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WANTON AND WICKED:
TRACING THE EASTERN FEMME FATALES OF OSCAR WILDE'S ORIENTALIST
NARRATIVES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

WANTON AND WICKED:

TRACING THE EASTERN FEMME FATALES OF OSCAR WILDE'S ORIENTALIST
NARRATIVES

BY KRISTEN PEREZ

In this dissertation, I review the monstrous depictions of Eastern women that appear in Oscar Wilde's prominent Orientalist works. Across different literary genres, Wilde's poems "Athanasia" (1879, revised 1881), *The Sphinx* (1894), and his drama *Salome* (published in French in 1893, translated into English in 1894) each contain a feminine icon of the ancient East that was sensationalized in the nineteenth-century European cultural consciousness. I use Edward W. Said's discussion of Orientalism to examine how the feminine mummy of "Athanasia," the eponymous creature of *The Sphinx*, and the princess of *Salome* are reduced to sexual objects of Orientalist fantasy. Across these works, these monstrous women are marginalized by patriarchal control and dictated by the disparaging desires and often grotesque curiosities of their male counterparts. However, I demonstrate how Wilde reconstructs these Eastern women as femme fatales and that exhibit extraordinary control over their male observers' desires. Wilde's Oriental woman is presented as a powerful force of nature as she is often immortal and has innate supernatural abilities. Therefore, I argue that Wilde confronts Western tropes of sexual conquest and imperialist control over the Orient by establishing his Eastern femme fatales as indomitable figures who usurp male authority by weaponizing the transgressive sexual fantasies that are projected onto them. I propose that Wilde's Oriental femme fatale is constructed to critique the patriarchal structures of Western imperialism as she thwarts the submissive image associated

with the subaltern woman and instead uses her sexual allure to reflect her male oppressor's depravity and powerlessness.

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Introduction

This dissertation examines Irish playwright and poet Oscar Wilde's (1854 – 1900) construction of the monstrous femme fatale that appears in his Orientalist poems "Athanasia" (1879, revised 1881), *The Sphinx* (1894), and his drama *Salome*, which he published in French in 1893, and which his lover Alfred Douglas translated into English in 1894. These three works stand out in Wilde's oeuvre as each text distinctly contains a feminine subject who originates from the ancient East. The feminine mummy of "Athanasia" and the subject of his poem *The Sphinx* are associated with ancient Egypt and are objectified by the respective masculine speakers of each poem. Meanwhile, the princess of *Salome* exists in biblical Palestine where she is objectified by her incestuous stepfather. These iconic representations of the Orient were influenced by the literature of the late nineteenth century that frequently displayed Eastern women as exotic figures of sexual fantasy and colonial conquest. Thus, I review these works through Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which examines how Western society had created the Eastern Orient because "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). Through this lens, I explore how the male figures of each text use the Oriental woman as an objectified projection of Wilde's "underground self" that embodies his transgressive desires.

Said contends that Orientalism established a binary of stereotypes in which the Western Occident was rational, masculine, and virtuous while the Eastern Orient was feminine, depraved, and inferior (40). Therefore, I trace the stereotypically marginalized and exotic depictions of the Eastern women in Wilde's Orientalist texts and examine how Wilde restructures his Eastern women to subvert oppressive structures of patriarchal control through the femme fatale, or "deadly woman," archetype. The femme fatale archetype was popularized in nineteenth-century

Western literature, where she was portrayed as a violently conniving figure who used her seductive abilities to manipulate and ruin her enemy. I have chosen to trace the depictions of the Oriental femme fatales that appear in Wilde's Eastern works as he depicts the Oriental women as an inhuman and supernatural figure who intelligently subverts imperialist and patriarchal control by weaponizing her enigmatic and sexual charms. Thus, the feminine figures of "Athanasia," *The Sphinx*, and *Salome* reclaim their agency by manipulating their male observer where most Orientalist texts from the nineteenth century unveil the Eastern woman as a lustful yet passive recipient of patriarchal desire.

The inhuman aspects of each femme fatale reveal how Wilde worked to have these narratives connect with Western audiences by using popular and iconic images of the Orient that resonate with the archaeological characters seen among Orientalist popular culture. By using Orientalized icons of Egypt and other exotic Eastern imagery, Wilde's stories reveal the consequences faced in a world shaped by fantasy where empires lie crumbled from perverted desires and feminine seduction. Therefore, I first examine the mummy discovery in Wilde's "Athanasia" and how the poem empowers the supposed artifact of the East to reverse the conquest narrative and exert her control over English land. I then review his poem *The Sphinx* that similarly has a Western academic framework that attempts and terribly fails to study the Eastern creature in his room. Both poems initially offer the Western male an illusion of control over Eastern women, a misconception that leads to the observer's destruction. Finally, I review Wilde's Orientalist play, *Salome*, and first explore the cultural and historical influences that shaped the Salome story before Wilde's adaptation to explore her evolving image in the Orientalist imagination. I then review Wilde's version of the Salome story to highlight the key differences in his version that displayed the princess as a cunning and independent figure. This

version of the tale instead functions to incriminate Salome's lustful stepfather in the demise of John the Baptist. Thus, these texts are inspired from Orientalist narratives of male control over the Eastern woman. Yet, the male figures of Wilde's text uniquely concede to the power of the subaltern femme fatale. Throughout these works, Wilde's Eastern femme fatale is depicted as a powerful icon of femininity who can project her male observers fantasies and his fears of disempowerment.

Across the nineteenth century, Orientalism was heavily incorporated into the art of the Decadent and Symbolist circles that Wilde oscillated between. The aesthetics of the Orient, which Said describes as its "eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, [and] its supine malleability," functioned as a multi-sensory illusion of grandeur and sensuality, which drew from the semi-archaeological and often exaggerated imaginings of the East (Said 206). The images that emerged included intense visual imagery that fed into the heightened strangeness and seductiveness, the supposed ancient allure of an egregiously perfumed, decorated, but poisonous Orient. The Decadent aesthetics, which emphasized the moral decay and destructive aspects of excessive opulence, flourished in this enigmatic and unrestrained narrative space.

The Western socio-political environment which surrounded Wilde was largely defined by colonial expansion and exploration from the Age of Enlightenment, where "Europeans started to explore new continents" which eventually "reached its high point in the nineteenth century" (Sharp 4). One site of Europe's interest was in North Africa, specifically Egypt, after the country was made accessible by Napoleon Bonaparte's series of invasions (1798–1801). As French and English researchers, tourists, and adventurous travelers ventured into Egypt, the budding field of Egyptology became a massively popularized area of inquiry during the 1700–1900 period. This

academic field immensely shaped the popular culture and art produced during this era as Egyptian artifacts reached European museums, and travel writers produced engaging works that fed the Western imagination. Eleanor Dobson describes the effect that Egyptology had on literary genres during this time, claiming that Egypt's "versatility as signifier was such that it was at the heart of contemporaneous explorations of science and religion, magic and occultism, gender and sexuality" (3). Therefore, the geographical distance and general foreignness of Egypt made the location a suitable literary setting to explore controversial or outlandish ideas with curious European audiences.

However, this Western projection of Egypt's inherent strangeness is articulated by Said as a symptom of a larger colonial phenomenon. Said's seminal work describes the basis of Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (2). The Orient is assumed to geographically encompass Eastern areas that are disconnected from Western Europe, like the Levant, North Africa, India, and other Asian countries. However, Said notes that the Orient and Western Occident are "man-made" concepts that are merely separated by the imagined histories, vocabulary, and images (5). In other words, the Orient is an artificial product of Western perception based on no reality and instead reinvents the areas and residents of the Orient under a generalized existence as the "other." Thus, Said observes that "Orientalism is a form of paranoia" as Western Europe's tendencies to other the residents and cultures of these colonized spaces reflects Occidental fears, anxieties, and perversities (72).

Since the Oriental figure was constructed by negative social mores and Occidental fascination across nineteenth-century art, it is crucial to indicate the role that gender plays in these representations. The female subalterns of the Orient were met with magnified violence and

objectification because of her distance from the hegemonic systems of power in Western society that upheld masculinity and whiteness. John McLeod discusses the term “double colonization” to describe this layered form of oppression where “women are twice colonised – by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too” (120). This means that the Eastern woman seen in Orientalist narratives was rendered sub-human as she was restrained by patriarchal systems of power and was further othered by the “exotic” space she inhabited. Wilde’s Orientalist texts create narratives of these inhuman feminine Oriental figures yet portray them retaliating against the male figures who control and objectify them. Said claims that the Oriental female caricatures seen in European travel writing and novels show how Eastern “women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy” and that they “express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing” (207). While the Oriental feminine icons of Wilde’s texts are ultimately sensual “creatures” of that fantasy, they are cunning and unwilling subjects who fiercely oppose their male observers.

In each of these works, Wilde frames an Orientalist narrative around each of these feminine figures of the East. Readers of “Athanasia” are shown a mummy stolen away from her ancestral home. The creature of *The Sphinx* is pinned in a perverse interview in a student’s chamber. Lastly, the young princess of *Salome* is intensely eroticized and later condemned for engaging in that taboo sexualized space. However, each of these feminine figures carries a secret that is both enticing and highly destructive to their curious spectators. Wilde’s Eastern narratives promoted some degree of archaeological merit but also depicted dramatized, theatrical, and often fantastical elements that portray the Oriental woman as an eternalized and unstoppable dominating force. The inhuman women of Wilde’s poems and drama are inextricably connected to nature, often through images of the moon, and are depicted as a transcendental being that

follows a cycle of immortality, which subverts Europe's assumed "position of strength" over the Orient (Said 40). These narratives contain boldly feminine implications of desire, which reveal how each monstrous femme fatale controls and dictates the text's environment with their sexual allure and body in a sudden reversal of the objectification that is projected onto them.

Critics like Elisa Bizzotto consider Wilde's depictions of Orientalist subjects a vacant vehicle to deliver his poetic aesthetics. Bizzotto claims that the exhaustive foreign-sounding words and names seen in his Orientalist poetry are "all irrelevant in terms of literal meaning" and are merely obscure fixtures "to achieve pure musicality" (109). Yet, I argue that this list of aestheticized language is a more intentional tool to display Wilde's critical framework in his Orientalist works. There is an acute sense of self-awareness exhibited in *Salome's* male despot and by the speakers in "Athanasia" and *The Sphinx* that reveals the distinct anxieties of the Western observer that exceeds the simplified decorative nature of Wilde's Orientalism and operates as criticism against the patriarchal structures of Western imperialism.

I. Unwrapping "Athanasia" and the Egyptologist Fantasy

Before he affixed the title "Athanasia" to the poem (it means "deathlessness" or "immortality" in Ancient Greek) in *Poems* (1881), Wilde had published it as "The Conqueror of Time" in the opening number of Edmund Hodgson Yates's magazine *Time*. The piece originally had eleven stanzas, with the final one omitted in later publications. The narrative begins with an archaeological discovery— a seed clutched by the "withered body of a girl"— after the ancient artifact is brought from an Egyptian pyramid to an English museum (line 3). Here, I analyze the first publication to show the poet's overt intention behind the emergence of the immortal flower that grows from the seed that falls from the mummy's hand.

The poetic structure of “The Conqueror of Time” emphasizes the miraculous narrative of the flower’s unprecedented immortality. Wilde’s stanzas are modeled on those of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593): heroic sestets with Sicilian quatrains and heroic couplets. The heroic sestet is a traditional form of poetry often used in epic and narrative pieces, including Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579), Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (1598), and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Hymn to the Spirit of Nature” (1820). The structure, therefore, supports a preternatural creation myth for Wilde’s imagined flower, which rises from its lowly origins “in the chill heart of some black pyramid” to its reborn omnipotence as “the conqueror of time” (lines 6, 65). The couplets further assert the poem’s central themes of nature’s transience and the adamant precarity of humankind. The tenth stanza highlights this distinction in the concluding lines: “We live beneath time’s wasting sovereignty; / It is the child of all eternity” (lines 59-60). The couplet signifies, especially with the italicized pronouns “We” and “It,” the everlasting flower of Egypt’s unparalleled dominion over nature as opposed to the feebleness of human endeavors under time’s constraints.

In unfolding this narrative, Wilde’s poetic voice draws attention to the inferiority of imagery taken from both Classical myths and Romantic poetry to the Egyptian flower that conquers time. Wilde’s allusions to Greek mythology reflect the magnitude to which the Egyptian flower manifests a new cultural paradigm for English culture. As the flower blooms in England, many inhabitants feel the effect of its presence. Various floral symbols of Greek myth are woven into the poem, from the personified “sad narcissos” that “hung across the stream,” an emulation of the eponymous figure of self-absorbed tragedy, to the asphodel meadows of the Greek underworld and lilies created by the Goddess Hera (lines 19–20).

Yet, these well-known flowers of Greek antiquity are each abandoned for the intoxicating Egyptian blossom that was “stolen from some heavenly Arkady” (line 18). The reader’s attention is extended toward other mythological figures when the nearby animals take notice of the white flower. Distracted from its sorrowful past, the “passionate nightingale / Forgot the hills of Thrace, the cruel king”: this is a reference to the Greek tragedy of Philomela’s rape and her magical transformation into a nightingale. The nightingale of classical myth is wholly transfixed by the flower’s enchanting spell. The nightingale also functions as an immortalized symbol of the Romantic period from John Keats, who was a significant literary inspiration to Wilde, and his poem “Ode to a Nightingale.” Keats’s nightingale is a natural figure of Romantic sentiment that represents an ideal of transcendence like that of Wilde’s flower. However, in Wilde’s poem, the nightingale of Greek origin and Keatsian retelling abandons its sublime existence for the Egyptian flower and dissociates itself from Western poetic tradition. These allusions to famous Greek and Romantic images induce a sense of anxiety as this Egyptian flower renders the cultural foundations of Western art static and detached from their original narratives.

Still, even if Wilde’s poem focuses on the idea that the immortal Egyptian flower is in every way superior to the flora of Greek and Romantic writing, his lines nonetheless brim with striking visual imagery of a curated English landscape in ways that represent the transitory state of mortal beauty. Wilde’s “The Conqueror of Time” offers rich visuals of floral “rain-pearls” and gold-dusted insects with “wings a-gleam” that illustrate a picturesque version of pastoral England (lines 22–24). The lush descriptions of Wilde’s ecological scene capture the beautiful yet ephemeral condition of the English surroundings. Once the “tired birds have stayed their amorous tune” and the “broad and glittering” moon rises, the temporal cycles of nature continue, and the beauty of the landscape declines. Such lines clearly emphasize our world’s

impermanence (lines 38–39). Likewise, the fecund and lively environment of buzzing bees and gliding birds becomes dormant and deemed insignificant to the Egyptian flower’s budding immortality. These lengthy descriptions of the poem’s English landscape mirror the limited visuals of the immortal flower. Wilde’s floral “conqueror of time” is characterized simply as “bright,” “white,” or like “snow” (lines 34, 65, 11). The striking lack of details for this extraordinary Egyptian flower makes its true origins ambiguous and hard to connect with the English pastoral.

Wilde’s limited descriptions of the flower’s origin extend Keats’s theory of negative capability, which prioritizes an artist’s capacity for depicting beauty before objective fact. Art produced from the *fin-de-siècle* was guided by the aesthetics of the Decadents, who rejected the previous Romantic period’s deep admiration for nature. Thus, the late nineteenth-century sentiment for artificiality coincided with the era’s rise in Orientalist literature — a genre of Western perspectives on objectified and exoticized images of Eastern cultures. Orientalism requires abstraction from any naturalness to preserve the imagined location for ancient and mystical fantasies of “the Orient.” This idea is implemented into Wilde’s poetry with the immersive effect that Keats refers to as negative capability, in which a poet is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (“Negative Capability”). This means that the portrayal of beauty becomes more essential to the poet than the display of factual authenticity. The fantasies of Orientalism are dependent on these artistic mysteries as “there is no distinction between the Middle East’s art and its reality: art is reality” (Haddad 173). By drawing on Keats’s negative capability for “The Conqueror of Time,” Wilde better establishes the inorganic, extraordinary, and primordial characteristics of the Egyptian flower from its enigmatic Oriental source. This effect is displayed as the speaker

describes how the mummified girl is an extracted artifact from “the dim heart of some black pyramid” (line 6). Wilde’s poem is not reliant on the archaeological details of “some” pyramid since the poem is focused more on the significance of the Orientalist symbols for their prehistoric effect than their accurate depictions. This sentiment is further established by Wilde in his essay “The Truth of Masks” where he states: “history moves as a pageant before our eyes, without obliging us to have recourse to a dictionary or an encyclopaedia for the perfection of our enjoyment” (1067). Thus, the pyramid is unspecified in location and repurposed into a distant artificial setting for the birthplace of transcendent histories for an elevated fantastical effect.

Wilde’s interest in negative capability for exploring Orientalist themes initially manifests from his earlier interactions with Eastern iconography upon visiting Rome. In 1877, Wilde explored an early fascination with Keats when he visited Rome as an Oxford student. He produced two poems during this trip: “The Grave of Keats” and “The Grave of Shelley.” Both poets’ graves are in Rome’s Protestant cemetery. When Wilde traveled to Rome, he submitted an earlier version of “The Grave of Keats” to the *Irish Monthly* and shared insightful context to his poem and detailed the cemetery’s pyramid of Cestius, a small white-marble pyramid that was constructed in 18–12 B.C. Earlier historians believed that the Ancient Roman pyramid was constructed to inter the body of Remus until archaeologists opened it and discovered its original inscription for a Roman magistrate, Gaius Cestius. Wilde comments on this underwhelming revelation: “so ancient and mysterious it appears; but we have now, perhaps unfortunately, more accurate information about it” (“The Tomb of Keats” 476). Therefore, the disenchanted narrative behind the Oriental symbol ushered a desire to make historical artifacts and exotic prose overlap. Among the gravesites of Wilde’s curated imagination sits the pyramid of Cestius, reformed as “the gray pyramid, symbol of the world’s age, and filled with memories of the sphinx, and the

lotus leaf, and the glories of old Nile” (477). Wilde’s Orientalist reimagining restores the air of mystery and mythology that is lost from historical or accurate fact. This aestheticized idea is represented in the mysterious nature of all Oriental items in “The Conqueror of Time” as the Egyptian mummy, pyramid, and ancient seed are all left nameless despite the rapid increase in Egyptian scholarship during this period. The ambiguity of Egypt thus generates a sense of timelessness to the Orient that emphasizes the poem’s theme of transcendence and the mysterious allure of the mummy.

The Egyptian motif of “The Conqueror of Time” highly reflects the popular culture and archaeological phenomena that surrounded Wilde. The nineteenth century was a turbulent era for Orientalist development as social views of the East altered from being Europe’s untouchable and fearsome Other to what Muhammed Al-Da’mi describes as a “helpless neighbour, a playground for its versifiers and a quarry for its antiquarians” (3). The Western development of colonies and annexation was extensively performed by the French and English governments as they sought conquest across areas from North Africa to South Asia in what would be perceived as the Near East, Middle East, and Far East to European scholars. This Westernized perception and amalgamation of Eastern cultures altered European foreign policy in the Orient, more specifically in North Africa, as French and British occupation permeated Egypt through travel books and other forms of amateur scholarship. The Orient became a new treasure trove to Western Europe, as Al-Da’mi notes that “the excavations in the great river valleys and the decoding of cuneiforms and hieroglyphics were for the first time unraveling ancient cultures and, therefore, intensifying the Orientalizing imagination of many minds” (26). This developing form of Orientalism amassed the interest of Western academics, and Western institutions sought to document histories of Eastern cultures. The occupation of these Orientalized nations was based

on the extortion of ancient artifacts for Western collection. Within Egypt, the ancient pyramids and tombs became places of pilgrimage and commerce, as French and English archaeologists and researchers rapidly began the process of exhuming Egyptian mummies and other ancient ephemera from these historical sites for the sake of documentation.

The purchasing and looting of mummies were an initial symptom of a larger dehumanizing development in the East, as the robbing of graves revealed the extent to which cultural universalisms were not extended to the mummified corpses that were reformulated as Oriental aesthetic icons under the Western field of Egyptology. Under the control of Western imperialism, Egypt's ancestral sites were pillaged for the exploitative acquisition of artifacts. Wilde's mummy in "The Conqueror of Time" is an example of this collection as the corpse of the young girl is retrieved, having "seen by lonely Arabs lying hid / In the chill heart of some black pyramid" (lines 5-6). These lines are reinforced by the dichotomy of Orientalism where Eastern figures, labeled under the generalized title "Arabs," are the static "lonely" stewards of barren tradition, culture, and empire. This process of renaming by European researchers is a process which Joanne Sharp argues "simplified the Orient and, by making it known to Europeans, made it possible for them to control it" (20). Thus, the speaker of the poem observes a post-colonial version of Egypt that supports a rescue narrative where researchers save Egyptian antiques, specifically a mummified girl, from the perceived wastes of the formerly exalted country for the renewed purpose of preservation and research in a masculinized institutional setting.

The gender of the discovered mummy is an essential feature of the poem that alludes to the sexual violence that was often associated with academic Orientalism. Richard Pearson notes how the "archaeology of Egypt was more often than not associated with romance and excitement, with erotic desire – and also with death" (222–23). The gendered power dynamic of

a girl mummy being stolen away by male researchers is a common trope of latent Orientalism. This sexual nuance of the mummy's abduction is more overtly displayed when Wilde's poem was later republished in his first collection titled *Poems* in 1881, as tensions were taut as the British and French empires dueled for control over Egypt. In the later imprint, in which the poem is titled "Athanasia," the line noting that the mummy was found in "the chill heart of some black pyramid" is substituted with "the dim womb of some black pyramid" (line 6). The change of diction displays a more invasive act of removing the girl's body from its "womb"—a feminized and intimate space. Therefore, the image of collection and conquest is transformed into a scene of sexual violence as a young girl is robbed from her "womb" and placed into Western stewardship. This rewritten connection to female genitals is described by Nolwenn Corriou as the basis of most archaeological fiction from the nineteenth century, where the "first stage of the explorers' quest is the penetration into female territory" (3). Thus, this image of conquest for the mummy and her hidden seed constitutes Wilde's mummy to be a femme fatale as her sensual charms and secrets ensnare the European abductors.

When placed in the museum, Wilde's mummy sits static and lifeless to be examined by Western figures. In the first line, the poetic voice speaks of "that gaunt House of Art." Here, the assonance highlights the words "gaunt," "Art," and "naught" with the similar "a" vowel sound. The rhythmic effect of this line brings emphasis to the words denoting museum curation and collection. Since the museum is referred to as "gaunt," which the OED defines not just as lean and haggard but also "hungry" or "desolate," its "lack for naught" implies that the essential fixture of British artifact collection is an ever-hungry entity that reflects a negative connotation—the museum is a masculinized space of colonial curation ("Gaunt," def. 2.b, 3). Corriou further deconstructs the symbolism of museum curatorship to describe how the "museumification of

antique objects also enacts a desire for the perfect control of colonial otherness: unveiled, packed away to England, locked in a case and labelled according to an alien scientific order” and that the female mummy’s position as “the antique woman is nothing more than one of the archaeologist’s possessions, one that can be purchased and exchanged like any other commercial product” (9). Thus, in the museum, there is an attempted control over the mummy’s form with the curatorial examination of her corpse.

An essential feature of Wilde’s “The Conqueror of Time” is how the female subject becomes an object of colonial sovereignty. The Eastern fantasies of explicit sensuality and hidden secrets made the Oriental female body “both an object of study and of desire” (Corriou 10). With the Orientalized girl mummy, there was a sense of both attraction and repulsion toward the figure as the morbidly sensual Other. This dichotomy is exhibited with the initial appearance of the mummified body in the museum: “The withered body of a girl was brought / Dead ere the world’s glad youth had touched its prime” (lines 3–4). There are underlying sexual connotations of the mummy’s youth that contrast with her withered and decayed form. The mummified girl is mystified by her Oriental origin as she is treated as a relic to be unraveled and looted. The archaeologists begin to unravel the mummy’s linen, an action that Corriou dissects as an emerging motif from the archaeology fiction of the late Victorian period (which had mostly female mummified subjects). Corriou claims that the “motif of the veiled woman that one must unveil to discover the secrets and the mystery of the East—or of the past in archaeological fiction—is only one of the features that construct the mummy as a modern Oriental woman” (4). By unraveling the mummy, her corpse is reanimated by the sexualized

action of looting for her secrets. Yet, Wilde uses the pronoun “they” for the imaginary academics that dismantle the mummified girl’s wrapping, and the created effect maintains a distance between the audience from their Occidental figures’ academic probing. This reveals a dismantled connection between the speaker and the invasive actions of the colonial institutions that perform Egyptological research.

Wilde’s upbringing, however, did not establish for him such a distance from the Orientalism invested in Egyptology. A significant facet of his milieu was the fact that his father, Sir William Wilde, chartered a voyage to the Orient in fall 1837. After his travels, Sir William created a compilation of his travel logs from his excursions through areas of notable colonial development (Egypt, Palestine, and Algiers), where he notated semblances of objective observation. During his stay in Egypt, Sir William took it upon himself to experience the Egyptology craze that stirred Western tourists to visit the pyramids. One tale from his excursion describes his singular encampment within a pyramid for the premise of embarking discovery, both historical and scientific, among the “gloomy chambers” of the pyramid that were already occupied by “wild, savage creatures” (W. Wilde 266, 262):

Finding I could not dispossess the Arabs, who, to say the truth, seemed to have a much better right to the place than I had, I determined to make the most of them; some I employed in thinning a few hieroglyphic tablets, left by the Frenchman, to make them more easily transportable to Alexandria; others occasionally entertained us with some wild song; and again an eastern tale was told and translated to me by the Maltese, as we sat smoking our pipes round the fire, composed of the bits of wood that formed the coffins of the people of ancient Egypt. (266)

He did not hesitate to debase Egyptian artifacts. Aside from a momentary recognition of the unnatural colonial narrative, Occidental travelers felt direct entitlement to own these objects. The preservation and documentation of historical paraphernalia among European travelers was a measure of colonial control that exacerbated the dehumanizing dichotomies generated by Orientalism. Thus, this information provides the context for Wilde's archaeological depictions and the attitudes more commonly seen regarding the Occidental researcher's perspective of Egypt as an inferior location for Western control.

Yet, Wilde's "The Conqueror of Time" does not indulge in the Orientalized power fantasy, as the poem instead functions as an allegory for "reversed colonization." As Hosford and Wojtkowski observe, academic Orientalism is the fundamental facet of the European colonial project and is founded in the French *mission civilisatrice*, or 'civilising mission', as the leading foreign policy to "restore life to the supposedly stagnant Orient" (5). While the cultural phenomenon of *mission civilisatrice* is depicted in Wilde's poem through the transportation of the mummy, there is a larger conversation occurring within the work that suggests a reversal of this control. The opening of Wilde's poem appeals to readers as an ode to the enthralling field of Egyptology. Yet, instead of the commonly witnessed Occidental tourist, the mummy appropriates the land of the colonizer and suggests an inversion of power. The sexual transgression that was imposed by the symbolic abduction and sexual transgression against the female mummy is turned on its head through the flower's extended control over the English ecology. The ramifications of Western fantasy and curiosity are seen as the flower that blooms from the mummy is, therefore, an extension of her power, reborn to take its revenge on the English landscape because of the initial colonial narrative. The Egyptian flower that blooms thus shows a

sense of sexual dominance as it enchants the local bugs and is unfazed by nature's order.

Therefore, Wilde consequently shows audiences the often-irreparable effects of indulging in the illusion of Oriental conquest and the inherent power located in the Eastern femme fatale's body.

The final dispossession of Western control in Wilde's poem is directly unveiled as the speaker shares meta-observations and concedes to the unprecedented power of the Egyptian flower. In the closing lines of "The Conqueror of Time," the flower's feminine and divine immortality concerns the speaker with what Nicholas Frankel calls "a prophecy of English cultural demise" (122). The final stanza of the poem develops into a social critique of the cycles of civilization through an exhaustive list of differences between human mortality and the unearthly flower:

The woes of man may serve an idle lay,
 Nor were it hard fond hearers to enthrall,
 Telling how Egypt's glory passed away,
 How London from its pinnacle must fall;
 But this white flower, the conqueror of time,
 Seems all too great for any boyish rhyme. (lines 60-66)

In this concluding couplet, the speaker's self-undermining voice emerges, and a moral imperative surfaces in the final line as he yields to the Oriental entity that emasculates his poem into a mere "boyish rhyme." This belittling claim communicates to audiences the often underestimated power of the Orient, a message that is contained within this stanza that captures what Al-Da'mi characterizes as the "theme of rise and fall, prefigured in such historical polities

as the Roman empire and the Arab caliphate, [that] was frequently invoked to remind the British empire-builders of a possible decay” (4). Ultimately, the Egyptian flower that blooms from the cataloged mummy rejects the stifling control of European academics. Instead, the extraordinary power of the white blossom serves as a reminder to audiences of England’s finite existence as an empire and how its feminine cycles of rebirth can outlast any masculine Western institution.

II. *The Sphinx* and the Perversions of the Orientalist Academic

Over the course of twenty years, Wilde developed his poem *The Sphinx*, which he eventually published in 1894 in a limited release of 200 copies. The poem follows the archeological musings of a university student who is visited by a Sphinx—a mythological creature that has the body of a lion and the head of a woman. Across 174 lines, the student interrogates the “half woman and half animal” that silently looms in his dormitory (line 12). Initially, the student is thrilled by the Sphinx, and he fervently questions the creature about her experiences in the ancient East. He implores her to “sing me all your memories” so he may hear about her centuries of life in Egypt and Greece, where he speculates that the Sphinx was witness to exotic creatures, gods, and other mythological figures (line 30). The student continues his archeological tirade with great zeal as his line of inquiry turns to discuss her lengthy sexual history. He asks: “Which was the vessel of your lust? What leman had you, every day?” (line 46). The reader is then taken on a grotesquely pornographic journey through ancient Egypt as the student fixates on the dominant, licentious creature and her centuries-old pilgrimage for sexual intimacy with any being from “dragons” to “hippopotami” (lines 49–50). Eventually, he assumes that the polyamorous Sphinx finally settled with the Egyptian god Ammon in an intimate relationship where she taught him her secret “monstrous miracles” (line 84). Toward the end of

the poem, the student grows to detest the Sphinx and her “curved archaic smile,” and he becomes weary of the ancient creature’s scrutinous and knowing gaze and finally spurns the “ghost of sin” to leave him (lines 86, 163). The poem closes with the narrator pleading for her to leave him in peace so he may futilely pray to his crucifix (line 172). By focusing on the extremely erotic nature of this poem and the speaker’s egregious objectification of the Sphinx, I will analyze how the overall arc of Wilde’s stanzas functions as a commentary on the contradictory nature of academic Orientalism and the depravity of imperialist control.

When crafting *The Sphinx*, Wilde experimented with standard forms of English poetry and adapted the poetic structure to emulate human speech. Upon its 1894 publication by the Bodley Head, *The Sphinx* was composed of 87 two-line stanzas, each line containing sixteen syllables, which increased the visual length of the narrative, especially when paired with the ten delicate illustrations by Charles Ricketts. When Wilde first began drafting the work, he had “begun composing the poem by modeling his stanzas (with an *abba* rhyme scheme in iambic lines) after those in Alfred Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, then stretching them out into couplets” (Beckson 357). Early manuscripts reflect the stanzaic form of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850), but Wilde’s shift to sixteen-syllable lines emulates a series of interview questions that the student poses to the Sphinx through elongated and questioning couplets.

The rhyme and repetition found within the poem maintain an inquisitive mood throughout the student’s inquiry and highlight the creature’s hypnotic effect. The poem contains multiple uses of anaphora, especially when the student rapidly asks about her erotic travels; he incessantly questions her: “Or did you lure unto your bed the ivory-horned Tragelaphos / Or did you love the god of flies who plagued the Hebrews and was splashed with wine unto the waist? Or Pasht, who had green beryls for her eyes?” (lines 65–66). The repeated use of the conjunction

“Or” in his inquiry reveals the sheer depth of his curiosity and evokes a sense of discomfort and unease with his excessive prying. With this depiction, Wilde displays the fervent curiosities of an intrusive student. However, the excessive repetition also reveals a rather hypnotic effect from Sphinx that initially mesmerizes the speaker. Upon first noticing the Sphinx in his room, the student observes these temporal shifts in time that leave the Sphinx still and unaffected as he notes, “Red follows grey across the air. The waves of moonlight ebb and flow / But with the Dawn she does not go and in the night-time she is there. / Dawn follows Dawn and Nights grow old” (lines 6–7). While the internal rhyme that connects “flow” and “go” encourages a feeling of movement, the word “Dawn” is repeated three times and reflects the prolonged length to which the Sphinx sits still in the dormitory for many mornings. With her body placed before him, the student is at first transfixed by this creature as her idleness and feline form encourage his growing curiosity to a dangerous extreme.

While the Sphinx occupies his room, the narrator is entranced by her seductive form and the control he has over her dormant disposition. The diction and style of *The Sphinx* imitate Charles Baudelaire’s fourteen-line poem “The Cat” or “Le chat,” which originally appeared in his controversial book of poems *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). When the speaker of Wilde’s poem introduces the creature resting in his dormitory, he describes her as an idle being: “Inviolat and immobile she does not rise she does not stir” (line 3). Instead, she sits passively in a student’s room, an image resembling a domestic cat that sits “couching on the Chinese mat” (line 5). This depiction of a submissive yet hazardous animal connects to Baudelaire’s sonnet. In Baudelaire’s “Le chat,” the speaker visualizes a strongly sexualized depiction of a cat, and he pleads with her to “Hold back the talons of your paws, / Let me gaze into your beautiful eyes / Of metal and agate” (lines 2–4). The narrator of Baudelaire’s poem strokes the animal and languishes in

touching her body, addressing the animal directly. Still, there is an implied tone of dangerous eroticism as he sees his wife doubled through the cat since they share the same stare that “[p]rofound and cold, cuts and cleaves like a dart” (line 11). Wilde’s Sphinx is illustrated similarly to Baudelaire’s cat, as they exude the same sensuality, intense gaze, and “subtle air,” which the speaker madly addresses in a similar apostrophe (line 13). Thus, there is a shared sense of perverse ownership between these two speakers and their idle house cat, where the illusion of domesticity invites each narrator to project his fantasies onto her.

Despite this idle image of the Sphinx, Wilde discloses multiple allusions to her violent capabilities through the speaker’s visual observations. In the confines of the student’s dormitory, the Sphinx is rendered a living sculpture for the speaker to interrogate. The student describes Sphinx through an ekphrasis, as a relic for his study. However, the student acknowledges the inherently poisonous nature of the beast when he examines her body: “And let me touch those curving claws of yellow ivory and grasp / The tail that like a monstrous asp coils round your heavy velvet paws!” (lines 15–16). From the student’s perspective, the Sphinx is composed of yellow nails, a color often associated with perverse sickness by the Decadents, and a serpentine tail that resembles the venomous snakes found in Egypt. Thus, her body is inherently a dangerous site of exploration that threatens the student with sickness and death. The student in *The Sphinx* further notes the creature’s “statuesque” form and her languid “eyes of satin rimmed with gold” (lines 8, 11). These repeated golden visuals highly resonate with visual images of decay and hint at the hazardous effects of interacting with the Sphinx. Even while she lies still like an artifact for her observer, her poisonous effects manage to penetrate his consciousness.

Wilde curated an academic yet excited atmosphere in the poem through the speaker’s distinct conversational tone. As a student of classics who was strongly versed in Ancient Greek,

Wilde's interest in archaeology emerges through the youthful narrator's boundless Orientalist imagination. While biographers have debated over the years in which Wilde worked on the poem, it is generally acknowledged that "he began to write it at Oxford, more or less completed it at Paris in 1883" (Pearson 92). With this context behind the poem's creation, the student's "basic archaeological impulse" is seen as a reflection of Wilde's early interest in items of antiquity (Frankel, *Oscar Wilde's Decorated Books* 166). Thus, the speaker seeks to unveil the ancient Sphinx's enigmatic knowledge and past. Among the two-line stanzas, there is an excessive use of exclamation points at the end of lines that reflect this extreme thirst for knowledge. One defining example of Wilde's animated use of punctuation appears when the speaker exclaims to the Sphinx: "Come forth my lovely languriose Sphinx! And put your head upon my knee! / And let me stroke your throat and see your body spotted like the Lynx!" (lines 13–14). These lines profoundly capture the youthful image of a student intimately interacting with an ancient figure through very close observation. Consequently, the speaker emanates a sense of naïveté in his eager speech and fast-paced round of questions. By making the poem read like the findings of an amateur scholar who only has seen "some twenty summers cast their green," the speaker's interactions with the Sphinx appear misguided, despite his boundless intellect (line 18). Thus, the beast tempts the immature student with the archaic power and knowledge that she embodies and that he wishes to excavate.

The power the Sphinx exerts over the student's intellect manifests once he constructs her as an omnipotent figure across various ancient mythologies. Within *The Sphinx*, the creature is portrayed as an observer of both Egyptian and Greco-Roman stories within a complexly layered narrative. As she journeys through her "thousand weary centuries," the Sphinx witnesses both Egyptian and Greek folklore (line 17). Through centuries of history and across miles of Eastern

land, the beast witnesses the Greek legend of the Cretan minotaur at “the Labyrinth in which the two-formed bull was stalled” and is acquainted with the ancient Egyptian god of death, the “Dog-faced Anubis” (lines 37, 132). Therefore, these collective mythologies establish the Sphinx of Wilde’s poem as a powerful creature of the amorphous Orient that transcends the geographic and temporal boundaries of Western scholarship.

This convergence of ancient cultures is physically reflected in the student’s hybridized descriptions of the Sphinx. Although she is primarily visualized in Egypt around “the steaming Nile,” she strongly matches the sphinxes that appear in Greco-Roman art (line 85). The earlier description of the Sphinx’s asp-like tail corresponds with Greek depictions of the Sphinx, in which her “serpentine body” relates to the Greek poet Hesiod’s idea that the beast was a descendent of the Chimaera, a monstrous lion-goat creature with a snake’s head for a tail (Struck “Sphinx”). To the scholarly narrator of Wilde’s poem, the Sphinx is presented as a figure of Greek tradition that primarily resides in Egypt. In ancient Greece, the Sphinx from the Oedipus trilogy was “the Watch-dog that presideth over evil days” (“Fragments” 460). Meanwhile, ancient Egyptians often depicted their sphinxes as male guardians or protectors (Suhr 99). Therefore, the student appropriates the malicious aspects of the Greek Sphinx and then mentally projects them onto the East, where her extremely carnal nature and eccentricity is better reinforced by the perceived Orientalized sensuality of ancient Egypt. From the perspective of an English student who sees ancient Greece and Rome as the foundation of Western empire, the Sphinx is inextricably linked to the sexually depraved and mystical perceptions of the East. As Richard Pearson has claimed, “archaeology is about desire: and Egyptian archaeology more so than any other” (222). For this reason, the promiscuous Sphinx is thus closely aligned to Egypt as a composed relic of the exotic Orient.

In her connection to Eastern empire, the Sphinx is portrayed as a formidable partner in the sexual relationships she shares with powerful figures of ancient Egypt. The student mentions the Sphinx's sexual partners of the past and excitedly remarks, "Great Ammon was your bedfellow! He lay with you beside the Nile" (line 74). Archaeology surrounding Ammon, also referred to as Amun, reveals that he was praised as the "supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon" in the New Kingdom era of ancient Egypt (Hart 13). While Western scholarship does not recognize a sexual connection between the Sphinx and Ammon, the speaker wholly focuses on her centuries-long intimate relationship with the Egyptian god. The student fixates on the sensual interactions that must have occurred between the god of Egypt, and reinvents the deity as a more vulnerable being with a "thick soft throat [that] was white as milk and threaded with thin veins of blue" (line 93). This emphasis on Ammon's delicate throat presents the god as a weaker figure than the Sphinx, whose name means "the throttler" in Ancient Greek (Struck "Sphinx"). Since she famously strangles her victims' throats, the Sphinx is an untamable creature that can overpower even a dominant male god.

In a continuation of this unprecedented power, the Sphinx remains unaffected by the gradual fall of ancient empire and religions. When Ammon dies, the ancient Egyptian empire lies crumbled and "ruined" (line 110). The student instructs the Sphinx to enact customary funeral rites for Ammon's corpse: "Wind round his head the figured coins! stain with red fruits the pallid lips! / Weave purple for his shrunken hips! and purple for his barren loins!" (lines 127–28). Thus, the student perceives the Egyptian king as a reproductively inferior mythological figure with his sickly "pallid" lips and "barren" sexual organs, ones that contrast with the Sphinx's perpetual sexual potency. By requesting that the Sphinx wrap the fallen god's corpse in "purple" cloth, the speaker recognizes the archaeological significance of wrapping figures of Egyptian nobility and

implies that the Egyptian pantheon houses a sterile, dead religion. Yet, the Sphinx triumphs over the fallen empire of ancient Egypt. In both Egyptian and Greek culture, the Sphinx was depicted as a funerary motif on tombs and was known specifically by Egyptians as guardians to sacred knowledge of the afterlife (Suhr 97). Therefore, the Sphinx is inherently a timeless and indomitable creature of macabre knowledge and mystery. As a funerary figure, the sexualized Sphinx of Wilde's poem would be the overseer of the lust, destruction, and death of a once-powerful masculine god whose empire lay "scattered here and there: deep hidden in the windy sand" (line 115). Therefore, the narrator reveals his concerning observations of the Sphinx's continued survival through bygone empires and the disastrous capabilities of her omniscient knowledge.

Still, the reader is shown two contrasting depictions of the Sphinx that appear paradoxical in their vast differences of agency. Wilde's poem is structured with two frames that shift perspective away from the student's present observations of the Sphinx. One version exists vividly in the speaker's reverie, while the other is a dormant effigy of a once-powerful icon—a now docile and feminine creature that has been seemingly domesticated. The poem's narrative delves into a highly detailed Oriental fantasy of the Sphinx's past where she is depicted as an actively dominant and licentious beast, much like a cat in heat, that seeks sexual intercourse "to breed new wonders from [her] womb" (line 52). Thus, readers are shown how she is reanimated by the student's vulgar imagination. These contrasting identities of the Sphinx being dominant yet subservient, both powerful and powerless, display the inconsistency within the observer's Orientalized mind as he is conflicted by his desire to view the Sphinx as both a sterile artifact for academic inquiry and as a sexually potent depiction of an active subaltern woman.

The Orientalized fantasy that surrounds Wilde's poem is strongly reflected in the student's controversial ideations of the Sphinx's innate sexual nature. Within *The Sphinx*, the beast attracts both lovers and curious spectators alike with her mystifying potential to execute their eroticized Oriental fantasy. Within the speaker's mind, the Sphinx is an ancient idol of sexual transgression as he questions if she had "made the Pyramid [her] lupanar" (i.e., her brothel) (line 62). The student is enamored by the possibility that the Sphinx is capable of reappropriating iconic locations and figures of Egypt as instruments for her lust—where an ancient and sacred burial site can be transformed into a brothel. John McLeod notes that the exoticized Oriental female is stereotypically depicted as an "active creature of sexual pleasure who held the key to mysterious erotic sexual delights" (42). In other words, the Oriental woman is an amorphous and bestial figure that acts as a keeper for condemned Western desires. By studying the eroticized Sphinx, the student is prompted to indulge his sexual imagination fully through the premise of academic interest.

Consequently, the Sphinx entirely embodies the sexual transgressions that are connected to the ancient East. Specifically, Barbara Voss notes that "nineteenth-century Europeans turned to Egyptology for counter cultural models of sexual potency, bisexuality, gender ambiguity, and homoeroticism" (318). Thus, the student's academic and archaeological interrogation of the Sphinx is revealed as a constructed imaginary space for him to explore deviant sexual interests. He imagines that the Sphinx seeks sexual intercourse with bestial creatures like "tigers" or "lions" and the student boldly asks if she pursued homoerotic relationships: "Or had you shameful secret guests and did you harry to your home / Some Nereid coiled in amber foam with curious rock-crystal breasts?" (lines 148, 141, 27–28). By establishing her in a "shameful secret" Sapphic relationship with a Nereid, a Greek sea-nymph, the Sphinx mirrors the speaker's

innermost motivations. The creature is a medium in which her Western spectator explores nineteenth-century erotic taboos as he imagines her unparalleled sexual appetite that spans species, cultures, and genders.

As the beast is distanced both by her archaic locations and eras from the Western nineteenth-century audience, the Sphinx operates outside the social mores that inhibit the speaker. Through their exotic projections of the East, Western scholars sought to legitimate their voyeuristic desires and ravenous sexual appetites. According to Joseph Allen Boone, by viewing ancient Egypt as the genesis of sexual promiscuity, the “guise of orientalist scholarship” permits Occidental researchers like Wilde’s scholar “to express a surfeit of subconscious homoerotic fantasy (94). With the sexually transgressive and indulgent moral attitudes that were associated with the Orient, *The Sphinx* reveals the narrator’s distinctive erotic curiosities. The student repeatedly alludes to images of homosexual relationships, as he asks the Sphinx: “Sing to me of that odorous green eve when crouching by the marge / You heard from Adrian’s gilded barge the laughter of Antinous” (line 33–34). He invokes the Sphinx to share her pleasant witness of the Ancient Roman emperor Adrian, or Hadrian, sharing a conversation with his beloved male partner Antinous. Thus, the narrator can explore eras in which homosexual relationships were significantly less stigmatized through the Sphinx’s enigmatic presence. Angie Blumberg remarks that Wilde’s poem operates by “manipulating the gendered, sexual, and temporal fluidity of the sphinx figure to utter and even depict dissonant desires” (251). That is to say, the Sphinx’s ambiguity permits more than just archaeological investigation but allows for the narrator to examine controversial aspects about himself that deviate from the conventional ideals of Western patriarchal society.

However, the Sphinx's ability to embody her observer's closeted desires eventually causes the student extreme anxiety and reveals her insidious control over him. The initially innocent curiosity of *The Sphinx*'s narrator is lost as she silently bears the student's increasingly perverse ruminations under the guise of Egyptological research. According to Sara Mills, exploration under Western imperialism was "considered to be a place of masculine endeavor, where heroic individual males behave in adventurous ways, exploring un-discovered countries and subduing the inhabitants" (36). With this line of thought, the speaker of *The Sphinx* can be considered another male adventurer, taking a journey into "un-discovered" accounts of his resident Sphinx. However, the speaker of the poem is stripped of any heroic qualities and is instead revealed to disclose highly perverse thoughts and shame. Iain Ross captures the essence of Wilde's poem when he notes that "*The Sphinx* dramatizes the frustrations and fantasies engendered by an attempted dialogue with a mute artefact, the diseased fecundity of its narrator's imagination" (462). The misleading idle appearance of the Sphinx ensnares the student's boundless curiosity, and functions to demoralize him by reflecting his inherent depravity. Thus, the veil that separates the licentious Orient from the supposedly righteous Occident is irreparably torn away.

Thus, the student's interactions with the carnal icon of the East leave him emasculated and conquered by the Oriental figure he believed he could control. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker reveals the disparaging effects of his inquiry as he pleads for the Sphinx to leave him:

Get hence, you loathsome mystery! Hideous animal, get hence!

You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be.

You make my creed a barren sham, you wake foul dreams of sensual life.

And Atys with his blood-stained knife were better than the thing I am. (lines 167–170)

The student who once implored the Sphinx to reveal her erotic secrets to him harshly admonishes her sexual presence. Much like the Sphinx left her god Ammon impotent and fallen, her ability to arouse the student's imagination leaves him "barren" and effectively feminized. This idea is repeated as the student views himself as an abysmal "thing" that is worse than the Roman legend of Atys who, in a frenzied state, castrated himself for the earth-goddess Cybele and bled to death. Therefore, the student's self-image is mutilated by his interactions with the Sphinx; as Boone remarks, the "encounter with exotic otherness en-genders profound anxieties about one's authority to narrate: the threat of being 'unmanned' by the attractive yet dangerous lure of a polymorphous Eastern sexuality" (90). With the student's dramatic defeat by the immobile Sphinx, Wilde displays the fragility of the Orientalist narrative that effectively positions the subaltern woman as a mirror for the Western academic's transgressive fantasies, desires, and anxieties.

III: Ruinous Desires and Fallen Empire in *Salome* (1894)

Salome, which Oscar Wilde drafted in French in 1891, is arguably his best-known Orientalist work. Even though the Examiner of Plays banned the drama from production on the London stage in 1892, the drama came to renewed attention not long after his early death in November 1900. In 1905, the German composer Richard Strauss premiered his acclaimed opera *Salome* in Dresden. Ever since that time, Wilde's one-act tragedy based on the biblical story of the daughter of Herodias has been central to his reputation as a world author. In this chapter, I begin by outlining the overall structure of Wilde's drama before situating it in relation to several sources, especially those of French origin, by Gustave Flaubert and J.-K. Huysmans. Thereafter, I focus on the distinct biblical idiom that Alfred Douglas employed when translating *Salomé* into English as *Salome*. My analysis concentrates on the motifs, stage directions, and dialogue that curate a transcendent Orientalist atmosphere and contribute to the unique political commentary contained within the play.

Salomé is a dramatized retelling of Herod-Antipas's banquet from the New Testament, a departure from his trove of English society comedies. Within the play, John the Baptist (referred to as Iokanaan) is portrayed as a religious zealot imprisoned within a subterranean cistern, captured by the proud yet ignorant tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, Herod Antipas. Herodias, the mother of Salome, detests Iokanaan for his outspoken condemnation of her incestuous marriage with the tetrarch. Still, Iokanaan proclaims his disdain for the kingdom's royalty, and his uncontrolled and defiant criticisms attract Salome's attention. The princess quickly becomes infatuated with Iokanaan after she hears his audacious remarks against Herod and Herodias, and she promptly expresses unbridled lust for him and repeatedly declares: "I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan" (560). After Iokanaan refuses her incessant sexual advances, Salome manipulates the

men of the kingdom to bend to her will. In response to her stepfather's request that she dance for him, offering her anything she wants (including half the kingdom under his control), she demands Iokanaan's head on a silver platter. To the horror of Herod Antipas, who lives in fear of the prophet, she kisses the decapitated head and is forcibly crushed to death by the tetrarch's guards. Therefore, Wilde's *Salome* is the image of seduction that shows the powerful extent to which feminine sexuality can manipulate patriarchal authority.

Chronicling Wilde's Dancer

Prior to Wilde's *Salomé*, the Jewish princess of the Herodian kingdom had been a prominent source of inspiration for generations of Christian art for her violent role in John the Baptist's beheading. The daughter of Herodias and Herod II originated from the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament as the unnamed "daughter" through a brief story from the banquet hall of Herod III:

And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee.

And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom.

And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. (Mark 6:22–24, *King James Version*)

The princess has a minor role in the primary account from the Synoptic Gospels, which outline the arrest, death, and burial of John the Baptist. The unnamed daughter operates according to Herodias's plans, and John the Baptist is portrayed as a martyr, unjustly killed by Herod's wife or his staunch righteousness.

Salome remains an unnamed figure of minor significance until the emergence of *Antiquities of the Jews*, a historiographical work by the Roman Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (37–100 AD), which chronicles Jewish history in the Levant. The *Antiquities* was published in approximately 93 AD and comprised twenty volumes that detailed Jewish history from the creation of Adam and Eve to the revolts in Rome in 66 AD. While his work is not valued strongly for its historical accuracy, it is a significant piece that emerged from the era of Hellenistic Judaism and presents thorough documentation of religious figures. The volumes include the rise of Herod the Great and his kingdom in Judea alongside the lives of his sons, Herod-Antipas and Herod-Philip.

Within Josephus's twenty volumes, there are no fewer than four women named Salome who have various associations with the story of Herod-Antipas. One Salome (also called Alexandra by the Greeks) was a former queen of Judea, and another was the sister to Herod the Great. The sister of Herod is described as "a very ill-natured woman, and would sometimes be a friend, and sometimes an enemy at different seasons" (Chapter 7, Book XVI). She is portrayed as a rather licentious woman who defies Jewish law, seeking divorces and relationships with various high-status men. Perhaps this Salome, the great-aunt to Wilde's Salome, is the predecessor of the same projected sexual deviancy among Jewish women.

The Salome of John the Baptist's story appears in volume XVIII where Josephus shares the history of Herodias who, despite the laws that forbade divorce initiated by wives, "divorced

her self from her husband, while he was alive, and was married to Herod [Antipas], her husband's brother by the father's side" (Chapter 5). The end of the volume includes an endnote where Josephus names the daughter of Herodias and Herod Philip: "For which adulterous and incestuous marriage John the Baptist justly reprov'd Herod the tetrarch; and for which reproof Salome, the daughter of Herodias by her first husband Herod-Philip, who was still alive, occasioned him to be unjustly beheaded." (Book XVIII, n14). Josephus's note is the first instance where Salome is named explicitly and is criticized for her responsibility in the beheading of John the Baptist.

Following Josephus's *Antiquities*, Western European artistic movements emerged that captured Salome in the minds of artists and writers, especially during the Renaissance period and much later in the nineteenth century. During the High Renaissance, painters were engaged in producing art with prominent Christian themes and stories. Many paintings of Salome came from early modern artists who portrayed her as a reluctant figure, the girls' faces placid and directed away from the gruesome scene before them. One iteration of this scene was depicted by Bernardino Luini (1480–1532) in his oil painting *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist* (1527).

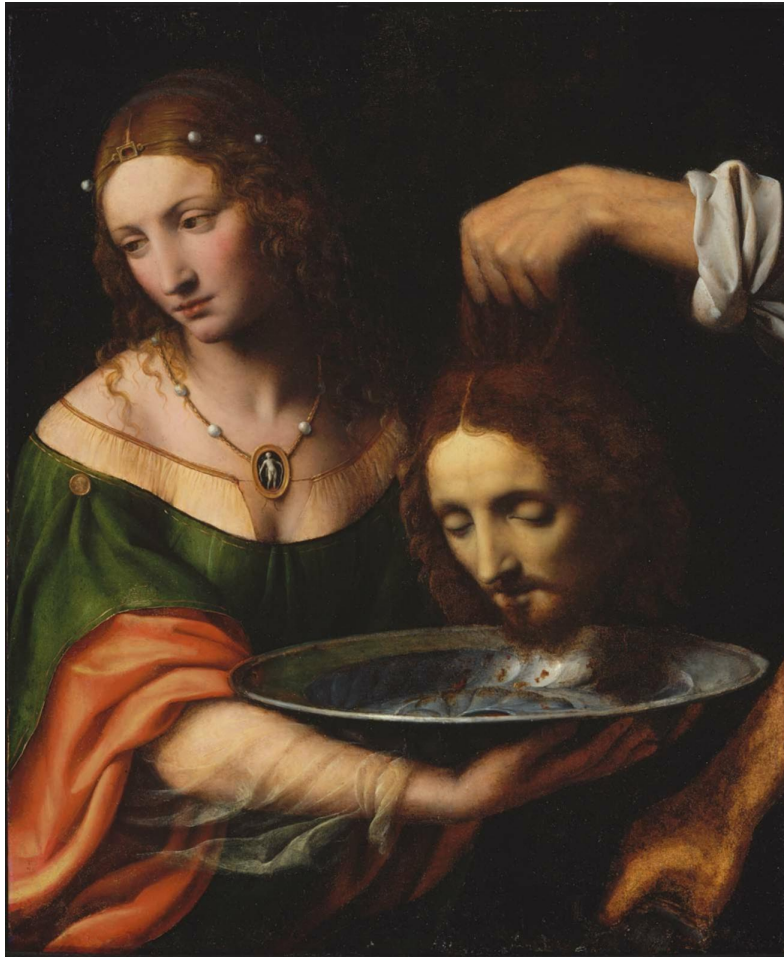


Fig. 1. Bernardino Luini. *Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*. ca. 1515.

Oil on panel. 24 1/2 x 20 1/4 in. (62.23 x 51.43 cm). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

In fulfillment of Herodias's demand, the prophet's head is held toward Salome's silver charger and the pale girl's face is lightly contorted with disgust. These Renaissance depictions contain rosy-cheeked girls with light hair that resemble Western European women. The girl is dressed in a plain costume with jewelry that highlights her light hair and fair skin. This Salome appears submissive and incapable of lust. Over many depictions of the princess, artists continue this tradition of a beautiful, often frightened, young girl that contrasts the horrible head beside her until the nineteenth century.

The innocent and cherubic image of Salome drastically shifted with the nineteenth century resurgence of the Orientalized violent tale. A prominent piece by the French artist Henri Regnault (1843–1871) introduced a dramatically different Salome to the early Decadent movement.



Fig. 2. Henri Regnault. *Salome*. 1870. Oil on panel.

63 x 40 1/2 in. (160 x 102.9 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The subject of Regnault's *Salome* (1870) has a complexion that is profoundly inspired by her Jewish heritage, with her olive skin and her curled dark mass of hair that almost covers her deep brown eyes. The girl is decorated in gaudy yellow veils that slip sensually down her shoulders and exudes the sensuality associated with the East for Western audiences. This Salome is an exotic Oriental object that blends into the shimmering jewels, furs, and ornamental textiles that surround her. She confidently stares at the viewer with her hand gripped around a large dagger, a knowing smile perched on her face. French artists like Regnault accentuated Salome's Eastern image and consequently emphasized her bewitching sensuality as an Oriental woman.

The nineteenth-century Salome evolved into a prominent fixture of the male-driven Orientalist fantasy. European society was perturbed by her role in John the Baptist's death, which defied their dominant ideology of Christianity and patriarchal structures. Thus, both Salome's origin in Ancient Judea (a geographical location in the contemporary Orient) and her limitless sexual allure became essential to her reimagined depravity and blood lust. Regnault's artwork displays the revisions made to Salome's character after the Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt. Therefore, the figure of Salome evolves with the development of latent Orientalism, which Yeeyon Im describes as "shared ideas about the Orient at an unconscious level as the Other of Europe that informed any European living in the period" (362). Thus, the salacious, feminine, and sensual stereotypes of the East that emerged with Western imperialist control over the Orient effectively transformed the pawn of Herodias's schemes into a promiscuous sexual icon and a true Oriental femme fatale.

In a continuation of this carnal and exotically Eastern image, another French painter of the nineteenth century had a penchant for the biblical tale of Salome that inspired many writers of his generation. Gustave Moreau (1826–1898) created approximately 150 charcoal sketches,

watercolor renditions, and early drafts of varying similarity to the final iteration of his famous Symbolist piece, *Salome Dancing Before Herod* (1876).

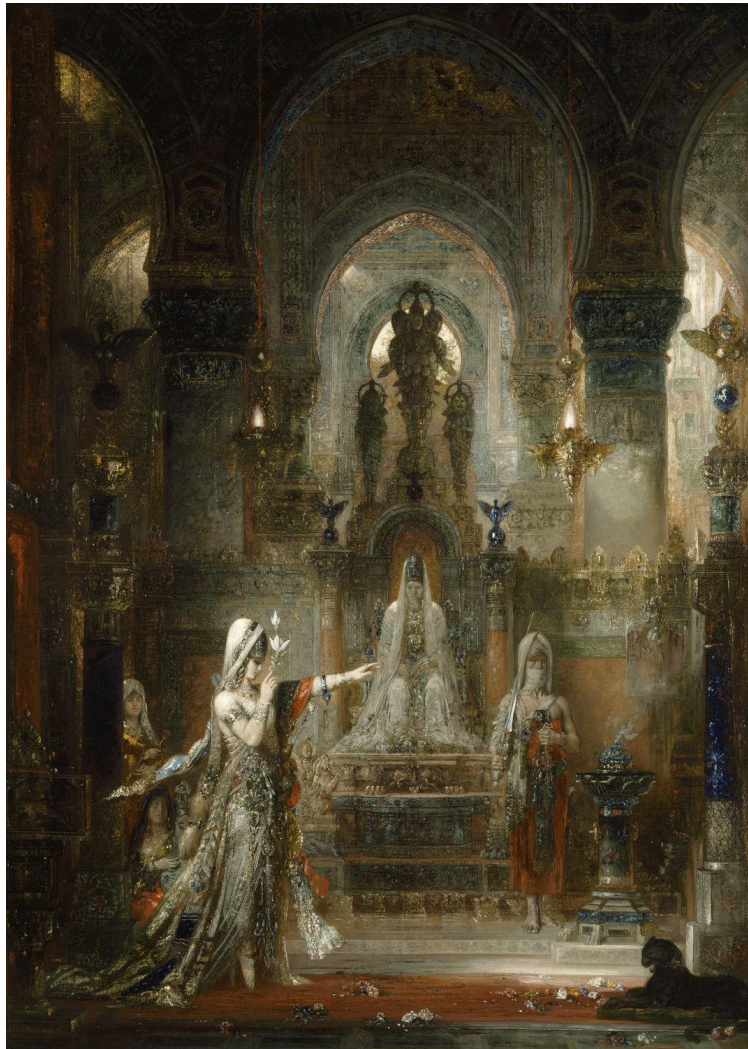


Fig. 3. Gustave Moreau. *Salome Dancing Before Herod*. 1876. Oil on canvas.

56 1/2 x 41 1/16 in. (143.5 x 104.3 cm). Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

Moreau worked on this painting for seven years, perfecting the details of the highly decorated figures and palace. Arabesque columns, high ceiling arches, innumerable jewels, and

delicate flowers flood this biblical portrait with a defining Orientalist ambiance. The viewer is a fellow observer of Salome's dance as Herod Antipas and Herodias stare at the illuminated girl. Small shreds of lighting emerge from the background of the palace, and a spotlight shines on Salome as she takes form. This painting became an immense source of inspiration to the Salomes that emerged in the rest of the late nineteenth century, including the protagonist of Wilde's play.

Artists like Moreau were entranced by this profoundly Oriental image of Salome, a representation that was heavily influenced by a Western archaeology of the East. In Moreau's painting, Salome holds a white lotus in her hand—a highly significant symbol of eternity and rebirth to ancient Egyptians. A black panther baring her fangs also sits in the right corner of the piece, her perched pose reminiscent of an old-world sphinx. Therefore, this painting shows a dangerously feminized Orient with motifs that display Western documentation of Eastern cultures and significant Egyptian symbols. This convergence of archaeology and fantasy in the Salome legend become essential to the symbolism and mystical atmosphere of Wilde's *Salome*.

One of the most prominent literary adaptations of the Salome legend appears in Gustave Flaubert's *Trois Contes* (1877). This volume contains "Hérodias," in which Herod Antipas navigates political relations between the Roman visitor Lucius Vitellius, the imprisoned and foreboding prophet Iokanaan (Flaubert's spelling of John the Baptist), and his vengeful wife Herodias. The main conflict of "Hérodias" is Herodias's desire for power as she attempts to dominate and beguile her husband and kill the prophet. After Iokanaan publicly humiliates Herodias in his scornful tirade, proclaiming that "the stones shall be too few to stone the adulteress," he invokes her wrath (Flaubert 178). Herod does not defend his wife, in fear of Iokanaan's prophecies, so Herodias enacts revenge on both men through her secret weapon—her hidden daughter, Salome.

In Flaubert's story, Salome is a highly eroticized tool for Herodias and is portrayed as a rather innocent figure. Flaubert's "Hérodias" depicts an alternative narrative from the original story of Salome. The reader learns that Herodias "had left the child in Rome, hoping to have others by the Tetrarch" (149–50). However, the audience learns that she presently keeps her daughter, Salome, in Herod's kingdom. Thus, Herodias uses her unrevealed daughter to manipulate Herod. Flaubert's Salome is a beguiling yet submissive figure who follows the dangerous commands of her mother. To enchant Herod and earn his favor, Salome dances before the banquet hall in a highly sensual performance:

By stretching her legs apart, without bending her knees, she stooped so low that her chin touched the floor; and the nomads, accustomed to abstinence, the Roman soldiers, experts in debauchery, the miserly publicans, the old priests soured by disputes, all, distending their nostrils, quivered with desire. (201)

This Salome is wholly enchanting and exceeds the limits of sexual provocation as she entices every man, even celibate priests. All the different factions that are represented in Flaubert's narrative are united in their lust for Herodias's daughter.

Still, Salome remains merely a tool and a younger double for her mother. Salome speaks for the first time after her performance, standing before Herod, and "lispering a little, uttered these words with an infantine air: 'I want you to give me, on a charger, the head —' She had forgotten the name, but she continued with a smile: 'The head of Iaokanann!'" (202). Flaubert thus portrays a child-like Salome who is immensely desired for her mystery, immaturity and silence that contrasts her mother's outspoken nature. While Flaubert's Salome is a drastically

less independent and self-serving figure than the one in Wilde's play, the political and dramatic interpretations of the Gospel that surround "Herodias" are a significant source of inspiration to Wilde.

A further essential depiction of Salome that captured her key role for Wilde's Decadent aesthetics appear in J.-K. Huysmans's *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*). Published in 1884, Huysmans's anti-realist novel contains highly detailed ekphrasis of Gustave Moreau's *Salome Dancing before Herod* (see fig. 3) and *The Apparition* (1876), another Symbolist painting of Moreau's recurrent form. The misanthropic protagonist, Des Esseintes, alienates himself from his aristocratic society by filling his home with luxurious art, literature, and decor. He wholly rejects the imperfections found in nature and instead is enamored by the highly eroticized and ornamental nature of Moreau's Salome paintings where Des Esseintes found "the superhuman and exotic Salomé of his dreams" (Huysmans 94). Huysmans offers an excessive Orientalist description of Salome that intensely exoticizes the princess as a sexual symbol, or the "deity of indestructible lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, of accursed Beauty...the monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, baneful, like the Helen of antiquity, fatal to all who approach her, all who behold her, all whom she touches" (95). Huysmans's characterization of the painting better reflects the Western European sentiments to Salome's story around the time of Wilde writing *Salome* and how she is heavily associated with the bestial feminine figures of the Orient. In this description, Salome is a highly Decadent figure as her feminine beauty and carnality are destructive to anyone who interacts with her. For an aesthete like Des Esseintes, who exclusively consumes art and luxury, his ideal Salome is a "monstrous" Eastern woman who is dramatically more fiendish and autonomous. This abstract description of Salome is a

convergence of Decadent and Symbolist aesthetics that are the essential to the construction of Wilde's inhuman princess.

Wilde's *Salome* (1894)

After reviewing past male-centered interpretations of the biblical story and their particular focus on Salome's erotic submissiveness, I will now focus on Wilde's unique rendering of the narrative in his one-act tragedy, *Salome*. Wilde's symbolist play was initially written in French and later translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas. The English version of *Salome* was then published in 1894 and included provocative ink drawings by Aubrey Beardsley that depicted promiscuous scenes from the drama. In reviewing Wilde's play, I will use Douglas's English translation of the text to analyze the dialogue, symbolist motifs, and stage directions that establish an underlying anti-colonial critique.

Wilde's play depicts Salome in an oppressive social and political environment governed by her incestuous stepfather, the Tetrarch of Judea. In the opening of the drama, Salome escapes onto the moonlit terrace outside of Herod's banquet. As she makes her way outside, Narraboth, the Syrian captain, observes that "[s]he looks very troubled" (Wilde 554). With this introspective depiction of the princess, Toni Bentley suggests that unlike "previous one-dimensional incarnations, Oscar Wilde gave Salome what she had heretofore lacked: a personality, a psychology all by her own" (28). This idea is further exhibited as Salome discloses the source of her troubles and declares: "It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that. I know not what it means. In truth, yes I know it" (555). Thus, Salome immediately diverges from previous interpretations that portrayed her as a silent and willing object of male fantasy, as she is self-aware and concerned by Herod's lustful gaze. This immediate development of Salome's

individuality reflects the emotional undercurrents of the play that motivate her desire for autonomy, as she rejects her role in Herod's banquet and declares, "I will not stay. I cannot stay" (555). With this understanding of Salome's disapproval toward her sexualization and captivity, Wilde's *Salome* asserts emotional conflict into the princess's story that ultimately propels her search for control over the male figures of the play.

Wilde's drama is established in the ancient East to better display the objectified princess's ability to reverse the structures of power within the play. Douglas's English translation of *Salome* contains antiquated language in the character dialogue, which generates a distinct sense of distance for Western audiences. To reanimate the ancient atmosphere in his play, the characters use words like "thee," "thy," and "thou" and other forms of archaic English that emulate the speech of the King James Bible (558). This archaic diction emphasizes the biblical landscape of the play, an effect which Luca Ambrogiani claims "enabled the spectator to linguistically associate the play with iconic representations of the past" (35). With this temporal and geographic distance, nineteenth-century audiences could fully engage with the avant-garde topics of the play that explore inverted gender roles and sexual violence. Wilde's language and biblical setting work to distance the reader from the radical sexual occurrences in the work through the distant constructed image of the Orient as a distant location and bygone era. Yeeyon Im notes that "Wilde's stage direction evokes the atmosphere of the Orient, a dreamlike space distant from reality" (364). Thus, Wilde used the geographical and temporal distance to usher in controversial and transgressive depictions of Salome that depart from the traditional narrative. With this "dreamlike space," Western audiences are overtly shown a layered political message of a promiscuous princess's ability to subvert colonial authority.

Throughout *Salome*, the princess is associated with symbolist motifs that connect her to the moon. One significant recurring symbol in *Salome* is the moon that hangs over Herod's terrace. The characters within the play are extremely conscious of the moon's presence, and multiple characters view the symbol with descriptions that frequently coincide with Salome's appearance. For instance, the Young Syrian's characterization of the moon reflects his eroticized projection of Salome:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN: She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing. (552)

With this description, the "little princess" Salome is represented in the moon, a profoundly transcendent symbol of feminine cycles. Therefore, Wilde's protagonist is effectively empowered and deified as a physical embodiment of the moon. Thus, the princess is presented as a powerful figure that is transcendentally connected to the environment that surrounds Herod's kingdom, showing her constant influence over the characters within the play.

The continual presence of the moon also functions to emphasize Salome's dangerous power over her lustful suitor's mental faculties. Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, there was a popular belief that the moon could cause people to suffer "from a recurrent frenzy or madness, believed to vary with the phases of the moon" ("Lunatic," def. 1.a). This concept is depicted within *Salome* as the male characters who are sexually interested in the princess act irrationally when exposed to her. Herod displays this crazed effect right before Salome performs her Dance of the Seven Veils, and he witnesses the moon appear "red as blood" (569). In response to his observations, Herodias declares: "You are sick. They will say at Rome that you

are mad” (569). Thus, Herod falls under the effects of a sort of lunacy from his prolonged observation of Salome.

Meanwhile, there is another character who constantly looks at the princess – the Syrian captain, Narraboth. In a frenzied emotional state, Narraboth dramatically commits suicide in front of Salome when she publicly expresses her lust for Iokanaan. After witnessing the tragedy, the Page of Herodias cries: “Ah! Why did I not hide him from the moon? If I had hid him in a cavern she would not have seen him” (560). This line emphasizes Salome's destructive abilities and the danger of both gazing at her and being seen by her. Katharina Herold-Zanker describes this power and states that Salome “is both victimized by the other characters’ gazes but also uses her own gaze to deconstruct and quite literally objectify others” (51). With this context to Salome’s gaze, we see how the symbolist features of Wilde’s play function to empower the princess. Since the moon represents the princess’s corruptive sexual appeal that affects those who objectify her, Narraboth and Herod are forcibly objectified and poisoned under the power of her supernatural abilities.

Along with his distinct use of symbols, Wilde’s *Salome* is an unparalleled adaptation of the ancient story as it portrays political instability within Herod’s kingdom. As the ruler of Judea, Herod is displayed as a very insecure leader who is hysterically driven by his desire to remain in power. His position as the Tetrarch, his marriage to Herodias, and his proximity to Salome are all sourced from his act of fratricide. The characters of the play reveal that Herod Antipas had his brother, the former Tetrarch, deposed and strangled after he sent the executioner the “death-ring,” a symbol of his nefarious scheme to take power (554). Herod displays some anxieties around his treacherous deed as he listens to the religious figures discuss the coming of Christ and his miraculous power of resurrection. Herod nervously shares, “I would allow no man to raise the

dead. It would be terrible if the dead came back” (565). Thus, Herod is distinctly aware of his precarious seat in power and covertly reveals his fear of being usurped.

Wilde emphasizes Herod’s underlying fear of losing his position by alluding to the weakened control over his colonial province. Per the original scripture, Wilde’s play is set in biblical Judea, which was under colonial control by Roman forces at the time of the original story. In this ancient setting, Herod Antipas governs Judea under the authority of Rome. Thus, Herod is notably positioned as a ruling figure of a client kingdom, an entity of Western colonial control in the Levant. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great, a king who was fiercely loyal to Rome and was “proclaimed king of the Jews by the Roman Senate” (Hoehner 6). This places the Herodian line of power as a colonial entity over the Jews who resided in biblical Palestine. This context of Herod’s inherited control is alluded to within Wilde’s play as Herodias criticizes the Tetrarch, saying, “My daughter and I come of a royal race. As for thee, thy father was a camel driver! He was also a robber!” (562). Herod passionately disagrees, but Wilde displays these points of deep uncertainty and insecurity within Herod, whose authoritative colonial control over the resident Jews within his kingdom is increasingly fleeting.

The source of Herod’s anxiety largely stems from his incestuous marriage to Herodias, as he does not produce any heirs to inherit the kingdom. Herod repeatedly discusses his concerns with his marriage to his late brother’s wife, Herodias. After he overhears one of Iokanaan’s prophecies, Herod comments on Herodias’ possible infertility and tells her: “I say that you are sterile. The prophet says that our marriage is not a true marriage. He says that it is an incestuous marriage, a marriage that will bring evils...I fear he is right” (567). In this comment, he discloses his fear of the eventual fall of the Herodian line of rule and his concerns about the effects of evil omens. However, he places the blame on Herodias, suggesting that his sexual potency is intact.

Thus, his persistent and lustful gaze towards Salome suggests a more perverse factor that motivates his desire—his desire to have her seated as the new queen. This notion of having Salome become Herodias's replacement is made apparent when Herod requests that Salome dance for him and offers the princess: "Whatsoever you wish I will give it to you, even to half of my kingdom" (569). According to Kirby Farrell, Herod essentially "begs for the erotic fertility of Salome's dance" and looks to Salome to save his failing kingdom and potentially offer him an heir (108). This interaction ultimately reveals the unbound depravity that Tetrarch projects onto his stepdaughter as an extension of his desire to continue his lineage for his colonial province.

However, the Tetrarch is not the source of Salome's desire, as Wilde reflects how Iokanaan is the recipient of the princess's dominating lust. When Salome first hears Iokanaan, she exclaims, "Ah, the prophet! He of whom the Tetrarch is afraid?" (555). This remark shows Salome's omniscient knowledge of Herod's fears. From his dark cistern, the princess overhears the prophet's audacious claims against her mother and stepfather. Yet, upon seeing him and hearing his critical remarks, she tells the prophet: "Speak again, Iokanaan. Thy voice is wine to me" (558). Thus, Salome's lust for Iokanaan instead displays her desire for Iokanaan's voice. The princess therefore displays her interest in the prophet's power over Herod and the prophetic omens that intimidate the Tetrarch, who has kept the prophet imprisoned yet alive for months out of fear of angering "an unknown God" (574). With Iokanaan's power to speak omens that directly address Herod's fear and anxieties, Salome seeks to embody that power with the tool afforded to her.

When Salome explicitly announces her lust for the prophet, Wilde outlines her desire to control him through promiscuous similes. As Salome speaks with Iokanaan, she examines him through highly descriptive and abstract language: "Thy body is white like the snows that lie on

the mountains, like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys” (558-59). Wilde displays the distinct masculinity of his Salome as she is capable of eroticizing and controlling the prophet’s body by comparing him to highly feminine images of pure, virginal “snows.” While Iokanaan is not receptive to her praise, her similes contain images that parallel the erotic poetry from Hebrew scripture. These abstract similes emulate the erotic poetry that appears in the Song of Songs, an ancient Hebrew scripture that references the carnal love between a man and a woman. However, Salome’s speech coincides with the masculine role in the scripture that eroticizes the feminine role’s appearance:

Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks.

Thy neck is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men. (Song of Songs 4:3–4, *KJV*)

By emulating the male role in their conversation, she is distinctly dominant and appears to exert her lust for Iokanaan as a form of control, especially since he refuses to look upon her and declares, “I do not wish to look at thee” (560). Since Salome cannot dominate Iokanaan with her body, she establishes him in a feminine position under her control through language, as she ultimately desires to emulate the prophet’s powerful language.

Still, Salome’s sensuality grants her a means of manipulating the Tetrarch’s desire and reversing the power dynamic of their relationship. After her continual refusal to dance, Herod hysterically pleads with Salome to perform for him on the terrace and makes failed attempts to control her. However, the princess eventually concedes once Herod gives her his word to gift her “everything” she may ask for (568). For her performance, Wilde’s depiction of Salome’s deadly

dance is notably simplified to “*Salome dances the dance of the seven veils*” (570). While the actual directions of the dance are left ambiguous, the imagery of seven veils implies that there is a type of erotic striptease occurring that shirks Herod’s desperate perverse fantasy. After she finishes her performance, Salome announces: “I do not heed my mother. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask for the head of Iokanaan in a silver charger” (570). Thus, by shedding her veils, Salome essentially unmask her true motivations and desires as she peels back the subservient fantasy that Herod has constructed around her. Salome’s desire for Iokanaan’s head is revealed to be her individual plan as she operates outside of her mother’s guidance, a key feature that absolved past versions of Salome from their culpability in the death of John the Baptist. Yet, this Salome contains a complex psychology that reveals how her relationship with Herod influences her extreme desires.

Wilde’s princess exclusively seeks to subvert Herod’s control and effectively emasculates her ruler. By employing her scheme to receive the head of Herod’s prophetic prisoner, Salome successfully undermines Herod’s authority by taking advantage of his incestuous lust. After witnessing Salome speak to the severed head of Iokanaan, Herod admits to Herodias: “She is monstrous, thy daughter, she is altogether monstrous” (574). While Herod was not directly killed by Salome’s manipulative abilities, his eventual demise was triggered by his transgressive and debauched gaze toward the princess. Herod is exposed to the consequences of his perverse incestuous fantasies as Salome willingly interacts with another sexual taboo as she holds the decapitated head of Iokanaan. The princess engages in a wildly necrophilic act and kisses Iokanaan’s decapitated head (575). With this extreme transgression of sexual taboos, the prophet’s foreboding prophecies against the Tetrarch are realized. Iokanaan once declared: “In his hand he shall bear a golden cup full of his blasphemies. And the angel of the Lord shall smite

him” (567) As Salome entirely embodies the limitless sexual depravity and fantasy that was once desired by Herod, the Tetrarch is forced to consider the consequences of his unbridled lust.

Unlike the princesses that appear in Flaubert’s and Huysmans’ respective works, Wilde’s Salome is an extremely self-serving figure whose autonomy makes her a monstrous threat to Herod’s empire. By using her sensual charms and supernatural abilities to entrap the Tetrarch, Salome endangers the future of Herod’s life and kingdom. Bentley notes that Salome’s “erotic allure leads men into danger, destruction, and even death” as she “was created by the male masochistic mind, resolving his contradictory desire for sexual connection and his even deeper fear of castration and annihilation” (22). Wilde’s drama culminates with the princess kissing Iokanaan’s head, which castrates the Tetrarch’s carnal conquest for the princess. Thus, the Tetrarch is effectively annihilated as his power is toppled by his boundless fantasies, while Salome’s manipulation of his lust allows her to usurp Herod’s control and reveal the fragility of his colonial kingdom. Ultimately, Wilde’s *Salome* displays “the triumph of a woman’s erotic power” by transforming the original puppet of Herodias’ violent ploy into a cunning creature that could topple Herod’s fragile empire through embodying perverse male desire (Bentley 16). Thus, audiences are forced to consider how the Tetrarch’s fantasies that once objectified the princess could cause the preeminent destruction of his colonial kingdom as Salome’s domination over the Tetrarch is immortalized within Wilde’s adaptation of the Judean princess.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored how Wilde's Orientalist narratives depict the Eastern femme fatale and how they are constructed to empower the historically marginalized female subaltern. By examining Wilde's Oriental femme fatale, I have revealed how they reflect the projected transgressive desires of their male observers.

Wilde's use of the femme fatale archetype when depicting Oriental women weaponizes the hypersexual and often monstrous tropes they were sensationalized for in the Orientalized minds of Western audiences. Through this approach, his texts thwart the standard conventions that permit Western male figures to have unquestioned authority and control over “the other.” The Oriental femme fatale gains a voice by operating outside Western social norms that upheld the ideal of a chaste and submissive European woman. Instead, the monstrous women of Wilde's Orientalist texts induce anxiety and identity crisis in their observers who associate with Western structures of patriarchal control. By portraying the Oriental woman as an inhuman and transcendent figure, Wilde challenges the inherent power and control associated with Western society.

Wilde empowers these Oriental femme fatales and grants them agency outside traditional narratives that depend upon the Eastern women's oppression. Some researchers view these texts, particularly with his focus on crumbling empires, as extensions of Wilde's rejection of the power ascribed to English imperialism and Western patriarchal society. Wilde notably rejected his association with England and upheld his colonized Irish ancestry. His turbulent relationship with marginalizing power structures in Victorian England, especially after he was incriminated for his homosexuality and fled to France after his imprisonment, leads some critics to consider his relationship to “the other” as a highly personal connection.

After examining Wilde's reimagining of the Oriental femme fatale, it appears that these Eastern figures' ability to reflect traditionally male traits like sexual dominance, autonomy, and keen intelligence in a subaltern feminine body—the usual site of conquest—is what makes them so monstrous to Western observers. The feminine monsters of “Athanasia,” *The Sphinx*, and *Salome* wholly subvert nineteenth-century imperialist literary conventions. While Wilde drew artistic influence from countless artists and writers, he transformed these traditionally othered figures from objects of Western male conquest into powerful, autonomous beings who challenge patriarchal and colonial authority.

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