Salome: Usurping the Gaze

‘You must not keep looking. You stare at her far too much. Terrible things may happen.’

Among the transformations and challenges of the fin-de-siècle, discussions about the role of women in society were prolific. Given that the dominant cultural order was hardwired towards gender inequality, modern women seeking freedom from regressive cultural norms were deemed by many to be a dangerous threat to the patriarchy. At the same time, many psychologists sought to define the differences between men and women by describing femininity as the irrational, emotional, and weak counter to masculine ideals of rationality and physical strength.

Within the narratives of Wilde and Strauss, Salome can be understood as both victim and villain, occupying a simultaneous position of subjugation and authority. Exploring her interactions with three male counterparts reveals the way in which she strategically oscillates between stereotypes of victimhood and villainy, deliberately offers herself as an object of male voyeurism (yet refuses to act as a blank canvas for the projection of male fantasies), and commandeers the very thing that threatens to objectify and entrap her – the gaze.

Narraboth

The protagonist is established as an object of the uninvited male gaze in the opera’s opening line, as Narraboth states: ‘How beautiful the Princess Salome looks tonight!’ Yet, during her interaction with him in the ensuing scene, Salome becomes the author of her own objectification.

Having tried and failed to command the soldiers to bring Jokanaan to her, Salome utilises a different approach when asking Narraboth to do her bidding. She pleads with him, presenting herself as powerless in order to more effectively secure the object of her desire:

‘You will do this for me, Narraboth. You know you will do what I ask you. And then, at dawn, under my veil of scented muslin, you’ll see my eyes upon you, Narraboth, you’ll see that I’m looking, perhaps you might see me smiling at you. Look at me Narraboth, look at me.’

By imploring Narraboth to look at her, Salome seemingly surrenders her power by deliberately offering herself as an object of the gaze, but this apparent circumvention of power is merely an illusion. The ambiguity of her plea renders Narraboth servile, and Salome ultimately
obtains dominance. What’s more, she also promises to return Narraboth’s gaze, seducing him with the possibility of a prized smile. By virtue of her ability to elicit male attention, Salome usurps masculine dominance, and as such, she can also be seen as embodying the archetypal femme fatale.

**Jokanaan**

In the following scene, upon first laying eyes on Jokanaan, Salome expresses her need to gaze upon the prophet, saying ‘I must look closer at him’. She then devours Jokanaan with her gaze, projecting her own fantasies onto him by repetitively describing his body and what she wants to do to it.

> ‘Naught in this world is so white as your flesh. Let me gently touch your flesh.’
> 
> ‘Naught in the world is so black as your hair. Oh, let me caress your hair.’
> 
> ‘Naught in the world is so red as your mouth. Oh let me kiss it, kiss your mouth.’

This scene plays out as a spectacle of emasculation, since Salome, by objectifying Jokanaan in this way, reverses the traditional power dynamic by depicting her male counterpart as an aesthetic object to be scrutinised and consumed.

> ‘Who is this girl who’s staring? I’ll not have her glances fixed thus upon me. Just why does she stare at me with those two eyes golden under their shimmering eyelids?’

Jokanaan’s discomfort reflects the fact that Salome’s appropriation of the gaze transgresses the conventional boundaries of subject and object, authority and subjugation, and, by association, feminity and masculinity.

**Herod**

> ‘But why, why is Herod always leering at me, with his repulsive mole’s eyes, under those flickering eyelids? It’s so curious that my own mother’s husband looks at me so’.

As Salome contemplates her stepfather’s persistent gaze in the opera’s second scene, the tetrarch’s incestuous yearning is symbolised by a leitmotif entitled ‘Herod’s Covetousness’. The protagonist is further objectified by Herod during the Dance of the Seven Veils, but his attention can simultaneously be seen as a vehicle for Salome’s empowerment, as the dance becomes a means through which she garners control.
Salome establishes power through the dance in terms of the narrative progression it facilitates. In this scene, Jokanaan’s fate is sealed, and we see the protagonist progress from impulsive virgin to insatiable narcissist, as both her body and her true character are unveiled. The veil itself, however, can be both revealing and protective, and the same can be said for the dance itself.

Neither Strauss nor Wilde includes any stage direction for the dance, though other interpretations suggest that Salome abandons herself to the gaze, but also denies, or defers, her subjection to it. In Flaubert’s *Hérodias*, for example, the dancing princess is described as ‘a floating spirit that might at any moment dissolve and disappear’. Spinning and contorting, she appears like a vision to Herod, and in doing so, she becomes unseen, invisible, and by association, powerful.

In contrast to her earlier interaction with Narraboth, Salome’s dialogue with Herod immediately following the dance sees a significant shift in the dynamics of power, as she powerfully and repetitively demands the head of the prophet. Now, it is Herod who pleads:

‘Salome, I must beg of you. Don’t be stubborn! See, I’ve always felt so much love for you. Maybe my love for you was just too much. But do not ask me for this one thing.’

Whilst his music is rhythmically and tonally convoluted, Salome’s accompaniment is characterised by simplicity and stability, allowing her command to be heard clearly. Musically and dramatically, then, she has usurped Herod’s dominance.

During her encounters with Narraboth, Jokanaan and Herod, Salome manipulates patriarchal models of female sexuality and wields them in order to obtain her deepest desires. She is simultaneously the consummate and consuming object of male voyeurism, and as both passive object and active looker, she utilises the gaze as a tool for the articulation of her agency. Salome is doomed by her sexuality, yet empowered by her ability to re-write the rules.

Charlotte Armstrong
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About the author:

Charlotte Armstrong is a PhD candidate in the Department of Music at the University of York. Her research is funded by The White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities (WRoCAH), and
concerns representations of disability and 'degeneracy' in twentieth-century opera. Charlotte is currently carrying out a research placement with Opera North, where she is working primarily on the concert staging of *Salome*. 