SPECTRAL VISION IN OSCAR WILDE’S SALOMÈ

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By

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This thesis investigates the visual practices of Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play *Salomé* in order to evaluate the play’s enactment of the male gaze. Scholars have explored Salomé’s relationship to the male gaze to understand her character, agency, and desire. Indebted to these considerations, my exploration considers how her expression of desire gestures to new ways of seeing and experiencing an “other.” I propose that the play employs visual practices that generate a spectral subjectivity that serves as the primary orientation of the characters Salomé and Jokanaan.

This new way of seeing provides an alternative understanding of how the gaze operates in the text. It enables a new relationship to emerge between the seer and the seen, and correspondingly, the subject and the object of vision. This reevaluation of visual practices in *Salomé* underscores the potential of the spectral subject to evade the gaze and to achieve agency through escape. How are *Salomé*’s characters shaped by the visual practices of the play? How does Salomé envision Jokanaan? What is the relationship between seer and seen, and subject and object?

Analyzing Salomé’s interaction with the male gaze, this thesis offers new interpretations of key scenes and relationships in the play by introducing the critical perspectives of Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked*, Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, and Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*. By exposing new visual practices in the play, Salomé’s...
agency takes on new characteristics and points to ways that her existence acts against, rather than usurps, the male gaze.
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INTRODUCTION

Salomé’s relationship to the male gaze has become, in the critical literature on Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play *Salomé*, the dominant lens through which we understand her character, agency, and desire. Emblematic of this critical trend, Joseph Donohue asserts in “Distance, Death, and Desire in *Salome*,” “It is critical to perceive how deep-rooted desire is persistently articulated in the idea of seeing things. As many commentators have noted, the play is rife with words and images related to vision, to gazing or looking upon some object of attraction” (130). The gaze, for Donohue, operates “ostensibly [as] the male gaze of Herod himself – something that is strongly desired and equally forcibly forbidden” (131). In agreement with Donohue’s emphasis on the relationship between desire and seeing in *Salomé*, my argument reconsiders the singular focus that Donohue and others have placed on a specifically male gaze that is defined by and determines sites of power in the play.

I argue that the play articulates visual practices that counteract and exceed the authority of the male gaze. My analysis of Salomé’s position within the visual system of the play proposes new visual practices, specifically a spectral performativity that operates on different terms than the male gaze. Casting her as a specter, the play enables Salomé to exist outside its own visual systems and, as a result, undermines the power of the male gaze to fix objects into view. *Salomé*’s repositioning of its subject, Salomé, as specter results in a new relationship between the seer and seen. These changes, I argue, extend to the relationship between the subject and object. Visual practices rooted in a spectral existence provide the foundation for new understandings of orientation and how subjects and objects relate to each other.
The play *Salomé* invokes a different way of seeing that produces alternative relationships between bodies and desire. The male gaze that Donohue describes, directed by a dominant subject, is understood to fix the object of its vision, setting the terms upon which the object comes into focus. Implicit within this male gaze is the privilege of invisibility for the gazer and a power to determine the visibility of others. The gaze, in this case, operates as an end in itself: the wish to see indicates a desire for another; the act of seeing constitutes the fulfillment of that desire. This kind of vision presumes a transparency of presence, that all that is present can be seen and all that is seen is present. Furthermore, it posits a unidirectional power through which the visualized has no agency. Brad Bucknell describes this power as the assumption of availability to the (male) gaze. The gazer achieves a position of power that he owes to his successful execution of the gaze.

Salomé’s strength, for many scholars, resides in her appropriation of the gaze. Summarizing this critical position, Jeffrey Wallen explains, “[critics] emphasize [that] Salomé’s ability to express and to act on her desires differentiates her from the other characters, and they have interpreted this capacity as a sign of resistance to the dominant cultural and political order” (128). This perspective, described by Wallen and Donohue, maintains the primacy of the male gaze and situates Salomé’s success and failure against her capacity to assume the gaze.

The power that is associated with the male gaze is politically attractive. Peggy Phelan articulates the seductiveness of visibility, contending in *Unmarked* that visibility “provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal” (6). Herod’s gaze, and arguably Salomé’s envisioning of Jokanaan, participates in precisely the kind of visibility that Phelan describes, ultimately advancing the political agenda.
of the play which makes visible a new and powerful female desire. Phelan claims, however, that this political project is limited by its very visibility. Sydney Janet Kaplan’s criticism of the play, which Richard Dellamora represents in “Traversing the Feminine in Salomé,” models the double-edged sword of visibility that Phelan speaks of. She argues, in Dellamora’s words, that “to a generation of younger women writers like Katherine Mansfield, Wilde’s assertions of desire were empowering—even if, in Salomé, that assertion invites women to a seeming endgame in which the pursuit of female desire is both repudiated (by John the Baptist) and punished (by Herod)” (248).

Kaplan’s conclusion speaks to the balance of power—power that both produces and restricts bodies—that underpins Michel Foucault’s theoretical corpus. He asserts in “Truth and Power,”

If power were never anything by repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (120)

The male gaze, supported by a flexible power system, controls the representation of minority figures. The character Salomé achieves power, but temporarily. Herod loses control, but regains his authority through Salomé’s murder. The critical analyses highlighted by Donohue, Wallen, and Kaplan address vision only as it relates to political visibility, without taking vision itself as
something contested. Wilde’s depiction of Salomé, however, questions what we might now call visibility or identity politics as the only way that vision can operate.

Salomé’s attention to new visual practices resonates with the historical period in which the play was produced. Wilde’s life was marked by a turn in sexual politics, during which identities linked to sexual acts became increasingly visible and regulated by political elites in England. Wilde’s trial, “which inaugurated a new regime of disciplinary power” according to Nicholas Mirzoeff, and the censorship of Salomé in England, described by Richard Dellamora, exemplify this new level of attention to visual bodies and the dangers of perverse sexuality.

During the development of the modern state in England at this time, visuality played a role not only in political and social life, but also in theatre and entertainment. The nineteenth century is marked by the popularity of new photographic technologies and the emergence of trick and magic shows, known as phantasmagoria.

As early as 1803, Terry Castle explains, “Phantasmagoria shows rapidly became a staple of London popular entertainment” (38). The ghosts of the magic lantern shows of the early 1800s or the Pepper’s Ghost exhibitions of the 1860s used optical effects to produce the illusion of ghosts for a live audience. Even as the audience understood that the ghosts were manufactured by technology, the ghosts took on a real existence. Castle stresses,

The phantoms they [the performers] subsequently produced had a strangely objective presence. They floated before the eye just like real ghosts. And in a crazy way they were real ghosts. That is to say they were not mere effects of imagination: they were indisputably there; one saw them as clearly as any other object of sense. (49)
Castle’s discussion of nineteenth-century optics shows and their integration into the Romantic poetic imagination argues that this period represents an internalization of the ghost into the imagination. Ghosts, in Castle’s analysis, are associated with the irrational nature of thought and the potential madness of “thinking too much.”

Though Castle’s argument exceeds the trajectory of this paper, the narrative she recounts provides the context for my assessment of visuality in Salomé. Castle provides evidence of the popularity of ghosts as features of the nineteenth-century mind, which would have informed the audience Wilde was addressing. I am not suggesting that Wilde’s audience would have seen Salomé as a ghost or specter in the way this paper sees her, but there are ways that ghosts and optical illusions played a role in the theatre of Wilde’s time. Castle’s “Phantasmagoria” argues that the audience of trick shows participated in ways of seeing that exceed what is rational and known. She explains how the audiences perceived these ghosts: “One might believe ghosts to be illusions, present ‘in the mind's eye’ alone, but one experienced them here as real entities, existing outside the boundary of the psyche” (48). The shows taught a new way of experiencing ghosts, of experiencing both what is present and not present on the stage in front of them (an experience that Castle sees as foundational for new psychological experiences of the modern era). They also put the audience in a position to be tricked or surprised by a performance. The “loss of control, the terrifying yet sublime overthrow of ordinary experience” (48), in Castle’s words, I argue repositions the audience in relation to the play. It undercuts their place of safety and compels their participation (not only through voyeurism) in the play, if indeed they are willing to “see” the ghosts.
In my analysis of *Salomé*, I look to Castle to set the social foundation for Wilde’s play and the experience of his readers and imagined audience. As a performative text, *Salomé* would have been experienced in readerly rather than performative settings during Wilde’s lifetime, but this experience extends the ghostly aspects of the text. Bucknell outlines the imaginative impulse involved in reading a performative text: “The potential of performance always shadows the written dramatic text, exposing the written text to its own openness with the constant possibility of being repeated, or ‘spoken’ in a moment of presence (of speakers, of images), which is itself potentially open to play and replay” (514). This potential is embedded in the form of the performative text, asking readers to see the text on the page and project the performance in their own mind as though they were imagining ghosts.

Even though *Salomé* was not written, marketed, or received within the historical lineage of London’s magic shows, it benefits from the new visual practices that infiltrated British theatre audiences of the time. *Salomé*’s textual history and literary possibilities are bound up with the image of the specter and the visual practices of performance. The specter is integral to the figure of Salomé, whose renditions have layered her story with new meaning, never escaping its Biblical legacy. The story is one that continues to appear and to enthrall artists and audiences. As Bucknell explains, Salomé has maintained a hold over artists and audiences for many centuries. Since Wilde’s iteration, Rita Severi has recorded at least 2,789 French poets who have written about Salomé, many of whom have, in Bucknell’s words, “drawn their ideal Salomé from literature and, in particular, from the heroine of Wilde’s drama” (503). Salomé’s literary history has depended on authors recalling her to life in new forms, and Wilde has produced a strong influence over how the story of Salomé is understood.
The play undeniably benefits from the visual economy of female sexuality, evoking the subject of Salomé for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. Bucknell illuminates the significance of Salomé’s visual appeal and its circulation within political, literary, and religious history, explaining,

The progression of the Salomé figure from unnamed obscurity in the biblical representations, to fully realized ‘femme fatale’ in Wilde’s late nineteenth-century drama…relies upon the interplay between written and visual signs and which constitutes the misogynistic subtext of manifesting Salomé to the eye of the viewer, reader, and, of course, writer. (503)

My argument proposes a new lens in which to view Salomé’s significance. As long as “seeing” is understood solely through the gaze and the gaze dominates the visual practice of the play, Salomé will always be entrapped by her visibility. This remains true when her character operates only as an actor in the male-gaze subtext. Without changing the terms of the gaze, she is unable to author a new subject position for herself. Her desire remains in service of the dominant gaze; she remains fixed within Herod’s gaze and the gaze of the audience. Revising this gaze, as this thesis proposes, results in new understandings not only of vision, but also of subjectivity and desire.

Vision is not merely a lens through which we can view Salomé and gauge her response. Separating vision from visibility opens up a new kind of vision that sees beyond what is immediately present. In order to explicate the significance of these new ways of seeing, we must first determine what it means “to see.” “Seeing” refers to the act of looking, both as a physical
capacity and as an effort to make conclusions about the meaning of what is “seen.” Vision operates as an enabler, always mediated, never transparent. The act of seeing and the conclusions one makes are never separate from each other. The same is true of language. Such an endeavor understands vision as a kind of language, a system of practices that mediates how subjects see and experience the world. As Wallen emphasizes, “The act of looking…is highly mediated by language” (124). But the reverse is also true. Heavily invested in the language of vision, the play *Salomé* invites a dual investigation, not only of the way that vision adheres to the principles of language but also how language, the ability to convey meaning, can be understood as a register of visibility. The central point of my thesis is to investigate Wilde’s attention to vision as an apparatus of language that mediates and conceals that which it intends to visualize.

Phelan provides the theoretical starting point for this analysis, arguing, “The image seen is a product of and a position within language” (15). The interplay between these two kinds of communication—vision and language—complicate the conclusions we are able to draw from the information these forms present to us, but it is their combination and friction against one another that makes these new meanings possible. Bucknell characterizes the confluence of word and image as a kind of sensory overload, explaining, “Wilde chooses to present his version of the story as a play, a medium where word and image are placed in intense proximity. Yet, the resulting sensory immediacy destabilizes the process of signification” (514). This paper attempts to read these signs—those of language and of vision, those readily present and those less visible—in order to articulate the ways of seeing that this play introduces. This is the challenge of attempting to make visible the lenses that mediate the way we see and to see how rereading
these lenses has repercussions for the kinds of bodies that are formed, the relationships that arise, and the desire that is revealed.

My project differs from Bucknell’s undertaking, which has offered important theorizations of the visual practices at play in Salomé. He remains fixated on the gaze as the primary mode of vision that takes place within the play, even as he questions “if the play is merely recapitulating the process of male projection that has pervaded the creation of the Salomé myth, or if it is implicitly critiquing such myth-making by exposing the solipsism of the gaze” (516). My endeavor builds upon Bucknell’s analysis and provides a complimentary and expanded understanding of what it means to look and to see in Salomé.

This thesis proposes a new term to describe the visual practices in Salomé: approximation. Approximation informs a certain kind of visual practice and produces bodies in its own inexact image. The term stresses that what we see only approaches the reality of what is present in front of us. Vision is approximate because it is mediated, both by the physical experience of seeing and by the interpretative practices that accompany the visual image. Vision becomes an iterative process, built on a series of images that combine to produce meaning. Each iteration of an image, for example the rewriting of the story Salomé, reflects something of the original, but exactly what belongs to the original and to the new is blurred into a new image. With each viewing, something of the original is lost, and the image before us approximates the meaning of the images that have come before it.

Approximation mimics how light (the vehicle of the images we see) travels through space into the eye. Lacan, who Phelan quotes, employs the metaphor of light, explaining, “’Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills—the eye is a sort of bowl—it
flows over, too, it necessitates, around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses’ (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*: 94)” (20). Approximation describes the process in which vision is refracted, diffused, floods, fills, and flows before the viewer receives it. This term aligns with Derrida’s description of the specter that is never fully present, never fully embodied, and always tied to what has been lost. The spectral, described by Derrida as being “out of joint” with time (23), capitalizes on the approximate visual practices that are “out of joint” in their own way.

Terms from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* are useful in describing the significance of the approximate. He writes, “One again, here as elsewhere, wherever deconstruction is at stake, it would be a matter of linking an affirmation (in particular, a political one), *if there is any*, to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the perhaps” (42). The approximate contains the experience of “the impossible” and “the perhaps.” When a body is read through an approximate vision, it is defined by what is present but also by what exceeds the frame of vision, what is lost, invisible, and impossible.

Close reading forms the backbone of how this analysis will be pursued. With particular attention to how Salomé is visualized within the play, these readings expose the ruse of a seemingly transparent vision. They identify features of the play that gesture to an approximate vision, to places that refract, diffuse, and reflect the image that disguises the original. Certain theorists, including Peggy Phelan, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, and Sara Ahmed provide the theoretical conversation upon which these close readings are dissected. Significant attention is paid to the perspective of the seen, to what remains outside the field of vision, and to how language enables or erases visibility.
My first chapter argues for a theory of performativity that emerges through the play’s visual practices of approximation. How the play envisions Salomé establishes the terms upon which her subjectivity is based. By crafting Salomé as a spectral figure, the play works against its supposed intention to make Salomé visible and instead contributes to what I describe as a spectral performativity. Even as Salomé is afforded a spectral presence that exceeds the timeline of the play, she cannot escape the visual practices that define her as such. There is a tension between Salomé as specter and the set of norms, the particular discourse, that marks her as a specter. How does the specter interact with the discourse of the spectral? Can Salomé escape her spectral characterization? My first chapter suggests a new relationship between the seer and seen based on Salomé’s spectral presence. How she is envisioned codifies a set of discursive practices that define the terms of her escape. By maintaining the possibility of what is lost or outside the object of vision, spectral performativity unseats the totalizing system of language that forgets its own history.

My second chapter looks at another aspect that defines subjectivity, the relationship between subject and other. It considers, in Phelan’s words, that “perspective is essentially a theory of relationships” (24). The language of vision that defines the subject also produces new forms of affiliations between figures. Not only are subjects defined by the system in which they participate, they also are formed by their orientation to the objects around them. How does a spectral subject interact with the figure of the other? How does this change the orienting relationship between subject and object? After focusing primarily on the character Salomé in Chapter One, Chapter Two focuses on the relationship that Salomé has with Jokanaan and the relationship that they represent between subject and other.
This thesis concludes by addressing the potential of the specter— as it is embodied by Salomé and Jokanaan—to open up the possibility of justice. By reversing the hold of the seer and the subject over the seen and the object, respectively, Salomé models a kind of nondominative discourse that remains necessarily flexible and fallible. Salomé’s spectral identity emerges from the visual practices that enable her to avoid being seen, to escape the present, to orient her away, and to exist otherwise.
CHAPTER I: SPECTRAL PERFORMATIVITY

“How do you recognize a ghost? By the fact that it does not recognize itself in a mirror.”

*Speckers of Marx*, Jacques Derrida

Rather than operating as a text about the male gaze, *Salomé* exposes spectral modes of visualization that force alternative readings of the body, performance, and desire. In particular, *Salomé’s* vision approximates bodies through the citation of the spectral. This approximation, as I have termed it, does not conform to theories of gender performativity that argue subjects reiterate (necessarily unattainable) norms to identify with particular gendered forms of the body in order to count as subjects. *Salomé’s* approximate vision is haunted by a refusal of materiality and an excessive accumulation of imagery that overexposes and ultimately erases the subject being desired. The language of seeing and the technologies that support vision, for example, moonlight and reflection, refract and multiply, defeating any possibility of “seeing” Salomé. Undermining her visibility, Salomé is reduced to a spectral presence whose immateriality forms the foundation of her agency and her desire.

Spectral performativity, excused from the materiality that defines the theory of performativity Judith Butler describes in *Bodies That Matter*, does not aim for subjectivity. As Phelan instructs us, “There is real power in remaining unmarked…Visibility is a trap” (6). Herod represents the limitation of visibility for Salomé. As she presents herself to him through dance and takes advantage of his attraction to her, he reacts to her visibility with fear and violence. When we read Salomé as a spectral figure, defined by a spectral performativity, her triumph is no
longer about whether she achieves the power of the gaze. Refusing the norms of embodiment, Salomé’s conquest takes a different form, a living on. Herod remains unable to conjure her at his will; he is unable to control his vision. In this way, Salomé becomes a threat to his rule, and Herod attempts to remove her. But rather than lessening her power, her disappearance underneath the light of the soldiers’ shields exposes her spectral longevity. As a spectral figure, her non-presence is integral to her identity and is necessarily temporary and incomplete (approximated).

In sum, Salomé offers a power to the figure that is seen that would otherwise go unrecognized through the male-gaze perspective. It is both a new kind of relationship between the seer and seen as well as a recognition of the power retained by remaining unseen or unmarked. Phelan echoes this perspective, asserting, “By locating a subject in what cannot be reproduced within the ideology of the visible, I am attempting to revalue a belief in subjectivity and identity which is not visibly representable” (6). This view, in Phelan’s words, enables the “construct[ion of] a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim” (2).

In Chapter One, this thesis extends Phelan’s work by moving into a specific terrain of unmarked subjectivity, that of the specter. In Chapter Two, it continues this investigation by exploring the relationship between the two characters defined by and complicit in the economy of spectral bodies, Salomé and Jokanaan. Despite their shared spectrality, their methods for responding to or refusing desire diverge and provide separate models for how a ghosted figure can generate power and agency. Intending to make Jokanaan visible, Salomé’s expressions of desire for the prophet only serve to displace her central position as subject. Just as these visual
practices displace the power of the seer, they also redistribute the power of the subject to the object.

My first chapter closely reads the dialogue between the Syrian and the Page, the Syrian’s desire to look at Salomé, Salomé’s expressions of desire for Jokanaan, and Herod’s command to his soldiers to kill Salomé. These scenes expose the citational and visual practices in the play that inform spectral performativity. My second chapter addresses Jokanaan’s persistent refusal of Salomé’s advances and his voluntary return to the cistern. In order to explore how Salomé’s approximation of images enables a theory of spectral performativity, the first chapter of this thesis puts the play in conversation with Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter, Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx, and Peggy Phelan’s Unmarked. The second chapter engages Sara Ahmed’s Queer Phenomenology in order to investigate how the spectral visual practices of the play empower a new understanding of the relationship between subject and object.

Though my first chapter’s assertions about spectral performances diverge from Butler’s conception of performativity expressed in Bodies That Matter, her study provides a necessary starting place as well as counterpoint. In many ways, performativity and identification in Bodies That Matter are already haunted by phantoms, by those excluded, by the cast-offs of the body. For Butler, the bodies that “fail to materialize produce the necessary ‘outside’” which in turn provides the norm to “qualify [certain bodies] as bodies that matter” (16). The figure Salomé has not failed to materialize; her materialization is a spectral one. The question then becomes how do ghostly bodies—with their insistent return and their visual asymmetry—change how we see bodies that matter?
Death in the Moonlight

The opening passage to the play is, perhaps, the most ghostly, contrasting with the ghastly beheading at the play’s climax. Petra Dierkes-Thurn describes how the princess and moon become “figuratively and linguistically intertwined” (23) through the exchange between the Syrian and the Page. The play begins with this conversation,

THE YOUNG SYRIAN: How beautiful is the Princess Salomé to-night!
THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: Look at the moon! How strange the moon seems!
She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things.
THE YOUNG SYRIAN: She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing.
THE PAGE OF HERODIAS: She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly. (583)

Bucknell interprets this scene as a sign of Salomé’s flexibility, as a figure that is simultaneously equivalent and also metaphorically related to the moon, explaining, “What is striking about Salomé’s way of seeing is that she, in her conflation with the moon, not only appears as the moon, but sees like the moon as well. Her power is to effect the mutability, the changes in shape, which the moon emblematizes” (517). This commentary only begins to uncover Salomé’s
incongruous flexibility as a subject, which, when aligned so closely with the moon, appears both approximate and cyclical. The repetition in each line operates like a return, reframing each image in a slightly different way.

In Bucknell’s analysis, the comparison of Salomé and the moon, both like each other, does not impart the original image of “woman” or “moon” with any new, collective meaning. He explains, “The interchangeability of the tropes relies upon seeing ‘woman’ essentially two ways, both of which are symbolic. The moon, as object of vision, maintains its traditional gender/symbol markings; the woman, as object of vision, maintains her traditional symbolic/gender markings. Woman as moon, or moon as Woman: one is the icon of the other” (516). The moon is seen through its likeness with Salomé, and vice versa. Lewsadder agrees, asserting, “The equivocality of the object establishes the equation of objects” (521). In both Bucknell’s and Lewsadder’s analyses, the “like” serves as an equalizer rather than a mediator, providing for the direct equation of Salomé and the moon. Viewing Salomé and the moon symbolically, however, underestimates the movement that occurs in the series of similes. Their meaning continues to shift with each equivocation, with each simile, resulting in symbols that are overwrought with shifting meaning. These shifts dilute and approximate the images of Salomé and the moon as the reader attempts to reconcile the contrasting descriptions.

This opening dialogue promotes an approximation of images. Likening Salomé and the moon with each other through this series of images preserves a vague impression of each separate image. Phelan stresses that metaphors do not produce equivocal meanings but rather generate new values: “For while metaphor can be understood as the erosion and loss of ‘original’ or ‘singular’ meaning it does not follow that this erosion negates value. On the contrary,
metaphor makes value” (24). The compression of the series of similes, re-writing, re-describing, builds upon the shared image of Salomé and the moon. The profusion of comparative imagery approximates the image of Salomé and the moon.

Salomé’s introduction, then, is marked by uncertainty and strangeness. What Bucknell fails to capture is that her entrance is marked by death. At another moment in Bucknell’s essay, he cites Meltzer who, he explains, “notes that in the description of this painting [Gustave Moreau’s “The Apparition” (1876) described by J. K. Huysmans in A Rebours], ‘Salomé is rendered almost lifeless…described as a corpse’ (Dance, 25)” (512). However, the imagery of death only gains significance for Bucknell in reference to Salomé’s ultimate destruction. His analysis of her death concludes,

Her association of love and death repeats the binary mythology of the moon. She becomes the speaking icon of the male gaze, the body of nobody in particular, yet the symbol of the moon and thus, of "Woman" as such. Herod's command to "Kill that woman!" (Salomé, 348) leaves little doubt as to what we are supposed to see. (523)

Salomé’s association with death at the beginning of the play sets in motion the spectral visual practices that allow her to become something other than the “speaking icon of the male gaze,” as Bucknell describes her. Spectral performativity becomes possible only through the play’s opening that embraces both a beginning and a return. Time (past, present, and future) collapses such that the originating moment has no true origin. Similar to gender performativity theories, the norm upon which the performance centers does not
exist; in Butler’s terms, “Performativity…is always a reiteration of norms… [which]
conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition” (12).

Unlike these theories, however, the norm upon which Salomé’s presence is based
is one of non-presence, as a spectral figure that lacks embodiment. Derrida understands
this concept of the return, “repetition and first time” in his words, as “the question of the
ghost” (10). Salomé has always already returned for the first time. Visualizing Salomé as
revenant instills a kind of agency in the apparition that the supposed visualizer cannot
regulate. According to Derrida, “A specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its
comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (11).

Greeted, then, by Salomé’s return, the opening passage casts her presence as both
spectral and moonlike. This one exchange demonstrates all three aspects of spectral
performativity that will be explored throughout my first chapter, including the
approximation of language, accumulation of similes, and the reflection of light—rather
than illuminating—dissolving form. These aspects inform my analysis in Chapter Two,
which addresses the interaction of these spectral forms in order to grasp how their returns
and refusals inform their distance from the play and each other.

The opening conversation between the Page and the Syrian illuminates the
distance—the approximation that occurs—between the object being described and what it
is being compared to in two ways: first, by the implicit relationship assumed between
Salomé and the moon and second, through the repetition of similes which signal the
limitation of the speaker to fully render the qualities of the moon/Salomé. The
accumulation of similes enacts a progression or rewriting of the moon as Salomé that
discloses not only her relationship to life but also what attracts her vision. The first of these three similes for death offers an action, “rising from a tomb,” the second emphasizes her death despite that rising, and the third interprets her vision as “looking for dead things.” And yet, the moon remains the direct reference of these similes, linking the moon with death. This sets up the play’s continued use of imagery of the moon, moonlight, reflections, and mirrors in order to complicate the idea of presence and foreshadow Salomé’s apparent death at the play’s conclusion.

Salomé’s Shadow

The action of the play centers on Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan, and it is this desire that links Jokanaan’s presence with the same spectral practices of approximation, accumulation, and disillusion that figure Salomé. Salomé sees Jokanaan as she is visualized in the play. On the one hand, she projects the image of herself onto his body, and on the other, she denies him anything like an embodied presence, despite her persistent desire for his body.

Expressing her wish to speak with him, she comments that the cistern where he is being held “is like a tomb” (587), recalling her own moment of entry into the play. Inquiring into his identity she hears, “You cannot be sure,” from the soldier guarding him (587). Seeing Jokanaan for the first time, “How wasted he is!” she exclaims. “He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver. His flesh must be cool like ivory. I would look closer at him” (589). This series of similes, representing him as reflective, diminished,
immobile, nonetheless indicates Salomé’s attraction to him. She sees him analogously to
the way that she is seen at the play’s opening and at other moments in the eye of the
Syrian, who proclaims, “How pale the Princess is! Never have I seen her so pale. She is
like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver” (584).

There is little less embodied than Salomé described as “like the shadow…of a
white rose...in a mirror...of silver.” The images of Salomé here, like those used to
envisage Jokanaan, both erase and reflect. What is meant to provide more clarity by
providing a more complete description only serves to reduce the material presence of the
object being visualized. Yet this lack of presence attracts sight. What’s more, this kind of
visualization is projected throughout the play, from character to character, from the
Syrian to Salomé to Herod to Jokanaan, further spectralizing the play’s politics of vision.

This tension between reflection (the duplication of images) and erasure (the
minimalizing of presence) exposes the dynamic Derrida identifies when he defines
hauntology in *Specters of Marx*. For him, the logic of hauntology exists at the limit of
discourse, eschatology, and teleology. He asserts, “It would comprehend them, but
incomprehensibly…the opposition between ‘to be’ and ‘not to be’” (10). Visualization in
the play comes to encompass reflection and erasure, as well as their limits, through
Wilde’s discreet references to Narcissus. Both the Syrian and Salomé are compared to
Narcissus, an aspect of the play surprisingly devoid of critical attention. In another series
in which the Syrian laments Salomé’s beauty, he proclaims, “She is like a dove that has
strayed…She is like a narcissus trembling in the wind…She is like a silver flower” (586).
She is envisioned as Narcissus after his entrapment by the image in the river. Her
inheritance of his curse, unwittingly falling in love with his own image, articulates a kind of desire based on visual attraction and on a failure of recognition.

Notably, in another example of approximation, Salomé is only “like a narcissus” and therefore is attributed only association with—not embodiment of—the mythical figure. Yet, in the accumulation of similes which follows the reference to the narcissus, she is likened to a “silver flower,” which echoes the reflective, mirror imagery of earlier moments in the play, enforces an accumulation of imagery (two references to flowers), and reduces her presence (in the play’s association of silver with the moon).

Salomé’s figuring as the flower narcissus, the manifestation of her visual attraction to herself in Jokanaan, informs the play’s second reference to Narcissus, which imagines him before his transformation into the flower. After the Syrian has killed himself in apparent anguish at Salomé’s attraction to Jokanaan, the Page of Herodias offers two very similar laments about his death, which scholars argue signals his homosexual desire for the Syrian and jealousy of the Syrian’s insistent looking at Salomé. This possibility of homosexual attraction between the Syrian and the Page, which Donohue and Dellamora point out, complicates Salomé’s gender identification and informs my analysis of Salomé’s relationship to Jokanaan in Chapter Two. My concern in this first chapter lies with the self-love (and love of the image) that appears in the Page’s implied reference to Narcissus.

In the second iteration of his expressions of grief, the Page says, almost offhandedly, “The sound of his voice was like the sound of the flute, of a flute player. Also he much loved to gaze at himself in the river. I used to reproach him for that” (591).
This passage plays on the myth of Narcissus, in which, in Edith Hamilton’s depiction, Narcissus refuses the affections of Echo, and as retribution from the gods, is condemned to fall in love with an image of himself. Hamilton explains, “Narcissus bent over a clear pool for a drink and saw there his own reflection, on the moment, he fell in love with it” (114). In the place that this happened, a lovely flower grew and the nymphs named it “Narcissus.” What Narcissus, and by extension, the Syrian, loved was an image of himself which he did not realize was merely an image. For Derrida, this kind of misrecognition operates as a spectralization of the body. He explains, referring to Marx’s analysis of the worker’s relation to the commodity,

There is a mirror, and the commodity form is also this mirror, but since all of a sudden it no longer plays its role, since it does not reflect back the expected image…It is as if they were becoming ghosts in their turn…How do you recognize a ghost? By the fact that it does not recognize itself in a mirror. (195)

The ghost, in this account, becomes spectral even to itself, unable to visualize what is present, that it is present. The association with the Syrian and Salomé with Narcissus indicates their inability to comprehend the identity of the image they desire. They, in Derrida’s words, “becom[e] ghosts in their turn” (195).

The inability of the ghost to recognize itself constitutes the threat of looking that Herod identifies late in the play. He affirms the deceptiveness of the mirror in relation to the danger of looking and comes to fear what is seen. As he negotiates with Salomé about her request, he complains, “Your [Salomé’s] beauty has grievously troubled me, and I
have looked at you too much. But I will look at you no more. Neither at things, nor at
people should one look. Only in mirrors should one look, for mirrors do but show us
masks” (601). The masks he mentions are like the ghosts that keep the individual from
recognizing himself in the mirror. Herod’s admission of looking “too much” reflects
Salomé’s overexposure. The language of “too much” and Herod’s irrational call for
Salomé’s murder recalls Castle’s analysis of phantasmagoria. She argues,

The magic lantern was the obvious mechanical analogue of the human
brain, in that it ‘made’ illusionary forms and projected them outward. But
in another highly paradoxical sense, ghosts now seemed more real than
ever before—in that they now occupied (indeed preoccupied) the intimate
space of the mind itself…Indeed, one could hardly escape them, for they
were one’s own thoughts bizarrely externalized (58).

In looking “too much,” Herod experiences the externalized ghosts of his own inner mind.
The projection of Salomé’s spectral subjectivity has overcome, indeed invaded, Herod’s
existence. For Bucknell, Salomé becomes, at this moment of triumph, “the icon of
destructive femininity, or the projection of the male gaze viewing itself in inverted form”
(523). But not only has the gaze been inverted; it has become externalized in the form of
a specter. Herod collapses, roaring, “I will not look at things, I will not suffer things to
look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars! Let us hide ourselves in
our palace, Herodias. I begin to be afraid” (604-605). Herod runs from any kind of light
or vision. He puts himself completely in the dark, attempting to move away from the
moon (whose associations with Salomé have already been well documented). He is experiencing what Tom Gunning describes: “We do not believe in ghosts, we are haunted by them. We do not see ghosts. Rather, our senses of vision and perception are brought to a crisis by them” (116). Herod experiences a crisis of vision, brought on by his excessive consumption of Salomé’s image.

The approximate mode of visualization in the text has forced a crisis of the male gaze by its most representative actor, the male king, a development that reframes the language of approximation in terms of mirrors and masks. The mirrors represent something masked, something hidden from the original image. The reproduction of the image in the mirror leaves something out so that the two images are no longer identical to each other. Herod commands a new way of seeing that does not look directly at Salomé at the moment in which the male gaze temporary entraps him.

Wilde’s stage directions indicate that the moonlight covers Salomé at the moment of her murder. As she is crushed under the soldiers’ shields, these shields would, in projecting the meaning of the stage directions, reflect the light (and the audience’s vision) away from Salomé’s body, leaving only the light shining against the shields in her place. The ambiguity of the meaning of this scene registers a number of readings: Salomé’s death, her murder, her sexual climax. Yet, in each scenario, what remains is the reflection of light and the denial of her physical presence. The opacity of this ending calls into question the supposed reassertion of Herod’s power when he is unable to escape the moonlight. Notably, the character Salomé has, since the first lines of the play, been likened to the moon. This shared likeness between the moon and Salomé assures her
staying power after the removal of her body as well as an association with the moon that highlights her perversion and leads to her removal. She has reversed the predicament that Phelan articulates for the object of vision. Phelan contends, “Representation is almost always on the side of the one who looks and almost never on the side of the one who is seen” (26). Unless, I emphasize, what you see is a ghost.
CHAPTER II: THE RETURN OF DESIRE

“A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.”

“The Truth of Masks,” Oscar Wilde

The first chapter of my thesis articulates a theory of spectral performativity, embodied by the character Salomé, which rewrites the relationship between the seer and the seen. The seer is unable to compel the seen into view as it is able to do within the perspective of the male gaze. Salomé, as a spectral subject, can never fully materialize. Her subjectivity is defined by two conflicting extremes, hypervisibility and diminished presence. This enables her to counteract Herod’s intentions to gaze upon her. His seeing “too much” and his increasing fear of being seen by her demonstrate Salomé’s power that issues from her position as the seen.

Moving from my first chapter’s attention to the seer and the seen, this second chapter considers the implications of spectral subjectivity on the relationship between subject and object. Subjects are shaped not only by how they are envisioned in their environment. The subject’s formation also depends on how it is distinguished from the objects of its environment.

This adjustment of Salomé’s role from seen to seer repositions her relationship to power. “Spectral Performativity” argues that Salomé has been constructed through a visual system that reduces her to a spectral presence, even as this perspective sees the possibility of her agency. The definitional norms of spectral performativity, which hold the subject beyond the vision of the present, necessarily exceed their own normative impulses. The specter cannot be contained by vision. There is always excess. The power of the specter is the power of escape and return. This
understanding centers on the specter and the way it is envisioned by its environment. Salomé is a passive recipient of these visual practices. Turning to the relationship between subject and object, however, as “The Return of Desire” does, puts Salomé into the position of seer. This chapter looks at how the specter Salomé envisions and interacts with her environment. In other words, how does a specter see?

Focusing on Salomé as a seer brings into focus her relationship with Jokanaan. She is positioned in two ways, by the gaze that brings her into view, in this case, a spectral view, and by the way she is oriented around the other characters in the play. Her agency and autonomy can only be understood when these aspects are viewed in tandem, the task of this second chapter.

Vision is intimately tied to how objects are oriented. Subjects who are able to see others are able to differentiate their own identity from what they see in their opposite. Phelan asserts, “Seeing the other is a social form of self-reproduction. For in looking at/for the other, we seek to re-present ourselves to ourselves” (21). How a subject sees itself in relation to another defines the position of both the self and the other. Salomé complicates the stability and efficacy of this positioning. Spectral subjectivity, which the characters Salomé and Jokanaan embody, changes the lens by which the subject is seen and how it relates to the other. The binary that defines the difference between subject and object is collapsed. The approximation that marks their existence refuses an exact orientation. When subjects and objects do not fully materialize, when what is seen appears only as reflection or repetition, or when a spectral presence exceeds beyond the present, we must understand the relationship between subjects and objects differently.

Investigating what the character Salomé can see indicates something about her position as seer and as subject. I argue that the vision of a spectral subject in Salomé provides a new
framework for understanding the relationship between self and other. The spectral subject, rather than being oriented around another object, is always oriented away from the center. The subject whose orientation is based on turning away becomes an oppositional figure, dependent on the position of the center in order to move away from it. It is in this way that the subject takes on some of the characteristics of the other, defined by an external force.

This investigation benefits from the perspective of queer critic Sara Ahmed who in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* describes the process in which subjects and collectives are oriented in relation to their spatial and relational environments. She asks, “What does it mean to think of ‘being oriented’” (69), and then answers, “We are oriented, then, toward objects, and those objects that are ‘other’ than us. They are other than us and must be so if they are to be available within our field of vision” (115). The subject defines itself against the other. With this perspective, we could reason that Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan serves to orient herself around him, and in turn, indicates her subject position that, in Ahmed’s words, “always reflects back or shows where one is located” (115). I argue, however, that Salomé and Jokanaan’s spectral existence makes this kind of orientation impossible.

Salomé’s orientation works differently than the process Ahmed describes in a number of ways. As a spectral subject, her incomplete presence makes it impossible for her position to be fully defined. She is not only not like the other; she is also not fully there. Her position is further complicated by the way that she envisions the object of her desire and the spectral characteristics he acquires. The spectral subject is a mirror that reproduces others in its likeness. I have already demonstrated the way that the visual practices of the play force Herod to externalize the ghosts of his mind. In this chapter, I argue that Jokanaan operates as a spectral figure and, as the
primary object of Salomé’s desire, disables her ability to orient herself around him. Because of
their shared spectral existence, it is equally possible that the subject produces the other or that the
other produces the spectral subject in its own form. Regardless of the power she generates over
Herod, Salomé is best understood as other, in opposition, as outside.

Language and Vision

My first chapter argues that Salomé’s spectral subjectivity is reflected in her character’s
desire for Jokanaan. She sees him as she is seen. The language she uses to describe him
diminishes his presence in the same terms used to reduce her presence. Furthermore, her desire
for Jokanaan is a desire to be seen by him, the expression of which capitalizes on and advances
his opaque characterization. This second chapter explores the consequences of this shared
spectrality on Salomé and Jokanaan. For Derrida, there is always another specter. How do these
specters interact? How do they express desire? What is the effect of their haunted presence on
each other?

Scholars have interpreted Salomé’s expressions of desire for Jokanaan as a
communication of colonialist impulse. She is able to usurp Herod’s power because she is able to
inhabit the position of the sovereign in relation to her subordinate, Jokanaan. In Citizen, Invert,
Queer, Deborah Cohler argues that Salomé’s expressions maintain the “orientalist impulse of
British national identity [which] remains foundational, both discursively and ideologically” (3).
Her desire is successfully expressed precisely because it is based on the colonial reservoir of
oppression.
Cohler’s criticism refers to a larger debate about Salomé’s relationship to Orientalist discourse. According to Cohler, “Salomé describes her desire not just visually but through distinctive cartographical similes and metaphors of empire” (19). Cohler’s position follows the model Edward Said poses in Orientalism that outlines how the desire of the West is constructed through a circumscribing of the East. The same position informs Sara Ahmed’s construction of the subject—other relationship. Ahmed explains that the Occident (subject) uses the Orient (object) to position itself. She emphasizes, “The Orient here would be the object toward which we are directed, as an object of desire. By being directed toward the Orient, we are oriented ‘around’ the Occident. Or, to be more precise, the Occident coheres as that which we are organized around through the very direction of our gaze toward the Orient” (116). The word “around” has particular significance for Ahmed, who uses it to convey how the energies of the subject are directed at, but distinct from, its object.

In orienting “around” the Orient (appropriately named), the Occident establishes itself in opposition to the savageness of the frontier (the outside). The Occident reinforces its own immutability and strength through the systematic manipulation of the Oriental position. The stable, innocuous invisibility of the Occident is able to exercise unchecked power against the Orient, codifying its representative images, forcing it to remain visible for the consumption by the Occident.

In her analysis of Salomé, Cohler concludes that the character Salomé participates in the totalizing system of Orientalist discourse. If this were to be the case, Salomé’s orientation around Jokanaan should offer her the position of the Occident: stable, invisible, and central. This chapter demonstrates how this position fails. Cohler offers the language of empire a place of supremacy.
without taking into account the position from which it is offered. She holds Salomé more accountable for the words she uses than for her position within the text, which I demonstrate is anything but stable or central.

Cohler’s passage does, however, highlight two important aspects of my argument: first, the integral relationship between language and vision, and second, that the character Salomé operates on multiple registers of power and vision. We cannot forget that Salomé is able to manipulate Herod because of the importance that he places on honoring his verbal contract with her. He explains, “I know not how to lie. I am the slave of my word, and my word is the word of a king” (599). He attempts to persuade her to change her request, offering her the treasures of his Kingdom, but she refuses. She is only able to negotiate for Jokanaan’s death because she is able to take advantage of the authority of the word. One the one hand, Salomé’s choice of Jokanaan over the spoils of empire positions Jokanaan as an object to be won. On the other hand, Salomé’s participation in the empire is mediated by her spectral presence that dictates her particular relationship to language.

Cohler’s interpretation does not account for circumstances in which Salomé employs the language of colonial possession. The discourse of empire hinges on the protection of stable identities. It clearly delineates the power that the subject holds over the object through its elaborate system of domination and control. The object is never able to talk back or refuse the characterization it has been given.

Salomé’s expression of her desire and Jokanaan’s refusal reveal a far more complex relationship between desire and Orientalism. The relationship between Salomé and Jokanaan is anything but stationary. It is an ongoing negotiation filled with requests, refusals, statements of
desire, and changing sentiments. Salomé continues changing her description of Jokanaan, continually reconsidering what she is most attracted to or disgusted by.

Two further questions must be addressed in relation to Cohler’s analysis. First, how would Cohler’s criticism view Salomé’s reproduction of herself in Jokanaan? I assert that Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan is actually a desire for herself, a desire that, as a specter, she is unable to recognize as such. Salomé, the subject, likens the object to herself, rather than orienting toward something that is “not me” (Ahmed 115). Second, how would Cohler’s analysis respond to the way that Jokanaan is imagined in the play, outside of the language that Salomé uses to describe him? This chapter, in answering these questions, concludes that Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan results in a collapsing of subject and other. Salomé ends up holding both positions, maintaining her status as central figure in the play, but rather than orienting herself around the object of her desire, her orientation is away from both that object and the center, taking on the properties of the object herself.

*The Other Specter*

My first chapter argues that the character Salomé inhabits a spectral reality and that this reality encompasses the object of her desire, Jokanaan. The visual practices that mediate her presence also have an impact on how he is viewed in the play. Jokanaan is not only a feature of Salomé’s spectral vision but occupies a spectral space on his own. This separate spectral existence complicates Salomé’s ability to conjure Jokanaan to the present, which remains beyond her control.
Hearing him for the first time, she demands, “Who was that who cried out?” (586). The Solders who answer her provide no clear explanation of Jokanaan’s identity, saying, “He is quite a young man,” and “You cannot be sure. There are those who say he is Elias” (587). Even the meaning of his prophecies is unknown, though feared. Hearing him again, Salomé asserts, “What a strange voice! I would speak with him” (587), finally exclaiming, “I desire to speak with him” (587). Salomé longs, at this early encounter, to see Jokanaan; yet, even when he is outside her view, she is already attracted to the spectral qualities of his voice and the strangeness of his disembodied presence.

She desires, upon hearing his voice, to make him visible to her, and she demands that he be removed from the cistern, which she describes as “so black a pit! It is like a tomb…” (587). His entrance mirrors Salomé’s arrival to the play. Both are introduced with the imagery of death. Commanding her servants to bring him forth, Salomé sees him and comments, “How wasted he is! He is like a thin ivory statue. He is like an image of silver. I am sure he is chaste as the moon is. He is like a moonbeam, like a shaft of silver. His flesh must be cool like ivory. I would look closer at him” (589). In this passage, which I have quoted in Chapter One, Salomé repeats the phrases that have been used to describe her, and as a result, his entry is marked not only by a similar association with death but also with a similar diffusion of light. His body is obscured by the “moonbeam…[the] shaft of silver” that covers him and by his implied association with another spectral figure, Salomé.

This multiplication of the specter models the same phenomenon that Derrida articulates in *Specters of Marx*. For Derrida, we inherit a plurality of specters that demand justice. He explains, “One never inherits without coming to terms with some specter, and therefore with
more than one specter” (24). Even though the progression of the play introduces Salomé before Jokanaan, it is impossible to conclude which specter comes first. Each has entered the play from the position of a return. In Jokanaan’s case, he has been recognized as the possible reincarnation of Elias, a prophet of an ancient age. Derrida argues that the appearance of the specter indicates a breakdown in time’s sequencing. Specters become present at a time that is not their own; this is how we know they are specters. He explains the untimeliness of the ghostly figure, writing,

[O]ne has to realize that the ghost is there, be it in the opening of the promise or the expectation, before its first apparition: the latter had announced itself, from the first it will have to come second. Two times at the same time, originary iterability, irreducible visuality of this space and this time. That is why one must think otherwise the ‘time’ or the date of an event. (204-205)

Without a clear place of prominence or moment of definition of one spectral figure over the other, we are similarly unable to determine which figure provides the determining orientation. Derrida’s statement provides a new term for us to view Salomé and Jokanaan’s relationship: “otherwise.” Rather than being oriented around a particular history, the specters Derrida describes are positioned “otherwise,” in opposition to the continuum of time. I extend this analysis, proposing that Salomé endures “otherwise” not only in relation to time but also to the objects of her environment. What exists otherwise cannot anchor the center or orient the objects around her.

Salomé’s intentions to see Jokanaan and to force him into view represent her struggle to inhabit a position of authorship or orientation. Some scholars, like Donohue, view Salomé’s
attention to Jokanaan as her effort to appropriate the male gaze. As a specter, a revenant, however, Salomé necessarily escapes the compulsion of the gaze. She holds, in Derrida’s words, “the power to see without being seen” (8). Yet, Jokanaan shares this power.

_Salomé’s Authorship_

Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan begins at their first interaction, but at this moment of initial attraction, Jokanaan remains indistinct to her, to the other characters, and invisible to the audience. As she ushers him into the vision of the play, Salomé, in Bucknell’s words, “dismembers and re-members Jokanaan before our eyes in a virtuoso act of verbal/visual creation” (518). I argue that Salomé’s efforts to authorize Jokanaan’s existence come in three forms: by calling him from his tomb, by defining his beauty, and by bringing about his murder. Each of these directives aims to demonstrate Salomé’s control over his body and how he is seen. If she succeeds at codifying Jokanaan’s position, or in Ahmed’s words, be “oriented around something” (116), Salomé validates her position as the center. Ahmed explains the importance of the center: “Perhaps to be oriented around something is what allows us to ‘hold the center,’ or even to constitute ourselves as at the center of things…In other words, to be oriented around something is to make ‘that thing’ binding, or to constitute oneself as that thing” (116). Her attempt to orient herself around Jokanaan exposes the integral tension within the formation of the subject, which holds the position of the center at the expense of the objects around it. In my close reading of their interactions and in her association with Narcissus, I discover that each of
Salomé’s efforts to authorize Jokanaan only further serve to spectralize her subject and redirect her orientation away from the center.

The Orient, a touchstone for Ahmed, provides an example of how the solidification of the subject occurs by determining the characteristics of the object. Ahmed argues that “The Orient is not only reachable, but ‘it’ has already been reached if ‘it’ is to be available as an object of perception in the first place” (117). The question becomes whether Salomé can bring Jokanaan into view, even as she retains his shared spectral existence. Ahmed declares, “The reachability of the other, whether the Orient or other others, does not mean that they become ‘like me/us.’ Rather they are brought closer to home, but the action of ‘bringing’ is what sustains the difference: the subject, whose agency is ‘behind’ the action” (117). What separates Salomé from this construction, however, is the idea that she is inescapably like Jokanaan. Salomé is unable to maintain a difference between herself and Jokanaan.

*The Gaze of Narcissus*

Salomé’s relationship with the story of Narcissus illuminates the significance of Salomé and Jokanaan’s likeness. The gaze of Narcissus represents two kinds of desire: desire as compulsion and desire as misrecognition. Narcissus continues to gaze in the river and becomes trapped at the riverside by his desire to keep looking at the image before him. His attraction is to a figure that he does not realize is only an image and, furthermore, is an image of himself. Both of these dimensions of desire play out in Salomé’s relationship with Jokanaan.
Salomé acts as Narcissus does, gazing at Jokanaan, who appears as a version of her self. Her gaze functions as a kind of replication. Her image is doubled by the reflective imagery of the play and by her image’s duplication in Jokanaan. She lives on in these reflections. Phelan’s analysis in Unmarked sheds light on the significance of Salomé looking and finding herself in Jokanaan: “Unable to reverse her own gaze (the eyes obstinately look only outside the self), the subject is forced to detour through the other to see herself. In order to get the other to reflect her, she has to look for/at the other. (She sees herself through looking at the other.)” (20). Seeing the other requires the subject to see herself in him. This interpretation recalls a passage in Derrida, which I referenced in my first chapter and its epigraph: “There is a mirror, and the commodity form is also this mirror, but since all of a sudden it no longer plays its role, since it does not reflect back the expected image…It is as if they were becoming ghosts” (195). Salomé does not expect to see herself in Jokanaan; the expected image is not the image she sees. Not only do Salomé and Jokanaan appear “like me/us,” but further, Salomé is unable to distinguish this fact.

Oriented Away

A close reading of Salomé’s statement of desire for Jokanaan reveals three qualities that indicate a subjectivity that is oriented away, rather than around its object: shifting descriptions, the deprecation of the body, and multiple gender identifications. Salomé asserts her desire for Jokanaan, proclaiming, “I am amorous of thy body! Thy body is white like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed” (589) and continues with a series of vivid similes for Jokanaan’s body. She exclaims, “Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper…It is of thy
hair that I am enamored, Jokanaan...Thy hair is horrible” (589-590). This shifting description demonstrates the inconsistency of Salomé’s position.

Rather than constructing a continuous body, Salomé’s description takes apart Jokanaan piece by piece. She begins by expressing her deep love of one aspect of his body and then her intense disgust of that part before replacing the area of her attraction with another specific area. Jokanaan is defined by extremes. In Salomé’s words, “There is nothing in the world so black as thy hair” (590) and “There is nothing in the world so red is thy mouth” (590). This accumulation of images produces an otherworldly combination; it is impossible for Jokanaan to be all the things that Salomé says of him. The instability of Jokanaan’s identity makes it impossible for him to serve as an orienting point for Salomé’s subjectivity.

Her expressions are marked by her disgust at his “hideous...body of a leper” (590) and his horrible hair, “covered with mire and dust... like a knot of black serpents writhing round thy neck” (590). The horror that she expresses and her vacillation between beauty and the grotesque serves not only to degrade Jokanaan’s position, but hers as well. Her image linked so closely with his, Salomé experiences what Phelan describes: “Since one sees oneself in the image of the other and sees the other in one's image, the degradation of one necessitates the degradation of the other” (17). Unlike Salomé, the central subject—in Ahmed’s sense—is indestructible when oriented correctly.

Furthermore, the shifting imagery that Salomé uses crosses gender boundaries and puts into question her own gender identifications. She describes Jokanaan as “a knot of black serpents writhing round thy neck” (590) and later as a “pomegranate cut with a knife of ivory” (590). Salomé characterizes Jokanaan as masculine (black serpents) and feminine (pomegranate),
calling into question his identity and the identity she holds in relation to him. Dellamora categorizes Salomé’s dual gender identity in terms of the play’s historical moment, explaining, “Salomé’s double significance as a deviant male and a deviant female underscores how closely issues of sexual difference were related to those of gender roles in the 1890s” (247).

In desiring both the masculine and the feminine in Jokanaan, Salomé’s own gender identity becomes unclear. Ahmed provides some reasoning that we can apply here when she explains, “turning toward one’s sex is read as the act of threatening to put one’s sex into question” (71). Her characterization of the “slantwise direction of queer desire” (72), which results from an improperly directed desire, is analogous to the position that Salomé holds in relation to Jokanaan. “Slantwise” indicates a desire that moves away from the straight lines of what is “right, good or normal,” to use Ahmed’s words (72). Ahmed describes this as a kind of perversion, as “a spatial term, which can refer to the willful determination to counter or go against orthodoxy, but also to what is wayward and thus turned away from what is right, good, and proper” (78). Salomé’s triumphant depiction of Jokanaan, interpreted by Cohler as a manifestation of her power, actually decenters her position in relation to Jokanaan. Her subjectivity is collapsed as she comes also to inhabit the position of the other.

Return and Refusal

Salomé’s desire operates on a number of registers, as a kind of self-love and as a desire for another that reduces the distance between subject and object. Her statements of desire, continually reiterated and ultimately unfulfilled, close with a question: “But what of that? What
of that? I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan” (605). Her phrase mocks him and his attempts to refuse her, but it also gestures to the play’s lack of closure. What are we left with? She asks for us, what has been achieved at the play’s closure?

Salomé’s disappearance at this moment of climax maintains the possibility of her return as well as her sustained presence, in the form of moonlight. The final scene mirrors the beginning of the play, when Salomé enters as a dead woman cast in the moonlight. Her narcissus-like gaze entraps her. Enamored with Jokanaan (as the unknown image of herself), she returns to the beginning moment of the play, destined to repeat her experiences endlessly. Her ability to outwit Herod and outlive Jokanaan does not enable her freedom, merely the agency to undermine the male gaze.

Jokanaan’s desire, on the other hand, operates as refusal. Even as Salomé’s envisioning of Jokanaan brings the two closer together, Jokanaan’s insistent refusal ensures that he inhabits the spectral dimension on his own terms. This, too, has its limitations. His resistance to Salomé’s advances fails in the face of Salomé’s persistence. Neither Salomé nor Jokanaan is able to escape the spectral practices of the play. I argue that in the inevitable return of the specter and the persistent refusal of desire, Salomé and Jokanaan generate an agency to counter the male-gaze that attempts to conjure their presence. This agency is inseparable from the spectral position they hold.

Jokanaan refuses to participate in Salomé’s assertion of visual power. He speaks two languages, prophecy and refusal, remaining able to walk away from Salomé, voluntarily returning to his place of imprisonment. His rejection of her advances epitomizes his
unwillingness to play the role of orienting object. His resistance to Salomé falls into three categories: his active instructions; his refusal to look at her; and his unsatisfying death.

Jokanaan’s response to Salomé’s interest in him is anything but passive. He commands, “Who is this woman who is looking at me? I will not have her look at me. Wherefore doth she look at me with her golden eyes, under her gilded eyelids? I know not who she is. I do not wish to know who she is. Bid her begone. It is not to her that I would speak” (589). Though a prisoner, Jokanaan commands the guards, attempting to remove Salomé from their shared location. With phrases like “will not” and “not to her,” Jokanaan stakes out a clear position of opposition to Salomé. Later, in the course of their negotiation in which Salomé begs to kiss him, Jokanaan responds, “Who speaketh?” (589). This indicates his limited vision, whether intentional (perhaps humorous) or experiential. Regardless, she is outside his view.

Again, he refuses her, “I do not wish to look at thee. I will not look at thee, thou art accursed, Salomé, thou art accursed” (591). Directly following this statement, the stage directions instruct, “He goes down into the cistern” (591), and Salomé repeats, “I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan, I will kiss thy mouth” (591). When Salomé is unwilling to leave his presence, Jokanaan removes himself from her view. The guards had brought him out of his cistern at Salomé’s request but she is unable (or unwilling) to prevent him from leaving of his own accord. Jokanaan’s assertions, for example “I will not look,” take the form of the negative, stating his position and what he is willing and not willing to do. He acts as if her wish to look upon him is a choice. His subsequent assertion “thou art accursed” imparts his own vision of Salomé upon the play. He goes on the offensive, refusing her attempts to define him and defining her “accursed” position.
Both Herod and Jokanaan attempt to move away from Salomé, mimicking how she is unable to orient around the center, but away from it. The way in which Jokanaan quietly removes himself from the scene contrasts with the flurry of activity during Herod’s retreat. Rather than asserting his position with confidence as Jokanaan does, Herod resolves, “I will not suffer things to look at me” (604). This construction situates Herod as an object of vision, and his use of “suffer” indicates the kind of harm he anticipates in being viewed. Herod’s withdrawal signals his capitulation to Salomé’s power. In contrast, even at his moment of death, Jokanaan refuses Salomé the satisfaction of his murder. She laments, “There is no sound. I hear nothing. Why does he not cry out, this man? Ah! If any man sought to kill me, I would cry out, I would struggle, I would not suffer…Strike, strike, Naaman, strike, I tell you…No, I hear nothing” (603). Outside her vision and silence, Jokanaan inhabits the spectral position, leaving Salomé unable to perceive the man that she has ordered to death.

Existing Otherwise

This chapter has argued that the repositioning of the relationship between the seer and the seen demonstrated in Chapter One alters the boundaries between the desiring subject and the object of desire. Salomé’s desire for Jokanaan destabilizes her position as the centralizing subject, and Jokanaan’s spectral qualities undermine her ability to orient herself around him. The construction of the subject as the center who calls attention to the objects in its environment cannot explain the way in which Salomé and Jokanaan relate to each other. The visual practices of this play produce this contest as Salomé and Jokanaan seek the upper hand in determining who can be
made visible; but they also make it an impossible contest to win. The specter who, in Derrida’s words, “inhabits without residing” (21) cannot contribute to the orientation of objects because it itself has no settled place within that space and time.
**Conclusion**

Salomé’s spectral quality suggests something important about the moment in which Wilde wrote his play and the meaning of self-representation. Dellamora points to Jonathan Dollimore’s position on individualism, explaining, “Dollimore has recently argued that in the critical apothegm of Oscar Wilde, one may ascertain that dissolution of the individual ego which is perceived as characteristic of our postmodern moment” (261). Dollimore’s claim implicitly invokes Wilde’s tendency, exhibited in perfect form in *Salomé*, to force the reader to hold two opposite positions in symmetry. In Salomé’s case, she is both subject and object; she is both hypervisible and diminished from view. What does it mean for the individual ego to be dissolved? How does Wilde, known for his embodiment of a magnanimous and timeless personality, become known for undoing the individual? The answer lies in Decadence.

Wilde is well known as a leader of the English Aesthetic movement and a contributor to the closely related Decadence movement. Charles Bernheimer describes the critical position that Decadent art helps to expose: “Decadent creativity does indeed open a space in which to ‘exist otherwise’: it does so by showing that every normative standard is already inhabited by otherness. Yet decadence cannot know itself as such except by forgetting the constructedness of the norm against which it measures its deviance” (54). Salomé, as a visually decadent figure, is occupied by otherness. Going one step further than Bernheimer does, the visual practices of the play embrace this strangeness, positioning Salomé so that she can expose the position of otherness that she inhabits. Salomé’s relationship with Jokanaan breaks down the boundaries
between subject and object, forcing her to reside in opposition to and away from the norms of the center.

In “The Truth of Masks,” Wilde concludes with a statement that upholds the necessity of a divided subject, declaring, “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (1173). Wilde has achieved, unwittingly, a response to the quandary Said later posts in “Orientalism Reconsidered”: “How can we speak of intellectual work that isn’t merely reactive or negative?” (209). The visual practices that craft subjects into specters enable a “nondominative” language (336), which Said refers to in Orientalism, so that the other can as much be recognized and represented as the subject. Phelan describes the interaction between the seer and seen: “it is not accurate…to speak of ‘the gaze(r)’ exclusively: the looker is always regarded by the image seen and through this regard discovers and continually reaffirms that s/he is the one who looks” (15). In doing so, she attunes us to the way that visual practices invoke an implicit relationship. I argue that the spectral imaginings of Salomé imbue the seen with a power not only to affirm but also to resist being looked at. Phelan depicts this relationship another way, explaining that “the relationship between the real and the representational, the looker and the given to be seen, is a version of the relation between self and other” (3). The role of the seer, I argue, becomes folded in with the position of the subject – who is recognized as a subject because it can see and it can orient itself around the objects of its environment.

The specter opens up the relational space that exists within the subject and the object. As other, it necessary precedes and follows the subject and is able to encapsulate a view of history that is more expansive than the present. Salomé not only moves away, but moves before us. Derrida writes, “[I]f there has been this appeal beginning with a word that resounds before us,
the ‘since’ marks a place and a time that doubtless precedes us, but so as to be as much in front of us as before us” (19). Salomé remains, able to alter the kind of vision of figures like Herod, but she also exists before us, ahead of us, and precedes us. She gains, in Derrida’s words, “the power (a power without power) to affirm the coming of the event, its future-to-come itself” (19). Ghosts like Salomé demand an attention to their position and justice for what they have lost. Salomé garners strength and agency through her moving away and achieves justice through a living on, a living otherwise.


Mirzoeff, Nicholas. “Disorientalism: Minority and Visuality in Imperial London.” *TDR*. 50.2


