

The Hyper Sexual Hysteric: Decadent Aesthetics and the Intertextuality of Transgression in Nick Cave's *Salomé*

Gerrard Carter

Département d'études du monde anglophone (DEMA)

Aix-Marseille Université

Schuman - 29 avenue R. Schuman - 13628 Aix-en-Provence, France

e-mail: gerrardpcarter@gmail.com

Abstract:

Salomé (1988), Nick Cave's striking interpretation of the story of the Judean princess enhances and extends the aesthetic and textual analysis of Oscar Wilde's 1891 French symbolist tragedy (*Salomé*), yet it is largely overlooked. As we examine the prior *bricolage* in the creation of such a hypertextual work, we initiate a captivating literary discourse between the intertextual practices and influences of biblical and *fin-de-siècle* literary texts. The *Song of Songs*, a biblical hypotext inverted by Wilde in the creation of the linguistic-poetic style he used in *Salomé*, had never previously been fully explored in such an overt manner. Wilde chose this particular book as the catalyst to indulge in the aesthetics of abjection. Subsequently, Cave's enterprise is entwined in the *Song*'s mosaic, with even less reserve. Through a semiotic and transtextual analysis of Cave's play, this paper employs Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality as it is delineated in *Palimpsests* (1982) to chart ways in which Cave's *Salomé* is intertwined with not only Wilde but also the *Song of Songs*. This literary transformation demonstrates the potential and skill of the artist's audacious postmodern rewriting of Wilde's text.

Keywords: Salomé, Nick Cave, Oscar Wilde, *The Song of Songs*, Aesthetics, Gérard Genette, Intertextuality, Transtextuality, Transgression, Puvis de Chavannes.

*"No artist is ever morbid. The artist can express everything."
The Picture of Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde*

"One hand slips beneath her robe, while the other holds a large apple which she eats. Her toenails are painted the colour of blood. Salomé fingers herself." The opening stage direction of Act 2 in Nick Cave's audacious 1988 rendering of Oscar Wilde's symbolist tragedy *Salomé* (1891) presents the deviant female hysteric in all her abject glory. In doing so, Cave creates a distinct narrative to serve as a mask to his phantasms, while demonstrating *Salomé*'s enduring legacy for causing shock and controversy for well over a century. Cave's radical departure from previous interpretations of the biblical narrative offers a fascinating insight into the continual success of the mystifying Judean princess. Clearly influenced by Wilde in dramatically showcasing Salomé's sexual perversity, Cave smashes the sexual taboo by further transgressing Wilde's aestheticism.

In Wilde's play, the author inverts the biblical book of the *Song of Songs*, strikingly imitating Ernest Renan's French translation from the original Hebrew, *Le Cantique des Cantiques* (1860). In using the biblical text, Wilde interweaves a number of abject themes: beheading, castration, murder, sacrifice, and incest, to name the most striking. Wilde takes the image of the Shulamite in the biblical book the *Song of Songs* and subverts it, tailoring it to create the corrupt, depraved and hysteric Salomé. Cave takes such abject themes from Wilde and extends them to present the reader with a hypersexual hysteric, a character that is "no yearning, lonely soul in search of ideal beauty but a bored, sadistic, narcissistic, and hypersexual teenager who engages in masturbation on stage" and who "enjoys ruthless verbal and physical power and play" (Dierkes-Thurn 2011, 188).

When we examine the prior *bricolage* in the creation of such a hypertextual work, we initiate a captivating literary discourse between the intertextual practices and influences of biblical and *fin-de-siècle* literary texts. Nick Cave's striking interpretation of the story of the Judean princess enhances and extends the aesthetic and textual analysis of Wilde's French symbolist tragedy, yet it is largely overlooked. Through a semiotic and transtextual analysis of Cave's play, this paper employs Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality as it is delineated in *Palimpsests* (1982), to chart ways in which Cave's *Salomé* is intertwined with not only Wilde but also Wilde's hypotext, the *Song of Songs*. Subsequently, Cave's enterprise is entwined in the *Song*'s mosaic, with even less reserve. This literary transformation demonstrates the potential and skill of the artist's postmodern rewriting of Wilde's text.

A multifaceted talent, Nick Cave is an Australian musician, songwriter, and author, best known as the front man for *Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*. Described as "the peerless Prince of musical Darkness" (Maume, *Independent* 9 June, 2015), "a sinister lord of malevolent melancholy, the Darth Vader of rock" (Wilson, *Noisey* March 3, 2015), Nick Cave's career spans over thirty years producing an impressive, and at times controversial, body of work. A recent study, entitled *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave* (2009), is the first collection of academic articles that claims to feature a "comprehensive scholarly and critical overview of Cave's work" (Dalziell & Wellberry 2009, 3). The compilation did not, however, include any work on Nick Cave's *Salomé* from his 1988 collection of poems, song lyrics, and short plays entitled *King Ink*.

Cave's play consists of five extremely concise acts, each entitled "The Seven Veils," "Dialogue with the Baptist," "Salomé's Reward," "The Chop," and "The Platter". Some acts are so terse ("Salomé's Reward", for instance, consists of only twenty-six spoken words) that one can assume Cave created *Salomé* to be appreciated more as a poetic exploration in abjection than to be produced for a live performance. Nevertheless, Cave boldly takes Wilde's Salomé to the extreme to enact Genette's notion of transtextuality and more precisely his concepts of transmotivation¹ (motivation, demotivation), and transvaluation².

Since "any text is a hypertext, grafting itself into a hypotext" (Prince 1997, ix) the transmission between author and reader "is always partnered by a communication or intertextual relation between poetic words and their prior existence in past poetic texts. Authors communicate

to readers at the same moment as their words or texts communicate the existence of past texts within them.” (Allen 2011, 38) Wilde’s *Salomé* has most certainly inspired Cave. However, the Australian author is in no way beholden to him as Cave took the notion of abjection to the extreme while investing an element of the burlesque.

Cave’s *Salomé* begins with the mysterious character of the Vestal Virgin, described simply as a “young girl” (86) who enters and moves to the centre front of the stage to announce the title of each of the five proceeding acts. She is the Mistress of Ceremonies, who presides over the action of the drama. In Greek and Roman mythology, “Vesta was the original and divine virgin”, Kroppenberg explains, “the virgin goddess *par excellence*. In her worship, her virginity was expressed by the fact that she was the only goddess who was not portrayed but illustrated by a flame that burnt in her unadorned and empty house.” (2010, 418-9) Kroppenberg describes the Vesta’s virginity as being “equated with her invisibility; her constant presence, on the other hand, was symbolized by the nonphysical flame: ‘She is a presence, not a vision’” (2010, 419).

Kroppenberg’s claim provides an enlightening insight into Cave’s choice of the Vestal Virgin’s mysterious presence who is not only visible but who also verbally announces each act. Ironically, she declines to name the first act entitled “The Seven Veils”, instead the Vestal Virgin introduces the play in a “deadpan” voice while declaring: “The Story of Salomé and John the Baptist in five parts. See this mess of thorns” (SFP, 86). By describing the drama as a “mess of thorns”, the reader is immediately confronted with a juxtaposition of ritual and religion, pleasure and pain. “The thorn on the rose-bush”, for instance, “helps to emphasize the counterpoise or ‘conjunction’ between thesis and antithesis, that is, between the ideas of existence and non-existence, ecstasy and anguish, pleasure and pain” (Cirlot 1967, 322-3). Taking this into consideration, if one was to correlate Cave’s ambiguous depiction with that of Christ’s crucifixion, then he or she is also thrust into a web of religious intrigue. The thorns, representing the martyrdom of Jesus: the symbolic crowning of thorns, which as the biblical accounts inform us, was used to mock the saviour’s kingship while administering torment, pain and agony.

Similar to Wilde, Cave displays a taste for paradoxes in the obscure nature of his stage directions. For example, while the first act opens with Arabic wailing and the sounding of bells, which consequently shrouds the scene in a characteristic depiction of the orientalism required to correspond to the biblical narrative, the stage direction also informs the reader that “all props, crown, throne etc. must look like they were made by children” (86). The childlike setting creates the perfect atmosphere to enhance Salomé’s immature and petulant attributes. Cave describes Salomé as an obnoxious, yet dangerous, upstart. Salomé “sulks and sighs and allows her heavenly body to pursue conquettishly [sic] the serpentine rhythms of music in a manner of cruel titillation... Salomé is bored and finds small pleasure in the torment” (86).

Compelled by Salomé’s sexual torment, Herod asks the princess, “What ails thee, my precious Salomé? What is it that has put your pretty little nose so out of joint?” (SFP, 86) While Cave chooses to use an archaic form of speech in the use of ‘thee’, a striking similarity to Wilde, he swiftly

provides a unique interpretation by using the contemporary idiom “so out of joint”. In doing so, Cave’s poetics mirror his aesthetics as the juxtaposition of Arabic wailing and bells is set against props made to look like children constructed them. King Herod desires Salomé to dance for him: “Dance for me, my peach... Come, my petal, dance and you shall be rewarded.” (86) Herod’s words provide a compelling insight into the intertextuality produced in literary production, in particular, the theory of imitation. Imitation is seen “as a theory not only of writing but also of reading as a performative act of criticism and interpretation” (Still & Worton 1990, 7). Herod’s words “my peach”, “my petal” echo that of the Shulamite in the *Song of Songs*, as she recalls her lover’s declarations of love: “My dove” (112), “My love” (112), “my beloved” (112), “my fair one” (112). Still and Worton suggest “Every literary imitation is a supplement which seeks to complete and supplant the original and which functions at times for later readers as the pre-text of the ‘original’.” (Still & Worton 1990, 7)

Considering “that all texts are potentially hypertextual” (Allen 2011, 108), Genette argues, that “sometimes the existence of a hypotext is too uncertain to be the basis for a hypertextual reading” (Allen 2011, 108). Cave may not have been aware of the biblical borrowings, which reside in the *Song of Songs*. However, the beauty of engaging in a hypertextual study of Cave’s *Salomé* is to discover these subtle semiotic reiterations of the text’s biblical hypotext.

Cave makes a departure from Wilde’s *Salomé* in pushing the *enfant terrible* to the extreme. Cave’s Salomé appears bored, narcissistic and entitled. When Salomé hears that her dance will be rewarded, she responds “[with a pout] A reward?” (86). Wilde’s Salomé, on the other hand, states, “Will you indeed give me whatsoever I shall ask of you, Tetrarch?” (132) While Wilde names Salomé’s dance in an iconic stage direction “Salome dances the dance of the seven veils” (140), Cave’s Salomé triumphantly announces the naming of the dance within the text: “Music! Let’s have some life! Your Majesty, ‘The Dance of the Seven Veils’.” (86). The previous imitation of the *Song of Songs* may have appeared subtle as an ambiguous semantic reference to a pre-existing biblical text unearthed in a study of intertextuality: “My peach,” “my petal,” however, Salomé’s announcement of her Dance of the Seven Veils is a blatant reworking of Wilde’s creation. Since Cave chooses to borrow from Wilde in the naming of the dance he is acknowledging the relevance and therefore, the importance of the Dance of the Seven Veils as being pivotal to establishing the dramatic turning point in Wilde’s drama. By making Salomé announce this dance in the first act, Cave abandons the theatrical prelude, established by Wilde, to build the anticipatory tension required to establish Herod’s intense erotic desire. Moreover, the ambivalent association of the seven veils serves to metaphorically elucidate the play’s subtext.

Cave’s interpretation of Salomé’s dance is unique in representing the unconventionality of post-modern minimalist dancing. Cave’s stage direction reads: “The music pulses and snakes, but Salomé remains stock-still, facing Herod. She removes, one by one, the veils that are bound about her body” (86). Postmodern minimalist dance enacts an active engagement between performer and spectator. As the spectator engages in the subjectivity of Salomé’s minimalist dancing, there is a

“reverse strategy of seduction at work... whereby spectators are drawn to the absence of spectacle” (Claid 2006, 114). In Cave’s interpretation of Salomé’s iconic dance, the absence is intriguing and thereby initiates a multitude of interpretative possibilities.

As Cave describes the removal of Salomé’s seven veils, he portrays the princess as possessing hair “as liquid gold. Her lips are blood-heavy and as clinquant as cut rubies. Her teeth are like pearls. Her breasts are hillocks of honey-coloured sand. Her quim is shielded by a fine lace.” (86-7) Such descriptions evoke the language reminiscent of the *Song of Songs*, whereby parts of the body are depicted and eroticised as metaphorical objects. For example, “Thy hair is like a flock of goats... Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep newly shorn... Thy lips are like a thread of purple,” (114-5), “Thy lips, my spouse, distill honey; honey and milk are concealed under thy tongue” (115), “his lips are as lilies gushing with myrrh” (117-8), “thy two breasts are as the two twins of a gazelle” (120). However, when Cave refers to Salomé’s vagina, he uses the slang and vulgar term “quim”: “Her quim is shielded by a fine lace” (87). Cave transgresses the *Song of Songs*’ biblical language that depicted metaphorical terrestrial beauty to the grime of the whorehouse. The choice of the lace is also alluring as it conceals yet reveals, offering a brief sight to her genitalia but at the same time concealing it as forbidden.

While Cave’s choice of poetics initiates the imitation of pre-existing language, either consciously or unconsciously, borrowed from the *Old Testament*, he engages, however, in the transgressive debasement of crude speech. The “locatable intertext need not necessarily be located by the reader who, for reasons of education, time etc., may never know or find it” (Still & Worton 1990, 26). Still and Worton cite Riffaterre in suggesting “what is essential is that in each individual reading, the (various) readers sense, indeed presuppose that there is an intertext through their perceptions of the symptomatic nature of the (un)grammatical articulations of the text itself” (Still and Worton 1990, 26). As Cave imitates Wilde’s text, he indirectly engages in an intertextual relation with the *Song of Songs*. By injecting Wilde’s *Salomé* with a heightened degree of abjection, Cave further plunders the poetic language of the biblical text.

Watching Salomé dance, King Herod becomes “increasingly delirious” (87) and eagerly counts the cascading veils one by one:

ONE!...oh! see how it flutters from your hand. TWO!...ohh! downward like a dying bird...THREE!...oh! beautiful Salomé, I love you...oh! Now, FOUR!... see how the veils cause the floor to storm, yet their absence reveals such still and silent flesh... FIVE!... oh! my heart pounds out to you. What you create with your seven veils God, creaking at the hinges, could never approach with his seven days. Oh... SIX!! [Herod clutches painfully at his hear as he collapses] (SFP, 87)

Before the audience hears the definitive number seven, which thereby indicates that Salomé is completely naked, “Herod clutches painfully at his heart as he collapses” (87). The stage direction indicates that the power of Salomé’s erotic minimalist striptease overwhelmed King Herod to the point of his near demise. By employing overdramatic theatrics characteristic of an exaggerated farce, Cave’s parody of Wilde’s *Salomé* is “relegating male voyeurism and the metaphysical elevation of

female sexuality to the realm of the absurd” (Dierkes-Thrun 2011, 189). Male voyeurism is brought to an abrupt end with the entrance of John the Baptist.

The first act ends as John the Baptist enters dressed in camel skins to ask “What evil here?” (87) Suddenly Salomé calls to the wings of the stage mere moments before blackout and commands, “Seize him, guards! Seize the Baptist!” (87) Unlike Wilde’s play, the prophet is not imprisoned in a cistern, having previously been arrested for denouncing the incestuous relationship between King Herod and his wife, Herodias. Nor is the Queen present in the play at all. Cave decided to forgo the queen’s presence and elected to exhibit the relationship between Salomé and men only. Apart from the Vestal Virgin who may preside over the drama but who does not, however, engage in dialogue with fellow actors, Salomé is the only female character in the text. The play consists of Salomé alone, engaging in dialogue with King Herod and John the Baptist, while the character named the Negro executioner appears in the final act to talk of Salomé. Cave’s departure from pre-existing treatments of the Salomé story to exclude the pivotal relationship between mother and daughter highlights Cave’s act of demotivation even further. By drastically cutting dialogue, Cave does not provide any motivation for Salomé’s demand for the Baptist’s head, except for her own narcissistic and self-centred pursuits. “The circumambient semantic pressure is such that cancelling one motive may be enough to suggest another irresistibly (by virtue of the formidable principle *no motive, no action*), without even having to identify it explicitly” (Genette 1997, 328). There is no mention of John the Baptist’s denouncement of the incestuous relationship between Queen Hérodias and King Herod. Nor is there any mention of Salomé’s unrelenting desire for the prophet. Instead, Salomé exists as a self-centred and egotistical child who, by her mere existence, feels entitled to defiantly possess that which she desires.

As soon as the Vestal Virgin introduces the second act, entitled “Dialogue With The Baptist”, the audience is greeted with a disturbing scene of the prophet caged in a wooden kennel with a wire-screen frontage. As the Baptist is incarcerated “like an animal” (88), Salomé “sits atop the box while swinging one long bright naked leg in front of the cage” (88). All eyes are on Salomé, as “one hand slips beneath her robe, while the other holds a large apple which she eats. Her toenails are painted in the colour of blood. Salomé fingers herself.” (88) The apple, like the apple depicted in the biblical Garden of Eden, is symbolic of indulgence and earthly desires. Cirlot reminds us that the warning not to eat the forbidden apple “came from the mouth of the supreme being, as a warning against the exaltation of materialistic desire” (1967, 14). Cave embraces the concept of the forbidden fruit to the extreme, as Salomé brazenly engages in masturbation. In this instance, such a display of sexual self-gratification is abject.

While Wilde’s Salomé yearns for Iokanaan’s love, Cave’s Salomé employs a sexual activity where man, in this case, the sacred prophet, is not necessary to satisfy her sexual yearnings and appetites. The fact that Salomé is masturbating while simultaneously eating an apple provides an insight into the psychological structure of her character. Salomé is the threatening Other, as she revels in the taste of a forbidden fruit. In this regard, Salomé’s garden is the garden of sin, highlighted

by the sexual act of masturbatory self-gratification. Cave takes an image usually associated with the biblical Eve in the Garden of Eden and further transgresses the religious motif to the extreme. While Eve is certainly damned in the Bible, Cave further exploits the biblical narrative by subjecting the female to perform a blasphemous and degrading act.

Salomé's actions do not go unnoticed by the Baptist, as he hurls insults at the princess: "You are sin. Lucifer, the dark angel, watches over you knowing that one day he will claim you. You are the wicked and you have his mark upon you. Repent now or suffer horrors too vile to mention." (88) There is an apocalyptic warning in the prophet's speech. However, just as his physical body is caged and imprisoned so too are his ominous words of prophecy, as they have no effect on Salomé. Furthermore, her fearless scoffing reply renders his threats null and void and reveal her obnoxious immaturity: "If I have my way, pompous turd, you won't have a brain for much longer!" (88) John retorts, as he barks back, "Spawn of incest, you are damned for eternity. Too vile for the grave, too vile for the grave. You are beyond redemption! Marked with devil blood, ruled by the moon! O hellish vixen! O cloven gender!" (88) Describing Salomé as "cloven gender" offers an intriguing insight into Cave's view of the gender ambiguity present in the young *femme fatale*.

'Cloven' is the past participle of cleave. The verb 'to cleave' is to split or divide. For instance, goats have cloven hoofs. "Cloven" gender refers to Salomé's "split" gender as her character, as demonstrated in Wilde's text, exhibits signs of gender ambiguity, which is represented in the variable oscillation between the character's masculine and feminine attributes. Cave takes inspiration from Wilde whose protagonist initially appears innocent and virginal but swiftly morphs into an assertive and masculinized *femme fatale*. Wilde's Salomé becomes masculinized, as she gazes longingly at the object of her desire who is in turn feminized by a succession of blazons: "I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan! Thy body is white, like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea and come down into the valleys." (82) The poetic blazons are once again borrowed from the *Song of Songs*: "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys! As a lily among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens." (111)

The intense adoration illustrated by Salomé's fetishization of Iokanaan's body continues until the prophet rejects her unquenchable advances prompting a sudden caustic backlash: "Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall, where vipers have crawled; like a plastered wall where the scorpions have made their nest." (82) Salomé's words embody a masculine aggressive quality. She moves from the seductress to the aggressor. She rapidly transforms from the ethereal virgin to the vindictive masculinized *femme fatale*. Powell suggests that "[t]he passionate language of Salomé's addresses to Jokanaan, in turn, is modelled on the love poetry of Song of Solomon, except that in the biblical source the passionate speaker is a man extolling the beauty and sexual allure of a woman. Within the frame of this gender shift, Salomé is "like" a man, and Jokanaan "like a woman" (61).

Powell is not alone in making the error of attributing the adoring declarations of passionate love borrowed from the *Song of Songs* to that of the man. Ellmann also states: "But the Song of Songs

describes a woman's beauty, not a man's" (1988, 344) and Davies refers to the biblical book "in which a man lauds a woman's beauty" (2011, 63). In the *Song of Songs*, there is a mutual exchange of poetic love between both the male and female characters of the biblical text. Furthermore, the *Song of Songs* is an ambiguous text as "the Song has a variety of contexts that shift frequently in no apparent dramatic sequence and within which many different kinds of voices speak. There is no reason to assume only a few fixed speakers in the Song, and even less justification for viewing Solomon as a central character." (Falk 1990, xiii) Nevertheless, we can assume that in Wilde's *Salomé* the "fetishization of the male body by a woman signifies a sexual/textual inversion" (Fernbach 2002, 56).

Cave draws from Wilde's approach to gender ambiguity and consequently reduces his text: "cloven gender". In doing so, Cave's reduction of Wilde's play can be seen in terms of Genette's notion of *excision*, whereby a text can be reduced "without diminishing it or, more precisely, without subtracting from it some part or parts. The simplest, but also the most brutal and the most destructive to its structure and meaning, consists then of suppression pure and simple, or *excision*" (Genette 1997, 229). Genette views such a practice as not necessarily diminishing the text's value. Rather, "it is possible to "improve" a work by surgically removing from it some useless and therefore noxious part... reduction by *amputation* (a single massive excision) is a very widespread literary, or at least editorial, practice" (Genette 1997, 229). Genette's theory of excision is evident, as John the Baptist describes Salomé as "marked with devil blood, ruled by the moon" (88).

The moon plays a prominent role in Wilde's play. From a statistical point of view, the moon is mentioned nineteen times by six different speakers (Toepfer 1991, 79). In opposition, Cave's drama refers to the moon seven times and by only two speakers: the characters of John the Baptist and Salomé. Although Cave is extremely economical in his references to the moon, his choice of language establishes the reverential potency of the moon symbol. However, the moon is not an omnipresent motif, watching over the events but is aligned with the devil's blood. Cave demonstrates a Wildean influence as his literary forefather used numerous descriptions of the moon to signify its power as a dominant feature in the play.

In Wilde's text, the "Slaves bring perfumes and the seven veils and take off the sandals of Salomé." (138) Although Herod initially appears overjoyed to watch the princess dance: "Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet! 'Tis well! 'Tis well! Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees" (138), he suddenly reveals his sudden delight: "No, no, she is going to dance on blood! There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance on blood. It were an evil omen" (138), and turns to the moon which has become red as blood, "Ah! Look at the moon! She has become red as blood. Ah! the prophet prophesied truly. He prophesied that the moon would become as blood. Did he not prophesy it? All of ye heard him prophesying it. And now the moon has become as blood. Do ye not see it?" (138) The moon has moved from descriptions of white and silver to one portrayed red as blood. Cave's choice of language presents the reader not only with a degree of ambiguity but also within its concise semantic structure, Cave's text

remains dense and informative. John's striking words "Marked with devil blood, ruled by the moon" conjure up visions of a young girl damned for eternity who is herself, psychologically caged in bloodlust and lunacy. Cave prefers to forgo Wilde's numerous descriptions of the moon and instead chooses to make a triangular connection of satanic symbolism in correlating the moon, devil blood, and Salomé.

Salomé responds, "Cleanse me, Baptist. Take this yoke, the moon, under which *ah* slave, the terrible Empress of *mab* body" (89). Salomé recognizes her enslavement to the moon as depicted by the image of the "yoke". The yoke is a symbol of subjection, servitude, and slavery. "A yoke is a burden or a bond or both." (Ferber 2007, 245) Ferber states: "The burdensome aspect of being under a yoke is the more frequently found, especially in the *Old Testament*, where "yoke" (Hebrew *'ol*) usually refers to social or political subservience." (2007, 245) Ferber cites Deuteronomy in the *Old Testament*: "Because thou servedst not the Lord thy God," Moses warns his people, "Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies," and the Lord "shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee" (Deut. 28.47-48). The image of the yoke is also present in the *New Testament* in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me: for I am meek and lowly of heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matt. 11:29-30) Cave momentarily removes Salomé from this biblical setting and inserts her enslavement into an historic period of American chattel slavery.

Cave demonstrates this shift linguistically by Salomé's exaggerated speech: "under which *ah* slave" and "*mab* body". Salomé embodies the African American slave by enacting a characteristic southern accent in order to align the dialogue's delivery with the colloquial speech of pre-civil war America. However, although such imitation may initially appear as a simple parody to a particular period of American history, the high degree of sensitivity in relation to the historic narrative of North American race relations is disregarded by Cave and therefore abject. As Cave turns this sensitive issue into the theatre of the absurd, he conjures up historic images of a painful past which still have ramifications and can cause turmoil and division in the twenty-first century. Cave's venture into burlesque travesty reinforces the notion that Salomé has no regard for the sacred and furthermore separates her from society's norms.

Salomé makes a mockery of the sanctity of Baptism as she taunts John the Baptist feigning a desire to be cleansed and made holy. She states: "I am woman. Cleanse me. Wash away all that's comely. Chasten me, Baptist, with your waters." (89) At which time, the stage direction reads: "The moon appears above them. It is a gold platter." (89) Cave's description of the moon as a "gold platter" presents an interesting intertextual reading. This study has shown that the sun inundates the Shulamite in *Song of Songs* in direct contrast to Wilde's Salomé, who is aligned with the sterile, white and silver qualities of the "chaste" moon. However, in Cave's treatment, he reintroduces a golden moon.

John the Baptist lashes out at Salomé: "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (89), his words taken directly from the book of Matthew in the *New Testament*, where Peter tempts Jesus with a secure

option and a way to avoid his impending suffering and painful death: “But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.” (Matthew 16:23) Cave’s borrowing from the biblical text marks a powerful reflection on the notion of temptation. Temptation represents a psychological struggle within an individual and possesses the power to override one’s values and ideals.

As powerful as temptation is, however, the sacred prophet is immune to Salomé’s sexual taunts and request to cleanse her with his waters. John the Baptist’s forceful rebuke is intensified by his acidic tongue: “A single strand of your hair would pollute the sacred Jordan river. Was it you who dipped her toe in what is now called the DEAD SEA? I would suffer an eternity in darkness, clothed in worms, rather than make a mockery of the blessed mystery of baptism.” (89) An undeterred Salomé responds: “Suit yourself, dick breath!” (89) Once again her language is childlike and insolent. She is a petulant child eager to have her own way.

Drawing the act to a close, the moon lowers itself and “appears to hover just above and behind Salomé’s head” (89). The princess mocks John as she incarnates traditional religious iconography: “See, Baptist. The moon sanctifies me. It sits behind my crown of curls like a gloriole” (89). Cave presents the reader with an image of Salomé in a holy state. Symbolised by a golden halo surrounding her head, Salomé’s ambiguous “holiness” attempts to elevate her inner spiritual qualities to that of the divine. The halo surrounding icon motifs “is a well-known symbol which denotes a sanctified state” (Solrunn 2004, 23). Solrunn explains the aesthetics of icon imagery in terms of portraying a source of light that is not manmade but is rather the divine light of God: “According to Orthodox tradition, an icon shall be honoured, because it manifests and actualises the spiritual reality towards which the faithful turn. In this way, an icon may be a reminder of God’s presence and an aid in prayer” (2004, 23). As Salomé is aligned with the light of a divine God, she presents the reader with an ambiguous identity. While depicting a hallowed and anointed outer self, she is fundamentally a woman who is murderous, narcissistic and ready to commit sin. In Christian tradition, sin is regarded as breaking the laws of God as established by the Ten Commandments given to Moses, the patriarchal leader of the chosen people. Sin that comes from within is deceptive, perceptually misleading and ambiguous. In Creed’s view:

The definition of sin/abjection as something which comes from *within* opens up the way to position woman as deceptively treacherous. She may appear pure and beautiful on the outside but evil may, nevertheless, reside within. It is this stereotype of feminine evil - beautiful on the outside/corrupt within - that is so popular within patriarchal discourses about woman’s evil nature. (1997, 42)

As the audience is left with the lingering image of the gold platter resting behind Salomé’s saintly appearance, the stage is enveloped in darkness to signify the end of act two.

However, Salomé’s corrupt nature returns to reveal itself in the proceeding third act. The shortest act within Cave’s play, act three entitled “Salomé’s Reward”, begins with the customary announcement of the Vestal Virgin before a single spotlight illuminates Salomé centre-stage. The

title is brief but thought-provoking. The concept of reward is treated ambiguously since it is usually bestowed upon a person as an award for doing good, but in the case of Salomé, it is inverted, and she gets rewarded for acts of evil. The fact that Salomé receives the head of John the Baptist as her reward attests to her innate diabolical nature. "In an evil whisper" (90) Salomé speaks, "My mouth asks for it. My heart weeps for it! My cunt yearns for it!! The moon, in turn, demands it. THE HEAD OF JOHN THE B.!!" (90). Cave explores a number of performative acts derived from ecstatic speech. Ecstasy or the experience of an ecstatic state originally referred to the realm of religion, with the ultimate connection to God. Toepfer views "in its original sense, ecstasy ('ekstasis') refers to a condition of being 'outside oneself'. If we assume that language is central to the construction of a self, then ecstasy also implies a condition of being 'outside' language" (1991 13). Salomé's mouth asks for John's head, her heart weeps out of intense longing for the head of the Baptist, and her cunt sexually yearns for it. Salomé's lewd and obscene language confesses her carnal motive, as John's impending death is aligned with sexual satisfaction. Cave's linguistic choice shakes the confines of accepted speech, confronting the reader with a sense of destabilization. Cave transgresses biblical rhetoric customary to the Salomé story to offer the reader a blasphemous departure from Biblical authority. Furthermore, Cave invites pagan ritual sacrifice in the association with the moon and its demand for the head of the Baptist.

To announce the fourth act entitled "The Chop", the Vestal Virgin appears to be vestal no more as the stage direction indicates: "Stands back; fingers herself absent-mindedly as she looks on." (91) Cave's bizarre interpretation of female eroticism displayed by the Vestal Virgin's distracted yet voyeuristic act leaves the possibility for interpretation open and impels the reader to collaborate in the construction of the text's meaning. The Vestal Virgin who initially appeared as an impassive actor, who guided the reader through the play's five consecutive acts, now engages in an active transgression of public masturbation. Considering the impending death of the Baptist, as the title suggests, this exhibition of abject voyeurism shatters the confines of normal behaviour. The position of the abject "is radically excluded" and draws the reader toward the place where meaning collapses (Kristeva 1982, 2).

Following the Vestal Virgin, Cave's stage direction indicates: "As in the remarkable painting by Puvis de Chavannes the scene is thus: (left to right) NEGRO with axe; JOHN THE BAPTIST, hands roped and kneeling; SALOMÉ, hand working diligently between her sugar thighs" (91). The painting Cave is referring to is entitled "The Beheading of St. John the Baptist" (1869) which is housed at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham (Fig. 1). This work is not to be confused with the larger version produced in 1870 that shares the same title and is exhibited at the *National Gallery* in London. Namely, the addition of the male figure in the red robe, assumed to be Herod, and the seated woman who shields her eyes from the horror of the sacred beheading. Due to the compositional aspect of the previous rendition with regards to Cave's stage direction, it is clear that the author was referring to Puvis de Chavannes's three-figured work.

Considered to play a critical role in the history of late-nineteenth century French art, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, “specialized in the depiction of women’s stately listlessness. His work, in turn, helped give direction to the wilting females of the symbolists.” (Dijkstra 1986, 77) Similar to the symbolists, who preceded Cave, Puvis de Chavannes’s treatment of the female aesthetic spoke to the author’s creative spirit. Not only did the subject of Salomé inspire Cave but he was also influenced by the painting’s compositional structure. The compelling aspect of Cave’s treatment is his abject translation of the pivotal scene. While the painting depicts an ambiguously demure Salomé, her head inclined modestly, as she clasps her cloak to cover her body, Cave smashes the sexual taboo. He brazenly depicts Salomé once more in an act of sexual self-gratification as her hand works “diligently between her sugar thighs”.

One similarity between the painting and Cave’s play is the presentation of John the Baptist. In both treatments, John is peacefully surrendering himself to the Lord. Puvis de Chavannes depicts the holy prophet already sainted with a golden halo; his arms open in an act of holy sacrificial offering. Similarly, Cave’s submissive John surrenders to a holy sacrifice as the stage direction indicates: “He looks heavenward” (91) and the prophet states: “I am ready, Lord!” (91) The one contrast between the two treatments is that in Cave’s play, John fires a threatening outburst to Salomé before his ultimate surrender: “All Heaven and Hell are watching, evil one! The angels puff up the clouds for me, the poker is in the furnace for you!” (S91). Although in Puvis de Chavannes’s painting, one can only imagine John’s spoken words before the executioner strikes, his demeanor is one of tranquillity and peace.

Another contrast to be considered between the two works is the active involvement of the princess. In Puvis de Chavannes’s painting, Salomé passively stands back, platter in hand as she awaits her trophy. She appears to be almost lingering, as the platter is held downward by her side. Her expression seems listless, as does her placid holding of the platter. Cave takes a more active approach as Salomé “in climatic ecstasy” (91) torments the prophet until he takes his last breath: “And so am I! Let the axe drop, and silence this fucking do-gooder!” (91) When John the Baptist utters his final words, “I go to my God. Though narrow are the gates, he will show the way” (91) the “moon blinks on and blood runs down the insides of SALOMÉ’s dress” (91). The blinking moon signifies life. The ancients depended on the cycle of the moon for the planting of their crops. “Also known as ‘Lunar Planting’, or ‘Moon Lore’, moon planting was adopted as farmers observed improved germination and growth of plants during certain moon phases.” (Bagnall 2009, 10) As previously addressed, the moon also depicts a woman’s menstrual cycle. The flowing of blood from the insides of Salomé’s dress leaves the interpretation open to ambiguous semantic references. For example, Salomé’s menstrual blood flow is abject and is furthermore ambivalent as it signifies life and death. A woman’s menstrual cycle confirms her fertility, which is a life force, whereas Salomé’s blood flow may also imply death in the representation of a miscarriage. The paradoxical notion of life and death aligns itself with the blood flow of John’s beheading which is certain death.

The last act, which is entitled "The Platter", is, without doubt, the most shocking in terms of glorifying Salomé's disturbing abject eroticism. The Negro executioner enters with John the Baptist's head on a platter. Cave insists the "head must be infinitely bloody and so on" (92). Herod recoils in horror and clutches his "problem heart" (92) before the Negro states, "This my most worthy master is the head of John the Baptist... minus the tongue, which Salomé demanded for herself. She said to inform you that you may eat the head but she's gonna teach her cunt to talk good" (92).

The fact that Salomé insists on keeping John's tongue presents a number of interpretative possibilities. It forces the reader to engage in an act of co-authorship, since the work of art is "constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity" (Eco 1989, 4). Eco's notion of open work requires the collaboration of interpreters to derive meaning from the text's inherent ambiguity and incompleteness. He states:

Every work of art, from a petroglyph to *The Scarlet Letter*, is open to a variety of readings - not only because it inevitably lends itself to the whims of any subjectivity in search of a mirror for its moods, but also because it wants to be an inexhaustible source of experiences which, focusing on it from different points of view, keep bringing new aspects out of it. (1989, 24)

Cave's foray into decadent aesthetics invites the reader to complete the work, elevating the role of the reader to that of co-author. The reader may embark on any number of pathways to explore this notion by questioning Cave's ambiguous employment of abjection. What is the reason for Salomé's insistence in claiming the prophet's tongue? Is the tongue a trophy, a lover's keepsake or a token of sexual degradation? Is the tongue a prop to be used in Salomé's abject sexual self-gratification? Or is Salomé implying that in order to be baptized she requires the tongue to instruct her in scriptural rhetoric? Will the prophet's tongue bestow upon the princess John's authority and power? Will Salomé in turn finally acquire the prophet's discipline and strength? The questions are endless and reinforce Eco's notion of an open work. However, when taking Eco's concept into consideration, nothing seems more ambiguous than the play's finale. Moments before blackout, a mysterious pre-pubescent girl enters for the first time "naked but covered in bloody hand-prints" (92) to announce the play's end: "GIRL: (Deadpan) The end" (92).

In drawing to a close, this study shows how Cave joins Wilde's intricate tapestry of transgression and demonstrates Salomé's enduring legacy for causing shock and controversy. For as Wilde once stated: "It is only the shudder that counts" (Ellmann 1988 341). Both Cave and Wilde take the biblical text of Salomé and subvert it, engaging the reader to journey with them to the extreme limits of what is permissible in society. By transgressing the Biblical book of *Song of Songs*, Wilde created an original narrative as he explored the aesthetics of abjection. In doing so, Cave is entwined in the Song's mosaic. This literary transformation sheds light on the author's motivating desire to represent the femme fatale in all her abject glory. Gérard Genette's theory of *transtextuality*

further illuminates the decoding of the intricate *Salomé* tapestry, its hidden threads and its loose ends.

The interwoven tapestry of creating something new with something old recalls Genette's theory of transtextuality. Genette provides the concept to examine the literary transformations both Wilde and Cave utilized as inspiration in their rewriting of the biblical myth. The process of adopting and consequently combining both literary and biblical influences to create an original work such as *Salomé* provides the reader with an inspiring literary tapestry so ambiguous that the reader is compelled to explore the play's foundation. Genette proposes that at times the existence of a hypotextual work is uncertain. However, this study illustrates the way in which Cave engages in a biblical borrowing of the *Song of Songs* by imitating some of the poetics exhibited in Wilde's *Salomé*. The reader is, therefore, able to experience the pleasure of discovering subtle semiotic resurgences of Wilde's biblical hypotext.



Figure 1: *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1869), Pierre Puvis de Chavannes
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

Endnotes:

1. Transmotivation is the original motivation being displaced by a newly invented one (See Genette 1997, 330-335). Genette points to Wilde's "substitution of an emotional reason for the political reasons of Jokanaan's execution" (1997, 330).
2. Transvaluation is the substitution of values that "can be roughly described as axiologically homogeneous" (Genette 1997, 367). Genette's definition of transvaluation is the rewriting of a text "as a double movement of devaluation and (counter) valuation bearing on the same character" (Genette 1997, 367).

References:

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Bagnall, Lyn. "Traditional Moon Planting." *Warm Earth* 83 (2009): 10-11.
- Cave, Nick. *King Ink*. Los Angeles: Two Thirteen Sixty One Publications, 1993.
- Cirlot, J. E. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.
- Claid, Emily. *Yes? No! Maybe: Seductive Ambiguity in Dance*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London, New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Davies, Helen. "The Trouble with Gender in Salome." *Refiguring Oscar Wilde's Salome*, (Ed) Michael Y. Bennett. Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2011. 1-19.
- Dierkes-Thrun, Petra. *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1988.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989.
- Falk, Marcia. *The Song of Songs*. New York: Harper Collins, 1990.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Fernbach, Amanda. *Fantasies of Fetishism of Fetishism: From Decadence to the Post-Human*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Kroppenber, Inge. "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgin". *Law and Literature*, 22, No. 3 (2010): 418-439.
- Maume, Chris. *Independent* 9 June, 2015.
- Powell, Kerry. *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Renan, Ernest. *The Song of Songs*. London: Ludgate Hill, E.C., 1860.

- Renan, Ernest. *Le Cantique des Cantiques*. Paris: Arléa, 1990 [1860].
- Solrunn, Nes. *The Mystical Language of Icons*. Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
- Toepfer, Karl. *The Voice of Rapture: A Symbolist System of Estatic Speech in Oscar Wilde's Salomé*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991.
- Wellberry, Karen, and Tanya Dalziell (Eds.) *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2009.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. London: Penguin Group, 2003 [1891].
- Wilde, Oscar. *Salomé*. Paris: GF Flammarion, 2006 [1894].
- Wilson, Anna. *Noisey* March 3, 2015
- Worton, Michael, and Judith Still. *Intertextuality Theories and Practices*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 1990.