2

Salome’s Tale—Iokanaan’s Telling—Wilde’s Retelling: Historical Relativity and (Un)specificity in Wilde’s Salome

Abstract: Chapter 2 discusses the ways in which Salome sees and shows. I venture to say that Salome exhibits a Brechtian turn in Wilde. Instead of just inviting the audience to consider what they would have done if they were in Salome’s position, Wilde seems to ask himself: How would I have written this play if I were part of this society? Wilde repositions the storyteller like a Brechtian actor. Salome, then, is a historically relative adaptation meant to alienate not only the audience but also the writer himself. This chapter, ultimately, discusses Wilde’s many translations, some literal and some metaphorical, of Salome and how these layers of translation lead to alienation.

Norbert Kohl describes the characters in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* as “puppet-like.” This is a shorthand description, one that Kohl never really explicates before or after the characterization. It appears to be a simple adjective for Kohl to emphasize the somewhat flat nature of the characters in *Salome*, each of whom have “their one fixation.” This description, however, is too suggestive to be ignored. What happens to Wilde’s *Salome* if we see its characters as “puppet-like”?

Puppetry allows for a production where the strings are visible. In effect, the entire production becomes quite visible to the audience. By separating the actor from the character, a liminal space, represented by the string, is created. This space is one of unexpected possibility for all involved—the actor, the character, and the audience. This element of puppetry allows us to “conceive of the actor as the producer of the signs that communicate a dramatic character, rather than as, necessarily, the producer and the site of those signs.” Thus puppetry exposes the spaces in-between the actor and the character, in-between the audience and the character, and in-between the audience and the actor. This opens up a bigger space between the playwright and his or her play, its actors, and its audience. And somewhere within all of these tangible spaces the meaning is transmitted to the audience.

Bertolt Brecht, as I will explore in chapter 3, wanted to see the strings; he wanted the audience to be aware that they were watching a play, and with this understanding to become somewhat alienated from the story. According to Austin Quigley, as quoted earlier in this book, *Salome* is a play about “the fascination with different ways of seeing.” But, I argue that it is about *showing*, as well. As quoted in the Introduction, “The question must be asked, what was Wilde doing when he set out to write [the play *Salome*] not only in a tongue but in a form not really his own?”

Taking a slightly different approach than Joseph Donohue, by discussing different ways that storytellers show, I argue that *Salome* anticipates some of Brecht’s notions of the theatre. Not just asking the audience, what would you do if you were in Salome’s position, Wilde seems to ask himself how he would write this play if he were a part of Salome’s society. In *Salome*, the storyteller is repositioned like a Brechtian actor.

While the Salome/St. John the Baptist tale is biblical, appearing in two of the Gospels, it is also historical, appearing in Flavius Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*. Wilde’s *Salome*, then, is a *historically relative* modern history play meant to alienate not only the audience but also the writer himself. This alienation is due to Wilde’s multiple translations: Wilde imbues