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Salome is undoubtedly the most prominent femme fatale of the fin de siècle. In his 1967 study of Salome, Michel Décaudin even calls her a ‘fin de siècle myth’.¹ From Stéphane Mallarmé’s poetic fragment ‘Hérodiade’ and Gustave Flaubert’s tale *Herodias* (1877) to Jules Laforgue’s and Oscar Wilde’s versions of *Salomé* (1887; 1892), many writers used the young Jewish princess as a literary trope; she became, so to speak, ‘inevitable’.² Indeed, Salome was the subject of poems, plays, stories, novels, operas, even posters and decorative objects, as well as paintings (J.-K. Huysmans famously dedicated many pages of *À rebours* (1884) to Gustave Moreau’s symbolist representations of Salome, which prompted Bram Dijkstra to write that Moreau’s *Salomé* (1876) ‘inaugurated the late nineteenth century’s feverish exploration of every possible visual detail expressive of this young lady’s hunger for St. John the Baptist’s head’).³ Salome was in fact so omnipresent in the literary field that in 1912 Maurice Krafft claimed to have recorded 2,789 French poets who had written about the dancer, before she slowly faded out of fashion later in the century.⁴ Even so the mythification of Salome and her dance engendered a cultural phenomenon – known as the ‘Salome epidemic’ or ‘Salomania’ on US opera and theatre stages in 1908-09 – which spread throughout Europe and America in the early twentieth century.⁵ With the symbolic beheading of John the Baptist, Salome came to crystallize all the anxieties of the fin-de-siècle hero, most notably the destructive and malevolent forms of femininity. To this day, the figure of Salome still generates many literary, social, and cultural debates about women, sexuality, immigration, race, and morality.

In her stimulating *L'Anti-Salomé* (2020), Marie Kawthar Daouda chooses to concentrate on the reverse image of Salome as a figure of malevolent femininity. With the concept of ‘bienveillance’ – that is, *benevolentia*, good will, benevolence and kindness (p. 13), or the voluntary

provision of care toward someone in need – Daouda analyses the representation of what she coins ‘benevolent femininity’ in the *fin de siècle* through a typology of ‘positive’ characters found in decadent narratives. In her book, she examines figures of benevolent femininity that fall outside the deadly *femme fatale* spectrum, whose links with decapitation often give rise to considerations of language and its performative power. On the contrary, the anti-Salome is an alterocentric figure, ‘celle qui se sacrifie pour faire advenir une ère nouvelle’ [the one who sacrifices herself in order to bring about a new era] (p. 16) – in other words, while Salome cuts off the poet’s head, as the author puts it, the anti-Salome crowns it (p. 16). The issue of self-sacrifice as a sign of strength, if not power and domination, is therefore central to this study. According to the author, ‘[s]e révèle en effet, derrière le mot de bienveillance, une transcendance de l’enjeu eudémonique vers un idéal où la volonté, l’acte et la parole ne feraient qu’un’ [the word benevolence also reveals a transcendence of the eudaemonic issue towards an ideal where drive, action, and speech would become one] (p. 13). Analysing an imposing corpus of literary works from a wide range of authors of the long decadent period (1850-1910) – Émile Zola, John Henry Newman, the Goncourt brothers, Renée Vivien, Liane de Pougy, Marcel Schwob, Marie Corelli, Léon Bloy, George Macdonald, Jeanne de Tallenay, Pierre Louÿs, Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendès, Jean Bertheroy, Félicien Champsaur, amongst others – Daouda recontextualizes the power of sacrificial women in the nineteenth century. In so doing, she reassesses benevolent female figures such as the Virgin Mary, Eve, Joan of Arc, Mary Magdalen, as well as androgynous female Orphic characters (e.g., Sappho, Hypathia), challenging the usual associations between seduction and evil that Salome represents. While the first two chapters are dedicated to the ‘obvious’ counter-figures to Salome (the Virgin Mary and Eve), sorrowful mothers, and the opposition between virgin figures who give speech and virgin figures who erase it, Chapter 3 addresses the question of androgyny (or rather, the question of ‘benevolent androgyny’), not in terms of a representation of the New Woman as a positive threat to social order, but predominantly as the perception of the crisis of the epic model (p. 118) and a vector of sacrificial crisis and benevolence. Chapter 4 focuses on the representation of a more

disruptive form of holiness in figures such as Joan of Arc and Mary Magdalen. Indeed, their sacrifices seem to circumvent moral issues while remaining resolutely canonical (p. 161). Daouda notes for instance that ‘la figure de Jeanne d’Arc [...] met en évidence l’efficacité de la confrontation entre les codes hagiographiques et les enjeux esthétiques ou politiques de la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle jusqu’à la Grande Guerre’ [the figure of Joan of Arc [...] highlights the efficacy of the confrontation between hagiographical codes and the aesthetic and political concerns of the second half of the nineteenth century until the Great War] (p. 161). In this sense, the dialectics of *devotio/salvatio* triggered by Joan of Arc are well represented in Michelet, Huysmans, and Blois (fairy and virgin, saint and monster, chimera), in turn engendering both history and ‘rhetorical *inventio*’ (p. 164). Finally, in Chapter 5, Daouda draws a parallel between figures of feminine benevolence towards affliction and Christ/Orpheus – also both representations of the romantic poet. In this concluding chapter, the author examines how such figures become ‘l’allégorie d’une altérité salvifique’ [the allegory of a saving otherness] (p. 221) in fin-de-siècle literature.

Daouda’s book offers insight into the overlooked theme of ‘benevolent femininity’ in the second half of the nineteenth century. It proposes a brilliant alternative to the perception of women and femininity more generally in fin-de-siècle literature, along with an impressive collection of illustrations. Its original contribution lies in the comparative reading of texts and media from an angle that is both literary and theological. However, Daouda’s serious and erudite study would have benefitted from a more thorough, and consistent, engagement with cultural, gender, and feminist theories, current debates about which are often neglected in the study (Julia Kristeva’s concept of reliance in maternal eroticism could have been further developed in relation to the function of the *Mater Dolorosa* in decadent literature, while Hélène Cixous is only quoted once in the book). Conversely, Daouda’s predominantly textual approach is drawn from a literary and theological reading of fin-de-siècle narratives; yet it misses the opportunity to properly engage theoretically with René Girard, who is referred to only sporadically and peripherally. Indeed, it

would have been interesting to see Daouda drawing further parallels between her textual analysis and Girard's theoretical reflections on sacrificial crisis and mimetic rivalry in literature and religion (he wrote about Salome, and the origin of language in relation to the scapegoat mechanism more generally),⁶ along with the use of key theological terms in relation to decadent literature, such as 'benevolence', 'atonement', 'sacrifice', 'redemption', 'devotion', 'martyr', 'victim', etc.

Overall, notwithstanding some reservations about theoretical range, the book is beautifully written and rigorously researched. Daouda's *L'Anti-Salomé* will be significant for scholars in the field of fin-de-siècle literature and culture, particularly those interested in the theology of decadence, and a broader, non-academic audience alike.

¹ Michel Décaudin, 'Un Mythe "fin de siècle": Salomé', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 4.1/2 (1967), 109-17 (p. 109).

² Pierre Jaudon refers to 'l'inévitable Salomé' in *L'Étouffement* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Plume, 1902), p. 86.

³ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 384.

⁴ Quoted in Décaudin, 'Un Mythe "fin de siècle": Salomé', p. 109.

⁵ See Marlis Schweitzer, 'The Salome Epidemic: Degeneracy, Disease, and Race Suicide', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre*, ed. by Nadine George (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), pp. 890-921.

⁶ See René Girard, 'Scandal and the dance: Salome in the Gospel of Mark', *New Literary History*, 15.2 (1984), 311-24. On the concept of the scapegoat, see Girard, *The Violence and the Sacred* [1972], trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), and *The Scapegoat* [1982], trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).