

# The Beheading: Salome's Gesture in the Works of Wilde, Moreau and Beardsley

## Abstract

The paper explores the problem of female subjectivity in nineteenth-century literature and visual art, focusing on the figure of Salome in the play by Oscar Wilde and the paintings of Gustave Moreau and Aubrey Beardsley. The biblical story of the Jewish princess Salome and John the Baptist, as well as the fascination with the severed head served on a silver platter, is of interest to Julia Kristeva in her book *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*. For Kristeva John the Baptist can be thought of as “the figure of the figure”, he sets the course of the figure of “prophecy in actuality”. On the other hand, Kristeva sees Salome as the divine castrator who incorporates the powers of horror. She is the one who invites us to experience the figure of John the Baptist in its severing and its dance. By this manner Salome is a singular figure who possesses the capacity of that which goes beyond representation.

In the nineteenth century we can see a shift in the artistic perspective through which Salome's story is introduced. Using Kristeva's theory, this paper will propose the term “disfigure” to refer to Salome as one who disfigures the whole. Beyond the tragic delight for the audience that such a gesture of “disfiguring” brings, it is a site of a turning point in the history of the reception of Salome's figure in art. She is not just the seductive dancer, the object of perverse male gaze, but also the subject, the doer and agent of the “incision”.

## Keywords

*figure, powers of horror, Julia Kristeva, Salome, Oscar Wilde*

## 1. Figure and Kristeva. The relentless fascination with the severed head

At the very end of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*, the guarantor of one of the key beheadings in the history of severed heads finds her own death. Obsessed with the figure of Salome, with his drama Wilde became a part of the Salomania of literature and art of the 19th century, along with G. Flaubert, J. Huysmans, H. Heine, G. Moreau, A. Beardsley, to name a few. The literature of the decadence sees in Salome a heroine, which is extremely separated from the one in the New Testament, where she is merely a controlled puppet, an unnamed daughter of Herodias, a dancer of an unnamed dance. The spotlight of literature and art in the 19th century falls upon eroticism, the depiction of the body, the imagination of the dance of the seven veils. Wilde, as the name of the play suggests, puts her in the centre of his tragedy, focuses the gaze toward her, and finally – kills her off. But why is the death of the princess requested in Wilde's version? What is the gesture that urges Herod Antipas to wish the death of the one from whom no one can look away? Generally, the fascination around John the Baptist's beheading culminates in an earlier moment – with the head served on a silver platter. And what a relentless fascination! In *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*, Julia Kristeva justifies this interest in the severed head through the need of human beings to make visible the subjective intimacy of the soul, through the need of using the visible in order to represent the invisible:

That palpation of the invisible surely had confronted them with the fundamental invisible that is death: the disappearance of our carnal form and its most salient parts, which are the head, the limbs, and the sex organs, prototypes of vitality. To represent the invisible (the anguish of death as well as the jouissance of thought's triumph over it), wasn't it necessary to begin by representing the loss of the visible (the loss of the bodily frame, the vigilant head, the ensconced genitals)? (Kristeva 2012, 4)

Having laid out this hypothesis toward the interest in the depiction of the severed head in the beginning of her book, Kristeva analyses the figure of John the Baptist in the chapter "The Ideal Figure; or A Prophecy in Actuality". For Kristeva, the prophet seems to us to be

a “figure of the Figure” because his death “reconciles incision and perspective, sacrifice and resurrection” (Kristeva 2012, 66). The term “figure” refers to the Latin meaning *shape, sketch, drawing*. In the subchapter “Figure: Event, History, Promise”, Kristeva herself notes the connection with the root “fingere” to bring forward the meaning of “plasticity”, which we find in model and modelling, for example in sculpture – the art form which contributes greatly to the volume of the concept along with portraiture in painting.

On the basis of Erich Auerbach, Kristeva recalls the long history of the word, which shapes the fate of representation in our history. The “palpation” of the invisible or “groping” is this movement between presence and absence, between death and vitality, between the raised and the severed head. Movement between the two is possible when a sensory metamorphosis occurs between what eyes can see and what hands can touch. This synesthetic osmosis of the visual and tactile is hidden in the modelling of the figure, which in Auerbach will lead to the opposition figure/truth in order to remove their contradiction, imposed upon the thinking in figurative speech. With Auerbach, there is something else hidden under the figure – not to mask and falsify something untrue, but, on the contrary, to reveal a truth that is always there and its “oncoming” is possible by figuratising it.

In this way Kristeva establishes the connection between the “figure” and the “event”, as already pointed out by her in the title of the chapter discussed just now. What she introduces, however, is the temporal value we can deduce from our understanding of the “figure”. From her favourite author St. Augustine and Hegel’s notion of *Aufhebung* to her own concept of mother tongue (a linguistic event that brings to the surface what is said and the “precipitated” meaning, which makes the unarticulated perceptible and sets the structure of the prediction, the premonition and the expectation that something will be said), Kristeva understands the figure not as a spatial topos, but as a temporal inversion and reversal. John the Baptist can be called the “figure of the Figure” insofar as he embodies this historical promise in the flesh, he sets the course of the figure of “prophecy in actuality” and mediates between the letter of the Scripture and the factuality of what is to come.

This is the figure for Kristeva, she allows “the New to be immersed in the Old, to discover it and be inspired by it” (Kristeva 2012, 59). Although many, according to Kristeva, have lost the memory of such myths,

stories and metamorphoses related to the figure, she draws attention that the astounding power of the severed head laid on a platter has not diminished: on the contrary, it is a “source of many irresolvable personal and cultural projections” (Kristeva 2012, 65). The present text, based on the invisible and visible connections between the paintings of Gustave Moreau, Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde’s play, without abandoning this cultural fascination with decapitation, similar to Kristeva, will insist that the image of John the Baptist is a figure which reveals the genesis of figurative prophecy as an invitation to read, that is as an invitation “to join the image to the text, the visible to the history and the myth” (Kristeva 2012, 65). Through this regard toward the vision of Moreau, Beardsley and Wilde, we will continue in the direction that Kristeva proposes “to experience the figure, severed *and* whole, in its severing *and* its dance: to inhabit it, rigid *and* fleeting, violent *and* happy, blood *and* spirit, horror *and* promise” (Kristeva 2012, 65–66).

## 2. Salome: Kristeva, Moreau, Beardsley, Wilde

Kristeva’s proposition concerning the perception of the figure can be compared with the mythical Salome, insofar as Salome is a provocateur who invites us to experience the figure of John the Baptist in “its severing and its dance”. For Kristeva in *The Severed head* Salome is a figure who illustrates *power of horror* intertwined with the horror of the feminine: “But, incised or imploded, the power of horror would be nothing without the horror of the feminine. Salome’s fate, which prepares for the more intrinsic, impregnated visions of the feminine by nineteenth-century artists, is stunning proof of this” (Kristeva 2012, 110). Tracing the fascination of artists on Salome’s figure in literature and art, Kristeva sees her as a sublime woman, a castrating female: “Charged with the obscure charms of symbolism, Gustave Moreau, Huysmans, and Félicien Rops participate in this cult to an apocalyptic Eve. Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley glorify severed-headed ghosts and, continually, the fatal Salome, divine castrator” (Kristeva 2012, 110). Incorporating the *powers of horror* this sublime woman represents the figure, which is beyond representation. Following Kristeva’s conceptualization of Salome as the *sublime female castrator*, I will observe the presence of her figure in the decadent and symbolist art and literature, or in particular in Moreau, Wilde and Beardsley.

But how is the interest toward the mythical dancer in that particular time period motivated historically? In “Idols of Perversity” Bram Dijkstra notes that Salome is the central figure, responsible for the male fantasies in the second half of 19th century. He justifies this interest through her nuanced biography, worthy of fetishization: “What better source for the fruitful conjunction of the period’s numerous libidinous fetishes than this virginal adolescent with a viraginous mother, a penchant for exotic dances, and a hunger for a man’s holy head” (Dijkstra 1986, 379).

Gustave Moreau played a particularly important role in the mythologizing of Salome in the second half of the 19th century through his paintings. In 1876, sixteen years before Wilde published his play of the same name in French (1891), Moreau added Salome to his unique repertoire of perverted women which up until that moment included Leda, Europa and Messalina, as well as several chimaeras. Moreau, who left behind a significant number of works (over 1,200 paintings and watercolors and 10,000 sketches), painted mostly biblical and mythological scenes. Among the notable figures that capture his interest, Salome stands out, featured in nineteen paintings and numerous sketches. However, before he took interest in her, Moreau’s fascination toward the head without an adjacent body can be seen in his paintings depicting Orpheus’s death. In these few works, Moreau shows a young Thracian woman holding the head of the musician. The girl is in a static position and in all versions of Moreau she holds the poet’s head placed on a lyre, while staring directly at him. Notably, these portrayals of the Thracian woman (1864 and 1865) preceded historically his renowned interpretations of Salome, and according to Dijkstra, the myth of Orpheus had, “for all practical purposes, been the later nineteenth century’s perfect entry into the realm of the fantasy of the severed head” (Dijkstra 1986, 380).

By 1876, Moreau was ready to “embark on a more detailed representation of the manner in which an intellectual can lose his head over women” (Dijkstra 1986, 380). This year is especially important for the artist, as he presented two of his most famous paintings (out of 19 completed and more than 100 drawings and sketches) centered around the Jewish princess. These two works are *Salome Dancing in Front of Herod* and *The Apparition*, and they were first shown at the Paris Salon. The exhibition, which at the time was still one of the most prestigious cultural events in Europe, organised by the French Academy of Fine Arts, was a great success for Moreau, who would return again

and again to the apocalyptic dancer. *Salome Dancing in Front of Herod* (Fig. 1) presents the Jewish princess in the foreground, dressed in lavish oriental clothes, standing at her fingertips, almost levitating. In her right hand she holds a lotus flower, while her left hand, stretched forward, points toward an overhead direction. Her gaze is directed toward the ground. Observers of this Salome are Herod (sitting on a throne in the perspective centre of the picture with the insignias of his royal power), Herodias (in the background on the left, half-hidden behind a massive column), a musician (below Herodias), as well as the executioner (to the right of Herod). Below the dancer's feet are scattered flowers on a red carpet. Everyone except the executioner is looking at the dancer. The painting caused a sensation in the Salon because of the exceptional detail of the image, as well as because of Salome's posture. Through it she seems to belong to the spaces of mysticism with the gaze turned down and "inward" as well as with her body which rises almost above the ground in this ballet step.



Fig. 1: Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing in Front of Herod*, 1876

Vasile-Ovidiu Prejmerean points out that in his own texts Moreau draws attention to the effect that this type of woman can bring, as applying not only to the common man:

This woman who represents the eternal woman, flimsy bird, often fatal, walking through life with a flower in hand, in search of her vague ideal, often terrible, and always walking, trampling everything under her feet, even geniuses and saints. This dance is executed, this mysterious walk takes place before the death who looks at her incessantly, gaping and attentive, and before the executioner whose sword strikes... A saint, a decapitated head are at the end of her path which will be strewn with flowers. Everything happens in a sanctuary that elevates the spirit towards the gravity and the idea of higher things. (Prejmerean, 2020)

The mystery and power of this woman, sweeping even geniuses and saints, is further enhanced by the depiction of the lotus. A sacred flower for Egyptians and Indians, the symbolism of the lotus is associated with femininity, fertility and life, but also with oblivion and apathy, which we know from Homer's *Odyssey*. And insofar as the consumption of this mythical flower by Homer's lotophages leads to the symbolic death of the subject through the loss of knowledge of one's own purpose and being, we propose that in Moreau the lotus is present to play the role of an oracle that predicts actual death. In this sense, Salome's duality is emphasized in Moreau's painting with the presence of the lotus as a harbinger of death. Moreover, the raised left hand of the dancer can be perceived as a gesture of greeting this inevitable forthcoming which is death, as a prophecy of the loss, the loss of the visible in order to represent the invisible, as a signifier of the future beheading.

In *The Apparition* (Fig. 2), the princess no longer holds a lotus flower and her left hand points not to a moment of the future, but celebrates the gesture of the victorious Salome; the finger points to a certain object: the head of John the Baptist. The severed head is shown levitating above the ground, shrouded in a halo of light. In an aesthetic similar to the other painting, the princess is on the tip of her toes. But this time Salome is beyond the dance: she steps on an ominous carpet of flowers and blood. The wish is fulfilled, the daughter of Herodias has found her "vague ideal", *The Apparition* fascinates with the horror of the pool of blood, the head without its adjacent body and Salome's gaze, directed toward John the Baptist's head.

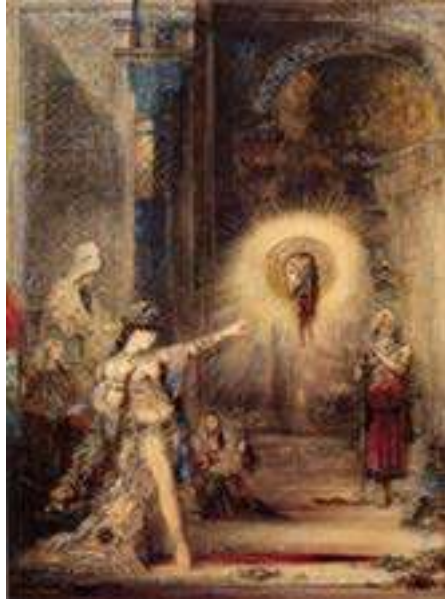


Fig. 2: Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876

Oscar Wilde finds in Gustave Moreau's paintings an overlap with his own sense of Salome. It is uncertain whether Wilde attended the exhibition, but by the time he started writing his play he had read Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel *Against Nature*, which contemplates on Moreau's works. In the fifth chapter of one of the most prominent decadent novels, Moreau's two paintings are presented through an ekphrasis by the protagonist Jean des Esseintes. Oscar Wilde's biographer Richard Ellmann considers Huysmans to be a main provocateur of Wilde's interest towards Moreau. Ellmann summarises Huysmans' view on Salome as a new type of heroine in the realm of painting through Jean des Esseintes:

Only Moreau has conveyed that she is not just a dancing girl, but the symbolic incarnation of undying lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, the accursed beauty exalted above all other beauties by the catalepsy that hardens her flesh and steels her muscles, the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like the Helen of ancient myth, everything that she touches. (Ellmann 1988, 340)

Not only will Wilde identify himself with Moreau's vision, the writer will also search for another artist who can come close to this thinking



of the figure of Salome. In 1893 Wilde was looking for a suitable artist to contribute with illustrations the play's English edition. That year the young and then unknown artist Aubrey Beardsley had read the French edition of *Salome* and immediately after that created his version of the Jewish dancer, inspired by Wilde. The painting, titled *J'ai baisé ta bouche Iokanaan*<sup>1</sup>, was printed in the first issue of the fine arts magazine *The Studio* in April 1893. *J'ai baisé ta bouche Iokanaan* depicts a completely levitating Salome holding the head of John the Baptist in her hands. A water lily is at the bottom right corner, as if constructed from the dripping blood that comes from the prophet's head. Beardsley presents Salome, who has just kissed the severed head of John the Baptist – a sublimatory moment in the play as well. Wilde, fascinated by Beardsley's work, hired the English artist, and the illustrated edition of the play was published shortly afterwards, in 1894. Beardsley redrew his design of *J'ai baisé ta bouche Iokanaan* for the book, simplified its forms and changed the title to *The Climax* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*, 1893

<sup>1</sup> The title refers to the final words which Salome utters in Wilde's play.

Beardsley's sixteen drawings were well received by critics, making the series the most distinctive of his career. Nevertheless, Wilde did not find in these paintings the Salome of his expectations. Beardsley was experimental and eccentric, trying to make his way toward a new artistic style, which was far from the Byzantine style that Wilde had expected to see. Because of the young artist's overall Art Nouveau black and white style, compared to the rich colours of Moreau, Wilde never found in Beardsley "his" figures of Salome and King Herod. The writer was disappointed, but this never became clear to either the public eye or to Beardsley. Richard Ellman notes that the writer allowed himself to express dissatisfaction only in his personal correspondence with Charles Ricketts (artist, illustrator and friend of Wilde): "My Herod is like the Herod of Gustave Moreau, wrapped in his jewels and sorrows. My Salome is a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon." (Ellmann 1988, 376) In terms of visual representation in art, Wilde is completely satisfied only with Moreau, because of his Byzantine style and symbolism of the paintings, but mostly because of their similar thinking about the figure of the divine castrator. The truth is that the audience at the time was not aware of the interaction between Wilde and Moreau's framed artistic "contexts" above. Wilde himself felt the lack of such a reception and needed to delineate the author's intentions, to turn his attention towards the French artist's interpretation, to look for a reader who could bring this common "thing" between the two artists to the public. This is a "thing" that is both behind and abstract enough to be instantly recognizable. Namely, it is that they introduce a new type of hero/heroine, which are beyond the traditional paradigms of the protagonist or antagonist and in general the attempt to be determined and explained. The mystical light with which this new hero/heroine is enveloped is an effect of the indistinguishability in the artistic representation of the profane and the sacred, of the banal and the transcendent. That is why Herod is both immersed in luxury and sorrow, he is the paradoxically constructed figure of the compassionate villain. And Salome is seen as both a pagan, worshipping the moon and as an ecstatic saint.

But above all, what is present behind the works of Moreau and Wilde and what belongs to their structure is the autonomous subject. The flowers and blood in "The Apparition" are symbols that refer to opposite contexts, but here they are woven into a single space. The common carpet, that, which is "gathered" in a common network of

signifiers that are “running away”, is something that Wilde recognizes as his own in Moreau.

This mystique, which art achieves in painting, Wilde conveys in his tragedy; the horror of Salome stepping in blood from “The Apparition”, Wilde will convey with double force: the princess will not only walk over blood after the beheading, she will perform her “dance of the seven veils” in a puddle of blood<sup>2</sup> before John the Baptist’s death. Her gesture in the play can be seen on the one hand, through the gaze that leads to the murder, and on the other – through the kiss of the severed head. The gaze held a symbolic importance to Moreau; in the play Wilde gives the gaze a role of a main character. All but one are looking at Salome. In the course of the dramatic action, the princess herself expects to be seen by John the Baptist, the subject of her desire. Ironically, he is the only one who refuses to look at her. Receiving this rejection, Salome becomes the opposite of the figure of Medusa: instead of killing because of the gaze, she kills because the gaze is avoided. The monstrous moment with the kiss of the severed head at the end of the play can be thought of as the supreme gesture of Salome’s refusal to accept her rejection. And if John the Baptist is a “figure of the Figure”, then we could see Salome as a “disfigure”, as the one who disfigures the whole. Because you are denying me your body, your hair, your lips, your eyes, I will take them by force, I will request your death and avenge your rejection, this is what Wilde’s princess tells us. Beyond the paintings of Moreau and Beardsley, in Wilde’s play the princess is most sinister for crossing one last frontier: she administers the kiss and is therefore doomed to follow John the Baptist in death. Herod decides to kill his stepdaughter when he sees the last gesture of the rejected lover. We experience the figure of Salome in her totality of a murderess and disfigurer, in the rebellion and horror of the fulfilled promise “I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan” (Wilde 1907, 23).

That is why the phenomenon of Salomania in the 19th century occurred in the first place, we might think. Both the prophet and his murderer are examples which go beyond representation. And if for Julia Kristeva John the Baptist’s death combines sacrifice and resurrection, we can deduce he is a positive example of the sublime figure. On the other hand Salome, the divine castrator who coincides the powers of horror and the horror of the feminine, is a negative

<sup>2</sup> The blood of the young Syrian, captain of Herod’s guard, who commits suicide in front of Salome.

example of the sublime. Negative, but being dreamt of by the male<sup>3</sup> who tries to represent her again and again.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kristeva 2012, 110.