

# Salome

*O. Wilde*

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The story of John the Baptiste and Salome is told both in Matthew and Mark with little variation. The plot is simple, and most children with some rudiments of a Christian education are familiar with it. Herod is the King of Judaea, a subordinate to the Roman emperor, who at the time turns out to be Tiberius. He has married his brothers wife Herodias. John the Baptist is in custody of the court, and he very much disapproves of the match as being close to incestuous and hence illegal. Herodias is very much disturbed by this. She has a daughter Salome, whom the king would very much like see dancing. He rashly makes an oath to the effect that she is able to ask anything of him, including half his Kingdom, would he only be allowed to see her dance. Salome consults with her mother, who advises her to demand the head of John the Baptist on a platter (or actually charger, as it is called in the Bible). The King is aghast, but having solemnly sworn there is no backing off and the request is met.

Now what could Oscar Wilde do with the material? There is not much of a plot, and consequently his play, even if greatly embellished, is very short, just one act and some thirty odd pages of text. For a starter there are more actors. In addition to the royal couple and the daughter, and John the Baptist of course, Wilde introduces some soldiers, some pages, some slaves, a few early Christian (so called Nazarenes) and a couple of disputing Jews. The Baptist is confined in a cistern of the palace, and through most of the play you only hear his incomprehensible rantings. He is on no account to be let out of his imprisonment by order of the King, who fears him. Salome is made explicitly into an object of lust, and her taunting of the Baptist is surely meant to show that she is not just an object of lust, but that she is fully capable of feeling it herself as well. Herodias censures her husband for constantly gazing at her daughter. The dance itself is highly erotically charged, involving bare feet and seven veils supposedly to be shorn one at the time. Her decision to have the head of the Baptist chopped off is her own, not instigated by her mother, although the latter wholeheartedly approves of it. The King is aghast and tries to stall, suggesting all kinds of alternative gifts, such as jewellery and white peacocks, and even the sacred veil of the temple. Salome insists, supported by her mother. The King has to eventually relent. A big Negro, the official executioner is sent down to do his assignment, not a word is heard, the Baptist meekly (or stoically) accepting his fate. The head is produced, it is kissed and fondled by Salome. The King is so disgusted that he orders her killed. And that is the end.

Now what gives the story a certain charm are the intermittent touches of wit sprinkled by the author. He lets for some reason one of the soldiers commit suicide during Salomes taunting of the Baptist. She takes no notice, although fellow soldiers are concerned. The King does not like dead bodies lying around, except those he has had slain himself. Although the play was originally written and performed in French, Wilde had his notorious lover Lord Alfred Douglas translate it into English. A translation marked by its ineptness,

and one suspects, later improved by the chagrined author himself. The English version is written in the style of the Bible, with all those 'thy's and 'thee's that go with that. Wilde obviously had great fun making all kinds of obscure as well as made-up Biblical references, luxuriating in the opportunity to write pastiches on Biblical themes with a marked tendency to parody. Another Wildean touch is given by the many allusions to the moon, which figure prominently in the stage directions. It is meant to to strengthen the Pagan connection.

In its initial staging in Paris in 1893 Sarah Bernard was meant to play the title role. It was not officially put on the English stage until long after Wilde's death, when the ban on its performance was lifted. All in all the play and any subsequent production has the character of a student skit.

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