Salome: Magic in Feminine Sexuality

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Gustave Moreau’s, *Salome (Salome Dancing before Herod)*, 1876, is a depiction of the biblical story of woman named Salome, and her dance for Herod, her stepfather and Galilean ruler. Herod tells Salome that if she dances for him he will give her anything she would like. Salome plans to ask her stepfather to behead John the Baptist. The paintings narrative and biblical references seem to suggest that Moreau’s motivation was to create a historical painting. However, through his use of symbolism, it is evident that Moreau is trying to represent the feminine power of lust and mysticism.

The central point of the paintings composition is Salome, who it towards the left of the painting. Herod is sitting on a throne directly in the center. There is a man on the right of Herod, dressed in red with a white veil covering his face. He is the executioner and who will behead John the Baptist. Herodias, Salome’s mother, is on the left. Next to Herodias there is another figure that is a musician.

In a very similar painting by Gustave Moreau, called *The Apparition*, 1876, depicts a very similar scene to *Salome (Salome Dancing before Herod)*. In both paintings there is a woman on the left of the composition, wearing the same type of garments, with their heads down, left arm extended and right arm bent towards their faces. Both paintings are depicted in similar looking palaces with a man on a throne. However, in *The Apparition* the woman’s extended arm is pointing to a man’s head floating in midair. He has a halo, and is therefore a saint, with a severed neck and light emanating from it. This image shows a vision of John the Baptist’s head which the woman is seeing and pointing at.

The woman in *Salome (Salome Dancing before Herod)* seems to be referencing this head, which was painted in Moreau’s *The Apparition*. HOW IS THIS COMPARISON HELPFUL? COMPARISONS ARE USED BY ART HISTORIANS TO SUPPORT A
Salome, in *Salome (Salome Dancing before Herod)*, standing in the foreground, draws the eye. She has a white veil that falls down the length of her body and a very large forehead. She is standing with her left arm straight, and raised out in front of her. Salome’s right arm is drawn up towards her face and she holds a light pink flower. The flower she is holding represents sexuality. She is also standing on a red, carpet strewn with roses, which along with sexuality, also seem to symbolize femininity, purity, fragility or virginity. Also laying on the red carpet, is a large black panther, which represents lust. Salome is adorned with items that represent female sexuality. Salome also wears a bracelet that is the "Ujat of ancient Egyptians" which is supposed to hold "magic fluid". Not only does the items Moreau surround Salome with represent female sexuality, but also feminine magic.

If you look closely, the painting reveals that Salome is preforming a dance. Her head is down and her arm is up but not pointing at anything. Everyone is looking at her, initially it seems as if she is preforming some sort of ritual or performance. The title of the Painting, *Salome (Salome Dancing before Herod)* suggests that her stance is part of a dance she is preforming to the person on the thrown, Herod. Herod’s focused gaze seems to represent that he is intensely memorized by Salome’s dance, again referencing lust. It also exemplifies how her sexuality and gives her enormous power, almost like magic.

If you look closer at Salome’s dance, you might notice she is on her tiptoes, in a way that is not humanly possible. By doing this, “...the artist has removed her from
reality by representing her almost hovering..." ix Depicting her as "hovering" seems to allude to magic, and makes Salome seem greater than just a normal woman. ix Moreau said, "In my Salome',... I wished to render the figure of a sibyl or religious enchantress with a mysterious character. And do I conceive the costume which is like a reliquary'. Salome’s action is not a dance... It is magical ritual, preformed with the aim of bewitching Herod." x Moreau intentionally put Salome in a inhuman position to communicate her magical and mystical side. Others have described her dance as a "...spell of lust..." xii and a "...symbolic deity of indestructible Lust..." xiii Moreau seems to be suggesting through symbolism that Salome represents the magical or spell-casting-like side of feminine sexuality. ok

Objects also depicted in the painting work as symbols to display Moreau’s idea of Salome's feminine power and sexuality. Above Herod thrown there is a statue of a figure with spread arms pointing to the bottom corners of the picture and to two smaller figures on either side of the sculpture. There are several theories of what this sculpture might be of. One theory is that the statue is of the “many-breasted” Phrygian goddess. xiv Others believe it is a statue of Diana of Ephesus. With multiple breasts, she is a symbol of fertility, and the smaller figures are thought to be the "Persian god of death", Ahriman. xv No matter which theories are correct the multiple breast of the central figure undoubtedly represent female fertility. The god of death statues, placed next to the woman with multiple breasts alludes to female power and sexuality in an almost dangerous way. The figures are possibly referencing Salome's drive to kill John the Baptist.

The architecture and atmosphere of the painting also represent Salome as a symbol
of female sexuality and magic. The architecture and decoration of the space makes it feel like some sort of palace or a place for very important people. The bright light coming in from the right of the painting creates an atmosphere that is awe provoking. The painting has a very central composition. The composition has three arches in the background. The arch in the center is the brightest light of all of them. In the central arch you can also see further into the distance. There are also two ornate pillars closer to the picture plane of the painting on the left and right of the frame. One source suggests, “The atmosphere of mystery and sensuality is heightened by the rays of diffused light coming down from the vaulting....”\textsuperscript{xvi} Even the compositional elements of the painting emphasize Salome’s feminine sexuality. One source explains, ”The entire paint surface has been mobilized to suggest the bewitching eroticism of Salome’s dance, which leaves everyone in Herod’s palace hall spellbound”,\textsuperscript{xvii}

It is very evident that Moreau is using symbolism to represent female sexuality and magic in Salome. These ideas are inevitably in relation to the historical story of the painting. All of a sudden when her sexuality and magic is put into context of her plan to kill John the Baptist her character has an eerie twist. Salome seems almost like a siren, using her magical powers to entrance Herod and use him to get what she wants. Salome becomes an almost evil female sorcerer, which gives her even more power in the painting.

You have conducted a good iconographic reading of the work, which is a good starting point. The next step would be a discussion of why those symbols and the story of Salome in general were interesting and significant in 19th century France. Otherwise analyze the work simply as an illustration of the Biblical story that it depicts. (So, why are we discussing it in a 19th-century art history class?) A research of the context when and where the painting was made would make your reading of feminine sexuality in Moreau stronger. For example you could discuss the idea of Femme Fatale and could complicate the very idea of femininity as a construct that is the product of specific historical circumstances.
Major problems of syntax and spelling.

Grade: 10/15
