Receiving Ištar through the seven veils of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*

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[This paper considers the suggestion that 'the dance of the seven veils' referred to in an enigmatic stage direction given in the script of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* may have been influenced in part by the Akkadian poem of *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*. While investigation of these texts and the contexts *Salomé* was written in suggests that it is possible that Wilde had some knowledge of *Ištar's Descent*, this is not demonstrable conclusively and may perhaps be understood best as an anachronism. Plausible explanation may be found in the 'Assyrianising' early stage settings for the play and the Strauss opera adaptation. The exploration of the entangled subjects of Wilde's potential reception of *Ištar's Descent* and the reception of *Salomé* unveils a useful lens through which to consider the afterlife of Ištar, and by extension ancient Mesopotamia, in late nineteenth century Europe and subsequently.]

Keywords: Oscar Wilde, Salomé, Richard Strauss, Ištar, reception.

1. *A Tragedy in One Act*

Simultaneously one of his most controversial and least known works, the Irish poet, playwright, and wit Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) initially wrote the script for his play *Salomé* in French while staying in Paris in 1891-92. The debut performance was intended for later in 1892 at the Palace Theatre, London, with the French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) at the helm producing and starring in the title role.[1] Yet the play's license was denied by the London censor because of its biblical subject matter and preparations for the performance came to a halt.[2] A year later in 1893, Wilde commissioned Lord Alfred Douglas (1870-1945), who had previously reviewed *Salomé* in the Oxford undergraduate publication *The Spirit Lamp,* with an English translation of the play.[3] Douglas' translation, critiqued by Wilde, was published in 1894 along with sixteen drawings by the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898).[4] *Salomé* would not be performed anywhere until its premiere at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, Paris, in February 1896 however, almost a year after Wilde was arrested in London and later imprisoned for "gross indecency", on account of his relationships with men, including the above mentioned Douglas, in April 1895.[5]

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1. Frankel 1997, 80; Marcus 2011, 999.
2. Lewsadder 2002, 519; Wilson 2017, 47-48.
3. Stratford 1999, 2; Seeney 2014, 29-31.
4. Daalder 2010, 49.
5. Schulz 1996, 39, 47; Tydeman and Price 1996, 25.

2. *SALOME dances the dance of the seven veils*

> HEROD Do not rise, my wife, my queen, it will avail thee nothing. I will not go
>   within till she hath danced. Dance, Salome, dance for me.
> HERODIAS Do not dance, my daughter.
> SALOME I am ready, Tetrarch.
> *(SALOME dances the dance of the seven veils)*
> HEROD Ah! wonderful! wonderful! You see that she has danced for me, your
> daughter. Come near, Salome, come near, that I may give thee thy fee. Ah! I pay a royal
> price to those who dance for my pleasure. I will pay thee royally. I will give thee whatsoever
> thy soul desireth. What wouldst thou have? Speak.
> SALOME (*Kneeling*) I would that they presently bring me in a silver charger . . .
> HEROD (*Laughing*) In a silver charger? Surely yes, in a silver charger. She is
> charming, is she not? What is it that thou wouldst have in a silver charger, O sweet and fair
> Salome, thou that art fairer than all the daughters of Judæa? What wouldst thou have them
> bring thee in a silver charger? Tell me. Whatsoever it may be, thou shalt receive it. My
> treasures belong to thee. What is it that thou wouldst have, Salome?
> SALOME (*Rising*) The head of Iokanaan.[6]

Wilde's *Salomé* is a radical retelling of the biblical narratives about the daughter of Herodias, who, according to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, dances for Herod and obtains the head of John the Baptist (Iokanaan in the play) in return.

> But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and
> she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might
> ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a
> platter." The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he
> commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. The head was
> brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother.[7]

Compared with Wilde's play, the biblical witnesses are relatively concise in their accounts. At a banquet for Herod, the daughter of his wife Herodias dances, pleases and, at her mother's encouragement, selects the head of John the Baptist as her reward.[8] No indication as to the name of the dancer, the type of dance she performs, or why it is so pleasing to Herod are offered, and her own motivations, and indeed her ultimate fate, are entirely absent from the narratives.[9] Wilde's play on the other hand, indebted to Josephus' identification of the daughter of Herodias as Salome

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6. Wilde, *Salome*, 786-804. All quotations from the play derive from Oxford Scholarly Editions Online (2019).

7. Matthew 14.6-11, New Revised Standard Version. See also the highly similar account in Mark 6.21-28.

8. John the Baptist's critique of Herod's marriage to Herodias (Matthew 14.3-5, cf. Mark 6.17-19) is implied as the reason for Herodias' role in encouraging his execution. The Herod of the story is thought to be Herod Antipas, tetrarch or vassal ruler of the Roman province of Judæa, whose wife Herodias was previously married to his half-brother, Herod II. See n. 10.

9. Of course, this is likely because these aspects of the 'Salome' story were not considered relevant to the aims of the New Testament, which instrumentalises this episode to serve the primary purpose of explaining the death of John the Baptist, foreshadowing that of Jesus, at the hands of Herod.

(Σαλώμη), fills in some of the Bible's blanks.[10] Placing Salomé's actions and agency before, during and after the dance and resulting death of the prophet at the forefront of the plot, her unrequited desire to "kiss [Iokanaan's] mouth", a foil to Herod's unrequited desire for her, becomes a key driver of the action throughout.[11]

By way of summary, Wilde's Salomé, who is introduced as the principal object of desire at Herod's court, awakens desires of her own when she has Iokanaan brought out of the cistern Herod has him imprisoned in and becomes "amorous of [his] body".[12] But Iokanaan's initial rebuttal of her advances means that Salomé's desire to kiss him, concealed from her mother and stepfather until the play's climax, is only realised after she makes an agreement with Herod and submits to his advances, dances, and acquires Iokanaan's disembodied head.[13] Horrified by her actions, Herod orders Salomé's killing as a moonbeam illumines the moment of her ecstasy.[14] In Wilde's play, the dance the daughter of Herodias performs for Herod, which is imaginatively named 'the dance of the seven veils' in a brief stage direction given in the script, is thus dramatically transformed into a vehicle of Herod's as well as Salomé's desires; the instrument of Iokanaan's as well as Salomé's own demise.[15] Having since become all but synonymous with the biblical story, Wilde's invention of the dance of the seven veils is inarguably his most defining contribution to the living tradition about the daughter of Herodias.[16] But what exactly was his inspiration?

3. *The first documented striptease*

In addition to the New Testament accounts about the daughter of Herodias and Josephus, it has been well established that Wilde drew on numerous biblical and broader ancient world sources, which were exceedingly popular subjects in the salons of 1890s Paris, in devising the script for *Salomé*. To highlight a few examples, it has been shown that passages from the biblical Book of Revelation are directly quoted in *Salomé* and that Wilde engaged with a recent French translation of the Song of Songs, while the idea for the dance of the seven veils has been traced to various origins including myths about the Egyptian goddess Isis as well as crucially, Mesopotamian Ištar, the main subject of the present discussion.[17]

To give a brief overview, Ištar's possible connection to Salomé and the dance of the seven veils has been considered in diverse types of scholarly literature, spanning studies of Wilde's play, feminist works on myth and symbolism, histories of dance and performance, and even a book about

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10. As Josephus explains, "Herodias was married to Herod, the son of Herod the Great… They had a daughter Salome, after whose birth Herodias… married Herod, her husband's brother by the same father, who was a tetrarch of Galilee" *Jewish Antiquities*, XVIII.136 (Loeb Classical Library 433, 92-93).
11. Wilde, *Salome*, 329-332.
12. Wilde, *Salome*, 1, 113-119, 285.
13. Wilde, *Salome*, 363-366, 697-718, 960-965.
14. Wilde, *Salome*, 1004-1020.
15. Wilde, *Salome*, 789.1.
16. Becker-Leckrone 1995, 247-249.
17. E.g., Kuryluk 1987, 221; Tydeman and Price 1996, 6-7; Sully 2004, 18-25; Marcsek-Fuchs 2015, 241; Carter 2019, 2.

Ištar, over decades.[18] In investigating this case, it is useful to first review a few select quotations that illustrate the grounds for this comparison and the discourse.

> The Bible presents the Dance of the Seven Veils as a mere vulgar striptease performed by Salome to "please Herod" (Matthew 14:6-8). Actually, the Dance of the Seven Veils was an integral part of the sacred drama, depicting the death of the surrogate-king, his descent into the underworld, and his retrieval by the Goddess, who removed one of her seven garments at each of the seven underworld gates… Salome represented Ishtar…[19]

> Four thousand years ago, Ishtar, the great goddess of Babylon, performed the first documented striptease when she descended to the underworld to retrieve her lover-son-husband, the mortal Tammuz. In this death and resurrection myth, Ishtar must relinquish her jewels and robes at each of the seven gates to the underworld until she stands naked in the "land of no return." Oscar Wilde assigned this symbolic descent to the underworld of the unconscious, a ceremony that equates stripping naked to being in a state of truth, the ultimate unveiling, to Salome.[20]

> The sexual desirability of Salome and the dance of the seven veils… have been connected to the Assyrian and Babylonian myth of the deity Ishtar's descent into the underworld which was discovered and translated in the late nineteenth century. The story… is dominated by Ishtar's removal of items of clothing and jewelry to allow her to descend through the seven gates of the underworld to culminate in her death and the tragic condemnation of "the lover of her youth" as her replacement in hell. Ishtar's seven stages of disrobing… are the seductive actions connected with the dance of the seven veils. However, the seven stages are not presented or referred to as a dance or as a form of seduction.[21]

The above examples show how biblical, Wildean and Mesopotamian traditions have all been conflated in the reception of the biblical 'Salome' as well as Wilde's *Salomé*, a phenomenon Mary Becker-Leckrone has described in response to the first quotation by Barbara Walker as "an intricate midrash which patches together supportable textual data with dizzying anachronism, tenuous speculation, slippery genealogy, and urgently interested feminist revisionism".[22] To recap, the 'Salome' of the Gospels has been seen, frequently through the lens of *Salomé*, as equivalent to the Salomé of Wilde's play. Both 'Salomes' have, in turn, been repeatedly connected to Ištar, sometimes implicitly and at other times explicitly the Ištar known from the Akkadian poem of *Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld*, due to the similarities that have been perceived between Salomé's dance of the seven veils, understood to have involved her unveiling, and Ištar's progress through the seven gates of the Netherworld, which involved the goddess' undressing.

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18. E.g., Buonaventura 1983, 35; Walker 1983, 885-886; Becker-Leckrone 1995, 254; Bentley 2002, 32; Sully 2004, 24; Kultermann 2006, 187; Cave 2011, 148; Garland 2011, 127; Blackmer 2016, 10; Sellers-Young 2016, 138-139; Carter 2017, 129; Pryke 2017, 199. See in addition the relevant feature by John Yohalem published in *Playbill* magazine (2004).
19. Walker 1983, 885-886.
20. Bentley 2002, 32.
21. Garland 2011, 127.
22. Becker-Leckrone 1995, 249.

Seemingly read back through the lens of Wilde's *Salomé*, the Ištar of *Ištar's Descent* has, in the manner of Salomé, been assigned the motive of journeying to the Netherworld and unveiling herself during her approach primarily in order to seek out her beloved Tammuz (the Hebrew name for the Sumerian god Dumuzi). In the process of reception, Salomé and Ištar have thus both been implicitly linked to, indirectly related, Mesopotamian texts about Inanna and Dumuzi known from Sumerian compositions, as well as other Akkadian texts about the death of the so-called substitute or "surrogate" king. To summarise, Ištar, primarily received as the Mesopotamian goddess of sexuality, descent, and death *par excellence*, has been recurrently recalled as a potential pre-biblical origin for what has emerged as the 'Salome' theme in the wake of Wilde, reified in the mysterious dance of the seven veils.

4. *The seventh gate and the garment of dignity*

> *7-ú KÁ ú-še-rib-ši-ma um-ta-ṣi it-ta-bal ṣu-bat bal-ti šá zu-um-ri-šá*
> *šebû bāba ušēribšima umtaṣṣi ittabal ṣubāt balti ša zumriša*
> the seventh gate he brought her through and removed, took away the garment of dignity of her body.[23]

To, at least for a moment, take seriously the suggestion that Wilde could have been inspired by *Ištar's Descent* when inventing the dance of the seven veils, it is necessary to first investigate the textual basis for this comparison. Crucially, the Akkadian text of *Ištar's Descent* does include reference to the number seven in relation to Ištar's apparel.[24] After surrendering her crown, earrings, necklace, breastplate, belt, and bracelets in order to gain entry at each of the first six gates of the Netherworld, at the seventh and final gate the gatekeeper takes from Ištar what is perhaps best translated as her "garment of dignity" (*ṣubāt balti*). At a glance, the motif of Ištar's undressing, which leads to her encounter with death, certainly seems to resonate with the plot of *Salomé*, especially if further connections are drawn between Dumuzi and Iokanaan as Ištar and Salomé's doomed beloveds. However, the stories are not as similar as they may initially seem.

Firstly, although Ištar's "garment of dignity" could plausibly have been some form of veil, the Akkadian terms more typically thought to denote this meaning are *pusummu* (derived from the verb *pasāmu*) and *kutummu* (derived from the verb *katāmu*), which both convey the meaning of a covering.[25] Second, even if Ištar's garment is to be understood as equivalent to a veil, her removal of seven articles of apparel, ranging from headwear to jewellery and other accessories, at seven successive Netherworld gateways hardly corresponds to Salomé's dancing, as Tony Garland points out above.[26] Third, while the dance of the seven veils has, largely due to the play's reinterpretation after Wilde, come to be associated with Salomé's unveiling, nothing about the enigmatic stage direction *(SALOME dances the dance of the seven veils)* or the subsequent dialogue indicates that

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23. The composite text of *Ištar's Descent* is available online via the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI P497322). All quotations from the text derive from the CDLI version, here quoted line 60. English translation my own.

24. Of course, seven was a number of special significance in ancient Mesopotamia. See, for e.g., Konstantopoulos 2015, 15-18.

25. van der Toorn 2018, 99; Fales 2021, 91-93.

26. Garland 2011, 127.

Wilde intended for Salomé to strip during the play.[27] If Ištar does not 'unveil' herself *per se*, Salomé does not cross through any Netherworld gates, and it cannot even be definitively shown that Wilde intended Salomé to undress at all, how plausible is it that Ištar's journey through the seven gates of the Netherworld could have been the inspiration for Salomé's dance of the seven veils, really?

Given that Wilde so radically transformed his other primary source materials, the discrepancies between *Ištar's Descent* and *Salomé* need not necessarily be a hurdle to establishing a connection between these texts, but the textual comparison is not sufficient evidence alone. Curiously, and as has been pointed out by Jess Sully, Wilde was a family friend of Archibald Henry Sayce (1845-1933), who became the first chaired Professor of Assyriology at Oxford in 1891, the same year Wilde began writing *Salomé*.[28] Letters exchanged between Wilde and Sayce survive from as early as 1878, when Wilde was at Magdalen College, right up through the late 1880s.[29] Critically, Sayce was working on his English translation of the tablet of *Ištar's Descent*, found at Nineveh in 1850, concurrently. His translation was eventually included in his Hibbert Lectures, given on the subjects of Babylonian and Assyrian religion, which were also published in 1887.[30] Considering this connection, it is quite possible that Wilde could have been exposed to Sayce's translation of *Ištar's Descent*, either through attending Sayce's lectures, reading the publication, or being told about the text through either written or spoken correspondence. However, once more, and as Sully concludes herself, this possibility is confined to the realm of speculation as no concrete evidence that could prove that Wilde was aware of *Ištar's Descent*, let alone based his play on it, has yet been found.

5. *That invisible dance*

Wilde left his most revealing instruction about the meaning of the dance of the seven veils inscribed in a copy of *Salomé* dedicated to Beardsley, in which he wrote:

> March '93. For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the dance of the seven veils is and can see that invisible dance. Oscar.[31]

Seeing Beardsley's supposedly exceptional insight into the dance, his illustrations for the play could shed light on the possible connection between *Salomé* and *Ištar's Descent*. Curiously, one of Beardsley's illustrations is captioned 'The Stomach Dance' (see Figure 1. The Stomach Dance by Aubrey Beardsley for *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, print, 1907, first published 1894. Public domain, CC0 1.0). As this is his only illustration for the play that depicts a dance, it may well be the case that it was intended to signify Salomé's performance of the dance of the seven veils.

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27. See first the discussion in Cave 2011, 145, then Boyd 2008, 38; Garland 2011, 126; Marcsek-Fuchs 2015, 328.
28. Sully 2004, 24
29. Wilde, *The Complete Letters*, 68, 79, 365.
30. Sayce 1887, 221.
31. Wilde, *The Complete Letters*, 578 n. 3.

Figure 1. The Stomach Dance by Aubrey Beardsley for *Salomé* by Oscar Wilde, print, 1907, first published 1894. Public domain, CC0 1.0.

The illustration depicts a woman with an unflinching expression exposing her stomach and breasts, while a demonic figure plays a string instrument below her. The emphasis on her obtruding stomach, which the eye is further drawn to because of the cluster of rosettes that hover around it, has been thought to indicate that this image represents a form of belly dancing.[32] Belly dancing is not known to have been performed in ancient Mesopotamia, so the question of Ištar's influence on Salomé's dance is a moot point if one is to take Beardsley's illustration as gospel. However, there may be little to be gained by searching for Beardsley's specific referent. After all, one should not assume that either he or Wilde intended for the meaning of the "invisible dance" to be made visible through the illustrations. Rather, as Gerard Carter explains, the dedication to Beardsley "demonstrates Wilde's implied intention to cloak the dance in confidential mystery. Through his dedication, he therefore confirms a multitude of readings and artistic interpretations".[33]

An important context to bear in mind is that Wilde wrote *Salomé* in the French Symbolist tradition.[34] One of the primary aims of this late nineteenth century artistic and literary movement was to communicate eternal, albeit essentially Christocentric, truths through purposefully esoteric representations. As has been discussed by Frederick Bohrer, noted Symbolists, including Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), who began referring to himself as "Sâr Merodack" in reference to Persian, Assyrian and Babylonian traditions upon establishing the mystical Salon de la Rose+Croix in Paris in 1892, achieved this end through a variety of "Ancient Near Eastern emulations" – and, I would add, conflations.[35] Reconsidering the invention of the dance of the seven veils in the context of this and Wilde's own sustained Orientalism, one wonders whether he even had a specific referent for the dance in mind.[36] Indeed, while perhaps the only defining connection between the script of *Salomé* and *Ištar's Descent* that is not an anachronism would appear to be the significance that both texts assign to the number seven, even this is likely not that revealing. After all, "seven is a number with a particularly high number of mystic and sacred connotations, and is significant in the majority of esoteric religions".[37]

Thus, the mystery of the dance of the seven veils, at least in the sense that Wilde envisioned it, will likely remain unresolved. Plausibly, this was possibly even the intended outcome. Yet there is still much that can be learned about the reception of Ištar in the wake of *Salomé*. Firstly, however, if it cannot be definitively established that Wilde intended their pairing, it is useful to consider the stage at, or rather, on, which the goddess' journey and the princess' dance became enmeshed.

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32. Marcsek-Fuchs 2015, 242; Carter 2017, 114. It is not lost on me that rosettes are also a symbol of Ištar!
33. Carter 2017, 142.
34. Farrell 2011, 121; Marcsek-Fuchs 2015, 230. Even Russ (2011), who argues against the categorisation of *Salomé* as a Symbolist work, concedes that the play engages with the important themes and motifs that characterise the movement.
35. Bohrer 2003, 254. Salome was a particularly popular Symbolist subject. See Bahrani 2001, 146 and, for example, the paintings about Salome by Gustave Moreau (1826-1989).
36. See Im 2011, 361-380 for a comprehensive reading of *Salomé* as an Orientalist play. On Wilde's Orientalism more broadly, see, for e.g., Xiaoyi 1997, 50.
37. Sully 2004, 24.

5. *Staging* Salomé *or the 'Ancient Near Eastern goddess'*

The script of a play is but one of its components. Just as much, if not substantially more, dramatic meaning is generated on stage in the presence of an audience. As a result, one might look to aspects of performance, including set design, costuming, and props, as well as musical accompaniments and, of course, choreography, to glean insight into how the early productions of *Salomé* might have helped to shape the subsequent reception of the play. Due to the relevance of the evidence and the relatively limited scope of this enquiry, the following discussion will only consider the impact of the play's early stage settings on the reception of *Salomé*. However, it is my hope that further considerations of the reception of Ištar via the reception of *Salomé* may follow this discussion.

As William Tydeman and Steven Price observe in their innovative theatrical history of *Salomé*, the early productions of the play, in part due to the taboo biblical subject matter and Wilde's own notorious arrest for sodomy, are poorly documented.[38] In the wake of legal threats, preparations for the debut production of *Salomé* by the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre company in Paris in February 1896 were largely conducted in clandestine. As such, the original stage setting is particularly hard to reconstruct.

After the Paris production, *Salomé* was next staged under the direction of Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) at the Neues Theatre in Berlin, where performances opened in 1903 and closed in 1904. Intriguingly, a photograph of the production shows that a colossal Assyrian bull or *lamassu* guardian was incorporated into the stage setting, alongside other features including a cistern cover, a seated lion on a plinth, and a palace gateway (see Figure 2. Photograph of the stage setting for Max Reinhardt's production of Wilde's *Salomé*, Neues Theatre, Berlin, 1903. Reinhardt Archives – copy of original in the Salzburg Archive). There can be little doubt that the inclusion of the *lamassu* was directly influenced by the archaeological excavations that had begun in Iraq at the sites of Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh during the middle of the previous century. As part of the ongoing Western colonial project, the most prized findings were removed to museums in the United States and Europe, including Berlin after German excavations began at Babylon in 1899, where they were received as remnants of a pre-modern, and certainly pre-European, world.[39]

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38. Tydeman and Price 1996, 27.
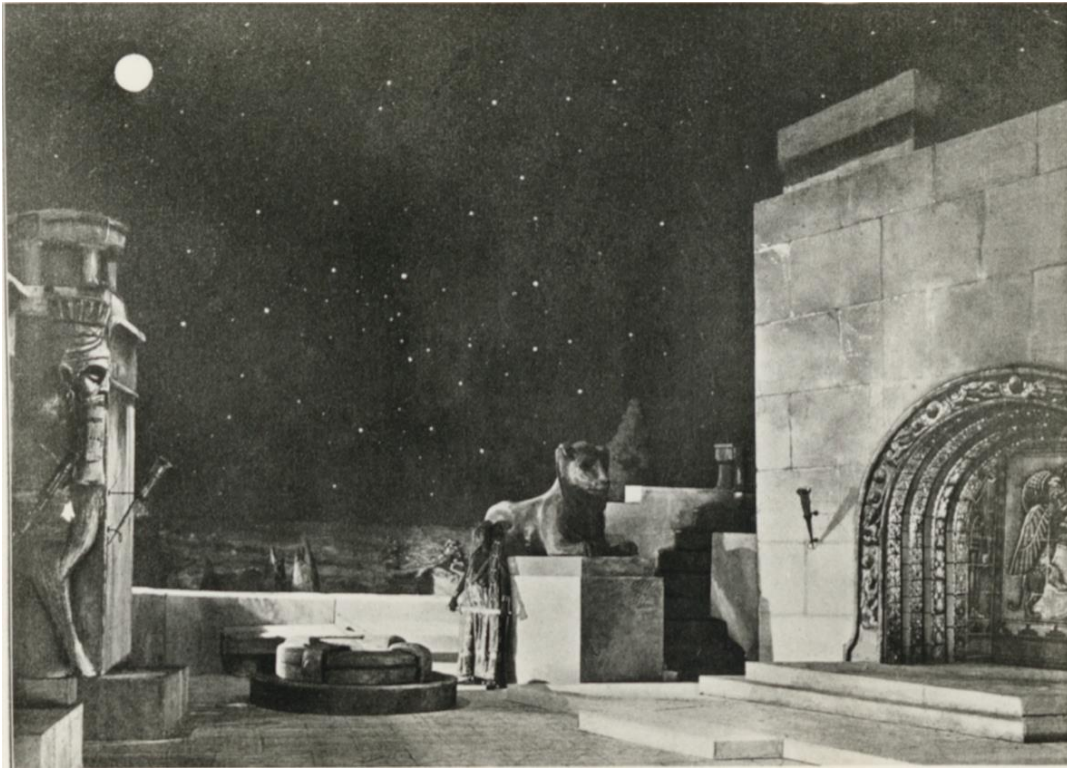39. Bahrani 1998, 166; Bohrer 2003, 275.

Figure 2. Photograph of the stage setting for Max Reinhardt's production of Wilde's *Salomé*, Neues Theatre, Berlin, 1903. Reinhardt Archives – copy of original in the Salzburg Archive

Of all the archaeological findings that were removed from ancient Iraq, the massive stature and otherworldly appearance of the Assyrian *lamassu* contributed to their becoming "the very image of the Ancient Near East" in Europe at this time.[40] From the many pertinent attestations to their cultural importance, one may recall a programme of the Théâtre de la Rose+Croix, associated with the above mentioned Péladan, dated to 1892 (Figure 3. Programme of the Théâtre de la Rose+Croix, 1892, in *Recueil de documents et photographies relatifs aux représentations des oeuvres dramatiques de Joséphin Péladan*. Bibliothèque nationale de France - Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal). The programme's design notably includes two *lamassu* flanking the central motif of a rose behind a Christian cross. Removed from their original context, the *lamassu* infuse the otherwise generic Christian symbolism with a sense of timeless, pagan antiquity. As Bohrer explains, the *lamassu* were essentially "appropriated and remade in Péladan's unique context", primarily to promote his strand of Rosicrucianism within the archaising and Orientalist aesthetics associated with French Symbolism.[41] Crucially, this instance of the appropriation of the *lamassu* can also be brought to bear on the impact of their inclusion in the stage setting for Reinhardt's

40. Bohrer 2003, 254.
41. Bohrer 2003, 254.

production of *Salomé*, which, I propose, provides one explanation as to why critics may have first identified a connection between Salomé and Ištar specifically.
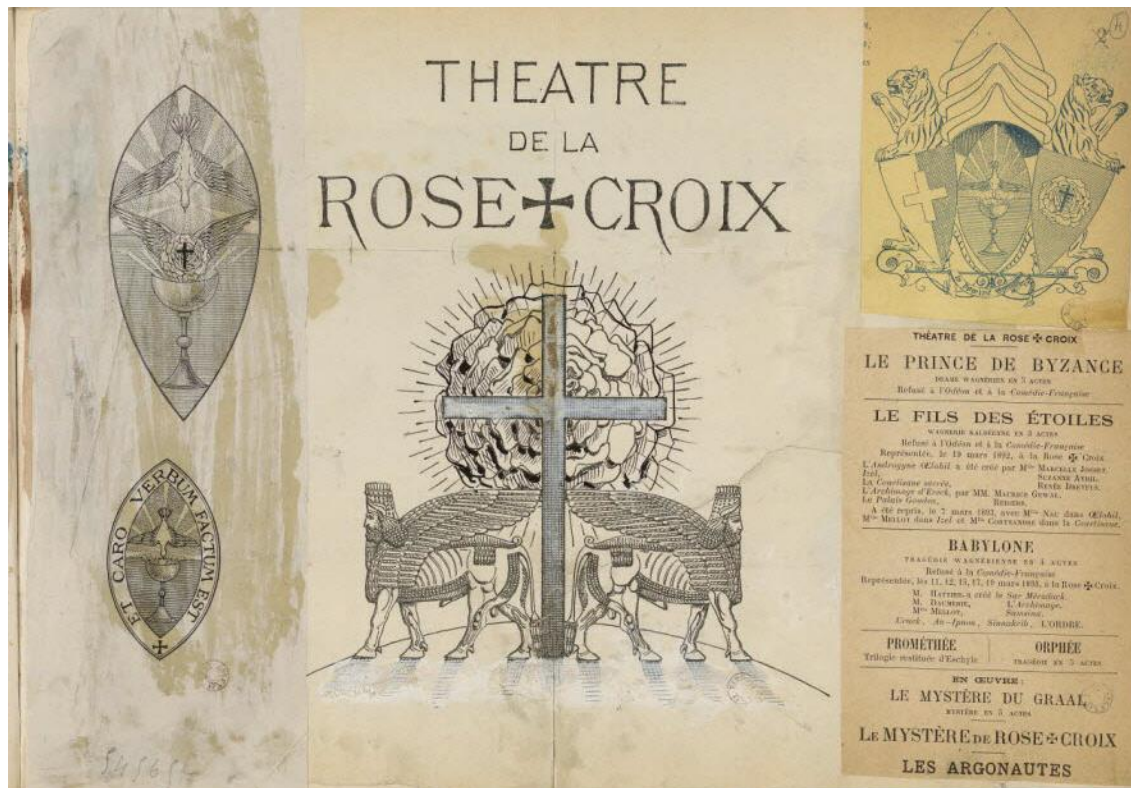

Figure 3. Programme of the Théâtre de la Rose+Croix, 1892, in *Recueil de documents et photographies relatifs aux représentations des oeuvres dramatiques de Joséphin Péladan*.
Bibliothèque nationale de France - Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal

To repurpose a concept notably discussed by Marian Feldman, the setting for the Reinhardt production would have essentially had an 'Assyrianising' effect on the reception of the play.[42] By this, I mean to suggest that, regardless of Reinhardt's intentions, the presence of the Assyrian *lamassu* in the stage setting would have recontextualised Wilde's reinterpreted subject matter, to the effect of transporting *Salomé* from first century AD Judæa to more ancient Assyria. It must be remembered, after all, that the archaeological findings from ancient Iraq were typically viewed as extra-biblical material by Europeans in this period.[43] The arrival of the translation of the eleventh or 'flood' tablet of the *Epic of Gilgameš* by George Smith (1840-1876) in 1872, which was received as a proto-biblical narrative, generated shockwaves internationally, as well as substantial revenue for further excavations in Iraq in the hope that similar material may be found.[44] Essentially acting as the *raison d'être* of the subsequent excavations, the quest for biblically relevant material in Iraq, and the associated mode of seeing the archaeological findings that would be extracted, would thus have been the primary lens through which the *lamassu* in the Reinhardt stage setting would likely have been viewed by theatregoers, and even subsequent scholars hoping to elucidate the many mysteries of Wilde's play by returning to photographs of this early production.

In the same way that the *Gilgameš* flood hero Utnapišti came to be received as a sort of proto-Noah therefore, I suggest that the presence of the Assyrian *lamassu* in the stage setting for the Reinhardt production would have led viewers, whether they encountered the production at the turn of the twentieth century or later through photographs, to conclude that there could also have been a more archaic, Mesopotamian version of Salomé, or at least that Reinhardt or even Wilde were implying that there was one. To further account for the leap that this would then suggest must have been made in the eye of the viewer between the person of Salomé, who is a human princess, and Ištar, who is, on the other hand, a goddess, one may recall how Salomé is continually mythologised by the other characters of the play.[45]

Significantly, Salomé is regularly addressed as if she were either interchangeable with the moon or, in the rebuttals of the prophet Iokanaan, the "Daughter of Babylon", which conveys the notion that she is to be understood as a quasi-divine, and certainly anti-biblical figure.[46]

Taking all this into account, it seems to me quite plausible that any viewer who was even remotely aware of any of the ancient Assyrian or, more broadly, 'Near Eastern' religious traditions, even as they are refracted through the hostile lens of the Bible, would have plausibly intuited a connection between Salomé and Ištar as the archetypal Assyrian goddess, or, at the least, the vague idea that behind Salomé stood an 'Ancient Near Eastern goddess'. In the words of the communication theorist James Carey, "reality is brought into existence, is produced, by communication—by, in short, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms".[47]

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42. Feldman 2014, 96-97. See also the more recent discussion in DeGrado 2019, 107.
43. Holloway 2006, 14.
44. George 2003, 24; Frahm 2006, 82; Finkel 2014, 4.
45. Although, in various ancient Mesopotamian contexts, there was a degree of slippage between these categories. See, for e.g., Asher-Greve and Westenholz 2013, 72, 80 on the conceptualisation of goddesses as queens and princesses. See also Miller 2013, 127-133 and Gansell 2018, 159-165 on the interrelated iconographies of goddesses and royal women.
46. Wilde, *Salome*, 3-7, 215-220, 294, 331.
47. Carey 2009, 20.

Figure 4. Photograph of the world premiere of the Richard Strauss opera, Hoftheater, Dresden, 1905, originally published in *Bühne und Welt VIII*, 7, 1905/06. Strauss Institut

It is likely that the transformation of the play into an opera by Richard Strauss (1864-1949), which is arguably the most recognisable stage adaptation of Wilde's *Salomé*, also had some role to play in the crystallisation of the Salomé-Ištar connection. A photograph from the world premiere of the Strauss opera at the Hoftheater in Dresden in 1905 reveals that the setting included two prominent *lamassu* as well as two additional Assyrian gate guardians arranged around a doorway decorated with rosettes (see Figure 4. Photograph of the world premiere of the Richard Strauss opera, Hoftheater, Dresden, 1905, originally published in *Bühne und Welt VIII*, 7, 1905/06. Strauss Institut). These Assyrian elements, and the pre-biblical world that they had come to symbolise in Europe, were thus arguably even more central to the setting of the opera than they were to Reinhardt's production of the play, further setting the stage for the performance of the 'Ancient Near Eastern goddess' archetype through the role of Salomé.

Off stage, and ultimately in front of a broader audience, the *lamassu* appears again in an advert for the hit 1918 silent film *Salomé* by William Fox (1879-1952) starring Theda Bara (1885-1955), which depicts Salomé performing the dance of the seven veils before Herod's court (see Figure 5. Ad for *Salomé*, 1918, with Theda Bara, originally published in *Moving Picture World* on January 25, 1919. Public domain).[48] Though the film is now all but entirely lost, its original release contributed to what has been described as a "Salomania craze" in North America.[49] Finally then, the Salomé-Ištar connection presumably entered popular consciousness through the world of film. But why has this connection been maintained in even more recent productions of Wilde's play?

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48. Many thanks to Paul Collins, who alerted me to this film poster.
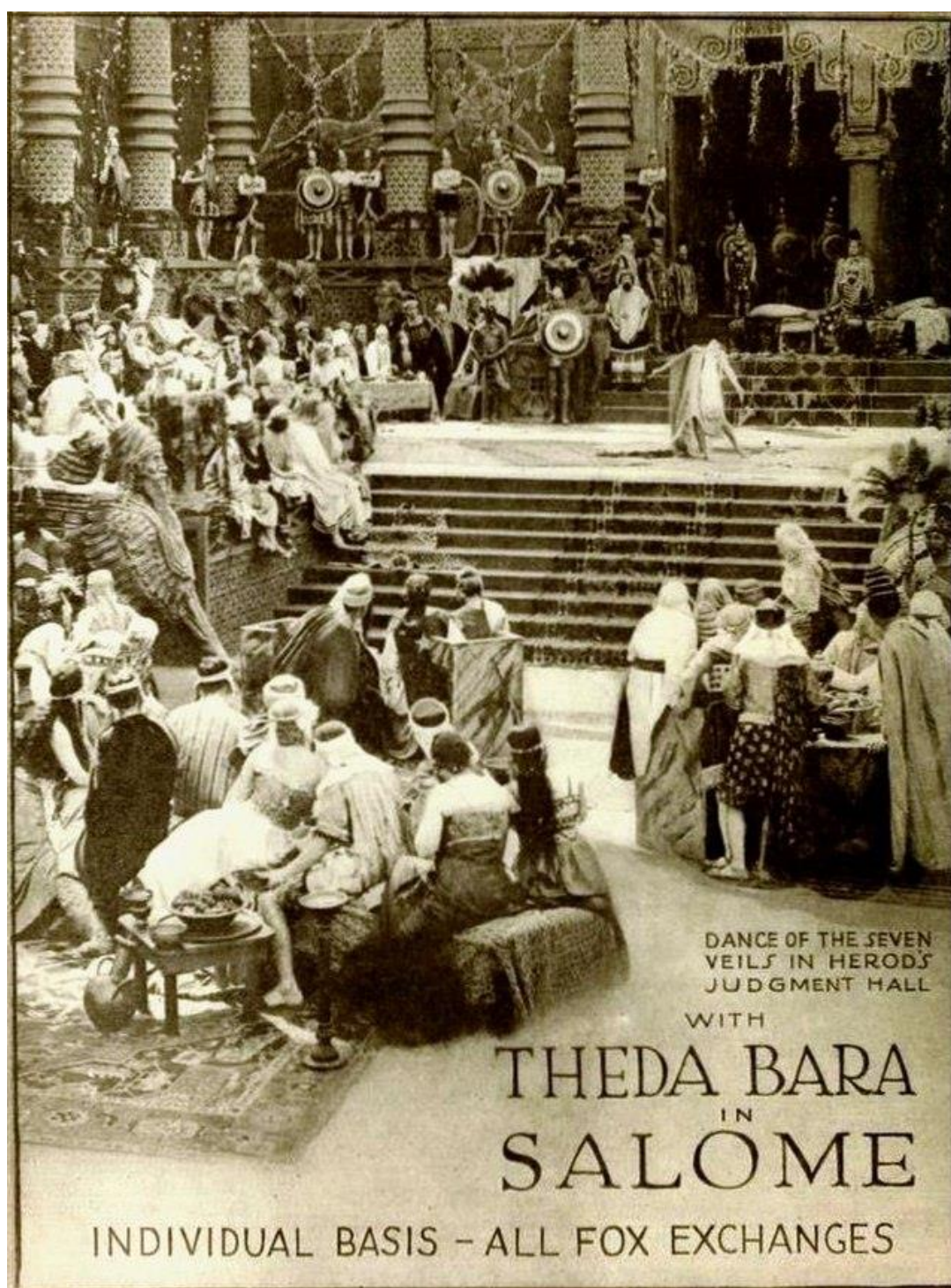49. Sellers Young 2016, 139.

Figure 5. Ad for *Salomé*, 1918, with Theda Bara, originally published in *Moving Picture World* on January 25, 1919. Public domain

6. *Salomé's descent*

More recently, direct quotations from the English translation of *Ištar's Descent* were incorporated into the dialogue of the Yaël Farber (1971-) production of Wilde's *Salomé*, which was staged by the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington D.C. in 2015 and at the National Theatre in London in 2017.[50] Compellingly, Farber's Salomé repeats Ištar's threat to "raise up the dead" so that they may "devour" and "outnumber the living", initially spoken by Ištar to the gatekeeper of the Netherworld, when Herod's guards refuse to fetch Iokanaan out of his cistern.[51] Further echoing *Ištar's Descent* and departing from Wilde's script, Farber's Salomé then precedes to climb down a giant ladder in order to enter Iokanaan's crypt.[52] This dramatic sequence from the Farber production certainly escalates what I have described with respect to the Reinhardt production and Strauss adaptation as the 'Assyrianisation' of *Salomé* to new heights for the 21st century. Likewise, it reveals another motive for the blurring of Salomé with Ištar in the reception of Wilde's play up through now.

In her textual and iconographic study of the roles and personas of Ištar published in her landmark work on gender and representation in ancient Mesopotamia, Zainab Bahrani puts forward the notion that a "semiotic reading of the visual images and literature in which Ishtar is represented reveals that she could function as Mesopotamian culture's embodiment of tropes of alterity".[53] In other words, Bahrani's reading of Ištar essentially contends that, in the available textual and pictorial evidence, the goddess could perform the role of the boundary-crossing 'other' in ancient Mesopotamia.[54] Therefore, in making the guiding ancient Mesopotamian ideals and social structures visible to even the modern reader through embodying their transgression – as Ištar does, for instance, when she threatens to unleash the dead upon the living at the entrance to the Netherworld – Bahrani continues that: "As a signifier Ishtar can effectively stand in for sexual otherness, excess, chaos, and even death".[55]

Irrespective of the extent to which Bahrani's reading may be wholly applied to the many varied Mesopotamian contexts in which the goddess is represented, her categorisation of Ištar according to these concepts, taken as a reception, provides a useful lens through which to probe the sustained connection between Ištar and Salomé, who has, after all, been received as a sign for the goddess. Critically, considering the concepts of sexual otherness, excess, chaos, and death in opposition to their binarized principles of sexual conformity, restraint, order, and an orientation towards life, it becomes clear that, notwithstanding the significant differences between *Ištar's Descent* and *Salomé* that have otherwise been pointed out in the course of the present discussion,

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50. I witnessed this when I attended the 2017 London production. According to the review by David Siegel (2015), the programme for the 2015 D.C. production attests that Farber drew on numerous sources, including *Ištar's Descent*, for her reinterpretation of *Salomé*.

51. *ušellâ mītūti ikkalū balṭūti eli balṭūti ima''idū mītūti* (*Ištar's Descent*, 19-20). For the original scene in Wilde's script, see Wilde, *Salome*, 166-220.

52. This stage action appears to be referenced in the review by Simon Jenner (2017), who remarks that "Her [Salomé's] descent recalls Babylonian Ishtar's removal of veils".

53. Bahrani 2001, 150-151. See also the relevant discussion in Fernández 2018, 200-201.

54. Hence the traditional explanation for her association with supposedly othered sexual and gender categories. See, for e.g., Leick 1994, 157; Zsolnay 2013, 83-84; Helle 2018, 41.

55. Bahrani 2001, 150-151.

Bahrani's reading of Ištar may be productively applied to Salomé's reception in Wilde's play, and, on the textual level, to the reception of the play itself.

Indeed, within the world of the text, it is, in Iokanaan's view at least, implicitly the sexual otherness and excess of Salomé that leads her to desire him in the first place, while the chaos that this brings to Judæa, and the way in which she is seen by Herod to pervert the status quo, is the ultimate cause of her own climactic death. Moreover, what is true of the reception of Salomé in the play is also true of *Salomé*: a play that was initially banned in London because of its taboo biblical subject matter and otherwise avoided in Europe on account of its notorious author; a play that is defined by its titular protagonist's performance of the enigmatic, seductive, and death-bringing dance of the seven veils.

More simply put, the reception of Salomé, like the reception of *Salomé* in the sense that the play may be considered to be an extension of Wilde's reputation, can, like Ištar, at least in the sense that Bahrani's reading allows one to speak of the goddess' reception in scholarship, also "effectively stand in" for "alterity".[56] If it was the presence of the Assyrian *lamassu* in the early stage settings for *Salomé* that may be pinpointed as the reason for the initial spurring of the Salomé-Ištar connection, it may be concluded that it was perhaps Wilde's characterisation of Salomé as a woman at odds with her society, and the reception of *Salomé* as deviant in nineteenth century Europe and subsequently, that ensured that this connection would ultimately endure.

Receiving the role of Wilde's Salomé and *Salomé* in this light, one can certainly begin to see why Salomé's status as a hypostasis or syncretism of the radical figure of Ištar, despite their differences, has been maintained given how Ištar has primarily been characterised as a *femme fatale* in cultural memory.[57] However, as Bahrani's reading of the goddess as the "embodiment of tropes of alterity" also resonates with the way in which the 'Ancient Near East' was constructed in late nineteenth century Europe and subsequently, what relevant insights about the afterlife of Ištar in this period and since can be gained from this case study for Assyriology, an academic discipline that was born synchronously?

7. *Receiving Ištar through the veil*

While it is true that Ištar could perform the function of the deviant other in ancient Mesopotamia, she also performed diverse other roles. To name but a few of her additional arenas, in first millennium Assyria at least, Ištar came to be the oracular goddess *par excellence*, the protector of kings, the model for queens, and the divine mother and wetnurse of crown princes. Today, Ištar continues to be typically personified as a goddess of love, sex, and war, and further associated with paradoxes, contradictions, and the very idea of difference.[58] The other elements of her persona, which might be more typically associated with what is considered sacred in post-biblical religions, have been comparatively de-emphasised in cultural memory. This, of course, neatly fits with the agenda of the Bible and nineteenth century European discourse about the

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56. See Boyd 2008 for a fuller consideration of *Salomé* as an extension of Wilde's persona.
57. See, for e.g., the characterisation in Brown 2001, 52. See also Blackmer 2016, 6.
58. E.g., Harris 1991, 261; Bottéro 2001, 94-95; Barrett 2007, 7; Assante 2009, 23-24; Zsolnay 2010, 389; Matsushima 2014, 3; Hrůša 2015, 51; Tzvi Abusch 2020, 93; van Dijk-Coombes 2020, 146.

'Ancient Near East', which sought to differentiate ancient Mesopotamian religions from the 'civilised Christian West'. But what of the rest of Ištar's identity: her sanctified status and heavenly queenship?

If Wilde's Salomé has been continually received as being like Ištar, this study has suggested that this comparison has been maintained, despite the significant differences between the play and *Ištar's Descent*, because both figures have primarily been characterised by their role as cultural transgressors. But the comparatively forgotten parts of Ištar's persona did co-exist with her association with alterity in ancient Mesopotamia, though this is difficult to appreciate because of the impact of nineteenth-century European perspectives on knowledge production today. Thus, while the present discussion has primarily been focused on the question of how much Wilde's Salomé resembles Ištar, a more pertinent question in the light of this exploration may well be to what extent has the modern Western image of Ištar been created in the image of (Wilde's) Salomé? Unveiling the answer to this question may be a prime place to start for reappraising the powers and persona of the goddess for future studies, which, given her centrality to much of the textual and visual record, will implicate numerous aspects of Assyriology.

8. *Conclusion*

Connections have been repeatedly made between the figure of Wilde's Salomé and the goddess Ištar in scholarly and popular literature, based on the similarities that have been perceived between the former's dance of the seven veils and the latter's progressive loss of attire at the seven gates of the Netherworld. While it may have been the case that Wilde was aware of *Ištar's Descent*, especially given his personal connection to Sayce, the inspiration for the invention of the enigmatic dance of the seven veils in *Salomé*, which is after all a Symbolist and Orientalist play, may not necessarily have been derived from a unique referent. Rather, I have argued here that it was more likely that the 'Assyrianising' stage settings for the Reinhardt production and the Strauss opera adaptation would have initially provoked this connection to Ištar in the eyes of viewers, who would have otherwise encountered the cultural heritage of ancient Iraq in the context of the European quest to account for the Bible. Subsequently, this connection probably became embedded in popular consciousness through the hit silent film starring Bara and produced by Fox.

Over a century later, the Salomé-Ištar connection has been maintained in the recent Farber production. Generously, this may be because the princess and the goddess have been seen to occupy comparable positions at the margins of normativity in their textual worlds. But, considering that Assyriology arose out of the same context as *Salomé*, this is surely a prompt to further evaluate the extent to which the modern Western image of Ištar may have been influenced by the hostile biblical perspective on – and the subsequent representation and reception of – 'Salome'.

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