

Why Salome? Transcultural and Intermedial Fin de Siècle Counter-narratives: Mechanisms of Exclusion and the Adaptability of Myth

The fin de siècle (late 19th century) was a period of intense cultural anxiety, marked by rapid social change and shifting gender roles. Among the many female figures that dominated literature, art and theatre during this time, none was as pervasive (and controversial!) as Salome: Jewish princess whose dance at her stepfather Herod Antipas' birthday feast fascinated him to the point that he promised her anything she would ask for, and who is traditionally represented as a direct cause of the beheading of St John the Baptist. From the pages of decadent poetry to the stages of European theatres, Salome became the ultimate femme fatale, a symbol of both transgression and allure. But why did this biblical princess capture the imagination of so many artists and writers in the end of the 19th century? And why does her myth continue to resonate today – not only in culture, but also in media and in politics?

This research project explores the adaptability of Salome's myth across different cultures and artistic mediums, focusing on literature, theatre and visual arts from France, the Anglo-Saxon world (Britain and the United States), and Poland between 1870 and 1914. By analysing major works, such as Gustave Flaubert's *Hérodias* (1877), Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1893), and Jan Kasprowicz's *Uczta Herodiady* (1905), alongside lesser-known adaptations, the project reveals how Salome became a scapegoat for broader social anxieties. By the use of René Girard's scapegoating theory and contemporary gender studies, the research investigates how Salome's story reflects fears about women's emancipation, national identity and moral decline at the turn of the century.

Beyond the historical analysis, the project also examines Salome's presence in contemporary literature and popular culture, including graphic novels, theatre, and even manga. The study connects Salome's myth to contemporary political discourse, highlighting how powerful women - from politicians like Angela Merkel, Giorgia Meloni, Sanna Marin or Tulsi Gabbard to female public figures - are often vilified through narratives strikingly similar to those that shaped Salome's legend. This raises crucial questions: why do societies repeatedly construct and demonize transgressive female figures? And how can understanding cultural myths help us challenge modern patterns of exclusion and misogyny?

By taking a transcultural and intermedial approach, this project not only deepens our understanding of fin de siècle literature but also sheds light on the enduring power of myths in shaping how we perceive gender, power and transgression. Through this research, we gain not just a richer appreciation of Salome's story but also critical insights into contemporary struggles over female agency and representation.