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Artistic interpretation from translation in Wilde's Salome

Jorge Luis Borges, an Argentinian writer once said, "The original is unfaithful to the translation".

In literature, Language is a tool that must be handled with precision and Oscar Wilde was self-described as a "lord of language" (Daniel, 1), thus it is not surprising that he decided to experiment with the French language when he wrote *Salome*, later translated by Lord Alfred Douglas into English. By analyzing the difference between the two versions, we can better understand Wilde's attempt at challenging the social norms of the Victorian era. We will try to understand why French was the language chosen, despite rumors and theories, and how French Literature influenced *Salome's* thematics on eroticism, decadence, and feminism. Then, we will thoroughly analyze both versions and try to draw a compare and contrast to understand how interpretation has a major role in Wilde's work: we will draw upon Anne Margaret Daniel's article "*Lost in Translation*" to highlight examples of potential mistakes or loss of meaning in the translation process. However, we will take a different perspective from Daniel's argument, contending that the translation changes enhance the discussion around the play's themes and allow for nuanced interpretations. Through our analysis, we will demonstrate the significance of the transmission of art and the importance of understanding the role of translation in shaping the meanings of literary works.

Wilde was an Aesthetic; he viewed art as an object of beauty rather than a philosophical work holding a deeper meaning and *Salome* is a work of Art. Originally from the bible, *Salome's*

various representations testify to the fascination she created for many Artists. Wilde decided to write the story in French and in some way, it goes in accordance with the ideas behind aesthetics: he did so for Art's sake. The French language was considered at the time as a language of eroticism and romanticism, furthermore, Wilde was widely influenced by the French decadence movement. This movement, like the aesthetic movement, was widely criticized and feared in the Victorian era:

“Themes of perverse sexuality or cruelty and violence shockingly dismantled what many Victorians felt were necessary or even natural lines drawn between aesthetic beauty and repellent or ‘ugly’ morality. Mainstream Victorian culture saw art and literature as a means of self-improvement or a spur to good works.” (Carolyn Burdett, 1)

It is clear that Salome tends to challenge the boundaries of literature in the Victorian era, and what better way than to use the French language? In the article “*Translation as Internal Communication*”, Kohlmayer states: “Wilde’s aesthetic return to Greek classicism was on a deeper level, a return to the pre-Christian sources of Europe. Salome was written as a heathen act of deconstruction directed against the conventional - in the sense of Puritan - interpretation of the bible” (112)

This tells a lot about the time in which the play was written, and how there seems to be a separation from the constraints orchestrated in part by the church which widely influenced literature and contrasted with the evolution of literature. This reveals also how we as a society tend to receive change as inducing fear, “decadent” literary comes from the word : decay: As if there has been a loss. In *Decadent Poetics*, Alex Murray & Jason David Hall cite: “Ross declares that ‘what is commonly called decay is merely stylistic development’” (1) Now, the choice of language for Salome tells us more about this attempt at stylistic development; it offers a new

opportunity for artistic enhancement and a truly distinct separation from a more traditionalism portrayal of the holy.

In her article, Anne Margaret Daniel analyzes the negative aspect of having the play translated back into English. She cites: “Wilde’s choice of language allowed him consciously to enhance a conception of the feminine in his linguistic treatment of Salome. (...) Much of the feminine sense and sensibility of the original Salome is utterly lost in translation” (67) In fact, the French language allows for pronouns to be part of the thematic elements, and this may be the ultimate reason why Wilde decided to use French. The emphasis on feminine pronouns to describe human parts or natural phenomena like the moon offers a deeper understanding of the importance of womanhood in the text. Salome is an archetype of the femme fatale and the fact that the violence of her words and action are as emphasized as the attributes that make her a female is important in understanding why this play challenges the constraints of the Victoria era. Other instances illustrated Salome’s characteristics with the aid of the French language:

“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.” (2)

The moon is a metaphor for womanhood in the text, and she is a direct representation of Salome since she is the central woman of the story and they have a lot in common; they both are mysterious and at the center of everyone’s sight. Even if you don’t want to look at her, you can’t restrain from it, just like the moon. Because Salome is the moon, she is associated with the vocabulary of death in this quote, “tomb, dead woman, dead things”. However, I found the translation of dead things inaccurate as it was originally “On dirait qu’elle cherche des morts.”

(2) (dead people) This amplifies the cruelty of Salome because it is more somber to find dead people than dead things, also, it foreshadows Jokanaan's death and offers more insight into Salome's nature. There is throughout the play others inference of death, like when Salome speaks on Jokanaan: "His flesh must be cool like ivory" (7), this is another instance of a missed opportunity as the original version translates as: "sa chair doit etre tres froide, comme de l'ivoire." There is a distinct difference between cool and very cold when it comes to the human body. Salome describes his body as very cold to represent his future corpse, contributing to a darker and more ruthless tone in the portrayal of her character.

Furthermore, when Salome threatens Jokanaan: "I will kiss thy mouth"(9), the original version cites: "Je vais baiser ta bouche", the term "baiser" in a verb is much more provocative and even considered slang in the French language compared to the more neutral tone of "kiss". This adds an extra layer of eroticism and sensuality to the play. I would argue that this specific line can be an argument to understand better the choice of using French to convey decadence, Wilde wanted to provoke the Victorian audience and succeeded.

I agree with Daniel in the idea that there is missed opportunity in transforming the original translation, however, I would argue that some quotes and passages may gain from this transformation as it adds complexity to the analysis of the thematics of the play and more importantly it gives space to other interpretations. For example, Salome is represented as a manipulator, also an attribute often credited to the "femme fatale". When she wants to see Jokanaan she persuades Narraboth: "Are you, even you, also afraid of him, Narraboth?" when the original version stated: "Est-ce que vous aussi vous en avez peur?" (6) This small change of adding "even you" add on to her manipulative tendencies, as she goes out of her way to compliment Narraboth so he meets the given expectation. We could understand that through the

process of translation, the translator interpreted this sentence as cunning manipulation and it tells much about how the character of Salome must have been received at the time. Going further in her representation, when the young Syrian says: "Never have I seen her so pale. She is like the shadow of a white rose in a mirror of silver." The French translation reads: "Elle ressemble au reflet d'une rose blanche dans un miroir d'argent." (2) There is a distinctive difference in her reflection, she is now a shadow when she was originally the reflection of a white rose. The shadow is the opposite of the white rose's reflection. This change is interesting: In the original version the young Syrian is blind to her true nature, and he only compares her to objects representing innocence and peace like doves or white roses. Of course, this is not the case as she is darker than he imagines, nevertheless, by transforming her into a shadow, the translator would imply that the young Syrian has unconsciously uncovered Salome's nature. This gives a strong interpretation that differs from the idea that Salome's nature is not invisible to those around her, as the original version makes us believe.

Another strong distinction between the two versions is a quote from Salome talking about the moon: "She has never abandoned herself to men" (4) The translation from; "Elle ne s'est jamais donnée aux hommes." Both versions imply that women have no agency in their relationship with men and that they easily claim ownership of them, however, the translation of "abandoned" illustrates how there is no going back, that if a woman gives herself she is not herself anymore. She has lost herself in men's dominance. This reveals a strong argument against the social norms dictated by the Victorian era: Initially, the audience would not be shocked by the choice of the word "giving" because of the economic transactional nature of marriage, however the word "abandons" reveals the negative aspect of being given away, the ultimate lack of freedom. So it becomes subjective.

The translation process itself involves choices made by translators, who may interpret the play differently based on their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This adds a layer of complexity to the reception and interpretation of *Salome* and highlights the significance of the choice to write the play in French.

Alfred Douglas was not the only noticeable translator, and the play has been exported to many art forms and languages. Audrey Breadsley was the illustrator for Wilde's work and her drawings convey a story of their own, adding to the complexity of the story. However, Wilde was not in agreement with her art as he was with Douglas' translation, he says that her drawing was: "too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine." (114) according to the article *Translation As Intercultural Communication* by Rainer Kohlmayer, he also adds that "Breadsley's play has still today a strong influence on the stage reception of Salome" (114) Kohlmayer further analyzes the German version of the play translated by Hedwig Lachman, "Her text (...) is rougher and more solemn than the French, but it does not follow the archaizing, historicizing fairy-tale style of the English version" (114) The German version was also an inspiration for many cinematic adaptations and offers another prism of looking at the play; under the linguistic elements of a different culture, with different interpretations.

Wilde's disagreement with the transformation of the text demonstrates that there were significant changes from the original to the translated text. However, Wilde was an experimentalist and his creativity and boldness was what made him challenge society's norms and write *Salome*, therefore, he should have acknowledged that artistic enhancement comes from change. In order to gain intellectual richness we must have a disruption of the traditional, just like he disrupted the traditional biblical story of Salome and John the Baptist.

Since Wilde's work is part of the aesthetic movement that promotes: Art for Art's sake, I would argue that Salome has taken an art form independent from Wilde's original work, therefore, the interpretation of Salome adds to the thematics of the play. The change in translation was not necessarily a loss; it gave life to an art that lives on its own and by having multiple translations we can consider that as a dialogue of how Salome is seen throughout different minds. This work is made to have various interpretations and translations and that is why it continues to fascinate and inspire authors today; we will have a different reaction towards Salome in the 21st century than critics received it in the Regency era. Audiences in the 19th century will be shocked to see a character like Salome and consider her personality a threat to the social norms that was all they ever knew as right, in contrast, a 21st-century reader will see a mark of feminism in an early text in Salome's dominance and agency over a man, how she is powerful and challenges the idea that women have no power. Translation offers the space for interpretation, and interpretation creates discussion; to keep a work of art still relevant centuries after it was created; it needs to generate discussion.

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