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Moral transgressions against Victorian society in the tragic plays of Oscar Wilde

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ABSTRACT

After Oscar Wilde was imprisoned in 1895 for acts of 'gross indecency', his reputation was destroyed. He was subsequently 'dismissed as an idle aesthete, an uncommitted poseur' and 'a mere dandy' (Eltis, 1996, p. 6). Critics would ultimately ignore Wilde's lifelong engagement with socio-political change throughout his works due to his legacy as a scandalous celebrity.

Today, his society comedies are at the forefront of his theatrical prowess, but his tragic plays are largely forgotten. This article scrutinises Wilde's deliberate yet overlooked focus on societal subversion in his tragic plays that scandalise nineteenth-century standards of morality in Victorian England just as skilfully as his more popular comedic plays.

Feminist writer Hélène Cixous (1977, p. 133) once asserted that tragedy 'is built according to the dictates of male fantasy', a claim that appears to position Wilde as a playwright who torments his tragic heroines. However, this article explores Wilde's women as symbolic of patriarchal oppression and the cost of escaping societal expectations. Wilde's tragedies reflect his devotion to individualism and feminism as political gestures aimed to contravene orthodox Victorian tradition.

Introduction

When disaster struck Oscar Wilde in May 1895, society ostracised him, and his literary works were 'sentenced from production and circulation' (Robins, 2019, p. 21). He was arrested and subsequently imprisoned to two years of hard labour for acts of 'gross indecency', as part of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 in England, which punished private and consensual sexual activity between men. After his release in 1897, he relocated to France in self-exile, and never returned to the United Kingdom (UK). He spent these last few years in squalor, ill health and shame before dying in 1900. Fifty years after his death, Wilde was still often 'dismissed as an idle aesthete, an uncommitted poseur' and 'a mere dandy' (Eltis, 1996, p. 6). Consequently, his works were negatively critiqued and deemed insignificant; serious academic study would only begin later in the century.

Today, Wilde's most revered plays are his comedies: *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895). All of his comedies belong under satirical farce: plays that parody and challenge societal values. In Regenia

Gagnier's analysis of Wilde's influence on the Victorian era, she believes Wilde 'mercilessly exposed his audiences' superficiality and lack of moral substance while he simultaneously presented to them images of themselves so glamorous and powerful that they could not help but forgive, even lionise, him' (Gagnier, 1997, p. 27). There is no doubt Wilde's defiance of conventional stage rubrics in theatre has confirmed him to be a proto-modernist, effectively reinventing 'the English and Anglo-Irish tradition of the comedy of manners' (Poulain, 2014, p. 291). However, researchers have often neglected similar themes of non-conformity in Wilde's tragedies: *Vera; or, the Nihilists* (1880), *The Duchess of Padua* (1883), and *Salomé* (1896). This article scrutinises Wilde's deliberate yet overlooked focus on societal subversion in his tragic plays that scandalise nineteenth-century standards of morality in Victorian England just as skilfully as his more popular comedic plays.

To critics, Wilde was 'the reputedly careless craftsman' (Eltis, 1996, p. 4). However, this critique is challenged by Wilde's frequent engagement with nineteenth-century political discourse. After all, he was the son of Lady Jane Wilde (née Elgee; 1821–96), an Irish nationalist who published poetry and prose under the pseudonym *Speranza*. She was a prominent activist who wrote during Ireland's Great Famine (1845–52), a time when Ireland was plunged into a nationwide famine due to food shortages, with further catastrophe occurring due to inefficient relief measures by the English government. Unsuccessful protest by Irish nationalists marked an end to Ireland's political awakening for the time being, but Speranza continued to support the Irish by publishing a compilation of poems in 1864. Cooper (2006, p. 28) posits that radical poets such as Speranza were 'ventriloquists' who could express the pathos of poverty in the absence of those undermined by voicelessness. This is exemplified in Speranza's 'The Voice of the Poor':

> The air around is ringing with their laughter—
> God has only made the rich to smile;
> But we—in our rags, and want, and woe—
> we follow after,
> Weeping the while. (Wilde, 1871, p. 14)

Speranza's poetry conjures pity for the deprived Irish people and reflects her hatred for authoritarianism. In the 1891 essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde parallels his mother's concern for the impoverished. He expresses a desire for socialism in society, believing it would 'relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others' (Wilde, 2001, p. 127) and advocates 'the possibility of self-development for all individuals' (Dellamora, 1994, p. 120). Wilde not only seeks individualism as the answer for social independence but for 'the full development of Life to its highest mode of perfection' (Wilde, 2001, p. 128).

In *The Soul of Man*, Wilde's desire for individualism in society made him believe that 'the cultivation of a personality can only occur when dominant moral standards are ignored' (Ivory, 2007, p. 526). He believed in a justification of transgressive acts and determined crime a 'positive phenomenon' in terms of personal enrichment. This ideology is further demonstrated in his 1891 essay *Pen, Pencil, and Poison* where he proposes that 'there is no essential incongruity between crime and culture' (Wilde, 2001, p. 211).

Wilde also shared his mother's proto-feminist leanings. He expresses a desire in *The Soul of Man* for women to pursue employment for the betterment of society and aimed to invoke socialism 'as a motor of change in relations between the sexes' (Dellamora, 1994, p. 124). Wilde was productive during the emergence of the New Woman ideal, a period of time where feminism began to expand rapidly. He edited *The Woman's World* between 1887 and 1889, a Victorian women's magazine which focused on issues such as women's education and the aims of the suffrage movement, where he demonstrated his support for women and their campaign for political justice.

A critique that surrounds Wilde is his superficiality; a persona 'full of inconsistencies' (Robins, 2019, p.

221) and largely 'a figure of paradox and contradictions' (Gagnier, 1997, p. 18). For example, Wilde's proto-feminist leanings seem unreliable when observing his characterisation of women throughout his oeuvre. In *Women of No Importance: Misogyny in the Works of Oscar Wilde* (1998), Victoria White explores the 'fear and hatred of women which runs through [Wilde's] work like a dark thread' and condemns him for the misogynistic portrayal of various female characters; women who 'embody the most conservative norms of society' such as the Duchess of Berwick in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (White, 1998, p. 158). Feminist writer Hélène Cixous' notion that theatre, in particular tragic theatre, 'is built according to the dictates of male fantasy' (1977, p. 133) may position Wilde alongside male playwrights such as Shakespeare or Euripides for positioning Salomé, Vera and Beatrice with various other female victims of the tragic genre, such as Electra, Antigone and Ophelia.

This article argues that Wilde's decision to position his tragic heroines as 'sacrificial object[s]' (Cixous, 1977, p. 133) of the patriarchy can be displaced as his engagement with transgression. Petra Dierkes-Thrun (2011, p. 9) believes transgression is 'not a stepping outside of power or overthrowing it but, rather, the testing and engaging of moral, aesthetic, sexual, and other cultural discourses, paradoxically affirming while also clearly challenging and expanding them'. Establishing Wilde's tragedies as transgressive fiction refutes criticism of him as wholly misogynistic, as White's analysis does not take account of Wilde's support of female emancipation or admiration for his activist mother. Wilde does not merely plunge women into tragedy without intent; he does so to mock and satirise Victorian misogyny.

The first section of this article explores Wilde's debut play *Vera; or, the Nihilists* (1880). The contemporary response to this political endeavour was one which achieved poor acclaim, largely for its 'unsophisticated' and 'melodramatic' (Eltis, 1996, p. 27) outcome. *Vera* remains entirely unperformed and unpopular in research, while the few researchers that *have* tackled the play agree that it is a mediocre work. Sos Eltis (1996, p. 37) concedes the play as being 'universally condemned as a youthful mistake, an apprentice piece without intrinsic interest or merit', and Elizabeth Miller (2017, p. 65) positions the play in history as 'a footnote in the studies of Wilde'. This article refutes critique of *Vera* as melodramatic and explores Wilde's politically engaged narrative through the depiction of its terroristic female protagonist.

This article also explores *The Duchess of Padua*, a play that can 'scarcely be imagined in a modern performance' (Worth, 1983, p. 39). It remains the most unpopular of Wilde's plays as it is entirely unperformed with little commentary or criticism; it is chiefly regarded as Wilde's 'most sustained failure in the theatre' (Mackie, 2012, p. 230). This article will explore the political aspect of the play as expressed by Wilde's desire for individualism through the portrayal of the play's transgressive female protagonist, Beatrice.

Salomé, Wilde's Symbolic Biblical drama, will also be discussed. It is his only tragedy that has made a lasting impression in research and critique. The play has received overall positive review; researchers in the last fifty years have determined the play 'Wilde's master work in the symbolic mode' (Worth, 1983, p. 73) and 'a masterpiece of Symbolism and a milestone of modernism' (Wilson, 2017, p. 46). This article explores Salomé as a transgressive female who builds her own agency by manipulating the male gaze. Wilde scandalously subverts the biblical tale of John the Baptist with a tragic twist, elevating Salomé into the play's showpiece and tragic hero.

Vera; or, The Nihilists

Wilde wrote his first play inspired by the Nihilist movement of nineteenth-century Russia, which sought to 'advance personal autonomy, sexual liberation, and solidarity with the poor masses' (Petrov, 2019, p. 76). The Nihilists were important to Wilde as a man who embraced his mother's anti-authoritarian pledge. In consideration of his Irish heritage and support for Irish nationalism, 'it is

impossible to read his description of the corrupt Russian empire in *Vera* without being reminded of England's own empire, or to encounter his Russian nihilists without thinking of Irish republicans' (Miller, 2008, p. 73). The profound implication in *Vera* of Wilde's Irish nationalism infers that his strategic aim in the play was to incorporate a scathing narrative on British imperialism through the tale of the Nihilists. Nihilism was a movement which 'featured negative evaluations of the prevailing culture, which stemmed from the labouring class who staunchly resented their servility to the elite' (Vishnyakova, 2011, p. 100), mirroring the Irish nationalist plight for independence. Eltis Sos (1996, p. 6) proclaims: 'Disobedience, rebellion, and resistance to the decrees of authority were central tenets of Wilde's personal philosophy.' This is expressed in *Vera*, a play that 'depicts the czarist regime in Russia as a stagnant, repressive despotism that devalues individual liberty' and 'champions individualism as a salutary corrective to autocracy and as an avenue toward collective good' (Miller, 2008, p. 76). Wilde's sympathy with the nihilist pledge and hatred for authoritarianism mirrors the cry for Irish freedom and justice in the poetry of Speranza.

Vera was ultimately suppressed by the censorship present at the time (Guy, 2020, p. 352) following the March 1881 assassination of the actual Czar of Russia, Alexander II, which led to the play's performance being postponed. Wilde's 'dangerously topical' (Eltis, 1996, p. 30) play was a testament to the apparent political sensitivities of the time, although it was not nearly as controversial as the total stage censorship of *Salomé* in England; eventually making its New York debut two years later. *Vera*'s failure was a definite blow to Wilde's beginnings as a playwright, but its potential has been greatly overlooked. Wilde's close companion Robbie Ross dubbed the play 'worthless as literature or drama', being 'interesting' yet ultimately revealing 'how slowly Wilde developed either his literary or dramatic talent' (Ross, 1882, as cited in Guy, 2020, p. 347). This article aims to expand on Ross' latter comment, as *Vera* is a fascinating and important, albeit melodramatic, display of Wilde's lifelong political sentiments.

The tragedy set in Russia begins with the unassuming peasant Vera Sabouroff, who, after discovering her brother Dmitri among a group of doomed Nihilist prisoners, decides to avenge him by the joining the movement herself. Four years later she is a striking revolutionary but violates the Nihilist oath of lovelessness and falls in love with Alexis, a fellow Nihilist. He is soon revealed to be the son of the Czar, and after the assassination of his father, he ascends to the Russian throne. Vera is tasked with killing him but is unable to do so in the name of love and consequently kills herself to save his life. Vera seemingly takes inspiration from dangerous Russian female revolutionaries of the same first name, including Vera Zasulich, who shot and wounded Fyodor Trepov after he ordered the flogging of a political prisoner, and Vera Figner, who participated in the planning of Alexander II's assassination. Wilde's protagonist 'stretches notions of female virtue' (Miller, 2017, p. 77) by committing herself to Nihilism. In *Soul of Man Under Socialism*, the defining bibliography for his politics, Wilde describes the Russian Nihilists he incorporated in his melodrama nine years prior:

> A Russian who lives happily under the present system of government in Russia must either believe that man has no soul, or that, if he has, it is not worth developing. A Nihilist who rejects all authority, because he knows authority to be evil, and welcomes all pain, because through that he realises his personality, is a real Christian. (Wilde, 2001, p. 159)

Wilde presents this concept in *Vera* through Peter Sabouroff, Vera's father, who plays the role of the careless Russian civilian and the archetypal overbearing patriarch. The prologue sets up Vera's decision to join the Nihilists with the arrival of the Colonel and a group of Nihilist prisoners. Vera is benevolent to the prisoners, daring to speak to them and offer them food, and ultimately believing them to be 'unjustly condemned' (Wilde, 1988, p. 427). When Vera discovers her brother Dmitri and

unsuccessfully offers to take his place, she decides she will keep the Nihilist oath, demonstrating her formidable courage. Vera ignores the commands of the Colonel's sergeant in favour of tending to the prisoners and is disobedient towards the Colonel himself, daring to ask, 'Who are our masters?', to which she is given the answer, 'Young woman, these men are going to the mines for life for asking the same foolish question' (Wilde, 1988, p. 427).

On the other hand, Peter is subservient to the Colonel and obeys his demands. He does not give the prisoners a second thought, simply deeming their arrival a stroke of luck and an opportunity for an abundant fortune (Wilde, 1988, p. 426). Vera is established by her father as a woman that has 'too many ideas' (Wilde, 1988, p. 424) and is 'always thinking of others' (Wilde, 1988, p. 425). He expects his daughter to marry and settle down with Michael, but she resists the dullness of marriage, believing: 'There is so much else to do in the world but love' (Wilde, 1988, p. 426). Vera sets herself apart from the enforced societal expectations on women as submissive by expressing her intelligence and independence from men. Wilde's play connects feminism and political terror to establish societal change in a modernising society as presented with the autonomous New Women. Vera is a transgressive character, embodying the dichotomy of the faithful female and the amoral nihilist, which develops in her an unbridled passion for justice through terrorism. Vera is immediately established in the prologue as a 'dangerous woman' (Wilde, 1988, p. 427) by the Colonel merely because she is able to read and write. Her role in society begins lowly and unsuspecting until it is subverted entirely in Act I; an absent Vera is named 'the most dangerous [woman] in all Europe' (Wilde, 1988, p. 440).

Wilde's decision to write a play about Nihilism showcases his feminist notions, as the movement was significantly proto-feminist. Katharine Worth (1983, p. 25) explains that 'sexual freedom figured largely in the nihilist manifesto and women's emancipation was a main plank in their programme'. Vera is disinterested in love until she falls in love with Alexis. When the new Czar is throned, the Nihilists conspire to assassinate him, but Vera refuses to comply in the name of love. The relationship between Vera and Michael has been largely ignored in research of the play, and although Michael is an unexceptional character of the play (who serves merely as a foil to Vera's true love, the Czarevitch), he aligns himself with the feminist facet of Nihilism. Michael attempts to reinvigorate the Nihilist oath she swore to take in vengeance against the captors of her brother Dmitri:

> Vera, I am not blind; I know your secret. You love this boy, this young prince with his pretty face, his curled hair, his soft white hands. Fool that you are, dupe of a lying tongue, do you know what he would have done to you, this boy you think loved you? He would have made you his mistress, used your body at his pleasure, thrown you away when he was wearied of you; you, the priestess of liberty, the flame of Revolution, the torch of democracy. (Wilde, 1988, p. 461)

This powerful scene in Act III emphasises the anti-authoritarian notions of Nihilism through Michael's hatred for the Czar, while also acknowledging the oppression of women by men. Michael deems Vera vulnerable to objectification at the hands of the Czar, and although he denounces his romantic love for her in favour of Nihilist celibacy, he chooses to revere her leadership in lieu of her sexual desirability. Wilde exposes the flaw of Victorian morality as women were expected to be obedient to their husbands while 'spinster' women were shamed for having the autonomy of being unmarried.

The end of Act I reveals Alexis' true identity as the Czarevitch after he is accused by Michael of being a traitor. The Nihilists demand his killing as tensions rise, but Vera defends him, asserting: 'Dare to lay a finger on him, and I leave you all to yourselves' (Wilde, 1988, p. 438). Vera is aware of her dominance over the group, alluding to a comment Alexis makes at the beginning of Act I when she is absent: 'The whole fire of revolution seems fallen

into dull ashes when she is not here' (Wilde, 1988, p. 432). She is set firmly apart from the other men who do not come close to her prowess.

Elizabeth Miller explores the female criminal in literature; narratives that 'tell cautionary tales about the dangers of transgressing social norms, but … also celebrate the *pleasure* of such transgression' (2008, p. 5). As the climax of the play approaches, Vera calls the spirit of Charlotte Corday, the French Revolution figure who assassinated Jean-Paul Marat, a move which she considered would 'save France':

> Methinks the spirit of Charlotte Corday has entered my soul now. I shall carve my name on the world, and be ranked among the great heroines. Ay! The spirit of Charlotte Corday beats in each petty vein, and nerves my woman's hand to strike, as I have nerved my woman's heart to hate (Wilde, 1988, p. 464).

Vera is aware that she not only leads the Nihilists, but also 'spearheads the Russian revolution' (Gupta, 2015, p. 120) through her bravery and obligation. To do so, she is seen attempting to diminish her femininity: 'I am no woman now. My blood seems turned to gall; my heart is as cold as steel is; my hand shall be more deadly' (Wilde, 1988, p. 463). Vera parallels Lady Macbeth, who called upon spirits to renounce her sex in preparation for regicide. Vera believes her femininity is an obstacle to achieving her Nihilist goals and favours masculine traits; her alliance to Nihilism is greater than her love for the Czar. It is important to note that Wilde's play was not a plea for an Irish audience to engage in terrorism, as he rejected that aspect (Worth, 1983, p. 25) but presents a Wilde in favour of both humanitarianism and feminism.

The Duchess of Padua

The Duchess of Padua was Wilde's second melodrama, written for American actress Mary Anderson, who Wilde pursued to perform the title role. In a letter to Anderson, Wilde describes his play with great merit: 'I have no hesitation in saying that it is the masterpiece of all my literary work, the *chef d'oeuvre* of my youth' (Wilde & Hart-Davis, 1979, p. 136). However, Anderson would eventually lose interest in the play and denied the role, asserting, 'The play in its present form, I fear, would no more please the public of today than would *Venus Preserved* or *Lucretia Borgia*' (quoted in Mackie, 2012, p. 229). The play being unable to 'please the public of today' was an accurate judgement; it is a five-act blank verse play that is 'highly derivative' with its obvious 'Shakespearean echo' (Worth, 1983, p. 39) through the *Romeo and Juliet* style ending and Renaissance setting.

The dark tragedy is set in sixteenth-century Italy as Guido Ferranti aims to avenge his father's death at the hands of the Duke of Padua. When Guido falls in love with Beatrice, the Duchess of Padua, he changes his mind about killing him, but to Guido's horror, Beatrice kills her husband so they may be together. Beatrice falsely accuses Guido of murder after he rejects her love, and after he is found guilty, is set to be executed. Beatrice's attempts to confess to the murder fail, leaving her at Guido's cell where she ingests poison and dies. Guido, upon finding her body, stabs himself with Beatrice's dagger.

The play was abandoned after Anderson's rejection but was later acquired and ran under the title *Guido Ferranti* by American actor Lawrence Barrett in 1891, although it only ran for three weeks until production came to an end. Regardless of its failures, *The Duchess* is significant in Wilde's oeuvre as it is equally representative of his political beliefs as his other plays.

Beatrice is a benevolent monarch aware of her privileged status. She expresses sympathy for the poor citizens of Padua and advocates for their welfare. The Duchess imbues political reformist ideas, developing in her an 'advocacy of the common people' which enhances 'her contemporary appeal to the social and political realities' (Mackie, 2012, p. 229) of Wilde's audience. Wilde once explained his characterisation of Beatrice: 'I tried to make her not merely an individual woman, but in some way the

incarnation of the lives of all women: she is universal' (1962, p. 138). Beatrice is a powerful feminine presence; she is independent from her husband's callousness and offers kindness towards the needy, stating, 'Every Monday morn shall bread be set / For those who lack it' (Wilde, 1988, p. 353).

She is unlike the unloving Duke, who does not share her benevolence and is dismissive of the socio-economic situation in Padua. He abdicates responsibility for the deaths of the impoverished as an act of God: 'They should thank me for sending them to Heaven / If they are wretched here' (Wilde, 1988, p. 351) and justifies this belief by stating: 'Why, poverty / Is one of the Christian virtues' (Wilde, 1988, p. 350). Wilde's play explores a critical view of wealthy privileged Christians, as he wrote in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism:* 'When Jesus talks about the poor he simply means personalities, just as when he talks about the rich, he simply means people who have not developed their personalities' (Wilde, 2001, p. 135). Wilde's sympathy for the poor is interjected with criticism towards those who justify immoral acts through religion. The Duke is representative of hypocrisy among religious patriarchy as he selfishly manipulates the good word of the Bible for his gratification.

While Beatrice frequently challenges her husband's cruelty, it is clear she is exhausted. She asks him, 'Have you no word of kindness ever for me?' to which the Duke replies, 'I hold you in the hollow of my hand / And have no need on you to waste kind words' (Wilde, 1988, p. 367). Beatrice is not afraid to speak up against her husband and it is evident he feels threatened by her contentions: 'So, so, you argue with me? This is she, / The gentle Duchess for whose hand I yielded / Three of the fairest towns in Italy, / Pisa, and Genoa, and Orvieto' (Wilde, 1988, p. 354). The domineering Duke is a depiction of men who believe women must heed their every command in order to appease their masculinity. The relationship between the Duke and the Duchess represents the institutional Victorian marriage between a husband and his doting yet unhappy wife.

Beatrice, unhappy with her relationship, looks to Guido for love. However, when Guido rejects Beatrice after her assassination of the Duke, she is hurt by his rejection and exclaims: 'I see when men love women / They give them but a little of their lives, / But women when they love give everything' (Wilde, 1988, p. 385). Beatrice observes herself as too feminine; she has given too much love towards men and received little reward. Her soliloquy in Act III portrays her in a state of misery as she describes the unloving treatment of husbands towards their wives: 'We are their chattels, and their common slaves, / Less dear than the poor hound that licks their hand, / Less fondled than the hawk upon their wrist' (Wilde, 1988, p. 356). It is clear that Wilde, through the characterisation of Beatrice, displays his sympathy towards oppressed women. Worth labels Wilde a 'social revolutionary' who 'demands sympathy for [Beatrice] as a crusader on behalf of the under-privileged and also as a woman who is herself a victim of tyranny' (1983, p. 45). Beatrice is ultimately a proto-feminist for identifying how women, regardless of social class, are made to silently suffer under the control of men.

Katharine Worth and Gregory Mackie are two, of few researchers, to comment on the play as a summary of Wilde's personal beliefs. Worth (1983, p. 39) affirms that the play 'retains interest as a revelation of Wilde's thinking on themes that were important to him', while Mackie (2012, p. 222) admits 'Wilde's engagement with the Renaissance in *The Duchess* gives us a fresh perspective on his conception of drama and his practice as a dramatist'.

Undoubtedly, the play is rife with notions from Wilde the aesthete. Wilde's play, although set in the sixteenth century, is meant for a nineteenth-century audience. Wilde explains this choice in his letter to Anderson by proclaiming that 'the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form' (Wilde & Hart-Davis, 1979, p. 137). In the same guise of *Salomé* and *Vera*, Wilde positions a transgressive female at centre stage to express a feminist narrative. This is evident in Wilde's explanation of Beatrice blaming Guido for the

Duke's murder. When Beatrice lies to the soldiers and says, 'This way went he, the man who slew my lord' (Wilde, 1988, p. 387), Wilde believes: 'Every woman will say to herself "I would have done likewise". In London (where the misery among the wives of our artisans has required special legislation, so dreadful is it) this speech will produce an extraordinary effect' (Wilde & Hart-Davis, 1979, p. 138). Wilde imagines his sympathies will extend to his female Victorian audience. The 'extraordinary effect' of this scene suggests he not only expresses his sympathy for women, but he also implores them to identify with the Duchess.

Although Wilde's proclamation for women to pursue crime appears ill-advised, it is in line with his devotion to individualism. In *The Duchess*, Beatrice shines as 'a modern woman in spirit, resentful of men's domination,' and 'vigorous in pursuit of her own fulfilment' (Worth, 1983, pp. 42-3). Yvonne Ivory's (2007, p. 529) research observes Beatrice as a representation of Wilde's belief that 'illicit acts, when driven by intense feelings, are not sins at all but rather acts of individualism'. This explains Wilde's decision to set his play in the sixteenth century as Renaissance ideology 'embraced non-convent' and viewed 'criminality' and 'dissident sexuality' as 'privileged aspects of experience' (Ivory, 2007, p. 524). *The Duchess* was a tool for Wilde to convey individualist ideas of non-conformity through the belief that crime is a facet of human passion and privilege. Individualism thrives on self-fulfilment, which is exactly why Beatrice is happy to pursue an affair and murder her husband.

Salomé

Wilde's *Salomé* originates from the story of John the Baptist as told in the Bible. According to Mark and Matthew (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Mark 6:14–29 & Matthew 14:1–12), John the Baptist was imprisoned for condemning the incestuous and adulterous marriage of King Herod Antipas to Herodias, the former wife of Antipas' half-brother. When Herodias' daughter performs a dance on Herod's birthday, he promises to grant her any wish. Coerced by her vengeful mother, she demands the head of John the Baptist on a charger. To Herod's distress, he complies with the oath and has the prophet beheaded. Biblically, Salomé is unnamed; an innocent pawn of her mother's vengeance. However, nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* (end of century) art and literature would soon transform Salomé into the defining image of the *femme fatale.*

Wilde engaged with every literary form of the French *fin de siècle* obsession with Salomé, including (but not limited to) Gustave Flaubert's short story 'Hérodias' (1877) and Stéphane Mallarmé's unfinished poem 'Hérodiade'; which would directly inspire the creation of his play (Neginsky, 2013, p. 168). Drawing from the biblical myth, Wilde's *Salomé* presents the eponymous princess lustfully pursuing Jokanaan (John the Baptist; name derived from Flaubert) and, despite his incessant rejection of her advances, repeatedly professes: 'I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan. I will kiss thy mouth' (Wilde, 1988, p. 313). She demands his decapitated head in exchange for performing the 'dance of seven veils' to King Herod, and after his execution, announces she has finally kissed the mouth of Jokanaan. This action disgusts Herod, who exclaims to his soldiers: 'Kill that woman!'; the curtain falls as she is crushed to death under their shields (Wilde, 1988, p. 330).

The main cause of Salomé's transformation in history is attributed to the influential grip of Gustave Moreau's *Salomé Dancing before Herod* and *The Apparition* (both 1876) on her *fin de siècle* image. Moreau's paintings had particularly 'obsessed' (Huysmans et al., 2002, p. 45) *Against Nature* protagonist Des Esseintes, who describes Salomé's dance within the painting:

> A pensive, solemn, almost august expression on her face, she begins the lubricious dance which is to awaken the slumbering senses of the ageing Herod; her breasts rise and fall, their nipples hardening under the friction of her whirling necklaces; the diamonds adhering to her moist skin glitter; her bracelets, her belts, her rings, flash and sparkles; on her triumphal gown

… (Huysmans et al., 2002, p. 45).

Salomé's exotic sexual appeal to men is apparent through the detailed focus of her adorned body. The sexualisation of Salomé is duplicated in Wilde's play, affirming Hélène Cixous' notion that tragic theatre 'encourages the double perversion of voyeurism and exhibitionism' (1977, p. 133). Salomé's obscene sexuality was so sacrilegious that the Examiner of Plays determined Wilde's play 'half Biblical, half pornographic' (quoted in Lewsadder, 2002, p. 520) for its indecent adaptation of a biblical myth.

Wilde would never see his play performed during his lifetime as it was refused a licence for production in 1892; a ban that cited an ancient prohibition of portraying biblical characters on stage. The first production took place in France in 1896 during Wilde's incarceration at Reading Prison, while the first English production of *Salomé* would not take place until 1931. Wilde, who wrote the play in French, defended his play against the censure, and retorted: 'If the Censure refuses *Salomé* [...] I shall leave England and settle in France, where I will take out letters of naturalisation. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in its artistic judgement' (Wilde, 1892, as cited in Mikhail, 1979, p. 188).

Wilde's threat to renounce his citizenship was an indignant act of protest against English morality. He believed the French would have never treated his play with such disdain, and was correct; the French reception of *Salomé* was largely positive in contrast to the negative English response (Donohue, 1997, p. 123). In an analysis of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's most successful society comedy, Murray Roston explains how 'the need to satisfy the censors [of *Earnest*] … reveals how necessary it was for Wilde to ensure that any parody of Victorian ideas be discreetly veiled if it was ever to be allowed stage performance' (2011, p. 190). The stage success of *Earnest* is attributed to conforming (or seeming to conform) to those moral requirements he did not follow in *Salomé*.

Researchers have also recognised Wilde did not only take inspiration from the New Testament but also from the Old Testament. The language contained in the *Song of Songs* exists in *Salomé* through Wilde's engagement with Ernest Renan's French translation. Carter (2019, p. 2) identifies that 'Wilde's choice to replicate such an erotically charged poetic style borrowed from one of the most sexual books of the Bible caused quite a caustic backlash at the time'. Wilde's audacious tampering of the Bible's narrative was less of a voyeuristic display of a biblical woman but an act of creative expression against Victorian fear towards female sexuality. This is exemplified by the play's consequent censorship which embodied 'the articulated concerns of the censorship's defenders' (Downey, 2004, p. 10).

In *Salomé*, the princess is undeniably 'interpellated by the masculine gaze' (Lewsadder, 2002, p. 521), and, therefore, her portrayal by Wilde as a victim of a voyeuristic patriarchy overturns her *fin de siècle* image as the malevolent *femme fatale*. Many have examined the symbolic role of the gaze in *Salomé*, such as Helen Tookey, establishing Herod as its main proprietor. The moment Salomé enters the stage she utters, 'Why does the Tetrarch look at me all the while with his mole's eyes under his shaking eyelids? It is strange that the husband of my mother looks at me like that' (Wilde, 1988, p. 308). Salomé is aware of her stepfather's incestuous lust towards her and so initially remains 'fiercely defensive of her virginal integrity' (Worth, 1983, p. 58). At the play's opening, Salomé asserts herself as a virgin, recognised by her identification with the moon: 'The moon is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin, she has a virgin's beauty. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself' (Wilde, 1988, p. 308). The moon, a recurring motif in the play, is personified as female, and Salomé's resonance with the moon acts as a rejection of Herod's sexual gaze and a reclaiming of her femininity.

Once Salomé becomes aware of her sexual desirability, she appropriates the gaze of men for her own pleasure, supplementing the notion that Salomé is a 'victim as well as destroyer' (Worth,

1983, p. 69). Narraboth, the young Syrian, is immediately mesmerised at the 'beautiful' (Wilde, 1988, p. 305) yet 'pale' (p. 306) princess from the moment he appears. He does not look away from her despite the Page's anxious disapproval: 'You are always looking at her. You look at her too much … Something terrible may happen' (p. 305). When Salomé enters, however, her interest lies purely in Jokanaan. She demands that he is brought from the cistern so that she may look upon him; an absurd request for the men around her. She then turns her attention to Narraboth for the approval of her request: 'Look at me, Narraboth, look at me. Ah! you know that you will do what I ask of you. You know it well … I know that you will do this thing' (Wilde, 1988, p. 310). Salomé is aware that the gaze is a deadly weapon, which means that once Jokanaan is gazed upon, he is doomed. Once Salomé's desire is fulfilled, she seizes Jokanaan's head and professes her fierce love for him: 'I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire' (Wilde, 1988, p. 330). By renouncing her virginity, Salomé mocks male reactions to overt female sexuality, such as by inadvertently causing Narraboth's death, cultivating in her a masculine agency (Lewsadder, 2002, p. 522).

The moon, like Salomé, is a 'dangerous woman' (Tookey, 2004, p. 26), emphasising how men historically perceived women as inherently evil. Just as Salomé is about to perform the 'dance of seven veils', Herod exclaims: 'Ah! look at the moon! She has become red. She has become red as blood' (Wilde, 1988, p. 324). Salomé draws her feminine energy from the moon, heightened by the symbolism of menstruation as a significant component of femininity. The play's climax reaches 'an explosion of Salomé's sexual powers' (Tookey, 2004, p. 29) and leads to Herod's anxieties skyrocketing. He thereby refutes his gaze upon Salomé or the moon: 'I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars!' (Wilde, 1988, p. 330). Salomé's final stage directions see her in complete conjunction with the moon: '[A moonbeam falls on Salomé covering her with light.]' (330).

Through Herod, Wilde symbolises the archetypal Victorian autocrat who fears female sexuality. In *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, Wilde suggests authority 'degrades those who exercise it, and degrades those over whom it is exercised' (2001, p. 138); a testament to Herod abandoning light after witnessing the consequences of his immorality and ordering his stepdaughter's violent death out of shame. Herod, like Peter Sabouroff and the Duke of Padua, is intimidated by a subversive woman. When he asks, 'I command thee to dance, Salomé' (Wilde, 1988, p. 321), she denies his request. He is ceaseless until he dares to offer 'whatsoever you desire I will give it you, even to the half of my kingdom' (p. 323). Salomé shrewdly uses this opportunity to demand the head of Jokanaan. By humiliating the Tetrarch with her intrepid bargain, Salomé subverts her destiny as the 'guardian of the phallus' (Cixous, 1977, p. 133) by appropriating his gaze and rendering him powerless against her, in what Lewsadder (2002, p. 525) refers to as Herod's 'symbolic castration'.

Dijkstra (1988, p. 384) explains that 'in the turn-of-the-century imagination, the figure of Salomé epitomised the inherent perversity in women: their eternal circularity and their ability to destroy the male's soul even while they remained nominally chaste in body'. This corresponds with Herod's sexual desire for Salomé as detailed in the play's beginning. Dijkstra determines Salomé the 'Everywoman' (1988, p. 396); she represents a fear of the feminist movement in Victorian men and is therefore the 'scapegoat' (398) for womenkind, as a gain of sexual agency is unbearable to patriarchal notions. However, for the patriarchy, Salomé is not the Everywoman; she is everything *but* female. This is evident through Herod's increasing anxiety as Salomé asserts her agency over him; when Salomé unites with the decapitated head of Jokanaan, the Tetrarch declares her the 'monstrous' daughter of Herodias (Wilde, 1988, p. 330). Similarly, when Herodias rejoices in the establishment of Jokanaan's execution, Herod detests her incessant interjections by retorting, 'You are always crying out … like a

beast of prey' (p. 327). In Wilde's *Vera*, the Nihilists fear Vera out of respect while upholding her femininity, but she is feared by the monarchy out of disdain. Much like Herod, the General declares that Vera 'is not a woman at all; she is a sort of devil!' (Wilde, 1988, p. 440). Here, Wilde explains that when women are not submissive to the patriarchy, they must be bestialised; they are no longer sexually desirable and so are stripped of their femininity.

Tookey (2004) and Carter (2019) have aligned Salomé with the 'monstrous-feminine' which embodies 'the patriarchal suppression and distortion of the feminine' (Tookey, 2004, p. 7). In *Salomé*, blood symbolises destructive female sexuality. This is displayed when Narraboth can no longer live with his unrequited love of the princess and commits suicide as a result; his blood pools in the centre of the stage. When Herod emerges, he exclaims, 'Ah! I have slipped! I have slipped in blood! It is an ill omen. It is a very evil omen' (Wilde, 1988, p. 315). His blood becomes the blood of Salomé, for it is she who instigated his suicide with her apparent sexuality. Salomé further demonstrates her dangerous femininity through her shocking necrophiliac pursuit of Jokanaan and 'shatters the confines of a Victorian puritanical ideal' (Carter, 2019, p. 6).

To Des Esseintes, the static image of Salomé reflects a 'cruel and passionate woman'; a 'whore'; she has 'bewitched and subjugated' the will of her male observer and awakened 'the languorous senses of man' (Huysmans et al., 2002, p. 49) with her sexual allure. To all her male observers, Salomé is unanimously 'the monstrous, indiscriminate, irresponsible, unfeeling Beast' (Huysmans et al., 2002, p. 46) because, to the dismay of men, she obtains her own agency. Salomé is a victim of the male gaze, and so desperately 'weaponises her awakening sexuality' (Blackmer, 2016, p. 9) to rebel against those who desire her in response to the 'symbolic loss of her virginity' (p. 8). Wilde's Salomé parallels Moreau's Salomé, who, 'like the Helen of Antiquity, poisons everything that comes near her, everything that sees her, everything that she touches' (Huysmans et al., 2002, p. 46). Tookey (2004, p. 25) identifies the association of Salomé with Lilith, who according to Jewish legend was the first wife of Adam and is ultimately 'the prototype for patriarchal defamation of female sexuality'. Tookey identifies Lilith as distinct to Eve, the 'benevolent goddess' of Eden, and although both wives of Adam exist under the same line of patriarchy, Tookey does not acknowledge Eve as Blackmer (2016, p. 5) does: the purveyor of 'sin and death into the world'.

Just as Eve plunged mankind into sin, Salomé instigates Narraboth's suicide and the death of John the Baptist. This is supported by Jokanaan's proclamation: 'By woman came evil into the world' (Wilde, 1988, p. 312). Jokanaan's disdain for women is striking as he is a sacred prophet, further portraying an inherent misogynistic perception of women within religion. *Salomé* showcases Wilde as a writer who 'directs artistic violence against the traditional institutions of moral, religious, and philosophical authority' (Dierkes-Thrun, 1988, p. 2) through the tale of a woman at the hands of her male oppressors. Wilde distorts a biblical myth with the assistance of *fin de siècle* artists and crosses every moral boundary to create his shocking play, all while headlining a powerful *femme fatale.*

Conclusion

Oscar Wilde was a complex individual who 'simultaneously engaged with and mocked the forms and rules of society' (Jackson, 1997, p. 169). Ultimately, he used his societal privilege to express compassion towards the impoverished and oppressed in both his fiction and non-fiction works. Wilde's plays in particular 'subverted the conventions of the popular stage, challenged the strict morality they upheld, and offered instead a creed of understanding, sympathy, and forgiveness' (Eltis, 1996, p. 209). Speranza's anti-authoritarian beliefs influenced not only her son's satirical comedies but his tragedies, which explore the radical notion of transgression. It is worth noting that Wilde's comedies all take place in contemporary Victorian England, while his tragedies are set in earlier time periods as an

extended hatred towards authority, as Eltis summarises: 'From sexual stereotypes to the unbending rules of puritan morality, all laws and systems which sought to categorise or control humankind were targets for Wilde's attack' (1996, p. 209). He took great avenues in mocking society because he knew he embodied everything it disliked.

Wilde's tragedies may appear alarming to those who identify tragedy as a genre that 'privileges a masculine ethos … by victimising women' (Drakakis & Liebler, 2014, p. 1). However, while Wilde's women are indeed subjugated by patriarchal power, they mock their oppressors by taking transgressive measures. Wilde's tragedies headline 'murderous women to signify the aura and power of female glamour' (Miller, 2008, p. 68) as they are all entangled in the murder of men; Vera's assistance in killing the Czar, Beatrice killing her husband, and Salomé initiating Jokanaan's execution. Vera places her trust in the new Czar and dies believing she has saved Russia from the corruption of the country's previous leaders. Similarly, Beatrice has had enough of her wicked husband and kills him, bringing an end to his tyrannical reign. Once Herod realises he is helpless against his stepdaughter, she is executed, highlighting his fragile male ego. The women of Wilde's tragedies are heroines who subvert the expectations of their male oppressors and are distinct reflections of Wilde's contempt of Victorian morals.

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