.

For Symons, the distinguishing feature of Symbolist writers was the self-consciousness, the self-awareness of this symbolic purpose in their works. According to literary critic Noreen Doody, Symbolists poets, novelists, and dramatists, rejecting the materialism of nineteenth-century European culture, actively sought to capture “knowledge beyond the everyday concerns of life,” through the use of symbols, “evok[ing] a sense of mystery in juxtaposing finite images with infinite apprehensions.” Symons finds that this endeavor produced “a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream.” Ultimately, this attempt to realize a deeper meaning in art lies

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5 Ibid., 1-2.
6 Ibid., 3.
7 Doody, “An Influential Involvement,” 49.
at the heart of the Symbolist endeavor. Literary critic Anne Varty identifies the Symbolist “creed,” established by Baudelaire and promoted by Mallarmé, which focused on the belief that “spiritual forces” control individual existence. Thus, artists aimed to attain a “higher plane of spiritual awareness” in their work.  

Similarly, Donohue claims that “to be a symbolist is to throw artistic and social caution to the wind under the pressure of a radical impulse to identify and reify the underlying unities of the world,” in short to represent the unseen Infinite.

In order to achieve this goal of understanding and depicting the world on a spiritual level, Symbolist artists employed symbols in a specific, though abstract, way so as to emphasize more greatly this essential theme. Varty explains this philosophical view with a concrete example:

> Whenever a character points to something seen, often using simile or metaphor to extend the range of literal vision in keeping with the symbolist enterprise of the piece, we see into the character’s mind, while the object ostensibly identified is in fact obscured by the subjectivity of vision.

Thus, in Symbolist pieces, abstract depictions carry the double function of mystifying the literal actions occurring in the narrative while also suggesting the deeper, fundamental purpose of the work as a whole. Theater arts scholar Karl Toepfer, however, offers a contrasting explanation as to why the Symbolist style exhibits, indeed strives for abstraction. Using Maeterlinck’s philosophical conception of symbols as an unconscious construction, Toepfer concludes that although the conscious mind can understand symbols, it cannot grasp “the system of perceptual relations which constitutes

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symbolization itself.” As a result, Symbolist “representations” must be mystical, enigmatic, and removed from “‘recognizable’ reality.” At the same time, Toepfer observes that Wilde does not limit his use of metaphor and symbolism in *Salome* to constructing the “unseen reality,” for in his extravagant – even decadent – use of metaphors in Salome’s description of Jokanaan and Herod’s enumeration of his treasures, while the metaphors do on one level illuminate the unseen, they ultimately fail to truly capture the central passions: “Metaphor in this context does not really reveal a reality which appearance represses; metaphor is itself a symptom of repression, an imprisoning of reality and desire within images and sensations.” Toepfer explains that in these two instances of decadent metaphorical usage, the speakers seek to allure the on-stage (and also off-stage) listeners; hence, metaphors do not function as vehicles to reveal the unseen, but merely as modes of seduction, the significance of which both textually and musically will be elaborated on in the subsequent chapters. Consequently, Toepfer determines that these passages demonstrate that no matter how much it may expand our power to ‘see’ an ‘invisible’ reality behind the world of appearances, metaphor nevertheless has less to do with defining what we may consider the *naked condition* of reality than the language of abstraction and theoretical generalization. [emphasis in original]

13 Ibid., 48.
14 Ibid., 102.
15 Ibid., 101.
16 Ibid., 102.
In one sense, then, Wilde turns symbolism against its Symbolist function in these two passages, thereby highlighting the importance of other Symbolist textual and thematic strategies to draw out the “invisible,” “Infinite,” “unseen” reality.  

II. The Relevance of Other Symbolist Methods

Symbolism grew, in part, out of Wagner’s notion of Gesamtkunstwerk, the idea of total theatre, and consequently, Symbolist dramatists developed the distinctive mysterious quality through the use of other devices in addition to actual symbols. Playwrights employing the Symbolist style sought to coordinate even the extra-textual aspects of drama, including staging, lighting, and costume design, with the goal of creating a completely cohesive work. In terms of the text, Symbolist writers considered the sound of the words themselves as a musical composition; thus many literary critics identify the constantly repeated words or phrases as “leitmotifs” in the textual/musical fabric. Toepfer examines the various types of repetition in Salome and concludes that, rather than reproducing the original meaning of the text in its first statement, repetition actually “ambiguates identities insofar as repeated words and phrases cannot mean exactly the same thing in different contexts or time parameters,” the same conclusion  

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17 Rodney Shewan constructs an argument around the idea that to Wilde, particularly in Salome, “the real mystery of the world is not the invisible but the visible (120).” The idea that the inversion of Symbolism is fundamental to Wilde’s treatment of the literary style is an equally valid method of interpreting Salome, which is confirmed by the portion of Toepfer’s argument just quoted and which Donohue hints at in “Salome and the Wildean Art of Symbolist Theatre.” In either case, a Symbolist Duality exists, but the emphasis is switched from a commentary on the “invisible” to a commentary on the “visible.” As we shall see, Strauss’s setting engages the Symbolist duality but musically offers no definitive view as to which of these (the invisible or visible) is the basic core that the drama seeks to draw out because of Strauss’s inversion of the traditional relationship between diatonicism and chromaticism. See Rodney Shewan, “The Artist and the Dancer in Three Symbolist Salomés,” Bucknell Review: A Scholarly Journal of Letters, Arts, and Sciences 30, no. 1 (1986): 120-8.

18 Ibid., 64.
music scholars form regarding Wagnerian or Wagnerian-inspired leitmotifs. Throughout
his discussion of this structural element, Toepfer emphasizes the idea that repetition,
because of its inability to ever be truly exact, undermines certainty in the play, hence
contributing to the mystical atmosphere so representative of Symbolist works.¹⁹

Wilde scholar Katherine Worth reinforces this point when she writes that the
“characters [in Salome] seem compelled to use the same words, move in certain
directions, enact rituals they hardly understand – always in a scenic context alive with
enigmatic ‘meanings.’”²⁰ Moreover, for Worth, as for Toepfer, repetition is just one
literary device that Wilde and the Symbolist writers employ to evoke mystery in their
works. Worth describes the other methods that act in conjunction with repetitive language
to create this effect in Salome:

Wilde evidently drew hints from this strange language, as from the
complex scenic scheme in which the landscape has a voice and changes of
sound or colour presage the catastrophes of the human drama.²¹

The unity of dramatic setting and action that Worth describes not only adheres to the
Symbolist paradigm of total drama but is also evident in Wilde’s own conception of the
play. In addition to the shifting changes in the landscape, notably the changing colors of
the moon, which influence and also reflect the speech and actions of the characters,
Wilde made plans for the costume design of the drama that required differing groups of
characters to wear contrasting colors. Charles Ricketts, an artist who Wilde had asked to
sketch a stage plan for the 1892 production that never staged, later recalls Wilde’s color
scheme for the costumes in which the Jews were to wear yellow, the Romans purple, the
soldiers bronze green, and Jokanaan white. For Salome, Wilde suggested “green like a

¹⁹ For the full discussion of repetition in Salome, see Toepfer, The Voice of Rapture, 64-92.
²¹ Ibid., 57-8.
curious poisonous lizard.” According to another account, the previous list of costume colors included having Herod and Herodias in blood-red, while still another claims that Wilde wanted all the stage performers to wear different shades of yellow. Notwithstanding the conflicting intentions, the careful reflections on color in the staging and costume design indicate the significance of the color symbolism to Wilde himself. Varty offers further explanation for this emphasis:

For Salome, the use of colour was more than picturesque, symbolic or symbolist. It would also help the audience to identify the different factions within the play and to link them to the successive colour changes of the moon.

The importance of color in the play, then, engages with the dual function of symbols as used by Symbolists both to obfuscate the visible and evoke the unseen by providing an enigmatic screen that overlays the actions.

When considering the other techniques Wilde employs that make Salome a Symbolist work, one cannot ignore the considerable influence of Maeterlinck on this drama. The resemblance between Salome and several of Maeterlinck’s plays is not coincidental: Worth details Wilde’s love of Maeterlinck’s works, to the point that during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol in 1895, when he was allowed to request literature from friends, Wilde asked for the complete works of Maeterlinck. Worth observes that both Salome and Maeterlinck’s La Princesse Maleine center around a young female protagonist whose sexual passion, aroused during the course of the work, leads to her

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23 Varty, A Preface to Oscar Wilde, 142-3.
24 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 65.
25 It should be recalled that the play was never produced during Wilde’s life, though various plans, both with and without Wilde, had been made.
26 Varty, A Preface to Oscar Wilde, 143.
27 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 54.
ultimate death.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, Wilde’s prose owes much of its clear participation in Symbolist discourse through specific treatment of language to the work of Maeterlinck. According to Worth, the idea of musical prose, the importance of the textual rhythm, and the incessant repetition are all precedents established in Maeterlinck’s work.\textsuperscript{29} In particular, Worth maintains, Jokanaan’s speech style indicates a Maeterlinckian influence most strongly, as he “has only one tone of voice, an organ note always thundering. ... His monotone becomes a Maeterlinckian device for creating a feeling of doom.”\textsuperscript{30} On the other hand, Varty argues that Wilde “eschews altogether the ‘monotone’ of Maeterlinckian theatre” in his treatment of Herod’s speech style, which has “distracted urgency” before Salome agrees to dance and later becomes “leisurely” while he attempts to divert Salome’s desires.\textsuperscript{31} Taking both authors’ readings into consideration, it appears that Wilde does not merely imitate Maeterlinck’s Symbolist style but rather adapts its hallmarks to further his characterization in \textit{Salome}.

Along with the textual influences, precedents established by Maeterlinck affect Wilde’s work on the rhetorical level. Varty notes that Wilde uses a “second degree dialogue” in \textit{Salome}, a device initiated by Maeterlinck whereby “characters use language not to refer to events, or to propel events around them, but with which they themselves muse on the cosmic forces operating on them.”\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{Salome}, little of the dialogue actually propels dramatic action; for the most part, the characters comment on the supernatural forces, primarily the moon and their various religious superstitions. Consider the opening of the opera, for instance. Narraboth and Herodias’s Page have a conversation (if it can

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 54-5.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{31} Varty, \textit{A Preface to Oscar Wilde}, 147-8.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 140.
be really called that as they do not actually respond to each other’s statements) that consists of each describing what they see around them: for Narraboth, Salome and for the Page, the moon and Narraboth. Neither character commits to action throughout this opening; instead they address the forces around them, which ultimately will dictate both of their fates. Varty also discusses the manipulation of dramatic irony in both Maeterlinck’s and Wilde’s works, since the audience does not know more than the characters do. Instead, the characters exist introspectively, as demonstrated by their distinct comments on the common surroundings (such as, for instance, the moon), making “knowledge a matter of perspective so that each character is both the agent and the victim of dramatic irony, and the audience is the recipient of collective knowing and unknowing.”33 This internalization relates directly to the theme of “humanity as victim,” which Varty argues as being central to many of Maeterlinck’s dramas as well as Wilde’s Salome, though the two authors represent the theme in contrasting ways. According to Varty, Maeterlinck’s works function as “drama[s] of stasis,” “theatre[s] of inaction,” resulting in a “meditative effect [that] convey[s] a sense of the futility of human volition in the sphere of action.”34 Wilde, however, succeeds in depicting the uncontrollable nature of the human condition by including critical moments of action – the Dance and Salome’s subsequent demand for Jokanaan’s head – which lead to the tragic conclusion.

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33 Ibid., 141.
34 Ibid., 140.
III. Structural Symbols in Wilde’s Work and the Impact on Form

Though Wilde’s play employs various structural symbols that embody the Symbolist duality of obscuring reality and illuminating the invisible, the moon functions the most ubiquitously for it directs other symbols. Herodias’s Page introduces the moon to the audience’s line of sight immediately after Narraboth comments on the off-stage Salome, thus setting up a connection between these two “characters.” Yet the moon has essential symbolic functions throughout the drama; in the most literal interpretation, it symbolizes the Princess in her various states throughout the narrative, either displaying her actions at the moment or foreshadowing her mental states yet to come, as in the opening dialogue. The obvious relationship between Salome and the moon reveals crucial information about both. According to Varty, Salome herself embodies a wide range of human emotions, and throughout the play different characters associate the moon with these same qualities. Furthermore, Toepfer’s observation that metaphors relating a human being with an object in nature create “the perception of a particular identity as a powerful disturbance of nature” offers added significance to the correspondence between Salome and the moon. Toepfer cites numerous examples of various characters (including, but not limited to Salome) engaging with or metaphorically related to “some non-human manifestation of nature,” and argues that these metaphors “dramatize the cumulative and pervasive disturbance of perception generated by ‘unnatural’ objects whose identities are not entirely human.” This conclusion can be best applied to the

35 By structural symbols, I mean those that recur consistently throughout the text, leading the dramatic action (or inaction, as it were), as opposed to the strings of symbolic metaphors Toepfer cites in his discussion of “metaphorical language function[ing] as a satire or critique of itself (102).” See Toepfer, The Voice of Rapture, 97-102.
37 Toepfer, The Voice of Rapture, 94.
38 Ibid., 95.
relationship between Salome and the moon. In discussing the moon imagery specifically, Toepfer argues that not only do these metaphors indicate a natural disturbance caused by the related human (in this case, Salome), but they also indicate the “unstable condition of the speakers’ perceptions.” Thus while the moon has a critical relation to Salome, it also offers substantial insight into the other characters that address it.

This more sensitive analysis explores the moon’s association with other key characters in the play, thus making its role as a structural symbol more apparent. Varty describes the moon as functioning both as the “agent of events” and a “mirror to reflect the portentous apprehensions of the characters.” In keeping with this broader view, Worth notes in a passing parenthetical comment that the moon serves as the vehicle “by which they [the characters] all define themselves,” supporting the claim that the moon reflects more than just Salome’s internal state. For Worth, then, one of the defining moments in the play, which centers so strongly on characters looking at each other, occurs when Herod turns his gaze inwards, observing that people should only look at mirrors, “for mirrors do but show us masks.” Combining the views of these scholars, one can read the moon as a mirror that unmasks all of the characters. Indeed, the characters’ interactions with the moon do much to portray the different personalities in Wilde’s play. The Page’s his opening comment about the moon already contains his characteristic superstition. Narraboth’s first observation of the moon demonstrates the wide difference between the two individuals, for Narraboth only sees a beautiful, young woman in the moon, representative of his obsession. Salome initially describes the moon

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39 Ibid., 96.  
40 Varty, A Preface to Oscar Wilde, 143.  
41 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 61.  
42 Ibid., 62.
as a chaste virgin, which Wilde scholars generally deem as an insight into Salome’s original conception of herself. Although Salome does not comment further on the moon as the play progresses, the moon notably changes with Salome in her growth from an innocent, pure girl to a sexually aroused and lustful woman. Even Herod’s comment on the moon reflects his inner state, as Worth observes: to him the moon “reels through the clouds like a drunken woman” who is “[surely] looking for lovers.” At the same time, Herod finds the moon to be “quite naked,” corresponding to his own imminent personal exposure that will result from his failure to persuade Salome to request anything but Jokanaan’s head. Herodias, of course, sees the moon as nothing but itself. Subsequently, to Worth, Herodias is “perfectly at home in the mundane world” where Herod, and no doubt Salome and Jokanaan, are so “restless;” thus Herodias is the only character unable and also unwilling to engage with the play’s Symbolic spirituality.

In addition to functioning as a mirror, the moon contextualizes the dramatic actions by leading the color symbolism of the play in its shift from white to red to black. As Doody observes, the moon’s role in controlling the light/color changes and setting the changes in scenic backdrop, while also being treated like a character in the play, advances the Symbolist enterprise for total theatre by creating “an interplay of lighting, scenery and language.” Although the play as a whole is divided into three large sections corresponding to the color changes of the moon, this color symbolism also operates on a microcosmic level. In the first section, the white moon oversees Salome imploring Jokanaan to respond to her charms; Worth notes that “like the moon ... Salomé must go

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43 Ibid., 61.
44 In Worth’s words: “It is a moment of bitter self-consciousness that Salomé’s horrific demand forces from him.” See Worth, *Oscar Wilde*, 62.
46 Doody, “An Influential Involvement,” 52.
through three phases: white, red and black.” 47 The red moon of the next section supervises most of the blood imagery in the play, from Herod’s superstitions about walking in blood to the appearance of “bloodstains” (rose petals) on a table. 48

Significantly, this “menstruous” moon (to use Helen Tookey’s term 49) illuminates Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils. With the red moonlight shining down on him, Herod tries to divert Salome’s true desire. His failure results in the emergence of Jokanaan’s head, which Worth describes as a “surrealist composition” for it too contains the three symbolic colors. From this point forward, Worth claims, “We are in the depths of the mind, experiencing a Dionysiac vision.” 50 The play culminates with Salome’s final monologue, itself an act of introspection. In keeping with Worth’s view of the play’s finale, Varty interprets the final monologue as the “ultimate form of duologue within the play” because it is a “dialogue between self and soul, between lover and beloved, between Salome and her mirror, Jokanaan.” 51 After this climactic self-reflection, Herod calls for darkness and the black moon reigns over the conclusion: in darkness, Salome succeeds in kissing Jokanaan. Worth considers this moment “a last spectacular piece of symbolism,” recalling the unity of text, action, and staging. 52

47 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 59.
48 According to Worth, the red moon ascends at the point where Jokanaan re-enters the cistern, though textually Herod makes the first indication of the red moon just before Salome dances. For analytical purposes, I will use Worth’s interpretation. See Worth, Oscar Wilde, 60.
49 For a sexual interpretation of the moon and blood imagery in Wilde’s Salome, see Helen Tookey, “‘The Fiend that Smites with a Look:’ The Monstrous/Menstruous Woman and the Danger of the Gaze in Oscar Wilde’s Salomé,” Literature and Theology 18, no. 1 (2004): 23-37.
50 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 69.
51 Varty, A Preface to Oscar Wilde, 148.
52 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 70.
IV. Strauss’s Musical Rendering of Wilde’s Symbolism

Throughout the opera, Strauss responds to the duality inherent in Symbolism, the structural symbols, and Symbolist language. From the beginning, Strauss captures the mysticism and abstraction characteristic of Wilde’s work and the Symbolist style. The clarinet scalar run that opens the piece creates aural ambiguity, as it does not adhere to traditional scalar or modal patterns (see Example 1.1). The motive comprises two major tetrachords (G-sharp and D) separated by a half step. When the other parts enter, they provide the C-sharp tonic chord, making the preceding scale even more confusing in retrospect as it neither outlines a dominant scale (G-sharp) nor confines itself to a diatonic C-sharp collection. As the work progresses, this opening scalar passage gains significance, however, for the first tetrachord (starting on G-sharp) is the dominant tetrachord of C-sharp, a key structural to the opera’s framework for its strong associations with Salome, and the second tetrachord similarly implies G, creating what Ross calls a “C-sharp – G polarity … confirmed by the arrival of a G dominant seventh” later in the progression.53 This “scale” and the subsequent harmonies suggest a sense of bitonality that is not only fundamental to the opera as a whole (which moves sometimes jarringly between distant keys and frequently lacks a single, clear tonal center) but also heightens the feeling of the supernatural evoked by this opening.

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53 Alex Ross, “Strauss’s Place in the Twentieth Century,” 198.

Strauss intensifies the lack of clarity by writing a nonfunctional chord succession with no real cadence, after establishing a C-sharp minor tonic in m. 2. Example 1.1 shows a piano reduction of mm. 1-8 of the opera, with chord analysis underneath. For mm. 1-4, the chords are analyzed as part of a C-sharp minor tonic. Starting in m. 5, however, the harmonies become arbitrary with chromatic motion away from the unresolved C-sharp major-minor seventh chord.\textsuperscript{55} As the music continues (past the example), the G major-minor seventh chord also does not resolve but moves through a passing chord; the Page’s music begins in B minor after a similar non-functional succession. As the analysis

\textsuperscript{54} All excerpts from the *Salome* vocal score come from this particular version and edition.

\textsuperscript{55} After this point, the chords are labeled by note name and quality because they are not functional. “PC” stands for “passing chord” as this chord fails conventional designation and is merely used for creating atmospheric color while continuing the chromatic line in the flutes and violins.
demonstrates, mm. 2-4 could be interpreted as a prolongation of the C-sharp tonic, but
the subsequent arbitrary chords emphasize the point that this opening seeks to create an
atmosphere of abstraction through its tonally ambiguous use of harmony. Most of the
passages in Salome operate in this non-functional way, punctuated by important
functional moments comparable to the tonic C-sharp minor chord in m. 2. By placing
clearly tonal moments alongside wandering harmonies, Strauss offers a musical version
of the “juxtaposition of finite images with infinite apprehensions.” A related instance
comes at the end of the opera when Salome kisses Jokanaan’s mouth (see Example 1.2). The orchestra prepares this tense moment by repeated alternation of a unison A (the
melodic line containing E and B seems disjoint from the A; at one point the unison A is
harmonized, see 357/4 of Example 1.2) with what Ayery identifies as a C-sharp minor,
(altered) F-sharp major polychord, with the C-sharp in the bass. Over Salome’s text
“Allein was tut’s,” a non-functional harmonic succession begins that includes several
bitonal harmonies. In contrast, the next section starting at rehearsal 359 features
functional tonality, reinforcing the concurrent usage of straightforward tonal function and
ambiguous harmonies. C-sharp major is clearly established through the bass motion by
fifth, although the preceding polychord should not lead directly to C-sharp.

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56 Though, because of the nontraditional relationship between tonality and nonfunctional harmony throughout Salome whereby diatonic gestures seem to standout and chromaticism becomes the norm, Strauss presents no definitive interpretation as to whether the finite, visible images or the infinite, invisible apprehensions lie at the foundation of the work’s purpose, returning to the point made earlier that Wilde, in some interpretations, inverted the theoretical basis of Symbolist philosophy.
57 It should be observed that the piano reduction used in the example excludes some of the pitches in the full score. The analysis is based on the full score, which is why it may seem incongruent with the example.
58 Craig Ayery, “Salome’s Final Monologue,” 122.
59 Note that the tuba has the bass pitch (C-sharp), not in the vocal score: the tonic chord is in root position, not second inversion.
60 Ayery applies Symbolism literally so his analysis considers the symbolic meaning of keys. In general, his conclusions about the final monologue can be understood as manifestations of the Symbolist duality.
Example 1.2 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, eight mm. after rehearsal 354 [or 354/8] to 359/3 (Vocal Score)
Example 1.2 continued
In addition to capturing the philosophical premise of Symbolism, Strauss engages with the structural color associations which guide the formal organization of Wilde’s work. The first color change of the moon corresponds to the musical interlude that precedes Scene Four.\textsuperscript{61} The bulk of the interlude functions as a musical distillation of the dialogue that has just taken place between Salome and Jokanaan, as most of the musical material for this passage comes from motives associated with Salome, Jokanaan, or their actions, and the music moves through the associative keys of both. As in the previous scene, the motives of the two characters interrupt and ignore each other over the course of the interlude, musically representing the two disparate personalities. Notably, the passage begins and ends in Salome’s most representative key, C-sharp minor (not counting the section starting at 152/12); additionally, Salome’s motives are the last heard: a solo cello plays her characteristic third figure at rehearsal 150, and the contrabassoon picks up and varies her defining motive from the beginning of the opera at 151/6. Thus, like the previous scene, the interlude opens and closes with Salome, though Jokanaan features prominently in the core of the passage. The difference lies at the end of the interlude, following the contrabassoon solo. The texture thins significantly, with the violas playing a tremolo as the sole accompaniment: the tension created foreshadows the same effect that occurs at the end of the opera, just before Salome kisses the decapitated Jokanaan. The Salome motives and their variants move through the winds until suddenly the brass cuts through the texture with the motive of Example 1.3. In this precise moment, the

\textsuperscript{61} It is worth noting that the only other musical interlude of this kind in the opera accompanies Jokanaan’s emergence from the cistern, a fundamentally important moment in the entire drama. That Strauss assigned a similar musical significance to this scene change and allows for musical reflection on what has just transpired between Jokanaan and Salome and, perhaps more significantly, within Salome herself, illustrates his recognition of the structural importance of this moment in the dramatic action. I doubt that the interlude to Scene 4 coincidentally accompanies the color change of the moon.
motive that accompanied Salome’s wish to kiss Jokanaan has become the motive for her desire to have his head, for when Salome demands the head from Herod she sings variations on Example 1.3 in a low register accompanied by the brass. Strauss musically depicts, at this point, Salome’s moment of perversion, and considering the strong relationship between Salome and the moon, we can infer that the moon changes from white to red, from a virginal state to one of destructive sexual passion, at this time as well, though it is not marked in the stage directions. Just as the red moon oversees the subsequent interaction between Salome and Herod and Salome’s Dance, this jarringly orchestrated gesture anticipates the aural landscape that follows.


Despite Strauss’s textual excisions that removed from the libretto much of the blood imagery that the red moon accompanies, the motivic treatment in Scene Four changes in a way that correlates to the violent element of Wilde’s text. For instance, consider Herod’s last extended speech before Salome’s Dance, starting at rehearsal 233. Herod is overcome by a series of premonitions, foreshadowing the vile act Herod will be forced to permit as a result of his oath to Salome. Among these, in Wilde’s play, Herod comments that the rose petals on the table appear like blood stains, but Strauss cuts this portion of the text from the libretto. The music, however, captures the violence suggested

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62 All excerpts from the Salome full score come from this particular edition.
by the blood imagery, through the use of sliding chromatic lines in the strings.

Additionally, the brass plays a diminished and abbreviated version of one Jokanaan’s themes at rehearsal 234; the change in tempo of this motive, its repetition, and the dynamic surge (crescendo to each restatement and then subito piano) enhance the aggressive suggestion of the text. Strauss’s setting of this passage demonstrates that while he did make substantial changes to Wilde’s text, removing some of the recurring imagery, he sought to recreate the Symbolist effect of that imagery in his music.

When the moon turns black, Strauss again alters the musical texture to represent the change aurally. As Ayery’s detailed analysis demonstrates, Salome’s final monologue, until the point where Herod interrupts her, is a complex passage in which Strauss places key leitmotifs in counterpoint and moves between structural key areas to depict in music the conflicting facets of the text. Strauss offsets Herod and Herodias’s brief conversation by recalling the fragmentary motives associated with Herod. In a textual and musical frenzy, Herod demands darkness, and as the darkness descends, an unsettling pianissimo passage with tremolo in the strings grows out of the rapid sixteenth notes and triplets in the woodwinds and strings that accompany the end of Herod’s musical line (see rehearsal 354 to 355). The tremolo passage that begins at 354/10 resembles the texture that preceded the red moon. Yet in contrast to the ascent of the red moon, which in both Wilde’s and Strauss’s scenarios arrives suddenly and of its own accord, Herod calls for the black moon so its rise is connected to Herod’s preceding music by the string/woodwind tremolo that begins at 354/6 and continues through Salome’s final lines. Strauss captures the essence of Herod’s interruption of Salome’s monologue in his musical setting: for both Wilde and Strauss, Herod’s role here is critical.
in calling for darkness to descend before Salome kisses Jokanaan’s decapitated head, appropriately changing the Symbolic setting of this climactic moment. Likewise, the shift from Salome’s music to Herod’s and then to an ambiguous and tense tonal passage musically creates the impression that the audience will soon reach the dramatic goal of the entire opera: Salome’s act of utter perversion.  

Not only does Strauss’s composition musically intensify the color changes of the moon, but it also adheres to the same formal principle, directed by the moon, that controls Wilde’s work. An inclination toward tripartite form pervades the entire structure of the play. The moon undergoes three phases, paralleling Varty’s reading of the play as centering on the three duologues between Salome and Jokanaan, Herod and Salome, and Salome and the head. As Worth describes in greater detail, each of these duologues itself features tripartite form. Similarly, Strauss’s setting, though divided into four scenes, also consists of three principal sections that each consist of smaller subsections in threes. With respect to leitmotivic material, the opera can be divided into three sections: the first includes Scenes One, Two, and Three and focuses on presenting and reinforcing the motives associated with Salome and Jokanaan; the second section consists of Scene Four until Jokanaan’s execution and introduces the music of Herod, while also showing the change in Salome’s music that accompanies her sexual awakening; and the third comprises the rest of the opera, in which Salome subsumes Jokanaan’s music into her

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63 Ayery denies perversion as a theme in Strauss’s work, but as we shall see in subsequent chapters, in my interpretation, perversion (or perhaps more accurately transgression) is the entire point of Wilde’s work that Strauss effectively captures in all aspects of his musical setting.
66 Indeed, scholar Jean Michel Boulay, after studying Strauss’s annotated libretto, observes that Strauss strengthens the three-part structures through his excisions. For Boulay’s full discussion see Jean-Michel Boulay, “Richard Strauss à l’oeuvre: Les premières esquisses pour *Salome,*” *Canadian University Music Review* 17, no. 2 (1997), 57-61.
own during her final monologue, while Herod’s music is largely ignored. Each of these
large divisions (my own reading) corresponds to the three duologues that Varty considers
as structural to the formal organization of the play. Although Carpenter divides the opera
into five sections, her deeper sectional analysis of the opera shows the recurrence of
subdivisions of three within the scenes,\textsuperscript{67} recalling Worth’s observations on Wilde’s text.
Additionally, though Carpenter never clearly claims that the opera reduces to the three
large sections I have outlined, her analysis strongly supports my own when she writes
that the formal organization of Strauss’s work has two defining characteristics: “the clear
use of symmetry and the grouping of events on all different levels in threes.”\textsuperscript{68} Carpenter
considers each of the different scenes in terms of the subdivisions into three within the
scene, but she comments on the parallel between the opening of the opera and the
beginning of Scene Four,\textsuperscript{69} and her analysis of the large sections within the first three
scenes (when considered as a set) resembles the formal design of the beginning of the
fourth scene.\textsuperscript{70} Likewise, her breakdown of the last part of Scene Four through the final
monologue shares some qualities with the first two large sections.\textsuperscript{71} Ayery’s analysis of
the final monologue highlights some of the similarities between its various sections,
though the use of threes is not as clearly evident in the final monologue itself as in the
two earlier subdivisions of the opera.\textsuperscript{72} In general, though, the formal structure of the

\textsuperscript{67} For Carpenter’s full analysis of the large-scale plan of the opera see Tethys Carpenter, “Tonal and
Dramatic Structure,” 89-93.
\textsuperscript{68} Carpenter, “Tonal and Dramatic Structure,” 89.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{70} See Carpenter, “Tonal and Dramatic Structure,” Table 1, 90-1.
\textsuperscript{71} Notably, it too is offset by an atmospheric introduction, though Carpenter views this final portion of the
opera as functioning similarly to a coda, yet I would argue that the complexity of the final monologue
compensates for its brevity.
\textsuperscript{72} For the most relevant portions of the analysis, see Ayery, “Salome’s Final Monologue,” 112-29. One
place where the use of threes is apparent through Ayery’s analysis is at the end when Salome kisses
Jokanaan’s mouth and Herod orders her death.
opera bears resemblance to that of the play in its obsessive use of subdivision by three. To be sure, repetition or variation by three is a common device in Western culture; but in the play and the opera, the moon determinates this structural division by going through the three phases which dictate the course of action in the drama.

Most musicologists hold that Strauss ignored the Symbolist influence of the moon in Wilde’s play because Strauss did not assign a leitmotif for the moon and cut many of the passages that refer to the moon. In the passages just analyzed, Strauss uses changes in Salome’s leitmotifs to indicate the three phases of the moon, thus establishing musically the Symbolist relationship between Salome and the moon inherent in Wilde’s text. At the same time, as in Wilde’s text, Strauss’s musical setting of each of the characters’ comments on the moon indicates the characters’ own internal states. The leitmotif associated with Narraboth in Del Mar’s analysis accompanies the Page’s reference to the moon, depicting the direction of the Page’s thoughts while he worries about the omen he sees in the moon. Strauss supplements Narraboth’s subsequent description of the moon with the opening motive (Salome’s first leitmotif), demonstrating where Narraboth’s interests lie at that moment. The differences between the two characters are emphasized by the contrasting orchestrations assigned to their distinct visions of the moon: the Page’s music features low strings and piano winds, creating a sense of brooding, while Narraboth’s line highlights a variety of instruments in greater dynamic range, correlating to the decadent nature of his thoughts. The musical setting for

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73 In my analysis, the red to black change does not incorporate any clear motive, but the tremolo accompaniment pattern is the defining feature of the passage. Tremolo accompaniment is pervasive in the score for *Salome*, but it is almost always associated with the titular character and the awakening of her destructive sexual desires.

Salome’s portrayal of the moon (rehearsal 29 to 30/8) matches her own virginal state at this point; compared to her best known musical passages from the end of the opera, Salome’s early music features a thinner musical texture marked by light orchestration (for Strauss, at least) – a relatively spare treatment of the leitmotifs, in contrast with the contrapuntal sections found later – and less harmonic instability (again, compared to other parts of this opera: Salome’s music at this point is in no way purely functional or unambiguous). When Herod addresses the moon, Strauss’s setting features many of Herod’s fragmentary musical associations, such as the descending sixteenth note lines in the woodwinds that accompanied Herod’s entrance at the beginning of Scene Four and the quick chromatic gestures in the strings; the thick orchestration and lack of a truly melodic motive are also characteristics of Herod’s music which will be discussed further in the next chapter. Herodias’s single line seeing the moon for itself, set with bare orchestration and clear tonality, depicts her pragmatic view of her Symbolist surroundings. These vast differences among the musical settings of the five references to the moon in the opera demonstrate that while Strauss may have diminished the prominence of the moon as a symbol, he maintained its Symbolic function.

Strauss’s setting engages with the Symbolist aspects of Wilde’s text not only through a sensitive treatment of the structural symbols themselves but also by responding to the Maeterlinckian influences in Wilde’s work. The musical characterizations replicate the textual characterizations, including Jokanaan’s “monotone,” which grew of Maeterlinck’s style. In a lush score rich with chromaticism, unstable harmony, and polyphony, Jokanaan’s music stands out for its diatonicism, tonal clarity, and homophony. Many music scholars point to these features of Jokanaan’s music and
criticize Strauss for writing such banal passages, yet banality was precisely the point of these passages because they recreate the mundane “monotone” of Jokanaan’s proclamations in Wilde’s text. Strauss’s musical treatment of Wilde’s repetition, characteristic of not only Maeterlinck but also the Symbolist style in general, needs no detailed analysis, for clearly the use of musical leitmotifs replaces the textual repetitions removed in the libretto; since the idea of textual “leitmotifs” grew out of a Wagnerian influence in the first place, it would only be redundant to point out the obvious Wagnerian influence on the leitmotivic structure of the opera. Strauss does, however, alter the Maeterlinckian manipulation of dramatic irony by using leitmotifs to foreshadow the dramatic events in places where Wilde’s text offers the audience little indication of what exactly will follow. For instance, the use of a truncated and dramatized version of one of Jokanaan’s motives in the passage where Herod describes several premonitions after he swears to give Salome whatever she asks for if she dances (rehearsal 234), predicts the finale more clearly than the original text itself, which only describes several bad feelings Herod has with no relationship to Jokanaan.

Finally, Strauss’s ambiguous tonality through most of the opera captures the dramatic stasis established by Wilde’s use of “second degree dialogue.” The unsettling lack of clarity of the opening of the opera, for instance, does more than evoke a sense of the mystical; the absence of functional purpose creates music that sounds and is directionless, just like the characters’ text. Instead, Strauss uses associative keys to indicate characters and ideas throughout the score, which offers some explanation for many of the sudden and unusual harmonic changes. As Carpenter explains in detail, keys themselves become symbolic of different aspects of Wilde’s drama. Salome’s association

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75 For a detailed leitmotivic analysis of Salome, see Derrick Puffett, “Salome as Music Drama.”
with A major and C-sharp major/minor is apparent from the beginning of the opera, but Carpenter observes that Salome’s musical progression from A major to C-sharp minor to C-sharp major (VI i I) corresponds to her progress “from naivety through frustrated desire to satisfaction of that desire.”76 Over the course of the opera, Carpenter notes that C minor and major come to represent forces that oppose Salome, ranging from Herod (who is generally mentioned in C) to Jokanaan (whose music usually revolves around C, though settles into other keys) to death.77 At the same time, the harmonic ambiguity that results from the emphasis on key associations serves as a parallel for Wilde’s use of dialogue in most of the play, for the characters’ words only offer insights into themselves, just as the key areas do in Strauss’s setting.

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76 Carpenter, “Tonal and Dramatic Structure,” 95.
77 Ibid., 94-5.
CHAPTER TWO
DIFFERING VIEWS OF DECADENT MORALITY

Treatments of the Salome story proliferated in the mid to late nineteenth century, particularly in France, with notable renditions by Moreau, Massenet, Heine, Mallarmé, Huysmans, Laforgue, and Flaubert.¹ All of these artists shared one common theme in their interpretations of the Biblical narrative: Decadence. The name Salome already lent Wilde’s play the Decadent connotations established by his forebears, and literary critic Helen Zagona argues that Wilde condensed the earlier adaptations of the Salome/Herodias character into his own: “Wilde achieves in his drama a veritable summation of all of the interesting facets of his predecessors’ treatments of the subject.”² Yet, in writing a play on the same subject, Wilde did not merely engage with the Decadent precedent associated with the Salome story, but rather amplified it, for Wilde brought his own understanding of Decadence, Aestheticism, and Dandyism into his interpretation of the Salome legend.³ According to Wilde’s biographer Richard Ellmann,

¹ For a summary of the history of Salome in European literature through the nineteenth century, see Helen Zagona, The Legend of Salome (Genève: Droz, 1960).
² Ibid., 135.
³ At the end of the nineteenth century, the differences among Aestheticism, Dandyism, and Decadence blurred, particularly because of figures like Oscar Wilde, who studied with the leading Aesthete Walter Pater, pointedly lived the life of a Dandy, and actively engaged with the French Decadents. Literary scholars discussing Wilde and Salome sometimes use these terms interchangeably and sometimes use them distinctly, yet often they arrive at the same conclusions. The distinctions lie as follows: Aestheticism was a movement in England, Decadence in France; both share similar premises with some differences in detail, at which point critics use one term or the other to discuss the issues precisely. Dandyism was a way of life adopted by some Aesthetes and Decadents that involved making life itself a work of art, with a strong focus on superficial artificiality to achieve this end. In a concise and accurate summation, literary critic Bonnie Robinson writes, “Aestheticism and artificiality, for Decadents, go hand in hand.” See Bonnie J. Robinson, “The Perversion of Decadence: The Cases of Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray and Salome,” in Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature, ed. Paul Fox (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2006), 152.
the characters in *Salome* personify the philosophical approaches Wilde learned from his two most prominent teachers at Oxford, Ruskin and Pater. Through his overview of *Salome*, Ellmann finds aspects of the Aestheticism that Wilde learned from Pater manifest not only in the story itself but in Wilde’s rendition of his titular character.\(^4\) Ultimately, for Ellmann, the dramatic work plays out the tension between these two contrasting forces in Wilde’s life through the opposition of Salome and Jokanaan.\(^5\)

Strauss’s compositions before *Salome* feature Decadent musical qualities such as aural saturation and eroticism, so the use of these features in this opera does not necessarily indicate Strauss’s acknowledgement of the Decadent aspects of his source, as these are hallmarks of the composer’s style. Indeed, careful analysis of the use of Decadence in *Salome* indicates that while Strauss remained sensitive to some of the underlying themes in his source, he did not provide musical corollaries for all of them.

### I. Symbolism Yielding to Decadence

On the most superficial level, Symbolism and Decadence seem contradictory and incompatible: where Symbolism seeks to bring out the inherent spiritual meaning of the world, Decadence only draws attention to the surface. Yet despite their incongruous approaches, the Symbolist and Decadent movements were strongly intertwined, with many of the same writers and artists upholding the values of both in their lives and works. Embracing this apparent inconsistency requires a deeper and more refined understanding of Decadence. Indeed, literary critic Paul Fox writes that “to reject the past

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\(^5\) Ibid., 89-90.
as a given, and to relish the subtleties of present nuance, is the beginning of Decadence.\footnote{Paul Fox, preface to Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2006), vii.} In Fox’s construction, Decadent emphasis on the superficial, while the defining quality of the style, is itself only a means to an end; the Decadent purpose grew out of the same frustration with Victorian materialism and artificiality that encouraged Symbolism. But while Symbolist art sought to represent the supernatural forces that control human life, scholar Robert Rix observes that Decadence replicated the contemporary disenchantment with spirituality that resulted from the fin-de-siècle.\footnote{Robert Rix, “Salomé and the fin du globe: Oscar Wilde’s Decadent Tragedy,” in Fins de Siècle/New Beginnings, ed. Ib Johansen (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2000), 101.} Ultimately, however, both movements issued commentary on late-nineteenth-century society through abstract mediums that masked the underlying intention. Though it may seem that Decadent art merely indulged in the materialism it represented, the deeper philosophy that drove the movement presented a reassessment of Victorian morals. Addressing Decadence and morality, Fox explains how the Decadents justified their seemingly immoral positions:

> Decadent artists would perhaps argue that it is precisely in the emphasis upon the value of the present moment that a higher system of evaluating life is produced. It adds a greater import to every action, to every perception of the world. It provides an ethical standard of interaction between the individual and society, a communion that aesthetes found lacking in the strictures of conventional morality.\footnote{Fox, preface to Decadences, vii.}

Underneath the superficiality of Decadent works, then, exists a strongly critical analysis of the society that produced such extravagant self-indulgence.

One source of dramatic tension in Wilde’s \textit{Salome} comes from the apparent contradiction and ultimate union between Symbolism and Decadence. Perhaps the most striking aspect of \textit{Salome} as a Symbolist play lies in Wilde’s adaptation of the Symbolist
style to his own, seen clearly in the passages that rather blatantly defy Symbolist qualities mentioned previously. Not coincidentally, these same features that break with Symbolism identify the work with its Decadent origins. Indeed, a closer analysis of the anti-Symbolist portions of the text demonstrates that Wilde presents a Decadent reading of otherwise Symbolist elements in the play, along the lines of the sort of Decadent reading Shafquat Towheed analyzes in Husymans’ *À Rebours* (“the breviary of decadence,” as Arthur Symons called it). Towheed argues that Husymans’ protagonist Des Esseintes reads various works “Decadently” in *À Rebours* because he “consistently privileg[es] the part over the whole.”

Though Towheed takes greater interest in exploring the shift in dialectic between reader and author, his premise is ultimately rooted in the Decadent philosophy of focusing on the moment. Wilde similarly constructs Salome with the same qualities as a Decadent reader, particularly in the passage where she erotically glorifies Jokanaan’s body, hair, and mouth. In each monologue, she concentrates exclusively on the one feature she is infatuated with until Jokanaan repels her; then she quickly revokes her interest before moving onto describe the next item in the same obsessive manner. Her love for Jokanaan, which develops to its fullest in this section of the play, operates Decadently: of Des Essintes’ Decadent reading, Towheed writes that “it is a truant re-reading of literature for its own sake, with the entirety of the text subordinated to the individual part that he chooses to read;”

likewise, Salome only notices the parts of Jokanaan in which she is interested (his physical qualities), ignoring his religious asceticism and proclamations, thus compromising her understanding of the entirety of his

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10 Ibid.
being. Consequently, this passage construes Salome as acting as a Decadent, whereas the earlier mentions of Salome and her actions describe her decadently. Taking Ellmann’s interpretation of Salome as a representation of the values of Pater into consideration, it is no wonder that Wilde constructs Salome’s first long passage of text in the play in such a way that Symbols lose their Symbolist function because in this case, the symbols and metaphors define Salome as a Decadent.

The Decadent philosophy of living in the moment motivates not only Salome but also Herod, and in Herod’s speech, we again see metaphors operating Decadently rather than Symbolically. That Decadence inspires the life and decisions of the Tetrarch as constructed by Wilde needs little explanation; in Herod’s character the complexity of the relationship between Decadence and Symbolism becomes the most heightened because of the conflict between his obviously Decadent actions and manners and his preoccupation with Symbols, particularly religious ones. In Worth’s reading, “in Herod the contradictions are extreme:” she describes him as “a gregarious extrovert” yet “capable of self-scrutiny as no other character is;” “sensual, abandoned, florid” but also “deeply respectful of the ascetic and spiritual nature.” Through the examples Worth uses to illustrate each of these qualities, it becomes apparent that Wilde constructs these variations in Herod’s personality by contrasting his relation to Symbols with his Decadent aspects: his introspective, superstitious spirituality is unmasked through his analysis of the moon and the act of looking and his acceptance of omens and signs, while his outgoing nature and extravagance become obvious through his speech and actions. In a revealing moment, when Herod is overcome by premonitions while trying to persuade

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12 Worth, Oscar Wilde, 61-2.
Salome to dance, he remarks, “It is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees,” and continues to coax his step-daughter; in this moment, Herod willfully represses his Symbolist understanding with his Decadent desires. In the end, Herod succumbs to Symbols once again, when he calls for darkness after Salome’s Final Monologue.

For Ellmann, this contest between the ascetic and Aesthetic elements recalls Wilde’s same conflict in trying to incorporate the philosophies of Ruskin and Pater in many of his works.¹³ Pater’s influence on Wilde and the personification of Aesthetic philosophy in the character of Salome is fairly obvious. Ruskin’s morally rooted views of art and life find their outlet in Jokanaan’s proclamations. Consequently, Ellmann argues that Herod functions as a stand-in for Wilde himself, caught between his two Oxford mentors:

At the play’s end the emphasis shifts suddenly to Herod, who is seen to have yielded to Salome’s sensuality, and then to the moral revulsion of Jokanaan from that sensuality, and to have survived them both. In Herod Wilde was suggesting that tertium quid which he felt to be his own nature, susceptible to contrary impulses but not abandoned for long to either.¹⁴

Thus, while Wilde’s shift in his usage of Symbols surrounding Salome follows the precedents established by his French forebears who used Symbolism and Decadence simultaneously in their works, he illustrates the apparent divergence between Symbolism and Decadence in his characterization of Herod. Wilde manipulates his treatment of both in order to produce such a paradoxical Herod – as a portrayal, it would seem, of the contradictions by which Wilde constructed his own life.

¹³ For the full discussion of the beliefs of Pater and Ruskin, their influences on Wilde personally, and their manifestations in his works, see Ellmann, “Overtures to Salome.”
¹⁴ Ibid., 90.
II. Decadent Eroticism and the Decadent Duality

Erotic imagery figures prominently in both Pater’s Aesthetics and the Decadence espoused by Mallarmé, and Wilde’s exaggerated use of erotic imagery in *Salome* emerges as one of the play’s most memorable Decadent features. Discussing erotic Decadents, Deborah Lutz concludes that “with the Decadent, eroticism also floats outward, permeating his subjectivity, yes, but also seeping into everything exterior.” This internalization and externalization of eroticism manifests itself only too clearly in Wilde’s titular character. Depicting her shift from a virginal state to one that is sexually aroused, Salome’s text in particular becomes saturated with erotic metaphors after she sees and falls in love with the Prophet: in her first speech describing Jokanaan’s body she employs a number of flower images; and in her description of his mouth she refers again to fruit and flowers. In her final monologue, the erotic subtext becomes more blatant as she speaks of wanting to devour Jokanaan and of losing her virginity to him. At the same time, eroticism surrounds Salome from the beginning of the play through the other characters’ descriptions of her, whether addressing her alluring purity or her seductive beauty. Thus, over the course of Wilde’s narrative, Salome herself internalizes the eroticism with which she was externally associated.

Decadent works evoke an erotic subtext on a deeper level, as well. Toepefer observes that exaggerated imagery based on exotic and “luxurious” metaphors not actually visible on stage

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16 And of course the color red, which begins to pervade much of her imagery at this point as well, itself contains much erotic symbolism.
indicate[s] a condition of satiation within the speaker, and [these metaphors] indirectly exert a pressure upon the listener to provide, in an erotic sense, a level of pleasure which exceeds in rareness and intensity that embodied by metaphorical imagery.\textsuperscript{17}

For Toepfer, this type of Decadent “saturation” of metaphors enhances the erotic element of the text. Specifically, Toepfer argues that this eroticism comes not only from the Decadent quality of the metaphors themselves but also from the profusion of images used to portray the same object, as in Salome’s speeches about Jokanaan’s physical appearance and in Herod’s descriptions of his treasures. For Toepfer, the “abundance [of metaphors] implies more than the sheer quantity or density of metaphors – it also includes a certain richness of language that makes large demands upon the sense of the listener. [emphasis in original]”\textsuperscript{18} Together, these lush images “inflate (or exhaust) the senses of [the] audience,”\textsuperscript{19} and the creation of this erotic impression indicates an inherently Decadent quality in the text. In Toepfer’s construction, Decadence seeks to produce a sense of the erotic (he is specifically concerned with “ecstasy”) through both Decadent usage as it is commonly understood (extravagant descriptions) and obviously erotic implications.\textsuperscript{20}

Because of the intrinsic relationship between Decadence and eroticism, conventional society and its critics often deemed Decadent art immoral, despite the Decadents’ belief in their superior morality. Charles Bernheimer explores this phenomenon, writing that “the notion of decadence is inhabited by a doubleness that puts

\textsuperscript{17} Toepfer, \textit{The Voice of Rapture}, 97.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
fundamental moral and social values in question.”21 According to Bernheimer, the term “Decadence” itself conveys the dual sense of a completely immoral act that simultaneously supersedes society’s inhibitive moral restrictions. Returning to Wilde’s mentors Pater and Ruskin, the root of the philosophical debate lay in their conflicting views of morality. Pater favored self-indulgence while Ruskin espoused the virtues of the virgin: when both reviewed Renaissance Italian Art, for instance, they might equally validly have called it “Decadent” and meant two entirely different things.22 While a Decadent act or a Decadent art can be construed as corrupt by society’s standards, Decadence subverts the social morality that it finds so contradictory; Robinson writes that “[Decadence] eschews such Victorian values as conformity, consistency, and sincerity.”23 Dandyism and Wilde’s adaptation of that mode of life (which led to his construction of the Individual) engages with this same type of subversion, which will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. For the moment, it suffices to say that Decadence manifested its own morality that questioned the conventional moral standards of the day.

III. Failed Decadents and the Tragedy of Salome

As mentioned previously, Salome ultimately does not function as a Symbolist “drama of stasis” in the Maeterlinckian style but rather contains key moments of action. According to Robinson, these actions indicate a break from Decadence, particularly as Wilde constructs it. Robinson argues that Decadents perform acts of “self-absorption and

22 See Ellmann, “Overtures to Salome.”
mental stimulation,” citing Husymans’ Des Esseintes as the prime example and claiming that for Wilde this internal focus allows for “self-realization and autonomy.” In Robinson’s reading, Salome fails to achieve this “self-realization and self-absorption,” because of her “single focus on her physical desire for Iokanaan,” which she discovers over the course of the play, instead. Literary critic Chris Snodgrass supports this same premise when he argues that “what distinguishes Wilde’s Salome as a tragic figure is precisely her plunging descent from art-like self-sufficiency to self-abandonment under the spell of another, in short a fall into uncontrollable desire.” Though Snodgrass reads Salome as a representation of art that eventually sacrifices itself for desire, Decadence pervades his interpretation as well, for “art-like self-sufficiency” relies on the acceptance of the Decadent belief in “art for art’s sake,” that permeates Decadent, Aesthetic, and Dandy philosophy. Salome’s actions, on the other hand, gain a motive after she falls in love with Jokanaan; she no longer operates in a directionless, self-gratifying manner for now her actions are all shaded with her desire to try to attract and possess another person. In this reading, as Robinson concludes, the Dance is not a moment of introspection for Salome, but rather “a simple, straightforward action” that allows her to possess Jokanaan’s head. Ultimately, Snodgrass argues that Salome’s tragedy results from her externalization that evoked this desire.

Salome effectively turns her gaze away from herself and in so doing breaks from Decadent practice, but Robinson concedes the possibility of Salome’s exchange with Jokanaan allowing her to “extend her experience through self-cultivation.” In Robinson’s

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24 Ibid., 153.
25 Ibid., 163-4.
interpretation, a truly Decadent nature should engage with societal conventions and expectations only as a method to redefine itself as removed from these:

Wilde reduces morality, principles, and integrity to sensations that allow self-cultivation through absorption of ‘difference,’ thus presenting Decadence as a powerful mode of self-realization.28

In the case of Salome, however, since Jokanaan denies the titular character’s interactions, she arrives at a “perverted, thwarted self-realization” because of her aroused sexual obsession.29 As with Snodgrass, Robinson’s interpretation also suggests that Salome’s failure as a Decadent leads to her ultimate demise and the tragic conclusion of the play.

IV. Strauss’s Musical Commentary on Decadence

Strauss creates musical Decadence through a lush treatment of texture, orchestration, and harmony. Consider the passage where Salome describes Jokanaan’s appearance and features. The section, starting at rehearsal 92, begins modestly, with bare instrumental accompaniment (flutes, solo clarinet, solo violin, and harp), simple texture (two melodic lines in counterpoint), and static harmony (the melodic lines arpeggiate a B major triad with slight chromatic embellishment at the end of the first phrase). Soon, however, Strauss adds more instruments, increasingly complicated motives in greater quantities, and gestures that feature even stronger chromaticism. Strauss heightens all of these aspects as Salome shifts from describing Jokanaan’s body to his hair and finally to his mouth, at which point these qualities suffuse the entire musical fabric. By amplifying the musical Decadence to correspond to the progress of Salome’s descriptions of Jokanaan, Strauss mirrors the erotic implications of the text, suggesting an

28 Ibid., 165.
29 Ibid., 166.
acknowledgment of the intrinsic relationship between eroticism and Decadence. Indeed, Strauss’s musical conception of Decadence rests on the evocation of the erotic through saturation of the senses, which Toepefer identified as a Decadent aspect of Wilde’s style in *Salome*. Not coincidentally, Salome’s final rumination on Jokanaan’s mouth, his most captivating (and, of the three, most sexual) feature, is set in E Major, a key Strauss had already associated with erotic suggestions in *Don Juan* and which he would continue to associate in this way in *Der Rosenkavalier*.30

Notably, the use of chromaticism in these Decadent passages differs sharply from the type of chromaticism discussed in the previous chapter that effected the Symbolist atmosphere. The opening of the opera, for instance, relies on a succession of unrelated harmonies used exclusively for their coloristic sounds, which is why they can so effectively create a mood of ambiguity. On the other hand the chromaticism found in Decadent moments either functions within a clearly diatonic context as embellishment or chromaticism used to connect these clearly diatonic contexts. For instance, in the passage starting at rehearsal 92, the music is clearly in B major: mm. 1-4 of this section repeat the tonic harmony and in m. 5, Strauss writes an unmistakable $V^4_2$ chord (see Example 2.1). Chromatic gestures begin over this dominant harmony as neighbor notes. At 92/8, the bass changes to F-sharp and in the next measure the dominant chord resolves to the tonic. The harmonic progression becomes slightly more elaborate ($I \, I^6 \, V^7 \, I$) at rehearsal 93 but is still functional and not coloristic. This type of chromaticism remains in effect in the next measure (93/6), when Strauss writes passing chords that have no clear tonal designation but do carry the purpose of leading to a D7 chord, which takes the music to

its next tonal destination, G major. The obscured tonality in this case does operate functionally as a means of modulating quickly between distant keys, and so although it is undeniably chromatic it behaves differently from the passing chords discussed in the previous chapter, which connected completely unrelated chords in functionless progressions. Even the most musically Decadent portion of this section, when Salome obsesses over Jokanaan’s mouth, uses chromaticism within a clearly diatonic context.

Example 2.1 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 91/6 to 93/10 (Vocal Score)
A noteworthy instance of this same type of chromatic usage occurs in Salome’s final monologue, starting at rehearsal 359 (see Example 2.2). As discussed previously, this tonally straightforward passage in C-sharp major contrasts with the preceding harmonic ambiguity. After Salome finishes her last, ecstatic outburst over kissing Jokanaan’s mouth, Strauss momentarily assaults our tonal expectations with the chord
marked by an “X,” which resists even a bitonal interpretation. On the downbeat of the next measure, the pitches of the tonic chord return in all the instruments except for the fourth trumpet, which plays a tritone above the root, only a hint of the previous dissonance. The unexpected and extreme dissonance in 360/6 and its quick resolution demonstrate most poignantly a Decadent usage of chromaticism within a tonal context. Furthermore, as this is the most erotic and perverted moment in the opera, Strauss’s setting emphatically confirms the correlation between Decadence and eroticism or, in this case, erotic perversion, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

Another quality, which might fall under the general category of instrumentation, clarifies Strauss’s conception of musical Decadence: his treatment of the vocal line. As Salome’s fixation with Jokanaan increases, her vocal line becomes more melodious and makes greater technical demands on the singer in terms of range and endurance. When Salome begins her obsessive descriptions of Jokanaan, she sings aria-like music that is not only melodic but also virtuosic. This aria-like vocal style enhances the Decadent sensation in the audience due to its sharp contrast with Salome’s earlier vocal lines, which were either speech-like or fragmentary and did not display the range of the singer’s abilities. The purpose of this vocal style is clearly more than seductive, for even when Salome persuades Narraboth to allow Jokanaan out of the cistern, her music and her vocal line is erratic, rather than melodious and Decadent; Strauss reserves the combination of all these musical qualities for Salome’s true moment of Decadent expression in the opera.

Ayery interprets this chord as F-sharp major (IV) over A7 (VI7); based on the vocal score, this analysis is valid, but the reduction excludes the B-sharp in the winds. See Ayery, “Salome’s Final Monologue,” 123-5.
Example 2.2 Richard Strauss, Salome, 358/5 to 361/1 (Vocal Score)

Strauss employs the same features – lush treatments of orchestration, melody, and harmony – for the musical setting of Herod’s list of treasures. The use of Decadent music for Decadent text is particularly poignant in this moment. Before beginning each description, Herod is overcome by uneasiness and tries to quiet Herodias who constantly
interrupts him; the musical setting of this text does not display Decadent qualities but
instead is marked by associative instrumentation (the use of a certain instrument timbre to
evoke a sensation, such as Herod’s fear), fragmented motives (to indicate his anxiety),
and nonfunctional progressions (to signify his superstitions). Once he recalls his intention
of tempting Salome away from her desire with Decadent language, Herod begins to sing
the same kind of voluptuous melodies with thick orchestration, motivic counterpoint, and
functionally inspired chromaticism that define Strauss’s musical Decadence.

Example 2.3 Richard Strauss, Salome, 268/5 to 269/4 (Vocal Score)

Yet the chromaticism in Herod’s Decadent music requires closer analysis, as it
operates differently from that in Salome’s. The section starts at 268/5, but at this point,
the harmonies seem unrelated and shift suddenly: the first few measures alone move from
C Major to C Major-minor seventh to an embellished A Major to an altered E-flat-Major-
minor-seventh chord (see Example 2.3). This random progression bears more in common
with Symbolist treatment of harmony than with Salome’s Decadent music. As Herod’s
speech progresses and he moves into his most Decadent passage at 286/3, however, his
music gains greater tonal clarity (see Example 2.4): the section begins with alternating D-
flat and G-flat Major triads, then shifts to alternating E Major and B Major-minor-seventh chords (with the E suspended in some voices), and continues to shift to distant key areas that are “established” by alternating triads related by a fifth. Unlike Salome’s passage, the music lacks a clear tonal progression and cadences, but the harmony is not just coloristic, though it is still marked by jarring dissonances and sudden shifts. The fact that Herod’s “Decadent” music actually falls between the two styles relates to his place in the work at large, caught as he is between believing in Symbols and living in Decadent metaphors.

Example 2.4 Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 286/3 to 288/1 (Vocal Score)
Herod’s music corresponds exactly with the point made by Varty, mentioned in the previous chapter, that Herod’s textual style shifts from being marked by “distracted urgency” to “leisurely” seduction as he tries to tempt Salome. Previously, I offered this point as an example of Wilde’s adaptation of Maeterlinck’s Symbolist monotone writing, but with Strauss’s setting, an added element elucidates the reason for Herod’s changing textual and musical styles, for at this point, Herod is moving into his most Decadent mode of speech and music. In addition to the Decadent features described above, his vocal lines become considerably more melodic (in a conventional sense) and allow the tenor to show off his range starting with this seductive section at rehearsal 269, a musical form of “leisurely” speech distinct from his earlier fragmentary passages that depicted his internal “distracted urgency.” This shift into a Decadent musical style that corresponds to his attempted seduction of Salome emphasizes the relationship between Decadence and eroticism; indeed, Strauss employs similar musical devices (though not as exaggerated) in his setting of the earlier passage starting at rehearsal 224 when Herod begs Salome to dance for him, and earlier still when he tries to get Salome to drink, eat, and sit with him at rehearsal 173. By contrast, some of Herod’s most fragmented and atmospherically chromatic music occurs when he is commenting on his premonitions and superstitions, as for instance at rehearsal 164. Thus, the changes in Herod’s speech and musical features both convey the faceted nature of Herod’s personality, which draws elements from his Symbolist and Decadent aspects and from his basis in the philosophies of Pater and Ruskin.

32 Michael Kennedy believes that “if Salome is the first of Strauss’s great female roles, Herod is the first great tenor part he wrote.” See Michael Kennedy, Richard Strauss (New York: Schirmer Books, 1976).
Salome’s changing musical style, however, indicates her heightening eroticism. For Salome particularly, Strauss exercises his truly erotic musical language, marked by stunning vocal and orchestral climaxes: Kramer writes that “the music is deliberately theatrical in the debased sense of the term with which Nietzsche tirelessly sought to tar Wagner.” In both Wagner and Strauss, this theatricality epitomizes almost exclusively an erotic subtext. To take one example, consider the passage after Salome finishes describing Jokanaan’s mouth (see rehearsal 122). Jokanaan repels her and Narraboth tries to stop her, but Salome is consumed by her desire and repeats it between their protestations. Each statement is set at a higher pitch level until her final restatement at rehearsal 129, where she arpeggiates an E minor triad (her sexual arousal will soon be cut off by Jokanaan’s long proclamation) with the violins reinforcing her melodic line one measure after she begins the motive. This section is just one example among many in Salome’s part from this point forward where Strauss introduces eroticism in purely musical terms to emphasize the changes she undergoes over the course of the opera.

Strauss captures the cause of this perversion, Salome’s interactions with Jokanaan, in his manipulation of the principal leitmotifs of the opera. As in the text, the exchange with Jokanaan fails to strengthen her self-identification because she begins to absorb and use leitmotifs originally associated with the Prophet. In the musical settings for Salome’s Decadent descriptions of his body, the leitmotifs that had accompanied Jokanaan’s ascent from the cistern and his prophecies are among the many motives used to thicken the texture. The music accompanying her speeches not only perverts these motives themselves (as will be discussed in the next chapter) but it also diminishes her

34 For discussions of eroticism in Salome’s final monologue, see Abbate, “Opera; or the Envoicing of Women;” and Kramer, “Culture and Musical Hermeneutics.”
Decadent identity, because music that previously carried religious overtones due to its association with Jokanaan is now used alongside Salome’s own characteristic leitmotifs in the same Decadent context described above. Thus while the Decadent musical quality is preserved, Salome begins to lose her self-conception as a Decadent (as opposed to someone who uses Decadent music). By adopting Jokanaan’s motives, her musical personality is no longer distinct from his; Strauss demonstrates Salome’s failure to achieve Robinson’s construction of “self-realization” because her music does not maintain its own identity as the opera progresses.

Example 2.5 Salome’s first leitmotif; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, opening, mm. 1-4, Clarinet (Full Score)

The conflict between the use of musical Decadence through the end of the opera and the textual reduction of Salome’s Decadent behavior reaches its epitome in the Dance. Strauss’s Dance is no more introspective than Wilde’s, yet it maintains all the qualities of musical Decadence. The introduction of the Dance begins in A and evokes the exotic through instrumentation and rhythmic displacement. When Salome actually begins dancing at B/14, indicated in a stage direction, the accompanying music is variations of her first leitmotif (Example 2.5). As the Dance progresses, another of her leitmotifs, the “Waltz motive” (Example 2.6)\(^\text{35}\) gains significance, for it recurs at

\(^{35}\) Note that the first instance of the “Waltz” motive, given in the example (from rehearsal 24) is the chromatic variant, in which the first three pitches are descending chromatic steps. In other instances, this motive is presented as descending whole steps (suggesting scale degrees 3, 2, 1). In general, fragments of this second version (with the whole steps) occur more frequently in the opera than the chromatic version.
structural moments and leads the tonal direction. In its first statement in the Dance (K/6), Example 2.6 is presented in G-sharp major and offsets a section where motives inspired by Jokanaan’s leitmotifs predominate. The second statement of Example 2.6 at O/2 occurs in A major and modulates to A-flat (G-sharp) by its completion; this leads into the Dance’s principal theme, actually written as a waltz, in C-sharp major (see P/8). The third occurrence of Example 2.6 (T) maintains the C-sharp tonic. The fourth statement (W/6) is chromatically altered and leads to a new section in E major at rehearsal Y. This final section incorporates elements of everything that came before: it refers to Jokanaan’s prophesies, repeats the exotic introduction, and includes elements of Salome’s leitmotifs, all leading dramatically to the final restatement of Example 2.6 (h/11), again in A Major. By beginning and ending in one of Salome’s keys, the musical setting of the Dance seems to suggest a moment of self-reflection for the Princess. Yet the recurring use of Example 2.6 and the presentation of an actual waltz-inspired theme, contrasted with references to Jokanaan, demonstrate the purely functional nature of this action. She dances to fulfill her desire for Jokanaan, not as an act of self-realization. Additionally, the use of E major for the climax of the Dance, though tonally standard (simply a modulation to the dominant), further emphasizes her perverted motivation through the Straussian tonal associations of that key. Through the Dance, Salome seeks to satisfy her recently aroused erotic nature.

Example 2.6 “Waltz” motive; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 24, mm. 1-7 (Vocal Score)
Strauss’s decision to set the Dance to music suffused with Decadent musical qualities is not insignificant, despite his concurrence with Wilde in writing a Dance that is not introspective. Returning to Robinson’s argument, Wilde’s play suggests that Decadent acts lead to self-realization and that Salome’s failure to act purely Decadently (that is, in a static self-absorbed way) results in her tragedy. By continuing to use the Decadent music in the setting of the Dance, however, Strauss does not present the same view of Decadence as Wilde. Whereas Wilde portrays Decadence positively as a way of perceiving one’s Individuality, Strauss seems to employ Decadence merely for its superficial qualities rather than its self-defining ones. To be sure, Strauss’s music does respond to the complex nature of identity, particularly Salome’s identity, but this is primarily done through a representation of Salome’s sexuality.
To speak of Salome is to speak of sexuality, yet Wilde’s work presents a shifting, multifarious understanding of this thematic element. Read literally, the play depicts a naïve virgin’s powerful sexual arousal and the moral consequences of this uncontrolled sexuality. But Wilde himself presented two reasons why the play should not be interpreted in this morally driven way. First, Wilde labeled the play “a tragedy,” suggesting that Salome’s actions should not be construed negatively as a fable about the effects of sexual deviance. Second, Wilde wrote that he could not “conceive of a Salome who is unconscious of what she does, a Salome who is but a silent and passive instrument,”\(^1\) indicating that Salome has some self-awareness of and control over her actions, and thus that the play does not seek to demonstrate the effects of sexual arousal on a defenseless young female. Excluding this superficial reading opens Salome to a host of interpretations influenced both by the place of the Salome figure in the late nineteenth century and Wilde’s own complex sexuality. Literary critics have presented several contrasting but complementary interpretations of Salome’s sexuality (just as they have for Wilde’s) but ultimately, one meaning emerges: that Salome embodies all of these.

Strauss’s treatment of sexuality in the opera seems, at first glance, to correspond only to constructions of Salome as femme fatale. Deeper analysis, however, presents some surprising corollaries between the ambiguous sexualities of Salome and Wilde and

Strauss’s use of leitmotifs throughout the opera. Whether or not Strauss himself acknowledged and actively sought to depict these ambiguities is beside the point, for the musical setting itself engages with the transgressive aspects inherent in the play.

I. Salome as Femme Fatale

Wilde provides his eponymous character with an unprecedented motivation for her actions, amplifying the existing nineteenth-century construction of Salome as a femme fatale. Notably, the Bible simply presents Herodias’s daughter (not even named “Salome”) as acting out her mother’s revenge on Jokanaan for his constant disparagements of Herodias. Nineteenth-century renditions of the legend focus more deliberately on Salome herself, depicting her as a sexualized and deadly woman, but still offer her little justification for her actions other than obeying Herodias. Wilde develops Salome’s character further by providing her with her own motivation. By including the exchange between Salome and Jokanaan in the first part of the drama, where she fantasizes possessing his body and ignores his spiritual declarations, Wilde portrays Salome as a woman inspired only by her own sexual desires with a deadly power that she exerts when her sexual will is not satisfied. Indeed, Wilde’s Salome seems to resent Herod’s assumption that she asks for Jokanaan’s head on Herodias’s orders when she derisively responds that she is not merely heeding her mother’s instructions. Yet Wilde amplifies Salome’s acts of seduction, presenting her as more powerfully self-aware than just an alluring dancer; literary critic Kate Millet observes the frankness of Salome’s

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2 According to Katherine Downey, Josephus’s Antiquities of the Jews provides the name “Salome” for Herodias’s daughter (97). For more information on the origins of the Salome legend, see Katherine Brown Downey, Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama (New York: Continuum, 2004), 96-99.
entreaties, such as when she says to Jokanaan “I am amorous of thy body.” In an earlier instance, not cited by Millett, Salome forthrightly tells Narraboth that he will obey her commands because of how enamored he is of her. For Millet Wilde’s Salome is “no mere vampire or seductress,” but rather she embodies an imperious sexual will. [emphasis in original] ... Nothing so passive as a vaginal trap, she is an irresistible force and is supposed to betoken an insatiable clitoral demand that has never encountered resistance to its whims before.

In a similar interpretation of Salome’s powerful sexuality, Tookey comments on the danger Salome poses not just to those that she seeks to possess but to the entire patriarchal structure as a whole. Comparing her to Lilith, who sought sexual equality with Adam (or “menstrual sexuality,” that is, self-satisfying for woman), Tookey observes that Salome defies the patriarchal norm established in the play by Herod (who commands that no person should see or speak with the Prophet) in two ways: first, by instigating the meeting with Jokanaan (“reversing the patriarchal code” whereby man should approach woman sexually, not vice versa) and second, by desiring him sexually, “bringing the profane into contact with the sacred.” Thus, Salome’s sexual will defies both “Herod’s secular law and Jokanaan’s divine law,” in Regenia Gagnier’s complementary reading. The combination of Salome’s personal sexual motivation for her actions and her self-assured attitude confirms her role as a most powerful femme fatale in Wilde’s construction. Indeed, Gagnier concludes that “Wilde’s Salome posits the castration of the

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4 Ibid., 152.
5 Tookey, “The Fiend that Smites,” 25-6. In Tookey’s reading, the moon has a large role in symbolizing Salome’s menstrual sexuality, adding further significance to the moon symbolism discussed in Chapter One.
forces of law and order by the forces of illicit sexual desire.” Wilde’s Salome displays unprecedented power as a femme fatale because she ultimately presents a threat outside the context of the narrative, by seeking to undermine accepted gender/power structures.

Wilde’s conception of Salome played off of an apprehension of female power that pervaded late nineteenth-century Western society. Elaine Showalter identifies two reactions to female power in the arts that accompanied the changing gender definitions occurring during the fin de siècle: “an exaggerated horror of its castrating potential” and “the intensified valorization of male power.” Wilde’s play displays both of these responses. Salome’s monologue to the decapitated head just before she kisses it prolongs and intensifies her gruesome symbolic castration of Jokanaan. In response, Herod, in both fear and disgust, orders that Salome be killed, and Wilde’s stage direction for the Princess to be crushed under the guards’ shields ends the play. Millett observes that Herod’s order had been prophesied by Jokanaan; the conclusion of the play is not a reaffirmation of Herod’s authority over Salome’s life but rather Jokanaan’s control over Salome’s passion, the source of her power. Salome’s death preserves male power, then, because while a confirmation of Herod’s power may seem to bring the entire patriarchal structure into question (for some readers), reinforcing the power of Jokanaan, the man who rejects Salome and then is killed by her, only strengthens it. Furthermore, Victoria White, building on an argument of misogyny as a theme common to Wilde’s works in general,

7 Ibid., 169.
8 Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (New York: Viking, 1990), 10.
9 Millett, Sexual Politics, 154.
10 For Millett, Herod embodies “a corrupt authority in a corrupt state (Sexual Politics, 154).” Tookey, on the other hand, considers Herod and his court a representation of patriarchy (“The Fiend that Smites,” 25). These two views are not necessarily in direct conflict with each other, as indeed Gagnier presents both Jokanaan and Herod as authoritative figures in the play (Idylls of the Marketplace, 167), but accepting one over the other does require a shift in perspective.
contends that the sexualized woman (corresponding to Tookey’s construction of menstrual sexuality), for Wilde in particular,

is immediately a threat. Her sexuality is automatically evil. … Salomé has beauty as long as she is virginal. However, the prophet Jokanaan rouses her sexuality and she proceeds to enact the myth of the great castrating bitch.\textsuperscript{11}

The play follows the trajectory of Salome’s loss of virginity and, by extension, her loss of beauty. Elsewhere, White explains that Wilde identifies beauty with the quality of being “white,” “golden-haired,” and “flower-like,”\textsuperscript{12} all terms used by various characters to explicitly or implicitly describe Salome in the beginning of the play. The moon’s corresponding progress from white to red to black reflects Salome’s own sexual progression, adding further significance to the moon symbolism.

Nonetheless, Wilde’s Salome is not solely a \textit{femme fatale}. In contrast to the previous readings, Worth argues that Wilde differed from his Salome-interpreting predecessors, who did construe Salome as a \textit{femme fatale}, because he “sees her far more sympathetically as ‘the tragic daughter of passion.’”\textsuperscript{13} This gentler view of the character Salome points to a complementary interpretation of the relationship that drives the play. Adding nuance to her argument, Millet concedes that “Salomé is not exclusively or even fundamentally female; she is Oscar Wilde too,” leading her to conclude that ultimately the play dramatizes homosexual guilt and rejection.\textsuperscript{14} Before we can understand \textit{Salome} as a play centering on a homosexual relation, however, we must first understand how to read “homosexuality” (if it can be so called) as Wilde himself constructed it.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 165.
\textsuperscript{13} Worth, \textit{Oscar Wilde}, 56.
\textsuperscript{14} Millett, \textit{Sexual Politics}, 153.
II. Decadence and Homosexuality

By the end of the nineteenth century, Decadent philosophy itself began to involve a homosexual implication. Wilde’s trials in 1895 strongly established the inseparability of aestheticism and homosexuality; indeed Gagnier identifies that over the course of the trials, a clear defiance of Victorian rationality became evident in both Wilde’s art and sexuality, which were increasingly rooted in the same philosophies:

In the art world, Wilde’s homosexuality, contrary to mainstream notions of “productive” or “purposive” sexuality, likewise contributed to his particular formulation of aestheticism, including his explicit rejections of Victorian notions of the natural (as in “Nature imitates art”), of the purposive (as in his stance of idleness), and of the productive (as in “art for art’s sake”).

Still, despite these corresponding philosophies that dictated Wilde’s art and “sexual deviance,” one cannot immediately identify Wilde or his work as “homosexual,” for the concept of a “gay identity” did not exist at this time and only began to emerge as a consequence of the 1895 trials; indeed as Joseph Bristow has shown, this type of reading only demonstrates modern ignorance of Wilde’s historical context. Alan Sinfield, studying the emergence of the queer identity in the fin de siècle, emphasizes that although Pater’s Aesthetes were considered effeminate, they were not “distinctively homosexual. That was lurking in potential;” and “Decadence, similarly, lingers trembling on the brink of homosexuality.” Sinfield supports his argument by presenting contemporary criticism of Decadence, in which “same-sex passion is still only a minor

15 Gagnier, Idylls of the Marketplace, 139.
and indeterminate element.” Using a poignant example, Sinfield offers a reading of Husymans’ *À Rebours*, in keeping with the contemporary views of Decadence and “same-sex passion,” in which Des Esseintes’ same-sex encounter with an effeminate boy “appears as his ultimate debauchery, a climactic feature of decadent aestheticism. ... [Des Esseintes] is by no means a queer personality, in the way that Wilde’s trials were to establish.” At the same time, however, Sinfield concedes that Wilde and other Decadents’ philosophy of “idleness and amorality that claimed the authority of art and class” did “[succeed] in establishing a dissident cultural formulation,” and it is this dissidence that allows for transgressive readings of Wilde’s works before his trials.

Admittedly, “homosexual identity” did not exist in Wilde’s conception, but his obsession with paradox and perversity, itself born out of his Aesthetic/Decadent/Dandy philosophy, allowed him to enact a transgression that directly relates the transgressive aspects of his life and works. Donohue argues that because of his Dandyism, Wilde simultaneously participated in the society that he actively sought to distinguish himself from:

Applying Baudelairean notions of the dandy, we may perceive in Wilde's life a covert, burning need to gain distinction, to acquire originality while apparently adhering to a broad range of middle- and upper-class conformities and conventionalities likely to confer success and social acceptability.

This paradox of one’s place in society allows Jonathan Dollimore to argue that “Wilde’s experience of deviant desire ... leads him not to escape the repressive ordering of society, but to a reinscription within it, and an inversion of the binaries [surface vs. depth, lying

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18 Ibid., 95.
19 Ibid., 96.
20 Ibid., 97.
21 Donohue, “Salome and the Wildean Art.”
vs. truth, change vs. stasis, difference vs. essence, etc.] upon which that ordering depends.”

Thus, Wilde’s same-sex activity is not explicitly “homosexual” as the term is understood today but rather transgressive. Dollimore finds the roots of Wilde’s “transgressive aesthetic” in the writer’s conception of the Individual, which rejects “public opinion, mediocrity, and conventional morality,” to allow for “cultural diversity and difference.” Furthermore, Dollimore argues that Wilde fashions a series of paradoxes in which the appearance, superficiality, and insincerity that define the society Wilde criticizes carry greater value than nature, depth, and truth, for these too are social constructions but ones that actively attempt to exclude difference. By constructing a “transgressive desire ... both rooted in culture and the impetus for affirming different/alternative kinds of culture,” Wilde demonstrates how “the outlaw turns up as inlaw,” for both share the same “cultural dimension;” taking this inversion even further, Wilde, as an artist, aesthete, and critic, uses society’s cultural tools against itself to construct those qualities that society forbids.

III. *Salome* and the Transgressive Aesthetic

Turning now to *Salome*, we can read a transgressive desire as the driving motivation for the play. Salome enacts transgression much the same way as Wilde constructed it in his own life. Like Wilde, Salome also possesses a “vagrant,” illicit desire for the deeply spiritual Jokanaan. Just as Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic undermines societal structures by demonstrating how society necessarily includes that which it

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23 Ibid., 8, 9.
24 Ibid., 14-5.
actively seeks to exclude, Salome’s sexual desire also undermines the existing social order for both defiant female power and homosexuality threaten patriarchal structures in similar ways. Additionally, Wilde presents Salome’s deviant sexuality through her Symbolist association with the moon, causing the “powerful disturbance of nature,” discussed in Chapter One, or, in other words, undermining the value society places on the natural by depicting Salome’s “unnatural” desires through a natural element.

Furthermore, *Salome* enforces the same relationship between aesthetic philosophy and sexuality that Gagnier identified as a defining aspect of Wilde’s homosexuality. In Gagnier’s construction, non-“purposive” sexuality corresponds to non-“purposive” art and both are apparent in the play:25 Salome’s sexual desire and action at the end of the play is merely self-gratifying, and the play as a work of art itself carries no moral function within conventional standards. For Gagnier, *Salome* is “a spectacle of purposeless, ‘unnatural,’ unproductive, and uncensored art and desire.”26 Clarifying the connection between aesthetic art and sexuality, Gagnier writes, “In the work that he felt was his best illustration of art for art’s sake, through the figure of Salome, he portrayed sex for sex’s sake, without purpose or production.”27 The focus on the lack of utility (within societal standards) and “unnaturalness” of *Salome* further strengthen the relationship between Salome’s transgression and Wilde’s.

This interpretation may appear forced, however, for it apparently restates the previous analysis and seems an exercise in semantics whereby the word “transgressive” replaces “female power.” Indeed, Gagnier’s discussion of power, Decadence, and sexuality, points out the overlap between a feminist reading and a homosexual one.

26 Ibid., 140.
27 Ibid., 165.
Ultimately, the difference lies in the contextualization of the interpretation. At the end of his reading of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, even Sinfield concedes that “meaning is contextual, and once Wilde enters the dock and his relations with Alfred Douglas are invoked, the book is deafeningly queer.” A similar claim can be made about *Salome*, not only because of Wilde’s life and works at large but also because of implications in the text itself. Gagnier favors the homosexual reading after discussing the negative view towards women as embodying materialism, paralleling White’s misogynist reading. Kate Millett identifies imagery that suggests the homosexual subtext in Salome’s descriptions of Jokanaan: “The kiss she courted, the ivory knife cutting the pomegranate, the scarlet band on a tower of ivory – all are images of anal penetration or fellatio.” Additionally, Salome’s usurpation of the gaze (a male power) in her long speeches describing Jokanaan’s appearance can be construed as both female empowerment and Salome’s adoption of a masculine quality; Gagnier writes that “throughout her catalogue of the parts of Iokanaan’s body, her metaphoric flights relentlessly appropriate the man,” ultimately exposing a man to the gaze, again suggesting homosexuality.

Perhaps the strongest support for a homosexual, or at least transgressive, reading of the relationship between Salome and Jokanaan comes from the existence of the explicit homosexual relation between Narraboth and Herodias’s Page. That this relationship serves as a dramatic foil to the implicit one becomes evident through Aubrey

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32 Tookey, “The Fiend that Smites,” 30. Tookey ultimately constructs the subverted gender relationship as a female homosexual relation (see 34-5), but the idea of a man being exposed to the gaze also possesses a male homosexual quality.
33 Though in the typical nineteenth-century (and also Biblical) style of downplaying homosexuality, the Page refers to Narraboth as his “brother.”
Beardsley’s illustrations for *Salome*. Wilde himself acknowledged that Beardsley would catch the subtleties of his text: in the edition he sent to Beardsley, Wilde wrote, “For the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is and can see that invisible dance.” Beardsley’s ambiguous images fall between satire and sincerity, thus allowing for various interpretations. Consider the image entitled *The Woman in the Moon*, originally titled *The Man in the Moon*, which shows a face in the moon overlooking two escaping lovers (see Appendix, Figure 1). Most scholars assume this image shows a scene not in the play where Jokanaan and Salome stand defenseless before the moon-face, which has been construed as Herod’s face and as Wilde’s face. Elaine Showalter offers an alternate reading, claiming that Herodias’s Page and Narraboth are the two figures. The ambiguity of the image allows for both interpretations, strengthening the dramatic association between the two homosexual relationships.  

Beardsley further emphasizes this point by including an image of the two homosexual lovers, *A Platonic Lament*, showing Herodias’s Page kneeling over the body of the dead Narraboth with the same mysterious face in the background (see Appendix, Figure 2). This illustration contrasts directly to *The Dancer’s Reward*, which depicts a corresponding scene of Salome contemplating Jokanaan’s death (see Appendix, Figure 3). The two images seem to complement each other, for whereas the first is centered on the lower right, the second is centered on the upper left. Additionally, the first image consists mostly of white space, with the only black being the shroud that covers Narraboth’s body, but in the second Salome’s black robe, perhaps a reinterpretation of the shroud, fills most of the visual plain. As the title suggests, the first depicts a tender relationship instilled with the sorrow of death. The second image, however, contains violence and perversity, not only through

the illustration of Jokanaan’s decapitated head but also through Salome’s unrelenting expression. The parallels between these two images help to highlight some of the similarities between the two relationships in the text; at their core, both relationships embody some type of “vagrant” sexual desire.

Ultimately, Salome’s sexual identification fails precise categorization. In The Dancer’s Reward, Beardsley captures the complexity of the character Salome, for while she is part of a homosexual relation (as the parallel to A Platonic Lament would suggest), she is still pictured as a vindictive, perverted and sexually frustrated woman35 exacting her revenge. After reviewing the various interpretations of Salome’s sexuality, William Tydeman and Steven Price conclude that “the sexual identities of Wilde’s characters should be seen as fluid and unstable rather than fixed and easily definable.”36 Perhaps this ambiguity of sexual identity lies at the heart of a thorough interpretation of Salome, for Wilde himself eludes the definite sexual labels we use today.

IV. Strauss’s Sensitivity to the Sexual Complexity in Wilde’s Work

Strauss captures the complexity of Salome’s sexual characterization in the first leitmotif associated with Salome, the clarinet solo from the opening of the opera (Example 2.5) and its uses. In addition to the previously discussed C-sharp/G duality inherent in the opening “scale,” the motive itself splits into a compound melody (the top pitches read G-sharp, A, C-sharp and the bottom are G-sharp, F-double-sharp, and E)

35 For an explicit analysis of the sexual image in the outlines of this illustration, see Linda Gertner Zatlin, Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 95. Notably, Zatlin denies homosexual readings of Beardsley’s works, though many scholars interpret Beardsley’s illustrations in this way.
before landing on the C-sharp that is perceived as tonic due to the C-sharp minor chord in m. 2 (see Example 1.1 for the harmonic setting of Example 2.5). Already, the music conveys a sense of Salome’s divided nature: she is split between the chaste virgin (hence the relatively predictable upper line) and the exotic seductress (expressed in the unresolved chromaticism and the augmented second of the lower line), though neither part explicitly suggests a C-sharp tonic. Furthermore, Strauss’s placement of this motive just before Narraboth’s description of the beautiful Princess and the Page’s portrayal of the deadly moon emphasizes the relationship between the fractured leitmotif and Salome’s textual characterization.

The treatment of this motive throughout the opera hints at the transgressive subtext. The motive accompanies most of Salome’s interactions with Narraboth and Jokanaan but is conspicuously absent in her dealings with Herod even when she forces him to take the oath and later asks for Jokanaan’s head. The use of the motive in the scenes involving Narraboth and Jokanaan not only serves as a musical identifier for Salome but also corresponds to her attempts to exert her sexual will over both. The exclusion of the motive from Salome’s exchange with Herod supports this added association for the leitmotif of Example 2.5: Salome does not need to seduce Herod because he is already enamored of her. That the music implies Salome’s need to use her associative leitmotif with Narraboth is not insignificant, for it suggests a lack of predisposition on Narraboth’s part for Salome, corresponding to his explicit homosexual relationship with the Page in the text, many of the implications of which Strauss actually excised from the libretto.
Furthermore, the variation of the motive that Strauss uses only in the interactions with Jokanaan from Scene Three correlates to Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic. The variation, first occurring at 83/4 when Salome introduces herself to Jokanaan, lacks the ambiguous scale that opens the gesture and stays diatonic within its key (in this case A major) by changing the augmented second of the lower melodic line to a major second (see Example 3.1) Salome’s passion for Jokanaan, who represents one form of patriarchy, forces her to remove her exotic element, one of her most questionable aspects. A deeper reading, however, illustrates that this chromatic-to-diatonic change corresponds to a constructed “other” adopting the “normal” (in musical terms, the diatonic) and subverting this norm to contain the illicit desire of something that should belong outside the norm, thus enacting a transgression. For Strauss, this diatonic variation of Salome’s first leitmotif serves a more practical purpose, as it leads directly into Jokanaan’s strictly diatonic music, yet the parallel it has with Wilde’s transgresive aesthetic is notable.

Example 3.1 Variation of Salome’s first leitmotif; Richard Strauss, Salome, rehearsal 83, mm. 4-7, Violin Solo (Full Score)

At the same time, Salome’s characterization as a femme fatale gains musical strength through the handling of her three principal leitmotifs throughout the opera. Together, the three leitmotifs (Examples 2.5, 2.6, and 3.2) emphasize different aspects of Salome’s personality: her split nature between virgin and exotic temptress, her role as a seductive dancer, and her obsession with sexuality, respectively. As the opera progresses,
the repetition of these motives at critical points add further nuance to their meaning. The use of Example 2.5 just before Salome’s final monologue creates a direct association between Salome’s divided personality as established by the first usage of the leitmotif (discussed above) and her power to castrate. Example 2.6 strongly suggests an exotically distorted Viennese waltz, and its association with Salome’s Dance specifically occurs from its first use in the opera, just after Salome says “Es ist seltsam, dass der Mann meiner Mutter mich so ansieht,” (“It’s so curious when my own mother’s husband looks at me so”), foreshadowing the later scene in which Herod’s appeals for Salome to dance are juxtaposed with Herodias’s irritated response that Herod should stop looking at her daughter. The structural importance of Example 2.6 to Salome’s Dance (discussed in the previous chapter) further enhances this leitmotif’s association with the Dance of the Seven Veils. In addition to associating Salome with her Dance, this motive also provides a perverted re-interpretation of an accepted Western tradition that itself suggests illicit sexual behavior. Finally, the obsessive repetition of the motive that originally sets her text “Ich will deinen Mund küssen, Jochanaan” (“I long for your mouth’s kisses, Jokanaan”) (see Example 3.2) musically emphasizes Salome’s single motivation for the course of the opera: her unfulfilled sexual desire. This leitmotif is defined by its repeated starting pitch and subsequent move up a minor third to the dominant, further emphasizing obsession and dissatisfaction. After Strauss finally adds this motive to Salome’s musical language (among the last of Salome’s leitmotifs to occur in the opera), he reuses it frequently for the rest of the piece, providing an internal mirror to Salome’s psyche. In the scene with Jokanaan when she begs to kiss him and he constantly rejects her, Wilde

illustrates Salome’s sexual fixation by having her respond to Jokanaan’s religious advice, prophecies, and banishments with the restatement of her desire, and Strauss musically intensifies the effect through restatements of this motive during Jokanaan’s speeches. Due to this musical treatment, Strauss can place Salome and her sexual desire more resolutely in this scene than Wilde can (if two characters were to speak at the same time, they would become unintelligible) and in so doing demonstrate Salome’s complete indifference to any aspect of Jokanaan but the sexual, strengthening the *femme fatale* aspects of her personality.

Example 3.2 “Ich will deinen Mund küssen” motive; Richard Strauss, *Salome*, rehearsal 122, mm. 10-13, Salome (Full Score)

Strauss bestows his Salome with another musical power that makes her all the more terrifying. Throughout the opera, she has an uncanny ability to manipulate motives associated with other people and ideas, particularly those of Jokanaan. Strauss uses this device to greatest effect when Salome first comments on Jokanaan’s pale skin (78/5); the music that accompanied Jokanaan’s ascent out of the cistern (start of Scene 3) now leads to Salome’s awakening passion. Similarly, before Salome begins fantasizing about Jokanaan’s beauty, the violins play a varied version of his prophetic motives at 90/3, which originally accompanied Jokanaan’s first on-stage speech where he condemns Herodias (see Example 3.3a,b). The beginnings of the two motives are noticeably the same but Salome changes the end to a rising line, creating a sense that she has possessed
one of Jokanaan’s leitmotifs for her own purposes. Just after this, she says “Ich bin verliebt in deinen Leib, Jochanaan!” (“Your body wakens my desire, Jokanaan”), changing what originally denoted divine will into a corporeal sensation. This musical perversion occurs again after Salome comments on the beauty of Jokanaan’s body, with the altered motive in the cellos preceding her request to touch his flesh (rehearsal 95). She usurps the motive again before fetishizing his hair (101/3); during the next monologue about his hair, Salome appropriates another of Jokanaan’s motives (compare the clarinet part at 106/8 to the bassoon part at rehearsal 67). These appropriations amount to self-conscious perversion as Salome sexualizes gestures that were once spiritual.

Example 3.3a Jokanaan’s original leitmotif; Richard Strauss, Salome, rehearsal 66, mm. 1-4, First Horn (Full Score)

Example 3.3b Salome’s Variation of Jokanaan’s leitmotif; Richard Strauss, Salome, 90/3 to 91/4, First Violin (Full Score)
This last method of depicting Salome’s sexual perversion once again obscures the difference between *femme fatale* and transgressive qualities. On the one hand, Salome’s sexual re-treatment of Jokanaan’s spiritual gestures demonstrates her power as *femme fatale* to absorb and reconfigure the defining features of a decidedly masculine character. On the other, it once again suggests an appropriation and subversion of the (religious) norm by a constructed other, amounting to transgression.

Strauss’s musical setting presents numerous possibilities for this type of transgressive reading because the music also creates a correspondence between the Salome/Jokanaan and Narraboth/Page relationships. Puffett observes that Strauss varies the motives associated with Salome and Narraboth in similar ways. According to Puffett, the “*progressive* character [emphasis in original]” of the variations musically represents the increasing stress the two characters feel over the course of the opera. Puffett contrasts this quality with the variations of a motive associated with Jokanaan, noting that the relative lack of change in the subsequent repetitions of Jokanaan’s motives shows his inflexibility and solidity, regardless of the situations he faces.38 Through motivic usage, the music itself reinforces the parallelism between Salome and Narraboth that exists in the text itself. The opening of the opera further emphasizes this correlation for the dialogue between the Page and Narraboth musically anticipates the dramatic tension between Salome and Jokanaan. Salome’s presence is felt from the beginning by the use of her motive from Example 2.5 and the clear establishment of C-sharp minor. In m. 6

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(see Example 1.1), the D-major/minor ninth chord can literally be construed as the Neapolitan of C-sharp but the later move to a G-dominant-seventh chord refigures this chord as predominant of C; in a very loose reading (ignoring the coloristic passing chords which undermine tonal function by not resolving sevenths and leading tones), the Page’s entrance is set up to be in C, Jokanaan’s key, thus musically anticipating the later dialogue between Salome and the Prophet. Yet, the Page is not Jokanaan, so his music begins in B minor instead.

The musical setting directly engages with the transgressive aesthetic in two final ways. As discussed in Chapter One, the leitmotif characterizing Salome’s desire to kiss Jokanaan’s mouth turns into the same leitmotif used to depict her perverted obsession with possessing his head during the musical interlude to Scene Four through a change of timbre and later, through, textual association. The two motives share the same opening, but the ends feature contrasting contours, indicating a subtle shift in intention (compare Examples 3.2 and 1.3). Following a transgressive interpretation, this transformation suggests that the first usage of the motive contains in itself the subsequent connotation, for “abnormality is not just the opposite, but the necessarily always present antithesis of normality.” The music implies that Salome’s desire to kiss Jokanaan already encompasses her desire to have his head; the two are the same. Puffett argues effectively against a literal approach to leitmotivic analysis in Salome, remarking that it borders on the absurd to posit a dramatic function for the relationship between the setting of

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39 The D-major-minor-ninth chord can also be interpreted as D/A polychord, emphasized by the A-minor arpeggio over Salome’s name in the vocal line, further representing the fissures in Salome’s personality.
40 The first and clearest use for the leitmotif associated with Salome’s desire for Jokanaan’s head is in the interlude to Scene Four. Throughout her dealings with Herod after the Dance, this motive and variations on it set the majority of her curt responses to Herod as he tries to dissuade her.
41 Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence, 15.
Jokanaan’s “Wenn er kommt” (rehearsal 13), which also begins with a rising minor third, and this motive for Salome’s desires. Yet I would argue that this connection is imperative to a transgressive study of the opera. This musical correlation indicates that Salome’s deviant desire is necessarily inherent in Jokanaan’s own religious proclamations, which is not to suggest that Jokanaan engages with Salome’s sexuality. Rather, the musical relationships confirm Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic. Furthermore, the subversion and inversion of the normal by the other serves to release the transgressive quality, and this is unmistakably what occurs in Salome as her ability to voice her deviant desire is a form of liberation.

This same transgressive appropriation and reinscription of the norm occurs on a larger scale with respect to tonality in general in Salome. The prevalence of functionally ambiguous music in the score separates the entire work from Strauss’s oeuvre to this stage in his career. The point is not that Salome the character engages the transgressive aesthetic by use of exclusively atonal music in a tonal context; in fact, that is not the case in the work as a whole. Instead, the opera Salome, with its predominantly “advanced,” modernist approach to tonality, making completely tonal passages stand out, demonstrates the opera’s inversion and subversion of traditionally accepted musical practices. In Wilde’s output, according to Dollimore, this type of “subversive inversion” is motivated by an underlying “non-centred or vagrant desire,” and ultimately the subordination of the natural liberates the transgressive aspect. Dollimore only makes this statement after having studied the bulk of Wilde’s output and noticing the prevalence of this trend in general, so to make a comparable assertion about Strauss proves difficult.

Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence, 14.
as most of Strauss’s works do not push tonality to this extreme. It is notable, however, that *Elektra* is the only other work on such a scale that subverts tonality in a similar way, and *Elektra* also centers on a “vagrant desire,” though of an incestuous rather than homosexual nature.

Ultimately, whether *Salome* depicts the machinations of a *femme fatale* or the societal subversion and inversion of a transgressor, both Wilde and Strauss present the same response to this usurpation of male authority: a final confirmation of the patriarchal structure. Not only does Strauss provide a musical setting for Wilde’s final stage direction signaling Salome’s death, but he also emphasizes Salome’s utter lack of power in her society by concluding in C, the key associated with Jokanaan and Herod, after she had just emphatically reached C-sharp Major at the climax of her final monologue. Yet after the tonal re-configuration that has taken place in this opera, and particularly the established normalcy of C-sharp and tonal ambiguity by its end, a unison C will never sound the same again.

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44 The conclusion in a key associated with Jokanaan as well as Herod underscores Millett’s point that Jokanaan summons Salome’s death.
APPENDIX

IMAGES FOR WILDE’ S *SALOME* BY AUBREY BEARDSLEY

*Figure 1* Aubrey Beardsley, *The Woman in the Moon* (In Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, London, 1938.)
Figure 2 Aubrey Beardsley, *A Platonic Lament* (In Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, London, 1938.)
Figure 3 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Dancer’s Reward* (In Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, London, 1938.)
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