A femme fatal goes opera

Salome from Oscar Wilde to Richard Strauss

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1   Prelude

23 And he [Herod] promised her [Salome] with an oath, Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom. 24 She went out and said to her mother [Herodias], What shall I ask for? The head of John the Baptist, she answered. 25 At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. 26 The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. 27 So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, 28 and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

Gospel of Mark 6, 'John the Baptist Beheaded.'[1]

Salomé (rising): I do not heed my mother. It is for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan in a silver charger. You have sworn, Herod. Forget not that you have sworn an oath.

Salomé in Oscar Wilde's 'Salome'.[2]

Ich achte nicht auf die Stimme meiner Mutter. Zu meiner eignen Lust will ich den Kopf des Jochanaan in einer Silberschüssel haben. Du hast einen Eid geschworen, Herodes. Du hast einen Eid geschworen, vergiß das nicht!

Salome in Richard Strauss's opera 'Salome'[3]

An immense development becomes apparent from the 'girl' that dances for Herod and acts on behalf of her mother when she asks for John the Baptist's head in the two gospels, to the independent woman named 'Salomé' in Wilde's play, and 'Salome' in Strauss's opera respectively, who demands Jokanann's (Jochanaan's) head for her own sexual desire, if we compare the first given quote above, which is taken from the Gospel of Mark 6, verses 23-28, to the second and third citations by Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss.[4] Both evangelists Mark and Matthew, who first tell the story about the beheading of John the Baptist, do not specify the name of the 'girl' that dances for Herod. In fact, neither the biblical dancing 'girl' nor the various variants of the figure 'Salome' ever existed in real but are merged figures from different historical events and stories. However,

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[1]   Gospel of Mark 6 (23-28), 'John the Baptist Beheaded,' see http://www.bibleserver.com/index.php, accessed 01/06/2007.

[2]   Wilde, Oscar, 'Salomé,' in *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), p. 737.

[3]   Strauss, Richard, *Salome in Full Score* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981) pp. 250-251.

[4]   Throughout the text I will distinct between Wilde's 'Salomé' and Strauss's 'Salome' by spelling, the same applies to 'Jokanann' (Wilde) and 'Jochanaan' (Strauss). In each case, if I mean the whole work *Salomé/Salome* rather than just the figure, I will indicate this with italics. If the overall figure of Salome outside play or opera is meant, I stay with the spelling without accent.

contemporary audiences of Wilde and Strauss were mostly not aware of Salome's pre-biblical history or any historical facts regarding her. The audience knew the two gospels, and the figure Salome from contemporary responses by artists such as Moreau, or writers like Flaubert ('Hérodias') and Huysman ('Á Rebours'). Ludwig Kusche traces in great detail what stories contributed to evangelists' account of the biblical 'girl', and the subsequent evolving character of 'Salome' in culture history.[5] Kusche concentrates on the Salomes in music history and only briefly mentions literarical or art historical accounts of her, but on this matter several other authors, for example Mario Pratz and Richard Ellmann, report about that matter in great depth.[6] This essay will therefore not feature yet another section on Salome's predecessors, but for the sake of completeness includes a graph of more or less direct influences on Wilde and Strauss in the appendix.

As one can see from this briefly sketched Salome-b(ibl)iography, Wilde and Strauss were far from being the first to be fascinated with Salome but their treatments of her story are certainly the most well known – Kusche is quite right when he calls it a 'culmination in the artistic treatment' of this subject matter.[7] However, it is Wilde's play that attracts Strauss to the subject and Strauss does not just use the basic setting of Wilde's text. He actually remains quite close to the original wording, (or, for correctness' sake, Hedwig Lachmann's splendid German translation of Wilde's text,) creating the first German so called *Literaturoper*, a concept which I will discuss later (section 2.1, p. 10).[8] As Strauss reports himself, the first person who suggested to him to transform Wilde's *Salomé* into an opera was the Viennese poet Anton Lindtner. Although Strauss sensed the potential of the text immediately, he could not find a starting point in the first 'cleverly versified opening scenes' Lindtner offered him.[9] Only after he had seen the play in Berlin, staged by Max Reinhardt and featuring Gertrud Eysoldt as Salomé, it occurred to him 'to set to music "Wie schön ist die Prinzessin heute Nacht" straight away.'[10]

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[5] Kusche, Ludwig, *Richard Strauss: im Kulturkarussel der Zeit 1864 - 1964* (München: Süddeutscher Verlag München, 1964), pp. 129-150.
[6] Ellmann, Richard, 'Overtures to Wilde's Salome,' in *Richard Strauss: Salome*, ed. Puffet, Derrick, *Cambridge Opera Handbooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Pratz, Mario, 'Salome in literary tradition,' in ibid.
[7] Kusche, *Richard Strauss: im Kulturkarussel der Zeit 1864 - 1964*, p. 137.
[8] The very first literature opera is Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* in French, based on Maurice Maeterlinck, from 1902, three years before Strauss's *Salome.*
[9] Schuh, Willi, ed., *Strauss, 1864-1949: Recollections and reflections*, 2 ed. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974).
[10] Ibid.

> *Now, of course, that the dance and especially the whole finale scene is steeped into music it is easy to say that the play was "simply calling for music." Yes, indeed, but that had to be discovered,*

as Strauss judges in 1942, looking back in his memoirs 'Reminiscences of the first performance of my operas.'[11] But what is the feature in Wilde's play, that 'simply calls' for music? Strauss was neither the first nor the last to notice this; in fact music had been set to the play from the very first performance on, and also the recent staging of *Salomé* in Dublin's Gate Theatre, directed by Steven Berkoff in 1988, is throughout accompanied by piano-music both composed and performed by Roger Doyle. So not 'just' *Salomé's* famous 'Dance of the seven veils' requires - quite naturally – some sort of musical setting but actually the whole play seems to ask for a musical treatment. Following, in this paper I will try to detect the features of Wilde's *Salomé*, which attracted Strauss to such extent that he based his first literature opera on it.

There are two main imaginable motives for selecting a particular text in order to transform it into a libretto. Firstly, which is the aesthetic of the text, the actual text material: to what degree is it simply the text's aesthetic value – style, structure, wording or timbre, - which accommodates a musical setting? And, secondly, there is the subject of the text and its cultural context. Surely, if the artist is not interested in the subject he will hardly chose it for musical setting, no matter how beautiful and musical the language of the text is. While in earlier operas the subject often was the main reason for the selection of a text, especially in the case of novels, which then had to be transformed completely to become a reasonable libretto, these changes with Strauss's who creates a *Literaturoper*, which by definition sets an existing text to music with a minimum of alterations of the original wording. Therefore, both text material and subject matter have their share in this discourse on why Strauss felt that *Salomé* 'simply called for music.' Which of the two motives came first in Strauss's assessment I cannot tell. Besides, both reasons coexist, subject shapes Wilde's text treatment, but also Wilde's desire to use his particular style jointly shapes the characterisation of the figures. Although the close and (in the end product) indivisible interaction of form and subject, for the purpose of this essay they will be treated in two individual sections, '*Salomé*'s surface: Aesthetic values' (section 2, p. 4) with an interlude on 'the concept of the *Literaturoper*' (2.1, p. 10), and 'Below the surface: *Salomé* in context' (section 3, p. 13). Findings will be summarised in the 'Postlude' (p. 18).

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[11]   Ibid.

Wilde called *Salomé* a 'beautiful coloured musical thing' and wrote in a letter to Edmund Gosse that is was 'his first venture to use for art that subtle instrument of music, the French tongue.'[12] Doubtless, the French idiom has musical quality, but Strauss did not use Wilde's play in original tongue, not even Wilde's English translation but Lachmann's German translation of *Salomé*.[13] That the German sound is rather different from the French is obvious and we know from Strauss's correspondence with Romain Rolland that he treated the German idiom different than the French. After Strauss finished *Salome* in German he wanted to launch the opera in French and wished 'to preserve Wilde's original, word for word; that is why the musical phrases must be adapted to the French text.'[14] This French version of the opera was never really successful and later Strauss agreed on a translation of his libretto into French to fit the original musical lines (1909). Subsequently the first French version was forgotten till its rediscovery in 1980.[15] This shows once more the different sound quality of the German Lachmann-version of *Salomé* to which Strauss initially was drawn; accordingly I will study the qualities of the translated version.

2   *Salomé*'s surface: Aesthetic values

Even though a libretto is dialogue, it is different in nature to a usual theatrical play – first of all simply because parts of it (and since Wagner unexceptionally everything) are sung and not spoken. Originally, a libretto text would contain the nearly spoken recitative parts during which the plot moves forward, and static aria parts in which the plot freezes and emotions are expressed. These latter parts in text would already provide a certain musical treatment because of their textual form and structure. I am writing in conjunctives because this is not the case anymore in *Salome*. When I was watching the DVD of a *Salome*-production, a friend, not knowing the opera, came in and asked surprised if everything in *Salome* is recitative without arias. After watching a little longer she rephrased her question: is everything in *Salome* aria? *Salome* is through composed, without

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[12] Wilde as cited in Schmidgall, Gary, 'Salome,' in *Literature as Opera*, ed. Schmidgall, Gary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 249f.

[13] Schmidgall summarises, 'one need not be a linguist to sense that the German is a less supply inflected, more strictly modular, more guttural language – one, in short, which can be more stark and harsh.' Ibid., p. 272.

[14] Strauss, letter to Romain Rolland, 5ᵗʰ July 1905, in Myers, Rollo, ed., *Richard Strauss & Romain Rolland: Correspondence* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), p. 29.

[15] Kennedy, Michael, *Richard Strauss*, ed. Sadie, Stanley, 2 ed., Master Musicians (Oxford et al.: Oxford Univeristy Press, 1995), p. 42f.

distinction between recitative and aria, non-repetitive, which is nothing new – number-operas had pretty much died out with Wagner's *Musikdrama* and his *unendliche Melodie*. The difference is however that Wagner wrote his own text suitable for his own music, and Strauss based this opera on an existing play not changing much in the text bar from reductions. But what my friend's questions indicate are an aspect of the opera that Norman del Mar described before: '*Salome* immediately impressed its early listeners as having been composed "in a single breath", the long and complex structure forming on vast pan.'[16]

Another difference between Wagner and Strauss is the length of the opera. No matter how beautiful Wagner's music dramas are, he challenges his listeners with an immense duration. *Salome* is much shorter with its approximately 110 minutes, in contrary to a 270 minutes lasting *Siegfried*, or even more fastidious, a nearly 1.000 minutes (16 hours) lasting complete *Ring*.[17] Strauss feels sympathy with his audience and challenges it musically but not with extreme duration. Still, this brings us to another characteristic of a libretto. Sung speech takes more time than spoken word, and if everything is sung, the plot has to move forward in singing as well. Altogether, the action that happens on a musical stage is extremely slowed down in comparison to a spoken play. Therefore, either the action has to be reduced to a minimum, or the Wagnerian approach would be the opera extended to an immense length. Strauss chose the first possibility. To remain within a normal duration, complicated strands or sub-plots are of little help – and here we hit on one of the first features of *Salomé*.

Salomé is in its original setting pretty straightforward. Everybody loves Salomé compulsively to such an extent that one (Young Syrian) commits suicide when he does not gain Salomé's attention anymore, the other (Herod) is prepared to do nearly everything to get a glimpse of Salomé's body. Salomé on the contrary becomes obsessed with Jokanaan whom she desires. To achieve what she wants she very consciously addresses Herod's longing and dances for him. After this dance she asks for Jokanaan's head as substitute for his whole body to assuage her desire. In the end Herod calls her a monster and lets his soldiers kill her. Herodias comments in between but has no impact on the plot. The only strand which we can possibly call sub-plot is of the Young Syrian but an end to his life is

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16 Mar, Norman del, *Richard Strauss: A critical commentary on his life and works*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), p. 242.

17 Of course there are more differences and similarities to be traced between Strauss and Wagner, but this is not object of this paper. However, some are worth mentioning, since Strauss stands in the direct succession of Wagner and is himself very conscious of this.

made long before the end of the play. All other characters like the soldiers, the Jews, the Nazarenes etc. seem to blend in as little ornamental dots, which do create some context and particularly help emphasizing the psychological maladies that lie below the surface of the play, but apart from that they are marginal and certainly do not act as driving force of the plot at any time – in this actually respect a quite pointillist technique.[18]

Thus, one major feature of *Salomé* is its slow and linear progressing which leaves room to the tight cluster of psychological mêlées between the lines. This static quality advantages the transformation into a libretto significantly, since time in an opera moves much slower than in a theatre play as we have discussed above. I have mentioned *Salome*'s 'non-repetitiveness' in a different context before at the beginning of this section. This may have led the reader to raising his or her eyebrows – how can *Salome* be non-repetitive if repetition is one major characteristic of *Salomé*? Above I was speaking in the context of musical form, in which sometimes larger sections are repeated identical as refrain. Although one can speak of reoccurring motives in *Salome* in a *leitmotiv*ic way, in general *Salome*'s music is always moving on, 'breathless' (del Mar) and without direct repetitions, and a normal audience will not be able to depict reoccurring *Leitmotiv*es consciously. Repetitive is meant here in a more literal and direct way, as is shown in the following example. Lines such as

> ERSTER SOLDAT: Der Tetrarch sieht finster drein.
>
> ZWEITER SOLDAT: Ja, er sieht finster drein.
>
> ERSTER SOLDAT: Er blickt auf etwas.
>
> ZWEITER SOLDAT: Er blickt auf jemanden.
>
> ERSTER SOLDAT: Auf wen blickt er?
>
> ZWEITER SOLDAT: Ich weiß nicht.

are distinctive for Wilde's play.[19] However distinctive, such lines can be easily condensed – and Strauss crosses out the two middle lines. In this way *Salomé*'s repetitive structure helps when cutting down the text to a possible length for a

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[18] Gary Schmidgall relates *Salome* to various movements of the fin-de-siècle, one of which is pointillism. Schmidgall, 'Salome,' p. 272.

[19] Text examples are taken from Lachmann's translation, since Strauss himself worked with the German text. Wilde, Oscar, *Salome*, trans. Lachmann, Hedwig (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1907), see http://www.ebook-bibliothek.org/eintrag_578.html, accessed 15/04/2007. (This edition is without pagination).

libretto. The following is another example taken from the occasion just after Salomé enters the stage:

> **SALOME:** Wie gut ist es, in den Mond zu sehen. Er ist
> wie eine silberne Blume. Kühl und keusch.
> ~~Wie eine Jungfrau.~~ Ja, wie die Schönheit
> einer Jungfrau. ~~Gewiß, wie eine Jungfrau,~~
> die rein geblieben ist. ~~Die sich nie~~
> ~~Männern preisgegeben hat wie die andern~~
> ~~Göttinnen.~~

'She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses'[20] is not a literal repetition but another embellishing description of the moon's virginity, adding nothing new to the meaning of 'virgin', and is therefore redundant and removed by Strauss.

Furthermore, Strauss does not limit himself to eliminating repetitions as shown above. Sometimes he cuts out ornamental descriptive sections which are not necessary for further understanding, as for example shown in the next excerpt:

> **ERSTER SOLDAT:** Aus der Wüste, ~~wo er sich von~~
> Heuschrecken und wildem Honig nährte.
> Er trug ein Kleid von Kamelhaaren und
> um die Lenden einen ledernen Gürtel.
> ~~Er war sehr schrecklich anzusehn.~~ Eine
> große Schar war immer um ihn. Er hatte
> auch Jünger, die ihm folgten.

Sometimes the sections Strauss considers unnecessary embellishment subordinate to the main plot are a lot longer, like for example, just before Jochanaan's voice sounds first. Here Strauss abolishes a large section with the description of Herod's wine-preferences and a discussion on different religions, from the First Soldier, 'Herodias has filled the cup of the Tetrach,' to The Cappadocian, 'That seems to me altogether ridiculous.'[21] By such reductions Strauss simplifies the action and diminishes it to the main plot solely.

Strauss's excisions give considerable insight into his intentions and interpretations of certain characters. For example, the character of the Young Syrian in Wilde's play is elaborated in much greater detail than in Strauss's *Salome*.

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[20]   Wilde, 'Salomé,' p. 722.
[21]   Ibid., p. 720.

After his death in Wilde's play, Herodias' Page comments in some sorrow on his personality, the First Soldier tries to draw Salomé's attention to the captain's suicide and with the Second Soldier he discusses whether to remove to corpse or not. Strauss removes all posthumous responses to person and death of the Young Syrian, thus Narraboth's (as the Young Syrian is called in Strauss's opera) suicide happens barely noticeable along the way. Strauss's cuts from and around Narraboth leave a depiction of the character that resembles his importance for Salome; for her, Narraboth is nothing more than a tool to render possible her meeting with Jochanaan, beyond this she has no interest whatsoever in his person or well being. In Roland Tenschert's words, 'Strauss restricts the dramatic delineation of the Young Syrian solely to the fact that he helps Salome to fulfil her wish to be allowed to see Jochanaan.'[22]

The treatment of The Young Syrian is typical for all of Strauss's expurgations. In total he compresses the original (Lachmann-) text of *Salomé* into about half its length. His reductions 'serve primarily to streamline the plot for musical purposes,' and to free the main plot from inessential secondary action.[23] For this purpose, some other characters which are only subordinate to the main strand, are eliminated completely, such as Tigellinus, a Nubian, and the Slaves of Salome. From Naaman, the Executioner, nothing more than his arm is left: 'a huge black arm, the arm of the executioner, which stretches out from the cistern, holding Jochanaan's head on a silver charger.'[24]

As Tenschert notices, Strauss seems to dislike subordinate clauses, and so transforms Strauss, for example, Lachmann's text 'Das Schweigen, das im Walde wohnt' (Wilde: 'The silence that dwells in the forest') into 'Des Waldes Schweigen.'[25] Another example is Lachmann's 'Es ist eine sehr gefährliche Lehre. Es ist eine Lehre, die aus Alexandria kommt,' ('It is a very dangerous doctrine. It is a doctrine that cometh from the schools at Alexandria,') which in Strauss's version simply becomes 'es ist eine sehr gefährliche Lehre aus Alexandria.'

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[22] Roland Tenschert investigates how Strauss approached his task of transforming the original into a suitable libretto by studying Strauss's copy of Lachmann's *Salomé*-translation.
Tenschert, Roland, 'Strauss as librettist (with a Postscript by the editor),' in *Richard Strauss: Salome*, ed. Puffet, Derrick, *Cambridge Opera Handbooks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[23] Ibid., p. 37.
[24] Translated from Strauss, *Salome in Full Score*, p. 301.
[25] Tenschert, 'Strauss as librettist (with a Postscript by the editor),' p. 40f and Wilde, 'Salomé,' p. 726.

Sometimes, Strauss cuts nothing but rearranges the word order of certain sentences; 'Wie eine Frau, die aus dem Grab aufsteigt' becomes 'Wie eine Frau, die aufsteigt aus dem Grab.'[26] This example is typical for most cases of word-reordering, some of which are displayed in Tenschert, generally Strauss changes the initial female ending of the line to a male ending, probably to suit his musical intuition of the lines in question better. In general both female and male endings occur in the play and the libretto, so it cannot be argued that one or the other is Strauss's favourite.

The use of *Leitmotive* has already been discussed in some detail, for example in the essay '*Salome* as music drama' by Derrick Puffet.[27] Dealing with symbolistic plays, one might think that *Leitmotive* resemble reoccurring symbols. It could however become quite boring, if the whole opera would consist of attached *Leitmotive* illustrating given symbols, and logically Strauss applies this technique in a more complex way. But these reoccurring textual symbols help nevertheless, to tie the play together – as Wilde himself wrote about his *Salomé* in 'De Profundis' that it contained 'refrains whose recurring motifs make it like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad.' This 'bonding' facilitates the understanding of sung dialogue – since it is nearly impossible to understand sung speech immediately, in text or content, repetitions help the audience to comprehend the text. These superficial repetitions give room for elaboration 'below the surface', or else, musical expression.

What we do see from this intertextual comparison is that although *Salomé* in Lachmann's translation lacks the musicality of the French language, it indeed accommodates musical setting simply by the text structure and form - and was, therefore, an optimal source for Strauss to use as a foundation for his first *Literaturoper*. As briefly indicated in the Prelude of this essay, the main characteristic of the so-called *Literaturoper* is that its libretto is based on an existing play with as little changes as possible. It is time to take a closer look at the concept of the *Literaturoper*, as it explains quite a lot of the above identified features of *Salome*.

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[26] Tenschert, 'Strauss as librettist (with a Postscript by the editor),' p. 41.
[27] Puffet, Derrick, '"Salome" as music drama,' Ibid.

2.1 The concept of the *Literaturoper*

Surprisingly the term *Literaturoper* - although resonating throughout literature - has not entered many dictionaries so far. The *MGG* does not feature a section on this particular type of opera at all, and the paragraph in the *New Grove Dictionary* is also of little help as it only consists of one sentence: 'a term of recent origin used to denote an opera in which the composer sets an already existing literary text, however abbreviated (as apposed to a specially written libretto);' followed by a very short list of examples.[28] This lack of references has been noticed before by Peter Peterson who in order to correct the deficiency provides an essay to outline the concept of the *Literaturoper*.[29] As becomes apparent in his text, the term as such has not been strictly defined so far, and this may be a reason for its absence in dictionaries. Some scholars count all operas that are in some way based on earlier literary works to the genre, neglecting the conceptual difference between whether an opera is solely based on a pre-existing story, or is a literary work deliberately set to music, which is a new development that evolved around the beginning of the twentieth century. If this broad definition would be the sense of *Literaturoper*, one might as well skip the term as it becomes trivial, which is what for instance both Karl Dietrich Gräwe or Wolfgang Ruf suggest.[30] Peterson however provides a definition that delineates the *Literaturoper* convincingly from other opera-genres:

> *The term "*Literaturoper*" refers to a special form of music theatre, which bases its libretto on a pre-existing literary work (drama or narrative), whose linguistic, semantic and aesthetic structure are adopted by the music-dramatic text (opera-score), but remain recognisable as such.[31]*

Although Peterson does not narrow the definition down to a certain time it describes what has been happening increasingly since Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902) and particularly in Germany since Strauss's *Salome* (1905). Of course it had long been normal practice to use existing texts for a libretto, mostly novels as well as dramatic texts. But these texts literally had been 'used,' librettists extracted whatever was useful, and discarded and changed whatever was needed to create a suitable libretto. With the *Literaturoper* composers aspire to write music about autonomous literary works, which had been approved in literature

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[28] 'Literaturoper,' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Sadie, Stanley (Londen, New York: Macmillan Press Limited, 1992).

[29] Petersen, Peter, 'Der Terminus "Literaturoper" - eine Begriffsbestimmung,' *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 56, no. 1 (1999).

[30] Both as cited ibid., p. 55.

[31] Ibid., p. 60.

already and were not initially intended as libretto, to realise them with music and interpret them compositionally.[32] To achieve this endeavour the main modifications naturally can only be abbreviations with a minimum of alterations of the original wording, as is the case in *Salome*. Strauss's desire of remaining as close as possible to the original becomes even more obvious when he is setting *Salome* in French: one of his main concerns is, as he explains to Rolland, that the text has to be as authentic as possible to Wilde's *Salomé* (see Prelude, p. 4). However, Strauss certainly did not deliberately write a first *Literaturopera*, as the term was invented and applied later than Debussy's or Strauss's operas, apparently in 1914 by Edgar Istel.[33] Nevertheless, the fact that Istel invented the phrase highlights that the filling of a terminological vacuity around an already existing phenomenon, which had not been clearly described yet, was obviously required. Music-theatrical practice was (as so often) ahead of academic theory.

This new genre is a logical consequence of Wagner's *Musikdrama*. Wagner abandoned an opera structure of confined parts that were musically self-contained and instead founded the *Musikdrama* which, in contrary to the former, is a musical whole. The dialogue was meant to be similar to the dialogue of a spoken drama. To remain musically coherent, Wagner created both his *leitmotiv*-technique and the *unendliche Melodie* (Germ.: endless melody), a form of *Sprechgesang* derived from the earlier *accompagniato*-recitative, which progresses without musical partitions. As one has to understand everything of the dialogue, Wagner initially discards opera-typical ensemble- and choir-parts in which people sing overlapping and therefore become incomprehensible. A couple of these characteristics return in the *Literaturopera,* particularly the use of endless melodies.[34] In *Salome* most of the time we do have a quite ordered dialogue – people mostly sing consecutively without overlapping each other's words, with a non-repetitive and perpetually progressing melody-line (*unendliche Melodie)*. This order is disturbed when the Jews come in – they all talk higgledy-piggledy, as is normal for disputing people but unusual and striking in *Salome*. Obviously it is impossible to grasp the words when hearing the scene for the first time.

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[32] Ibid., p. 70.
[33] Ibid., p. 53.
[34] Schmitt-von Mühlenfels, Astrid, 'O'Neills Mourning Becomes Electra: Vom Drama zur Literaturoper,' in *Eugene O'Neill 1988: Deutsche Beiträge zum 100. Geburtstag des amerikanischen Dramatikers*, ed. Halfmann, Ulrich (Tübringen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 109-111. The text seems at first glance not to have a lot to do with our subject, *Salome*, but it deals with a similar transition from existing literature to opera, and for this purpose Schmitt-von Mühlenfels explains the origin and a few characteristics of the *Literaturoper*.

While Wagner could not dismiss the fore-stories of his operas and composed them rather extensively, according to Schmitt-von Mühlenfels *Literaturoperas* seem to start rather abruptly, in the middle of a dialogue or situation.[35] In *Salome* this certainly is the case: it starts without any overture right with the first words of the play by the Young Syrian, and on top of that Strauss discards any textual account of the pre-story later in the play, so that the immediate impression is even more emphasised as in Wilde's original.[36] For Strauss particularly this idea of the very sudden opening became his awaited inspiration for the musical setting of the rest, as mentioned in the Prelude (p. 3). Strauss's words simultaneously signify the aesthetically important decision of regarding the challenging attractions of the literary work itself as inspiration ('spark') for the composition, without having to create them first.[37] After *Salome* the concept of the *Literaturoper* gained popularity, later prominent examples are Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (Georg Büchner (*Woyzeck*) 1925) and *Lulu* (Frank Wedekind; 1937), Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* (Jakob Lenz; 1965), Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (William Shakespeare; 1960), and Vaughan Williams's *Riders to the Sea* (John Millington Synge; 1937). One of the most direct successors of Strauss's *Salome* is Alexander von Zemlinsky's *Eine florentinische Tragödie* (1917) which is like *Salome* based on a text by Oscar Wilde. The opera ends surprisingly with a kiss of husband and wife because of their conciliation after he just murdered her lover, consists of one act and plays with a of Strauss reminding orchestral sound world.[38]

However, as became clear above, the desire of writing a *Literaturoper* cannot have been the only reason for Strauss to pick *Salomé* since the concept as such was not even outlined yet. Wilde's text indeed helped him to create a relatively new form of opera, but, as particularly Gary Schmidgal and Sander L. Gilman

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[35] Ibid., p. 111.
[36] See also Krebs, Wolfgang, 'Zur Dramaturgie von Richard Strauss' "Salome,"' in *Richard Strauss: Salome [Program]*, ed. Ross, Peter and Dagmar Fischer (Stuttgart: Staatsoper Stuttgart, 1996), pp. 12-14. Of particular interest for the topic Salome as *Literaturoper* is also Jürgen Maehder's essay, '"Salome" von Oscar Wilde und Richard Strauss – Am Beginn der deutschen "Literaturoper"' in the same Program.
[37] Holland, Dietmar, '"Ein einmaliges Experiment an einem besonderen Stoff:" zur Musik der "Salome,"' in *Richard Strauss: Salome [Program]*, ed. Ross, Peter and Dagmar Fischer (Stuttgart: Staatsoper Stuttgart, 1996), p. 7.
[38] Most examples from the article 'Literaturoper,' in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*; Zemlinsky: Troger, Dominik: 'Florentinische Komödie: Salomes Nachfahren', (Oper in Wien, 2003) see http://www.operinwien.at/werkverz/zemlinsk/aflor.htm, accessed 24/05/07.

argue, many other aspects regarding the subject matter and context of the play probably contributed to Strauss's attraction too, which I will investigate below.[39]

3   Below the surface: *Salomé* in context

> *[Salomé's] surface is brilliant, exquisitely polished, mesmerizingly simple. […] On its surface – in the words, sounds, and images Wilde savors to sybaritic excess – 'Salomé' is a gorgeous creation.*
>
> *Pristine and fascinating as the surface is, however, a turmoil of activity seethes underneath. This primarily psychosexual activity is coarse, violent and ugly.[40]*

If the aesthetic values concerning language and structure of the play represent the surface, we shall now look 'between the lines', underneath this surface. *Salomé* displays a lot of emotional and mental disease which was quite fashionable at the time. All protagonists seem to be compulsively obsessed with one or the other, giving birth to 'poisonous melodies of sexual fixation and frustration, nervous exhaustion, and neurosis,' to which Strauss responded musically.[41] Strauss was attracted to such dark and wild subliminal worlds, as this subconscious level embraces manifold possibilities to recreating and expressing it in music. Hoffmannsthal, his later librettist, calls this typical feature of Strauss suitably his '*furioso* vein.'[42]

Schmidgall shows how *Salomé* is related to symbolism and the decadence movement and describes it with its 'obscure psychic willspring of fatal attraction' nearly as embodiment of decadence aesthetic of which the *femme fatale* is a major feature.[43] Wilde's *Salomé* can indeed be seen as femme fatale – in contrary to her biblical predecessor she is well aware of her sexual power, a fact that becomes obvious in her very first phrase when she enters the terrace respectively stage:

> *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. I know not what it means. In truth, yes, I know it.[44]*

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[39]   Schmidgall, 'Salome;' Gilman, Sander L., 'Strauss, the Pervert, and Avant Garde Opera of the Fin de Siècle,' *New German Opera Critique* 43, no. Special Issue on Austria (1988).
[40]   Schmidgall, 'Salome,' p. 249.
[41]   Ibid., p. 251.
[42]   Hoffmannsthal as cited ibid.
[43]   Ibid., p. 260.
[44]   Wilde, 'Salomé,' p. 721. Strauss did remove exactly these two last important sentences. But, although not stated so clearly in the opera, ('In truth, yes, I know it,' is missing,) it still is obvious that Salome is aware of her sexual impact on men which she presents immediately with Narraboth, whom she manipulates to serve as key to her longings.

She cannot understand, why Jochanaan is immune against her seduction attempts - thus, she turns around to whom she knows she can influence: Herod. At last, Salomé is the ruin for both: the one man who is obsessed with her (Herod, plus, of course, the Young Syrian) and the other (Jochanaan) who is the opposite. Her ruinous appearance ultimately creates her own downfall. *Salomé*'s further position in the decadence movement can be seen in the graph which is included in the appendix.

Whether Strauss's *Salome* is also decadent, is questionable. At the time when Strauss composed his opera, the decadence movement was already dieing out and it would be rather unlikely for Strauss to pick up a trend that is no trendy anymore. Yet Rolland feared that exactly this had happened, that Strauss had 'been caught by the mirage of decadent literature.'[45] Reason for this fear was the mere subject of *Salomé*, not Strauss's musical treatment as such. Rolland thought that Strauss was 'worthy of better things than *Salomé*.'[46] Unfortunately, no letter of Strauss's response survived, but Schmidgall believes that the 'mere choice of "Salomé" for an opera may be the most "decadent" aspect of the entire translation.'[47]

However, how can the subject matter be decadent but the resulting opera *Salome* not, as Schmidgall proposes?[48] As I have discussed above, one feature of the symbolism in *Salomé* was the French language and its particular sound itself, which inevitably is quite different in its German transition and therefore cannot sustain as argument. Schmidgall even claims that Strauss was 'intellectually alien to this [decadent/symbolist] aesthetic.' Instead he relates *Salome* to expressionism, as Strauss's music expresses what lays beneath the textual surface of *Salomé*: a dark world of sick emotions with musical 'harsh lines' and 'brutality.'[49] If we take symbolism as an impressionist movement which stands for the artful expression of the personal impression of the outside world (the surface), and expressionism as its countermovement the expression of the own inner emotions (below the surface), Schmidgall's idea works. While for impressionism the premise of gorgeousness comes first, the main principle of expressionism was genuineness. Moreover, expressionism seems to be a mainly German movement, which again promotes the idea of *Salome* as forerunner of expressionism. In his article on expressionism in the MGG, Stephan regards amongst other things contrasting dissonances as main

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[45] Rolland in letter to Richard Strauss, dated Tuesday evening, 14th May, 1907 in Myers, ed., *Richard Strauss & Romain Rolland: Correspondence*, p. 83.
[46] Ibid., p. 85.
[47] Schmidgall, 'Salome,' p. 264.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., pp. 272-274.

feature of musical expressionism, and therefore ranks *Salome* as a preform of the movement.[50] Nevertheless, Strauss wrote *Salome* in the first place for a German audience, who was similarly 'alien' to the rather French impressionistic movement; a wider discussion of French impressionism versus German expressionism seems not fruitful for this paper.

That Strauss tried to fulfil to his (German) audience's desires and was a strong believer of the critical voice of mass-audiences and the historical filter between master works and mediocre works, becomes quite clear in many of his texts, such as 'Is there any Avant-Garde in Music?' or his prefatory note to 'Aus dem Musikleben der Gegenwart'.[51] Whether or not he was part of a particular movement did not seem to be Strauss's main concern; he was more anxious to write an opera that was at the same time of (modern) artistic value and pleased his audience equally.

With this in mind Sander Gilman's questions about contextual reasons for choosing a libretto which he asks in his essay 'Strauss, the Pervert, and Avant Garde Opera of the Fin de Siècle' (1988), become even more interesting. He investigates what the author's intention in selecting a theme for an opera could be, what the 'cultural significance of selecting a given text to be set to music' is, and uses as case study Strauss's *Salome*.[52] Although sometimes quite speculative in his interpretation, Gilman points out a couple of interesting things. First of all Strauss himself said about *Salome* that he wrote a 'Jewish' opera, which opened the possibilities for him to use certain sound colours and oriental musical features.[53] According to Gilman, Strauss associated Jewry with the cultural avant-garde and the essentially Jewish subject helped him creating an avant-garde opera as non-Jew. (p. 39) Alongside, there was an aroused public discussion about Jewry and the image of the Jews at the time when Strauss wrote *Salome*. Whilst Jews themselves wondered if they ever could truly integrate in western European societies, the others emphasized the differences between Christian and Jewish people. Jews were attributed with strong mainly negative stereotypical features,

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[50] The term 'expressionism' as such only came into existence years after *Salome*; apparently its first use was 1910 by Aby Warburg in relation to art history. Therefore, Salome cannot quite be seen as actual part of the expressionism movement, but only as forerunner. See Stephan, Rudolf, 'Expressionismus,' in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Sachteil*, ed. Finscher, Ludwig (Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter), pp. 244-246.

[51] Schuh, ed., *Strauss, 1864-1949: Recollections and reflections,* (1907) pp. 12-17 and (1908) pp. 18-22.

[52] Gilman, 'Strauss, the Pervert, and Avant Garde Opera of the Fin de Siècle,' p. 36.

[53] Schuh, ed., *Strauss, 1864-1949: Recollections and reflections*, p. 150.

which - as so often in history - often stemmed from insufficient knowledge about their culture.

One main (Christian) concern was the image of the Jew's different sexuality. In Gilman's words, the 'Christian image of Jews had long focused on their sexual difference, a difference seen in Jewish ritual practices, such as circumcision, [and] fantasies about Jewish sexuality, […].' The Jewish practise that if the husband dies, his brother marries the left behind widow, was considered incestuous and also impacted the Christian image of the Jews. This, of course, is resembled in *Salome* with Herod who marries his brother's wife Herodias (who also happened to be a cousin of both,) and, moreover, has a sick paedophile desire for Salome, his stepdaughter.[54] The musical depiction of Herod with an extremely high voice can, for example, be related to the Jewish tradition of circumcision. Salome obviously is perverted herself, kissing the head of the beheaded Jochanaan. In a Freudian reading she may be the victim of Herod's attempts to seduce her and in turn victimizes Jochanaan. Salome's perversion has to do with 'the representation of a sexual hysteric and the source of her hysteria' on stage. 'In a German reading of 1905, Salome would have been a study on hysteria.'[55] Another resulting image because of the Jews' incestuous habits was that Jews were more susceptible to mental disease than Christians. Such perversion as displayed in *Salome* could only take place in a Jewish environment was the common belief, and could therefore only be written by a degenerated man himself, Oscar Wilde, whom the conservative audience also considered to be a degenerated pervert because of his homosexuality.

While the subject of the opera draws on public concerns about Jewry of the time, it is also the choice of the homosexual author Oscar Wilde which is of wider public interest. The British trials on Wilde's homosexuality were documented in great detail and published by Max Spohr in Leipzig 1896 and were still in public consciousness. Whilst the figure of Oscar Wilde on the one side helped shaping the German emancipation movement of homosexuality, on the other (conservative) side he was marked as perverse because of his sexual preferences.[56] This closes the circle – homosexuality is considered to be perverse and so are Jews, therefore Wilde must essentially be Jewish. The content of Salome therefore

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[54] Ibid., p. 42f.
[55] Ibid., p. 53f.
[56] Ibid., pp. 42-44. In Gilman's words, 'Wilde after this became as much the image of the persecuted artist as he had been the representative dandy of the 1880's. He became the symbolic artist persecuted by the forces of aesthetic conservatism, represented in the writing of avant-garde Germany by the metaphor of Victorian (read: Wilhelmian) prudery.' (p. 43)

addresses both Jewish and Anti-Jewish audiences, audiences that are interested in the homosexual subject, and also spectators whose main interest is the avant-garde aspect of the opera.[57]

With *Salome* Strauss wrote an opera with which he addressed nearly all potential spectators. Besides, with the choice of a perverted subject matter, Strauss did certainly not accidentally provoke difficulties with censorship, like the initial objection of the play by Austrian censors, or the problems in Berlin, where Salome was only allowed after the director had the idea of raising the star of Bethlehem on stage at the end of the opera. Although tiring, such troubles are the best promotion for a work and helped to keep *Salome* constantly in public consciousness. Even if none of the above-mentioned subject matters applied, audiences were attracted by mere sensationalism.

Another catchword, which we need to consider, is 'nervousness.' In 1945 Strauss spoke of Salome as 'the first great representative of all the female characters whose subtly differentiated psychologies all the nervous counterpoints […] of [his] later scores would serve.'[58] Morten Kristiansen establishes the depiction of a main feature of (German) new romanticism and modernism as formulated for example by Hermann Bahr, or later by Hoffmannsthal. As Kristiansen shows, Strauss quite often uses the terms 'nerves' or 'nervous' in his letters to explain what kind of opera character he is looking for.[59] It is not rocket science to see (or hear) *Salome*'s constant nervousness. It is not just the figure of Salome, who is essentially nervous, but also more importantly the underlying music which because of its dissonances, its up and downs, its wild rhythms etc. is extremely nervous in order to depict the restlessness of the minds of the protagonists. As Strauss' father commented after Strauss played some bits of the music to him on the piano: 'Oh God, what nervous music. It is exactly like having ants in your pants.'[60]

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[57] On top of that, Harry Kupfer and Walter Rösler see in *Salome* the critique on Christianity: Jochanaan as representative of Christianity is not able to forgive Salome's sins but refers her to Christ instead and fails to recognise in *Salome* a searching human. Therefore Jochanaan represents a Christianity which ab initio has been unable to solve 'big social issues.'
Kupfer, Harry and Walter Rösler, 'Salome-Konturen,' in *Salome [Program]*, ed. Staatsoper unter den Linden (Berlin: Staatsoper unter den Linden, 1995) pp. 8-10.

[58] Strauss as cited in Kristiansen, Morten, 'The Twentieth Century and Beyond: Richard Strauss, Die Moderne and the Concept of Stilkunst,' *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2002), p. 693.

[59] Ibid.

[60] As remembered by Strauss in his 'Reminiscences of the First Performance of my Operas,' published by Schuh, ed., *Strauss, 1864-1949: Recollections and reflections.*

4   Postlude

The aim of this paper was to find reasons for Strauss's choice of Wilde's *Salomé* to base his opera on. We took a look at the surface of *Salomé*, meaning the actual text structure and form, and below the surface, investigating the context of Strauss's *Salome*. Most articles which are concerned with the reasons for Strauss's choice concentrate either on aesthetic values or contextual values, but rarely combine both. Taking into consideration both aspects, it becomes clear that one cannot answer the question, which facet was most important, one way or the other.

Strauss's musical inspiration was closely linked with the original Lachmann-text, and with Wilde's unique characterisation of the protagonists. The setting of the text, particularly its static quality and frequent text repetitions, made a transition into an opera libretto possible and even quite uncomplicated if we take Strauss's word for granted: After he figured that the best way to open the opera was with the first line of the play devoid of further introduction or overture, Strauss states that 'from now on it was not difficult to purge the piece of purple passages to such an extent that it became quite a good libretto.'[61] As we can see from the changes Strauss made in the transition from Lachmann's text into a libretto, and his later attempt to work with the French version, the particular language sound was very important for his compositional progress.

Wilde's specific depiction of the characters also leads from the textual to the contextual values. His femme-fatale-Salomé could not have existed without the French decadence, thus Wilde's characterisations are shaped by his cultural surrounding. Such characterisations changes their meaning according to time and cultural environment, hence, Strauss's Salome is a different figure than Wilde's Salomé, as particularly Gilman and Schmidgal established. While Strauss was aware of connotations with homosexuality and Jewry in the play, I doubt that Strauss wanted to make a statement about either issue. As we have seen he used them sometimes to resemble certain stereotypical images of the Jews in his music and to create new 'oriental' sound-worlds, but moreover he chose a subject that was of controversial interest for nearly everybody, as it dealt with a lot of psychological maladies and disease and well-known images of Jewry, additionally was based on a play by a homosexual author and therefore gained the necessary attention for a successful opera from the public. If Strauss had wanted to make an

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[61]   Ibid.

anti-Semitist statement he would probably not have used the language of music which despite all its nervousness and dissonances is still a gorgeous creation. Subject of the play and the depiction of the different figures created a web of possible associations for both himself and other potential viewers and listeners and it is more than likely that Strauss apart from the musical potential sensed the possibility of a profitable new opera.[62] He turned out to be right; Salome was a great success within a relatively short period of time. To the German Kaiser's statement that *Salome* would do Strauss 'a lot of damage', Strauss only replied humorous that 'the damage enabled [him] to build the villa in Garmisch.'[63] For Strauss's desire to break new grounds after Wagner's *Musikdrama,* his meeting with Wilde's Salomé can be called a magnificent fluke, enabling him both finding a new music-dramatic language and creating a starting point for the concept of the *Literaturoper* in Germany.

'All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril' – as Oscar Wilde states in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Strauss went beneath the surface of *Salomé* but mastered the danger.

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[62]   Schmidgall, 'Salome,' p. 266.
[63]   Strauss: 'Reminiscences of the First Performance of my Operas,' in Schuh, ed., *Strauss, 1864-1949: Recollections and reflections*, p. 152.

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6   Appendix

Salomé is a perfect example for the interaction between the arts. Words (the two Gospels that feature the story of John the Baptist's beheading, who in fact are merged figures from different historical events and stories themselves) give rise to paintings, musical responses and other literary works, which on their turn again cause numerous responses. With the following graph I try to display some of the intertextual and -medial relationships which are of particular importance to Oscar Wilde's and Richard Strauss's *Salome*. The size of the bubbles does not imply any hierarchical status or judgement. The vertical height of the bubbles resembles inasmuch as possible the time of origin (inaccurately). Thicker frame lines indicate works which had more impact on Wilde's Salome than the other works. Sources for this graph were mainly the texts by Lawrence Kramer, Ludwig Kusche, Norman del Mar, Mario Pratz, and Derrick Puffet.

Gospel of Mark 6, Verses 14-29 and Gospel of Matthew 14, Verses 1-12.

Salome had long been a favourite subject of painters, since it offers a chance to depict oriental splendour, exposed women and exotic scenery under the auspices of being a Biblical story. Oscar Wilde's knowledge of iconographic responses to Salome was immense, but he particularly admired Gustave Moreau's paintings of Salome's dance which influenced his own depiction of her.

The figure Salome was transformed from the early ages till today; however historically incorrect these portrays are, it became accepted as such in ecclesiastical history, since it served the churchmen well with yet another female figure that brought sin upon the men. Since then the story of John the Baptist's beheading had long been featuring in numerous responses such as passion plays and oratorios.

1841 Heinrich Heine: Atta Troll.
Heine introduces the theme 'love' as reason for John the Baptist's beheading (with an 'ironical attitude'), but it is Herodias who kisses the head. (Pratz, pp. 16-18/Ellmann, p. 22)

1871/76 Gustave Moreau: paintings 'Salomé' and 'Salomé's Dance'
Other for Wilde important painters were for example Rubens, Titian, Da Vinci, Dürer, but only Moreau's Salome satisfied him.

1877 Gustave Flaubert:
'Trois contes' which feature the short story 'Hérodias'. Wilde admired Flaubert a lot and copied shamelessly from 'Hérodias'. (Puffet, p. 2). 'The appearance of the severed head tellingly coincides with the disappearance of Salome,' (Kramer, p. 272) which may have been impulse for Salomé's death in Wilde. However, Salome is still tool of her mother.

1862 J. C. Heywood: Salome, dramatic poem. Wilde reviewed one of its three parts in 1888 and may well have known the other two parts. As in Heine Herodias kisses John's head. (Ellmann, p. 22)

1864-1896 Stéphane Mallarmé: Hérodiade, fragments since 1864, 'Scène de Hérodiade' published in 1896. Provided immediate stimulus for Wilde's play. (Puffet)

1886/87 Jules Laforgue: 'Moralités légendaires' presents with an 'ironical attitude' that draws on Heine an 'exquisite caricature' of Salome. (Pratz, p. 18)

1884 Joris-Karl Huysmans: À Rebour, symbolistic novella of self-conscious decadence. It features descriptions of Moreau's Salome-paintings which Wilde knew and liked to quote. (Puffet, p. 2/Pratz). For Huysmans Salome is purely an object of desire. (Kramer, p. 277)

1889 Maurice Maeterlink's plays, above all **'La Princesse Maleine.'** Wilde derived his particular language of Salomé: 'the childish prattle employed by the characters', (Pratz, p. 15); or his 'enigmatic, cryptic, yet often flowery style, an idiom particularly and uniquely French' (del Mar).

Walter Pater one of Wilde's Oxford mentors. Pater lent him Flaubert's 'Trois contes'. (Puffet)

1892 Oscar Wilde: Salomé
He began the play in 1891; the English translation was published in 1894. The (French) debut performance took place in Paris (1886), the first German performance in Berlin (1901).

1893 Abrey Beardsley: *Salomé*-Illustrations

Max Reinhardt

Hedwig Lachmann

Numerous film-productions, versions of the notorious dance of the seven veils, etc.

1905 Richard Strauss: *Salome*