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Sean C. Hall
sshall@achcorp.com

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The Cult of Salomé: Decapitation Imagery and Cultural Anxiety in Belle Époque Europe.

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Liberal Studies

By

Sean Charles Hall

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Mentor: Dr. Susan Libby
Reader: Dr. Patricia Lancaster

Rollins College
Hamilton Holt School
Master of Liberal Studies Program

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The Cult of Salomé; Decapitation Imagery and Cultural Anxiety During the Belle Époque

The period in history known as the Belle Époque represents a high point in European culture when arts flourished and modernism really took hold. We begin this period with the Franco-Prussian War and end it with the Great War (WWI). It is an era marked with considerable change to nearly every institution and many facets of society during a roughly 34 year span. This metamorphosis which visited Europe came swiftly, sometimes welcomed and sometimes not. The economic changes and the prosperity which occurred during this time were most certainly welcomed, but the profusion of new social ideas were sometimes met with opposition, and even hostility. Ideas such as Socialism shook the core values of the old European monarchial system, and other changes, such as to the role of women in society, disrupted long standing traditions and cultural norms. Many of these drastic changes to tradition caused cultural anxiety. Many of those who felt this anxiety were the artists, writers, and composers, all of whom acted as a mirror to society. Many would express this social perturbation of their changing world through their various arts. One theme which had a strong appeal to the artists of the Belle Époque is representations of women decapitating men. The old Biblical stories of Salomé and John the Baptist and Judith and Holofernes made great fodder for painters, writers, playwrights, and composers. The explosions of these images in the arts reflects a cultural apprehension which many during this period suffered. A good term for this expression in art is *the Cult of Salomé* in which the arts made great use of decapitation imagery as a culturally symbolic usurpation of male

authority and power, and is in itself emblematic of an underlying social anxiety relating to the rise of the feminist movements and the changing gender roles within society.

The story of Salomé is one of ancient mythology which begins as a mythical figure dances her way into the underworld and becomes a symbol of erotic attraction and the concept of fertility. The story's origins can be found in the goddess Ishtar of Babylonia who sought to save her lover from the underworld by performing a *Dance of the Seven Veils*. This helped her get through seven-times-seven gates at which she had to leave something behind in order to move forth.[1] Ishtar's journey to and from the underworld is seen as a symbol of natural fertility similar to later Greek myths of Demeter and Persephone.[2] This early mythical Salomé and her *Dance of the Seven Veils* has little semblance to the biblical figure from which many artists of the Belle Époque took their inspiration.

The story of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist is found in both the gospel of Saint Matthew and of Saint Mark. King Herod had imprisoned John the Baptist, and as he languished in prison one night, Salomé danced for Herod, so pleasing him, that he granted her to ask for anything she wished. Upon her mother's command she asked for the head of John the Baptist, which Herod reluctantly gave.[3] There is no real expression of sexual power and usurpation of male authority in the biblical tale other than that of Salomé's mother who used her daughter's reward to seek her revenge. If anything, Salomé is an obedient daughter who follows the orders of her mother as any

[1] Udo Kultermann, "The Dance of the Seven Veils: Salome and Erotic Culture around 1900," *Artibus et Historiae*, 27 no. 53 (2006): 187.

[2] Ibid,.

[3] Nanette B. Rodney, "Salome,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin,* 11 no. 7 (Mar., 1953): 190.

good daughter is expected to have done in those days. She is little more than a servant and a bit player in a grander story.

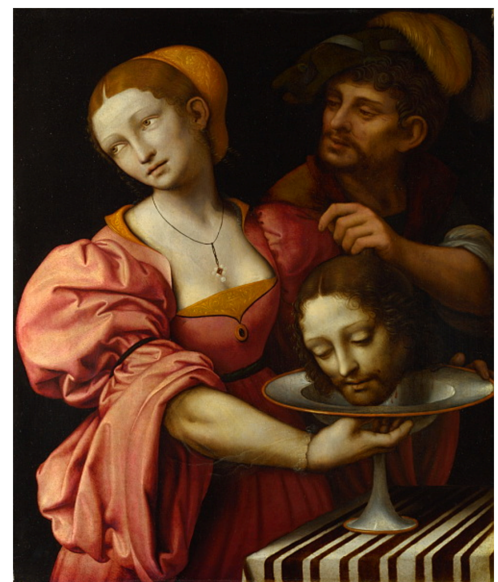
The idea of sexual exploitation for gain, or female usurpation of male power is not present in earlier expressions of this story in art. The relief of Salomé from the Bishop's Bernward column in the Hildesheim Cathedral (Salomé's dance, relief from the Bernward Column, St. Mary's Cathedral, Hildesheim, 993-1022), is one of the earliest representations of the Salomé story, only shows Salomé dancing as the head of John the Baptist is brought out. In many of these earlier representations of Salomé, the king stands as the central figure, and the story is just as much about him as it is about Salomé and her mother. It was not until the Renaissance that the character of Salomé becomes the key figure in representations of this story in art.

Since the trope of decapitation imagery becomes popular in both the Belle Époque and the Italian Renaissance and later in the Baroque period, a comparison of all their usages of these images can tell the viewer a great deal about the society which created these works. Many of these earlier depictions of the tale of Salomé do give her more importance in their works than from earlier representations, yet she remains nonsexual, and still a docile bit player in the drama which unfolds upon the canvas. In her role there is neither the

Salomé's Dance, relief from the Bernward Column, St. Mary's Cathedral, Hildesheim, 993-1022

sexual power, or any ideas of the usurpation of masculine power. There is no presence of an assault on masculinity or the changing role of women in the culture of this period. She is entirely a woman of the Renaissance, or the Baroque period, and no evidence of the femme fatale as will be become evident during the Belle Époque period where the difference is very pronounced.

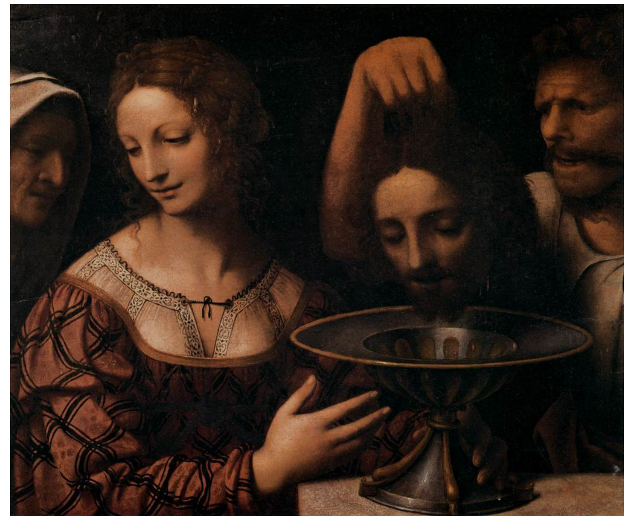
One Renaissance artist's depiction of Salomé is that of Giampietrino whose work depicts Salomé far differently than what will come in the Belle Époque. In Giampietrino's *Salomé*, circa 1510-30, the viewer can see that his painting is giving a Salomé as a more central figure. The king and her mother are nowhere to be seen. While the colors are vibrant, the figure of Salomé is morbid, brooding, shamefaced, and guilt ridden. Salomé's face bears a fearful expression and with a hint of disgust in the task at hand. This Salomé cannot bring herself to look at the decapitated head of John the Baptist, which will become a common representation of Salomé in the paintings to come in this age. The executioner appears to be examining her face closely for the slightest emotion. He looks almost mockingly at her as if to suggest either condemnation or perhaps pleasure in her discomfort. The light is coming in from the direction in which she is looking, lending a dramatic air to the work. There is no feeling of Salomé as a powerful character observed. Instead she more resembles a



Giampietrino, *Salomé*, circa 1510-30

frightened servant sent to perform a loathsome duty for her master.

Following what appears to be a tradition in the representation of Salomé at this period is artist Bernardo Luini and his work entitled *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1527. Here is a similar depiction of Salomé to that of Giampietrino. We see she is looking away from the severed head upon the charger. Her eyes are downcast clearly showing the task to be of the most unpleasant kind and not one of her choosing. Is it guilt upon her face, or is it sorrow at her deed, or both? This is a Salomé not in control of her own destiny, but rather a young woman who has been forced into this role. The light, as in the other depictions of Salomé from this period, is coming from the direction which she is facing. The light being used to add drama to the scene as if illuminated by stage lighting. The feeling is dark, muted, and almost sinister as we the viewers gaze upon the Christ-like head being placed into the bowl. The sight is one of tragedy not of triumph. In this working of the story both characters look to be the losers of the Biblical tale.



Bernardino Luini, *Salomé,* circa 1527-31

Another painting by Bernardino Luini is his work entitled *Salomé*, circa 1527-31, which bears many of the same hallmarks as that of Giampietrino, demonstrating a repeating, or growing traditional representation of the Salomé story as depicted upon

the canvas. In this work as in the others we can see a repeated vision of the story. Once again Salomé dares not look upon the charger loaded with the severed head of John the Baptist, yet this is a different Salomé. She is not all that much different from the Salomé characters depicted in other works, although she looks perhaps more in possession of feminine beauty and a calm claims her expression. She still lacks anything resembling strength of character or a challenge to male authority. The hag, her mother, whispers in her ear as if to give instructions to the marionette she controls. This work also offers a similar palette as the other works of this period with colors that are as subdued as Salomé is herself. She is simply another example of the character of Salomé as bit player in a drama. She is a pawn on a board in a story not of her making and beyond her control.

Bernardo Luini, *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist,* 1527

In the Baroque period there was the great Italian painter Michelangelo Caravaggio, who was known for creating highly dramatic effect with his use of tenebrism, a pronounced chiaroscuro, which added to the emotional feeling of the his paintings of Salomé. He gives us two remarkable renderings of the story. His paintings appear to also follow Giampietrino and other earlier artists ideas of her representation, and like theirs, Caravaggio's expresses not female power, but rather an almost submissive and

unwilling Salomé. As in the earlier depiction she looks as if after carrying out her mother's wishes she cannot now bring herself to look at the severed head upon the charger before her. Caravaggio's *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1607 gives us again a sense of shame rather than female conquest or emasculation. Perhaps she feels guilt at having even usurped this power from John the Baptist in an almost unnatural battle of wills between the two sexes. Even the executioner has the look of regret upon his face and the mother appears to be looking down as if expressing her own guilt. The feeling is that all were involved in some wrong doing.

In Caravaggio's later reworking of this subject of *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1609, the same look of shame and regret is apparent on the faces of all present, and once again Salomé cannot bring herself to look upon the decapitated head of John the Baptist. If the viewer did not know the story then she would resemble nothing more than a servant being unwillingly forced to hold the silver charger loaded with its dreadful contents. These Renaissance and Baroque representations of Salomé still seem to be based in the Biblical tale in which Salomé only plays a small part. Examining further this work a viewer sees the light is

Michelangelo Caravaggio, *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1607

again coming from the side which Salomé is looking towards, yet no feeling of holy or supernatural light is felt as in some of his other works. This lighting is used only to add a dramatic effect of highlighting his characters. The colors used are again as subdued as Salomé is herself in this painting. The entire scene is somber as the characters fulfill their unfortunate destinies.

These representation of Salomé during the Renaissance and Baroque periods are many and are always the same traditional representation of a weak and submissive woman. While she has moved more into the spotlight, she is still a woman who has no power of her own. She is at the beck and call of her mother, or the king, but not of her own will. This is a traditional representation which has lasted throughout these periods in history and one which follows other similar culturally transmitted ideas of women in art. Other examples are the representation of Eve as depicted as shamefully covering her nakedness while Adam does not. Another is the *Venus Pudica*, or shameful Venus, who is always represented traditionally as covering her genitalia while blushing, ashamed of her nudity. It will not be until the coming of the Belle Époque when modernity will challenge traditions in many parts of society including the traditional roles of women. With the rise of modernity the viewer sees this change reflected and nowhere more pronounced than during the Belle

Michelangelo Caravaggio, *Salomé with the Head of John the Baptist*, 1609

Époque, a time of relative peace and prosperity when European societies faced rapid transformation. Traditional representations in art will be as altered as the role of women themselves in the coming age of high modernity.

In Europe the Belle Époque really begins with the end of a war, or more aptly put, a defeat for France. It would require a great philosopher, historian, and perhaps another grand thesis to explain the causes of the Franco-Prussian war. Let it suffice to say that Prussia and France went to war and the outcome did more than simply mean the defeat of the French, it meant their utter humiliation. The war was a disaster for the French from the start. Railroad problems, miscommunications, lack of supplies, and the advance of a well organized Prussian army threw the French into confusion and chaos. In consecutive battles the French fell to the Prussian onslaught and for all of their beautiful uniforms and bravado the French swallowed the bitter pill of defeat.

The French and even the world were shocked about the French defeat and the terms of surrender would prove another humiliation for the French nation. An Austrian witness to the defeat at the Battle of the Sedan described it as the most stunning event in history... an army of 100,000 that had fought twenty victorious campaigns around the world laid down their arms and France fell from prominence as a world power almost overnight.[4] Their army was often thought as symbolic of French manhood since the flower of French masculinity marched forth into battle to prove themselves against their enemies. With their defeat so came the defeat of French male pride as their armies were fairly easily pushed aside. The entire French army along with the government

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[4] Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: the German Conquest of France in 1870-1871*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 229.

collapsed with the devastating battle and the fall of the city known as Sedan. Paris quaked with disbelief while in the Prussian capital they celebrated and sang a *Te Deum* in the cathedral to mark the great victory against French pride.

The defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War must have left a deep psychological scar in the psyche of the nation as defeat in war often cause. While the end of this war ushers in a long period of peace and stability, it also begins a long and sustained cultural reexamination especially in the male population of France who now perhaps felt that French manhood had not been as strong as Prussian manhood. Some French questioned French manhood and many may have felt their masculinity was perceived as weaker than that of the Prussians. The proof to many lay on the bloody battle fields scattered across France and in the peace treaty signed by the French government in Versailles. At the war's conclusion the French thought that they had finally hit rock bottom, but they were wrong.

The government moved to Bordeaux and Versailles in hopes that it would be easier to govern from a less turbulent part of the country than Paris, but what occurred in their absence was a power vacuum and an insurrection. As the Prussian troops left Paris on 18 March, Aldolphe Thiers, the new head of the government, decreed that the Parisians had to relinquish the cannons which had been used to defend the city from the Prussian siege, but the Parisians refused.[5] They now began to make demands of their own from the government, one of which was to keep the guns in place guarded by local militiamen. The government attempted to deprive the citizens of Paris of their cannons from the Place des Vosges and failed, but then tried again at the bigger threat

[5] David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005), 60.

of the cannons at Montmartre, which overlooked the city, and this action in turn sparked an uprising started by those who lived in the working class village on the edge of Paris.[6]

With Paris in full revolt what was left of the French government fled Paris and Parisians began to form their own revolutionary government which became known from that time forward as the Paris Commune. The Communards, as they would come to be known, quickly formed a Central Committee which immediately began arguing everything from the type of government they wanted, a republic or a socialist government, to changes in the social structure, to whether or not to attack the exiled government in Versailles, or dig in.[7] The uprising did take on radical components, some of which were extreme.

The women in the Commune began to garner some political representation and even added to the radical change this new government brought with its creation. Women even joined in the planning of extremist actions against the old government. Louise Michel, a school teacher and head of the woman's complement to the eighteenth arrondissement Vigilance Committee, put forth a plan to assassinate the old president Thiers at Versailles which was met with approval from fellow activists, but never acted upon.[8] Women in the Commune were not simply going to sit by and allow the men to take charge. They now demanded a place in government in which their demands could also be heard and debated. For the first time, perhaps since the Women's March on Versailles during the 1789 Revolution, women were creating a part for themselves on the revolutionary stage. The Paris Commune created not only

[6] Ibid,.
[7] Ibid, 65.
[8] Ibid, 64.

challenges to the French government, but also to French society and the role of women within it.

Despite contributing to the French Revolution of 1789 the role of women in France had remain relatively static with no say in government whatsoever. After the Revolution Napoleon Bonaparte put women in a subordinate position with his *Napoleonic Code* (a.k.a., the Civil Code) of 1804, which defined and codified their status eliminating the few gains women made during the Revolution.[9] With the volatile environment of France, revolutionary conditions appeared to offer some glimmer of hope for the women of France. The rise in ideas regarding socialism, the revolutions of 1830 and of 1848 appeared to offer women more of a role, but the repression which followed each again kept women in a subservient position in society and with no representation in government.[10] As with those earlier revolutions, the Paris Commune would promise more rights for women, and make good on those promises for a least a short period of time until the Commune's fatal end.

Women in the French Commune would finally obtain the representation and some of the equality many had long desired. Many others, including the government in exile, would see these changes as too radical, and desire to crush them along with the rebellious Communards, but for the moment women gained political power. Many of their reforms were actually quite reasonable such as a policy for public schools which called for the education of girls to be equal to that of boys.[11] While the male members

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[9] Ibid, 143.
[10] Ibid, 144.
[11] Ibid, 151.

of the Communards may have seen this as simply a way to foster an informed and productive citizenry, it also stood as a step towards equality.

Women also achieved independence in the area of work under the Commune. Thanks much in part to the recent war and the siege of Paris, the Parisian economy was in chaos leaving many women deprived of financial support.[12] Historically women's pay was always much less than that of men. The Commune's Women's Union petitioned to establish workshops for women in which the Commune leaders, noting that many women were in need of a living wage to take care of themselves and families, relented and established an all-female cooperative venture for the production of sandbags to be used on barricades.[13] The Commune paid women a higher wage than the factories, and their pay neared that of the men of the Commune.

The Paris Commune took women out of the home and gave them a bridgehead in the public square. The old cultural stereotypes of women being paragons of virtue and purity with their maternal duties to attend to was both challenged and shattered during the Commune.[14] Women were playing a far more visible role in the managing of the Commune than ever been seen before. For some this was very disconcerting since the idea persisted that women were not intellectually or emotionally capable of participating in civic life and for many this caused unease and anxiety at the very least. Women were not only demonstrating themselves as capable, but were also assuming the roles formally characterized by masculinity. Those carefully manicured gender lines were blurring and, while the Commune appeared to tolerate it more out of necessity, the

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[12] Ibid,.
[13] Ibid, 152.
[14] Ibid,156.

old government opposed it and used such examples of women fighting alongside men at the barricades as propaganda against the Commune and their supporters.

The Versailles, the name by which the government had become known, then stormed Paris and crushed the Commune. Their bombardment destroyed many buildings, many of which already showed the scars from the Prussian Siege, but now French cannon shells exploded amongst French buildings to kill French rebels. The Commune supporters fought street by street, barricade by barricade, falling back slowly as both sides paid a high price for the territory lost and gained. Arsonists began to set fire to buildings to cover retreats, but also to enact a revenge upon the buildings of the old government. Actress Marie Colombier described the scene in her memoirs as she saw it from a friend's terrace which overlooked Paris:

> We saw a light that slowly began to grow, expanding into sheaves of fire, spreading into blankets of red, filling the horizon. We looked at one another and suddenly understood: "My God! These fanatics have set fire to Paris!" The flames roared like a continuous bass, interrupted from time to time by dry rifle fire.... Little flames, carried by the wind, swirled above our heads: they were the parchments of the Court of Accounts - or rather the history of the Second Empire that was disappearing page by page. Finished this legendary time of folly and grandeur! Finished Balzac's dream realized in the fanciful adventure of this epoch.[15]

The Versailles had included female incendiaries in reports to the French and foreign press which created a mass hysteria at the thought of women running amuck through the streets of Paris burning government buildings, so much so that many women who were merely suspected of being arsonists were executed upon being

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[15] Stephane Kirkland, *Paris Reborn: Napoleon III, Baron Haussman, and the Quest to build a Modern City*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 314.

captured by the Versailles' troops.[16] Many women would join their male comrades before the firing squad. During what became known as the Bloody Week, between 17,000 and 35,000 people were killed, not only men and women, but also a great many children.[17] Many others, including many of the women, were imprisoned, deported, or exiled in the days following the fall of the Commune.

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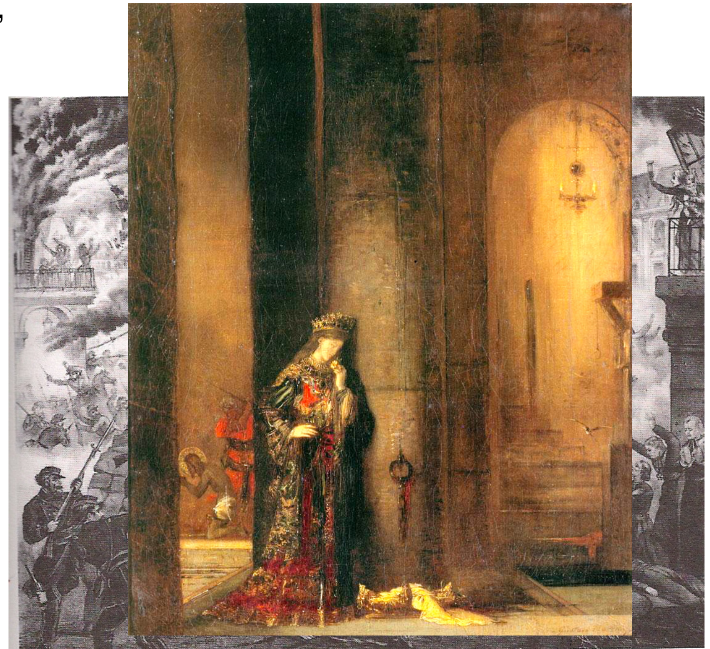
[16] David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 159.
[17] Stephane Kirkland, *Paris Reborn*, 315.

The Commune now defeated, the government in control of Paris set about to undo all the damage caused by the Commune which also included social damage. A vigorous campaign began to win the Parisians away from the ideas of the Commune and back to the ideas of the French republic as well as a return to the traditional role of women which had predated the sweeping change of the Paris Commune. Caricatures made very good use as propaganda in the many newspapers and journals which circulated around the nation. One such caricature entitled *La Terreur Sous La Commune* or *the Terror Under the Commune* from 1871 illustrates brave Versailles forces having to battle not only rebellious men, but also women. Two in the foreground can be seen with sword and club in hand joining a hasty retreat before the victorious Versailles troops.[18] This is perhaps an image not unknown to the French audience. After all the allegorical Marianne leading Parisians into battle was a popular trope used by artists; however, where their Marianne was a fanciful caricature, the women in these engravings were far too real to life. The women here were participants who fought side by side with the men on the barricades. Also in the engraving is an image of the

[18] Ibid, 177.

image of the execution of clerics by the Communards and the toppling of the Vendôme Column, both equally symbolic of the attacks upon traditional society.

Out of the ashes of defeat, from the chaos of political uncertainty and a visibly changing role of women, a young painter, Gustave Moreau, appears to have been the first to usher in the reemergence of Salomé as a theme in the arts, but a Salomé quite different than those which came before. It is possible that Moreau noted the cultural shift occurring all around him and he turned to this symbolic theme in his first work of Salomé entitled, *Salomé in the Prison*, 1872, as a means to reflect the changed world around him. In this work the viewer witnesses the moment just before the execution of John the Baptist as he kneels before his executioner. Salomé, pensive, ambiguous, is leaning against a wall with a rose in her hand, a romantic symbol, and with just the hint of a bemused and mischievous smile. She is awaiting her prize and the statement is one of an erotic satisfaction which she will soon receive upon his death. She has changed from that earlier portrayal of the virgin youth who mechanically followed her mother's commands to one of a quiet female rage. Moreau goes on to do numerous studies on this theme

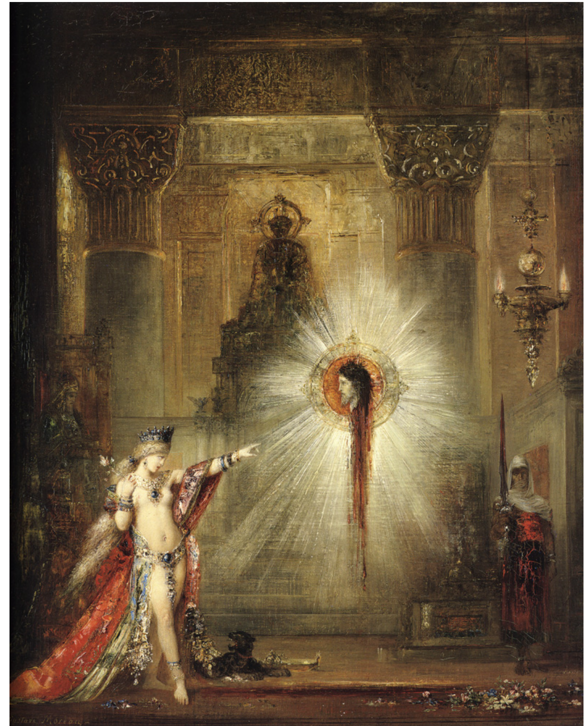


Gustave Moreau, *Salomé in Prison*, 1872

La Terreur Sous La Commune or *the Terror Under the Commune* from 1871

as well as other paintings, but his most memorable work arrived for the 1876 Salon entitled *the Apparition*, 1876.

Moreau's *the Apparition*, is a work which embraces the symbolist vision's main concern of representing absolute truths with the use of metaphorical and symbolic meaning. Perhaps in Moreau's mind he felt that society had weakened and the attack on masculinity may have made France more effeminate. This in turn could have led to the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, yet society could fight back. In his work, *The Apparition*, 1876 we find yet another representation of Salomé dancing, nearly nude, sexualized, as the head of John the Baptist floats before her in a vision which she alone sees. The head which hovers before her has an incriminating gaze which is locked onto her eyes. This painting suggests the feminine challenge to masculine nature manifested as power and lust in Salomé and in John the Baptist as spirituality and chastity.[19] This work could be seen as a symbol of the victory of the spirit over the flesh, yet Salomé dances on and will have the head of the Baptist. Her gaze can also be seen as rebellious since unlike the earlier portrayals of Salomé who turned away submissively, she looks straight on into his eyes. It is almost as if a battle



Gustave Moreau, *the Apparition*, 1876

[19] Jean Paladilhe, Jose Pierre, *Gustave Moreau*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 102.

of wills is underway between the vision before her and her eventual victory over this man.

Joris-Karl Huysmans publishes his very influential *À Rebours* in 1884 in which he captures this change from Salomé being a docile puppet controlled by her mother to the conspirator who uses her sexuality to usurp power and life from men. In an interesting passage Huysmans writes nine pages which describe two paintings of Salomé by Gustave Moreau, he writes:

> Des Esseintes at last realized the superhuman and exotic Salomé of his dreams. She was no longer the mere performer who wrests a cry of desire and of passion from an old man by a twisting of her loins; who destroys the energy, and breaks the will of a king by trembling breasts and quivering belly. She became, in a sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible lust, the goddess of the immortal Hysteria, of accursed beauty, distinguished from all others by the catalepsy which stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; the monstrous beast, indifferent, irresponsible, baneful, like the Helen of antiquity, fatal to all who approach her, all who behold her, all whom she touches.[20]

The myth of Salomé as is noted in the art of the 1870s and 1880s shifts from just a bit player in the biblical tale to becoming the manipulating and diabolical figure who pollutes with her accursed beauty and her monstrous irresponsibility. She is perhaps now a symbol of a society under attack by an unwanted virus. She is now something for men to fear in a changing social landscape.

This shift in her representation also painted her as a bloodthirsty virgin. This new imagining sets Salomé as the epitome of the inherent perversity of women with the

[20] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, (London: Penguin Books, 1956), 52-53

ability to destroy the male's soul even while she remained nominally chaste in body.[21] One almost pictures her as an abomination with an angel's face. A creature who lures men to their doom with her youthful beauty. Her virginity at once a sign of purity, but also in her guise as Salomé, a weapon. Perhaps the French poet and critic Stéphane Mallarmé says it best in his poem about Salomé entitled *Hérodiade*. He writes of the moment his Salomé gazes fixedly at herself in the mirror as she says these lines:

> The horror of my virginity
> Delights me and I would envelope me
> In the terror of my tresses, that, by night,
> Inviolate reptile, I might feel the white
> And glimmering radiance of thy frozen fire,
> Thou that art chaste and dies of desire,
> White night of ice and of the cruel snow![22]

This was a new image for the threat of a new women for a new time. A changing idea of even virginity, once thought of as a cherished possession of the virginal woman turned into something of danger. The Belle Époque had arrived and with it a new sense of uncertainty. The concern was not only about the changing role of women, but also where this new world was heading. Everything appeared to be changing and concerns abounded.

The Belle Époque certainly represented great transformation to Paris and an evolution in not only the Parisians' rebuilt capital and their society but also their entire world. Baron Haussmann's modernization of Paris had given the city new avenues, parks, fountains, statues, restaurants, cafes, concert halls, and other amusements earlier in the century, and after the war and the Communard revolt, Paris set to work

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[21] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity; Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Find-De-Siecle Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 385.

[22] Ibid,.

rebuilding it all over again. It is through the newly built Paris that the Belle Époque is born and throughout Paris the rebuilding marked not only the next evolution of Paris but that of a newly evolving society. As so often is the case with French history, what began in France would in turn influenced greater Europe, but the end of the war began a new Paris rebuilt, and from there the Belle Époque truly got underway.

The Parisian flâneur, the stroller of the city streets, explored this new landscape, taking in his changing city first hand. It is easy to imagine the world the flâneur encountered in the late 1800s. The view before him would be one of wide avenues full of men in top hats, and women in frilly dresses carrying on with the day to day business of life in the city. Our flâneur might have started out sauntering down a grand avenue, pass Maxim's famous restaurant on his way to some favorite café on the Champs-Élysées. He would no doubt stop at one of the many *Colonne Morris*, the famous advertising columns scattered throughout Paris, to gaze upon the colorful posters. There he would view the cornucopia of what Paris had to offer. Posters showing the latest show or café concert adorned those delightful columns. In such places as the riotous Folies Bergère, or the dinner and concerts of Les Ambassadeurs our flâneur would have witnessed yet another new sight to Paris; the mixing of the classes and a rising economic class set to challenge the old.

The new rising and increasingly powerful bourgeoisie in the company of *le gratin*, or the upper crust of society, became a more common sight. Granted, class lines still existed. The famed Jockey Club de Paris remained a cloistered male haven for the aristocratic elite well into the twentieth century but times were changing. The lines

between changing social classes were beginning to blur. These new economic realities added to the change affecting France, and while many were gaining wealth, others were not. The old aristocracy, whose power was slipping away, formed an alliance with the haute bourgeoisie in order to survive, but all of these groups appeared to have felt a vague, poorly defined sense of marginalization.[23] The aristocracy was being supplanted by the robber barons and factory owners. Realizing that they were losing power to this haute bourgeoisie they looked for someone to blame and as always, women were conveniently available.[24]

Men would find in women a useful scapegoat to the problems of the day. They would have the women's movement which demanded equal rights, equal pay, more political representation and the vote, to look down upon as an ever growing challenge to their authority. Men would also view women as a long standing blight on society in the form of prostitution and of course this oldest of professions was not to be their fault. Men, in the man's world, viewed themselves as the victims of these street walkers and these courtesans. Prostitutes became another symbol of how certain women have weakened society, and in the cities filled with a growing dispensable wealth the supply and the demand appeared to be on the rise.

Prostitution in the latter half of the nineteenth century became widespread and a common sight in the urban areas and these women were often pointed to as one of the reason French society was at risk. These prostitutes were due in part to the rise of the middle class who not only had newly acquired wealth to spend, but who also elevated

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[23] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 354.
[24] Ibid,.

their own wives to positions of spotless quasi-virginal household nuns.[25] Many found themselves battling ideas of how an upstanding woman of society should behave and their own human nature as sexually driven creatures. A market for women of easy virtue found cities such as Paris good soil to flourish in. Along with this new element in the urban landscape came a social backlash against the profession, or more aptly against women.

Many writers began to blame not male society for creating prostitution, but female society. A writer of the day, Bernard Talmey, suggested that it was foolish to believe that prostitutes were driven by idleness or necessity, but instead "one should realize that not a few choose this life to satisfy their nymphomaniac desires."[26] Prostitutes were now being blamed for corrupting men and not for men exploiting women. Otto Weininger writing in his work *Sex and Character* declared that:

> ... prostitution cannot be considered as a state into which men have seduced women. The man may occasionally be to blame, as, for instance, when a servant is discharged and finds herself deserted. But where there is no inclination for a certain course, the course will not be adopted. Prostitution is foreign to the male element.... The disposition for and inclination to prostitution is as organic in woman as is the capacity for motherhood.[27]

These writers would have their readers believe that men were the mere victims of tempting sirens who lure men towards doom and corrupt not only them, but also society in which no class was immune.

The literature of this period also expresses the same idea of woman as the corrupting force of men and society. In Émile Zola's *Nana* the reader finds the story of

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[25] Ibid, 356.
[26] Ibid,.
[27] Ibid, 357.

a courtesan of Paris whose very nature is predatory. Zola writes of her as death and poison:

> With her the rottenness that is allowed to ferment among the populace is carried upward and rots the aristocracy. She becomes a blind power of nature, a leaven of destruction, and unwittingly she corrupts and disorganizes all Paris, churning it between her snow-white thighs as milk is monthly churned by housewives. And it was at the end of this article that the comparison with a fly occurred, a fly of sunny hue which has flown up out of the dung, a fly which sucks in death on the carrion tolerated by the roadside and then buzzing, dancing and glittering like a precious stone enters the windows of palaces and poisons the men within by merely settling on them in her flight.[28]

Not a flattering view of the profession Nana follows and Zola will compare her to an infected fly spreading plague throughout society in this work. The men are her victims and not the other way around. Zola writes, "She had finished with her labor of ruin and death. The fly that had flown up from the ordure of the slums, bringing with it the leaven of social rottenness, had poisoned all these men by merely alighting on them."[29]

While Nana poisoned her victims with lust and desire, her poison would in the end also destroy her. It is as if Zola is suggesting that her very nature is not simply a danger to unwitting men, and to the society, but also to the she-devil herself. Zola perhaps is giving his readers a glimpse of the realism he is known for when he writes the end of his character Nana's life. She is poisoned by her own poison as Zola describes her last moments, "Venus was rotting. It seemed as though the poison she had assimilated in the gutters and on the carrion tolerated by the roadside, the leaven with which she had poisoned a whole people, had but now remounted to her face and

[28] Émile Zola, *Nana,* (New York: eBook Media Ventures, 2012), 222.
[29] Ibid, 468.

turned it to corruption."[30] One feels sympathy, but at the same time can see a corrupting force which so corrupts that in the end she herself falls victim to her own nature. What she gave out to so many is returned to her as a retribution for her crimes against a society plagued by such women. Women of the night were doubtless seen as that which weakens men and were to be blamed for adding to the decadence of their world.

In some of these writings about prostitutes we see a growing concern about female power and the effect upon not simply men but society. Prostitutes represent a cultural problem to a Europe founded in a Judeo-Christian tradition in which such pursuits by women have always been looked down upon on one hand, but tolerated, and even secretly endorsed by men on the other. Brothels during this period were a common sight as were the women who walked the street corners alone at night. As it was seen as a societal problem it was also a need which a supply and demand market provided, but by men who were often eager to place blame anywhere but on themselves. The fact that these women clearly had power over many of these men was a problem for them which they wanted to rationalize away as something they were powerless against. It appears to have unsettled the male psyche. It would not be the last time women of this age would unhinge male confidence and masculinity. A rising movement would soon lend to the feeling that women were something they were losing control of.

The defeat of the Paris Commune, and the rights which women had for that brief moment, did not simply go away, but rather a international feminist movement began in

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[30] Ibid, 487.

earnest. Calls throughout Europe demanded equality and eventually the vote were heard from many of these new feminists. Their presence was seen and felt by society as they marched in the streets, gave speeches at rallies, and began to distribute literature on the subject. Many feminists took pen to paper and began not only to demand more rights, but also to attack traditional norms such as ideas of masculinity.

The Viennese feminist writer and activist Rosa Mayreder wrote of a need to create new identities for new times. She not only wished to change ideas regarding the traditional roles of women, but also those of men in Europe and beyond. She believed the society's old perceived notions of a male dominated society were entirely superfluous and that men were clinging on to outdated moral codes that were in for a wake up call. Perhaps she was correct since as we have seen men were reacting to the assault on these old ideas of what it is to be a man. She writes:

> Modern man suffers from his intellectualism as from an illness... is it not significant that men, educated to be critical in all questions, remain uncritical for longest when it comes to analyzing masculinity? To be masculine... as masculine as possible... that is the true distinction in their eyes; they are insensitive to the brutality of defeat or the sheer wrongness of act if only it coincides with the traditional canon of masculinity.[31]

This is a challenge to the very cultural values the West had constructed around masculinity. For Rosa Mayreder and other feminists this canon was on its way out and the time had long been due for a new interpretation of the roles of men and women. Women were no longer going to allow men to simply dictate the terms of their lives. They believed they deserved a say and were joining other women to push that point.

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[31] Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years; Europe, 1900-1914*, (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 249.

Women were now an organized force who protested in the streets and demanded equal rights and even the vote. This was an international movement intent upon redefining women in society and their presence was difficult to ignore. Groups such as the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) staged massive rallies in London with estimated crowds of 300,000 to 500,000 with many people carrying signs demanding more equality and the vote.[32] Lobbying of political leaders had begun and petitions were signed and submitted. Women interrupted speeches in Parliament with their protests and any public event would often become an opportunity for women to speak out publicly for their cause. Women's activism was a very visible presence in the changing world of Belle Époque Europe. Even if the men who supported traditional ideas regarding the roles of men and women wanted to hide away from this clamor for change they were unable to. Suffragettes, as they had begun to be known, became a common sight in the cities of Europe.

Many suffragettes were young women from respectable families who were practicing anything but traditional ladylike behavior in the name of social change. The stereotype of women being calm and nurturing paragons of family values was shattered almost overnight. An example of this is found on 13 October 1905 when suffragists Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenney interrupted a speech by Sir Edward Grey at Manchester Free Trade Hall that resulted in the women being dragged away by police and imprisoned.[33] Other imprisoned suffragettes even continued to protest from their jails cells. In June 1909 many refused to take food in protest and the Home Office

[32] Ibid, 266.
[33] Ibid, 274.

ordained that they should be force fed leading to newspaper accounts of women being pinned down while doctors inserted rubber tubes into their stomach in order to force porridge into them.[34] The spectacular events made front page news as many read in disbelief at the unladylike comportment of these young women and civil disobedience began to turn to violence.

Suffragette protests became radical as women not only chose prison to the home and hearth, but also with exhibition of violence as opposed to that of peaceful protesting. An attempt to storm Parliament became another public spectacle as women battled with police causing public disorder the likes of which had never been seen before in London. Led by radical activist Leonora Cohen the suffragists made a dash for Parliament, and literally fought hand to hand with police as they attempted to break police lines. Cohen was knocked to the ground by a policeman, but not before throwing a note wrapped around a stone through a window of Parliament which read:

> Votes for women
> This is my protest against the Liberal Government for its treachery and torture of the suffragettes of Great Britain who claim the right to have a vote and become recognized citizens.
> Signed, Leonora Cohen
> Leeds[35]

This type of rebellious behavior had never been seen led by women before. This was something all too new and something which caused a great deal of consternation to society at large. Stones were thrown at shop windows, at the windows of MPs and

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[34] Ibid, 275.
[35] Ibid,277.

government ministers and, in 1912, at 10 Downing Street.[36] A climate of increased radicalism shocked the nerve at the heart of the British Empire. Arson attacks on empty buildings and letter boxes and even a letter bomb addressed to Prime Minister Asquith showed society that these women could in fact be very dangerous.[37]

Even as far away as the Russian Empire the women's movement struck at the heart of government. While the Russian suffragette movement paled in comparison with that in London and elsewhere they still followed the example set by those in other countries. In 1905 Russian women also stormed their parliament as bewildered deputies shouted abuses at the women invaders.[38] It was a sight which caused one deputy to record the event in his memoirs. He wrote of that day, "raided by suffragettes, short-haired young ladies in spectacles, most of them puny-looking, and an older peasant deputy kindly took one of the women aside to give her the advice to forget all this women's suffrage nonsense and to go get married." Clearly some of the deputies were beyond baffled by the storming of parliament, they appeared incapable of understanding the debate these women were trying to push and confused as to why these women were steering away from the role society had set for them.

In France the women's movement took more of a literary approach as the issue was argued about in books and in newspapers. Marguerite Durand, founded *La Fronde*, a newspaper written, typeset and printed entirely by and for women, with the purpose of advocating feminist demands ranging from women's admission to the École

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[36] Ibid,.
[37] Ibid,.
[38] Ibid, 282.

des Beaux Arts to enlisting them in the regular army.[39] This was just one of many such newspapers created in France to support women's rights. Many feminist's books in France also argued for women's emancipation. Madeleine Pelletier wrote works covering controversial issues such as not only women's political rights, but also arguing for free abortions and radical changes in girls' education in titles such as *Woman Struggling for Her Rights*, 1908, or *Yesterday's Ideology: God, Morals, the Fatherland*, 1910.[40] These women would be a very visible challenge to the old guard who sought to held women back.

Germany also had their share of feminists who demanded the vote and challenged the traditional roles of the sexes within society. One such woman was Anita Augspurg who argued: "The question whether the fundamental relationship of men and women needs reforming must not only be answered in the affirmative, we can even say that it must be revolutionized in its very foundations."[41] She also set out to create her own newspaper to promote women's rights. Her journal titled *Newspaper for Woman's Suffrage* publicly called for a marriage boycott, and argued that marriage was little better than sexual slavery for women who upon entering marriage lost all their rights to their husbands.[42] This in and of itself is a direct attack on the institution of marriage which had remained unchanged for perhaps thousands of years.

On and on and from country to country in Europe the same demand for change and the same challenges to male authority spread. In each nation men were seeing in

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[39] Ibid, 284.
[40] Ibid,.
[41] Ibid, 287.
[42] Ibid,.

the streets and in the newspapers a very different woman than they had even known before. Women were showing themselves capable of political action and men seemed almost impotent to do anything to stop them. Women were making themselves a force in public life and many such as Marie Curie who had been awarded two Nobel Prizes; Sarah Bernhardt whose fame spanned the Atlantic; sculptor Camille Claudel who was a famed artist, or the novels of Colette were showing women who could not only compete in public life with men, but succeed in outshining them. For some men this was taken with a grain of salt, but for many others this shook the very foundation of their long standing dominance and many reacted culturally against these women.

Male culture reacted to this threat to its supremacy in ways which promoted and glorified traditional ideas of manliness. A fetishism for military dress appeared to sweep many nations. The Kaiser and the Tsar of Russia were rarely ever seen not wearing a military uniform.[43] Never before had uniforms and mustaches been worn with such exuberance on the streets of the capitals of Europe. The clicking of well polished boot heals and the twirling of mustaches became a common sight from London to St. Petersburg. Along with this reaction came the return of ideas of manly honor both in the military and in the private life of men of a certain class.

Dueling became all the rage during the Belle Époque and continued well into the twentieth century. Men took to the fields of honor even in the face of laws against such actions, but the police most often turned a blind eye to these personal combats showing how ingrained honor was within masculine society. Even the most progressive and peace-loving men such as socialist politician and writer, Léon Blum (later to become

[43] Ibid, 229.

prime minister), took to the field to defend his honor.[44] The ideas of honor and dueling to protect a man's name did not go away with the coming of modernity, but only grew as a reaction against the modern world's demands for society to alter and traditions such as dueling to come to an end.

Another unlikely duelist is the writer Marcel Proust who demanded satisfaction due to an insult regarding a review written about Proust's first novel from Paul Duval, who wrote under the pseudonym, Jean Lorrain.[45] It may be difficult to imagine Proust, with his celebrated asthma, throwing down the gauntlet at the feet of Lorrain, but that is exactly what he did. He rose to the occasion in a manner which may seem uncharacteristic of the gentle, meticulous, Hercule Poirot-like Proust many believed they knew, but this was masculinity at work even in the most unlikely of men. Even the effete Proust and the peace-loving Blum fell victim to these social norms and masculine identities which demanded they act the part of a man even if it put their lives in peril. Those ideas were stronger than ever during this time due to the apparent reaction against changing male identities, but this soon would be fading away with the coming of the Great War. While dueling all but disappears after the World War I, the last duel was fought by Gaston Defferre and René Ribière, both deputies in the Assemblée National, in 1967.[46]

The artists once again joined in a reaction against these assaults on traditional ideas of masculinity by becoming part of Gustave Moreau's vision of their apparent collective femme fatale in the character of Salomé. Her presence begins to fill the

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[44] Ibid, 221.
[45] Douglas W. Alden, "Marcel Proust's Duel," *Modern Language Notes*, 53 (1938), 104.
[46] Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, 221.

canvases and stages on which the painters and writers gave their viewers a reflection of society's preoccupations and fears. Salomé can be seen as a growing allegory of this assault on masculinity and on the changing identities of the male and female genders. She was now to be emblematic of the coming of the "New Woman." The artists had found their muse and to some she was terrifying.

This cultural anxiety appears to have been reflected in the arts first in France, but the changes which visited that nation also visited the wider Western world. As has historically been the case with the French their ideas disseminated to a wider Europe and even to nations beyond that were also experiencing challenges to their own long standing traditions and norms. The women's movement had taken root in many western nations. Artists from all over began to depict this woman who had the power to remove the heads of men. Similar issues were coming to the surface of society from New York to Moscow and while mostly the artists reflecting this shift were men, on a rare occasion a female artist also can be found who used Salomé as her subject.

Ella Ferris Pell, *Salomé*, 1890

A depiction of Salomé by a female artist is that of Ella Ferris Pell, an American who exhibited in Paris, who gives a different view of the character which is devoid of madness, or terror. Her work entitled *Salomé* from 1890 gives the view of a woman of

strength. Not a woman to be feared, but perhaps one to be taken seriously. It is a painting done in the Orientalist manner lending to Salomé's sensual exoticism. She stands tall, dominate, with charger in hand, waiting for the head of John the Baptist to arrive. Whether Pell consciously intended to or not, she gave her viewers a revolutionary feminist statement in the fact that in place of the vampire filled with a crazed sexual hunger, she gives a woman of flesh and blood, not a mythologized flower of evil, but a healthy and strong women of pride.[47] She is not simply waiting for the bloody severed head of John the Baptist, but for the power and the freedom which accompanies it. She is waiting for what she has been denied for so very long. A viewer gets the sense that the severed head, though an act of violence, is somehow warranted, and that John the Baptist's head could represent a type of oppression which is finally meeting its end. This Salomé is not a crazed man-eater, but a redemption for all women. Pell gives us a rare glimpse into a woman's point of view regarding Salomé. It would be a point of view not shared by many others, particularly men, who were eager to show her in a threatening and maddening light on both canvas and upon the stage.

The playwright and notorious wit, Oscar Wilde, is yet another whose interpretation of the Salomé tale led him to alter her myth and in doing so reflect the changing society of 1890s' Europe. Wilde wrote his play *Salomé*, 1891, for the London stage; however, the official censor, the Examiner of Plays banned any public

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[47] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 392

performance for forty years due to mixing the biblical and highly erotic content.[48] What so shocked the censor appears to have been more then just eroticism. Wilde reworked the story to project a role reversal for the genders of his characters. His anti-heroine is given masculine power and authority as well as aggressive lusts which all make her more like a man and John the Baptist like a woman trying to save his chastity.[49] This is certainly an exchange of power as the male becomes effeminate and even subordinate to female control. To many in this period, what Wilde wrote may have been shocking, but also expressed a fear of the direction society appeared to be heading. The roles of the genders were changing. As Salomé demonstrates in Wilde's play, women are no longer commodities, but rather are becoming more and more in command of their own lives. Wilde is perhaps reflecting the anxious regard of the rise of the "New Woman" who possesses both strength and power, endangers men, and requires to be disciplined in some way to ensure the realization of the masculine ideal in society.[50] Wilde ends his play with Herod turning to see Salomé kissing the head of John the Baptist and he says in the last line of the play, "Kill that woman!"[51] Apparently even the decadent Wilde felt Salomé too dangerous for society and something in his play which had to be eliminated for the good of all.

Wilde's play *Salomé* goes further to influence other artists interested in expressing this new idea of the "New Woman" as the femme fatale and this gender role reversal he adds to the story. Aubrey Beardsley is one of the first to take Wilde's

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[48] Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde: Victorian Sexuality, Theatre, and Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59.

[49] Ibid, 61.

[50] Ibid, 59.

[51] Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1927), 57.

interpretation of the Salomé story and turn it into art. Beardsley illustrates Wilde's manuscript entitled *Salomé* in which he really captured the essence of Wilde's modernized biblical tale with his own added decadent sensibilities. Both Wilde and Beardsley achieved in this work a scandalous success as newspapers gave reviews such as this from the Art Journal which exclaimed that, "this book is for the strong-minded alone, for it is terrible in its weirdness and suggestions of horror and wickedness."[52] It is quite easy to see how reviews such as that it made many people curious enough to run out and buy a copy of their own. This *succès de scandale* did much to increase the popularity of the Salomé as does the illustrations of Beardsley which take on a popularity all of their own.

Aubrey Beardsley, *the Climax*, 1894

A viewer of Beardsley's illustrations gets a sense of what this new image of Salomé conveyed about the evolving *fin de siècle* society when examining in particular his work entitled *the Climax*, 1894. In this work the illustrations give the viewer a cruel-faced Salomé floating in a dream-like scene of black and white. In her hand is the severed head of John the Baptist, lifeless, and dripping a very art nouveau

[52] Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1998), 82.

whiplash-like curve of blood from his neck. As in Wilde's play this image is the moment when Salomé takes possession of the male power through the symbolic decapitation and in this instance can be noted the erotic satisfaction she receives from his death, which further illustrates the danger to which unmitigated female power and sexuality can expose men.[53] She stares triumphantly into his lifeless eye as if, like in Wilde's play, she is about to kiss his dead lips in a perverse last embrace and symbolic victory. Beardsley's other illustrations from this book version of Wilde's play are equally as powerful and as menacing, and his depictions of Salomé helped form an idea of Salomé in the public's eye as the quintessential femme fatale. This link between female sexuality and power had been securely tied and a rebranding of Salomé had been cemented by Wilde and Beardsley vision. As this apparent cult of Salomé grew so did the art created by others who took inspiration from Wilde's play and Beardsley's accompanying illustrations.

In the years following Wilde's play many artists took up their paint brush inspired by what Wilde set in motion. Beyond a doubt Wilde's play can be seen as a significant highlight in that his re-evaluation of this historical legend became one of the most famous Gesamtkunstwerks of the period.[54] A new synthesis of art emerged in which the new modern image of Salomé became one born out of Wilde's imagination. The femme fatale could be said as here to stay.

Taken from the last scene of Wilde's play when Salomé kisses the severed head of John the Baptist, Lucien Lévy Dhurmer's *Salomé*, 1896, displays that very moment,

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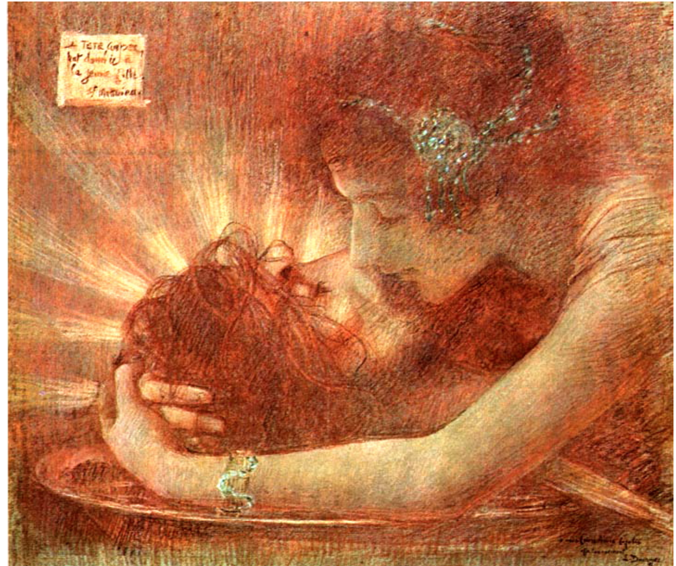
[53] Kerry Powell, *Acting Wilde*, 61.

[54] Udo Kultermann, "The Dance of the Seven Veils," Salome and Erotic Culture Around 1900," *Artibus et Historiae*, 27 no. 53 (2006), 194.

and gives the viewer yet another idea of the symbolic decapitation and castration of Wilde's and Beardsley's imagination, as well as a perverse usurpation of male power which occupies this work as she seemingly makes love to this head. This man's head is powerless in her hands. The severed head becomes what women have been to many men before, a sexual object, something to be desired and toyed with. His role again is that of the pursued female as Salomé takes the role of the predatory male. Dhurmer gives us a vivid palette of soft colors which in themselves feel feminine with shades of pinks, reds, and golden yellows.



Lucien Lévy Dhurmer, *Salomé*, 1896

The spectacle is gruesome, yet erotic, and full of portents about the possible threat to men which the "New Woman" may represent. You can almost hear the last lines of Oscar Wilde's play as Salomé speaks:

> Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on my lips. Was it the taste of blood? Nay; but perchance it was the taste of love.... They say that love hath a bitter taste.... But what matter? What matter? I have kissed thy mouth.[55]

She took her last kiss like that of a vampire loving the taste of its victim's blood. It is the victory of a lion over the sheep. The reversal of gender stereotypes is complete in this

[55] Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, 57.

painting by Dhurmer. As these reflections in the arts regarding women continues elsewhere, so the perceived assaults upon masculinity in other nations. Back in France the Jews in the army became the focus on those looking to cast suspicions on those who may weaken France.

About the same time as Wilde's play hit the London stage, a scandal occurred in France involving a Jewish officer by the name of Alfred Dreyfus. This scandal would be known as the Dreyfus Affair and would tear French society asunder. It all begins with a piece of paper found in a office garbage pail. The trash from the German embassy was being smuggled out by a cleaning lady in the employ of the French government. Towards the end of August 1894 a note found torn into six pieces which when pieced together gave evidence of someone on the general staff who was passing classified information to the Germans including one document which was extremely difficult to get ahold of and suggested the involvement of a person on the General Staff.[56] With this evidence and this evidence alone they went on a witch hunt and settled on a captain of artillery as the traitor within their ranks.

Captain Alfred Dreyfus was called before his military superiors and accused of the crime of treason against the state. At nine in the morning of Monday, 15 October 1874, his superior, Commandant du Paty de Clam, feigned an injury to his hand and asked Dreyfus to take down some dictation for him, after which the Commandant grabbed the paper and in a booming voice said, "in the name of the law, I arrest you for

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[56] Piers Paul Read, *The Dreyfus Affair; The Scandal That Tore France in Two*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 102.

the crime of high treason."[57] A confused Dreyfus protested his innocence all the way to his trial and then on to his his cell on Devil's Island.

What followed during his many years in isolation were be be a stain upon the honor of France. It was in fact due to honor that Dreyfus had bee condemned to a hell on earth in the first place. Once the military began to realize that they had made a mistake they chose instead to hide the truth from the public. The French military was an institution in which the French people had to trust. Rather than to have their image tarnished or the authority questioned, they allowed an innocent man to be falsely accused. Evidence was fabricated against Dreyfus by the military and his life was ruined. This was made easier for those who condemned him due to the fact that he was Jewish and antisemitism was rampant in France in those days.

The officer class of the French army was one of the last preserves of the French aristocracy and the very symbol of national pride and French manliness. This is the same aristocracy which had lost part of their power to the rising bourgeoisie. Many of these middle class upstarts were of the Jewish faith and with a mixture of jealousy and envy, a great deal of prejudice was thrown their way. Many officers, such as General Alfred-Louis Delanne, head of the Third Bureau of the General Staff proudly proclaimed, "No Jews here," meaning none were to be found on his staff, so his department could be trusted.[58] Many French officers held similar views regarding Jewish officers, that they were not wholly trustworthy as they were not fully Frenchmen,

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[57] Ibid, 146.
[58] Ibid, 142.

but something alien, something suspect, and therefore a possible threat. Of course this was unfounded and ludicrous, but the fact remains that many held these views.

The Jewish officer in the Army was seen as another assault upon French masculinity. No doubt many in the Army and society were simply looking for a scapegoat to many of their own failings, such as with the defeat by the Prussians, and in the Jewish military officer they found the ideal bogeyman for a nation that appeared to have lost its way. The army had lost their last war because the army was weak and decadent, or so some may have thought. Within its ranks they had men such as Dreyfus. Jews who were seen as effete cosmopolitans and the type of men best suited at being bankers or accountants rather than warriors of France.[59] They were held with as much suspicion by Catholic France as Protestants, and Freemasons.[60] This perceived Jewish menace was one founded upon the stereotypes of the day in which the Jews were city people who set about luring virile peasants away from the fields and into their factories turning many Frenchmen into emasculated machine slaves.[61] This threat to French masculinity was no different than that coming from the suffragettes movement. Just as this Jewish threat emasculated the army, so did the perception by many of suffragettes who were a threat to society. Many of the suffragettes were stereotyped as well. They were (when not accused of being depraved and sex-crazed harlots) were often described as mannishly unattractive or as shorthaired young ladies in spectacles who presented a very unfeminine exterior.[62]

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[59] Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, 297
[60] Ibid, 32.
[61] Ibid, 324.
[62] Ibid, 297 - 298.

These stereotypes of the day presented a negative societal view of suffragettes which was exacerbated by yet another attack upon traditional norms by altering their dress. The world of women's fashion even reacted to this rise of the newly emancipated woman and shifting gender norms. In a society in which your place is written on how you dress, your class as well, or your social standing, women who were ideologically committed to emancipation wanted their dress to be independent of sexual images, so many turned to more masculine clothing.[63] This shift in clothing identity again threatened the long standing social understanding of the sexes, which had operated for generations using dress as a means of distinguishing. Not surprisingly many in mainstream society reacted against these women pointing to this shift in fashion as being of lesbian taste and as such marked them out as deviants.[64] These women were as much part of the decadence which had weakened traditional values. Clearly this represented a revolution in society's views of gender, which confused some and inflicted a great many others with more social anxiety.

Assaults upon masculinity appeared to be coming like a Biblical flood in this period and another would hit men in the form of falling birth rates. The declining birth rates, especially among the middle classes, raised fears of being swamped by those further down the social ladder, and questioned the manliness of husbands who fathered fewer children.[65] The relationship between men and women, husbands and wives, raised the specter of a decadent social disorder at work in which people no longer knew the place allotted to them by nature. How could French masculinity compete with the

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[63] Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), 190.
[64] Ibid,.
[65] Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years*, 446.

Prussian if they seemingly can no longer father enough children to secure the future of a nation like France? It appeared for many that their entire world was falling down around them. Men were decadent and weak as questions of their manliness rose everywhere and even their women were now also chipping away at their power in the social hierarchy in which they once ruled supreme. Is it any wonder that there existed a social anxiety just under the surface which the arts were reflecting? The theft of identity and a symbolic castration thanks to issues such as declining birthrates and the changing roles is reason enough for the artists of the period to keep the motif of decapitation alive on their canvases. As the Belle Époque progressed Salomé came along for the ride.

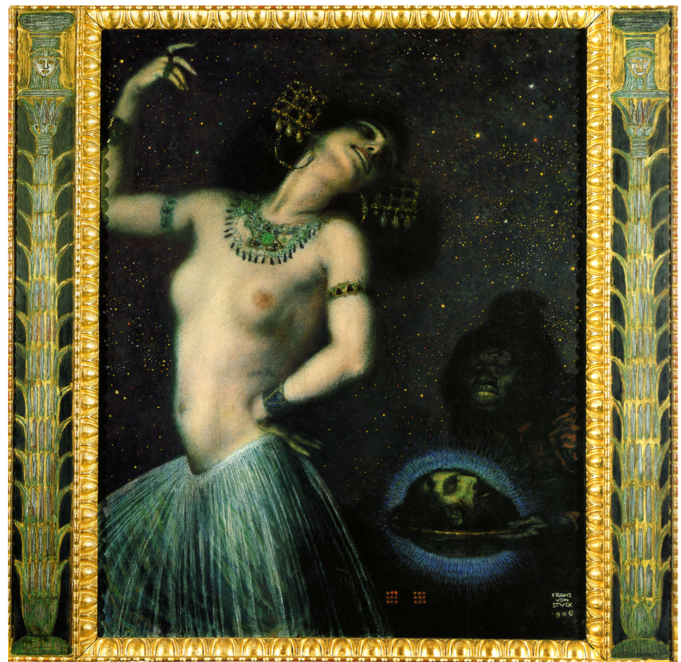
She appears again when the German artist, Lovis Corinth, gives the world an all powerful Salomé, the likes of which had yet to have been seen by people of the day. His work, entitled *Salomé II*, 1900, no doubt shocked the viewers of his painting as Wilde's play had shocked his audience. This is a sumptuous work with a Salomé who looks almost devoid of emotions. Perhaps all that can be seen on her face is curiosity as she toys with the severed head before her. She appears to be opening an eye to gaze into it. Perhaps she is attempting to see if the eyes are truly the windows of the soul and is looking for any remnant of John the Baptist within the decapitated head which is now her possession. Maybe she wants the last flicker of recognition in his eyes to register her looking down in triumph upon him, like a David peering down upon on a defeated Goliath.

The treatment of Salomé and the men in Corinth's work is much different than many of those earlier depictions of the story. The executioner is little more than the servant with no feeling of casting guilt on Salomé for her actions. The opposite was true in the earlier works from the Renaissance and the Baroque period where Salomé appeared to be a weak willed servant under the judgmental gaze of

Lovis Corinth, *Salomé II*, 1900

the executioner. The men in the painting also all appear to be the submissive ones as they now look down or away from the severed head. Salomé on the other hand looks to be fully in charge. She is the one to be feared more than even the executioner with the sword. Her weapons and power are her sexuality, her beauty, and the decapitation is very much another in a line of symbolic loss of male authority and power over women.

Continuing this theme of the modern all powerful femme fatale Salomé, showing her as no longer the innocent and submissive accomplice to her mother's will, is the Bavarian artist Franz von Stuck and his work *Salomé* of 1906. Once again we see a Salomé far different from those early images, or that which is found in the old Biblical tale. Here she dances with a manic glee as her dark African servant follows behind with the head of John the Baptist upon a plate in some twisted procession. The African servant, no doubt, represented the heightened sexuality as a representation of Africans in art usually meant a more savage and primitive sexual element.[66] Africans were thought to have been more associated with the natural world than Europeans were. This



Franz von Stuck, *Salomé* of 1906

[66] Susan Libby, "Visualizing the Exceptional Woman" (lecture, Rollins College, Winter Park, Fl, August 6, 2012.

figure adds to that already present sexuality of the topless Salomé as she dances under a star filled sky. All of these images are associated with female power, and as a viewer can note, that the sexuality being displayed is in a fascinating yet frightful manner. This work is truly remarkable in appearance and further establishes a new and even dangerous image which reflected the questionable rise of the "New Woman" in society. Is this really a reflection of male insecurity and anxiety regarding changing gender roles or a warning by the artists regarding the dangers of womenkind if given too much power? This image of Salomé is now a modern idea of her character, and one which most are familiar with today.

Austrian artist Gustave Klimt, a painter of extraordinary talent, whose works were emblematic of the Symbolist and Art Nouveau movements, turned his paint brush towards the subject of Salomé. He joined in the chorus of other artists covering this trope and created a work entitled *Salomé (Judith II)*, from 1909. This work shows Salomé as a sensual temptress inflicted with a certain madness. Her beauty is apparent on the surface, but her wrenching hands, twisted, and straining give the viewer an idea of what is going on underneath that sensual exterior. One can only speculate at Klimt's meaning here. Is she maddened by her act, is the "New Woman" mentally unstable, or is this a creature which man is now unable to control. Had the proverbial genie been let loose from its bottle with the coming of the emancipated woman? This is a question which begs to be asked of Klimt and his rendering of the Salomé myth.

Further examining this painting of Klimt's we can see at her side is, almost like a discarded and forgotten handbag, the head of John the Baptist. This work is the quintessence of decadence swimming in a vibrant sea of colors. Klimt gives his viewer burnt reds, lapis blues, dark black, hues of rose, and of course the luscious gold for which he is known. As with Corinth's work, Klimt's Salomé is also topless, breasts exposed, giving the viewer an idea of her heightened sexuality. She is both alluring and at the same time repulsive similar to Stéphane Mallarmé opposing ideas of the purity of virginity mixed with the horrible lust for power in his poem *Hérodiade*. This is a long canvas which stretches Salomé, giving her a greater stature in height. She dominates the painting and the head of John the Baptist appears little more than an accessory or a trophy to decorate her dress. As with many of the paintings of Gustav Klimt this is a work of tremendous beauty, but as a symbolist painting the work could represent the rise of the "New Woman;" and also an expression of that ever present male anxiety tied to that ascending new power let loose upon the modern world.

Gustav Klimt, *Salomé (Judith II)*, 1909

The Cult of Salomé spreads also to the world of Opera as the subject becomes firmly established as a cultural trope of the period. Inspired by Oscar Wilde's play the composer Richard Strauss offers the story set to music in his work entitled *Salomé* from

1905. This is a work which garnered a great deal of attention for Strauss, some good, and some, due to the shocking nature of a crazed Salomé kissing the bloody decapitated head of John the Baptist, not so good. Kaiser Wilhelm II is recorded as saying, "I really like this fellow Strauss, but *Salomé* will do him a lot of damage."[67]

This isn't the only opera which Strauss worked on that used strong women as a theme and a warning. He also teamed up with writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal to warn the world of the madness of women in *Elektra* and to argue, in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, that women who remain childless demonstrate their nothingness by having no shadow.[68] No doubt Strauss was not only expressing the feeling of anxiety of his day with these roles, but was also making a statement regarding the proper place for women in society. For him, Salomé is also a warning perhaps of the "New Woman" and her effect upon men and society. She is symbolic of his ebbing power. In Strauss' opera he ends with Salomé visibly panting impatient for the head of John the Baptist as Herod, the King, sinks in despairing defeat.[69] Salomé's unbridled power, perhaps unchecked by a society which keeps a woman under control, allows her to beat down the very pinnacle of authority, the king himself. What could such a woman do to European society if left unchecked? This could very well be the question Strauss is asking with his opera *Salomé*, but the world would soon have greater concerns than that of the changing roles of women to deal with.

The Belle Époque comes crashing down in the horrors of a new war. Just as this era begins with the Franco Prussian war, so it comes to a bloody end in the First World

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[67] Derrick Puffett, *Richard Strauss: Salomé*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 145.
[68] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity,* 376.
[69] Derrick Puffett, *Richard Strauss: Salomé*, 146.

War. The battlefields once again became the proving grounds for male pride and masculinity. They also proved that the industrial age had given them industrial slaughter, as many of the very artists who used Salomé as a muse to express fear over changing gender roles now found that the real fear was mankind and the warfare they unleashed. Many would never return from that line of blood and mud which divided Europe in half. New words came into being such as mustard gas, no man's land, and trench warfare. An entire generation would be labeled as lost. The world would never be the same and, while the Belle Époque found itself in its final death throes, so did the trope of Salomé which lived on, but slowly began to fade away in the imagination of the artists. Some persisted, but this almost endemic use of the Biblical figure was losing its grip upon the public's imagination.

A few examples outlived the Belle Époque to show that the idea of Salomé as an unwilling victim had forever been changed into that of a dangerous women. The story had rewritten itself thanks to the artists of the Belle Époque and the character of Salomé would remain chaste as a sexually charged and somewhat demented femme fatale. This continued imagining of the character can be seen in the photography of František Drtikol. The Czech born photographer gave his viewers another typical view of Salomé as resembling a mentally disturbed women. She is young, with a certain beauty, but the danger is found in her sinister eyes and in the look of madness which adorns her face. This photo of Drtikol is from the very end of the war, but still shows Salomé as the earlier artists of the Belle Époque viewed her. She is nude and grasping within her hands the head of John the Baptist like a possession she fears will be pried

from her hands. It is her prize and one which she plans to keep.

Another example of the idea of Salomé as formed in the Belle Époque, but living on is found in the new art form of cinema. A film entitled *Salomé* from 1923 is an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play and stars the 1920s film vamp, Alla Nazimova. The film is remarkable in how well they assimilated the vision of Aubrey Beardsley. The costume design incorporates many of his flowing Art Nouveau inspired designs which Beardsley did in black and white and which also worked very well with the black and white cinema of the time. In this film it is evident that this is not only the same Salomé from earlier Belle Époque re-imaginings, but also a persistent vision of her now firmly planted in popular imagination. The use of Salomé to express cultural anxieties concerning gender may have lost its potency, but this new version of Salomé was here to stay even if artists now longer looked to her as their muse as an expression of their national malaise.

Alla Nazimova in *Salomé*, 1923

Salomé, 1919, František Drtikol

Salomé may not have lived on much past World War I, but her new image remained. Questions as to why this story took on so much appeal to the artists of the

Belle Époque, who refashioned her in the the diabolical creature they made her into, persist. Much evidence points to her use as being a reflection of the social fears, which the artists may have been reflecting in their changing world. The changing role of women, the challenges to tradition, the threat to masculinity all influenced the imagination of the artists. The diminishment of her as a widely used trope may be tied to the fact that the "New Woman" had become the new norm. With women gaining the vote and eventually representation in government Salomé no longer reflected that social insecurity. Society had evolved, but some may argue that those fears still exist and do in fact resurface from time to time.

On the cover of Spy magazine from February 1993 there sits a image of Hillary Clinton. She is a woman of considerable political power who may be running for President of the United States in the 2016 election, yet the cover speaks to a similar cultural fear of a powerful woman. On this cover the viewer sees not a professional and intelligent woman who is capable of leadership, but instead a woman dressed as a dominatrix. The photoshopped image shows Hillary Clinton's head on the body of a woman dressed in leather and in her hand not the head of John the Baptist, but a riding crop. Her political power, or evidence of intelligence has been traded for a sexual power as if this is how some in society view such a woman. In the background looks to be the Oval Office of the White House. This cover is a statement

Image removed due to copyright.

of the discomfort of some at having a strong confident woman near the highest levels of power. Is she a corrupting force as once Salomé was imagined to have corrupted the king and brought ruin to John the Baptist? It is, for some, a social anxiety as much alive today as it once was to the men of the Belle Époque who feared the shifting roles and the emancipation of women in their day.

Modernity had done its work on the Belle Époque as perhaps it is still having an effect on our world today. Changing roles of women and men are often in flux and with great change comes unease. Many fight against change and until a certain level of acceptance pervades society that cultural anxiety can surface and be reflected in the art. Salomé may be gone, or so we may believe, but soon she may resurface when those long established traditional view of women and power, or gender and masculinity are challenged again. Perhaps in the coming election we will see more images of women who are depicted as dominatrixes and maddened power hungry Sirens who lure men to their doom and who contaminate society with their decadence. With change always comes fear, so Salomé may be far from being extinct.

Spy Magazine, February, 1993

Appendix

Additional paintings from the Belle Époque of Salomé not mentioned.

Salomé (1865) by Pierre Bonnaud

Salomé (1870) by Henri-Alexandre-Georges Regnault

The Tattooed Salomé (1876) by Gustave Moreau

Salomé dancing before Herod (1876) by Gustave Moreau

Salomé in the Garden (1878) by Gustave Moreau

The Dance of Salomé (1885) by Robert Fowler

Salomé (1888) by Francisco Masriera y Manovens

Salomé (1889) by Leon Herbo

Salomé (1893) by Odilon Redon

Salomé (1897) by Alphonse Maria Mucha

Salomé (1898) by Juana Romani

The Dancer's Reward (1894) by Aubrey Beardsley

Judith I (Salomé) with the head of John the Baptist (1901) by Gustav Klimt

Salomé (1907) by Vardges Surenyants

Salomé (1909) by Robert Henri

Salomé (1914) by Gaston Bussiere

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