Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was

Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was;
Salome: Nymph, Seducer, Destroyer

By

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CAMBRIDGE
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To those who crave love but are unable to love.

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"Salome" by Rosina Neginsky[1]

The window's a stage.
Dolls are moving in the fog.
With wine-filled goblets in their hands,
Puppets dance the Minuet
To the music of Handel.

Sipping the wine of curiosity—
I look at them
The window stage opens
And a beautiful lady
Dressed in jewels
Flies out of it.

"My friend," she whispers to me,
"I am in love with you.
Would you dance the Minuet with me?
By the way,
My name's Salome."
I embraced Her.
She was naked and lovely.
Together we started
The rhythmical dance.

"I know,
You write about me,"
She said.
"Once in the castle of Herod
I was a twelve-year-old princess
And I did not know
How to dance at all.

For two thousand years
I've been Everything:
The beautiful whore
In Gustave Moreau's work—
I am dancing with you now
Her dance
In her costume.

I was the Princess Salome,
Who the other guy,
Whose name begins with M too—
I think Mallarmé—
Named Hérodiade.
He dressed me in jewels
And told me I was his self-portrait!
That one whose name begins with an M
Copied John the Baptist from Moreau.
Moreau severed the Baptist's head,
Painted himself as the Baptist,
Suspended his head in the air
And blamed it all on me!

There was also Flaubert.
In his story I'm truly young.
Imagine, he made me dance upside-down.
As a child he saw me in Rouen,
Shaped from stone:
My head down,
My legs above,
Flaubert reproduced this image.
But it wasn't me at all.
How could I, at 1,200 years old stand on my head?

The sculptors who put me on my head
Stole me from Herrad de Landsberg,
The learned nun.
She copied me from Isis,
The one who gave a second life to Osiris.
Isis was a good dancer.
She arched her body like a bridge
And danced on her hands
The dance of life.
But it wasn't me.

Today I'm two thousand years old.
I'm ancient.
For some reason however,
They still force me to dance,
The Dance of Seven Veils.

My friend, I ask you
Who haven't I been?
My friend, rescue me!"

Sounds of the Minuet.
The window's a stage.
Puppet-people drink wine.
The window closed.
The door opened.
I am waiting,
Sure She is about to come out.

A fat woman falls out of the castle.
But She?!
For sure this is her castle.

A woman yells,
Her husband hisses,
The car hums,
And I…

I am still dancing the Minuet with Her,
With a divine woman,
Two thousand years old.
I hear her whisper,
"My friend, rescue me!"

And it seems to me that she understood it all,
And blessed me to unravel
The eternal enigma of this mysterious life.

Notes

[1]Rosina Neginsky, "Salome," *Juggler. Poems* (New Orleans: University Press of the South, 2009), 106-115. I am including a Russian version of this poem, since originally it was written in Russian and then rewritten by the author in English.

Саломея

Сцена – окно.
Куклы движутся в тумане
Под музыку Генделя,
Менуэт вином запивая.

Я на них смотрю
И вино любопытства пью.

Окно-сцена проломилось,
И прекрасная дама,
В ожерельях вся
Вылетела из окна.
“Мой друг”, --
Мне шепнула она.
“Я в вас влюблена
И вас Менуэт со мной
Танцевать приглашаю.
Саломея я” --
Невзначай бросила она.

Я обнял ее.
Она была нага, хороша,
И в танце ритмичном
Вдвоем закружились мы.

“Я знаю,
Вы пишете обо мне”, -
Прошептала она.
“Когда-то в замке Ирода
Я принцессой была.
Мне было двенадцать лет,
И танцевать совсем не умела я.

За 2000 лет кем только я ни была?
Прекрасная проститутка
С картины Густава Моро,
В костюме которой
С вами сейчас танцую я.

Принцесса, которую другой,
Тоже на М.,
Кажется Маллармэ,
Иродиадой назвал,
В ожерелье одел
И своим портретом признал.

Иоанна Крестителя этот на М.
Списал с Моро:
Тот Крестителю голову отрубил
И себя Крестителем вообразил.

Голову он, висящей в воздухе, изобразил,
Ореолом ее окружил
И меня обвинил.

Был тоже Флобер.
У него я совсем юна.
Представьте себе,
На голове танцую я!

В Руане он видел меня.
Там из камня вылеплена я:
Голова вниз,
Ноги вверх!

Но то совем не я!
Разве в 1200 лет
На голове могла бы стоять я?!

Те, кто на голову поставили меня,
У Herrad de Landsberg,
Ученой монашки,
Украли меня.
А она срисовала меня с Изиз,
С той, что Озирису вторую жизнь дала.
Изиз большой танцовщицей была!
Мостиком и на голове
В танце жизни стояла она.

Сегодня мне 2000 лет.
Я очень стара.
Но танец семи вуалей все еще танцую я!

Мой друг,
Кем только я ни была!
Мой друг,
Спасите меня!”

Звуки Менуэта,
Сцена-окно,
Куклы – люди пьют вино.

Окно затворилось,
Дверь отворилась...
А я жду...
Вот-вот выйдет она.

Тут толстая баба
Вывалилась из дворца...
А Она?!
Ведь это замок Ее!

Баба шипит,
Муж ее кричит,
Машина гудит...

А я...
Я все еще Менуэт танцую
                              С Ней,
С прекрасной женщиной,
Двух тысячи лет.

"Мой друг,
Спасите меня!" --
Все еще шепчет она.

И кажется мне,
Что она все поняла
И на разгадку вечной загадки
Благославила меня.

PREFACE

The origin of this book is in a conversation I had on a flight from Paris to Chicago. At the time I was reading Mireille Dottin-Orsini's book *Salome*. Seated next to me was a man who lived in Paris and was on his way to Chicago for vacation. At a certain point during the flight we began to talk. When he saw the book in my hand he said, "Ah, Salomé, la grande séductrice!" ("Ah, Salome, the great seducer!") I smiled and replied, "Really?" And then, hoping he would elaborate on the subject, provocatively added: "I did not know she was *la grande séductrice*." Alas, the conversation did not continue in this direction, but his statement left me puzzled. I asked myself: Was Salome, as a historical figure, really *la grande séductrice?* If this was not the case, why does she have this reputation?

These became troubling questions. Reputations often do not correspond to reality, but that does not stop them from influencing the destiny of an individual, a group of people, even a nation, society and the entire course of history. Such thoughts led me to write this book, *Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was*. It is an investigation into Salome's reputation and the construction of such reputations. The result is a better understanding of woman's image in society and a study of how different outlets—theology, visual arts, literature and music—contribute to the creation and propagation of images and reputations. The focus is on Salome in particular, but my interest is also on myths in general. Thus, I use the story of Salome to inquire into the process of myth generation, one of the most fascinating and important of all cultural phenomena.

Work on this project has also reminded me of the personal component of myths and myth-building. As historians and scholars we often focus on the larger processes of history; it is important to remind ourselves that such processes take place at a human level. A key element behind the power of myths is their accessibility and adaptability to people's everyday lives.

One of the richest experiences on my own quest of discovering Salome's myth was my time in Florence, Italy, a city famously associated with John the Baptist and images of his life. During my stay I visited Prato, a small town less than half an hour from Florence by train, where the Renaissance painter Filippo Lippi lived and worked for a period. It was

in Prato that Lippi painted one of the most fascinating fresco cycles depicting the story of John the Baptist and the associated dance of Salome. Woven into these beautiful images is the subtext of Lippi's own life, a story of love and loss, which left a profound impression on me. The scenes, which are at once historical and personal, speak to the power of myth on levels both large and small.

Work on any scholarly project is often lonely, as the nuts and bolts of research and writing is done alone with our books and thoughts in front of a computer screen. My experience writing this book was no different. Perhaps the interdisciplinary nature of this project and a necessity to work in art, literature, theology and even sociology kept me from settling too comfortably into one particular group. However, I was fortunate that throughout the process of writing this book I had people who supported me and were always interested in my progress.

My very sincere gratitude goes to my friend Larry Shiner, emeritus professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Springfield, specialist in aesthetics, who was always present during my research and writing. He encouraged me throughout the entire process and was one of the most helpful and supportive readers of this book. My gratitude also goes to Peter Cooke and Brendan Cole, who shared with me their own work and made a number of valuable suggestions, and to David Boffa and Frank O'Leary.

INTRODUCTION

This is the study of a myth and its sources – the mythical image of Salome and its links to the broader cultural myths surrounding women. Although the root of the Hebrew name "Salome" is "peaceful," the image spawned by this famous woman to carry that name has been anything but peaceful. She and her story have long been linked to the beheading of John the Baptist, since Salome was the supposed catalyst for the prophet's execution. According to the Gospel accounts, it was the seductive beauty of Salome's dance at the banquet of her stepfather, Herod Antipas, that led to John's beheading.

Salome and her dance have been topics of literary and artistic works for centuries. The story's basic origins, however, provide little to suggest that this should be the case. In the Gospel she is nothing more than a tool in the drama of John the Baptist's martyrdom (Mark 6:14-29, and Matthew 14:1-12). In the Middle Ages her role was always secondary to John the Baptist's. She was part of *his* story. At the same time, however, she was also widely used as a cautionary example to shape and reinforce a cultural view of women and their place within society. Later, during the Renaissance, and especially in the nineteenth century, she became a fully independent cult figure. Her story was embellished and expanded, becoming a favorite subject of artists and writers. Though the meaning of her roles varied throughout the centuries according to the ideology of the period and the sensibilities of individual artists, she was always predominantly an incarnation of evil. From her humble beginnings, mentioned in a few lines of the Gospels, she had thus become a figure of mythic proportions, entirely independent from the historical Salome.

For the earliest disseminators of the Salome myth it was important to portray her as one of the main players in the execution of John the Baptist. Although he was executed for political reasons by Herod Antipas, in the Bible he became the victim of two women. One of them was the wife of Herod Antipas, Herodias, and the other was her daughter, a young unnamed dancing girl who later appears under the name of Salome.

The Bible and the Church fathers developed three main stereotypes of women: the saint, the sinner and the repenting sinner. The image of a saint, of an ideal woman, a woman-mother, was attached to the Virgin Mary. The image of an evil sinner who is going through the process of repentance

was attributed to Mary Magdalene, whereas Salome belongs to the type of the inherently evil sinner who is without repentance, the descendent of the supposedly sinful Eve.

Her image, although always an embodiment of evil, went through a number of transformations. Church fathers and the artists who worked for the Church during the Middle Ages propagated the vision of Salome as evil through writings and the visual arts. When the shifting cultural and artistic norms of the Renaissance placed increasing emphasis on beauty and individuality, the stereotype of Salome as a purely evil destroyer began to falter. Salome's evil image was thus transformed into the image of a beautiful woman, a muse for artists. This development continued during the Baroque period, when Salome's cruelty and her already established ideology as an evil and mischievous woman were again emphasized alongside her status as a beautiful muse. As a result of these changes her image became representative of the more secular worldview of the time. Despite the various incarnations of Salome, one thing remained constant up to the nineteenth century: For centuries, she was not an entirely independent figure. Rather, she remained an appendix to John the Baptist and was always represented in association with him.

In the nineteenth century, however, the myth took a different shape. With the increasing independence of women and the appearance of feminist movements, women became a threat and potential competitors to men. Since society and social rules were largely made and governed by men, there was an effort to repress women and not let them break from social stereotypes to become equal, strong and independent. Ironically, it is through the process of a struggle against women and their potential power that Salome became a truly independent cult figure in her own right. She was used as a tool, a scarecrow of sorts, and as a symbol of the dangerous and destructive woman, manipulative through her beauty and through her ability to enslave and destroy men by awakening in them an uncontrollable sexual desire. The problem raised was that women, while physically and domestically indispensable, were considered by many to be socially destructive if given too much power. In the nineteenth century, Salome became a symbol of the dangerous and seductive woman who, once allowed to gain social power, would destroy man. Her image served as an inspiration for artists, poets and writers, who used her and her story to create new myths based partly on her existing reputation and partly on their own imaginations and philosophies.

In the nineteenth century, Salome became a symbol of woman-vampire, whore and murderess. Her supposedly Jewish origins were also stressed in order to emphasize the danger of a rising merchant class, many

of whom were Jews. Her myth was thus made into a multifaceted expression of societal fears.

That image of Salome disappeared in the immediate aftermath the First World War, when feelings of hostility and struggle directed toward women were replaced by a real enemy and a true struggle for survival in Europe. The twentieth century created images of Salome in art and literature as well, but those images are only a tribute to the once-powerful myth. Freed of any real ideological foundation, these more recent appearances of Salome are little more than shadows of her former self.

The processes by which myths are created are among the most important of all cultural phenomena. In looking at Salome as a case study, this book examines those processes, considering how Salome and her story was transformed from history into myth. Particular attention is given to why and how Salome was presented as evil and how the purpose of her evil varied from one period to another.

The book is organized chronologically, looking at art and literature from Biblical times through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and into the nineteenth century. The goal is not a survey, but a study of carefully selected works that serve as examples and evidence for my larger argument.

The first part, *Creation of the Salome Myth,* is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, History and Myth in the Biblical Story, examines the genesis of the story from historical, textual and literary viewpoints and considers the reasons for and results of that genesis. I begin with the Biblical story of Salome and its links to earlier folklore, specifically the story of the Roman consul Flaminius, who was expelled from the Roman Senate for having a prisoner killed to impress a young boy who was his lover. This story went through a variety of transformations, appearing in the accounts of different historians and serving as an inspiration for the Evangelists. I explain how they used the story of Salome and John the Baptist as a literary device to make their narrative emotionally and visually more effective, a tactic borrowed from contemporary Roman authors. For the Evangelists, the effect of their narrative was important not only as entertainment but also to construct a religious belief system based on the characters they were discussing. Their accounts of the life and death of John the Baptist—and of Salome and Herodias as archetypal, corrupting women and relatives of Eve—have become engraved in history and in people's psyche. The critical associations that develop at this early stage form the underpinnings of nearly all later expressions of this story.

The second chapter, The Evil Salome of Theology and Iconography:

From the Church Fathers to the Renaissance, analyzes the construction of Salome's image in Christian theology and how that image was applied to more general views on women. It demonstrates how her image contributed to the established myths of women as evil seducers and destroyers of men.

Chapter three, The Beautiful Salome of Renaissance Painting and Sculpture, is in some sense an extension of the previous chapter. It studies examples of the story of Salome created in different visual art forms from the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries. Close examination of these images reveals how they reflect the ideology and established artistic norms of a given period even while shaping new social ideologies and sensibilities. In this chapter I analyze new and unconventional images of Salome. One is by the Northern Renaissance artist Rogier van der Weyden. It was he who invented a new way of representing Salome by turning her head away from the bleeding head of John the Baptist. That iconography endowed Salome with a certain degree of shame and conscientiousness, changing the way in which her physical beauty could be considered.

The fourth chapter, The Seducer-Destroyer Salome of Nineteenth-Century Art, illustrates how the image of Salome was constructed in art and literature in order to neutralize the social, political and economic challenges created by the nascent feminist movements. It is during the nineteenth century, particularly in France, that Salome's ideological role and image as an independent figure were shaped.

The second part of the book, *Salome and the Head of John the Baptist in Artists' Self-Portraits*, examines how the image of Salome was used in the creation of personal myths. Chapter five, Painting: Titian, Bernard, Moreau, demonstrates the construction of the self-portrait in *decapité* and in disguise and examines the significance and hidden meaning of each self-portrait. I examine artworks that create a personal legend through the story of Salome and John the Baptist. In those representations, the artists I examine—Titian, Emile Bernard and Gustave Moreau—often convey a hidden biographical message as well as their philosophical stance on art. By portraying themselves in the guise of the beheaded John the Baptist these artists further complicate and personalize the imagery and story of Salome.

Chapter six, Poetry: Stéphane Mallarmé, studies the self-portrait in literature, concentrating specifically on Mallarmé's unfinished poem *Les Noces d'Hérodiade*. In this poem Mallarmé fully reinvents the mythical image of Hérodiade/Salome as a *femme fatale* in order to create an image of himself. Mallarmé's untraditional Salome-Hérodiade becomes a metaphor for the poet's mythical ego, his inner world and his philosophy of creativity.

Part three, *Salome in Story, Drama and Music*, explores literary examples and their manifestations in visual arts and music. Salome's Dance in Flaubert's "Herodias:" Pictorial or Ekphrastic? (chapter seven), is a detailed study of the dancing Salome and her relationship to the process of creativity in Flaubert's short story. I consider the history of the image and the complexity of Flaubert's creative process, which, partly subconsciously, partly consciously, reshaped an already established mythical image of Salome, making her a dangerous object of masculine desire.

Chapter eight, Wilde's Salome, is an in-depth literary analysis of Wilde's play *Salome*. Wilde's Salome appears almost androgynous and can be taken as a symbol of the writer's reflections on life and art. On a less sophisticated level, his Salome becomes a striptease dancer performing the dance of Seven Veils, which became famous after Wilde's invention. Wilde's characterization of Salome's dance and its seductive effect on Herod colorfully and explicitly illuminated what many of his predecessors had only suggested about her nature. This characterization contributed greatly to the propagation of Salome's myth in the twentieth century and to her reputation as a seducer and destroyer.

Chapter nine, Wilde, Beardsley, Strauss, discusses several interpretations of the play. The "androgynous" Salome of Oscar Wilde is highlighted in visual form in the work of the English artist Aubrey Beardsley, whose illustrations I examine in this chapter. In music, my study is centered around Richard Strauss's opera *Salome,* based on Wilde's play. In this opera the character of Salome is depicted through music, and music enhances her with features that make her an even more complex, multidimensional and ultimately tragic character. Overall in this chapter I demonstrate how Aubrey Beardsley and Richard Strauss selectively focused on some of the play's possible interpretations in order to create their own artistic masterpieces.

There are many more works of art and literature, both minor and major, which feature Salome as a character and which either contributed to the various myths of Salome or were instrumental in their propagation. Unfortunately, the constraints of time and space do not allow for an examination of all instances of the Salome myth.

For example, the main text of my book does not study any of the appearances of Salome in Eastern Europe or Russia. It is worth noting, however, that Salome made a significant entrance into Russian culture with the translation of Wilde's play, which inspired its performance in theaters and also a film with Alla Azimova in the role of Salome. Salome made a particularly distinctive appearance in Russian poetry, especially in

that of the twentieth century.[1] In Russia, the image of Salome was not invented or reinvented, but rather propagated in the form that she had already taken earlier in the minds of other artists and poets.

This book strives to challenge of the social stigmas attached to Salome, and it also questions the notion of social stigma in general. Part of the goal is to explore why and how history attaches such stigma to certain individuals, nations and cultures—in short, how society at large elects its demons and chooses its scapegoats. Perhaps human social structures are such that they require an enemy in order to reinforce who we are and who we want to be. Perhaps Salome has been one of those enemies, a vital figure in the structure of societies struggling to establish their ideologies and shape their cultures.[2]

Notes

[1] See Appendix 2.
[2] See the theory of the scapegoat developed by the French philosopher René Girard.

Part I

Creation of the Salome Myth

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY AND MYTH IN THE BIBLICAL STORY

The Bible

Three New Testament Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—mention the death of John the Baptist, but only Matthew and Mark depict the participation and the roles of Salome and her mother, Herodias. Matthew's account is the shortest and contains the essentials of the story:

> At that time Herod, the tetrarch, heard about the fame of Jesus; and he said to his servants, "This is John, the Baptist, he has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him." For Herod had seized John and bound him and put him in prison, for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because John said to him, "It is not lawful for you to have her." And though he wanted to put him to death, he feared the people, because they held him to be a prophet. But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry; but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison, and his head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, and she brought it to her mother. And his disciples came and took the body and buried it; and they went and told Jesus.[1]

Many critics, theologians and historians have tried to determine the real reason for and manner of John the Baptist's death. The only historical sources we have are the works by the historian Josephus Flavius, principally in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*, written around 93 or 94 AD. More extensive than any biblical account, *Antiquities* provides a comprehensive account of Jewish history of the period, including a description of Herod's family and the story of the death of John the Baptist. Nowhere in his account is there any mention of a dance performed by Salome or by any other woman, nor of any involvement of Herodias, nor of any women in the execution of John.[2]

It is from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews* that we learn the name of Herodias's daughter, Salome (the biblical accounts do not give the girl a