

SAINT SEBASTIAN

In his semi-autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask*, the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima described his sexual awakening as a young boy when he came upon a reproduction of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, a painting by the late Renaissance artist Guido Reni. The event is transferred to the fictional narrator, but recalled the actual event that had proved so formative for Mishima.

A remarkably handsome youth was bound naked to the trunk of a tree. His crossed hands were raised high, and the thongs binding his wrists were tied to the tree. No other bonds were visible, and the only covering for the youth's nakedness was a coarse white cloth knotted loosely about his loins... Were it not for the arrows with their shafts deeply sunk into his left armpit and right side, he would seem more a Roman athlete resting from fatigue... The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh, and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy.' The boy's hands embarked on a motion of which he had no experience; he played with his 'toy': "Suddenly it burst forth, bringing with it a blinding intoxication... Some time passed, and then, with miserable feelings I looked around the desk I was facing... There were cloud-splashes about... Some objects were dripping lazily, leadenly, and others gleamed dully, like the eyes of a dead fish. Fortunately, a reflex motion of my hand to protect the picture had saved the book from being soiled.

The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian would prove to be a pivotal theme in Mishima's life and art to which he would return time and time again. It formed the basis of Mishima's philosophy, which saw the complex intermingling of beauty, death, and sexuality. In general, the martyrdom is also one of the great themes of Decadent art, and over the centuries, the beautiful St. Sebastian has become a central image of homosexual identity.

THE LIFE OF THE SAINT

According to legend, Sebastian was born to a wealthy family in third century Gaul, converting to Christianity as a young adult. *The Acts of the Saints*, which were attributed to St. Ambrose, but were probably written in the fifth century, are the main source for the legend of Sebastian. They were used as the basis for all the later accounts; and in particular, that of Jacques de Voragine who, around 1264, popularised the life of the saint in the Golden Legend. *The Acts of the Saints* tell how Sebastian became an officer in the imperial bodyguard of the emperor Diocletian, eventually becoming Captain of the Guard in the Imperial Roman Army. He was a favorite of Diocletian, though the emperor was unaware of Sebastian's faith. During the persecution of the Christians, Sebastian visited Christian prisoners in order to provide them supplies and solace; going so far to also convert the jailers and the Prefect of Rome. When Diocletian discovered Sebastian's faith in 286 CE, he demanded that the young man renounce Christianity, but Sebastian refused. The emperor ordered that Sebastian be executed. He was tied to a tree, and Mauretanian archers shot him with arrows, which Voragine describes in detail in the Golden Legend: "*Diocletian had him bound to the medium of a plain and ordered to the archers that one bored him with blows of arrows. He was covered so much with it, that he appeared to be like a hedgehog; when it was believed dead.*" Miraculously, and no doubt to the supreme annoyance of Diocletian, Sebastian did not die from the arrows, and after his wounds had been healed by the widowed St. Irene, he returned to the emperor's palace. Here, he confronted Diocletian and denounced his persecution of the Christians. Diocletian ordered that Sebastian be clubbed to death and tossed into a sewer. This time the death was final, and his fellow Christians retrieved Sebastian's corpse from the sewer, and buried him on the Appian Way. In 367, a basilica, one of the seven chief churches of Rome, was built over his grave. Scipio Cardinal Borghese completed the present church in 1611. The saint's relics in part were taken in the year 826 to St. Medard at Soissons.

The canonization of Sebastian was confirmed by two miracles credited to him. The first, somewhat bizarrely, involved a woman who slept with her husband before a religious festival (the dedication of a church to Saint Sebastian) and was tormented by it at length. The second miracle was less sexually charged, and established the reputation of Saint Sebastian as a guardian against the plague. Towards 680, a terrible epidemic devastated the cities of Pavia and Rome. In each of the cities, the plague

ceased when, following a vision, furnace bridges were set up in honour of Saint Sebastian in the Saint-Pierre-aux-Liens church of each city. Following his apotheosis, Sebastian became the patron saint of archers, soldiers, athletes, and sufferers of the plague; with two other celebrated instances of his intervention occurring in the plagues of Milan in 1575, and Lisbon in 1599. His feast day is 20 January.

The story of Sebastian's martyrdom, like so many other examples from early Christian history, is without any basis in fact, and instead drew upon archetypes current at the time, and the myths and symbols of Europe's pagan past. In turn, the basic story of the martyrdom was itself elaborated on to produce a more complex myth than that of a loyal Christian.

The most obvious of these developments was the transformation of the saint into a beautiful young boy. Evidence suggests that Sebastian was not originally seen in the youthful guise we see him in now, but was a rather more conventional male figure. The earliest mosaic picture of St. Sebastian, which probably belongs to the year 682 (the time of his initial rise to prominence as protector against plague), shows a grown, bearded man in court dress, with no traces of the arrows that would come to figure so prominently in his legend. Later, in the 13th century, the dominant way in which painters represented Sebastian was at the time of his initial, but ineffective, martyrdom at the hand of the archers. This narrative image supports a metaphor seen in two frescos painted by Benozzo Gozzoli in San Gimignano around 1464. In one, the saint undergoes his martyrdom, with the archers thoroughly piercing his body with arrows. In the other, Sebastian shelters a family under his cape, protecting them from a barrage of arrows launched by God and an army of angels. The pervading theme given to Sebastian's martyrdom here is therefore a limpid one, with the body of the saint acting as a passive shield which deflected the arrows of the plague. This metaphorical use of the martyrdom of Sebastian was a starting point from which painters of subsequent centuries would explore with infinite variations and interpretations.

At the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th, a hybrid depiction of St. Sebastian began to emerge. These images show the piercing of the saint without the context of the actual scene of the martyrdom. Some of the images use nudity as an additional attribute, going to the extent of showing the saint stripped even of his piercing arrows. This scarcely veiled celebration of the naked male form came under attack following the Counter-Reformation, where the queer reading of the myth was denounced as being incompatible with the meaning of the holy legend. *"O Vanity of the man who makes vain what is true, clean and principal, to give place to fictions which do not weigh more than one wisp of straw... I see Étienne lapidated without stones... Sebastian without arrows... O vain vanity, error infinite."*

It was the art of the Renaissance that first portrayed Sebastian as a youth pierced by arrows. The image of Sebastian gave artists, so many of them queer, the opportunity to paint the male form, at a time when the nude female predominated in art; the numerous depictions of Venus being the best example of this. But far from being just a chance to paint the male nude, Sebastian provided the possibility of exploring an image that was profoundly sexual, and profoundly homoerotic, without ever needing to explain or justify it. It is impossible to look at the vast majority of paintings of Sebastian from the Renaissance onwards and not sense something more in the intent of the artist than a mere religious depiction.

SEBASTIAN, THE PAGAN SAINT

The process of canonisation within the early church was often nothing more than the adoption of pagan deities as thinly veiled historical personages, and this can be clearly seen in many of the aspects of St. Sebastian. Indeed, the adoration of the saint as a naked youth by queer and transgressive artists in itself suggests a profoundly pagan approach. One of the gods with whom Sebastian shared a remarkable similarity was Apollo; a comparison that was acknowledged even during the Renaissance. The transformation of Sebastian from the bearded figure of the early centuries into the handsome youth immediately suggests Apollo. The saint acquired the latter's beauty and sunny fairness, and in so doing recalled the aesthetic codes of ancient Greece, where the god *was represented like a very beautiful god, very large, remarkable especially by its long black locks with the bluish reflections, like the petals of the pansy*. The physical beauty of the two was not, however, the only quality they shared, and we find both figures associated with arrows, and furthermore with arrows as a symbol of disease; carried by Apollo and endured by Sebastian. In the ancient world, Apollo the archer was

feared because he bore the arrows of the plague, as Homer testifies in the *Iliad*. Here he tells how: "From the summits of Olympus he went down, full with ire, Carrying his tight quiver on the shoulder.... a terrible whistle escaped from the money arc. It reached initially the mules and the dogs fast. Then they were the warriors whom it struck of his pointed feature; And the funeral piers burned without end, by hundreds. Last nine days during, the god launched his arrows on the army." There is evidence to suggest that in the early years of Christianity, the military figure of Sebastian, as the head of the Praetorian guard, would have easily filled the vacancy left in the popular unconscious by the warrior god Apollo. There is no better example of how easily this transition could have taken place in the popular mind than how the church of San Sebastiano, which was built in Rome after the plague of 680, was placed above the remains of a famous temple that Augustine had dedicated to Apollo.

While Apollo cast the arrows of disease, Sebastian weathered them, and since he did not die from them, the arrows almost seem to immunise him. The role of Sebastian as protector against plague cast his body as a prophylactic charm. The building of effigies of his naked, pierced body to ward off the plague, recalls folk magick, with the pierced body of the saint acting as a cross between a witch's pin-pricked poppet, and the naked figures that were located on church walls to ward off evil spirits. The use of nudity is a common motif in figures such as the Sheela-na-gygs which are found on churches throughout the British Isles, where a female figure is shown holding her vagina open and grinning lasciviously. The motivation seems to be that, on the whole, nudity is something unusual in conventional western society, and that when confronted by the shining, reflective naked skin, a spirit would be taken aback. A comparison can be made to gargoyles, whose ugly and grotesque faces are meant to create the same kind of shock as a form of psychic defence.

Although Sebastian may have been consciously or unconsciously acknowledged as a Christian stand-in for the pagan warrior god Apollo, there were other gods that his myth immediately recalls. As a young man who is killed by arrows, irrespective of how he may have first been envisioned, Sebastian recalls the male form of the corn spirit who appears across Europe and the Mediterranean in folklore, traditional festivals, and at the core of many myths and legends. A spirit was believed to be resident in the fields of crops, taking its name from whatever crop had been planted there, and acting as its protector and *genus loci*. At the time of harvest, the corn spirit was flushed out by the reapers, and would frequently take refuge in the final sheaf that was cut in the field. It was then bound, and kept until the following year, when it was often returned to the field to fertilise it before sowing. A movement within the corn could betray the presence of the spirit in a field, while the actual shape of the spirit was many and varied. Many animals were seen as guises of the corn spirit, including sheep, horses, stags, roes, sheep, bears, asses, foxes, mice, kites, swans, and storks. Sometimes the last sheaf was seen as the spirit's head, tail, umbilical cord, or neck, and so to cut the sheaf was to *get the neck*, or *have the head*.

Other than these animal forms, the corn spirit was seen as a goddess, the Corn Mother, or more pertinently to this discussion, as a young male figure, the dying Corn King. The Corn King was the temporary consort of the goddess, who was crowned for a year, and then killed and replaced when his power was exhausted. This dying Corn King and his mistress goddess appear through out Europe and the Middle East in such couples as the Greek Adonis and Aphrodite, Orion and Artemis, the Sumerian Dumuzi and Inanna, the Anatolian Attis and the goddess Cybele, the Egyptian Osiris and his partner Isis, and the Jewish Jesus with his scarlet womyn Mary Magdalene. The deaths of these consort figures often involve a tree in some way. Attis was said to have castrated himself and died beneath a pine tree; although another account says he was gored to death by a boar (a fate he shared with Adonis), while the funeral ark of Osiris was transformed into a Djed pillar or tree. Similarly, Jesus was crucified on a tree as the Bible literally calls the cross; and as apocryphal tradition has elaborated on by saying that the cross was made from the tree in the Garden of Eden.

The image of Attis bleeding beneath the pine, or Osiris encased within the Djed pillar, is remarkably similar to the pictures of Sebastian tied bleeding to a pillar, or to either a cypress or laurel tree. But perhaps the strongest echo of pagan myth in the legend of Sebastian is the Norse story of the god Balder. Like the stereotype of Sebastian, Balder was depicted as a beautiful young god, but one who was impervious to any kind of weapon, except for a sprig of mistletoe; a parasitic plant known as Guidehel in northern Europe, whose white flowers were seen as the semen of the dying king. The various gods would play a game where they would throw weapons at Balder, and watch as they harmlessly glanced off him. But the trickster god Loki discovered that Balder was vulnerable to

mistletoe, and when the gods were playing their game, he gave a sprig to the blind god Hodur, and helped aim his bow at Balder. The sprig of mistletoe hit Balder and he died, descending into the underworld where the goddess Hela kept him until he was allowed to return to the world above when it was reborn.

The sexual nature of the Sebastian legend, with its ideas of androgyny and transgressive sexuality, is also inherent in many of the tales of the death of the corn. Attis explicitly mutilates himself sexually to become like Cybele, while some of the other legends are less obvious in the motif. One of the ways the theme is often couched by mythology is with the leg or side being used as a euphemism for the male genitals, or for a desired "male vagina". In the myth of the birth of Dionysus, for example, Zeus took the unborn god and hid him within his thigh, or side, until the child came to term and was born from the pseudo-vagina of the wound. If the leg or side was potentially a pseudo-vagina, then becoming lame was one of the ways this transformation could be achieved, and thus we find that blacksmiths in various cultures, who are often consorts of the goddess, are frequently lame. To receive a wound in the side or the leg was to become more like a goddess, and so for the corn spirit consort of the goddess, their death was an act of joining the goddess, not as half of a couple, but as the whole of the singular goddess. Thus we find Adonis is wounded in the side by the boar that kills him, or the Norse god Odin wounds himself in the side when he hangs upon the World Tree in an attempt to become one with the goddess Hela, and receive the wisdom of the runes. In Arthurian legend also, we find the figure of the Fisher King, King Pellam, ruler of the Waste Land, who carries a wound in his thigh which cannot be healed until his grandson, Sir Galahad, succeeds in finding the Holy Grail, at which point the surrounding land is reborn.

The wound in King Pellam's side was caused by the Spear of Longinus, the lance responsible for perhaps the most famous side-wound in western mythology. Apocryphal tradition in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches tells that the centurion who stood beside the cross as Jesus hung dying was called Longinus, and that it was he who pierced the side of Christ with a spear to prove that he was dead. In so doing, Longinus prevented Jesus' legs from being broken to hasten his demise, and so the act was one of mercy, rather than malice. In a remarkable echo of the killing of Balder by his blind brother Hodur, apocryphal legends describe Longinus as also being blind, and say that after he rubbed his eyes with his blood-splattered hands, he recovered his sight and converted to Christianity. There has also always been a queer reading of this myth, suggesting that Longinus was gay, and that what he did he did out of love for Jesus. Certainly, the image of a centurion piercing and penetrating the side of a restrained young man with his phallus-like lance, during the same kind of beautiful death as Sebastian, is unavoidably homoerotic. The same can be said for the mystical flow of water and blood that emerged from the pseudo-vagina of Jesus, and which intimates the plainly sexual sacrament that he had instituted at the Last Supper when he said "*Take, eat, this is my body.*"

With Jesus experiencing the same kind of tree-held and body pierced beautiful death as Sebastian, it is possible to see the death of Sebastian, whilst being a continuation of the pagan death of the corn king, as being more of an emulation of Jesus. Martyrdom in itself was the desire of Christians to die as Christ had died, but the death of Sebastian takes this premise to another level. Sebastian dies almost as Jesus had: tied to a tree, and pierced by those who loved him. In so doing, Sebastian experiences a kind of homosexual hierogamos, being pierced as Christ is pierced, and thereby being pierced and penetrated *by* Christ.

In recent years, a number of works have played upon the homosexual connotations of Jesus. In June 1976, the London magazine *Gay News* published a poem by the noted poet, translator, and travel writer, James Kirkup, called *The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name*. With its title being a somewhat tortuous play on the last line of the poem *Two Loves* by Alfred Douglas, *The Love That Dares to Speak Its Name* is told from the perspective of St. Longinus; though he is unnamed in the poem. It tells how the centurion is left alone with the body of Jesus freshly taken down from the cross, still warm, and with his penis "*anointed with death's final ejaculation.*" The centurion goes on to tell how he kisses Jesus, sucks his penis, and is finally penetrated by the martyred Christ in his own passionate and blissful crucifixion. *I felt him enter into me, and fiercely spend his spirit's final seed within my hole, my soul, pulse upon pulse, unto the ends of the earth- he crucified me with him into kingdom come.*

The notorious protector of public decency, Mary Whitehouse, passed the Kirkup issue of *Gays News* to the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the publishers were called to stand trial on a charge of

blasphemy. The editor of *Gay News*, Denis Lemon, and the publishers were charged with an offence under a blasphemy libel law; making it the first case to have gone to court under this law for fifty years. Justice Alan King-Hamilton disallowed the defence of the poem on any literary or theological grounds, and the defendants were convicted and given a suspended prison sentence. All appeals to the European Court of Human Rights failed, and the poem is still illegal and unavailable in England. More recently, when an UK based Christian gay and lesbian website provided an external link to a site featuring the poem, there was an attempted, but unsuccessful, prosecution of them under the same law. This law was also used against the filmmaker Nigel Wingrove, whose film *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* was banned, and continues to be the only film in the UK banned because it is deemed blasphemous. The 18 minute film is based on the life of St Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Carmelite nun said to have experienced ecstatic visions of Christ, and shows her masturbating and aroused in scenes involving the Crucifixion of Jesus. Wingrove seems to have been rather unlucky in the ruling against him, as the release of his film came in the same year as the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, the predictable but unwarranted controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and Madonna's *Like A Prayer* video. It would seem that conventional society had had enough of their paradigm being broadened, and made a martyr of Wingrove.

More recently, but in a somewhat similar vein to Kirkup's poem, the American playwright, Terrence McNally had the 1998 scheduled run of his new play, *Corpus Christi*, cancelled by the prestigious Manhattan Theatre Club in New York, following threats to kill the staff, burn down the theatre, and "exterminate" M^cNally. The reason for these threats was that M^cNally's play told the story of a young gay man called Joshua and his sexual adventures with his 12 disciples. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights in New York vowed to "wage a war" against any attempt to stage the play. While top playwrights, such as Tony Kushner, Edward Albee and Athol Fugard, urged the theatre to reverse its cancellation, accusing them of "*capitulation to right-wing extremists and religious zealots*".

The homosexual associations being made with Jesus are not simply the work of gay artists seeking to appropriate conventional religious themes for the sake of blasphemy or controversy, but may actually be based in fact. In 1958, Professor Morton Smith of Columbia University uncovered a letter at the Mar Saba monastery, which mentioned a suppressed extract from the gospel of Mark. The letter was between Bishop Clement of Alexandria (one of the founding fathers of the early church), and a correspondent called Theodore, who wrote complaining about the Carpocratians, a Gnostic sect. The Carpocratians were using a passage from Mark's gospel to justify their beliefs and practices, which were not shared by Clement and Theodore. In his reply to Theodore, Clement congratulated him on his opposition to the Carpocratians, and then wrote a dissertation on the passage in question, quoting the passage in its entirety. What is remarkable is that this passage does not appear in the canonical New Testament today, but was obviously current at the time. It is from Mark chapter 10 (between verses 34 and 35), and tells the story of the raising of Lazarus: "*And the youth, looking upon him (Jesus), loved him and beseeched that he might remain with him. And going out of the tomb, they went into the house of the youth, for he was rich. And after six days, Jesus instructed him and, at evening, the youth came to him wearing a linen cloth over his naked body. And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the Kingdom of God.*"

The expurgated text seems to suggest that the raising of Lazarus, rather than being a literal raising from the dead, was the kind of mystery school initiation that was common throughout the ancient world; something that the biblical scholar Barbara Thiering has emphasised in her recent work. What is also clear, and may have been obvious to the Carpocratians also, is that there seems to have been a homosexual element to the ritual, with the half-naked youth who loved Jesus being shown the mystery of the Kingdom of God during the final night of his instruction. If these inferences can be so readily made from the passage in Mark, it is somewhat understandable that the founding fathers of the Church would feel no guilt over removing it from the canon in order to preserve the image of Jesus that was in concordance with their particular ideas.

SEBASTIAN AND THE HOMOSEXUAL GAZE IN ART

The homosexual relationship between Sebastian and his Christ is a complex one that becomes the same for the viewers of images of the saint who look at him from a queer perspective. A hint of this can be seen in a painting of St. Sebastian by Pietro Vannucci detto il Perugino (1448-1523), now

housed in the Louvre. The image includes an extract from Psalm 38:2, which, in the King James Version, reads: *For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hands presseth me sore.* On the most immediate level, the words are those of the saint himself, while, by extension, a pious person viewing the painting repeats the words in turn. On another level, the viewer by reading the text states: *Your arrows, Sebastian, are inserted in me, the same arrows, Sebastian, which are inserted in you, are inserted in me.* That Perugino intended such an intimate interaction between painting and viewer can be seen by a smaller image (53.3 by 39.5 cms) that he painted around 1495. The small size meant the painting was intended for private devotion, as does the image itself, which features, portrait-like, just the head and upper torso from the larger painting. One cannot help thinking that a personal devotion to this sublime image of Sebastian, with his golden skin, bared neck, and wistful expression, would have been more than purely holy and innocent. Of all the paintings of Sebastian over the centuries, Perugino's is one of the most obviously sensual and least conventionally pious. The neck of the saint is the only area of the painting that bears the mark of martyrdom, with an arrow delicately buried into the flesh where a vampire, or lover, would bite. Attached to this singular shaft, Perugino writes his name in gold letters *Petrus Perusinus Pinxit.* With its subtle placing, the arrow does not distract from the beauty of the saint's body, but allows a voyeuristic epiphany for the viewer who discovers it, and follows Perugino's queer gaze that he has immortalised in the arrow that bears his name.

This love for the saint that Perugino shows with his intimate placing of the arrow, and the care taken over the youth's matchless chest, can be paralleled with an image by Antonello, where the five arrows evoke the five wounds of Christ. The arrows appear to write on the body like the five letters of the word AMORE: the love of the martyr pierced with the divine love of the beloved.

While, on the one hand, the adoration for Sebastian can be based on a sadomasochistic attachment to the beautiful death of the saint, with the piercing and the pain being instrumental in the attraction, another form of devotion, as typified by Perugino, seeks to save the saint from pain. In all the eleven images of Sebastian painted by Perugino, he never wounds the saint with more than two arrows; with the exception of an early fresco from Cerqueto, and a large panel in the National Gallery of Umbria. Although his adoration for the saint is obvious, the public sexuality of Perugino is less clear. Biographical information does suggest that this family man was not immune to the charms of young boys, and his name is listed in somewhat dubious circumstances in the Florentine registers (dated as July 10 and 11, 1487), with another painter, Aulista d' Angelo. The two men are condemned (with Perugino less harshly than Aulista) for events dating back to the previous year: a quarrel that the judge suspects to be of a romantic nature. The evidence, then, is not strong enough to draw any conclusions about Perugino's sexuality, other than basing it on the apparent love and concern he shows his subject; especially considering that he otherwise put little stock in religion.

The same ambiguity is not true of another painter, Giovanni Antonio Bazzi (1477-1549), who proudly and notoriously proclaimed his love of boys by adopting the otherwise insulting sobriquet of *il Sodoma*. The single Sodoma painting of Sebastian, from 1525, equals those of Perugino and Guido Reni as hallmarks of homoerotic art. Like Perugino and Reni, Sodoma seems to shy away from injuring his saint too severely, sending as many arrows into the supporting tree as go into the body of Sebastian. Once again, like Perugino, the arrows that do enter the saint are exquisitely placed, with one forcefully piercing his upper thigh, and the other cutting clear through his neck. Sodoma clearly takes the opportunity provided by his subject to contemplate on the golden skin of the youth, which appears to merge with the dark tones of a beautiful Vinci-esque landscape in the background. A descending angel, holding a crown of martyrdom, whose rays of light contrasts strongly with the dark shafts of the arrows, further defines the body of the saint. Another of Sodoma's paintings provides an interesting contrast with his Sebastian image, and features the flagellation of Jesus prior to his crucifixion. Jesus is shown tied to a pillar, standing in exactly the same pose as Sebastian traditionally appears, with a thin veil-like loincloth that barely covers his genitals. While it is certainly an image of Jesus and not Sebastian, in many ways it is Jesus *as* Sebastian.

Somewhat surprisingly, Leonardo da Vinci, whose rather matter of fact homosexuality is well attested, did not, as far as we know, paint an image of St. Sebastian. There is but one sketch by da Vinci that considers the theme of the martyrdom, and it is interesting in that it follows some of the queer precedents of Perugino and Sodoma. The saint is shown hung on a tree, with the only torture seeming to come from the uncomfortable position in which he has been left by the artist. A single arrow is shown, and this does not even touch the naked body of the saint, but instead mirrors

Sodoma's example by burying itself in the tree trunk. Whilst not devoting himself to Sebastian as others had, da Vinci did skirt the same themes raised by the saint's martyrdom with a Hermetic obsession with androgyny. The spirit that drove artists to depict Sebastian as the idealised being, part womyn, part man, part boy and part girl, was the same spirit that led da Vinci to paint John the Baptist as a sublime androgen (rather than the hairy prophet of scripture), or even to possibly use his own face as the basis for that paragon of feminine beauty, the *Mona Lisa*.

The adoration of Sebastian seen in the work of Perugino, Sodoma, and Reni, to name but a few, extended not merely to a celebration of the skin and chest of the saint, but went still further by allowing artists to suggest and celebrate the genitalia of the saint. If there is anything that confirms the homosexual intent in many of these works, it is the interest shown in trying to reveal the penis of the saint, whilst essentially keeping it hidden from those who were not similarly inclined.

In the Sebastians of Benozzo Gozzoli and Piero Della Francesca, a very visible and rounded bulge is obvious in the saint's loincloth; but on the whole, this is more a practical consideration than an erotic one. A 1480 painting of the saint by Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506), which is now housed in the Louvre, provides a stark contrast with these former works. While the saint is shown wearing a heavy loincloth that hides any indication of the genitals, Mantegna, in a technique repeated by artists elsewhere, compensates by using an arrow buried in the fabric to suggest the penis. The arrow in question is the only one not to have been drawn from the side, with the saint pierced from the left and right, and not the front. As a result, the arrow juts from the mass of material, clearly intimating a penis. But this simulacrum is made all the more shocking when the viewer realises that, with all the wounds on the saint's body, it is only this one that is bleeding, with a long red trail staining the loincloth. Mantegna cleverly has the penis of the saint being the only part of his body that bleeds in his ecstatic martyrdom for Christ; thereby recalling the pseudo-vaginas of the sacrificed corn king. A similar use of the arrow as a marker of the penis appears in a painting by Liberale da Verona from 1490-91. In this instance though, it is not the arrow itself that emphasises the sex of the saint, but a trail of blood that leads from a wound near the navel down to the groin.

In some works, the penis of the saint is highlighted, not by visual indicators, but by its very necessity to the stability of the composition. In an engraving by the Venetian Jacopo de' Barbari (1460/1470-1516) that is preserved at British Museum, the loincloth of the saint is untied and by all rights should fall from his body, except that it is held in place by an erection that the folds draw with skill. A similar device is used in a 1526 image of Sebastian by Dosso Dossi (1479-1542), where the saint is shown leaning against a fruit tree, with his groin masked by a long ribbon that falls from the tree while passing between his thighs. On the level of the groin, the form drawn by this fabric lets the viewer imagine what can only be an erect penis.

Yet again, it is Perugino who excels at the erotisation of the saint by suggesting his penis. Not only does he paint the saint's loincloth as a flimsy veil that seems to be inching its way as far down as piety will allow, but he uses what material there is to suggest a penis. In three of the Sebastians painted by Perugino in the 1490s, the end of the loincloth is tied in a knot at the crotch, with an obvious excess of material that hangs over and dangles like a penis. The luminous Sebastian now housed in the Louvre is the most explicit of the three, with the material not merely suggesting, but rather imitating, a well proportioned member; with the folds of the material even echoing the head of the penis. In a painting of the Virgin and the infant Jesus flanked by Sebastian and John the Baptist (housed in the Uffizi gallery), Perugino once again suggests the length and head of the saint's penis with the patterns of the loincloth. Not only this, but recent restoration has shown that Perugino also included a sprinkling of pubic hair lying above the indecently low material; the observation of which is yet another erotic cue for the queer viewer. This erotic display is all the more remarkable considering the superficially pious company in which the saint appears, but the feeling of the painting is peculiar in of itself. Sebastian looks off into space as is typical of Perugino's depictions of him, while the Baptist looks downwards with a melancholy gaze, pointing his traditional finger of benediction at the Christ child with almost a sense of absentmindedness. Mary is even more peculiar, for with her cheeks puffed out and her lips pursed, she completely ignores the viewer's gaze and looks to her left with a distinctly bored expression on her face. Intriguingly, Mary is shown wearing the red dress traditionally associated not with her, but with the Scarlet Womyn, Mary Magdalene.

There is one final form in which Sebastian is depicted in Renaissance art that seems to reference a much older pagan stream of symbolism. The image of St. Irene nursing Sebastian's wounds following

his piecing by the arrows of the archers provided a way for artists to consider his naked body without the direct context of the martyrdom, and without necessarily showing the harmful arrows. It was also popular amongst 17th century artists such as Trophime Bigot, Bartolomeo Schedoni, and Georges de La Tour, where the darkened setting of Irene's home allowed the artist to explore the use of luminous candlelight. La Tour repeated the same technique, and became the master of it, in his other works, such as *Repenting Magdalene* and *The Discovery of the Body of St. Alexis*. With an awareness of the pagan precedents of the Sebastian myth, it is impossible to look at images of St. Irene nursing the wounded Sebastian and not see a parallel with other stories of the dying god-king. The image is particularly reminiscent of Isis nursing and rebuilding the mutilated body of Osiris; just as images of the Virgin holding the Christ child echo those of Isis nursing her son, Horus. In some paintings of the healing of Sebastian, Irene is accompanied by another female saint, which again recalls some of the images of Isis and Osiris, where Isis is joined by her dark sister, the goddess Nephthys.

The name Irene (*Peace*) in itself has some interesting pagan connotations, as it was the name of one of three dove-shaped Horae that announced the coming of death, and were in the service of the goddess Aphrodite. A temple dedicated to the pagan Irene on the acropolis of Constantinople was rededicated to her canonised Christian form and renamed the Church of Holy Irene. It was because of her pagan associations that the Christian form of Irene was included in the patently pagan story of Sebastian. This association is borne out by a community of self-castrating Christian monks who lived on Mount Athos, and seem to have represented a continuation of the Attis cult; after whom the mountain was almost certainly named. Intriguingly, the monks of Athos were condemned as heretics for being too dedicated to the teachings of a so-called nun named Irene.

SEBASTIAN AND D'ANNUNZIO

The homosexual connotations of the Sebastian story seem to have gradually developed over time until they became fully immersed in the aura of the myth, not just for the queer viewers of the myth, but for the straight as well. A religious play called *Mystery of Saint Sebastian*, which was performed by the inhabitants of Lanlevillar in 1567, shows one of the ways in which this theme had permeated the myth. As Sebastian is shot with arrows he cries out: *O Archers, Archers, if ever you loved me, that your love I still know it, with measurement of iron! To you I say it, I say it to you: that which more deeply wounds me, more deeply loves me... That which adjusts better than any other with the roughest of his darts and which strips it of such force... that it wounds the bark of the tree boring me of all the pole. That one, certainly, I will know that he loves me.*

It was after reading an old manuscript of this play that the Italian aesthete and writer Gabriele d'Annunzio was moved to write his own poetic version of the tale, a four thousand line work written expertly in French. The final result was a mystery play which combined dance, music, and words, and which d'Annunzio saw as his masterpiece, his contribution to the Decadent art style that had swept Europe at the time. Even before reading the *Mystery of Saint Sebastian*, the themes behind the legend had long haunted d'Annunzio. The *Adonis*, which he had written in 1883, foreshadows the theme of the drama, in which he writes: *Thus died the Adolescent, in a great mystery of Pain and Beauty as imagined by my Dream and Art.* Later, whilst contemplating a painting of the martyrdom by Mantegna, he had referred to the saint as *the Athlete of Christ*. The fascination with Sebastian even extended to one of the pivotal womyn in d'Annunzio's life, the Russian Nathalie de Goloubeff, who was his mistress for two years. During the early days of their relationship he compared her with the martyred saint, as she had the long boyish legs that he associated with Sebastian. On 7 December 1908, he wrote to her: *My suffering is like a carnal magic, O St. Sebastian.* Shortly afterwards, she replied with a letter in kind that shows a complete understanding of the masochistic subtext of the Sebastian motif:

Today is the triumph of St. Sebastian. He is abandoned on his bloody couch, but never has a more feeble life concealed a more conquering mind and a more knowing body. For him it is the greatest pleasure to relive his martyrdom. Superhuman is his inspired body. By an unparalleled magic he has brought back to his pallor all the stigmata of his torture- the bites in the legs, the blows on the back, the scratches on the shoulders and the wounds of the arrows flowering with blood. He loves his executioners. He calls to the archer who loved him

with an abundant heart, with an absorbing passion. The basilisk with serpent's eyes, the guardian of swirling death, come to St. Sebastian stretched on his burning couch.

D'Annunzio was in many ways a Renaissance man who was influential on the Futurist movement, and was courted by both Fascist and non-Fascist groups. He received a long precession of visitors from the fields of European and American art at his Villa Saint-Dominique. Many of these were womyn of the Parisian Left Bank salon scene, including such famous lesbians as Natalie Barney, Romaine Brooks, and Radclyffe Hall and her partner Una Troubridge. D'Annunzio's own sexuality seems ambiguous or at least fluid, and he had more platonic relationships with his womyn friends than would perhaps be deemed normal for a straight man. His close friendship with Romaine Brooks was almost certainly platonic, and the same seems to be true of his relationship with another womyn that he welcomed to the Villa Saint-Dominique, the dancer Ida Rubinstein.



Gabriele d'Annunzio

Ida Rubinstein had been born in St. Petersburg, into a rich Jewish family, and grew up accustomed to having her every whim satisfied. As a child, she wanted to dance, and was enrolled at the Opera school. At the age of twenty, although it was obvious that being too tall, and too thin, she would never be the rival of Pavlova or Karsavina, she still managed to astound the impresario Diaghilev with her presence and stage sense. Rubinstein became a private student of Mikhail Fokine, and in 1909, he choreographed a performance of *Salomé* for her, in which, at the end of the Dance of the Seven Veils, she was completely naked. This dance was only performed once, because it was closed by the censors, but Rubinstein went on to star in other Fokine produced iconic roles such as Cleopatra, Zobeide in *Scheherazade*, and as a queen or idol carried by slaves, swathed in the opulent costumes of the designer Leon Bakst. Rubinstein also tried her hand at theatre, where her Russian accent threatened to be as much an impediment to acting as her figure had been to dancing. Once again, though, she overcame the disadvantage with her otherworldly presence and her sense of place. Rubinstein was concerned not so much with winning polite applause, but with creating a spectacle that was an invocation of Divine Beauty, with she as its incarnation.

D'Annunzio's friend and collaborator Robert de Montesquiou (who is often regarded as the model for Proust's Baron de Charlus, and for the figure of Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A rebours*) suggested that he should visit the Opera where Rubinstein was performing *Cleopatre*. D'Annunzio followed his friend's advice and was enthralled by Rubinstein's performance and presence. As soon as she appeared on stage, he said to his secretary: *She has the legs of St. Sebastian, which I have been looking for in vain for years.* Writing to Montesquiou, d'Annunzio spoke of being unable to quell the agitation of artistic fire that Rubinstein had stirred within him; to which Montesquiou immediately replied: *Create for her the exceptional work which such an artist deserves.* D'Annunzio continued to wax lyrically over Rubinstein for all who were willing to hear, saying: *Among the frivolous actresses of Paris, Ida creates the effect of a Russian icon among the trinkets of the Rue de la Paix.* The mysterious presence of the dancer not only excited and entranced the poet, but also put him in awe of her, and like a nervous schoolboy, he thought Rubinstein would be a difficult person to meet. Choosing a ceremonious approach, with strings pulled by Montesquiou, the first meeting of poet and dancer was a success, and d'Annunzio soon left for Arcachon to set to work.

D'Annunzio appreciated Rubinstein's approach to the aesthetics of beauty, and wrote glowingly of her attitude towards performance: *Before dancing, she sat down in silence like a sibyl listening to the god within her... She is motionless in the discovery of herself.* The painter Romaine Brooks was well

aware of Rubinstein's power of presence, and the two womyn were lovers for three year. Brooks painted Rubinstein in a portrait eerily similar to her own self-portrait, and also used her as the model for several paintings. In *la France Croisee*, a painting honouring womyn war workers, Rubinstein appears as a figure cloaked in black bearing the insignia of the Red Cross, while in *Le Trajet* (The Crossing, 1911), she is shown as an image of female sexuality and morbidity. In what amounts to a lyrical paean of adoration, Brooks made an exhaustive description of Rubinstein:

She seemed to me more beautiful when off stage; like some heraldic bird delicately knit together by the finest of bone-structures giving flexibility to curveless lines. The clothes she wore were beyond fashions, for without effort everything contributed to making her seem like an apparition. The banality of her surroundings, to which she paid no attention, made the effect even more striking. I remember one cold snowy morning walking with her around the Longchamps racecourse, Everything was white and Ida wore a long ermine coat. It was open, and exposed the frail bare chest and slender neck, which emerged from a white feathery garment. Her face sharply cut with long golden eyes and a delicate bird-like nose; her partly veiled head with dark hair moving gracefully from the temples as though the wind were smoothing it back. When she first came to Paris she possessed what is now so rarely spoken of: mystery. Hers was a mask whose outer glow emanated from a disturbed inner depth...She was cultivated in so far as it suited her, She knew by heart pages of Goethe and Nietzsche and would declare Dostoevsky to be greater than Shakespeare, making her point open to discussion.

Beginning work on his play, d'Annunzio asked Montesquiou (who was a collector of reproductions, and had published a 1914 monograph on St. Sebastian) to send him all the images he had of the saint; both engravings and photographs. D'Annunzio himself went to the Bibliotheque Nationale to ask the medievalist, Gustave Cohen, to guide him through the mysteries of the story, and he brought everything he could find on *The Golden Legend*. Then, from Arcachon, he sent his secretary, Tom Antongini, to consult the most obscure works on the theme in the library at Bordeaux. Utterly absorbed in his subject, he found inspiration even in the nearby pines that had been gashed by the resin-collectors: *Each tree had its own martyrdom as if in each lived a spirit eager to suffer and to bleed like the divine hero chosen by me.*

As soon as she was sure that the poet was at work, Ida Rubinstein came to Arcachon, bringing with her the designer Leon Bakst, who, to the fury of his previous patron, Diaghilev, had agreed to work separately with Rubinstein. Bakst was to be responsible for decorating d'Annunzio's vision, and originally had plans of turning the theatre into a cathedral, but had to lower his ambition. The day after her arrival, the tall, slim figure of Rubinstein was to be seen by the people of Arcachon, standing in the grounds of d'Annunzio's villa, practising shooting arrows at the pine trees. In his notebooks, d'Annunzio wrote simple lines of inspiration in French; poetic synopses of the play that was beginning to take shape:

The character: The sick young man- suggestion by colour-yellowish brown-a sad yellow. A woman green like a larva with bloodshot eyes...Asiatic voluptuousness -the spots in concentric circles as on the lamprey- the blue and black mantles-star-spangled... The dryads, the leaves of the tree changed into a veil. The young Boeotians. The bounding strength, the vitality of the muscles of the spotted garments which make them resemble young winged panthers, powerful butterflies... St. Sebastian against the tree- a Daphne. The unity of beings- the boundaries between species abolished -the leaf and the beak... A kind of corporeal topography- a human body with valleys, hills and plains...The direction of the wind -the fluttering of the garments and the hair... The prodigious invention of the costumes and accoutrements. The art of showing patches of living skin, in the openings- the evocation of the beast by gesture.'

D'annunzio divided his work into five acts, or *mansions*, as he called them: *The Court of Lilies*, *The Magic Chamber*, *The Council of False Gods*, *The Wounded Laurel*, and finally, *Paradise*. Sebastian's martyrdom begins in the third mansion, *The Council of False Gods*, and in his words, d'Annunzio gives voice to the saint with beautifully evokative language.

*"I suffer," he moaned. O listen!
"I suffer! What have I done?
I suffer and I bleed.
The world is red with my torture.
Ah! What have I done? Who dealt the blow?
I die- O rare beauty
I die, to rise again to life eternal!"*

Later, in the midst of his martyrdom, Sebastian cries out to his torturers, and d'Annunzio writes his interpretation of what are probably the most important lines in the apocryphal versions of the tale: *he that loved me most, wounds me.*

*"Fear not! Weep not!
But be intoxicated
with blood as in battle.
Aim closely, I am the Target.
From the depths, from the depths
I call forth your terrible love."*

The greatest challenge facing d'Annunzio once the words of his play had begun to assume form, was to find a composer to produce the accompanying music. Initially, Roger Ducasse was considered, and then Henri Fevrier, but when the ever-resourceful Montesquiou was consulted, his immediate reply was *Debussy!* Despite not being his first choice for the position, d'Annunzio had admired Debussy who was only one year his senior; having been introduced to the Frenchman's music by the young musicians he surrounded himself with. He wrote a letter to Debussy requesting his help, and explaining his concept with characteristically colourful prose:

I have dreamed for a long time of the bleeding youth transfigured in the Christian myth, like the beautiful wounded god mourned by the women of Byblus before the catafalque of ebony and purple in the Vernal Equinox. I had chosen this line from a verse of Veronica Gambara, the great Italian poetess of the Renaissance: 'He that loved me most, wounds me.' My mystery play is a development of this theme."

Debussy was happy to accept such a potentially prominent project, having confided to a friend: *I am like someone waiting for a train in a sunless waiting room.* In December, d'Annunzio travelled to Paris to meet Debussy, and the two men quickly found that they had much in common. Debussy shared d'Annunzio's vision of a Christ united with the pagan Adonis in the singular figure of the androgynous and beautiful Sebastian. The theme also appealed to Debussy's idea that religion was fundamentally an aesthetic experience; recalling the painter Perugino, for whom religion merely provided the chance to explore the figure of his beloved Sebastian. D'Annunzio told how Debussy, whom he nicknamed *Claude France*, had *showed surprise, but only to love me, to give himself entirely, he who seemed still wounded by the obtuse presumption of another poet.* In turn, Debussy's family was overwhelmed by the simplicity of d'Annunzio, who boasted of being a great friend of Chouchou, Debussy's daughter, sending her dolls and letters that he signed as *the sorcerer with the yellow beard.*

D'Annunzio specified that his mystery play was to have "*music between one syllable and another, between one line and another*", and as a result, the workload for Debussy was enormous, with only four months before the premiere. The text of the play arrived gradually in segments, the first act in January, and the third a month later, quickly followed by the second act. Debussy wrote to friends and acquaintances bemoaning, in typically elaborate fin de siècle style, of the workload: *What do you want to become of me, faced with the torrent of beauty of your double consignment.* The letters between d'Annunzio and Debussy show the poet and composer exchanging ideas as the work progressed, with Debussy dissuading his partner from using liturgical Latin in the work, and d'Annunzio suggesting actresses and performers for suitable roles. After Montesquiou had edited the text of any remaining hints of Italian, it was read for the first time at the apartment of the impresario Astruc, in the Pavilion de Hanovre on, fittingly, the Boulevard des Italiens. Astruc was enchanted, as were the actors, while Montesquiou would tell all who would hear that the *Martyre* was the most

beautiful thing one could hear, not only in a season, but in a whole lifetime. The press, in turn, caught Montesquiou's enthusiasm, publishing wild gossip about Rubinstein and the performance, so that soon the premiere of the work was being eagerly anticipated.



Rubinstein as St. Sebastian

The first performance of the play was scheduled for May 1911 at the Chatelet, and Rubinstein went off to Monte Carlo for five days to rehearse with Fokine, who had created a dance for her. Debussy continued with the music for the play and engaged Andre Caplet, who had just orchestrated Debussy's *Gigues* and *Children's Suite*, to help in the orchestration of the new score. He retired into seclusion, locking the doors of his house and accepting no visitors, except for a few friends and somewhat curiously, a number of journalists who interviewed him on his latest project. In one such interview with Henri Malherbe of *The Excelsior*, he identified himself as a suffering artist in the guise of Saint Sebastian: *I must endeavour to be a great artist, so that I may dare to be myself and suffer for my faith. Those who feel as I do will only appreciate me more. The others will shun and hate me.* Debussy said how he was *"so happy and proud... to illustrate M. d'Annunzio's work in music"* and he wept both when he played the music on the piano to his publisher Durand, and at the rehearsals of the piece. The music, which is both sensual and grief-stricken at times, left a deep impression on many involved with the performance, with the chorus also reduced to tears according to one account.

Meanwhile, Leon Bakst had designed the sets for the play, and these would come to be regarded as his finest achievement. He faithfully followed d'Annunzio's visionary stage directions, and the final result expressed everything that was lush and decadent:

The red of the embers floods the entire portico with crimson; but already the evening is falling over the gardens, which turn more blue. The arcades are filled with azure. In the dark azure, the tall sheaves of lilies begin to shine with a supernatural whiteness, as if they were clustered round a celestial spirit. An elliptical vault can be seen, of such a polished substance that it reflects every image, like a concave mirror. A double rectangular door, as huge as the portal of a temple, stands closed in the far wall. Leading up to it are seven steps painted in the colours of the planets, like the seven levels of Nineveh, the seven enclosure-walls of Ecbatana. Two sun idols, two colossi completely covered with serpentine whorls down to the winged and clawed feet, holding in their two hands two symmetrical keys, support the monolithic lintel on which is engraved a Chaldean inscription. The face of the Sun and the face of the Moon shine on the bronze door-leaves with their enormous hinges.

The stage directions for the third act, *The Council of False Gods*, was a description of all the gods of Asia. *In the centre of the ceiling with its blue lacunae, a circular opening which is closed by means of a round shield like those of the Curetes, manoeuvred by chains, allows the fumes from the spices to escape. On the other walls are movable sheets of ivory, which cover the niches where the sublime theogonies and the unutterable conjunctions are hidden.* The decor for the final act, *Paradise*, was the finest though: *The ancient laurel of the wood of Apollo can be seen, on a hill round like a breast. They are close and thickset, dark and motionless like their bronze votive images offered in sanctuaries. Their trunks, bristling with leaves sharp as the tips of spears, rise against the sky, which is streaked with the long sulphurous trails of the fleeting day.*

Whilst the various elements of the play were coming together, controversy began to rise around it. This is understandable considering that it featured music by a confessed pagan in Debussy, and starred a Jewish lesbian dancer as a male Christian saint. The thematic identification of the saint with the pagan Adonis did not help, while d'Annunzio was already regarded with some suspicion by the church. A week before the performance, Cardinal Amette, the archbishop of Paris, wrote an edict reminding the faithful that all of d'Annunzio's work was already on the index of works forbidden to Catholics, and that excommunication could be a possibility for anyone who went to see the play. Subscribers withdrew their support, and the cancellation of tickets threatened to leave the Chatelet almost empty for the Gala Performance. Both Debussy and d'Annunzio justifiably felt the need to defend their work:

“The Archbishop of Paris, in a manner that was ill-advised, has attacked in his recent decree a work, still unknown to him, created by two artists who, in the course of several years of labour, have given at least evidence of their unremitting aspiration toward the severest form at art. Without tailing in the respect which the Archbishop's note itself fails to accord us, we desire to express our regret at the singular treatment which we have not deserved; and we affirm -upon our honour and upon the honour of all those who are acquainted with 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian'- that this work, deeply religious, is the lyrical glorification, not only of the admirable athlete of Christ, but of all Christian heroism. “

In an interview published in *Comoedia*. Debussy continued this defence by saying:

“Is it not obvious that a man who sees mystery in everything will be inevitably attracted to a religious subject? I do not wish to make a profession of faith. But, even if I am not a practising Catholic nor a believer, it did not cost me much effort to rise to the mystical heights which the poet's drama attains. Let us be clear about the word mysticism. You see that this very day the Archbishop has forbidden the faithful to assist at d'Annunzio's play, although he does not know the work. But let us not dwell on these annoying details... From the artistic point of view such decrees cannot be considered, I assure you that I wrote my music as though I had been asked to do it for a church. The result is decorative music, if you like, a noble text interpreted in sounds and rhythms; and in the last act when the saint ascends into Heaven, I believe I have expressed all the feelings aroused in me by the thought of the Ascension. Have I succeeded? That no longer concerns me. We have not the simple faith of other days. Is the faith expressed by my music orthodox or not? I cannot say. It is my faith, my own, singing in all sincerity.

More bad luck was to befall the play, when on Sunday, 21 May, the date of the Gala Performance, a plane crash killed the French War Minister, and the nation went into mourning. The performance was held, but as a rehearsal with only the press admitted; although many people with tickets forced their way in. The first official performance came on the following day, and though it was barely adequate, many critics wrote well of it, and compared the music to *Parsifal*. Praise was particularly given to Rubinstein's performance, where, with her typical sense of presence, she appeared as an ascetic hermaphrodite that moved with a breathtaking beauty. In the first act, in her breastplate, she looked a little too much like Joan of Arc to many in the audience, but in the final act, where she appeared almost naked beneath the ropes that bound her, she stunned even the harshest critics. Jean Cocteau attended the performance and deftly explained the postures in language that regular visitors to the Opera would understand: *She suggests some stained glass miraculously brought to life, in which the image, a little ill at ease and filled with motionless memory, silent, translucent and sacred, has not yet*

acquired the free use of its created voice and its new movements. Marcel Proust, who had gone to the Chatelet at the insistence of Montesquiou, was more enthused by Debussy's music than by the genius of d'Annunzio. He said to Debussy: *I was so happy to be able to listen to you in the intervals, and to listen by your side during the last act when, joined to your enthusiasm by your wrist, as if by a metal electrode, I stirred in my seat with ecstasy, as if it had been electric.*

The play was later performed, to little real success, in Boston and Italy, and was revived in April in 1922, when Ida Rubinstein, who controlled the rights to it, reprised her original performance. At one point Debussy expressed interest in turning the work into a full opera, but never found the right libretto.

It is interesting to note that many of those in attendance for the premier of d'Annunzio's *Martyre* were well acquainted with the story, and during their lives also considered the theme of St. Sebastian. Marcel Proust included several references to Sebastian in his work *Swann's Way*, where he describes the engineer and man of letters M. Legrandin, who is distinctive for his flowery speech, preference for wearing cosmetics, and shifting sexual proclivities. Proust tells how he *"smiles while his eyes remain full of pain, like the eyes of a handsome martyr whose body bristles with arrows."* In his memoirs, Jean Cocteau told how Proust had become so enamoured with Mantegna's rendition of St. Sebastian in the Louvre that he once arrived in an ecstatic state at Cocteau's home to escort his friend to see the painting. Cocteau also addressed the theme in poetry a year after the performance of *Martyre*, where in his *"Les Archers de Saint Sébastien"*, the narrator is one of Sebastian's adoring archers, a man who will later be called on to kill his leader, *"a heart so dear to us."* In the poem, Sebastian only utters two words, *"Mary!"* and *"Jesus!"*, while the rest of the poem is told by its breathless eyewitness:

*Despite the leader's order, with a brief
glance I looked back, and I saw-
I'm telling you, I saw -a round
chain of splendid gold hover above his
forehead by the effect of a divine prodigy*

*His head was tilted just so, and so too
the beautiful chain of gold; and something
awoke within me! Still, I see him still,
and I hear a strange voice at my ear,
a new voice.*

*And the voice says to me: it is pure!
Go play ball up against the walls!
Dream on the window balcony! Dance around
the joyful fountain! You've just
made a new saint, for Saint Sebastian.*

THE ROLE OF ST. SEBASTIAN IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

D'Annunzio's *Martyre* is in many respects reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, with both works reflecting the Decadent spirit of the age, and with the sacred-profane relationship between Diocletian and Sebastian mirroring that of Salome and the Baptist. Sebastian can be seen as a symbol of the 19th and 20th centuries, bridging a gap between the beauty and relative simplicity of the pre-Victorian age and the current industrial age, which was inaugurated with the martyrdom of millions of young men in the First World War.

It is interesting, then, that Wilde, who also stood on the crux between these ages, had an interest in the martyred saint, and went so far as to adopt the pseudonym of Sebastian Melmoth following his release from prison. Wilde considered Reni's *St. Sebastian* his favourite painting and the ultimate depiction of beauty, while he also admired a series of photographs of young men emulating the martyred saint by the writer and photographer F.W Rolfe; otherwise known by the pseudonym Baron Corvo. As a matter of interest, Corvo's first separately published work was a poem called *Tarcissus: The Boy Martyr of Rome*, which he dedicated to a pupil who had died at a school at which he had tenure. Corvo's best-known work, *The Desire and the Pursuit of the Whole*, tells the story of the

writer Nicholas Crabbe's exile to Venice and his love for a boyish girl named Zildo, passing through the phases of decline, fall, and eventually, romantic salvation. Like Wilde's Dorian Grey (whose personal effects include medallions of St. Sebastian), and like Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Crabbe has a particular fondness for the image of St. Sebastian; a perfect example of the author projecting himself into his lead character.

Another photographer who created a series on the theme of St. Sebastian, was Wilde's American publisher, Fred Holland Day, whose bulk of homoerotic photography focuses on the idea of Arcadia as a queer paradise of amorous fawns and pretty youths. Day knew Wilde personally, and in a letter from Lord Alfred Douglas to Day, he mentions "*the pleasure of meeting you at my cousin's... & afterwards in London when you dined with me & Mr. Oscar Wilde at Kettner's.*"

Inspired by a visit to the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, Wilde wrote his poem *The Grave of Keats*, in which he identified Keats with the martyred saint:

*"Taken from life when life and love were new
The youngest of the martyrs here is lain,
Fair as Sebastian, and as early slain.
No cypress shades his grave, no funeral yew,
But gentle violets weeping with the dew..."*

Wilde may have written of Keats as Sebastian, the beautiful youth taken in his prime, but the identification of Sebastian, as the martyr for beauty, was just as easily applied to Wilde himself. There is certainly something of the self-destructive and masochistic martyr in the way that Wilde pursued his relationship with the beautiful but spoiled Lord Alfred Douglas. The same is also true of the way in which he sued the Marquess of Queensberry for libel, in a course of action that would lead to his imprisonment, and ultimately to adopting the name of the saint upon his release. Wilde also identified himself with Mary Magdalene, and in his *De Profundis* (which he wrote while incarcerated), he imagines himself as Mary weeping over the erotic form of the murdered messiah, his "*body swathed in Egyptian linen with costly spices and perfumes.*" During his travels on the continent, Wilde visited Sebastian's grave. Here, he told how: "*the vision of Guido's St. Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening Heavens.*"

A few decades earlier, in his 1870 thinly veiled fictional fantasy *Venus in Furs*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch referenced St. Sebastian as one of several spectacularly martyred Christian saints who are an incitement to what we would now describe as *masochism*. In 1877, in a somewhat similar vein, the British aesthete and historian John Addington Symonds published an exhaustive work of Renaissance painting in which he sort to identify Renaissance art as a form of sexual liberation, in which there was an incompatibility between art and piety. To illustrate his point, he chose one painting, Sodoma's *St. Sebastian*, which he argued showed that "*suffering, refined and spiritual, without contortion or spasm, could not be presented with more pathos in a form of more surpassing loveliness*". Symonds was part of the *bourgeois radical* movement: men and womyn with socialist ideals who sought to reform public opinion in the 1890s, and who were frequently involved in art as well as politics. These include such figures as John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, and Oscar Wilde. Symonds was a pioneer in the establishment of a gay identity, even collaborating with Havelock Ellis, and he can be considered the first modern historian of male homosexuality, and the first advocate of gay liberation in Britain. His work, particularly in his criticism of Renaissance art, shows a deep understanding of the queer subtext of many Renaissance paintings and their creators, as well as the interaction between pagan and Christian themes that gave rise to such figures as the martyred Sebastian:

It is wonderful to watch the blending of elder and of younger forces in this process. The old gods lent a portion of their charm even to Christian mythology, and showered their beauty-bloom on saints who died renouncing them. Sodoma's Sebastian is but Hyacinth or Hylas, transpierced with arrows, so that pain and martyrdom add pathos to his poetry of youthfulness. Leonardo's St. John is a Faun of the forest, ivy-crowned and laughing, on whose lips the word "Repent" would be a gleeful paradox. For the painters of the full Renaissance, Roman martyrs and Olympian deities -the heroes of the Acta Sanctorum, and

the heroes of Greek romance- were alike burghers of one spiritual city, the city of the beautiful and human. What exquisite and evanescent fragrance was educed from these apparently diverse blossoms by their interminglement and fusion -how the high-wrought sensibilities of the Christian were added to the clear and radiant fancies of the Greek, and how the frank sensuousness of the Pagan gave body and fullness to the floating wraiths of an ascetic faith- remains a miracle for those who, like our master Leonardo, love to scrutinise the secrets of twin natures and of double graces.

Similar idea to those put forward by Symonds can be seen in a 1909 essay by the Belgian novelist Georges Eekhoud, in which he sought to explain the popularity of the Sebastian figure. In it, he claims that Sebastian, as the *"faultless masculine nude... reconciles, at the price of his martyrdom, paganism and Christianity, Olympus and Golgotha."* Two years earlier in his 1907 collection *Antinous and Other Poems*, the Catholic convert Montague Summers devoted a lyrical sequence to the martyr, proclaiming that Sebastian was worshipped in the twentieth century just as Antinous (the apotheosised lover of the emperor Hadrian) had been in earlier epochs. Praising the gorgeous and the voluptuous, Summers exhorted how *"New gods arrive, and antique altars fall."*

In 1906, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke considered Sebastian, not so much as a later-day Antinous, but as a new Narcissus for aesthetes. Rilke's poem *"Saint Sebastian"* has the saint appear at his martyrdom, not as the traditional passive victim, but as a narcissistic youth fully aware of his beauty and his death as an act of art.

*He stands like a man reclining -completely
held up there by a magnificent choice. Withdrawn
and self-possessed, like mothers when they nurse,
and involved in himself, like a wreath.*

*And the arrows arrive: now, and now,
as if they were springing from his groin,
shuddering stiffly at the feathered ends.
Yet he just smiles darkly, undamaged.*

*Only at one point does his sorrow grow
pronounced, the eyes in naked pain, until
they seem to turn aside from something futile;
as if dismissing with utter contempt
the destroyers of a beautiful thing.*

Rilke's poem can be compared to T.S. Eliot's *"The Death of St. Narcissus,"* in which the saint is a Sebastian-like figure, who becomes a dancer for God: *"Because his flesh was in love with the burning arrows."* The figure of St. Narcissus may have been inspired by the dancer Nijinsky who had danced the role, and Eliot may have been influenced by another dancer, Ida Rubinstein in her Sebastian role, when he wrote his own Sebastian poem around the same time. Eliot seems to have suffered from a degree of internalised homophobia, and his poem, *"The Love Song of St. Sebastian,"* can be seen as a valiant and somewhat self-righteous attempt to retrieve the legend from its centuries of homosexual use. Instead of the martyrdom of the androgynous Sebastian by the archers who love him, Eliot has his Sebastian as a violently heterosexual man who narrates a fantasy of his self-flagellation in the presence of his lover before strangling her like Othello murdering Desdemona. Although Eliot retains Sebastian's sense of sexual transgression, he replaces it with the rather dull misogyny of murder ballads.

Eliot's *Love Song of St. Sebastian* was written in 1914, the year the Great War began. The war saw poetry freed from the niceties of Georgian verse, with poets able to explore the atrocities encountered in the trenches of Europe. This transformation also saw the adoption of Sebastian as a fitting symbol for the soldiers sent happily to die in Europe, welcoming death with patriotic fervour like martyrs. Poets such as Georg Trakl, Jean Reutlinger, Julian Grenfell, and Siegfried Sassoon identified with the saint as soldier, and enhanced his homoerotic associations within the context of a willing receptivity to death in battle. In 1914, one of these poets, the Austrian Georg Trakl (a friend of Rilke and Martin Heidegger) published his second book, a collection of poems entitled *Sebastian Im Traum* (Sebastian

in dream). Its title work was a poetic sequence that perfectly encapsulated the troublesome spirit of the age, showing the strange decay of a solitary youth whose idyllic childhood is overshadowed by an undefined gloom:

*And in silence a rosy angel appeared to that boy;
Gladness; when in cool rooms a sonata sounded at nightfall
O the nearness of death...*

The aftermath of the Great War, as in any war, saw a transformation in the attitudes of society, and the fealty to the state that had seen so many young lives sent to their death was questioned. Sassoon, one of the loudest dissenting poetic voices against the war, used the image of Sebastian to express his sadness over the baptism of a generation in blood. In an untitled poem that appears at the beginning of his volume of verse, *The Heart's Journey* (1927), Sassoon writes:

*Since thought is life, God's martyrdoms were good,
And saints are trumps, no matter what they did.
Therefore I celebrate Sebastian's blood
And glory with Lorenzo on his grid,
And likewise with all victims, bruised by boulders,
Stabbed by sadistic swords, on pikes impaled,
Who propped their Paradise on bleeding shoulders
And bred tumultuous pomps when princes failed*

*Thus for their murdered Master, -thus for his dreamed
Utopia, -from a crooked Roman cross,
Heavenward on crimson clouds their conquest streamed
To touch His lips in life-redeeming loss.*

Twentieth-century artists have followed in Oscar Wilde's footsteps in identifying with the saint, and have continued to utilise the homoerotic facets of the Sebastian legend in their own work. Klaus Bodanze clad Sebastian in leather (*St. Sebastian in Leather*), Alfred Courmes has incorporated him into a 'fetish painting' (*St. Sebastian Sailor*), while Jean Reutlinger, a French poet killed in World War I, photographed himself as a tormented St. Sebastian in 1913. More recent French artists have addressed Sebastian, including the Parisian duo Pierre et Gilles, who have been collaborating since they first met and fell in love at a party in Paris in 1976. They are considered the most famous artists in France today, drawing their themes largely from their Catholic upbringing, and using many counter-culture notables as models, including Nina Hagen, Boy George, Marc Almond, Jean-Paul Gaultier, Siouxsie Sioux and Budgie.

The American painter Julian Schnabel has also addressed the theme of Sebastian, linking the saint with the devastation of AIDS, perhaps the ultimate consummation of Thanatos and Eros, in his *Fox Farm Paintings*. Schnabel's linking between the saint and AIDS has a certain historical poignancy considering Sebastian's role as the medieval protector against plague, which he then revives in the modern age as patron saint of a new epidemic. The Catholic aesthete John Gray provides something of a prediction of the role Sebastian would come to play as the patron of a modern plague, in the 1897 poem *Saint Sebastian*, whilst also suggesting the saint's homoerotic status through his tactile powers to heal. In it, Gray enthuses to the saint: "*Thou didst advene where men lay chained and dark... And by thy bright touch their sicknesses were healed.*"

The photographer Joel-Peter Witkin, who uses corpses and human oddities in his work, explored the role of St. Sebastian as a gay saint in his 1991 work *Gay Saint*. Sebastian is shown as a desiccated skeleton, with the only bodily remains being the head, whose visage appears to be that of a standard leather clone. For the image, Witkin composed a sculpture of a real human head, skeleton and penis, and pierced the composite's chest with arrows, taking the sex and death of the Sebastian story to its ultimate conclusion. Witkin also provides a Sebastian-related anecdote from the creation of another of his works, *Glass Man*, at a time when he was staying in Mexico, where the morgue that provided him with bodies to use in his photographs was having trouble acquiring the type of body he had in mind.

I'm in this room with a dead guy. I'm propping him up, and I put a fish in his hand as a kind of prop, and I'm checking the lighting. Then I get that straight, and I take a few photographs, just as a kind of a record. Then I make arrangements to have the guy autopsied. And as soon as he's being autopsied, he starts changing! He's on the table, and he's changing. I turn to my Mexican translator, who is a very, very bright man, and we have seen the same thing. He says, "He's being judged. This guy is being judged right now." Suddenly, he's not a punk any more. He's gone through this kind of transfiguration on the table, on the autopsy table... When I got him back, and I put him in this room, I got him on this chair, and I photographed him sitting down. Then I spent an hour and a half with him, and after that, he looked like a Saint Sebastian. He looked like a person who had grace. His fingers, I swear to God, had grown 50 percent. They were elegant. They were the longest fingers on a man I've ever seen. It was as if they were reaching for eternity.

With a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Witkin can be aligned with a number of artists in the 1970s who explored self-mutilation as an extreme art form, and were disproportionately Catholic, or raised as Catholics. The French artist Gina Pane climbed a ladder studded with razor blades that cut into her bare feet; while stills from her piece *Sentimental Action*, show her dressed in white, with her face hidden behind a bunch of roses, and her outstretched arm bleeding from punctures inflicted by tacks. The American artist Chris Burden bolted himself to a gallery floor next to a live wire and buckets of water that would have electrocuted him if they had spilled. In other performances, Burden was shot, or crucified on a Volkswagen car, and in *Through the Night Softly* (1973), his arms were tied behind his naked torso, while he dragged himself over shards of broken glass. Other notably visceral artists include Linda Montano, who inserted acupuncture needles around her eyes, and Vito Acconci, who tried to bite as much of his naked body as possible and made prints of the bites. Even Andy Warhol, whose initial theme appears to be one of the superficial nature of consumer capitalism, was a practising Eastern Orthodox Catholic, whose earlier work featured car crashes and the stark and iconic electric chair. Warhol's images of Marilyn Monroe and Jacqueline Kennedy are not so much pictures of starlets and trophy brides, but of the death goddesses of popular culture; with the death of Kennedy having many of the hallmarks of the ritual sacrifice of the corn king at which Jacqueline Kennedy stood by officiating. The extreme death art of the 1970s was not without context, though, and had a precedent in the 1960s work of the Viennese Actionists, who doused themselves in animal blood, cut their bodies, and tied themselves to crosses in six-day "*orgy and mystery*" plays.

This fascination with death and pain seems to represent a continuation of so many of the themes of St. Sebastian, and of religion as a tactile and ecstatic experience in which the body of Christ, and the bodies of his martyrs, are the supreme sacrament. This stands in stark contrast with the prevailing Protestant makeup of America in particular, where the Puritanical roots mean that God is distant and vengeful, while Jesus is seen solely as the risen Christ, rather than the human Jesus who ascended to god-hood. While Catholicism is marked by the exhortation of the body of Christ and by extension, the human body, in Protestant theology, the body and its functions are to be denied and feared, while Catholics themselves are looked upon with suspicion, if not outright hatred. It is interesting to note that the appropriation and heretical use of Catholic imagery by contemporary artists is often decried, not by Catholics themselves, but by Protestant and Evangelical Christians, who have little claim to the imagery, and would normally lambaste the idolatry of their Catholic counterparts.

With an understanding of the rites of Catholicism and esoteric Christianity, the extreme performance of a group like the Actionists takes on a greater meaning, representing a vast six-day mass in which the congregation is literally bathed in the blood of the lamb. The Actionists, and other artists that address religious themes in this manner, take the cornerstone on which the Christian West has been built, and addresses it in an unveiled and non-sanitised way. Christianity is based on death, which is celebrated in the mystery of the mass (in both Catholic and Actionist forms); whereas Protestantism approaches religion much like the average meat eater, who will gladly eat meat, but prefers not to be reminded of the murder involved in their meal. An artist who creates a work of art every bit as visceral as the cannibalistic cornerstone of a religion, is entering into a far more intimate relationship with Christ than the scrubbed and polished worshippers whose depth of religious experience does not extend beyond vague catch phrases like "Jesus Saves." Thus, there is much religion to be found in the themes of blood, bondage, and submission rituals in the work of contemporary artists like Robert

Mapplethorpe, Janine Antoni, Bob Flanagan, and Karen Finley. While these modern day martyrs and penitents may not be striving to unite themselves with a bleeding Saviour, their efforts to stretch the limits of human endurance suggest a similar longing of oneness with the divine as displayed by the figure of St. Sebastian. Mapplethorpe's later work, for instance, can be seen as an inverted mirror of Catholic teaching about the path to salvation, with God as Sex, and a redemption that comes through physical ecstasy. Similarly, Julio Galan pairs the erotic spirituality seen in the devotional folk images of Roman Catholicism with scenes of bondage and full-lipped adolescent boys.

Another artist who explored Catholic imagery in a somewhat heretical way was Salvador Dali. Dali considered the theme of St. Sebastian throughout his career, including two ink drawings in 1927, a watercolour in 1943, and finally, an oil painting in 1982. Also of note is Dali's *Veston aphrodisiaque* (1936), which was a sculptured St. Sebastian cocktail jacket, on which the arrows had been replaced by liqueur glasses filled with crème de menthe. It was, theoretically, meant to be worn only "during certain promenades late at night, or in very powerful cars going very slowly (in order not to spill the liquid in the glasses)". Around the same time as his first ink renditions of Sebastian, Dali wrote a poem on the saint, which was published in *L'Amis de les Arts*. In it, he writes: *Irony, I have already said, is nudity; it is the gymnast who hides behind the pain of Saint Sebastian. And it is also this pain because we are able to measure it... I would like to talk about the patience in the exquisite agony of Saint Sebastian*'. This admiration for the Saint and his divine patience was something Dali that shared with his one time lover, Federico García Lorca; regarded as the most important modern poet in Spain. Both artist and poet admired Sebastian, especially for the saint's "emotional control". Much like Sebastian, though, Lorca was taken in his youth, and was martyred by the forces of Franco; which lead to Dali escaping to France. On the morning of August 19, 1936, Lorca, along with a schoolmaster and two bullfighters, was dragged into a field in the Sierra Nevada. All four men were shot, though Lorca was reportedly not killed outright, but shot multiple times until a final merciful blow was given. Their bodies were thrown into unmarked graves and buried.

Lorca had spent his 38 years rehearsing his death, often assuming a corpse's pose for the amusement of friends like Salvador Dali and more seriously in the death-haunted flamenco music of the gypsies he celebrated and in the plays and poetry he wrote. Pablo Neruda refers to an event in Lorca's life that appears to have been a premonition of his gruesome death. Unable to sleep one night, Lorca went out for a stroll amid the ruins of an ancient estate. Sitting in a moonlit mist amongst the ruins, Lorca felt an immense solitude, which was broken when a tiny lamb came out to browse in the weeds *like an angel of mist*, making his solitude bearable and human. Suddenly, though, four or five wild swine came out of the shadows and descended on the lamb, literally tearing it to pieces before Lorca's horrified but ecstatic eyes.

The more recent work of Brazilian painter and sculptor, Ana Maria Pacheco, follows in the footsteps of Dali, in some respects, combining images with sculpture in a surreal, but markedly more disturbing way. She was the first non-European artist to be appointed Associate artist from 1996-98 at the National Gallery in London, and in 1999, the gallery premiered a major new work from Pacheco: *Dark Night of the Soul*. The work is an installation comprising twenty larger than life figures carved in wood. The central figure is a naked man bound to a pole, and wearing a black hood, his body pierced with arrows. Four massive black-clad men surround him, whilst a small naked child stares at the victim with an expression of innocence and curiosity. The remaining figures are onlookers, who react to his predicament in a variety of ways, ranging from the terror-struck to the conspiratorial. The man is not identified as or with St. Sebastian, other than through his image itself, and the title of Pacheco's sculpture allows for a broader interpretation, with the modernity of the figures making it a story of martyrdom relevant to our own times. The title of *The Dark Night of the Soul* is relevant in its own way to the legend of the homosexual saint, as this is the name of a text written by the 16th century Spanish Carmelite mystic San Juan de la Cruz (St John of the Cross). The text is a detailed commentary on a poem called *On a Dark Night*, which, although it is included in virtually every anthology of religious poetry, can be read as an account of a nocturnal homosexual assignation between lover and beloved. In words that recall the night spent together by Lazarus and Jesus, the poet writes *Oh, night that guided me, Oh, night more lovely than the dawn, Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed in the Beloved!*

ST. MISHIMA AND THE BEAUTIFUL DEATH

The artist who perhaps has identified most strongly with Sebastian was the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. Mishima was born Kimitake Hiraoka to an upper middle class Tokyo family, and came to be regarded as the *Leonardo da Vinci of modern Japan*; a fittingly queer epithet. From the beginning, his life was set in a slip of myth, being raised by his grandmother, who indulged his whims for fancy clothes and a way of life beyond the masks of the outside world. He pledged as a youth “*I want to make a poem of my life,*” but he would later acknowledge his ephemeral role by saying “*I slip through life as if I were a ghost, neither dead nor alive, making things up as I go along.*” This fantastical life became the basis for Mishima’s first book, *Confessions of a Mask*, which was published in 1949, on the urging of his patron, Yasunari Kawabata, Japan’s premier novelist at the time. It was proclaimed a work of genius and Mishima followed it over the years with a number of skilfully crafted novels (*Thirst for Love*, *The Sound of Waves*, *Forbidden Colours*, and *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*), the four volume novel *Sea of Fertility*, and plays in both a modern style, as well as the traditional No and Kabuki forms.

Mishima infused his work with his knowledge of traditional Japan, which rivalled only that of scholars, but also drew on the literary heritage of the West. He read Swinburne, Wilde, d’Annunzio, Thomas Mann, Cocteau, and Proust, and it was this European style that would later come to wield the greatest influence on his writing. As a writer, Mishima is most commonly linked with Cocteau and d’Annunzio, and the link extends beyond literary style. All three were poets, and all three knew how to devise their own publicity; while Mishima mirrored d’Annunzio’s passion for sport in his own passion for bodybuilding. A natural exhibitionist, Mishima became as famous for his body as he was for his words. The versatility of Cocteau, on the other hand, was something shared by Mishima, but in the words of the French writer, Marguerite Yourcenar: “*Cocteau’s art is the art of the sorcerer and Mishima’s that of the visionary*”

In the life and work of Mishima, the interplay between love and death, between Eros and Thanatos, is most evident. The formative moment for Mishima was the famous incident that he recalls in *Confessions of a Mask*, where as a young man, he experienced arousal for the first time after seeing Guido Reni’s image of the martyrdom of Sebastian. Sebastian has his autobiographical hero in *Confessions of a Mask* write a prose poem celebrating this moment of ecstatic revelation.

This was Sebastian, young captain in the Praetorian guard. And was not such beauty as his a thing destined for death? Did not the robust women of Rome quickly scent his ill-starred fate, as yet unknown to him, and love him for that reason? His blood was coursing with an even fiercer pace than usual within his white flesh, watching for an opening from which to spurt forth when that flesh would be torn asunder. How could the women have failed to hear the tempestuous desires of such blood as this?

His was not a fate to be pitied, in no way was it a pitiable fate. Rather was it proud and tragic, a fate that might even be called radiant.

When one considers well, it seems that many a time, even in the midst of a sweet kiss, a foretaste of the agony of death must have furrowed his brow with a fleeting shadow of pain.

And he must have foreseen, if dimly, that it was nothing less than martyrdom which lay in wait for him along the way; that this brand which fate had set upon him was precisely the token of his apartness from all the ordinary men of earth.

The theme of the martyrdom was carried through into the cover art for one of the editions of *Confessions of a Mask*, which featured a close up image of a torso, wrapped in the loincloth of the saint, and pierced, not by arrows, but with swords. The theme of the saint himself would recur many times in Mishima’s life: He translated d’Annunzio’s *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian*, and supervised its Tokyo performance. He also made the identification with the saint complete by replicating Reni’s image in a photograph with himself as model, as part of a book of photographic images called *Barakei (Torture by Roses)*. The theme of Thanateros was with Mishima constantly, and came into even greater focus in his later years. In his work, it found its way into the four-volume *Sea of Fertility (Spring Snow, Runaway Horses, The Temple of Dawn, and Decay of the Angel)* which explicated the link between violence and sensuality, and the contrast of self-indulgence with self-sacrifice. Mishima

recognized that the spirit of Thanateros was inherent in the code of the samurai, where a glorious death is hoped for, and death is not feared as one imagines oneself dying every morning. In many respects, Mishima represented an invocation of Thanateros, standing with the Western image of St. Sebastian on one side, and the *Hagakure (Hidden Among The Leaves)*, the book that codified samurai ethics, on the other.



Mishima as St. Sebastian

As part of his embracing of Thanateros as represented by the *Hagakure*, Mishima formed a private army, the Tatenokai (or *Shield Society*), made up of a handpicked group of young men, with the aim of revitalising the spirit of the samurai, and imperial Japan. Mishima saw the army as a way of reviving the “*soul of the Samurai within myself*,” while the oath of the Tatenokai spoke to the larger national soul of Japan itself: “*We hereby swear to be the foundation of Kakoku Nippon (Imperial Japan)*.” Mishima convinced high-ranking members of the Japanese army (some with similar right-wing leanings) to sponsor the Tatenokai; a decision which enabled Mishima to make his final flourish in the poem that was his life. On 25 November 1970, Mishima embraced Thanateros for the last time. He finished the final book in his *Sea of Fertility* tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel*, left it with a note stating “*Human life is limited, but I would like to live forever*,” and made his way, with four members of the Tatenokai to the Ichigya army base in Tokyo. Using only the weapons of samurai tradition, they took a general hostage, and had the army gather outside the building, where Mishima could address them, decrying the loss of Japan’s national spirit in the wake of American occupation, and the need to restore traditional worship of the emperor. Mishima then committed hara-kiri, plunging a sword into his stomach and his 21-year old lieutenant and lover, Masakatsu Morita, after three attempts, decapitated him. Morita, now lacking the physical strength to follow Mishima, ordered one of the other Tatenokai to decapitate him. The three remaining men placed the two heads upright together, cried and prayed, and even the captured general murmured the Buddhist pray for the dead: *Namu Amida Butsu*.

There is a remarkable similarity with the death of Mishima and the death of Sebastian. The saint’s piercing by arrows is echoed by the samurai sword that entered Mishima’s stomach, while Sebastian’s death at the orders of the emperor Diocletian is perversely similar to Mishima’s desire to die for the emperor of Japan. In this way, Mishima completed the journey he had begun when he saw Reni’s image of the saint in the throes of the beautiful death, in which, as he himself wrote “*The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy*.” Mishima’s mother seems to have grasped the completion of this journey, when she said: “*Don’t grieve for him. For the first time in his life, he did what he wanted to do.*”

Another queer writer for whom St. Sebastian and his beautiful death appear to have held great significance is Tennessee Williams. A vivid stream of Sebastianian imagery features significantly in the work of Williams, who came from a high church Episcopalian tradition, and later converted to Catholicism. His 1948 poem *San Sebastiano de Sodoma* celebrates both the religious aspects of St. Sebastian's story, as well as the tradition that has made the saint an icon of homosexuality. It is clear that Williams was well aware of the queer subtext of the myth, with the saint being pierced with phallic arrows in “*throat and thigh*,” as Mary plays the role of voyeur, raising “*a corner of a cloud through which to spy*.” In the climax of the poem, the Eucharistic chalice becomes the desecrated anal “*cup*,” which, when pierced in an erotic act, releases its “*sweet, intemperate wine*.”

Traces of the martyred saint can also be seen in Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, where the saint has a namesake in Sebastian Venable. *Suddenly Last Summer* is one of Williams's more poetic dramas, a meditation on desire and cannibalism, which, in this respect, echoes the ideas of Mishima, and of the Sebastian legend itself. It tells how a young woman called Catherine is institutionalised and threatened with the possibility of lobotomy for telling the truth about the death of her cousin, Sebastian Venable, who had been torn apart and eaten by Mexican boys whose sexual favours he sought. Catherine Holly has been brought to the conservatory of the splendid New Orleans home of Sebastian's powerful mother to face her family and a psychiatrist. The conservatory is filled with carnivorous plants and rings with the sounds of the jungle. This is Sebastian's garden, representing his vision of nature that he tried to capture in his poetry but was most vividly depicted in his death. The garden unmistakably echoes the garden in which the martyrdom of St. Sebastian is often depicted in, and its association with homoerotic death confirms this. As an aside, Catherine's institutionalisation and threat of lobotomy is the fate of many women in Williams's work (for example Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*), and was also that of his sister, Rose.

Williams takes the similarity between Sebastian Venable and St. Sebastian beyond the nature of their deaths, and uses the narrative to emphasise the link. Catherine tells the reader that the Mexican beach where her cousin used to attract young men is "*named for Sebastian's name saint...La Playa San Sebastian*". Violet Venable, who claims that her son was chaste and saintly, cements the connection between the two Sebastians with her idealised memory of her son, whose pictures and poetry she treasures religiously: "*She lifts a thin gilt-edged volume from the patio table as if elevating the Host before the altar... Her face suddenly has a different look, the look of a visionary, an exalted religieuse.*" While Sebastian Venable resembles his saintly namesake, his cousin Catherine appears as an incarnation of St. Catherine of Bologna, who kept a diary where she recorded her visions in which the living flesh of Christ was consumed during communion. She was subsequently shut away in a convent because of these visions, much like Williams's Catherine is put into the care of nuns. Williams seems to recall the visions of St. Catherine, and traces the symbolism of the martyred Sebastian to his pagan roots, by depicting Sebastian Venable's death as a pagan Eucharist. As he is pursued, his attackers chant "*Pan.*" a word that means *bread*, but which also references the ambisexual god of Arcadia, who would copulate with boys and girls alike. Catherine Holly, in turn, describes the death of her cousin in gory details that suggest more than just an unfortunate death, but an act of sacred cannibalistic martyrdom.

They had devoured parts of him.... Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives or maybe those jagged tin cans they made music with, they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs. There wasn't a sound any more, there was nothing to see but Sebastian, what was left of him, that looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed! -against that blank white wall....

The violent but beautiful deaths of Sebastian Venable, of Yukio Mishima, and of Saint Sebastian, can each, in some way, be traced back to the cannibalistic and homoerotic instructions of Christ at the Last Supper: "*Take, eat, this is my body.*" In the work of Williams and Mishima, and in that of other queer writers such as William Burroughs, there is a persistent linking of homosexual desire with cannibalism; which as Williams emphasises, has an Eucharistic quality about it. The same theme can be seen in the lyrics of the band Coil, who, in *Circles of Mania* sing: *You get eaten alive By the perfect lover. I fell in to a burning ring, A burning ring of knives, And the knives slide in, They slide deep into my skin, And they open me so wide, That you stick your head inside, You get sewn inside alive, You get eaten alive By the perfect lover. When you've swallowed one, You just swallow another, To drive away this hunger, You stay inside forever...*

The cannibalistic death of Sebastian Venable on the beaches named for his Roman namesake bears an unsettling similarity with the death of the Italian director, painter, and poet, Pier Paolo Pasolini. In 1975, on the night between All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, Pasolini was murdered on the shores of Ostia, a few kilometres outside of Rome, by a seventeen-year-old rentboy. The boy first clubbed Pasolini savagely, and then drove over his chest with a car. According to the autopsy report, the cause of death was "*the tearing up of the chest*". What is remarkable about the death of Pasolini is that it

was an act of martyrdom set in a slip of myth, in which everything was taken into account to make this final act, like that of Mishima, an intentional work of art. Pasolini's art and life were violent, and he had long prophesied his own death in his work. In his *Stylish Beast*, he wrote:

"Just because it's a holiday. And in protest I want to die of humiliation. I want them to find me dead with my penis sticking out, my trousers spotted with white sperm, among the millet plants covered with blood-red liquid. I am convinced that also the last acts, to which I alone, the actor, am witness, in a river that no one comes to - will, eventually, acquire a meaning"

Pasolini was well aware that a martyr is not a victim, but someone who chooses their fate down to the very last detail. To be a martyr is to *bear witness*, as Pasolini says in *Stylish Beast*, where one's death is an act *to which I alone, the actor, am witness, in a river that no one comes to*. Pasolini's death is full of this intent and planning, with circumstances (or himself) conspiring to make his death the death of a Corn King martyr, whose death closes one door and opens another. Not only did his death occur during the pagan festival of Samhain, when the veils between the worlds are at their thinnest, but it took place at Ostia, a place that explicitly refers to a sacrificial victim, the *host* of the Eucharist. The parallels with the death of Sebastian Venerable are striking, with both beach-based deaths coming at the hands of young boys: the lovers who destroy and consume the beloved.

Again, it is Coil, in their song *Ostia*, who provide interesting insight into the death of Pasolini as a Pagan-Christian martyrdom for art and renewal. With lyrics that recall d'Annunzio's description of Sebastian transformed into the earth, as a *kind of corporeal topography- a human body with valleys, hills and plains*, they reference another dying Corn King, the biblical Samson:

*There's honey in the hollows,
And the contours of the body.
A sluggish golden river,
A sickly golden trickle,
A golden, sticky trickle
You can hear the bones humming
And the car reverses over
The body in the basin...
Killed to keep the world turning.*

The death of the homosexual martyr is not something limited to the conscious self-apotheosis of people like Mishima and Pasolini, but something that in a homophobic culture, can be forced upon anyone who is gay, or even suspected of being gay. The most striking example of this in recent times is the murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man from Wyoming, whose attackers tied him to a fence in the cold after beating him, and then left him to die; the blood washed from his face by tears. Like Sebastian, Shepard could be described as effeminate, and so his martyrdom was not based simply on his homosexuality, but on the challenge his very existence posed to the strict laws set down by societies' demarcation of gender. The death of Matthew Shepard was shocking in its brutality, but certainly not unique in America, where politicians often feel there is no reason to regard attacks on people based on their sexuality (or gender identity) as a hate crime like attacks based on race or ethnicity.

Another form of the beautiful death again intimately connected with cannibalism and homoeroticism is vampirism. The vampire's drinking of blood, so vilified in popular culture, is really a continuation of the communion instructions of Jesus: *Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins*. There is certainly a persistent vein of sanguine themes in the pagan predecessors of Jesus and Sebastian as dying corn kings undergoing the beautiful death. Anemones spring from the blood of Adonis, hyacinths from the blood of Apollo's lover Hyacinthus, and violets from the blood of Attis. The very symbolism of the blood flower highlights the original idea of the blood spilt by the dying corn king as a male replacement for life-giving menstrual blood, as menstruation is associated with flowers in many cultures; since a woman bleeding during her period is a *flow-er*. In one Gnostic story of creation, the primal Psyche (soul) loves Eros, and as part of the sexual act, causes her blood to flow, from which the rose grows; while in Native American mythology, Coyote gives menstruation to a young woman and declares that she has "flowers." Similarly, in India, *kula* (*flower*) is a euphemism for menstrual blood, with the lotus being

the pre-eminent floral representation of the vagina in Tantra, and menstrual blood as the elixir of life. This menstrual elixir also appears elsewhere in Hindu mythology as *Soma*, in Persia as *Haoma* or *amrita*, in Egypt as *Sa*, in Greece as *ambrosia*, and in northern European mythology as the lunar mead. Blood has always possessed associations with protection, purification, and salvation, and so nothing is more powerful than blood that bleeds from no wound and doesn't result in death. As Dracula says in Bram Stoker's novel: *the blood is life*.

Some Gnostic sects took the communion instructions of Jesus to their natural and literal conclusion, and used menstrual blood as a sacrament. The term Borborians (*borboros* meaning *dirt*) was given to a number of Gnostic sects (including the Peratics, Barbelites, Ophites, Haimatittoi, and the Entychites) who would give blood as communion, saying: "*Here is the blood of Christ.*" The Borborians believed that everything in nature contained the divine spark, and so they would collect these things and partake of them sacramentally. This practice extended in particular to menses and semen, and was based on a quote from the *Gospel of Eve*: "*I am dispersed in all things, and in gathering me you gather yourself.*" Another source of the doctrine was the *Gospel of Thomas*, where Jesus says: "*If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.*" The Borborians groups interpreted the blood of the Passover as menstrual, and said the cord of Rahab, the harlot of Jericho, was stained with menstrual blood. A quote from Revelations 22:2, which speaks of a "*tree of life which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month,*" was also understood to be a metaphor of menstrual blood. The Barbelites in particular taught that the power of the goddess Barbelo was dispersed amongst the archons, and that she appeared to them in seductive beauty and gave them pleasure, taking her power into herself through their seed. They imitated this, saying: "*We are collecting the power of Pruneikos from bodies by their fluids.*"

The menstrual sacrament of the Borborians was revived in 1800s France, by Pierre-Michel Eugene Vintras, the Catholic Satanist whose mentor was a Madam Bouche who lived near St. Sulpice and went by the name of Sister Salome. Vintras founded the Church of Carmel in 1839, after he received a letter from the archangel Michael, followed by visions of the archangel, the Holy Spirit, St. Joseph, and the virgin Mary. He was informed that he was the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, and he was to found a new religious order and proclaim the coming of the age of the Holy Spirit. Vintras travelled the countryside attracting followers with his missionary zeal, and holding masses like the *Sacrifice of the Glory of Melchizedek*, and the *Provicimal Sacrifice of Mary*, which were performed in the nude with chalices of blood and wafers soaked in menstrual blood, and ended with sex. The menstrual Eucharist also occurs in Aleister Crowley's religion of Thelema, where sacramental cakes of light used for the Gnostic Mass include "*the blood of the moon*", as *The Book of the Law* coyly puts it.

With the obvious associations of blood with menstruation, it becomes clear why the iconography of the vampire is often the same as that of the goddess, with both the goddess and the vampire being linked with night, blood, full moons, as well as totem animals such as bats and wolves. Several goddesses, particularly crone goddesses, have vampiric traits, including the Mesopotamian Lilitu (later to become Lilith in Jewish folklore), the Hindu Kali, the Aztec Coatlicue, and the Greek Lamia (or her multiple form as the Lamiai); a bisexual succubus who drank the blood of others. A recent short story by Carol Leonard has played on this connection between menstruation and vampirism. Leonard's *Medea* tells how a womyn called Hannah encounters Medea, a vampire, who gives her a herstory lesson, providing a possible origin for the vampire mythos. Medea says: "*Lunar blood was the basic ingredient in the Great Rite. Menstruating priestesses of the Goddess would collect their holy blood for the sacrament - the blood of the goddess Charis, goddess of sexual love. Did you know that the word eucharist, meaning communion, comes from the name Charis?*"

There are also vampiric traits in the legends of the dying corn spirit, such as in the story of Attis, where following his death, Cybele and Agdistis plead with Zeus to restore him to life. Zeus refuses, but he does grant that "*the body should not decay, that his hairs should always grow, that [one] of his fingers should live, and should be kept ever in motion.*" (Significantly, this was the finger that signified anal intercourse in Greco-Roman symbolism.) In this way, Attis is not reborn as such, but remains in a state of never-fading un-death, much like the fate of vampires; especially the beautiful vampires found in the books of Anne Rice.

The vampire has always evoked an aura of sexuality that, if not homosexual, can at least be called pansexual. It is fitting then that the transition of the vampire from a dreaded monster of folklore to the

modern charismatic literary figure should have occurred around the same time as the burgeoning of the Decadent and Symbolist art styles, with their attendant associations with homosexuality. There were hints of the queer vampire before this period though, as in, for example, the 16th century poem *On a Dark Night* by St. John of the Cross. In the poem, there is not only the obvious homosexual theme, but also one of vampirism, where Jesus takes the role of seductive vampire: *With his gentle hand he wounded my neck, And caused all my senses to be suspended*. Two centuries later the queer vampire (or at least a vampire-like character) took female form in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Christabel* (1816), in which the young maiden of the title comes across a mysterious woman called Geraldine, and takes her back to her castle to take care of her. As they prepare for bed, Christabel notices that one of Geraldine's breasts appears to belong to a much older woman. Geraldine initiates lovemaking and, as Christabel falls into a trance, chants a spell. When Christabel awakens the next morning, she notices that Geraldine's wrinkled breast appears youthful, and Geraldine herself appears more beautiful than ever. After Geraldine's departure, Christabel begins to think increasingly that the night spent with the mysterious woman has been a dream. Coleridge's Geraldine is more goddess than vampire, echoing mythological encounters White Goddesses such as Hela and the loathly lady of Arthurian legend, who test the charity of those they encounter, and reward those who do not blanch or shy away in horror.

Three years after Coleridge wrote *Christabel*, the word *vampire* came to the fore in John Polidori's *The Vampyre: A Tale*, which he wrote as part of the famous writing contest proposed by Lord Byron at the Villa Diodati, Switzerland (where Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley were also in attendance). The central character of *The Vampyre* is Lord Ruthven, a nobleman and vampire who is suave, aloof, pansexual, and almost certainly based on Byron, with whom Polidori was infatuated. In the years that followed, other Romantic, Symbolist and Decadent writers approached vampirism, such as Charles Baudelaire, who linked vampirism to lesbianism, and Oscar Wilde, whose eponymous character in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has been described by numerous literary critics (including Camille Paglia) as vampiric. As already mentioned, Dorian has an interest in St. Sebastian, which is shared by Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*; a work which also includes allusions to vampirism. Mann has Aschenbach envision his beloved Tadzio and other young men taking part in a vampiric ritual to a phallic god: *"His senses reeled in the steam of panting bodies... They laughed, they howled, they thrust their pointed staves into each other's flesh and licked the blood as it ran down."*

The male homosexual vampire also occurs in the 1884 *Manor*, by the early gay rights activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, which tells how Har, a fifteen-year-old youth living in the Faeroe Islands, is rescued from drowning during a tempest by a nineteen-year-old named Manor, who lives on a neighbouring island. The two young men fall in love, but several months later, Manor drowns in a storm while on a whaling expedition. When Manor's body is washed ashore, Har throws *"himself sobbing over the beloved body and [tastes] again for a moment the bliss of an embrace."* Manor is buried, but afterward visits Har as he lies in bed, kissing him with icy lips. The following night he visits Har again, this time wounding his chest and sucking blood as the two make love. When the villagers discover what has transpired, they destroy Manor with a stake, and the devastated Har dies of loneliness. Har's mother honours his last request, that he be buried alongside Manor.

The male vampires of Polidori, Wilde, Mann, and Ulrichs also have their female counterparts from this period of literature, and the most notable of these is J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1871). This is the tale of Carmilla, a noblewoman who returns after being dead one hundred and fifty years as a beautiful, seductive vampire. She and a young woman named Laura become lovers; Laura enjoys the passionate embraces, but her vital energy is nevertheless depleted. Carmilla is, however, depicted somewhat sympathetically, pleading with Laura, *"Think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours."* Another female vampire is found in Cora Linn Daniels' 1891 novel *Sardia: A Story of Love*, which tells the story of a young woman called Lulu, who is loved by both a man named Guy, and the Countess Sybil Visonti. The Countess is a vampiric figure if not a true blood-drinking vampire, who tells Lulu: *"You cannot get rid of me... Nothing shall drive me away."* The lesbian writer Renee Vivien evoked the possessive and powerful aura of Carmilla and the Countess Visonti, weaving together the influences of Sappho and Baudelaire, by depicting herself as a vampire, telling her lover, *"I believe I take from you a bit of your fleeting life when I embrace you."*

The culmination of the male and female homoeroticism of these vampires was Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, which flirts with both male and female homosexuality. It has a scene where passion between womyn occurs briefly, but more vividly has the Count trying to keep Jonathan for himself when he chases the three vampire sisters away, warning "*This man belongs to me.*" The Count's line was one of the first Stoker wrote when he began writing *Dracula* just one month after his friend, compatriot, and rival Oscar Wilde had been convicted of sodomy. In her recent *Homoerotic History of Dracula*, Talia Schaffer argues that this date was significant, and that Stoker was a closeted homosexual, who modelled *Dracula* on the events of the Wilde scandal, and used the novel to counter the disapproving public stance he took as he distanced himself from Wilde.

The figures of the vampire and St. Sebastian have much in common. Both represent a blurring of gender boundaries, with the beautiful Sebastian being echoed in Anne Rice's androgynous vampires who are so glorious that they seem worthy of worship, or Poppy Z. Brite's beautiful, listless vampires who could easily hide in a gothic cub. In a society with heavily defined gender roles, the vampire biting the neck of a male victim immediately becomes a transgressive homosexual act; which explains why cinematic vampires, and *Dracula* in particular, rarely attack male victims, and instead are cast as staunchly heterosexual lotharios. Like Sebastian's association with the medieval plague, and with the modern plague of AIDS, modern interpretations of vampires have been qualified by an understanding of AIDS. Sebastian, the eternally young inoculation against the plague, mirrors the vampire that stays forever beautiful, their veins flowing with a sacred blood that inoculates against death. The parallels between vampirism's Dark Gift (as Anne Rice calls it) and AIDS are all the more poignant in light of the growth of barebacking (unprotected sex) amongst some gay men. Here, in what is literally a dance between Thanatos and Eros, HIV-negative men purposely put themselves at risk through unprotected sex with HIV-positive men. The virus becomes apotheosised as *The Gift*, and its attendant language emphasises ideas of communion, rich in the metaphors of procreative insemination. Gifters imagine themselves giving a vital part of themselves to the men they infect: "*It gives me a thrill to know that I have helped bring him to his destiny, inseminated him with my own substance. It's what he asked for.*" For the receivers of *The Gift*, the HIV virus has been so iconised in gay culture that they feel they will not be truly gay until they have the virus. The irony is that the images of emaciated victims of AIDS that so typified the early years of the epidemic are rarely seen now, as HIV patients are given a range of steroids to maintain body weight. Used in combination with weight-training, the drugs can produce the sculptured bodies so admired in gay culture, so that like Sebastian immortalised for eternity, or the beautiful vampire, those marked to die from HIV are often the most beautiful.

*"And Oh, the Shower of Stain -
When Winds - upset the Basin -
And spill the Scarlet Rain."
-Emily Dickinson*

SEBASTIAN SET IN SILVER

The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian has proved to be an important source of inspiration for avant-garde and queer filmmakers. It is referenced in Paul Schrader's *Mishima*, where the young Mishima is shown coming across Reni's painting, but it also appears in its own right as the theme of three particular movies. The most famous of these is *Sebastiane* of 1976, which was written and directed by Derek Jarman and Paul Humfress, and was Jarman's first feature film. He had previously worked on three movies, including designing the sets for Ken Russell's story of the possessions at Loudon, *The Devils*. Russell had already referenced the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian in his 1965 film *Debussy*, in which one of Russell's characteristically controversial scenes featured a womyn attached to a cross in water, being shot through with arrows.

Sebastiane is a visually striking work (a characteristic that Jarman would carry through into his other films), and is notable for being the first film to be filmed entirely in Latin. The film affirmed the homoerotic reading of the Sebastian legend, telling how the saint was exiled from Diocletian's orgiastic court to a far-flung outpost for refusing to sleep with the emperor. Here he experiences visions in the form of a leopard boy, and resists the advances of the centurion Severus. The centurion begins to torture Sebastian which makes the saint descend into sexual ecstasy fantasising he is having sex with Jesus. As Sebastian chooses the visions of sex with Jesus over the desires of the centurion,

the centurion increases the brutality of the torture. Ultimately, shot through with arrows, Sebastian dies in Jesus-sex ecstasy.



Poster for *Sebastiane*

Just as images of Sebastian had stood as encoded symbol of homosexual identity down through the centuries, so Jarman saw *Sebastiane* and his other films in a similar light. While at this early point in his career, Jarman was reticent about being labelled a gay filmmaker, he nevertheless saw *Sebastiane* as an equivalent of the works of Cocteau and Wilde that he had read as a boy in an attempt to make sense of his sexuality. *"My films are a message of solidarity to people who have been dispossessed. Because when I made Sebastiane there was no way of imaging yourself as gay, you couldn't even see gays on television, so how did you come to terms with yourself?"*

In 1984, the Czechoslovakian director Petr Weigl (whose other releases include a filmed version of Strauss's *Salome*) released his film *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*. He based the film on both d'Annunzio's play and Debussy's music, and shot it on location in Ephesus, Didyma, Aydin, and Sardis, where the ruins provided an appropriate historical backdrop. The actor Michael Biehn played Sebastian, while the Orchestre National De France and Choeurs de Radio France performed the music, under the direction of conductor Sir Colin Davis. Unfortunately, the film was only released in Germany, and has not been issued on video.

The simply titled *Saint* of 1996 returned the martyrdom to black and white, with an 11 minute film originally shot on Super-8. Once again, *Saint* combines the legend's elements of faith and devotion with its undercurrent of homoeroticism: *Thunder. Stormclouds approach ominously. Hands with strings entangle the body like snakes. Fingers drill holes in the air like arrows. People watch. The arrows strike wounds in Sebastian's white skin. The boy collapses. Blood drips. A pearly tear falls. The stormclouds pour the first rain in Sebastian's gaping, lifeless mouth and the crystal waterskin breaks.*

Bavo Defurne, the Belgian director of *Saint*, approached the project emphasising the organic and tactile aspect of the medium. He hand processed the film's negative, saying *"Like the people, plants and animals that appear in the film, the film stock itself felt as if it was organic, its very unpredictability enabling me to achieve richly contrasting tones. I loved the tactile - almost erotic - touch of the film material."* The depiction of Sebastian by actor Olaf Nollen has been described as the most beautiful in cinematic history, with an unmoving, placid expression almost devastating, expressing uncomfortably desirable. Defurne's build-up to the firing of the first arrow has an agonising tension, with a brilliantly timed false start that suggests a moment that is worthy of Alfred Hitchcock.

The theme of Sebastian's martyrdom also occurs in *L'escorte*, a film by Denis Langlois. The film has associations with the Mishimaesque ideas of sex and death through its addressing of the subject of Aids, albeit in a comedy of manners that emphasises the life of its characters over a simple wallowing in maudlin. Sebastian is central to all the main characters of the film. Nathalie practices Kyudo, Japanese archery as a form of Zen meditation; the HIV-positive Christian paints a violent modern version of the saint's martyrdom; while his best friend, Philippe, remembers being tied to a tree in a recurring dream. The motif of being tied to a tree came from a childhood memory of Langlois: *"I remember being tied to a tree by some kids who left me there all alone. I was really scared because I was tied up and abandoned and at the mercy of anyone who might pass by. It was while I was writing that the Saint-Sebastian thing came to me. With its dramatic kitsch side, it quickly became a key image of the film... In the film, Steve tied to a pole, represents Saint-Sebastian. It seems to me that this icon has become the perfect symbol for our times, when love and death are more intricately woven than ever. Steve is a romantic."*

SALOME

Saint Sebastian's status as an icon of Decadent art pales in comparison with another figure: Salome, the dancer of the seven veils, and the woman whose actions led to the death of the New Testament prophet John the Baptist. According to the biblical record, John was an apocalyptic prophet, a zealot, and the older cousin of Jesus. He taught throughout Judaea, and eventually angered the ruling tetrarch, Herod, who imprisoned him for saying that Herod should not have married Herodias, his sister in law. Herodias sought the death of John, but Herod, afraid of the prophet's powers, would not agree. But on the day of Herod's birthday, when a feast was held, Herodias sent her daughter, Salome, to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils before him. In gratitude, Herod offered the young woman the gift of anything she wanted. The erudite Salome asked for the head of John in a charger, and honour-bound, Herod reluctantly agreed to the request. John was beheaded, and his head was given to Salome and then to her mother, Herodias.

Although much of the New Testament is set in a slip of myth, the story of Salome and John the Baptist is one of the most strikingly mythical, and reads considerably more like a mystery drama, instead of documented fact. This is because it is, indeed, a mystery drama. There are hints throughout the text, and other apocryphal versions of the story, suggesting that Salome was in fact the lover of John the Baptist, and that she was also a priestess, a sacred prostitute, Babalon incarnate. She is the killer and beheader of John the Baptist, a man who has assumed the purple mantle of her consort, a magickal office that is only temporal, and ultimately results in the sacrifice of its incumbent. By dancing the Dance of the Seven Veils, Salome called upon the destructive power of the goddess Babalon that brought about the end of John, and in so doing she intimated both Babalon, and her predecessors.

The ritual performed by Salome can be traced back to Sumeria and Babylon, where the same highly charged relationship between Salome and John the Baptist can be seen in the goddess Inanna/Ishtar and her sacrificial consort Dumuzi/Tammuz. Like Salome, Inanna had seven veils that she gradually removed during her descent into the underworld realm of her sister, Ereshkigal. The myths of Sumeria tell how Inanna sat in heaven, with no knowledge of the underworld, until she opened her ear to it, and desired to experience it. She deserted her temples in the seven cities of Sumer, dressed herself in royal robes and beads of lapis, and descended into the underworld. As she travelled deeper into the underworld, Inanna passed through seven gates, and at each of them was made to remove one of the items she was wearing. Finally, when she came to the throne room of her sister Ereshkigal, she stood completely naked before the queen of hel.



Inanna

Ereshkigal judged Inanna, fastening the eye of death on her, and struck her so that she turned into a rotting corpse that was hung from a hook on a wall. But Inanna's absence was noted in the upperworld, and after her Prime Minister, Ninshubur, petitioned the god Enki, two creatures were sent into the underworld to find her. They were made from dirt and were neither male nor female, but were known as *kurgarra* and *galatur*. When they came upon Ereshkigal groaning as if she was in labour, and moaned in sympathy with her, she was pleased and offered them anything she wanted. When

offered the *water-gift, the river in its fullness, or the grain-gift, the fields in harvest*, they declined and instead asked for the corpse of Inanna. The corpse was duly given to them, and the *kurgarra* sprinkled it with the food of life, while the *galatur* used the water of life, and so Inanna was revived. But because no one could leave the underworld unscathed, just as the Norse goddess Hela firmly keeps what she has, Inanna was unable to return to the world above unless someone took her place. As Inanna made her way up to the earth with the *galla*, the demons of the underworld, attached to her, she was met by her faithful Ninshubar. The *galla* said that Inanna was free to leave as they would take Ninshubar in her stead, but the goddess protested fiercely, speaking of Ninshubar as her *sukkal* and constant support, who was both her sage and warrior. She also refused to have her two sons taken in her place, and instead, she gave the *galla* her husband, Dumuzi, who had not cried for his departed wife, but had instead relished his new role as sole ruler of Sumer. As Ereshkigal had done to her, Inanna fastened the eye of death on Dumuzi, and he was taken by the *galla*.

In the stories of both Inanna and Salome we see the idea of the veil representing initiation and a progression deeper into the mysteries of the underworld. In Salome's dance, the removal of each successive veil brings the death of John the Baptist to even greater certainty, while Inanna's removal of her veils brings her deeper into the realm of her sister, and closer to her own imminent death. Each veil, then, represents a division between worlds, just as the Western European festival of Samhain or Halloween is seen as a time when the veils between the worlds thin.

The pagan archetype that lies beneath the legend of Salome and John the Baptist goes some way to explaining why it was widely believed that the events in the gospels were not the first time Herodias and Salome had appeared in the biblical record. The animosity between Salome-Herodias and John the Baptist has been credited to the fact that, as the gospels attest, the Baptist was thought to be the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, while by association, Salome-Herodias was the reincarnation of the Sidonian queen Jezebel. Jezebel was married to the Hebrew King Ahab, and had sponsored the worship of the god Baal in Israel. Elijah opposed her reign, killed her priests, and sought her death, getting his way when she fell from her window and was eaten by dogs. Although Elijah had seemingly triumphed over Jezebel, later in her incarnation as Salome-Herodias, it was she who finally gained the upper hand by having him killed in his incarnation of John the Baptist.

The legend of Salome and John the Baptist has an astronomical dimension that was also applied to their archetypal predecessors. The constellation of Orion was associated with several distinctive figures, including Nimrod, a character from the book of Genesis who was called a great hunter before the lord. Other Orion figures from the same cultural mythology are a trio of related characters: Samson, Elijah, and John the Baptist. These three were all regarded as wild prophets, but only the hero Samson can be defined as a hunter (once having killed a lion in true archetypal fashion), and appreciated seamlessly as an Orion archetype. They all, though, had a strong relationship with a woman manifesting as the death goddess: Samson with his Philistine lover Delilah; Elijah with Queen Jezebel; and John the Baptist with both Salome and her mother Herodias.

The identification of these sacrificial king types with the Orion constellation is confirmed in other cultures with the constellation also appears as a representation of the sacrificial king. The Orion of Greek mythology was a mighty hunter who was killed by the goddess Artemis, when she saw him swimming in the ocean and mistook him for an animal. In Egypt, Orion was known as Sahu and represented the god Osiris, who was killed by his brother Set, and whose wife, Isis, also had seven veils. Isis was represented astrally as Sothis, the star of Sirius, and this association can be applied to the other examples of the goddess and the sacrificed king. The mythic associations of the constellation also include the theme of water, which is represented astrally by the celestial river of the Milky Way. Orion swam in the ocean, the remains of Osiris were carried away by the river Nile, while Aurvandil (a figure from Norse mythology associated with the constellation) was once carried across the twelve-fold underworld river of Elivagar. The river motif is less obvious in the story of Samson, but it features prominently in those of Elijah and John the Baptist: Elijah once crossed the river Jordan by parting the waters like Moses, while John baptised people in the very same river.

John the Baptist is not the only sacrificial king in the New Testament, and his contemporary Jesus figures in much the same role. Like John, Jesus was twinned with a powerful female figure, Mary Magdalene, and can be seen astrally as the Orion constellation, just as Mary can be seen as the star of Sirius. There is, however, a marked difference between John and Jesus, as the latter rejected his relationship with the goddess, and instead made the sacrifice a matter wholly related to himself.

Rather than acting as the consort of the goddess, Jesus took the opportunity of a ritual death as a means to elevate himself to the status of a god, while rejecting the goddess who made it possible. Orthodox Christianity, who sought a monopoly on the titles of Christ and Messiah, suppressed this once widespread heresy. However, strains of this idea continued in the beliefs of some Gnostic sects, and in the ideas of groups that, although they cannot strictly be called Gnostic, represent an alternative view of Christianity. One such group, who still exist today in Syria, are the Mandaeans, who believe that John the Baptist was the real saviour and messiah, and that Jesus was an impostor who, like Paul after him, perverted and corrupted the original message. A similar sect, the Johannites, which may also continue to exist, believed the same, and venerated the image of the head of John. It has been argued that Leonardo da Vinci was a member of this sect, and that he produced the famous Shroud of Turin as a mockery of Jesus and his followers; in that he used his own image, which was then worshipped as a true likeness of their Christ. The beliefs of the Mandaeans and Johannites were given confirmation of a kind with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In these, mention is made of conflict between the Wicked Priest and the Teacher of Righteousness, corresponding to Jesus and the Baptist respectively.

The association that John the Baptist has with Gnosticism is significant because it is possible that Salome was a pivotal figure in the melee of magick and mystery religions that gave birth to this form of mysticism. According to Barbara Thiering, Salome is the same person as Helena, a prostitute who became the companion of the arch-heretic Simon Magus. Simon Magus appears briefly in the historically unreliable New Testament as a charlatan who tries to buy salvation from the Christian apostles, but his true importance goes well beyond the somewhat comic figure he is painted as there. The authors of the New Testament sought to belittle his status, because he was actually a rival of Jesus, the true inheritor of the mantle of John the Baptist.

Simon Magus was the son of a Jewish mage, but was born in Samaria, and educated in the great hub of learning that was Alexandria. He was the disciple of an Arab mystic, also from Samaria, called Dositheus, who had been a follower of John the Baptist; as Simon Magus had himself been. Amongst the many manuscripts discovered at Nag Hammadi, there is a short text called *Revelations of Dositheus* (also known as the *Three Steles of Seth*), which Dositheus is not thought to have written himself, but which speaks to the weight that his name must have carried. Dositheus led a group of thirty disciples, a number that may be related to the thirty aeons of Valentinian Gnostic cosmology. Of these thirty disciples, twenty-nine were male, and one was female, and named Helena. If Helena were indeed Salome, she would have been held in high esteem, being the direct link with the deceased Baptist, and indeed, his initiatrix.

Dositheus recognized Simon Magus as an advanced soul, and following the death of Dositheus, Simon was given the leadership of the Dositheans. The role of Simon was much like that of Jesus. Like Jesus, Simon could claim spiritual descent from John the Baptist, and like Jesus, he would perform innumerable signs and miracles, including the act of levitation that is mentioned in the book of Acts. But unlike Jesus, or at least the public image of Jesus, Simon not only accepted womyn among his number, but also venerated the Feminine as the source of all life. Drawing on the Greek and Eastern roots that Gnosticism would emerge from, he taught a cosmological system in which there were seven heavens, governed by three pairs of twin-gendered powers (the traditional Gnostic concept of aeons), which had been born out of the womb of Epinoia, or Ennoia. Epinoia was a goddess, the intelligence of god, much like the Gnostic's goddess of wisdom, Sophia, and they were both credited with giving birth to God the Father, who only received that title after the goddess gave it to him.

Simon travelled to the coastal city of Tyre and met a holy prostitute called Helena who became his companion. This Helena may have been the same Helena-Salome that Simon knew from the Dositheans; although the name Helena may have also been a generic form of title for priestesses of the goddess, just as Christ and Messiah were for the sacrificial king. Which ever the case may be, Simon considered this Helena to be the reincarnation of Helen of Troy, as well as the goddess forms of Inanna and Athena; although incarnation, or manifestation, is probably the more appropriate term. But first and foremost, Simon regarded her as the embodiment of Epinoia, while he was Nous (*The Thought of God*). He worshipped her as Pistis-Sophia-Prunikos, or *Faith-Wisdom-Holy Whore*, the original word made flesh, from whom Nous, the thought made flesh in Simon, had emerged. Through the divine couple of Helena-Epinoia and Simon-Nous (although primarily through Helena), salvation

could be attained by those who accepted their incarnation. Unlike the soon to arrive Pauline brand of Christianity, this salvation was by grace, and without need of works. Thus, those saved were able to act however they liked from then on, without any fear of retribution or a final judgement.

This period of early Gnosticism sees a striking descent of tradition through several couples who took the roles of teachers: John the Baptist and Salome, Dositheus and Helena, and Simon Magus and Helena. The constant in each of these couple is Salome-Helena, and although John the Baptist acted as the first visible exponent of this new system, it was Salome who was the actual font of the tradition. She was the scarlet womyn and the physical incarnation of the tradition who passed it to Dositheus, and then to Simon Magus. This, then, was a remarkable womyn; one whose true role has been frequently downplayed but whose importance may have been sensed by the artists and poets who have invoked her in their art.

Barbara Thiering's interpretation of Salome and Simon Magus is based on information encoded within the New Testament, and the book of Revelation in particular, using a technique using words with double meaning called Peshet. In her take on early Christianity, Simon Magus was the adviser of Herod Antipas, siding with him in his feud against the royal Herods, and as such, was behind John's death. Based on a peshet interpretation, the head of the Baptist was not his real head, but rather a headband bearing the letters that signified his rank; a peshet meaning that is always given to the word *kephale* (*head*). Thiering appears to act as an apologist for Salome-Helena, placing the blame on Simon Magus, though she also points out that the reason the writer of Mark's gospel emphasises the role of Salome was to assuage rumours that it was Jesus who was responsible for the death of the Baptist. In one of the fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls, written at a time corresponding to the arrest of John the Baptist, the Wicked Priest is accused of plotting against the Teacher of Righteousness. Jesus had a justified claim to the title of king, as the gospels emphasise by recounting his lineage, but he also sought to claim the separate and quite distinct title of priest, which was also inherited by birth, and not ordination. John had opposed him in this, and because of this, Jesus, with the ironic title of the Wicked Priest, may have wanted him dead for purely political reasons.

Thiering gives several instances in which Salome-Helena appears in a veiled guise throughout the New Testament. She appears as the Samaritan womyn, the Syrophoenician womyn, as Martha of Bethany, and as Sapphira in the Acts of the Apostles. Thiering further states that Salome-Helena was also known as Luna (Moon), a name or title of some significance to heretical interpretations of the Salome myth. The most striking coded reference to Salome-Helena is in the book of Revelations, where her role as a sacred prostitute is emphasised in the depiction of her as Babalon the Great, Mother of Harlots. Carried away into the wilderness, the prophet tells how he: *saw a womyn sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the womyn was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written: Mystery Babalon the Great, The Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth. And I saw the womyn drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her I wondered with great admiration.*

Salome's involvement in the ritual death of the Baptist and her coded appearances throughout the New Testament are not her only appearance in the biblical record, because she is named as one of three womyn who stood in silent vigil at the crucifixion of Jesus as he appeared to die. The womyn beside her were Mary, his mother, and Mary Magdalene, his lover. Like Salome, both womyn were sacred prostitutes, priestesses of the mysteries that the death of Jesus represented the culmination of, but which would soon be subverted to create a new patriarchal religion.

Jesus was born into the mysteries of the goddess, and despite his largely male following during his life, it is apt that three powerful priestesses attended his death. In the apocryphal book known as the *Protoevangelium*, or the *Revelation of James* (a gospel originally considered to be authentic, but which was later removed from the canon), Mary was presented as a sacred prostitute who conceived her son whilst spinning a thread of scarlet in the temple in which she was resident. The name Mary itself, the Greek form of the Hebrew *Miriam*, like Salome, was a Gnostic title of female office and rank. The *Protoevangelium* provides another clue to the mysteries into which Jesus was born as it says that Salome was the mid-wife at his birth. It goes on to relate how Salome tested Mary's hymen after the birth of Jesus, and found it still intact; perhaps the only gynaecological examination recorded in

scripture. The *Protoevangelium* was a major influence on the evolution of Mariology, with its unashamed adoration of Mary, and its confirmation of the virgin birth.

The other womyn at the crucifixion of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, stands as an equal of Helena-Salome, or perhaps the inheritor of her mantle. The name Mary, which was also applied to Salome as Mary Salome, was not only the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *Miriam*, but is linguistically, and thematically, related to *myrrh*. Like Mary Salome and Mary his mother, myrrh appears at both the beginning and the end of the life of Jesus. The Magi had brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the infant Jesus at his birth, while he was offered vinegar mixed with myrrh as he was dying, and his body was covered in a mixture of myrrh and aloes when it was brought down from the cross. The three Marys were myrrh-bearers, priestesses enacting the role of death goddess; as the fact that they alone visited the tomb of Jesus confirms. This function has pagan parallels in the Jesus' Greek counterpart, Adonis, whose mother was the temple-maiden Myrrha, and in whose rites myrrh was used as an aphrodisiac. Myrrh was a common symbol of death throughout the ancient world, just as the name Mary, and its pagan precedents, was often applied to the death goddess.

Like Salome's dance of the seven veils with its pagan precedents in Inanna and Isis, Mary Magdalene was also associated with the number seven. She appears in the gospel record as a womyn out of whom seven demons were cast, and these demons can be compared to the seven guardians of the gates through which Inanna had to pass on her journey into the underworld. Mary Magdalene also shares Salome's association with the decapitated head, and she is frequently shown in the company of a skull.

SALOME'S WIDE RANGING THREADS

As we have seen, the theme underlying the relationship between Salome and John the Baptist (and that of the Magdalene and Jesus) is similar to what underlies the legend of St. Sebastian's martyrdom, with John figuring as a dying consort of the goddess, just like the beautiful Sebastian. This connection is confirmed by Salome's name, which means *Peace*. *Peace* is also the meaning of the name Irene, the womyn who nursed the wounded Sebastian, and whose name was also that of a heretical nun who taught the virtues of nudity and castration. With Irene's role as one of the dove-shaped Horae of Aphrodite, it is interesting to note the symbolism of the dove in the New Testament, where it appears at that crucial moment of John's baptising of Jesus. As Jesus emerges from the water and dove descends, a voice is heard saying: "*This is my beloved son.*" Although the dove is identified as the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, various Gnostics groups interpreted it further as Sophia, the goddess of wisdom. In Gnostic kozmology, Sophia appears in two aspects: as the embodiment of wisdom, and as a fallen womyn that incarnates in other fallen womyn like Salome and Mary Magdalene. Both aspects came to the fore with the Gnostic reading of the baptism of Jesus, which has Sophia being born from Silence, and in turn, giving birth to the male Christ and the female Achamoth. At the time of the baptism of Jesus, Sophia sent Christ down to earth in the shape of her own totemic bird to enter the human form of Jesus. Sophia herself also descended in her dove form, when as the Holy Spirit, she impregnated the Virgin Mary.

We have already shown how Salome, who appears at both his birth and his death, brackets the life of Jesus, and the idea of the dove-shaped Sophia confirms this. Jesus appears as the child of Mary and Sophia-Salome, and it is her voice of thunder that is heard at his baptism, when the divine spark of his mother enters him and anoints him with the status of Christ. Later, when Jesus is crucified the same voice is heard when Jesus cries out as he dies and the veil of the temple is torn in two. The Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* confirms this idea, telling how, after he had risen from the dead, Jesus spent eleven years speaking with his disciples, and teaching them: *of the First Mystery, which is within the veil which is within the first ordinance, which is the 24th mystery outside and below these which are in the second space of the First Mystery, which is before all mysteries the Father in the form of a dove. And Jesus said to his disciples: "I have come forth from that First Mystery which is the last mystery, namely the 24th.*

Another motif of importance is Salome's interest in claiming the head of the Baptist, which has a long precedent in sacrificial goddess mythology. The priestesses of Artemis, at Taurus, would sacrifice any men that happened to land on their shore, nailing their heads to crosses, while in an echo of Sebastian's martyrdom, victims of Artemis at Hierapolis were hung from artificial trees that stood within her temple. The Hindu goddess Kali is probably the most well known goddess to appear

holding the head of a male sacrifice. She is shown with her right hands making the mudras of "*fear not*" and conveying blessings, while the left hands, hold a bloodied sword and the severed head. Forming a garland around her neck are yet more heads of male victims; fifty in all, with each representing a letter from the Sanskrit alphabet. One of Kali's manifestations is as the goddess Chinnamasta, who is considered a terrible ghoul, and is shown wearing a living snake as a garland and standing over two lovers in Union; usually the goddess Lakshmi and the god Vishnu. Chinnamasta appears in a gruesome guise like Kali proper, but whereas Kali holds the severed head of a victim, Chinnamasta holds her own severed head, with blood spurting from the wounded neck.

Not as well known as Kali, though allegedly as ancient, is a goddess by the name of Baphomet, who is still venerated in England by traditional Satanists. She is described as a bloody and violent goddess who is depicted seated cross legged and topless, holding a flaming torch in her right hand, and the severed head of a male sacrifice in her left. Baphomet is regarded as the Bride of Satan; although given the strength and presence of Baphomet, it is perhaps more fitting to call Satan the consort of Baphomet. This linking between Baphomet and Satan echoes a similar relationship in Italian witchcraft, where Lucifer was said to be the father and lover of the goddess Aradia. The legend of Aradia tells how the goddess Diana was the first being to come into existence, and she divided herself into light and darkness. While she retained the darkness for herself, she transformed the light into Lucifer, the light-bearer, who became her son, and lover. She fell in love with him, and seduced him by transforming herself into a cat. From their union, Aradia was created, and it was prophesied that she would become the Messiah of the Witches, and their queen. And so, Aradia was said to spend equal time in hel, heaven, and earth, where she was sent by Diana to teach the secret arts of witchcraft. Like Diana her mother, Aradia also engaged in an incestuous sexual relationship with Lucifer, her father. This aspect of the myth recalls similar incest stories in Northern Europe and the Americas, where the act was between the sun goddess and her brother the moon, and also recalls the incest implied in the story of Salome's dance before Herod.

Significantly, the name Aradia is believed to be a corruption of Herodias, whose infamy grew in Europe to such an extent that she came to be regarded as a witch-queen equal to the dark goddesses, such as Hekate and Hela, who had preceded her. Considering the similarity between Baphomet and Aradia, it is interesting that Herodias also appears as a witch-queen in England, where she was also conflated with Eurydyke, the lover of the musician Orpheus. In medieval English poetry, she appears as the mythical queen Heurodis, whose consort was a god-begotten king of Winchester called Sir Orfeo. The story of Orpheus and Eurydyke is important to both Salome and Baphomet, because it is another example of the sacrifice and decapitation of the dying god by the goddess. Although she is cast in the conventional myths as merely the wife of Orpheus, the nymph Eurydyke (*universal dyke*) was originally a Hekate-like form of the dark goddess as matron of fate and justice; like the Scandinavian Hela and the Egyptian Maat. Orpheus was her consort, and the tale of the couple repeats the journey to the underworld motif seen in the story of Inanna and Dumuzi, with Eurydyke as a mortal womyn who dies and descends, and with Orpheus attempting, but failing, to retrieve her. The most Salomian moment though involves what occurred after the loss of Eurydyke, when Orpheus wandered through the wilds of Thrace, carrying only his lyre, which he played constantly. It was while he was playing his lyre that a band of Maenads came upon him, and the frenzied womyn tore him to pieces, and cast his head into the river Hebrus. The river carried the head along until it came to rest on the shores of Lesbos, completely undamaged by the journey, and still singing. The Muses found the head and buried it in the sanctuary of the island. The lyre of Orpheus was also kept as a holy relic in the temple on Lesbos, and was considered taboo and not to be touched. When Neanthus, son of the Tyrant of Lesbos, once played it, he was soon after torn to pieces by a pack of dogs; whether they were real dogs, or the priestesses of Lesbos, the sacrifice to the goddess is again clear. It is also significant to find the goddess Eurydyke, the source of the word *dyke*, so closely associated with the island of Lesbos, home of the great Lesbian (and lesbian) poet, Sappho.

The bloodthirsty frenzy of the Maenads who tore Orpheus to pieces echoes the manic and demonic nature that is often attributed to Salome's dance, her *Danse Diabolique*. Both dances involve a fierce and bloody touching of *The Other*, of an embracing of the dark goddess as the unrestrained womyn that men cannot possibly hope to control. It is this dance that makes the story of Salome so transgressive, because it shows a womyn who comes to understand who she can be as an incarnation of the goddess; and it shows what patriarchal society has to lose by allowing womyn to attain this

state: their head. As the confluence of lesbian related words in the story of Orpheus suggests, the dance of Salome and the frenzy of the Maenads, although they initially appear to involve men (since men meet their ends as the result of both), are essentially exclusively female domains. The Maenads would kill any man who happened to enter their space, while Salome's dance, despite what Herod may think, is a moment of communion between Salome and the goddess. Small wonder, then, that explorations of the theme of Salome have often been pursued by lesbian womyn, such as the dancers Ida Rubinstein, Maud Allan, and Loie Fuller (who performed a three-dance version of Salome in 1895, and whose troupe Allan joined to tour France). Even when this is not the case, such womyn have often attracted allegations of lesbianism from a society that regards a womyn without a man as a threat, and consider "lesbian" the supreme insult.

Similar associations with lesbianism are found in the contemporary worship of Baphomet, where lesbian temples are dedicated primarily to Baphomet, and sub-dedicated to Hekate. The ceremony of *Synestry*, produced by the Daughters of Baphomet, is a good example of the kind of rituals associated with the Sapphic worship of Baphomet. It is an womyn-only rite for Baphomet that is traditionally held during the annual return of Sirius (the star we have already seen associated with Salome); although Sirius can be replaced with the moon if the rite is performed at any other time of year.

It is interesting that Baphomet is also the name of the deity worshipped by the Knights Templar, (though it is unclear whether this was the same goddess, or whether a confusion over the name), who in turn also attracted allegations of homosexuality. Evidence does point to the deity being the same in both cases, and there is certainly a strong connection between the Templar Knights and a cult of the head. It has been suggested that the name Baphomet was a corruption of Mohammed, or comes from *abu-fihamat* (*Father of Wisdom*), and that the Templar Knights were really adherents of Islam. A far more interesting explanation, and one that confirms the female identity of the deity, comes from the Atbash cipher, a system which used the Hebrew alphabet to encode words with an entirely different meaning; much in keeping with the use of peshar in the Dead Sea Scrolls. When the Atbash cipher is applied to *Baphomet*, the name translates as *Sophia*, the Gnostic personification and goddess of wisdom, who, as we have seen, is intimately related to Salome-Helena. Other interpretations of the Baphomet name bear this out, and recall Salome's bloody associations. The name is said to come from *Baphe-meteos* (*the baptism of Metis*). Metis (*wisdom*) was the mother of the gleaming-eyed goddess Athena, but was originally the same goddess as Medusa, the crone aspect of the goddess whose association with severed heads is well attested. The name Metis may have its roots in the Sanskrit *medha*, and the Egyptian *met/mat*, all suggesting the powers of feminine wisdom contained in menstrual blood. This baptism of Metis was, thus, with the menstrual blood of the dark goddess, the wise blood, and the same life-giving blood that Simon Magus referred to as flowing out of Eden. The same menstrual root occurs in other goddess names, such as the witch-goddess Medea, the mother-goddess Demeter, and the Irish faery queen Mab, whose name implies red mead. Baphomet is, thus, the Mistress of Blood, Mistress who is Stained/Dyed/Dipped in Blood; all of which are fitting epithets for Salome also.

The connection between Templar Knights' veneration of Baphomet may seem a million miles away from Salome, but it is interesting to note that in recent years several writers have highlighted the link between the Knights and John the Baptist. John appears to have been held in particular reverence by the knights, and some authors, such as Clive Prince and Lyn Picknett have gone as far as to suggest that the knights may have represented a strain of the Mandaean heresy which saw the Baptist as the true messiah.

While it is witchcraft and Satanism in which Salome appears in the above examples, she also features in appears in another form of magick: Enochian magick. Received by the magickians Dr. John Dee and Edward Kelley, Enochian magick is a system that, although nominally but minimally Christian, represents something of new European form of magick; relying on neither native traditions or Judaeo-Christian Qabalah. The Enochian psychokozmic universe features thirty levels known as aethyrs, through which the initiate passes from Tex to Lil; much like the layers of the underworld through which Inanna descends, or the aeons of Valentinian Gnostic kozmology. While much of Enochian magick represents an interaction with the goddess Babalon, who Salome can be as an incarnation off, Salome does appear directly for the adept on the travels through the aethyrs. Upon entering the fifteenth aethyr of Oxo (which, appropriately, means *the aethyr of dancing*), the traveller sees a beautiful dancing goddess, who is identified by most people as Salome; and was certainly

identified as such by Aleister Crowley. By the system of Enochian Gematria, Salome has the numerical value of 151, which is equivalent to the Enochian word *Zorge* (love), and to the phrase *Hoath Babalon* (a true worshipper of Babalon). The appearance of Salome and her dance in this aethyr is said to represent the ecstatic joy of spiritual consciousness, and provides a visual representation of the music of the spheres.

As a point of interest, it is worth noting that whilst editing *Sebastiane*, Derek Jarman was planning a film called *The Angelic Conversation of John Dee*, which he described as: *a dialogue between Queen Elizabeth I and Dr John Dee in which Dr Dee unfolds the mechanics of the universe with the aid of his scrying mirror and the intervention of the Angel Ariel*. The film was never realised, but elements were included in Jarman's film *Jubilee* (which starred Jordan, the iconic womyn described as *the first Sex Pistol*). Part of the work's name continued on in another of Jarman's films, *The Angelic Conversation* of 1985. The film's soundtrack was provided by Coil, and includes such choice song titles as *Enochian Calling*, and features the reading of Shakespeare's sonnets (many of which are homoerotic) by Dame Judi Dench.

THE ROLE OF SALOME IN ART

The theme of Salome, on both its esoteric and exoteric levels, wielded immense influence in the darker fields of art throughout history. The Symbolists of the nineteenth century in particular were drawn to Salome's sense of power as the incarnation of the death goddess, and placed her along side other dark figures such as Medusa and Circe. It is interesting to consider that the figure of Salome was almost as popular among nineteenth-century artists as the Virgin Mary was among medieval artists. This can be seen as evidence for the gradual re-emergence of the Dark Goddess who, having lain concealed for so long, was beginning to reappear with the growth of freedom from universal religion and the influx of new ideas and world views.

Despite the prominence of the Salome motif amongst Symbolist artists, the theme had significant precedents in Western art. Salome herself had appeared in the paintings of Renaissance artists such as Luini, Caravaggio, Fabritius, and Guido Reni, in rich images showing the triumphant womyn holding the head of the Baptist; though never looking too thrilled about it, and often maidenly turning her eyes away. The paintings of Salome, though, can be compared to those depicting the Jewish heroine Judith, a rich widow from the town of Bethulia, who inveigled herself into the camp of the enemy Assyrians. When their commander Holofernes invited her to a private party with him, she waited until he got drunk and decapitated him. She safely escaped the camp, bringing the head with her back to Bethulia. The following day, the Bethulian soldiers, armed with the head of the enemy's commander, drove the Assyrians away. The story of Judith and Holofernes, thus, gave artists another avenue with which to address the subject of the decapitating female, but with the helpful caveat of her being a virtuous womyn on the side of God; unlike the irredeemable Salome. The Renaissance paintings of Judith and Holofernes are arguably some of the bloodiest works in Western history, and differ from those of Salome in that the artists felt the freedom to show the decapitation in all its gory glory, and to permit Judith to enjoy it. In Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, the head of the unfortunate Assyrian is pressed hard against the table, his eyes bulging towards the viewer, as Judith determinedly slices the blade through his neck. In more celebratory portraits of Judith, the mood is equally odd, with the paintings of Lucas Cranach the Elder in particular showing a serene Judith holding her sword and her prize; looking every bit the blissful death goddess. Perhaps the greatest image of Judith is that of Artemisia Gentileschi, whose name alone should have guaranteed that she would paint a fine depiction of decapitation. Gentileschi's *Judith* is still more violent than Caravaggio's, with the position of Judith and her maid above the prone Holofernes adding to his sense of terror. The arms of Judith are sturdy limbs, whose hands clasp the sword and the head of Holofernes with grim determination.

Decadent and Symbolist artists gave precedence to Salome over Judith (though Klimt is one artist who painted both womyn), but not as the maidenly figure averting her gaze from Renaissance art, but rather as a self-possessed figure whose inspiration seemed to come more from the sureness of Judith. It may be significant that many of the paeans to Salome came from the Decadent and Symbolist art of France; even Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* was originally written in French, and received its premier performance in France. France had a long history of religious heresy, including several Gnostic-styled groups referred to as Albigensians or Cathars who were brutally suppressed at the beginning of the thirteenth century. The most famous of these groups were the Templar Knights, who, despite having

bases throughout Europe and the Middle East, were an order founded, and eventually suppressed, in France. This stream of heresy seems to have infected much of French culture, and this is particularly evident in the later interaction between the worlds of the occult and the arts.

The most striking example of this is Sar Josephin Peladan, who was famous for his eccentric habits, statements and dress; going so far as to claim to have discovered the tomb of Jesus. Peladan was one of the co-founders of one of the most famous French occult orders of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, *Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose Croix* (*Qabalistic order of the Rosy Cross*), which was founded in Paris around 1888. In 1890, Peladan created his own order, *l'Ordre de la Rose Croix Catholique et Esthetique, du Temple et du Graal* (*Order of the Temple & the Graal and of the Catholic Order of the Rose-Croix*), or C.R.C, as he was able to claim a lineage older than that of the O.K.R.C. He had received it from his elder brother Adrien Peladan, who had in turn received it in Toulouse, in 1858. Peladan claimed that he was to perpetuate the work of this ancient order, and in so doing, challenged the authority of the O.K.R.C and its Grand Master, Marquis Stanislas de Guaita. De Guaita and several O.K.R.C members tried in vain to persuade Peladan to disband his order and prevent a schism, but Peladan would not be reasoned with, and instead had plans beyond the scope provided by the O.K.R.C. He saw the C.R.C not just as a place for training in the esoteric arts, but as a place concerned with all the arts of music, science, culture, and art itself. Peladan socialised and co-operated with many famous musicians and artists of the time, including Gustave Moreau, Stravinsky, F elicien Rops, Georges Rouault, and Erik Satie. In words reminiscent of Mishima's dissertations on beauty, Peladan said his aim was "*to tear love out of the western soul and replace it with the love of Beauty, the love of the Idea, the love of mystery.*"

The C.R.C organised salons, shows presenting magickal art to the public. The first of these was held between March 10 and April 10, 1892, and was advertised with a beautiful and esoterically rich poster by Carlos Schwabe. Using simple blue tones, the poster showed three female figures, each clasping lilies and representing different stages of initiation. Another salon poster, from 1894, is also esoterically rich, showing Hugues de Payen (founder of the Knights Templar) and Leonardo da Vinci (in the guise of Joseph of Arimathea), as keepers of the Grail. Artist who were invited to display their work at the C.R.C salons did not have to necessarily adhere to the philosophy and themes of the order, but they were expected to avoid military, historical, and domestic themes. The first show proved to be a success, with the streets becoming blocked from people trying to get into the gallery meant for only 200 people. While there may have been a degree of dilettantism from some members of the French cultural elite who were attracted to the world of the occult (as was also the case in the English Order of the Golden Dawn at the same time), the influence can be seen in the strength of magickal themes within the art of Peladan's associates.

It is in the art of one of these associates, Gustave Moreau, that Salome appears prominently, and in arguably her finest depictions from the period. Moreau was an aloof, solitary artist, who, in spite of himself, became a success in high society, and was taken up by occult and Masonic circles. He wished to bury himself in a dream world, a philosophy that was at odds with the prevailing worldview of realism and pragmatism. He said "*I love my art so much that I shall only be happy when I can practise it for myself alone.*" Moreau made his debut in 1864 in Paris with *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, a work echoing in some parts the style of Edward Burne-Jones, and which gained some notoriety. In the words of Zola, who was opposed to Moreau's work and instead hailed Manet as a realist and a modern painter: "*His talent consists in taking subjects which have already been dealt with by other artists and altering them, treating them more ingeniously. He paints his dreams, not simple, naive dreams such as we all have, but sophisticated, complicated, enigmatic dreams which are difficult to understand immediately.*"

When *Oedipus and the Sphinx* began to attract criticism, Moreau retreated from the art world and into his own, so that after 1880, he never exhibited his work. Moreau produced two main works on the Salome theme: *The Apparition* (*Salome and the Head of John the Baptist* (1875); and *Salome* (1876), though he constantly reworked the images in similar paintings. It is interesting to note that the Salome paintings were not Moreau's first exploration of the patently pagan theme of the dark goddess-incarnate and the severed head of her lover. In 1865 he had painted *Orpheus*, showing Eurydyke holding the severed head of the poet; and evincing a style that at the time still echoed Burne-Jones with a static pose and a largely polished finish. This finish is missing in the later Salome works, where the peaceful isolation of the early works is replaced by a lush swirl of decadent colour. Moreau uses a

haze of seemingly half-finished brush strokes to give a dreamlike sense that is far more suited to his increasingly introverted world.

The only other theme to which Moreau seemed to return as he did with Salome was that of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian. This is not surprising since Debussy, who composed the music for d'Annunzio's mystery play on the saint's death, was another of the individuals associated with the magickal and artistic circle of Sar Peladan. Between 1869 and 1876, Moreau explored the theme of St. Sebastian with a series of paintings. *Saint Sebastian and the Holy Women* of 1869 and *Saint Sebastian* of the same year, place the saint and his two rescuers in a darkly brushed landscape, where the placement of the figures resembles the Salome painting. Another *Saint Sebastian*, painted between 1870 and 1875, resembles Moreau's iconic works such as *Jupiter and Semele*. The idealised saint stares straight out of the canvas, his lips sharply defined, and his hands raised above his head as if by will, rather than by the bonds, which tie him to the tree. *Saint Sebastian christened martyr* and *Saint Sebastian with an Angel* of 1876 mirror each other in the same way that *The Apparition* and *Salome* do, although the works are more highly polished than the Salome paintings, and seem to hark back to the sharply defined figures of Oedipus and Eurydyke.

The Dutch writer Huysmans was particularly impressed by the work of Moreau, and recognized his importance as one of the founders of the Symbolist style. In his 1884 Symbolist novel, *A Rebours* (*Against the Grain*), Huysmans gave voice to his admiration for Moreau with an elaborate description of the Salome paintings:

“Enveloped in the odour of depravity, in the overheated atmosphere of this church, Salome, the left arm stretched out in a commanding gesture, the right arm bent, holds a large lotus on a level with her face. She moves forward slowly, on the tips of her toes to the sound of a guitar, whose strings are plucked by a woman who is crouched behind her. With a rapt, solemn, almost majestic expression, she begins the lascivious dance which is aimed at awakening the deadened senses of old Herod; her breasts form two hillocks whose nipples stand up, rubbed by her jangling necklaces; diamonds glisten on her moist skin, while her bracelets, belts and rings throw out sparks of light. Her triumphal dress is sewn with pearls and interwoven with a design of silver and gold, while the breast-plate, product of a goldsmith's art, in which each stitch is a precious stone, seems to flame and become entangled with fire serpents who swarm over her dull flesh and her skin the colour of a tea rose, like glorious insects with marvellous wings, marbled in carmine, crossed with flashes of yellow, speckled with steel-blue and spotted with peacock green.

Another artist to exhibit at the Salon de la Rose Croix was the Belgian Jean Delville, who showed his allegiance by painting Peladan in his *Portrait of the Grand Master of the Rosicrucians wearing a Surplice* from 1894. Though none of Delville's paintings deal as famously with Salome as those of Moreau, one of his most consistent motifs was the severed head. Like many Symbolists, Delville celebrated the dark goddess Medusa who was herself decapitated; at least in the Athenian version of the tale that we have. His *Medusa* of 1891 is a powerful figure, her arms raised and bearing two dishes into which the serpents that form her hair flow. Another of Delville's classically themed decapitation works was his *Orpheus* of 1893, where the head of the poet (modelled on the artist's wife) merges with his lyre and is cast upon waves and seashells.

The theme of Salome and the Baptist was also touched upon by the Symbolist Odilon Redon, whose *Head of a Martyr* of 1877 is a stark, black and white image of a head resting in a bowl. Like Moreau, Redon also explored the theme of St. Sebastian, with at least three paintings based on the martyrdom. Next to the work of Moreau, though, perhaps the most striking Symbolist image of Salome is by Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer in his *Salome Embracing the Severed Head of John the Baptist* of 1896. The painting shows Salome with her arms lovingly wrapped around the head of the Baptist, with her lips locked to his just as firmly. It is a powerful evocation of all the necrophilic subtext of the original legend, and of the heretical interpretations that were built up around it over the centuries.

In addition to the visual interpretation of the Salome story were the literary forms. An unmistakable sense of Salome can be seen in the poetry of Remy de Gourmont, who also wrote an infamously difficult to perform one act play about Lilith. In his *Oraisons mauvaises* of 1900 he wrote:

"May your mouth be blessed, for it is adulterous! It has the taste of new roses and the taste of old earth, it has sucked in the dim pith of flowers and reeds; when it speaks, what one hears is like a treacherous rustle of reeds, and this cruel ruby all blood-stained and cold is the last wound of Jesus on the cross. May your soul be blessed, for it is corrupt! A proud emerald fallen on the paving of the streets, its haughtiness has blended with the smells of mud, and I have just crushed in the glorious mud, on the paving of the streets, which is a way of the cross, the last thoughts of Jesus on the cross."

The French literary interest in Salome had already been established by Puvis de Chavannes, who considered the theme of Salome in the *Beheading of St John the Baptist* in 1869, where Anatole France stood for Herod and Princess Marie Cantacuzène for Salome. Similarly, Gustave Flaubert wrote a short work called *Hérodiades*, which appeared in *Trois Contes* in 1877, and was later set to music by Massenet in 1881. Many of these works, including Huysmans's sumptuous description of Moreau's painting, would have exacted an influence on Oscar Wilde when he came to write his own interpretation of the legend. Wilde's admiration for Huysmans was surpassed perhaps only by his admiration for the reigning French Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* of 1869 is a lyric drama telling the tale of the marriage of Herodias and Herod, which bears certain similarities to Wilde's play, and show how Mallarmé's theories of poetics and literature may have also influenced Wilde's style. In what is the very embodiment of the Symbolist style, Mallarmé's poetic style is characterised by a lack of superficial continuity, so that individual words and images resonate against others in ways that create abrupt and confusing shifts of sense; a description that could also be applied to Wilde's *Salomé*.

The interest in the Salome legend was not limited to France, and elements of it appear in Heinrich Heine's 1843 epic *Atta Troll*, which references the story in the fantastic setting of the Wild Hunt. Drawing on German folk beliefs that placed Herodias at the head of the hunt (replacing, or providing a mask for, the goddess Hela), the narrator describes how Herodias, laughing madly with desire, kisses the head of the Baptist, having once loved him and demanded his head in the heat of passion. Heine's story is the first to use the motif of the kissing of the head of the Baptist, which would come to be a pivotal moment in Wilde's version of the story. Another work dating from a little later, though still predating that of Wilde, is the least famous setting of the Salome legend: a dramatic poem by an American author and Harvard graduate, J.C. Heywood. Heywood's *Salome* was published in Massachusetts in 1862, and reprinted in London throughout the 1880s. Wilde reviewed the piece in 1888, and seems to have drawn on its erotic nuances, especially the climactic scene in which Herodias kisses the Baptist's head following his execution.

A head-kissing scene also occurs in John Keat's poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, from 1884. It tells the story of Isabella, a daughter of a recently deceased wealthy landowner, who was left to the care of her two brothers who plotted to arrange her marriage, hoping to collect her dowry. Their plans were foiled when Isabella fell in love with Lorenzo, a servant at her brothers' house, with whom she engaged in a secret affair. Their happiness was shattered when Isabella's brothers found out, and lured Lorenzo away and killed him, burying him in a grave hidden away in the depths of the forest. Isabella waited for Lorenzo to return to her, pining away a little more each day, until finally, Lorenzo's ghost appeared to her one night and told her what her brothers had done to him. The next day, Isabella made a pilgrimage to the forest and unearthed the body of Lorenzo. She cut off his head, and in the words of Keats: *Pale Isabella kiss'd it, and low moan'd. 'Twas love; cold, -dead indeed, but not dethroned.* She took the head home with her, putting it in a basil pot and tending it with much care and love. Because of her loving attention towards the basil plant, which she feed with her tears, it grew and grew, while her obsession became the talk of the town and she was seen as *poor mad Isabella*. In a final attempt to return her to normality and marry her off, her brothers stole the basil plant from her, but bereft of both Lorenzo and his head, Isabella pined away, and died of misery. When her brother examined the basil plant, they discovered the head of Lorenzo and fled the town for fear of the consequences. The theme of Isabella was a popular one for Pre-Raphaelite artists (including John Everett Millais, William Holman Hunt, John Alexander, John William Waterhouse, and John Melhuish Strudwick), though the convention of the basil pot distinguished it from the cult of the head depictions of Salome and Judith.

SALOME AND OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was certainly aware of Moreau's painting, Flaubert's story, and many of the previous explorations of the Salome legend when he came to write the play that must be counted as one of his most significant works. Wilde first began discussing the idea of a play based on the Salome story in the autumn of 1890, and wrote the play, in French, during the autumn of 1891 in Paris. After an evening of discussing the legend with some of the Symbolists and Decadents that he had befriended in Paris, Wilde retired to his room, opened a blank notebook that happened to be on the table, and began writing the play. After a few hours, and with much of the text written, he went out to a nearby café. Needing inspiration, he asked the leader of the orchestra to play some music which might evoke "*a woman dancing in her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain.*" The play was finished soon afterwards, and plans were made to produce it for the theatre. According to Robert Ross, Wilde was largely inspired to write *Salomé* after seeing Moreau's paintings. Nevertheless, both Ross and Wilde had to frequently counter persistent rumours that it had been composed specifically for the divine Sarah Bernhardt. Wilde wrote in a letter to *The Times* that, although he admired the actress and was delighted that she wanted to produce and perform his play, "*I have never written a play for any actor or actress, nor shall I ever do so. Such work is for the artisan in literature, not for the artist.*"

Elkin Mathews and John Lane published the French version of *Salomé*, dedicated to Pierre Louÿs, in Paris and London in 1893. In 1894, they published an English translation with the famous illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. The translation was originally by Lord Alfred Douglas, but Wilde was not satisfied with the "schoolboy faults" of his work, and Douglas does not appear directly credited as translator on the title page. Instead, he is mentioned in the dedication, which reads to "*my friend, Lord Alfred Douglas, the translator of my play.*" Wilde was also unhappy with Beardsley's illustrations, and although he had liked the artist's initial drawing, *The Climax*, he objected to the final images, claiming that they were "*too Japanese while my play is Byzantine.*" Wilde was probably justified in his description, as Beardsley had seen and been influenced by Japanese erotic prints, and incorporated sexual details into the Salome images that were unrelated to the action of Wilde's play. In so doing, Beardsley invested each image with alternative dramatic scenarios that spectators could either choose to "perform" in their own minds or ignore, depending upon their mood. Despite Wilde's objections, Beardsley's illustrations have become synonymous with the play, and add to the queer subtext. The figures of Beardsley are largely androgynous, and without knowing the scenes and contents of the play, it is often hard to recognise which figure is which. John is not shown as the hirsute prophet of scripture, but as a youth with long black hair and sculptured features, who is often more beautiful than Salome herself.



Oscar Wilde

As a play by a homosexual and Irish man, *Salomé* by its very nature is a work of the outsider, of *The Other* within conventional society. This outsider status takes two forms, with the work acting on more than just a single level: as an exercise in queer subtext, and as pagan mystery play. Wilde immediately identified the pagan nature of his play in the opening scene where everything is lit with the glow of a baleful moon, and the attention of almost all the players is drawn to it. The Young Syrian refers to the beauty of the Salome, while the Page of Herodias, almost oblivious to his companion, comments on

how strange the moon looks, “*like a woman rising from a tomb... like a dead woman.*” The voices of the two figures switch back and forth like the text of a mystery play, talking about two apparently different things, but combining into a singular voice which identifies Salome with the moon. When Salome herself enters, she also comments on the moon, unavoidably drawing a comparison between it and herself: *How good to see the moon! She is like a little piece of money, a little silver flower. She is cold and chaste. I am sure she is a virgin. She has the beauty of a virgin. Yes, she is a virgin. She has never defiled herself. She has never abandoned herself to men, like the other goddesses.* The moon hangs heavy over the entire play, with many of the characters noting something odd about it. The only person who does not respond to the moon is Herodias, who, when Herod waxes lyrically over the moon and its similes, curtly replies: *No; the moon is like the moon, that is all.*

With his identification of Salome with the moon, Wilde is recalling her status as a death goddess, and referencing her counterparts in other cultures such as Cybele and Artemis. Throughout the play, the moon moves in phases that mirror the roles adopted by the goddess. At the beginning, she appears virginal and chaste to Salome, but at the same time, she rises like a dead woman from a tomb for the Page of Herodias; just as Artemis was a virginal goddess who also saw men sent to their gruesome deaths. When Salome sees Iokanaan for the first time, both the Page and the Syrian see the moon for once. The Page says it is *like the hand of a dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud*, while the Syrian sees her as being *like a little princess, whose eyes are eyes of amber. Through the clouds of muslin she is smiling like a little princess.* Later in the play when Herod looks up at the moon after the death of the Young Syrian, the sphere has taken on a far more ghastly aspect: *The moon has a strange look tonight. Has she not a strange look? She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked. The clouds are seeking to clothe her nakedness, but she will not let them. She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman... I am sure she is looking for lovers. Does she not reel like a drunken woman? She is a mad woman, is she not?* Here, Wilde has Herod reference the spectre of female drunkenness as illustrative of the wild, maenadal dance of goddesses such as Kali and Sekhmet, in which the goddess is empowered by the removing of her veils; just as Salome becomes similarly empowered through her dance. Then, when Salome has agreed to dance for him, Herod realises that the moon has reached its final phase and has become red like blood. This not only marks the end of the phases through which the goddess has passed, but is the fulfilment of a prophecy by the Baptist. *In that day the sun shall become black like sackcloth of hair, and the moon shall become like blood, and the stars of the heaven shall fall upon the earth like unripe figs that fall from the fig-tree, and the kings of the earth shall be afraid.*

Although, Herod alludes to Salome as a goddess through the simile of the moon, her dance provides him with other ways to drop hints of her divine status. As Salome is about to dance, Herod remarks on her naked feet: *Thy little feet will be like white doves. They will be like little white flowers that dance upon the trees... 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.* With his mention of Salome’s feet as white doves, Herod recalls the dove’s appearance as a symbol of peace (the meaning of the name Salome), and as the bearers of death, as exemplified by the Horae of Aphrodite and St. Irene. Doves were also sacred to the goddesses Ishtar and Atargatis, and were associated with the Sumerian primal dragon goddess, Tiamat, for whom a dove was ritually cut in half at the annual recitation of the *Enuma Elish*. Further afield, the German goddess Frau Harke (a form of Hela) was believed to fly through the air as a dove making fields fruitful, while in a Podolian folksong, a white dove sits in a little oak on top of a burial mound. It was a dove that guided the Roman hero Aeneas to the golden bough, and as with the other examples, this reveals the idea of the dove as a guide between worlds, as a form of the white goddess of death, whose crystal white bones point the way to hel. In Wilde’s play, the Young Syrian confirms Salome’s association with the dove, and with death, by killing himself in front of her, and crying out his final words: *Princess, Princess, thou who art like a garden of myrrh, thou who art the dove of all doves...*”

Another of the characters that Wilde uses to describe Salome as a goddess is the Baptist, Iokanaan, who engages with Salome in what amounts to a contest of insults. Although what he says towards Salome and to Herodias are intended to be insulting, the words, when read with a magickal eye, show how Salome was a priestess of the goddess Babalon. In wonderfully rich language, he refers to her as *daughter of Sodom... the wanton one, the harlot... the daughter of Babylon with her golden eyes and*

her gilded eyelids, whose mother hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities, and the cry of her sinning hath come-up even to the ears of God. The superficial insults of harlot and whore, like those addressed to her former incarnation Jezebel, mask a far more esoteric reference to Salome's role as a Scarlet Womyn, a holy whore. The words *whore* and *harlot* descend from *Har*, a title of the goddess Inanna-Ishtar as the mother of harlots, whose high priestess was called the Harine. This same word appears as the title for Persian sacred prostitutes, *houris*, and in *Horae*, the name we have already seen used for the nymphs of Aphrodite; and for her own sacred prostitutes too. The word also appears as the Hebrew word *hara*, which means both a pregnant belly and the holy mountain of the goddess. Even in the very north of Europe, the word *horgr*, which is used now as a generic title for a holy place, literally implied a house of holy whores; as a result, medieval law in Germany forbade the building of horgrs.

Just as the pagan undercurrent of Salome begins with the lunar discussion of the Page of Herodias and the Young Syrian, so does one of the most obvious queer subtexts of the play. Wilde paints a quite intense relationship between the two, with the Page of Herodias besotted with Narraboth, the Young Syrian, but with the Syrian more interested in looking at Salome. There is also a suggestion that Herod appreciates the Young Syrian's beauty, remarking that: *he was fair to look upon. He was even very fair. He had languorous eyes.*

It is a conversation between Salome and Narraboth that is the best examples of the queer subtext of the play, and which Neil Bartlett (who analysed *Salomé's* homosexual subtext in his book *Who Was That Man?*) identifies as the point where Wilde turns Salome herself into a male homosexual figure. Salome tries to bribe Narraboth into letting her see the Baptist, by promising: *tomorrow when I pass in my litter beneath the gateway of the idol-sellers I will let fall for thee a little flower, a little green flower.* The colour green has long been associated with homosexuals, with the Roman epigrammatist, Marcus Valerius Martial linking *grass-green (galbinus)* with the effeminate homosexual. In her book *Another Mother Tongue*, Judy Grahn provides an in depth exploration of the use of green as a queer colour, but other than this general queer context, the green flower of Narraboth had a specific relevance for Wilde. Wilde was known for wearing a green dyed flower in his buttonhole as part of the eccentric dress that he used to draw attention to himself in London in the 1890s. The green carnation became a symbol adopted by aesthetes, and by homosexuals, with Wilde and his circle sporting green carnations at the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1892. In 1894, the novella *The Green Carnation* appeared anonymously, but Wilde recognised the character Esmé Amaranth as himself and the character Lord Reggie Hastings as Lord Alfred Douglas. They also guessed that the author was Robert Hitchens, and they sent leg-pulling telegrams to him. By publicising Wilde's relationship with a Douglas, albeit through pseudonymous characters, the book may have encouraged the Marquess of Queensberry to make his accusations against Wilde, and significantly, the book was withdrawn in 1895 when the scandal broke.

Another flower that figures prominently in *Salomé* is the rose, with the Young Syrian piquantly describing Salome as being *like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver.* In turn, Salome celebrates Iokanaan's body by saying that it is whiter than even *the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia*, and that *the pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre, and are redder than roses*, are not as red as his mouth. Herod also wears a garland of roses which he then takes off and throws away, saying: *The flowers are like fire. They have burned my forehead... How red those petals are! They are like stains of blood on the cloth. That does not matter. It is not wise to find symbols in everything that one sees. It makes life too full of terrors. It were better to say that stains of blood are as lovely as rose-petals.* Beardsley's illustrations for *Salomé* also emphasise the theme of roses, with tiny rosettes scattered around the images.

Although the rose was a favourite flower of Decadent and Symbolist art in general, it also had a long standing as a symbol of homosexuality. In ancient Greek mythology, it was associated with several deities linked with same-sex relations and transgenderism, including Adonis, Aphrodite, Dionysus, and Eros. It was given as a courting gift between lovers, as Philostratus (200 CE) alludes to when he writes: *"So must you beautiful boys arm yourselves with roses, and let that be the equipment that your lovers will present to you. Now the hyacinth suits a fair-haired boy well, the narcissus a dark-haired one, but the rose suits all, since once it was itself a boy."* Later in Middle Eastern and then European symbolism, the rosebud became symbolic of the anus and anal intercourse. In a sixteenth-century allegorical work, the Islamic writer Mehemmed Ghazali compares the open or relaxed anus to the

laughter of a thousand roses, and the closed or tight anus to a *silent rosebud*. In the nineteenth-century French bohemian circles that Wilde frequented, the rosette, or petite rose, signified the anus, with gay men being referred to as the *Chevaliers de la Rosette* (*the knights of the petite rose*). This theme carries through into the work of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, where the rose, especially when linked to blood, as in *Poema doble del lago Eden*, often signified homosexual love. In *La oracion de las rosas*, for example, Lorca compared the queer French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine to a *bloody rose* (*rosa sangrienta*). In the twentieth century, these associations persisted in the work of Jean Genet, who wrote *The Miracle of the Rose*, and Yukio Mishima, whose photo essay *Barakei* (*Torture by Roses*) includes an image in which he has a large rose pressed to his mouth, threatening to swallow him whole.

In addition to its strong connection with male homosexuality, the rose also appears in association with lesbianism, where instead of the male anus, it symbolises the female vagina. This can be seen not only in the poetry of Gertrude Stein, Renée Vivien, Elsa Gidlow, and Judy Grahn, but also in the words of the original lesbian poet, Sappho, who referred to the rose as the queen of flowers. The poetry of Elsa Gidlow is particularly rich in vaginal rose imagery, and in *For the Goddess Too Well Known*, she writes: "*I break wild roses, scatter them over her. The thorns between us sting like love's pain. Her flesh, bitter and salt to my tongue, I taste with endless kisses and taste again.*" Similarly, in her poem *Roses Rising*, Renée Vivien talks of being *drunk from so many roses, Redder than wine. Leaving their garden, the roses have followed me.... I drink their brief breath, I breathe their life. All of them are here.* Perhaps one of the most remarkable links between lesbian love and roses comes from the modern Greek poet Olga Broumas, who, whilst reviewing notes she had made on Sappho, found a two-verse epigraph that she assumed she must have copied from one of Sappho's poetic fragments. But the two lines are not from any known fragment, and it seems instead that Sappho took the opportunity to write a few precious words through the hand of her literary descendant: *She who loves roses must be patient, and not cry out when she is pierced by thorns.*

As Judy Grahn shows in *Another Mother Tongue*, the queer subtext of a theme, image, or archetype can carry down through the ages, even if it is never mentioned outright, and can still be understood by the queer viewer centuries after its inception. In many respects, it is like some ancestral trait carried in the makeup of queer people. Thus, a military investigation of "prominent queers" at a Newport naval base in 1919 found that drag queens there had assumed the nickname *Salome*. Similarly, the white aesthete that was Wilde may seem a million miles away from black America, but queer artists of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s were just as aware of the homosexual subtext of *Salomé* as their European counterparts. The African American artist and poet Richard Bruce Nugent, in particular, revealed a fascination with *Salomé's* themes of transgressive gender, and in the 1930s, he painted a series of *Salome* images interpreting conjectural gender and the performance of identity. These show female figures, many of them named after biblical characters, performing a burlesque of drag-queen-like exaggerated gender. The images are not so much of real womyn, but of the constructs and caricatures of gender that are imposed like a mask, or like *Salome's* veil. Nugent had only to look to his friend and fellow dancer Hemsley Winfield for a contemporary *Salome* in drag. A year before Nugent painted his *Salome* series, Winfield had played the part at the Greenwich Village Cherry Lane Theatre. In a 1984 interview, Nugent also recalled dancing with Winfield in a *Salome* production at the Alhambra Theatre.

That Nugent as a gay man was aware of *Salomé's* transgressive themes, and was expressing them in his work, can be deduced from one of his earlier works, the 1926 prose poem *Smoke, Lilies, and Jade*, which had appeared in the controversial literary journal *Fire!* The poem, with its obviously queer title, describes the relationship between the autobiographical Alex, a young black artist "*content to lay and smoke and meet friends at night... to argue and read Oscar Wilde,*" and his male Latin lover, Beauty. Cementing the connection with Wilde and *Salome*, Nugent writes how while gazing at his sleeping lover, Alex muses: "*his lips were so beautiful... quizzical... Alex wondered why he always thought of that passage from Wilde's Salome when he looked at Beauty's lips... he would like to kiss Beauty's lips.*"

Nugent followed the example of Wilde in recasting biblical characters as queer icons in a series of 1947 watercolour sketches which feature the superficially adversarial couples of Jesus and Judas, and David and Goliath. Nugent employed a plethora of phallic visual puns to describe homosexual lust between the adolescent and effete and his enemy, a hyper-masculinised and unzipped Goliath. His

illustration parodies the stereotype of gay male relationships, with an older predatory man targeting a younger object of beauty. Emphasising his desire for David, Goliath grasps a thorny, rod-like plant, growing from behind and between David's legs.

The investigation and challenging of gender roles in the Salomian work of Nugent, and in Wilde's original play may account for the misidentification of a photograph said to be of Wilde. The image is of a rather generously proportioned person, dressed in the costume of Salome, and leaning forward on one knee, with her arms stretched out towards the head of the Baptist on a platter. In Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde, the photograph is unequivocally identified as *Wilde in costume as Salomé - Collection Guillot de Saix Paris*, thereby supporting Ellmann's premise that Wilde's life was rich in conscious and unconscious displays of his "homosexual drive". Ellmann apparently did not check the source of the photograph himself, and in 1992, Wilde's grandson, Merlin Holland, and a German scholar, Horst Schröder, proved that the image is, in fact, of Alice Guszalewicz, a Hungarian soprano who sang in the opera *Salomé* in Cologne in 1906.



It seems remarkable that the image could have been unquestionably regarded as Wilde, especially when one considers Guszalewicz's aquiline nose, feminine waist, and obvious breasts. Similarly, in a world where the vaguely androgynous drawings of Aubrey Beardsley were enough to stir up gender anxieties (and lead to the notoriety of his *Yellow Book* periodical), Wilde with all his outrageousness would not have been brave enough (or suicidal enough) to pose for a photograph cross-dressed. The ease with which the misidentification could occur, and the willingness to believe that Wilde's oeuvre included transvestism on top of his homosexuality, says something about stereotypes and archetypes that surround both Wilde and his *Salome*. If we accept Ellmann's identification of the image as that of Wilde, especially within the context that he places it in his book (surrounded by instances of Wilde's "homosexual drive"), then the photograph becomes the supreme example of the mythic Wilde flaunting his sexuality. With performances of his play banned, Wilde himself takes on the role of Salome in a perverse gesture of defiance. His male hands, though disguised as female, reach out towards the head of the equally male Baptist, emphasising the themes of transgressive gender, and referencing the idea of homosexuality as a form of narcissism.

PERFORMING SALOME

Wilde's *Salomé* has acted as something of a barometer of societies' tolerance and attitudes, with each decade presenting a different response to the staging of the play. The first live performance of *Salome* was scheduled to star Sarah Bernhardt at the Palace Theatre, until the Examiner of Plays, Edward Pigott, refused to provide it with a license. Although the sexual overtones of the work may have been a contributing factor, the ostensible reason given was the policy against representing biblical characters on stage (an archaic law leftover from the Puritans' disdain for mystery plays). As a result, it was not until February 11, 1896, that *Salomé* premiered in a minimalist performance at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris. Because of the controversial nature of Wilde, the play's preparation was

done in secret, and to avoid the homosexual overtones of the relationship between the Page of Herodias and the Young Syrian, the director, Aurélien Lugné-Poë, cast an actress as the Page; a choice imitated by several subsequent directors. Toulouse-Lautrec designed the program, and the play itself met with a mixed, but generally positive, response; though many suspected that much of the enthusiastic applause was actually in support of the play's infamous author. The play was first publicly performed in Germany at the Neues Theatre in Berlin in 1903, and ran for 200 hundred performances. Max Reinhardt produced the work, based on the success of an earlier private production at the Kleines Theatre in 1902; at which the composer Richard Strauss was present. *Salomé* was privately performed in both London and New York around the same time, in what were small-scale, private affairs.

With his death in 1900, and the birth of a new century, Wilde became a safe historical figure from another age, whose plays could now be revived. The one exception, though, was *Salomé*, whose popularity in decadent Europe only confirmed its depravity in the English mind. *Salomé* was not publicly performed in London until 1931, thirty-one years after the death of Wilde, who never saw *Salomé* performed. Charles Ricketts oversaw private English stagings in 1906, and had been involved in plans for a far more lavish premiere in Paris that did not eventuate.

I proposed a black floor - upon which Salome's white feet would show; this statement was meant to capture Wilde. The sky was to be a rich turquoise blue, cut across by the perpendicular fall of strips of gilt matting, which should not touch the ground, and form an aerial tent. Did Wilde actually suggest the division of the actors into masses of colour, today the idea seems mine! His was the suggestion, however, that the Jews should be in yellow, the Romans were to be in purple, and John in white. Over the dress of Salome the discussions were endless: should she be black like the night? or - here the suggestion is Wilde's - 'green like a curious and poisonous lizard'? I desired that the moonlight should fall upon the ground, the source not being seen; Wilde hugged the idea of some 'strange dim pattern in the sky.'

As Ricketts' account suggests, although *Salomé* with its single act became a staple of small budget theatre groups, Wilde originally intended it as a sumptuous visual feast more in keeping with modern cinema than the bare stage of a community theatre. This can be seen in set sketches by Ricketts and Wilde, which have the cistern in which Iokanaan is held as being both material and 'symbolic' (enclosed by its 'wall of green bronze') and with a grand staircase leading to Herod's palace. Wilde had envisioned similar grand plans for the aborted Sarah Bernhardt performance of *Salomé* in 1892, which was intended to be a major West End event rivalling a much lauded production of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* which was playing at the St James that same season. Designer Graham Robertson had incorporated costumes from Sardou's *Cleopatre*, and had created for Bernhardt *a golden robe with long fringes of gold, sustained on the shoulders by bands of gilt and painted leather which also held in place a golden breastplate set with jewels*. The gown was accompanied by *a triple crown of gold and jewels* which echoed the robes of the Hebrew priesthood, and which Bernhardt intended to wear over flowing, powdered-blue hair. Robertson recounts in his Club memoirs that one of Wilde's plans was to have *'every costume of some shade of yellow from clearest lemon to deep orange, with here and there just a hint of black all upon a great empty sky of deepest violet'*. Not content with this, Wilde also wished to have *'in place of an orchestra, braziers of perfume ... [with] scented clouds rising and partly veiling the stage from time to time - a new perfume for each emotion.'*

The first private London performances of *Salomé* by the New Stage Club at the Bijou (10 May, 1905), and the Literary Theatre Society at King's Hall and the National Sporting Club (10 and 20 June, 1906), were boycotted by the press. The private nature of the performance and the limited box office takings meant that Ricketts had to turn his limited resources into a virtue. For the Literary Theatre performance (on a double bill with Wilde's *Florentine Tragedy*), he *'placed dim cypress like curtains against a star-lit sky; the actors were clothed in every shade of blue, deepening into dark violet and green, and relieved by the red lances of the soldiers'*. One of the few critics to brave the boycotts of both stagings, Max Beerbohm, was unconvinced by the performances, and questioned whether it would ever be possible to produce an English *Salomé* that moved beyond the one dimensional naughtiness shown by Miss Millicent Murby as Salome in the Bijou staging.

In 1911, Adeline Bourne, a prominent suffragette, organised the first English *Salome* to appear on a proper stage, and went some way to proffer an alternative to the music hall inflections typified by Millicent Murby. The play was directed by Harcourt Williams and played to an audience comprised mostly of womyn. Bourne herself starred as a blatantly politicised Salome, dressed with a restraint that was in stark contrast to other interpretations both past and future. *The Bystander* reported that Bourne's performance put viewers in mind of 'a twentieth-century Suffragette attempting an entrance into the House of Commons or asking for Mr Winston Churchill's head on a charge sheet'. The critic for the *Penny Illustrated Paper* unconsciously highlighted the queer undertones of Wilde's play by decrying the performance as 'a sorry spectacle, fit only for sexless women and "pussy cat" men'.

The Examiner's ban on *Salomé* was removed in 1931, and marked to some extent, the assimilation of the play back into the Western canon. Wilde's society plays had already been made palatable for the middle classes, and the removal of the ban also removed much of the blasphemous and perverse aura of *Salomé*. There is a marked contrast between the last private performance of the play and a public version that opened at the Savoy, four months later.

Reviews of the final performance on May 1931, at the Gate Theatre Studio, prior to the lifting of the ban, highlight the apparent savagery of the work. Salome's dance was performed by Margaret Rawlings *in no prudish spirit*, and evoked *a chill feline evil* that recalled Beardsley and the 1890s. The critic for the *Daily Telegraph* similarly found it all *creepily impressive*, and in particular *the moment when Salome speaks to the head, and the silver bowl throws in her face a reflected, horrible pallor*. While the production at the Savoy four months later could boast authentic Dervish music and a plaster head for Iokanaan, the performance in general shied away from anything morbid or sensuous. Joan Maude as Salome was, as the *Illustrated London News* observed, neither *voluptuary* nor *virago*, but rather 'a nice little High School girl slightly offended because John the Baptist refused to partner her in a tennis tournament'. The *Telegraph* was no less scathing and dismissed her dance as the ill-advised callisthenics of 'a personable young woman in scanty draperies'. Robert Farquharson, who reprised the role of Herod that he had successfully performed in the premieres of 1905 and 1906, was not exempt from criticism, and put one critic in mind of music-hall comic Dan Leno. Slammed by the critics and painted conventional and modest by the middle-class, *Salomé* would not be performed in London for a quarter of a century.

The re-emergence of Wilde as a playwright, and *Salomé* as a truly transgressive play, can be seen with Lindsay Kemp's staging of *Salomé* in the 1970s. Kemp, an actor, mime, choreographer, and dancer, presented the play as a homoerotic spectacle, half-danced, half-acted, at London's Round House in the winter of 1977-78. He incorporated about a third of Wilde's text, with an all-male company that performed in both English and French, and confirmed the queer reading of the play by alternating performances of *Salomé* with his own balletic adaptation of Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers*. Kemp's opening scene actually evokes St. Sebastian, with Herod's archers shooting down a winged Iokanaan, while the work closed with the unbeheaded Baptist being slowly enveloped in Salome's cloak, until she pressed a pomegranate kiss on his bloody mouth to the strains of the *Liebtestod* from *Tristan and Isolde*. Response to the production was mixed, but the staging, with its drumming, live snakes, incense and blood, impressed critics. Kemp's own performance as a Salome who is *a bald little gnome [who] really does suggest a depraved waif of 16* was also praised for replacing the predictable strip tease with the kind of *inner transformation and self-revelation with which Wilde was fundamentally concerned*.

While Kemp's production reaffirmed the role of Salome as a queer play of transgressive sexuality, Steven Berkoff placed it within the context of power politics. Berkoff's *Salomé* was first seen at Dublin's Gate Theatre in April 1988 (with Alan Stanford in the role of Herod), then at the Edinburgh Festival, and, in the autumn of 1989, at London's Royal National Theatre (with Berkoff himself as Herod). With his production, Berkoff sought to focus attention upon the physicality of Wilde's words: 'So much was the perfume and tapestry in the language that I decided that the stage should be bare and allow the words to bounce off the hard surfaces without being softened or cushioned.' The set reflected this, comprised of just a dais with banqueting table, a backdrop of night sky, and a large expanse of marbled floor, cast with the air of a 1920s cocktail lounge. The minimalism of the set extended to such important motifs as Iokanaan's head, and particularly Salome's dance, a pantomime in which Salome (Katherine Schlesinger) removed nothing at all. As Berkoff explained, the dance 'like everything else had to be an illusion... Herod sees her naked fulsome limbs as the actress "acts"'

the dance.' The final result was a compelling production, that, in the words of Michael Billington of *Country Life*, seemed to overturn *everything we prize in the British theatre, from the autonomy of the actor, to representational staging, to swift, light speaking.*

A more recent performance of *Salomé* is that of Sydney choreographer Graeme Murphy, which received both cries of acclaim and outrage when the Sydney Dance Company premiered it to sell-out audiences in 1998. Murphy drew on Wilde's play to produce a highly stylised dance narrative with an erotic charge. The music for the performance was a percussion-based score by Michael Askill, best known for his work with the Sydney percussion ensemble Synergy, who not only composed the music, but also assisted in the development of the dance itself. The score incorporated Middle Eastern percussion, and featured Omar Faruk Tekbilek, one of the world's foremost Middle Eastern musicians, on almost half the tracks. Askill's score created a rich tapestry of percussive timbres, using a wide variety of European, Middle Eastern, African and south-east Asian percussive instruments including bass drum, tom toms, bongos, Thai gongs, glockenspiel, and ocean drums. Overlaid on this base was the voice of Tekbilek, as well as chanting from the dancers of the company. Graeme Murphy himself contributed the voice of Herod, with text by Oscar Wilde. Tekbilek was also involved instrumentally, playing the ney (Turkish flutes), zurna (Turkish oboe) and frame drum, while another percussionist, David Hewitt, contributed sounds from the djembe, darbuka, frame drum, and marimba. For the pivotal scene of Salomé's dance, an entrancing and hypnotic flute melody was used.

Arguably the interpretation of Wilde's play that has had the greatest impact is Richard Strauss's opera *Salomé*. The Viennese writer Anton Lindner introduced Wilde's *Salomé* to the German composer as a theme for an opera, and offered to write the libretto for him. Strauss accepted at first but was unable to settle down to actually composing the music, until he realised that, rather than writing the music first and applying Lindner's libretto to it, he should use Wilde's own words; based on the German translation by Madame Hedwig Lachmann. By doing so, and not relying on an adaptation, his music was forced into a purely operatic style in which the voice was foremost, creating a marked departure from the symphonic form that had long predominated in his composition. The sparse, brief language of Wilde's *Salomé* ably lent itself to an operatic libretto; although it was at odds with the rather more emotional libretto style that was then current.

At the first rehearsal of the opera, the soprano who had been given the title role, Marie Wittich, described as the "*sixteen-year-old with the voice of Isolde*", rebelled because she considered the part too strenuous and improper. She told Strauss "*I won't do it; I'm a decent woman*", but was eventually brought round and the first performance took place in Dresden on December 9, 1905. The opera proved an immediate success and whilst the critics were characteristically unimpressed, there were 38 curtain calls. Performances of *Salomé* were soon taking place across Germany, though sometimes with restrictions placed on the religious or moral aspects. In Berlin, it was only allowed as long as Salomé prayed for redemption during her final soliloquy, and if the Star of Bethlehem, rather than the obviously pagan moon, shone at the end (irrespective of the anachronism of the Star of Bethlehem shining when it would have actually shone 30 years earlier). In Austria, the opera was completely censored off Viennese stages until 1918, and Gustav Mahler, an admirer of the opera, almost resigned his post as director of the Vienna State Opera over the censorship. In Berlin, the Kaiser warned that the opera would do Strauss no good, but the composer replied that it enabled him to build his villa at Garmisch in the Bavarian Alps.

In other countries the opera experienced larger problems. In order for it to be performed in Great Britain, where Wilde's play was still proscribed, all Biblical references had to be deleted. John the Baptist became a prophet named Mattaniah, the action was moved to Greece, and the Jews became "learned men". The conductor, Sir Thomas Beecham, also agreed to change some of the language, but the singers "forgot" and most sang the original words. The censor, who did not understand German, later congratulated Beecham on being so co-operative. There was also no head at the conclusion of the performance, and was instead replaced with a dish of blood, which paradoxically, seems all the more shocking, blasphemous, and magickally significant. In other productions, the head has often proven to be a source of amusing anecdotes, with many companies not allowing a recognisable head, and substituting it with a piece of meat, or some other formless object. When in 1907 Olive Fremstad gave the first performance of *Salomé* to be given at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, she was seen to stagger while carrying the plate with the head. When questioned, she admitted that she had been to the morgue and spent some time rehearsing with the real thing. At Rudolf Bing's farewell gala, Birgit

Nilsson sang the closing scene during which the severed head of John the Baptist, presented to her on a tray, was modelled on Bing's own. At a private performance in London in 1908, the Baptist's head was made of trifle, and was eaten, no doubt with great relish, at supper afterwards.

The American premiere of *Salomé*, at the Metropolitan Opera in 1907, caused such a scandal that the rest of the run was cancelled at the insistence of the financier J.P. Morgan, and was not seen again at that house until 1933. Two years after the Metropolitan opening, Oscar Hammerstein presented *Salomé* in New York, and in spite of attempts to suppress it, this was a great success. It was whilst staying in New York in 1951, that Yukio Mishima attended a performance of Strauss's *Salomé*, which he admired for pages in his diary. In 1960, he produced a performance of Wilde's play at the Bungaku-za theatre. Like the story of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, he had been fascinated with the play since he had first read it at 15. He designed the sets and costumes for the play, which opened on April 5, 1960, and was considered a success.

Seen in isolation, it becomes clear why Strauss's *Salomé*, while not as vilified as Wilde's original play, still attracted controversy. Despite the aura of convention that the operatic staging gives to any work, *Salomé* still retains much of the shocking and transgressive sense of Wilde's play. The lechery of Herod and his persistent desire to see his step daughter dance naked can be truly unsettling (making him one of opera's great villain roles). While Salome's macabre and prolonged celebration with the head of the Baptist can leave one feeling every bit the voyeur as Herod. Salome's dance itself can be the most obscene, but evokative sight to appear on an operatic stage. In the original play, Wilde's understated instructions [*Salome dances the dance of the seven veils*] had provided a blank canvas on which successive dancers could paint their own unique interpretation. In his opera, Strauss did likewise, with the music for the Dance of the Seven Veils being a long, seductive orchestral piece that is open to any interpretation that the performance's choreographer might choose.

Strauss's *Salomé* was not the only opera to interpret the myth of the dancer, and two years after the cancelled run of the German opera at the Metropolitan in New York, a French telling of the story opened at the Manhattan Opera House. It was Massenet's opera *Hérodiade*, a work that was based, not on Wilde's play, but on Gustave Flaubert's *Hérodias*. Massenet's *Hérodiade* was a work far more suited to the conservative audience that had rejected *Salomé*, presenting a story that removed much of Salome's power and made her far less threatening to conventional mores and institutionalised patriarchy. Instead of being the incarnation of the Death Goddess who sacrifices her consort, Massenet's Salome loves the Baptist with a sickly maiden love and stabs herself when she hears he has been executed by order of her mother. *Hérodiade* did not escape the hand of the censor, however, and when it was produced in London in 1904, under the name of *Salome*, the story had to be transferred to Ethiopia just as Strauss's *Salomé* was often moved to Greece.

MAUD ALLAN, SALOME, AND THE ENEMY WITHIN

The same kind of gender anxieties that had been associated with Adeline Bourne's 1911 production of *Salomé* reared their head during a wartime production of the play in 1918 by Jack Grein; perhaps one of the most controversial attempted stagings of the play ever. The dancer Maud Allan was recruited to play the lead role, but it proved to be one of the major factors in an ensuing scandal and legal proceedings that had repercussions throughout high society and the world of the arts. The role of Salome has long attracted dancers like Maud Allan, and from 1890s onwards, others included Mary Garden, Mlle. Dazie, Little Egypt, Gertrude Hoffman, Alla Nazimova, Anja Silja, Natacha Rambova, Saharet, Diana Allen, Eva Tanquay, Ida Rubinstein, Djita, Ada Overton Walker, Beverly Cort, Gaby Deslys, Ruth St. Denis, Theda Barra, Ruth Muller, Nina Barkis, Maria Ewing, Jetta Goudal, Lilly St. Cyr, Olive Fremsted, Rita Hayworth, Eartha Kitt, and Vera Fokina. While the performance of a Hollywood starlet like Rita Hayworth was a safe attempt at trying to rehabilitate Salome from the status of death goddess to that of innocent waif, those of Alla Nazimova, Ida Rubinstein and Maud Allan provoked controversy and allegations of lesbianism.

The scandal surrounding Maud Allan was not helped by her family circumstances, which established her as an outsider in the eyes of the general public. She had spent time in Europe, and in Germany specifically, but was Canadian by birth, from a family that had more than a hint of perversion and insanity associated with it. Her brother, Theo Durrant, was found guilty of killing and butchering two young womyn, and Isabella Durrant, his mother, remarkably echoing Violet Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, attended her son's execution, saying, "instead of being the greatest criminal of the century,

he is the greatest martyr.” In another example of life imitating, or intimating, art, the newspapers reported that after her son’s execution, Isabella Durrant became *“hysterically morbid; she publicly kissed her dead son’s lips.”*

Whilst these events were happening in Canada, Allan was living in Germany, where she had a brief affair with the sculptor Artur Bock, who sculpted her as Salome, in an intimation of the role she would soon come to be identified with. She began to dance with a shawl for the benefit of her piano tutor, Ferruccio Busoni, who in turn introduced her to Marcel Remy, who became her manager and later wrote the music for her ballet *The Vision of Salome*. Allan was herself an accomplished musician and a born actress of a melodramatic and untrained style that was suitable for mime. She designed her own costumes and also had an understanding of effective lighting. Her first performance was in Vienna, where she appeared draped in virginal white or funereal black, and danced to Mendelssohn’s *Spring Song*, Chopin’s *Marche funebre*, Schubert’s *Ave Maria*, and Rubenstein’s *Valse Caprice*. Allan was much compared with another dancer, Isadora Duncan, and was sometimes seen as her rival (though posterity has made Duncan the victor). Duncan made her private life public as part of her grab for fame, espousing free love and a bohemian life style, but Allan, with much in her private life to keep secret, was more circumspect. Her mother wrote to her speaking of the rivalry between Allan and Duncan, and suggesting that her daughter not act like Duncan, but remain unmarried and chaste. In words that almost paraphrase Wilde’s *Salomé*, she wrote: *“the ideal purity of your work is so much better portrayed by a virgin than by one who has been contaminated by men”*

It was after Allan and Remy had attended one of the Berlin performances of Reinhardt’s staging of Wilde’s *Salomé*, that Allan was inspired to create her own dance based on the play; as it had also inspired Strauss to write his opera. Her *Vision of Salome*, based on the dance and climax of Wilde’s play, premiered in Vienna, in December 1906. On the very same night, both Ruth St. Denis and Mata Hari were performing in the same city, with both womyn also adopting oriental costume and imagery; and with Mata Hari in particular wearing beaded breastplates similar to Allan’s. Allan’s performance had to be quite spectacular to compete with these other dancers, and going by a reviewer from a later Prague performance, it certainly was. *“It is as if a wildly jerking sensuality was driven into the slender body, as if it began to blossom and swell forth and glow through her skin...”*

In naked sensuality, her body calculating, she meets the eyes of Herod; the rhythm of her motion accelerates; she knows what she wants, and suddenly in it grisly horror the head of the prophet is handed her from the cistern. With the natural motions of the wild ash she dances Salome, the demivierge of the perverse instincts, gaze now focussed on the pale head in heated ecstasy. Wildly she revolves her head in jerking madness; her eyes and fingers groping in the cramps of love, they fantasise about unheard-of desires; shame seems to have vanished from her perspiring body; one draws back from the flame of this passion. Finally abrupt shock overcomes her, freezes her motion, forces her to lay aside the dead head and to be paralysed in the numb pose of nameless self-disgust...

Between 1906 and 1908, Allan performed her *Vision of Salome* in Vienna, Budapest, Munich, Paris, and Marienbad, where it was applauded in 1907 by the visiting English king, Edward VII. In Budapest, Allan performed the dance in a lion cage, having been challenged by Count Geza Zichy (scion of one of Hungary’s most powerful families) in a wager. She danced behind bars, with lion cubs, rather than full-grown lions, and the Count paid the wager of 10,000 marks, which Allan then donated to a hospital. Determined to have his own back, the Count had Allan dance a private performance for him in the hall of a palace where, in the middle of the dance, someone replaced the fake head with the real head of a recently deceased man. As one American newspaper reported it: *as one from whom life passes very quickly, she crumpled to the floor. From her hands dropped the head. It rolled upon her breast and fell beside her, leaving upon her white body a crimson trail.* The paper inferred that it was the Count who was responsible for the substitution, but it may have been his wife, an American, who was probably well aware of Allan’s family history, and was seeking revenge on the count for his less than professional interest in Allan.

After her success in Europe, Allan arrived in London in February 1908 to perform her dance. In an admirable publicity coup, she held a private matinee performance two days before her debut for selected members of the press, government, and aristocracy; thereby ensuring their support, and giving her performance an aura of respectability. Her appearance was breath taking, wearing nothing

above her waist except for breastplates of pearls and jewels, held in place by an open mesh of gold and pearls. From her hips hung strings of pearls, over a transparent black skirt, its hem embroidered with gold and jewels. The audience was entranced, as if Allan's serpentine arms and swaying hips put the audience under a spell; so much so that some of the audience would later swear she had danced naked. The *Labour Leader* wrote:

One moment she is the vampire... next she is the lynx. Always the fascination is animal-like and carnal... Her slender and lissom body writhes in an ecstasy of fear, quivers at the exquisite touch of pain, laughs and sighs, shrinks and vaults, as swayed by passion... She kisses the head and frenzy comes upon her. She is no longer human. She is a Maenad sister. Her hair should be dishevelled, her eyes bloodshot. The amazing crescendo ceases, she falls to the ground a huddled yet wondrously beautiful mass... London has never seen such a graceful and artistic dancing. It is of a magical beauty. But the beauty is magic; and the magic is black and insidious.

Allan's dance was, on the whole, a success, and to the somewhat Decadence starved populace of England, it provided what appeared to be an authentic glimpse of exotic, fin de siècle art. When Allan attempted to take the dance to other regions of England, it did meet with resistance in places from churchmen, but perhaps the strongest moral outrage came in Lord Alfred Douglas's magazine, *The Academy*. An article, written by Christina Marshall (under her male pseudonym of Christopher St. John) suggested that Allan's dance was nothing more than a pale imitation of an earlier performance by Isadora Duncan. When Allan threatened to sue, Douglas printed a vague retraction, but Allan would later confront him personally at a garden party, where, assuming that it was he who had written the article, she gave him a "gross insult". The irascible Douglas replied sharply in kind "*But your brother was a murder!*" at which point Allan struck him across the face with her fan. Douglas by this point had turned his back on his homosexual past, and with all the enthusiasm of a recent convert, was happy to, in the paraphrased words of Robert Ross, *kick Oscar's corpse*, and distance himself from the legacy of his former lover.

Such was the popular appeal of Allan (with statuettes, replica jewellery and sandals being just some of the items marketed under her name), that she was adopted by the politically and socially important Asquith family, and in particular, by Margot Asquith. With Herbert Asquith loosening licensing laws, inferences were being made of the decadence of the Asquiths, and of high society in general, and these were somewhat cemented by the patronage and matronage of Maud Allan. Margot Asquith almost certainly attended a womyn-only Salome evening that was held in Mayfair one August night, where the womyn tried to outdo themselves with revealing outfits in the style of Allan's. The music of Salome was performed by an orchestra segregated from the proceedings by a wall of palms and flowers, and following dinner, some of the womyn showed that they could not only mimic Allan's dress, but her dancing too. The barely veiled lesbian connotations of this womyn-only gathering were not lost on people who heard about it, and it surely contributed to rumours that began to circulate linking Margot Asquith and Maud Allan romantically.

In 1908, Allan celebrated the 250th performance of the *Vision of Salome* at the Palace Theatre, and the event coincided with the release of her memoirs, the highly mythologized and romanticised, *My Life and Dancing*. At the same time, a thirsty-six page portfolio called *Maud Allan and Her Art* was released, as a paean of sorts, featuring a tribute by Frank Harris, and two sonnets by the magickian Aleister Crowley. Crowley was suitably impressed with Allan and her attendant aura of mystery and tragedy; and one can not help but think that it would have been in the guise of Maud Allan that Crowley saw the Salome dancer in the Enochian aethyr of Oxo.



After travelling to both Russia and America, where her performance was less than rapturously received, Allan continued performing *The Vision of Salome*, but hoped that she would not have to reply on it for much longer. She began work on a new dance piece with her devoted friend and admirer, William Leonard (literary editor of the *Daily Mail*, who had had to resign his post as an Oxford professor when his homosexuality became public). Allan commissioned Debussy to write the score for the performance, ensuring that the work would have a long, ecstatic dance solo. The work, *Khamma*, with a plot in which Debussy had a hand, was a series of three dances set in an ancient Egyptian temple where a girl dances herself to death before a statue. While there are obvious hints of Wilde's *Salomé* in the theme, Debussy's influence would have been Florent Schmitt's *La Tragedie de Salome*, which had opened earlier in the year, and Stravinsky's *Petrouchka*, which had been first performed at that season's appearance of the Ballets Russes. The work has some brilliant passages, but after the initial enthusiasm, Debussy felt unable to finish the orchestration of it, and handed it over to the composer Charles Koechlin. The work was finally given to Maud Allen in 1916, but she never performed it. Debussy later called the work, "that queer ballet with its trumpet calls suggesting a riot or an outbreak of fire."

Following tours to South Africa, India, and living in California for a time (where she made a film, *The Rugmaker's Daughter*, incorporating extracts from three of her dances), Allan returned to London, in the winter of 1917 to play a season at St. Martin's Theatre with a solo pianist and a little symphony. Though those days were now behind her, Jack Grein had seen Allan perform during her London heyday, and decided to cast her in the lead role of his production of Wilde's *Salomé*. With his production of *Salomé*, Grein hoped to use two matinees at the Court as a springboard for a production that his War Players might bring to the English troops. But factors including Allan's sensuality, Grein's Dutch extraction (which to myopic English eyes looked suspiciously German), and a panic over the threat to national security posed by homosexuals, led not only to a court battle, but the resurrection of Wilde as a spectre of perversity. A libel trial followed, which in the words of Robert Ross, gave the British public the enjoyment of "kicking Oscar's corpse to make up for the failure of the Fifth Army."

News of the imminent performance was sent to the right wing member of parliament Noel Pemberton Billing, by, somewhat paradoxically, Marie Corelli, a founding member of the Vigilante movement, who lived in Stratford-on-Avon with her companion Bertha Vyner (a woman said to have had a black moustache). Oblivious to truisms involving the throwing of stones and people in glass houses, Corelli forwarded an advertisement of the performance, and scandalised, asked rhetorically why it advertised private performances. {The reason for their only being private performances was nothing as scandalous as Corelli hoped, but was simply because public performances of the play were still illegal due to the Examiner's ban.} Billing was not home when the letter arrived, and instead his right hand man, a mentally unstable and paranoid American called Harold Spencer, opened it. Spencer perused the evidence and immediately saw "a devilish plot" from the enemy within, with Grein, a foreigner, putting on a decadent play by the homosexual and Irish, Wilde, and starring a woman rumoured to be involved in a lesbian affair with the Liberal leader's wife. This dovetailed well with the persistent urban legend of a Black Book, which Billing and Spencer had sought to perpetuate to account for losses on the Western front. It was said: *There exists in the Cabinet Noir of a certain German Prince a book compiled by the Secret Service from reports of German agents who have infested this country for the past 20 years, agents so vile and spreading such debauchery and such lasciviousness as only German minds can conceive and only German bodies execute.* According to Billing, this Black Book contained the names of forty-seven thousand homosexual men and women in important positions in England, who were being blackmailed into helping the enemy. It went without saying that the 47,000 could be regarded as members of the cult of Wilde, whose centre had now been moved from ineffectual Paris to heathen Vienna and Berlin. That Wilde's friend Robert Ross was as openly gay as society would allow, pro-German, and a friend of the Asquiths, further confirmed in the minds of Billing and Spencer that members of the 47,000 could be found even in Downing Street.

With the evidence of the enemy within so clearly presented in the forthcoming *Salomé* performance, Spencer immediately wanted to reveal it in print. But being bound by decency and the limits of language, he was unable to write as explicitly as was required to convey the sheer horror he saw in these members of the cult of Wilde. The word *lesbian* was still for the most part limited to textbooks on sexuality, and he could not call Maud Allan a sodomite (even if the phrase had on rare occasions

been applied to female homosexuality when, as in this case, the right words couldn't be found in patriarchy's dictionary). While Oscar Wilde's love may have been the kind that dare not speak its name, lesbianism was the love that wasn't even allowed to have a name. Spencer telephoned a village doctor and was given the term *clitoris* and told that it was "*a superficial organ that, when unduly excited or overdeveloped, possessed the most dreadful influence on any woman, that she would do the most extraordinary things.*" Spencer duly used the word, and in the 16 February issue of *Vigilante* the bold headline of ***The Cult of the Clitoris*** was followed by a brief statement: *To be a member of Maud Allan's private performances in Oscar Wilde's Salome one has to apply to a Miss Valetta... If Scotland Yard were to seize the list of these members I have no doubt they would secure the names of several of the first 47,000.*

This was an unprecedented salacious headline, for those that knew the meaning of the word, and Billing's friends suggested that he and Spencer might have gone too far. But the self-righteous Billing would not be placated, and began to find an audience who were willing to believe in some other reason for loses at the Front. The loses had raised anti-German and anti-Semitic hysteria to an all time high, and Billing played no small part in this, even calling for the continued use of poison gas after German entreaties to ban it by both sides. The fiery Maud Allan was not so easily swept away in a storm of patriotic jingoism, and when Grein showed her the Cult of the Clitoris paragraph, she was outraged, and the two immediately consulted their solicitors. Robert Ross, who was well acquainted with the pitfalls of lawsuits, tried to dissuade the two, but like Wilde (who had unsuccessfully sued the father of Lord Alfred Douglas over being called a "posing sodomite"), Allan self-destructively went ahead with the libel action.

The resulting trial served Billing and Spencer well, with their allegations of the 47,000 receiving more coverage than they could possibly have hoped for. Comparisons were drawn between Maud Allan and Mata Hari, who had been shot as a German spy the previous year. The careers of the womyn mirrored each other in many ways, with both travelling from the theatre to the circles of high society. It was implied that Germany could have easily recruited Allan as a spy or disruptive agent during her lengthy stays in the country.

In what seems eerily similar to the specious logic of medieval witch trials, Pemberton Billing vilified Allan for having the knowledge to even be offended by the Cult of Clitoris name. Billing asked her if she was acquainted with the term "clitoris", to which she replied: "*Yes, but not particularly.*" When Billing called Spencer as a witness and asked about the title, Spencer said that he had tried to find a title "*that would only be understood by those whom it should be understood by*", and then told how the word had come from the village doctor. Another witness for Pemberton-Billing, Dr Serell Cooke (who had recently read Krafft-Ebing's *Pschopathia-Sexualis*, and with Harley Street specialists, had written a medical analysis of *Salomé*), said that he had shown the word to fifty or sixty friends of his and none of them had known what it meant. Dr Cooke drove the final nail into the coffin by declaring "*Of course, clitoris is a Greek word, it is a medical term... nobody but a medical man or people interested in that kind of thing, would understand the term.*" In a culture that had consistently sought to ignore the clitoris and the erotic pleasure of womyn, Maud Allan, as someone who must therefore be one of those "*people interested in that kind of thing*", was a womyn with too much knowledge.

Allen's knowledge of the clitoris was not helped by the prevailing medical opinion that had carried through from the late eighteenth-century into the early twentieth century, which held that one of the persistent characteristics of a lesbian was an unusually large clitoris. With the West's fiercely drawn and protected lines of gender roles, lesbians were assumed to be masculinised, and an enlarged clitoris was one signifier of this masculinity; and in a phallogocentric society, there was no way heterosexual men could imagine two womyn having sex without something resembling a penis. With the representation of lesbians as sexually different from the norm (twice different, first as womyn, and then as lesbians), they were identified as *The Other*, throwbacks to an earlier evolutionary stage, who like black women and nymphomaniacs (other bearers of the enlarged clitoris), were possessors of a 'primitive' sexuality. The aura of a witch-hunt surrounding the Allan trial also extends somewhat uncannily to the clitoris. It has been suggested that the devil's marks and teats that witch-finders found on their victims as signifiers of witchcraft were actually clitorises, misidentified by men who were certainly no experts on female genitalia. As with the clitoris as a signifier of lesbianism, any

witch who had protested her innocence, and the innocence of her clitoris, would have been deemed to know too much.

Spencer further compounded the suggestions of occultism when the family history of Allan was introduced into court, and mention was made of the murders committed by Theo Durrant. When asked what he knew of the murders, Spencer said that, as a child, it had been one of the dreadful tales used to frighten them, and that the crime “*was supposed to have been a Black Mass.*” When asked what he meant by a Black Mass, Spencer gave a lurid description worthy of Dennis Wheatley, in which young womyn were put *on the altar instead of the Host*; although the standard Black Mass would surely have a womyn as the altar itself, rather than the Host. With his exaggerated account of the Durrant murders, and his wild and unfounded talk of Black Masses, Spencer was trying to cast Maud Allan, who he described as “*a very unfortunate hereditary degenerate*”, in the same mould as a medieval witch, with himself cast as the righteous witchfinder.

In this atmosphere of misogyny and hearsay masquerading as fact, Wilde’s play, Wilde himself, and Allan’s performance as Salome all came under attack in the court. Experts called by Billing, fresh from reading Krafft-Ebing and armed with a few catch-phrases culled from the infant field of psychiatry, were able to metaphorically exhume, desiccate, and then rebury the body of Oscar Wilde, and anyone who should align himself with the queer Irish blight on English morality. Like a modern talkshow audience spouting truisms and pop psychology, Cooke used his scarcely working knowledge of terms like “sadism” to inaccurately define *Salomé* with its necrophilic overtones as being the very embodiment of sadism. He stated that only a person afflicted with the disease of sadism could write a work like *Salomé*, and that only people similarly afflicted could possibly wish to view it or perform in it. The only way a person who was not a sadist could take such a role, said Cooke, was if they were forced to with financial rewards; inferring that, if she was not a sadist, then Allan was at the very least a prostitute. With Allan obviously in mind, he said that sadism was congenital, and occurred in families “*which have an hereditary taint either of insanity or some other neuropathic condition.*” This insidious disease could go undetected until triggered by some event, whereupon it would suddenly burst forth. Cooke’s loosely constructed “sadism” was a microkozom of everything Billing and Spencer feared about their perceived enemy within: lurking beneath the surface of normality undetected, it was nevertheless there and could burst forth at any moment and bring Christian civilisation crashing down.

With a typically misogynist incomprehension of female sexuality, the blustering Dr Cooke went on to elaborate on how a work of “sadism” such as *Salomé* could affect a sadist acting the role, or simply watching the performance. Once again confusing necrophilia for sadism, Cooke stated categorically that a sadist could watch the play, especially such a pivotal moment as the kissing of the head, and become excited, even to the extent of experiencing spontaneous orgasm. As Maud Allan was practically on trial, Cooke’s theoretical sadist was always a womyn (if not Allan herself), and so his baffling dissertation evoked a spectre of untamed, inexplicable female lust, with *Womyn*, who is already *The Other* in patriarchal society, becoming yet still more bizarre and beyond the norm. Here was the horror of a womyn who, although she already had a propensity for non-procreative sexual pleasure through the scarcely understood clitoris, could now apparently also achieve orgasm without any physical contact in some mysterious maenadial intoxication. The court proceedings highlighted the pagan and unchristian nature of such a phenomenon by turning to Wilde’s play, and dwelling on its lunar symbolism, which Cooke compared to the effects that the cycles of the moon was meant to have on “*female erotomaniacs*”. Cooke and Billing put forward a theory that *a very artistic intellectual producer* (which by this stage was a euphemism for the sadist enemy within) would schedule a performance of the play *on certain days in the month during which the moon is passing through certain phases*. Quite which days were the “*certain*” ones was not clear, but Billing and Cooke’s testimony reveals fearful allusions to menstruation, which was as equally dreaded and misunderstood by such men as the spectre of the unleashed female libido.

The trial continued on, enveloping many members of high society, in particular Margot Asquith, in the melee of the mythical 47,000, which by the end of the trial had been boosted to 52,000. Robert Ross was called to testify and ably defended the ghost of Wilde, while Lord Alfred Douglas also testified, but was well entrenched in the Billing camp, and tried desperately to distance himself from his former relationship with Wilde. By the end of the trial, the jury would probably have had to remind themselves that, despite the revelations of strange new sexual worlds, and decadence in high

places that they had heard, the trial was meant to be nothing more than a simple libel case. The verdict did not bode well for Allan, or for her supporters amongst high society or the arts, and Billing (like the Marquess of Queensberry before him) was found not guilty of libel.

SALOME IN FILM

Like the story of Sebastian, Salome's tale has provided a source of inspiration for many filmmakers. But unlike the legend of Sebastian, however, the more widely known nature of the Salome story has meant it has played a role in film from the earliest years of cinema. A survey of film titles from the beginning to the end of the twentieth century shows the prominent hold Salome has held over the minds of filmmakers. Just some of the titles are *Butterfly Dance* (1897), *Salomé* (1908), *Salomé Mad* (1909), *Sawdust and Salomé* (1914), *Salomé* (1918), *Salomé vs. Shenandoah* (1919), *A Modern Salomé* (1920), *A Sister To Salomé* (1920), *Salomé* (1923), *Strauss Salomé* (1923), *Salomé of the Tenements* (1925), *Heart Of Salomé* (1927), *El Nacimiento de Salomé* (1940), *Salomé* (1940), *Salomé* (1953), *Salomé* (1985), and *Salome's Last Dance* (1988).

It was a film interpretation of Salome that can probably be classed as the first art film. Alla Nazimova, a Russian-born, theatre-trained actress, decided, following her contract release from Metro in 1921, to make films "with merit." The first of these films, which she financed with her own fortune, was Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (United Artists, 1922), while the second was a version of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. The director for both films was Nazimova's husband, Charles Bryant, while the set and costume designer was the beautiful and capricious heiress Natacha Rambova (who was born with the rather less splendid name of Winifred Hudnut), who went on to marry Rudolph Valentino.

Madame Nazimova (as she was called) and Natacha Rambova attempted to follow Wilde's original play, but their true triumph was in recreating Aubrey Beardsley's drawings. Rambova dressed the cast in scanty costumes for the most part coloured black and white to match Beardsley's illustrations, except for occasional touches of gold and silver to catch the light. The fabrics came exclusively from Maison Lewis in Paris, and were no doubt responsible for the exorbitant \$350,000 that the film cost at the time. The slaves were dressed in loincloths of silver lame grape leaves, while dwarves wearing harem pants and plumed helmets made up the lively orchestra. The Young Syrian (played by Earl Schenck) wore a costume of fishnet with leggings that look like fish scales, a stylised wig, and had his nipples painted. Most important of all though was Nazimova's costume for the dance of the seven veils, which featured a silver sheath and a white wig; though Nazimova had several wig and wardrobe changes during the course of this film.



Alla Nazimova

Nazimova's performance is remarkable, for, as a woman of 42, she managed to convincingly play a young girl of 14 who is petulant, pouty, self-absorbed and vapid. Dressed in a tunic, slit up the sides, with a headpiece covered with balls on springs, vibrating with every toss of her coy, empty little head, it is not surprising that Herod is unable to stop looking at his stepdaughter. Herod was played with suitable lechery by Mitchell Lewis, wears a crown of posies, white face make-up and red rouge generously smeared on his lips; while Herodias, played by Rose Dione, is equally grotesque, with long frizzy hair, and dressed in a kind of lace leotard. *Salomé* was filmed entirely indoors allowing for controlled lighting, and adding to the sense of night in which all the action occurs.

Being based on Wilde's play, and filmed at a time when the work was still under the Examiners Ban in England, *Salomé* could not help but court controversy. It also came at a time when the public was looking with disfavour on some of the excesses of Hollywood; amongst other things, the Fatty

Arbuckle murder-rape trial was under way at the time. As part of this atmosphere, the system of film censorship had just began, and considering that in 1918, Theda Bara's now lost interpretation of *Salome* (Fox) had been banned in many areas of the country, it was inevitable that Nazimova's *Salomé* would attract a similar fate. It was not helped that the public seemed to be well aware of the queer subtext of Wilde's play, and rumours began to fly about Nazimova's homosexual art film. It was rumoured that in homage to Wilde, Nazimova had made certain that most of the actors in the film were homosexual, while *Variety* noted that "*the heroic figures were given a decided appearance of effeminacy.*" There is an element of truth to this as both Nazimova and Rambova were lesbians, and one or both of them had decided that men in drag should play some of the court ladies in the film. In addition, one of the extras later recorded that "*some of the cast were gay, and some of the extras as well, but there's nothing surprising or unusual about that.*"

The finished *Salomé* sat on the shelf for a year, and when it finally found a distributor, it was not a commercial success; and with America's track record with Wilde's *Salomé*, this is not surprising. *Salomé* was the finish of Nazimova's career as an independent producer, and shortly afterwards, she retreated to the theatre. Despite the lack of success, the work still retained an iconic status, and in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (Paramount, 1950) it is exactly this role that Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond sought to use as a vehicle to make her comeback on the silver screen.

It is an interesting aside that one of Nazimova's lovers for a brief time was Dorothy Wilde, the niece of Oscar Wilde, who mirrored her uncle's bohemian lifestyle and his homosexuality, and was dubbed Oscaria. Dorothy, or Dolly as she was also called, looked much like her uncle (which must have proven an interesting experience for Nazimova), and in 1930 she appeared as Oscar at the Duchesse de Clermont Tonnèrre's costume ball. She spent much of her time in the Parisian Left Bank and declared herself to be "*more Oscar-like than he was like himself.*" Oscaria's affair with Nazimova was brief, and her primary lover was the salonnière, Natalie Barney, whose house in the rue Jacob was a meeting place for artists and writers, and all the great Paris-American and French lesbians of the time. Another of Nazimova's lovers was the director and actress Eva Le Gallienne, who had also been infatuated with Eleonora Duse, and whose father, Richard Le Galliene, was a one time lover of Maud Allan (and allegedly of Oscar Wilde himself also).

To extend the six degrees of separation still further, another of Barney's lovers was the French writer, journalist, dancer and artist, Colette. Born Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, she explored her own Salome-like theme, posing in classic Symbolist-styled photographs as dancer and vamp. Her most Salomian moment though was *Reve d'Egypte*, a fifteen minute performance at the Moulin Rouge with her then lover, Mathilde de Morny (the youngest daughter of the Duc de Morny), who had written the outline for the play. Mathilde was familiarly known as Missy, and in lesbian circles as Monsieur Belbeuf (the name of a former husband) because of her remarkably butch appearance. Like several notable lesbians of the period, such as John Radcyffe Hall and Gertrude Stein, Missy was male-identified to such an extent that she would possibly be considered transgendered today. A series of photos showing her convincingly dressed in a bowler hat and suit, as an Arab sheikh, with a false moustache, as a monk, and as a Roman emperor.

Reve d'Egypte told the story of an archaeologist interested in the occult (played, cross-dressed, by Missy, whose name appeared reversed on the bill as the suitably exotic-sounding Yssim), that falls in love with a mummy. In the performance, Colette appeared as the mummy, who gradually undid her bandages and danced to seduce the archaeologist, before finally kissing him. The first performance of the work on the evening of Thursday, January the 3rd, 1907, caused a scandal and was banned by the Paris police commissioner. A riot broke out almost immediately after the curtain rose, orchestrated in part by the Morny clan, and by members of the Jockey Club to which the Marquis de Belbeuf (Missy's former husband who was outraged by her continued use of his name in such a context) belonged. Whistling, trumpets, and shouting drowned the music out, while all kinds of objects were thrown at the stage. The uproar reached its climax during the sustained kiss between Colette and Missy, when crude insults joined the other objects being launched at the two womyn. Colette's mother Sido, who had come to Paris to see her daughter dance, was not impressed with the controversy and the scandal that was now being associated with her name. In a letter to Colette, she showed her disapproval, and also hints at the way in which Colette's performance was every bit a part of the same spirit of Decadence embodied by Salome. "*The perfume you have drenched yourself in does not have the right smell. You are using it to give a false impression. Your short hair, the blue eye makeup and*

the eccentricities you indulge in on stage are all designed to make people think you are an original spirit independent of convention.”

OTHER SALOMIAN FILMS

Another black and white telling of the Salome tale is perhaps more notable for what its creator and cast went on to later produce. As a student in 1970s Liverpool, Clive Barker (who would later create the movie *Hellraiser*) and a group of friends produced two short films: *Salome*, based on Wilde's play, and *The Forbidden*, which was inspired by the legend of Faust. *Salome* was shot in starkly beautiful black and white 8mm film, and lit with a single light so that the figures of the actors constantly emerge from an inky background. Both *Salome* and *The Forbidden* feature early footage of Barker himself, who also did most of the special effects, while Doug Bradley, who went on to play Pinhead in the *Hellraiser* movies, played Herod. The rest of the cast comprised Anne Taylor, Graham Bickley, Phil Rimmer, Lyn Darnell, Susan Bickley, and Julie Blake. Adrian Carson, who produced a vaguely chthonic and sacral soundtrack of dark ambience, provided the film with its only sound.

Barker's *Salome* gives obvious clues to his later work with *Hellraiser*, and reveals the influence on his filmmaking of Jean Cocteau and Kenneth Anger. Being himself gay, like Cocteau and Anger, it is not surprising that Barker should have been drawn to explore the transgressive theme of Salome. The same ideas can be seen in *Hellraiser*, which far from being a mere horror film, is a profoundly queer and mystical work. The main protagonist, Pinhead, and his entourage of Cenobites (described as *Demons to some, angels to others*) can be compared to Salome, or to the archers who shoot Sebastian full of arrows. They are concerned with providing a transcendent pleasure through suffering, and the motifs of skin, pins, and hooks, all add to this sensuous feeling. At one point, Coil were going to provide the soundtrack for *Hellraiser*, and recorded several tracks of chilling samples and ominous percussion for the film, but the group's involvement was derailed when Barker's Hollywood backers insisted on a more conventional soundtrack.

Another cinematic telling of the Salome story from around the seventies or late sixties is an obscure Italian film written and directed by Carmelo Bene. Again, it is based on Wilde's play, and overflows with eye-burning colors, bellowed dialogue and over the top acting, fast editing and camerawork, luminous costumes and props, and even vampires; with many of the actors wearing vampire fangs. Bene provides his own twists to Wilde's basic framework, with Salome's initial dialogue with the Baptist being shouted back and forth with John stationed on a boat in the middle of a river and Salome back on shore. Each time he rejects her advances, he is hit over the head with a thick book by one of Salome's servants. Salome's final confrontation with Herod is even more bizarre, for as he descends into utter madness, she peels the skin from his face. Another notable element from Bene's film is a soundless opening montage of strange and decadent imagery, which includes a man crucifying himself on a flashing neon cross. Similarly, in Herod's final speech, which he delivers in an endless babble, the camera madly zooms in and out.

One final notable Salome film is Ken Russell's *Salome's Last Dance* from 1988. Like Russell's earlier film *The Boyfriend*, *Salome's Last Dance* is a film about the staging of a play; with the film within the film being a common Russell motif. Russell has *Salomé* being performed, virtually uncut, within a pseudo-historical 1890s frame drama, in which brothel-keeper Alfred Taylor (Stratford Johns) surprises Wilde (Nickolas Grace) with a private showing of his recently banned work. Wilde watches the performance, and interacts with it as Taylor's rough trade spills from stage to drawing room. Wilde begins to see himself as Iokanaan, drawn self-destructively to Lord Alfred Douglas as the Baptist was to Salome. Glenda Jackson played Lady Alice and Herodias, while Imogen Millais Scott played the young maid whom doubles as Salome in the play.

The film critic for the *New York Times*, Vincent Canby dismissed the device of a play within a play as a *perfumed comic stunt*, but still found that beneath Russell's self-indulgent wit lurked a serious work, *in which vice and virtue become so intertwined as to be indistinguishable*. Russell's response, suitably Wildean, was to expand the scenario, using it as the basis for a 1993 Bonn production of Strauss's opera, in which Salome shoots her way out of the brothel with a pistol hidden in the head of the Baptist.

Russell also referenced Nazimova's *Salomé* in *Valentino*, his film version of the life of Rudolph Valentino (played, with a terrible accent, by the dancer Nureyev). With much of the film rendered in flashbacks, it opens with Valentino's funeral, where the mourning Nazimova makes a grand entrance

dressed in a beautiful replica of the Peacock Gown from *Salomé*. She camps it up for the attendant newspaper photographers, and faints over the coffin. When the photographers miss this pivotal moment, Nazimova gladly repeats her performance.

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