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Reconstructing Salome: Feminism and Biblical Reconstruction
in Tom Robbins' *Skinny Legs and All*

by
Shelly Carmen Colette

Thesis presented to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
of the University of Ottawa
as partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Tom Robbins' characterization of the New Testament figure of Salome in the novel *Skinny Legs and All* is a medley of historical and contemporary reconstructions. Drawn from biblical and early post-biblical discourses around the Salome narrative, and bearing a strong similarity to early Roman histories of the story of Lucius Flamininus, Robbins' Salome is implicitly constructed as a romantic feminist alternative to oppressive sexual norms in Western Christian culture. Robbins' implicit intention is to provide his readers with an alternative and liberatory interpretation of Salome and the Salome narrative. Examining Robbins' reconstruction from radical feminist perspective, however, I contend that his reconstruction reinforces the same oppressive sexual norms and values he is attempting to subdue. Using the theoretical and methodological models of feminist biblical scholars Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Alice Bach, I employ a critical feminist literary-biblical analysis to evaluate Robbins' characterization Salome, with an emphasis on the models of divine female sexuality he advocates through his reconstruction of her character.

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Private email correspondence between the author and Jacqueline Salkield reprinted with special permission of Jacqueline Salkield.

INTRODUCTION

I first read Tom Robbins' *Skinny Legs and All*¹ in the summer of 1996, and was taken with the imaginative ways in which he reinvents the biblical figures of Salome and Jezebel. It was to better understand the process of biblical reinterpretation that I registered for my first religious studies course. Initially, I was enthralled, inspired to model my self and my behaviour after Robbins' portrait of Salome. He presents his reconstructed Salome both as liberated from patriarchal oppressions in Judeo-Christian western culture, and as a model of feminist liberation to women. As I learned more of feminist theory and feminist biblical hermeneutics, however, my perspective on Robbins' Salome began to change. I have since learned to assess feminist liberation in more critical terms, and now find that Robbins' reconstruction of Salome is in fact *not* liberating to women; that through his reconstruction, Robbins reifies existent patriarchal oppressions for women in western society.

1. The Problem

Robbins' Salome is reconstructed from a multitude of sources. In a private email to Jacqueline Salkield, Robbins responds to a request for information on the sources he used in reconstructing Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils:

I researched the Dance of the Seven Veils rather thoroughly while writing *Skinny Legs and All*, but with the passing of time and the writing of three additional novels, I don't remember very much about my sources. There is Josephus, himself, of course, and there's an interesting take on Salome in Barbara Walker's *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. Also, I remember consulting Graves, Campbell and Neumann. As you've probably discovered,

¹ Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

some of the accounts are conflicting. I seem to recall piecing together the version that made the most sense to me from what I know of Levantine history and mythology.....²

Based on Robbins' own limited memory of his historical research, inconsistencies abound in his portrayals of Salome and of the Dance of the Seven Veils. For instance, Robbins explicitly states in *Skinny Legs and All* that "Josephus the historian records that [the Dance of the Seven Veils] is the dance performed by the biblical Salome at the birthday party of her stepfather, Herod."³ However, Josephus mentions neither dance nor birthday party; much less does he explicitly name the Dance of the Seven Veils.⁴ The Dance of the Seven Veils is, in fact, a twentieth century construction, invented by Oscar Wilde for his play, *Salome*, where he "named it (uncapitalized) in a simple stage direction.... It wasn't put into the script until it was published – months after the original manuscript that did *not contain that stage direction*."⁵ Salkield, in an as yet unpublished thesis researching stagings of Wilde's play, has found that,

The stage direction was one of the selected bits Richard Strauss selected from the original Wilde script when he prepared the music/libretto for his opera, *Salome*. Lots of evidence, including photographic, proves it was *his* version of the story, using *Wilde's* dialogue and scenario, that cemented the idea that the original Salome danced like that for Herod. Even though most of the Salome's [sic] didn't actually end up bare-ass naked like they do today!⁶

² Tom Robbins, email to Jacqueline Salkield, 19 Sept. 2003 (forwarded in private email from Jacqueline Salkield, 20 March 2004).

³ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 401.

⁴ Josephus' narration of the death of John the Baptist is relatively short, and claims that John's execution was entirely politically motivated. For further information see, Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities, Books XVIII-XX*, vol. 9, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 135-137, lines 116-119.

⁵ Jacqueline Salkield, private email, (20 March 2004).

⁶ *Ibid.*

Robbins, then, takes a twentieth century construction of dubious genesis, and falsely attributes it, with blatant historical factuality, to a legitimate historical source. But historical accuracy is not Robbins' intent, and my interest in his reconstruction of Salome does not lie in assessing his ability to do quality historical research. Rather, I am fascinated by the ways in which Robbins engages feminist theory in his reconstructed Salome.

In his email, Robbins mentions that he consulted the works of [Joseph] Campbell. Robbins also did fieldwork with Joseph Campbell, after having taken graduate courses in Far Eastern Studies and Comparative Religion at the University of Washington.⁷ He has also been involved in a lecture series on occult religious traditions and personal spirituality, and has developed friendships with such notable figures as Timothy Leary and Robert Anton Wilson.⁸ Robbins' interest in myth, comparative religion, and personal spirituality is evident in his deconstructions and reconstructions of religious history and biblical figures. Historical accuracy is not foundational to the larger intent of his work. Robbins intent is to make these figures pertinent to the religious, spiritual, and social concerns of his contemporary audience.

Robbins' primary sources are the two biblical passages recounting the story of how Salome danced before Herod, requesting the execution of John the Baptist as payment for her performance. Found in Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12,⁹ the

⁷ Dale Kirby, "Tom Robbins: From Blowing Rock to Windy Cliff," <http://www.rain.org/~da5e/trbio.html> (June 24, 2004). See also Mark Seigel, *Tom Robbins*, Boise State University Western Writers Series: 42 (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1980).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The Gospel of Luke also makes reference to the arrest and execution of John the Baptist (Luke 3:19-20, 9:7-9), but omits any mention of the circumstances surrounding this execution that may have involved Salome and her mother Herodias. As the topic of my study is Robbins' popular reconstruction of Salome, I have not included the Gospel of Luke in this analysis of the Salome narrative.

plotlines of each passage are remarkably similar. In both accounts, the Salome story is presented as a flashback: the tetrarch Herod hears rumours of the wondrous workings of Jesus, and concludes that Jesus is John the Baptist reincarnated. The story then goes back in time, as the narrator relates how Herod had had John the Baptist executed. Salome had danced for Herod and his guests at a banquet celebration, and Herod, besotted with her performance, offered her whatever she might desire. On the advice of her mother, Salome demanded the head of John the Baptist on a platter. John was summarily beheaded in prison, and his head brought to the banquet hall on a silver platter. The gruesome dish was presented to Salome, who in turn presented it to her mother. Upon hearing of John's execution, his disciples took away his body, and reported his death to Jesus. Both biblical passages then return to the present tense of the narrative, and continue recounting the deeds of Jesus.¹⁰

While each of these biblical narratives recount the same basic plot, they portray two very different Salomes. In Mark's account, Salome is characterized as a vindictive, manipulative young woman. She is in league with her mother, Herodias, both of them wanting John the Baptist dead, and neither above using Salome's young and attractive sexuality to achieve this end.

Matthew's account of the Salome story, by contrast, is an abbreviated version of Mark's. In the Gospel of Matthew, Salome's character is less fully formed. Matthew presents Salome as naïve, and much more innocent than in her Markan characterization. In Matthew's rendition of the story, Herodias is the mastermind behind the death of John the Baptist; Salome is merely the device by which Herodias manipulates his execution.

¹⁰ Terence L. Donaldson has noted that the flashback narrative in the Gospel of Matthew does not, in fact, return to the narrative present. See Terence L. Donaldson, "'For Herod had arrested John' (Matt. 14:3): Making sense of an unresolved flashback," *Studies in Religion* 28:1 (1999), 35-48.

In only one way do both gospel accounts of Salome's character agree. Both Matthew and Mark construct a sexually seductive Salome, whose sexuality is the impetus behind Herod's promise to have John the Baptist beheaded. It is commonly understood amongst biblical scholars that the portrayal of Salome as a highly sexual young woman was a device used to underscore the licentiousness of Herod's court, to cast Herod as a villain.¹¹ Disparaging the female members of Herod's family was a means by which the biblical authors were able to disparage Herod himself, and demonstrate that their sympathies lay with the disciples of John the Baptist, and of Jesus. But whatever the reason for the biblical authors' construction of Salome as a highly sexual woman, it is not an attribute strongly highlighted in the biblical texts proper. It is, in fact, little more than a plot-prop.

In Robbins' reconstruction, however, Salome's strong sexuality is her primary characteristic. Robbins takes a secondary characteristic of a secondary character, and places both on center stage. In this, Robbins is doing quite the same thing as many biblical commentators in the early Christian church. In a common tactic exemplified by the homilies and commentaries of St. John Chrysostom (c. 354-407 CE), Salome was often demonized as the harlot to whom Christians owed the death of John the Baptist. Chrysostom pointedly highlighted her sexuality as lascivious, manipulative, and vulgar. Often conflating Salome with her mother, Chrysostom characterized Salome's sexuality

¹¹ This is commonly found in most biblical commentaries. See Ben Witherington III, "Salome," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. in chief David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 906-907; L. Fillion, "Salome," *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, vol. 5, ed. F. Vigoureux (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1912), 1380-1382; J.P.M. Walsh, "Herod Antipas," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, eds. Catholic University of America (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 1079-1080.

as synonymous with female manipulation and satanic influence, and a primary contributor to the decadent depravity of humanity.¹²

This early Christian interpretation of Salome's character bears a striking resemblance to earlier Roman legends that mirror the Salome story. Three accounts exist of the story of how Lucius Flamininus, a Roman senator, beheaded a prisoner at a banquet at the behest of either his paramour or a whore.¹³ In each of these narratives, the whore/paramour is a secondary character, used mainly as a plot prop. As in the biblical characterizations of Salome, her sexuality is a device by which the authors draw attention to the licentiousness and depravity of Lucius' court. As we see in the early Christian commentaries of the biblical Salome story, Roman commentaries on the Lucius narrative also draw attention to the whore/paramour's sexuality, highlighting it as a source of moral and social decay. Fully two thirds of the arguments against Lucius Flamininus presented in Seneca's *Controversiae*¹⁴ refer to the lasciviousness, decadence, depravity, and immorality of her sexuality.

Like the early commentators upon both the biblical Salome narrative and the parallel Roman legends, Robbins highlights Salome's sexuality, emphasizing the ways in which her expressions of sexuality influence the moral and religious lives of those around her. Unlike these commentators, however, Robbins does not vilify her sexuality. Rather, he perceives Salome's passionate sexuality as a positive characteristic, one that is

¹² These characterizations of Salome are found in four of Chrysostom's works: "The Gospel of St. Matthew [Homily XLVIII]," "Homilies," "Homilies on Second Corinthians [Homily XXVIII]," and "Treatise to Prove That No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself." Please refer to the bibliography at the end of this paper for publication information on these texts.

¹³ These accounts are Cicero's *De Senectute* (44 BCE), Seneca's *Controversiae* 9:2 (c. 35-39 CE), and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (100 CE).

¹⁴ Seneca, "How Flamininus Executed a Criminal at Dinner," *Controversiae* 9:2. (c. 35-39 CE), trans. M. Winterbottom, *The Elder Seneca: Declamations in Two Volumes*, vol. 2. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1924), 235-263.

liberatory for herself and for those with whom she is in contact. Robbins deifies her sexuality, constructing a Salome who is an embodiment of the divine feminine principle. Exhibited as she dances the Dance of the Seven Veils, Salome's sexuality is the way in which the people around her achieve enlightenment. The main character in the novel, Ellen Cherry, describes her revelations of enlightenment as she reflects on the experience of watching Salome dance:

She had to admit that the girl, despite her snotty disposition and skinny legs, was amazing, whirling like that for well over an hour, but Salome's impact was certainly not on the *mind*. In fact, the girl was making her rather horny, she who had never been tempted by other women before. And that made it all the more extraordinary that she was simultaneously entertaining big abstract thoughts. Only they weren't self-generating thoughts so much as they were— Well, it was as if a coating of something was being peeled off of her corneas and she was seeing things for which the eye game had barely prepared her.¹⁵

As Ellen Cherry has a sexual reaction to Salome's dance, she is revealed seven stages of enlightenment. It is Salome's own divine, and strongly sexual, feminine principle that is the vehicle for this enlightenment.

The feminine principle that Robbins embodies in Salome is a highly paradoxical assembly of traditional female characteristics: innocence, innate spiritual wisdom, maternal tenderness, and wholesome sexuality. For Robbins, all of these are considered quintessentially 'feminine.' Despite their paradoxes, the innate femininity of each allows them to coexist. The "feminine principle" is this innate femininity – the underlying thread that holds together the paradox of innocence contrasted with sexuality, maternity, and wisdom. In Robbins' reconstruction of Salome, the dominant characteristic is, of course,

¹⁵ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 461.

her sexuality. It is through her alluring sexuality, evident as she dances, that Salome reveals her innocence, wisdom, and maternal tenderness.

The feminine principle is not merely ultimate femininity, however. For Robbins, it is a *divine* ultimate femininity. In a 1978 newspaper column articulating his feminist views entitled “Is Feminismo Destroying Feminism?” Robbins says that, “at the purer levels sexuality and spirituality are virtually the same.”¹⁶ He describes true, sexually open femininity as divinely archetypal and claims that a deification of this feminine principle, this archetype, leads to human happiness:

The reemergence in the modern world of the feminine archetype – the recognition in our time of the Goddess, the Great Mother – was such a benevolent and auspicious moonrise that it illuminated in a special way the working philosophies of thousands of happy people.¹⁷

Robbins links the divine “Great Mother” archetype with female sexuality. She is earth-mother goddess, a deity that teaches humanity how to nurture and worship their sexuality. She promotes fulfilling and liberating eroticism. Speaking for “the Great Mother,” Robbins addresses those who would snub sexual expression: “Hey, androids!” he writes, “The Great Mother has asked me to warn you that if you don’t loosen up, in your heads and in your loins, she’s going to take your ten-speeds away.”¹⁸

As an embodiment of this divine femininity, Robbins’ Salome becomes an archetype; she is the human materialization of the earth-mother goddess. Through his reconstruction of Salome, Robbins seeks to advocate a return to a more matriarchal spirituality as a means of promoting social harmony. As she casts off each of seven veils

¹⁶ Tom Robbins, “Is Feminismo Destroying Feminism? Notes on Nukes, Nookie, and Neo-Romanticism,” *The Weekly: Seattle’s Newsmagazine*, 21 June 1978: 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

during her dance, Salome casts off seven veils of illusion that determine ways in which Judeo-Christian western culture is oppressed. These seven forms of illusion are sexual, spiritual, religious, political, economic, artistic, and temporal. Once humanity is aware of the seven veils of illusion, it is able to shake off the oppressions of these illusions, and exist in social harmony. Devotion to Salome's earth-mother goddess sexuality, to her embodiment of the feminine principle, is the vehicle by which enlightenment and social harmony will be achieved.

Robbins' feminine principle exists in contrast to the masculine principle, what is quintessentially masculine. The masculine principle is never fully defined by Robbins, although in *Skinny Legs and All*, he does situate the masculine principle in the figure of Ellen Cherry's husband, Boomer Petway III, as well as in two inanimate objects. Robbins focuses primarily on defining what is quintessentially feminine, not masculine. He does, however, emphatically state that the masculine needs its opposite, the feminine, in order to exist, and vice versa:

Between men and women there are important similarities. There are also important differences. Finally, the differences are more significant, for it is the balance of opposites, the *yin yang* polarity that holds the universe together. It is these differences, in tension, that make life possible.¹⁹

Robbins consistently maintains that these differences are primarily sexual. In both his overt expression of his feminist views, and in *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins focuses on the sexual distinctions between male and female. Further, he unswervingly refers to female sexuality as divine, over and above male sexuality. Unlike her male counterparts, Salome, as an embodiment of the divine feminine principle, radiates "an aura of

¹⁹ Ibid., 14

timelessness.”²⁰ Devotion to the feminine principle, writes Robbins, is “an instinctive human reflex.”²¹ According to Robbins, an erotic relationship with the divine sexual feminine principle is necessary for spiritual and social liberation. Referring to what he perceives as the primary goal of feminism, Robbins writes:

A basic tenet of feminism was that women must be free to express and enjoy their natural sexuality.... Indeed, if the human spirit triumphs over androidism [the inclination to subvert open sexuality], there may come a time when people again view life as a spiderweb of mysteries to be celebrated rather than as a rat nest of problems to be solved.²²

Robbins is linking spiritual freedom with social liberation, and identifying free sexual expression as the means by which such freedom and liberation are to be realized. Robbins reiterates this position repeatedly throughout *Skinny Legs and All*.

In venerating the archetypal feminine principle, Robbins is demonstrating his adherence to a romantic type of feminism. This feminism esteems traditionally “feminine” characteristics above and over traditional “masculine” characteristics. This is a perspective that draws from two other forms of feminism: complementarity feminism and gynecentric feminism. Complementarity feminists “[assume] that wo/men have essentially different natures”²³ from men, each complimenting the other. Gynecentric feminists “[believe] that there are essential feminine modes of perception that create a special female culture,”²⁴ a culture that is morally superior to the culture of men. A romantic feminist perspective combines these two, to form a type of feminism that

²⁰ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 342.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² Robbins, “Feminismo,” 13, 15.

²³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

recognizes women's culture as superior in its possession of traditionally feminine characteristics – nurturing, gentleness, spiritual and bodily wisdom, female sexuality, etc. From Robbins' *romantic* feminist perspective, his reconstruction of the figure of Salome could be considered liberatory for women. Within this feminist paradigm, women would be able to redistribute gender and sexual power dynamics, by adopting the highly sexual feminine identity and behaviours associated with the reconstructed Salome.

The question remains, however, whether or not Robbins' romantic feminist position adequately addresses feminist concerns about the structural oppressions, sexual and otherwise, of women. Feminist biblical scholar and theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza approaches issues of oppression from a position of radical egalitarian democratic feminism.²⁵ She defines a radical democracy as,

The envisioned social-political counter-system to kyriarchy²⁶... radical, that is grassroots, democracy means equal citizenship and decision making powers and radical, or total, economic, cultural, political, and religious equality, freedom, and well-being for all without exception. It envisions relations and institutions that are truly participatory and egalitarian.²⁷

As a feminist, Schüssler Fiorenza recognizes that women often do not have equal “decision making powers,”²⁸ and are habitually in positions wherein they are unable to

²⁵ Ibid., 105.

²⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza defines *kyriarchy* as “[a] neologism... derived from the Greek words for ‘lord’ or ‘master’... and ‘to rule or dominate’... which seeks to redefine the analytic category of patriarchy in terms of multiplicative intersecting structures of domination. Kyriarchy is a socio-political system of domination in which white elite educated propertied men hold power over wo/men and other men. Kyriarchy is best theorized as a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppressed.” Ibid., 211.

²⁷ Ibid., 213.

²⁸ Ibid.

voice their democratic consent on issues of “economic, cultural, political, and religious equality”²⁹ in their personal and social relationships.

From this feminist position, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that “‘what it means to be a man or wo/man’ is not a ‘naturally given’ or ‘divinely ordained’ fact,”³⁰ and that biblical reconstructions that focus primarily on ‘rescuing’ female biblical figures “[continue] the malestream discourses that have turned ‘woman’ or ‘women’ but not men into objects of study.”³¹ Robbins’ reconstruction of Salome engages in just such an act. He ‘studies’ Salome from a malestream perspective, substantiating the very discursive framework he attempts to dismantle. Further, by understanding her womanhood as sexual, divinely ordained, and quintessentially feminine, he continues the objectification of Salome.

2. The Method

I approach my analysis and critique of Robbins’ reconstruction of Salome from the radical feminist position articulated by Schüssler Fiorenza.³² From this feminist position I contend that, by focusing (and thus objectifying) Salome’s sexuality, Robbins’

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

³¹ Ibid., 107.

³² Schüssler Fiorenza’s position of radical feminism, and of feminist biblical interpretation, have grown as feminist theories have changed and evolved. Early in her career, for instance, Schüssler Fiorenza’s analytic methods were much less comprehensive than today – she initially focused primarily on gender issues, whereas her more recent work also addresses the roles of race, class, sexuality, and religion in systems of oppression. In this thesis, I have relied primarily on her more recent work. Her earlier work, however, has informed my understanding of her methods and theoretical bases. For further elaboration on the growth of methods of feminist biblical interpretation, see also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroads, 1993); *Sharing Her Word: Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Context* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); and “Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Women’s Bible*,” *Searching the Scriptures, volume one: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 1-24.

reconstruction does not address larger structures of patriarchal oppression. Moreover, his reconstruction in fact *reifies* aspects of structural patriarchy, in that it 1) perpetuates unattainable images of women; 2) solidifies women's role as Other; and 3) maintains constructions of a universal, monolithic, and abstract definition of 'woman' that does not correspond to the lived experiences of actual women. By substantiating these oppressive characteristics of a patriarchal culture, Robbins is effectively silencing Salome's democratic voice, and by presenting his reconstruction of Salome as a model of behaviour for women, it is likewise oppressive to women who take up this model of behaviour.

Using a post-structuralist literary method of narratological analysis, I examine the ways in which Robbins adopts both biblical narrative rhetorical techniques and highly sexual facets of biblical and early post-biblical characterizations of Salome, in order to argue his romantic feminist ideologies. Narratological analysis is habitually undertaken from within a structuralist paradigm, wherein the text and the intent of the author to construct meaning within that text are the focus of the analysis. Structuralism believes "that things cannot be understood in isolation – they have to be seen in the context of the larger structures they are part of (hence the term 'structuralism')." ³³ These "larger structures" are generally posited as the other literary/textual referents that are found

³³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 39. See also Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), trans. Stephen Heath, *Criticism: Major Statements*, eds. Charles Kaplan and William Anderson (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), 595-629; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (New York: Routledge, 1975); Robert Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974); Pamela J. Milne, "The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structuralist Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, 1 (Spring 1989): 17-34.

within the text being analyzed.³⁴ The text is centered within what could be imaged as concentric circles of contextual influence.

A *post-structuralist* narratological analysis, by contrast, understands that the centering of a given text in an analysis is an entirely arbitrary placement. Post-structuralism is a radical revisioning of the structuralist framework, and a rebellion against the short-sightedness of the structuralists. Post-structuralists argue that structuralism does not take its own theories to their fullest extremes:

one of structuralism's characteristic views is the notion that language doesn't just reflect or record the world: rather, it shapes it, so that *how* we see is *what* we see. The post-structuralist maintains that the consequences of this belief are that we enter a universe of radical uncertainty, since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing, and hence we have no certain standard by which to measure anything... Post-structuralism says in effect, that fixed intellectual reference points are permanently removed by properly taking on board what structuralists said about language.³⁵

Essentially, post-structuralists believe that there is no fixed intellectual reference point. No one truth that we can lean on, and base all our other ideas upon. They call this state of being 'a decentered universe'. There is no kernel of truth upon which the meanings of a text, as intended by the author, can be based. All meaning in a text is in a state of flux,

³⁴ Barry, 39-47.

³⁵ Ibid., 61. See also Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Critical Theory since 1965*, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), 83-93; "The exorbitant. question of method," *Of Grammatology*, ed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 157-164; Sara Mills, *Discourse: The New Cultural Idiom* (London: Routledge, 1997); Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism Versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, 3 (Spring 1988): 405-436; Sandra Lee Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 61-86; Joan Wallach Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Post-Structural Theory for Feminists," *Feminist Studies* 14,1 (Spring 1988): 33-50; Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford, England, New York, and Basil: Blackwell, 1987).

dynamically dependent upon all other statements within the discourse. Within a discourse of biblical interpretation and reconstruction, the post-structuralist paradigm allows a critical reader to approach the authority of the biblical authors with suspicion. Normally assumed to be the 'kernel of truth' upon which reconstructions are built, the meaning of the biblical text itself is seen as existing in dynamic relationship with all other statements in the discourse.

The discourse itself is also in a constant state of flux. Within a structuralist framework, the discourse within which a text exists is stable. A post-structuralist framework, however, posits that dynamic relationships of statements within a discourse continuously change the meaning of the larger discourse itself. Arguing that structuralist historical discourses are arbitrarily constructed as linear and unchanging, post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault says that,

the notion of tradition... is intended to give a special temporal status to a group of phenomena that are both successive and identical (or at least similar); it makes it possible to rethink the dispersion of history in the form of the same; it allows a reduction of the difference proper to ever beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin; tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence...³⁶

A fixed discourse, such as the one supposed by structuralism, implies that there exists a kernel of truth, a notion of tradition that constructs an unimpeachable origin upon which all meaning can be fixed. Post-structuralism destabilizes this fixed discourse, maintaining that as the meaning of each statement influences the meaning of every other statement in a given discourse, the meaning of the discourse itself becomes fluid.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 21.

Post-structuralism further adds another important component to an analysis of discourse that is overlooked within a structuralist framework: the reader. The social, cultural, religious, economic, racial, and within a feminist analysis, gender location of a reader informs the ways in which the reader will interpret the statements in a discourse. The reader is a voice, a statement in the discourse, and as a statement, she too is in a state of flux. Whereas a structuralist analysis emphasizes the intentions of the author in the construction of meaning, and explores the ways in which this meaning is constructed through the layering of voices within a discourse, a post-structuralist analysis asserts that the intent of the author is not accessible to the reader, and instead emphasizes the intentions of the reader in her construction of meaning.

A post-structuralist narratological analysis, therefore, explores the narrative structure of the text, but does not limit its analysis to the text itself. Rather, such an analysis examines the *dynamic* influence of other statements within the discourse. A post-structuralist narratological inquiry also incorporates the reader as a vital voice in the discourse into its analysis.

In *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins explicitly outlines his intended meaning for his reader. However, the ways in which the reader understands this intent is entirely dependent upon the reader's social, cultural, religious, economic, racial, and gender location. Therefore, in my post-structuralist analysis of Robbins' reconstruction of Salome, I consistently explore the ways in which "the reader" might interpret Robbins' intended meaning. As it is impossible to fully characterize "the reader," since all readers exist within different social locations, I have chosen to base my imaginary "reader" on

Robbins' internal intended reader – the reader his narrator is addressing, who would trust Robbins' articulation of meaning.³⁷

My analysis of Robbins' reconstruction is both post-structural and narratological. Post-structuralism posits that the meaning of a statement exists only in dynamic relationship to the fluid discourse in which that statement is situated. A narratological inquiry explores the narrative elements of the text in and of itself, as the center of a "communication event."³⁸ In order to bridge the gap between text as a self-contained entity and its dynamic relationship to its discourse, I have positioned Robbins' reconstruction of Salome in the center of my analysis, but not in the center of the larger Salome discourse. I use literary methods to explore the ways in which Robbins constructs the character of Salome within *Skinny Legs and All*. But I do so only in reference to other constructions of her character, highlighting the elements in Robbins' reconstruction that corroborate and maintain patriarchally oppressive statements within the larger Salome discourse and within western Christian culture. I employ a narratological analysis to examine the ways in which Robbins engages certain narrative and stylistic devices, but situate these devices within the larger discourses of literary and biblical rhetorical structures.

³⁷ See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, "Literary-Critical Methods," *Searching the Scriptures, Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 248-49. For a detailed example of the use of the author's intended reader as a tool in narratological analysis, refer to Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible & Literature* (1983), (Hammondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1990), where this technique is employed throughout.

³⁸ Malbon and Anderson, 245.

3. Previous Works in the Field

Very few critical literary analyses exist on Tom Robbins' work, much less on his reconstruction of Salome in *Skinny Legs and All*. Marc Siegel has written two books on Robbins: one on his use of 'American Wild West' symbolism and imagery,³⁹ another on the metaphysical elements Robbins' fiction.⁴⁰ Robert L. Nadeau has studied the same theme in Robbins, with a more scientific approach, in his 1978 article, "Physics and Cosmology in the Fiction of Tom Robbins,"⁴¹ and Laurence Ricou has taken up the subject of western imagery in a study of Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins.⁴² Daneet Rachel Steffens incorporated Robbins' fiction in a dissertation on "Magic Realism in English Language Literature."⁴³ Most importantly to this thesis, Catherine Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey have compiled a critical guide to many of Robbins' books.⁴⁴ Their chapter on *Skinny Legs and All* offers some critical insights into the text, although it does not address Robbins' reconstruction of Salome.

Most popular reviews of Robbins' fiction focus on his seductive style and imaginative ways of intertwining plotlines, ideologies, and images. They do not offer critical literary analyses. Some popular reviews, however, approach Robbins' work from

³⁹ Mark Siegel, *Tom Robbins*, Western Writers Series 42 (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1980).

⁴⁰ Marc Siegel, "The Meaning of Meaning in the Novels of Tom Robbins," *Mosaic* 14, 3 (Summer 1981): 119-131.

⁴¹ Robert L. Nadeau, "Physics and Cosmology in the Fiction of Tom Robbins," *Crit* 20, 1 (1978): 63-74.

⁴² Laurence Ricou, "Field Notes & Notes in a Field: Forms of the West in Robert Kroetsch and Tom Robbins," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 17, 3 (1982): 117-123.

⁴³ Daneet Rachel Steffens, "Virginia Woolf, Salman Rushdie, Tom Robbins: Magic Realism in English Language Literature," *Dissertation Abstracts International, Humanities and Social Sciences* 60.5 (November 1999): 1545.

⁴⁴ Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey, *Tom Robbins: A Critical Companion*, Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers, ed. Katherine Gregory Klein (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1997).

a cultural perspective, and these have helped me to contextualize Robbins' fiction within the larger discourse of Western culture in literature.⁴⁵

I critique Robbins' reconstruction of Salome with a feminist post-structuralist literary analysis. I have chosen to use as my methodological foundation the post-structuralist work of Michel Foucault,⁴⁶ whose work has influenced the practice of post-structuralist literary criticism, as well as post-structuralist feminist theories of discourse, power, sexuality, and deconstruction. Two feminist theorists in particular have informed my understanding of Foucault: Margaret A. McLaren's work on Foucauldian analyses of subjectivity, power, and conscientization;⁴⁷ and Sara Mills' study of Foucauldian discourse theory.⁴⁸ All feminist literary theory and feminist biblical interpretive methods used in this thesis project are understood from a post-structuralist Foucauldian perspective.

Many literary critics, of varying perspectives and methodological bases, have made significant contributions to the study of the Bible as literature, and of biblical themes in literature. Those whose works have proven invaluable to my study include Mieke Bal,⁴⁹ Alicia Suskin Ostriker,⁵⁰ and Northrop Frye.⁵¹

⁴⁵ See for example Sean T. Anderson, "Sex, Individuality, and Immortality in Tom Robbins' *Jitterbug Perfume*," <http://www.atpinternet.com/users/sta/501essay.asp> (March 15, 2004); Ben Colmery, "Hollow Dali," <http://www.a2zguide.com/tomrobbins.htm> (March 19, 2004); Nicholas O'Connell, *At The Field's End: Interviews with 22 Pacific Northwest Writers*, 2nd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998); Mitchell S. Ross, "Prince of the Paperback Literati," *NYTMS*, 12 Feb. 1978: 16-17, 66-69, 72, 74, 76-77.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

⁴⁷ Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002).

⁴⁸ Mills, *Discourse: The New Cultural Idiom*.

⁴⁹ Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death*, trans. Matthew Gumpert (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁵⁰ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1993); *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

In my research on feminist biblical interpretation, I have relied heavily on the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Alice Bach. Schüssler Fiorenza's extensive research on the methodologies of feminist biblical interpretation have set the standard in the field,⁵² while Alice Bach's studies of feminist critiques of popular biblical reconstructions are also foundational methodological guides.⁵³ In addition, Bach has written a number of articles on the subject of popular reconstructions of Salome. Her work marries historical research of the biblical narrative/theme/character with a feminist critique of its contemporary reconstruction.

There is a dearth, however, of feminist scholarship on the ways in which popular biblical reconstructions inform the larger discourse around biblical interpretation. Feminist biblical scholars can ill afford to ignore the myriad ways in which popular biblical reconstructions influence the meaning of the biblical text, both for individual readers, and on a larger cultural scale. The goal of feminist scholarship is to effect a change in oppressive structures, situations, and relationships. That popular biblical reconstructions have the power to change the meanings of a text that has such authority

⁵¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957); *The Great Code: The Bible & Literature*; *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of the Bible and Literature* (Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1990).

⁵² I have chosen to use the theories and methods of Schüssler Fiorenza in my analysis for two reasons: 1) when elaborating on her theoretical and methodological foundations, she addresses alternate methods of biblical interpretation in the field, demonstrating how these methods (ie. social scientific, positivist historical, etc.) fall short of a radical egalitarian feminist ethos; 2) her work has proven foundational to many other scholars engaged in feminist biblical interpretation. See, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (1984); *But She Said* (1992); *Searching the Scriptures*, 2 vols (1993); *Sharing Her Word* (1998); and *Wisdom Ways* (2001).

⁵³ Alice Bach, "Calling the Shots: Directing Salomé's Dance of Death," *Semeia 74: Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz*, ed. Alice Bach (1996): 103-126; "Introduction: Man's World, Women's Place: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), xiii-xxvi; "Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible," *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 351-365; "'Throw Them to the Lions, Sire': Transforming Biblical Narratives Into Hollywood Spectaculars," *Semeia 74: Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz*, ed. Alice Bach (1996): 1-13; Bach et al., *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in the Biblical World: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

within a largely Judeo-Christian culture, makes the analysis of such reconstructions vital to feminist biblical scholarship. While some feminist biblical scholars, including Bach and Schüssler Fiorenza, and to a larger extent, Mieke Bal, allude to the importance of popular biblical reconstructions to the practice of Christianity, I have not yet uncovered a work that engages in an extensive study of this discursive relationship, from a literary or biblical perspective. This study, then, is intended to be in part a first step towards such a comprehensive analysis.

4. Development

I begin my critique of Robbins' Salome with an analysis of the discourse that surrounds her character. In chapter one, drawing from biblical commentaries, I offer a literary interpretation of the biblical Salome. I examine three primary historical statements in the Salome discourse – biblical constructions of Salome, early Roman constructions of the Salome figure as it is found in parallel accounts of the story of Lucius Flamininus, and an early Church interpretation of her character – in order to provide a discursive context for Robbins' reconstruction. Subscribing to a post-structuralist narratological framework, I explore these statements as texts that contain images and stylistic devices in and of themselves, but also as texts that influence both one another and the larger Salome discourse.

In chapter two, I offer an interpretation of Robbins' intent to construct a Salome that supports his romantic feminist ideologies.⁵⁴ Based on my interpretation of the

⁵⁴ While other interpretations of Robbins' reconstructed Salome and of *Skinny Legs and All* (see Catherine E. Hoyser and Lorena Laura Stookey, "Skinny Legs and All," *Tom Robbins: A Critical Companion*) are possible, I find that the interpretation I offer in this chapter is well founded given Robbins' political and

romantic feminism inherent in *Skinny Legs and All*, I analyze Robbins' reconstructed Salome, and the relationships between his Salome and the other characters in the novel. I also examine the similarities between his characterization of Salome and the characterizations present in other statements within the larger Salome discourse. I demonstrate how Robbins uses four feminist hermeneutic techniques – a hermeneutics of suspicion, a hermeneutics of sensuality, a hermeneutics of desire, and a hermeneutics of laughter – to reconstruct a Salome that emphasizes her sexuality, and advances his romantic feminist ideals.

Chapter three critiques Robbins' romantic feminist ideologies, his use of biblical stylistic techniques, and his reconstruction of Salome as a liberatory figure. I put Robbins' romantic feminism in dialogue with Schüssler Fiorenza's radical feminism, demonstrating the ways in which Robbins reifies oppressive elements of patriarchy. I show how through his construction of Salome as an unattainable and deified model of 'liberated' female sexuality, Robbins is maintaining oppressive sexual norms and mores within Judeo-Christian western culture. Using the feminist literary-biblical methods of analysis advocated by Hebrew scriptural scholar Alice Bach,⁵⁵ I critique Robbins' adoption of biblical stylistic techniques, and illustrate the ways in which his use of these techniques not only substantiates patriarchal sexual norms, but also reifies his own ideologies in the same oppressive manner as traditional discourses.

This work concludes with an exploration of the importance of Robbins' reconstruction of Salome. From a radical feminist post-structuralist perspective, Robbins' reconstruction is a vital, and oppressive, voice within the discourses of both Salome and

spiritual perspectives as established in his 1978 "Feminismo," and as he illustrates these perspectives throughout the body of his fiction.

⁵⁵ Alice Bach, "Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible."

of biblical reconstruction. I illustrate the potential power of such a reconstruction, and the importance of critical analyses of popular biblical reconstructions.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL SALOMES

As a popular figure, Salome has been portrayed in art, literature, song, dance, theatre, film, and myth for thousands of years. Her image has taken its place within the imagination of countless western artists. Along with the image of John the Baptist's head on a platter, the dancing figure of this girl has become the central image of the Salome narrative. Present within various Western and Judaic cultures through several ages, images of Salome have evolved in both representation and in meaning.

In their redactions of the Salome narrative, the gospel writers draw parallels between their portrayals of Salome and the actions of Queen Esther, found in the Hebrew Book of Esther.¹ In this story, King Ahasuerus of Susa has disposed of his first queen, Vashti, for refusing to appear before him and his guests at a banquet. Esther wins what amounts to a beauty contest, and is crowned Queen. Not having previously told him that she was a Jew, Esther seduces a promise from the king to grant her whatever she desires, "even to the half of [his] kingdom."² Esther admits her Jewish heritage, and asks Ahasuerus to end the malicious persecution of the Jewish people.

Both the Book of Esther and the Salome narratives of the gospels contain similarities between the female characters. Like Salome, Esther relies on the advice and orders of others to determine her actions. Salome dances only at Herod's request; Esther never approaches the king unless he has given her permission. Salome requests the

¹ Daniel J. Harrington, "The Gospel According to Mark," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 610; Robert W. Funk, et al., eds., "Mark," *New Gospel Parallels*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia; Fortress Press, 1985), 204; Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 657.

² Esther 5:3.

execution of John the Baptist at the behest of her mother; Esther's requests of the king are advised either by the eunuch to whom she has been entrusted, or by her adopted father, Mordechai.

Each of the stories situates the action in a banquet setting, and both feature a thoughtless and licentious ruler. Both Herod and Ahasuerus are characterized as undignified, unaware, overly sensual, and inept.

The most striking resemblance between the Esther and Salome narratives is the stylistic adoption by Mark of the repeated line, "unto half my kingdom."³ Repeated three times in the Book of Esther, Mark's use of this line underscores for his audience the parallels between the drunken ineptitude and licentiousness of King Ahasuerus, and the drunken ineptitude and licentiousness of the tetrarch Herod's court.

An important distinction between the two stories, however, is that in the Book of Esther, Esther herself is the main character. By contrast, Salome is merely a secondary character, a foil for her stepfather Herod. Herod is the main character of the story in both gospel accounts. In this way, the gospel narratives seem to borrow other earlier sources: the many Roman legends of how the senator Cato expelled Lucius Flamininus from the Roman senate.

These legends, which I describe in more detail later in this chapter, were widely circulated from at least 184 BCE to 120 CE – a period of over three hundred years. They were popularly known throughout the Roman Empire during the period when the gospel accounts of the Salome narrative were being written. Each of the legends tells a version of how Lucius Flamininus had had a prisoner beheaded at a banquet table, in order to fulfill the request of his lover. With one exception, the 'lover' character in each of these

³ Esther 5:3,6; Esther 7:2; Mark 6:23. Note that Matthew does not include this line in his Salome narrative.

legends is incidental. The primary character is Lucius Flamininus, whose actions are mirrored by the gospel accounts of the tetrarch Herod.

Living under Roman rule, both early Jewish-Christian and early Roman-Christian audiences of the gospel narratives would have been familiar with the legends of Lucius Flamininus.⁴ This is not to say that the authors of the gospels and their audiences would

⁴ Recent biblical scholarship has cast doubt on whether or not Mark's gospel was written in Rome. This had been a common assumption amongst biblical scholars until fairly recently, based on two indications: in the 2nd century, Church historian Eusebius quoted Papias as saying that the author of Mark's gospel was a follower (interpreter) of Peter, who was himself based in Rome; and the author of Mark uses various "Latinisms," which scholars perhaps erroneously assumed indicated that the text originated in Rome. For instance, in the late 1960s, C.P. Ceroke wrote that Mark's gospel was most likely written in Rome, where these stories were in wide circulation, and that the colloquial style of Mark's gospel may mean that it was largely based on common oral traditions. See C.P. Ceroke, "Mark, Gospel According to St.," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, eds. Catholic University of America (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 238. Frederick C. Grant corroborated this in a 1951 biblical encyclopedia, writing that "[t]he probability is that Mark's Gospel is a compilation of the oral tradition current in the Christian community at Rome in the sixties." Frederick C. Grant, "Mark: Introduction," *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, eds. George Buttrick et al. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 630. More recently, however, biblical scholars have looked with skepticism at Papias reliability. In a 1992 encyclopedic article, Paul J. Achtemeier claimed that while the author of Mark's gospel demonstrates in a number of ways that he was likely not from Palestine (the author confuses Palestinian geography, explains in detail Jewish customs as though for a non-Jewish audience, and seems to have originally written the gospel in Greek), this does not necessarily indicate that the author of Mark was from Rome. Achtemeier also approaches with skepticism the link made between Mark's Latinisms and the gospel's Roman origins. He writes that the use of Latinisms "was once thought to provide evidence which indicated that the origin of the gospel, or at least its author, was to be located in a Latin-speaking area of the Roman Empire, perhaps even Rome itself, but we now know that such Latinisms occur even in the Hebrew Talmud, indicating the prevalence of such 'loan words' wherever Roman imperial power made itself felt." See Paul J. Achtemeier, "Mark, Gospel of," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, eds. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 541-557. Achtemeier places the origins of Mark's gospel somewhere outside Aramaic-speaking Palestine, possibly (but not definitively) in Rome, Alexandria, or Antioch. Joel Marcus substantiates Achtemeier's doubts on the definitive origin of Mark's gospel in Rome. He contends that Papias' tone belies an apologetic bias, and that it is possible that Papias was trying to instill apostolic authority on the Gospel of Mark by linking its author with Peter. Marcus claims that the content of the gospel "is addressed to a group that is predominantly non-Jewish..., going through intense suffering..., and needing to be strengthened in its faith." See Joel Marcus, "Mark, Gospel of," *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. David Noel Freedman et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 859-861. Marcus places the origins of Mark's gospel either in Rome, where Nero's persecution of Christians would have constructed a Markan audience which was both non-Jewish and undergoing intense suffering, or in Syrian Antioch, where Jews and Christians were facing persecution as a result of the First Jewish War against the Romans in 66-73 CE. In the end, although scholars are unable to definitively state the origins of Mark's gospel, the common consensus is that it was 1) based largely on an oral tradition, most likely Greek; 2) it was written for a non-Jewish audience; and 3) the author of Mark's gospel was probably not himself from Aramaic-speaking Palestine. Each of these three points indicate the strong possibility that the early Roman legends mirroring the Salome narrative would have been familiar to both Mark and Mark's audience.

The Gospel According to Matthew is much easier to place as probably intended for a Jewish-Christian audience. John P. Meier finds that "Matthew's gospel seems to reflect an organic development out of its

have been familiar with written Roman histories. In fact, it is highly unlikely that they would have ever read Livy, Cicero, Seneca, or Plutarch. However, given Seneca's description of the Lucius Flaminius story as having been popularly recounted in the Mediterranean world, as well as the striking similarities between the Roman Lucius Flaminius narratives and the gospel Salome narratives, it is likely that the gospel authors and their audiences would have heard the *legends* of Lucius Flaminius, even if they had not read the *histories*. Being familiar with these legends, the distinct correlations in plot between the biblical Salome narratives and the Roman legends of Lucius Flaminius would not have been lost on the gospel audiences, and they would likely have been able to fill in any nuances in plot, character, or theme missing from the gospel narratives.

In order to more fully understand how contemporary storytellers have reconstructed the gospel accounts of the Salome narrative, we must first carefully examine the origins of the gospel accounts themselves, as well as the ways in which these were understood by the early Christian church. The Salome narratives found in the gospels have a history of interpretation attached to them, a history popularly understood by their immediate audiences, and passed on to their interpreters in the early Christian church. Understanding the history of a reconstruction is essential to understanding the reconstruction itself.

Jewish matrix." See John P. Meier, "Matthew, Gospel of," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol 4, eds. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 622-641. While Matthew's audience was probably Jewish-Christian, however, Meier finds that they were probably very hellenized Christians, and that the author himself may very well have been Roman. Sherman E. Johnson contends that Matthew's audience would also likely have been familiar with the variations on the Salome narrative that "raced through the bazaars in Palestine." See Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, eds. George Buttrick et al. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 426.

To this end, I examine and compare two primary representations of Salome: the biblical images of Salome found in the Gospel of Matthew and in the Gospel of Mark.⁵ Each of these gospel writers have constructed vividly distinct portrayals of Salome, and the differences in characterization result in stories that are not equally adaptable to reconstruction. I will put the gospel accounts into dialogue with the earlier Roman legends mirroring the Salome narrative, and explore how all of these have influenced the interpretations of the story of Salome in the early Christian church.

PART ONE: The Biblical Salome

The Salome Narrative in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew

Within the gospel narratives of Salome's story,⁶ the gospels of both Matthew and Mark agree on several points. Each describes how the young Salome danced before her stepfather, the tetrarch Herod, and his guests at a birthday banquet. So pleased was he with her performance, that he offered her "whatever she might ask." At the prompting of her mother Herodias, Salome requested the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Although "grieved" at this request, yet "out of regard for his oaths and for the guests," Herod commanded that John be beheaded in prison, and that his head be presented to Salome, who in turn presents the gruesome gift to her mother.

In both cases, the Salome narrative is presented as a flashback. Both Matthew and Mark recount how Herod believed Jesus to be the reincarnation of John the Baptist. Here,

⁵ All biblical citations are from *The New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., eds. Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁶ All quotations from and references to the gospel accounts of the Salome narrative are taken from Mark 6:17-29 and Matthew 14:1-12.

the reader is transported back in time to the execution of John. Herod had had the Baptist arrested, bound, and put in prison for speaking against Herod's marriage to his sister-in-law, Herodias. Thus the stage is set for Salome's dance, and the subsequent beheading of John the Baptist.

Both gospel writers maintain the same narrative structural form. Although a third-person narration, both gospels present this flashback from Herod's point of view. The story is followed by a return to the narrative present⁷ and, reverting from Herod's point of view to that of the biblical narrator, continues to recount the words and deeds of Jesus.

Although both gospel accounts are consistent in narrative structure and basic plot, there are many distinguishing nuances present in each of the stories that change the way the story is read. The plot itself does not change dramatically, but the four characters in the story are radically different people from one gospel account to the other.

The portrayals of Herod in the two gospels are of particular importance. As in the Roman legends of Lucius Flamininus, the male figures in the gospel narrations dominate the scene, and determine the construction of the other characters surrounding them. As the flashback accounts of Salome's dance and John the Baptist's subsequent beheading are told from Herod's perspective, the differences in the gospel characterizations of Herod inform the ways in which the other characters are constructed. The construction of Salome in the gospel accounts is further determined by the construction of the other two characters – John the Baptist and Herodias, who themselves are informed by the gospel characterizations of Herod.

⁷ As I mentioned in the introduction, there are alternate perspectives on this point. Many scholars have noted that Matthew does *not* return to the narrative present, and a variety of interpretations of this narratological point have been elaborated. For further information see, Terence L. Donaldson, "For Herod had arrested John."

Biblical Characterizations of Herod, John the Baptist, and Herodias

In the gospel of Mark, Herod hears several conflicting reports concerning Jesus: rumours are rampant, and not confined to the rabble in the streets. These stories are now being told in the tetrarch's court. Herod himself believes Jesus to be John the Baptist resurrected. This device - the rumours and the confusion around Jesus, and Herod's belief that Jesus is the resurrection of John the Baptist - serve in part to underscore Herod's guilt, and in part his Jewish heritage and religiosity. A Jew of the Herodian dynasty, and closely aligned with Roman administration and culture,⁸ Herod would have nevertheless been familiar with the power of prophets for the Jewish people.

The narrator of Mark's gospel tells us that Herodias, Herod's wife, wanted the Baptist killed. Herod, however, knew "that [John] was a righteous and holy man." Herod "liked to listen to him," and protected him from Herodias' desire to have him killed. However, lest we be led to forget that Herod was part of the Roman rule, the narrator tells us that Herod's main reason for protecting John was that he feared him, presumably because of his role as a popular Jewish prophet.

Herod's association with Jewish culture is established in part by Mark through the way in which he promises a gift to Salome. Drawing allusions to the Hebrew Testament story of Queen Esther, Herod says, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." Putting this line in the mouth of Herod associates him with Jewish

⁸ J.P.M. Walsh, "Herod Antipas," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, eds. The Catholic University of America (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 1079. For elaboration on the various sects and dynasties in Jewish culture from c. 167 B.C.E. to the time of Jesus, refer to Marianne Sawicki, "City Women in the Entourage of Jesus," *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 182-191.

tradition. Through his use of this one line, Mark establishes conflict between Herod's Jewish heritage, and his political duties as a ruler for Rome.

But perhaps more relevant to the biblical audience itself, Herod's conflict between religion and politics is something Mark's readers would have found pertinent to their own situations. Mark's audience was likely facing religious persecution, either from Nero's Christian perspection (if Mark's gospel was indeed written in Rome – see footnote 4), or from the persecution of Jews and Christians following the First Jewish War against the Romans in 66-73.⁹ In turmoil from the conflict between religion and politics themselves, Mark's audience would likely have seen in his portrayal of Herod a reflection of their own situation.

After Salome has requested the execution of John the Baptist, we are told that Herod is “deeply grieved.” We know that he enjoys conversations with John, and that he fears him. The last image of Herod in this story is that of a ruler grieving over his role in the execution of a man whom he respects and fears.¹⁰

By contrast, Matthew's rendition of Herod's character is much darker. Herod is characterized as a lapsed Jew who replaces his respect for Jewish law, tradition, and prophecy with an allegiance to his political office. Matthew speaks to a largely Jewish-Christian audience who, like Herod, have been in contact with Roman culture, but have maintained their Jewish heritage.¹¹ Moreover, they have faced discrimination and alienation under Roman rule and the Herodian dynasty.¹²

⁹ Meier, 860.

¹⁰ Frederick C. Grant and Halford E. Luccock, “Mark: Text, Exegesis, and Exposition,” *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 7, eds. George Buttrick et al. (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1951), 736-37.

¹¹ Viviano, 631.

¹² Ibid.

In Matthew's narrative, Herod does not hear varying interpretations of who Jesus is. He comes immediately to the conclusion that Jesus is John the Baptist, "raised from the dead." There is less of a sense of guilt in this scene, and more a sense of fear.¹³ In this version, Herod does not fear John himself, nor does he regard John as a prophet. Rather, he fears the reaction of the crowd should John be executed. Herod's fear, in fact, does more to fill out the characterization of John the Baptist than it does Herod's character. The disapproval of a crowd implies that John had a wide and faithful audience. Matthew is drawing his readers' attention to John, at the expense of a fuller characterization of Herod.

Matthew omits mention of a personal relationship between Herod and John. The only reason given to explain why John was initially merely arrested and not executed is Herod's fear of public disapproval, and not because of any emotional motivations.¹⁴ Matthew's omission of conversation between Herod and John the Baptist also precludes any allusions to Herod's Jewish heritage. Although Matthew's Jewish-Christian audience would have been aware of Herod's Jewish heritage, he is portrayed as a Roman ruler, nothing more.

Matthew's gospel paints Herod as little more than a political animal. As readers, we are not drawn to sympathize with Matthew's portrayal of Herod in any way. Although he is one of the central figures in the narrative, Herod is a single-faceted character who does not face any life-altering personal dilemmas. In Matthew's version of the story, Herod serves as a mere plot-prop to the dramatic arrest and execution of John the Baptist.

¹³ Ibid., 657.

¹⁴ Ibid.

By contrast, Mark's characterization of Herod is much more full-figured. Herod is a thoughtful man in a position of political power. He likes John the Baptist, and although he also fears him, he enjoys listening to the words of this prophet of God. In the Gospel of Mark, Herod is a man torn between his political duty to Rome, and his Jewish heritage.

Characterizations of John the Baptist are largely dependent upon the constructions of Herod in the two biblical Salome narratives. In the Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist is not said to have had a huge following. John has disciples, we are told, who come and take his body away after he is beheaded, but his following is not so huge that Herod fears public upheaval. Herod fears not the crowd, but John himself.

The discussions between Herod and John the Baptist in the Gospel of Mark characterize John as a preacher who, like Jesus after him, spoke to the outcasts of Jewish society.¹⁵ As a Herodian, Herod did not place Jewish law and tradition above his Roman position as tetrarch, making him indeed an outcast of the Jewish *tradition*, if not of society.

Matthew, by contrast, does not mention any conversations between Herod and John the Baptist. In fact, "Herod wanted to put him to death." Clearly, in this account, there was no love lost between John and Herod. This puts John in a different light: the Baptist here could be conceived of as more righteous than loving. Parallels between John and Jesus are not as clear in Matthew's account. John is a prophet, nothing more. For the Christian audience, a prophet of God would have been perceived as a righteous role, and

¹⁵ Harrington claims that one of the reasons why the Salome narrative was included in the gospel accounts was to draw comparisons between John the Baptist and Jesus. See Harrington, 609.

John would be lauded for being in that role. However, from a narrative perspective, John's character is unrelentingly one-dimensional.

Biblical characterizations of Herod also influence the ways in which Herodias is portrayed in the two gospel narratives. Mark's construction of Herodias is much more vindictive and violent than that of Matthew. In Mark's account, Herodias is alone in her desire to have John the Baptist executed: she "had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him." The relationship between Herod and John the Baptist frames Herodias as a manipulative woman. Because of the men's relationship, Herodias is forced to circumvent the express wishes of her husband.

These manipulations are compounded by the high drama of Mark's narrative. In this gospel, events are not merely recounted by an outside narrator - the characters themselves speak. The reader hears Herodias herself speak as she advises her daughter: "The head of John the baptizer." Herodias' speech makes her character live in a way that a strictly third-person narration could not achieve.

The dialogue between mother and daughter also serves another dramatic purpose: it sets the stage. The reader is told that "[Salome] went out" to speak to her mother. We know from this that Herodias is not in the banquet hall, but rather watching the action from a distance. From this vantage point, Herodias seems even more deceitful and manipulative, trying unsuccessfully to keep her hands clean of blood. Mark is presenting Herodias as a woman engaged in clumsy machinations to relieve herself of the burden of blame.

The last image of Herodias presented in the Gospel of Mark is of her receiving from her daughter the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod and his guests may not have been privy to the clandestine conversation between mother and daughter, but they do see Salome present her mother with the Baptist's head. This serves not only to underline Herodias' evil deceits and manipulations; it also diverts attention away from Herod's role in the drama.¹⁶ At this, the most climactic moment of the story, the final image offered the reader is not a dancing girl, or a ruler torn by two cultures. The final image is of Herodias holding the head of John the Baptist as it lays on a platter. Herodias is alive to the reader, she is vengeful, and she is willing to sacrifice both her daughter and her husband to satisfy her vengeance.¹⁷

This characterization of Herodias only works, however, if Herod is determinedly unwilling to execute John the Baptist. If Herod had been searching for an excuse to have John killed, as he seems to be in the Gospel of Matthew, Herodias would have had no need to engage in such extensive manipulations.

Matthew's portrait of Herodias is much less malignant than that of Mark. At the beginning of Matthew's narrative, the reader is not told that Herodias wants John the Baptist killed, although it can be safely assumed that she shares her husband's displeasure with the prophet.¹⁸ Matthew's introduction of Herodias names her only as Herod's wife, and the cause of John's displeasure with the Herodian court. She is not plotting murder.

The lack of a personal relationship between John and Herod in the Gospel of Matthew and his desire to have John the Baptist killed reflect on Herodias'

¹⁶ Harrington, 610.

¹⁷ For an example of the ways in which Herodias is vilified at the expense of her husband, see Grant and Luccock, 734-737.

¹⁸ Dom Bernard Orchard, general ed., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1953), 878.

characterization in the narrative. When Herodias advises her daughter to request the head of John the Baptist, she is presented as a woman working on behalf of her husband. She is not quite the bloodthirsty and vengeful woman found in Mark's gospel.¹⁹

Allusions to the Hebrew Testament figure of Queen Jezebel²⁰ abound in the characterization of Herodias.²¹ Like Herodias, Jezebel is a queen who commits murder on her husband's behalf. And Jezebel, too, has been characterized through the ages as a sexual, vengeful, and blood-thirsty woman. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, early Church leaders sometimes conflated the characters of Herodias and Salome, comparing this hybrid figure to Jezebel, and highlighting the 'sinful' sexuality of the three women.

Herodias' diminished status as a character in the Gospel of Matthew is further corroborated by Matthew's almost complete reliance on third-person narration. Herodias is the only character in the story who does not speak. Matthew also omits the stage setting found in Mark's gospel: he does not describe Salome leaving the room to seek out her mother's advice. Herodias is present, but as she does not speak and is not actively engaged in the plot, for the audience, she is not really *there*. She is only her husband's henchwoman.

In Matthew's rendition of this story, the only point where Herodias' character is fleshed out is when Salome presents to her mother the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Here, we begin to get a glimmer of the full characterization of Herodias that had been offered in Mark's narrative. However, her near-invisibility up to this scene makes Herodias seem more like a hapless victim than a manipulative and vengeful woman. She has done her husband's evil deed, and is now presented with the gruesome reminder of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 1 Kings 16; 2 Kings 9.

²¹ Harrington, 609.

her actions. Moreover, this reminder is presented to her before all of the banquet guests, branding her as the orchestrator of John's execution, when according to Matthew's account, that role is not solely hers to play.

Characterizations of Salome in Gospels of Mark and Matthew

Salome's characterization within each of the gospel narratives was most probably used to underscore the licentiousness and immorality of Herod's court.²² She is not named by either of the gospel authors. In fact, we know her name only through the genealogical histories of Josephus, which name her as the daughter of Herodias and step-daughter of Herod Antipas.²³ However, just as the actions of Salome serve to illustrate the character of Herod, so do the characterizations of Herod – and of Herodias – provide different portrayals of the dancing girl in each of the gospel accounts of her story.

Salome is introduced into the Markan narrative when she dances for Herod and his guests. The narrator does not tell us explicitly that she had been asked to perform by Herod himself, although the characterization offered of Herod in the Gospel of Mark would support such an interpretation. It is also possible to assume that Herodias had asked her daughter to dance at the banquet. Mark's characterization of Herodias is of a woman fully in control of a stage she has set, manipulating the action and the players from the sidelines.

Whether Salome had been requested to dance at Herod's banquet, or whether she had made her own decision to dance, we are not told either way that she protested, or that she was unwilling in any way to perform. This belies the interpretation of her as an

²² Johnson and Buttrick, 426-427.

²³ Josephus Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities, Books XVIII-XX*, vol. 9, trans. Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), p.93, lines 136-137.

innocent child, manipulated by her mother. Mark makes absolutely no reference to a refusal by Salome to perform, or hesitance on her behalf. Salome is willing to dance, perhaps even eager. Salome “came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests.” She so pleases Herod that he offers her anything she desires. Salome’s ability to do so again brings her possible innocence into question.

Once Herod offers Salome whatever she wishes, the Gospel of Mark hints that Salome was at least partially aware of, and a party to, Herodias’ manipulations. Salome knows precisely where her mother is stationed, she goes to her, and asks her advice. Salome is not so innocent that she does not know that her mother has a plan, even if she is not fully aware of what that plan may be.

Mark tells us indirectly that Herodias was close enough to the banquet hall to be aware of what is going on, as she does not require from Salome an explanation. Salome is not shocked that her mother knows what has transpired in the banquet hall, even though Herodias herself is not a witness to Herod’s offer. In fact, Salome appears to assume that her mother will know exactly what she’s referring to when she says, “What should I ask for?” Salome and Herodias appear to be conspirators. Both seem to be aware of the other’s actions and intentions.

Salome’s role as co-conspirator with her mother is further established by her actions after having consulted with her mother. Mark tells us that, “*Immediately* she rushed back to the king and requested, ‘I want you to give me *at once* the head of John the Baptist on a platter’ [italics mine].” Salome seems almost eager to complete the task. Whether or not Salome had previously been aware of her mother’s intentions, she has no

qualms about complying with them. Moreover, she adds to Herodias' suggestion with the gruesome detail of requesting that the severed head be served to her on a platter.

The final scene in Mark's narration of the Salome story spotlights Salome and her mother. The severed head of John the Baptist is brought to Salome by a soldier. "Then," writes Mark, "the girl gave it to her mother." The head is carried through the banquet hall, given to Salome, who then passes it to Herodias. The gruesomeness of this scene highlights the possibility that Salome is engaged in her *own* covert manipulations. Thus far, Mark has presented Salome as merely being in compliance with her mother's wishes. Here, however, Salome initiates her own machinations. She was aware that her mother was hidden. It is implied that Herodias had been attempting to keep her hands clean of the affair. Salome undermines her mother's clumsy attempt to remain outside of the situation. Yet this action does as much to tarnish Salome's innocence as it does to indict her mother: she can easily be seen as trying to clean her own hands of complicity in the execution of the Baptist, by shifting full blame to her mother.

Salome's actions in this final scene could be read as a realization of her guilt in the grisly execution of a "righteous and holy man." However, Mark gives no indication that there is anything in her character to suggest this sudden about-face. Whether she danced of her own volition or upon the request of one of her parents, whether she was aware of her mother's intentions or not, Salome is presented by Mark as a young woman complicit in a deceitful and manipulative orchestration of events. There is nothing in Mark's characterization to suggest that her final action – presenting the head of John the Baptist to her mother – was anything more than self-preservation. As she is characterized

in the Gospel of Mark, Salome is never innocent, nor is she a pawn in anyone else's game.

Matthew's characterization of Salome is an abbreviated version of the character found in the Gospel of Mark.²⁴ Stylistically, Matthew's lack of high drama, coupled with his lack of extensive dialogue, change the way the characters are imaged by the reader. They are less dynamic. They do not engage as much with each other, offering to the reader fewer facets of their personalities. These stylistic changes affect the way in which Salome exists in relationship with the other characters, in turn changing how she herself is constructed.

As in the Gospel of Mark, the reader is first introduced to Salome as she dances before Herod and his banquet guests. Because of the characterization of Herod in this gospel, Salome's actions at this banquet seem much less premeditated and manipulative than they do in Mark's account. Salome's dance is sandwiched between an account of Herod's desire to have John executed, and his promise to Salome of "whatever she might ask." As she dances in the Gospel of Matthew, Salome is not much more than a plot-prop, a justification for Herod to do what he will with the Baptist. Salome may not be completely innocent in this scene, but neither is she maligned.

When Herod promises Salome whatever she desires as a reward for her pleasing dance, Matthew makes no direct allusions to the Hebrew Testament Book of Esther. In Mark, Salome is reminiscent of Queens Esther and Vashti. In Matthew's version of the story, no such allusions are made. Salome maintains her innocence throughout the dance, and during the immediate aftermath. This innocence, however, is due more to a lack of character development, than to an active characterization by the author.

²⁴ Viviano, 657.

After Herod has offered her “whatever she might ask,” Salome is not said to seek out the advice of her mother. Matthew tells us rather than Salome was “[p]rompted by her mother,” without any effort on her part. Here, Salome does not seem to be cognizant of the manipulations of her mother. This is in fact the first indication to the reader that Herodias wishes to have John the Baptist put to death.

As Matthew increasingly colours Herodias as a manipulative woman in league with her husband, he begins the subtle movement of the reader’s sympathy toward Salome. At the same time that Salome becomes aware of her mother’s manipulations, the reader is also offered a fuller characterization of Herodias. This is an important and strategic narrative technique: the reader’s allegiance is moving toward Salome. She begins to be fleshed out for the reader, not because of any active characterization on the part of the author, but because of the narrator’s alignment of the reader’s perspective with that of Salome.

Matthew tells us that “The king was grieved” by Salome’s request, and that he only agreed to John’s execution “out of regard for his oaths and for the guests...” However, this grief – if real and not merely feigned for the sake of appearance – seems most likely to be because he fears public retribution should John be executed.²⁵ The reader’s skepticism about Herod’s grief at the imminent execution of John the Baptist substantiates the understanding we have come to develop of Salome as the innocent mechanism by which Herodias and Herod are able to achieve their ends.

Salome only becomes fully characterized at the end of Matthew’s narrative. When the head of John the Baptist is brought to the girl, she hands it to her mother without a word. Matthew allows Salome to become fully integrated as a character at this point.

²⁵ Ibid.

However, this integration only occurs as the character of Herodias evolves. Salome's character development is fully dependent upon her recognition of Herodias' manipulative schemes.

That Salome's awareness of her mother's character occurs in tandem with that of the reader in the Gospel of Matthew, aligns the reader's sympathy with Salome in a way that could not occur in a narrative like the Mark's. The stylistic devices used by Matthew leave Salome as an incomplete character until over halfway through her part of the story. These are the same stylistic devices that allow for her to develop into an admirable and sympathetic character at the end of the story. Salome's character only begins to evolve as her perspective begins to merge with that of the reader. In this way, Matthew's abbreviated style forces the reader to become actively complicit in Salome's character construction. She only evolves inasmuch as the reader is able to see the scene from her perspective. It is her perspective that Matthew constructs, not her character.

If, in the Gospel of Matthew, Salome's character is almost wholly dependent upon how she perceives the actions of the other characters, then the ways in which these other players are constructed are vital to the development of Salome herself. In the Gospel of Matthew, Herod and Herodias are unmitigated connivers. As Salome begins to recognize the single-faceted personalities of her parents, she is presented in marked contrast as innocent and virtuous.

From an analysis of the different characters as they are portrayed in the two gospels, it becomes quite clear that, although each gospel story bears plot and structural resemblance to the other, these are not two versions of a single story. Rather, each of the gospel writers narrate two distinct stories.

Matthew's narrative is an abridged version of the story as it is found in Mark's gospel. His abbreviations result in characters that are single-dimensional representations of evil and innocence: Herod and Herodias are unmitigated evil, while Salome and John the Baptist are the innocents betrayed by them.

Conversely, Mark writes an intricate and dramatic story of intrigue and manipulations, presenting the four principle characters much more completely than does Matthew. Each character is engaged from the beginning of the story with a background, motivations, and desires. All of Mark's characters are fully integrated with each other – they play off each other in dynamic ways. Because Mark instills his characters with such evolved backgrounds and motivations, the reader is better able to imagine lives for them outside of the main stage of action. Mark's characters, and the plot they enact, are much more open to reconstruction.

PART TWO: Other Early Salome Narratives and Interpretations

The Larger Salome Discourse

Even though Matthew's Salome, while still underdeveloped, has the potentiality of being an admirable character, early Christian and contemporary reconstructions alike have often either demonized her as a highly-sexualized murderess, or reduced her to the unthinking and unwitting pawn of her equally demonized mother – neither of which characterizations are particularly admirable. Mark's more dramatic and unflattering portrayal of Salome has been the narrative most often drawn from in popular

reconstructions of her character. Two other sets of historical narratives have influenced contemporary understandings of the Salome story, as well, however: Josephus Flavius' Roman-Jewish history of the Hebrew people, and Roman legends of the dismissal of Lucius Flamininus from the Senate.

Josephus Flavius' *Jewish Antiquities*

Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* does not corroborate either of the gospel versions of the Salome narrative. In fact, Josephus does not mention such an episode at all. In all of his writings, Josephus mentions Salome but twice, and these are but genealogical records of the Herodian family.²⁶

Shortly before this genealogical history, Josephus relates the story of the execution of John the Baptist. He makes no mention of Salome, or of a dance and an ill-made promise, in his narration of these events. According to Josephus, the decision to execute John was purely political. Josephus relates that Herod feared the crowd of followers who were disciples of the Baptist:

...When others too joined the crowds about him [John the Baptist] because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did. Herod decided therefore that it would be much better to strike first and be rid of him before his work led to an uprising, than to wait for an upheaval, get involved in a difficult situation and see his mistake.²⁷

By Josephus' account, the Baptist's execution is purely political. Josephus also omits any objections John may have spoken against Herod's marriage to Herodias. Louis

²⁶ Josephus, 93.

²⁷ Ibid., 83.

H. Feldman writes that these omissions do not necessarily contradict the gospel accounts. It is quite possible, says Feldman, that the Christian Testament writers wrote only of the moral reasons for John's imprisonment and execution, as these would have been much more important to the expression of their faith.²⁸ Josephus writes that "to some of the Jews the destruction of Herod's army seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist."²⁹ We know from Josephus that at least "some" Jewish people, certainly those concerned with the fate of the Baptist, were not only aware of this history, but actively condemned Herod's role in John's execution.

Whether or not Josephus' version of John the Baptist's execution matches the versions of the gospel writers does not belie that all three accounts are used, to varying degrees, in contemporary reconstructions of the sequence of events, and of Salome's role in these events. Josephus is the only source to name Salome. He gives her a historical background and a life outside the confines of the biblical narrative. Josephus also provides a historical and political context to Herod's execution of John the Baptist, something that the gospel accounts do not fully elaborate.

Roman Legends of Lucius Flamininus

Three early Roman texts exist, relating a Roman legend detailing the story of Lucius Flamininus that parallels the biblical Salome story: Cicero's *De Senectute*,³⁰

²⁸ Louis H. Feldman, in Josephus, 83.

²⁹ Josephus, 81.

³⁰ Cicero. *De Senectute*. (c. 44 BCE), trans. E. S. Shuckburgh, *The Harvard Classics*, vol. IX, pt 2 (New York: P.F. Collier & Sons, 1909-14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/9/2. [June 20, 2004].

Seneca's "How Flamininus Executed a Criminal at Dinner,"³¹ and Plutarch's "Flamininus."³² The plot of this story was a well-known part of Roman history and legend.³³

Cicero wrote *De Senectute* [*On Old Age*] in approximately 44 BCE. This text contains the story of two Roman senators, Cato and Lucius Flamininus. Cicero describes a scene in which Lucius Flamininus "had yielded to the entreaties of his paramour"³⁴ at a dinner-party to behead a man who happened to be in prison condemned on a capital charge."³⁵ Cato expels Lucius Flamininus from his position within the senate because of his actions. Writing in the voice of Cato, Cicero says:

I was sorry to have to expel Lucius, brother of the gallant Titus Flamininus, from the Senate seven years after his consulship; but I thought it imperative to affix a stigma on an act of gross sensuality... I and Flaccus could not countenance an act of such criminal and abandoned lust, especially as, besides the personal dishonour, it brought disgrace on the Government.³⁶

Cicero's account is a philosophical treatise on morality, not a political or social history. He gives no indication why Lucius' actions had such strong political

³¹ Seneca. "How Flamininus Executed a Criminal at Dinner." *Controversiae* 9:2. (c. 35-39 CE), trans. M. Winterbottom, *The Elder Seneca: Declamations in Two Volumes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1924), 235-263.

³² Plutarch. "Flamininus." in *Parallel Lives*. (100 CE).

http://ancienthistory.about.com/library/bl/bl_text_plutarch_flamininus.htm. [June 20, 2004].

³³ Helen Grace Zagona, *The Legend of Salome and the Principle of Art for Art's Sake* (Geneve: Librairie E. Droz and Paris: Librairie Minard, 1960), 14.

³⁴ "his paramour" is translated as "a courtesan" by William A. Falconer. See Cicero, *De Senectute*, 51, 53. I have chosen to use Shuckburgh's translation of this passage in Cicero, as it is more reflective of the other renditions of this story given by Plutarch. Although Plutarch himself refers to the character as a "servant boy," he makes reference to other sources (among them the historian Livy) who refer to the character as "paramour." By contrast, Seneca's redaction of the story characterizes the woman as a "whore." However, Seneca's narration is designed to provide rhetorical colour, and as such was highly dramatized, and cannot be read as an explicit history.

³⁵ Cicero, paragraph 27.

³⁶ Ibid.

ramifications; nor does he relate the relationships between Cato and Lucius Flamininus, or of their roles within the Senate.

These blanks are filled in for the contemporary reader by Plutarch, who retold the story of Lucius Flamininus almost three hundred years later (100 CE). In his history of Titus Flamininus, a famous political and military leader, and the brother of Lucius, Plutarch recounts four versions of the event that were circulating at the time.

Plutarch begins with his own narration of the story: before expelling Lucius from the Senate, Cato had been in conflict with a man whom Titus (Lucius' brother) had named to the Senate, against Cato's wishes. The animosity between Cato and Titus was heightened by Cato's persecution of Titus' brother Lucius.

Plutarch says that Lucius "kept as a companion a boy whom he used to carry about with him..."³⁷ He continues:

One day at a drinking-bout, when the youngster was wantoning with Lucius, "I love you, Sir, so dearly," said he, "that, preferring your satisfaction to my own, I came away without seeing the gladiators, though I have never seen a man killed in my life." Lucius, delighted with what the boy said, answered, "Let not that trouble you; I can satisfy that longing," and with that, orders a condemned man to be fetched out of the prison, and the executioner to be sent for, and commands him to strike off the man's head, before they rose from table.³⁸

Plutarch offers two other variations of this story. He says that in Valerius Antias' version of events, a woman replaces the character of the servant boy.³⁹ Another Roman writer, Livy, claims that "a Gaulish deserter coming with his wife and children to the door, Lucius took him into the banqueting-room and killed him with his own hand, to

³⁷ Plutarch, "Flamininus."

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

gratify his paramour.”⁴⁰ Disagreeing with Livy, Plutarch cites Cicero and “other authorities”⁴¹ who claim that “the slain was no fugitive, but a prisoner and one condemned to die.”⁴²

Seneca the Elder⁴³ also told the story of Lucius Flamininus. Seneca’s narration of events differs from that of Cicero and Plutarch, in that it is presented not as history, but as an exercise in the practice of rhetoric. Seneca’s story is vividly coloured by the thirty speakers who comment on an initially succinct description of events:

Flamininus, when proconsul, was once asked a favour by a whore while dining. She said she had never seen a man’s head being cut off. He had a condemned criminal killed. He is accused of *lèse-majesté*.⁴⁴

Seneca claims that this was a story popularly known in the Roman empire, and often recounted to students by teachers of rhetoric. In the rhetorical exercise following this statement, students would debate the case for and against Lucius Flamininus on the charge of *lèse-majesté*.⁴⁵ Twenty-nine students present inflammatory statements against Lucius Flamininus, whereupon the teacher, Votienus Montanus, weighs these statements and issues judgement.

Although not an actual history, the student’s statements reflect popular opinions on this legend. In the exercise, the students initially spend very little time actually arguing the case. Instead, they describe the scene at large in dramatic detail, and focus on the immorality of Flamininus, of his court, and of the whore. Some of these statements are

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Seneca the Elder, otherwise known as Seneca the Rhetorician, is not to be confused with his more renowned son, Seneca the Younger.

⁴⁴ Seneca, 235.

⁴⁵ The charge of “*lèse-majesté*” refers to the crime of detracting from the majesty of the Roman empire. Flamininus was charged with *lèse-majesté* by Cato, when Cato expelled him from the Senate as a result of his actions.

particularly vivid, and vilifying. For instance, one student reconstructs in high drama an elaborated version of the story:

A man is hauled from the prison and taken to the praetor's [Lucius Flamininus'] party; the whore rules the praetor, the praetor the province. – They place there a man in chains; seeing the drooping eyes of that praetor, and thinking that he is being released by his favour, he thanks him. Holding the cup in both hands, he says: "May the immortal gods repay you the like!" – Of those who sat in the same room, one wept floods of tears with bowed head, another averted his eyes from the cruel sight, a third laughed – to keep in with the whore. Here, amid these different expressions on the faces of the guests, the praetor orders room to be made, orders the wretched man to stand quietly and offer his neck to the blow. Meanwhile the pause is marked by cups of wine. A Roman citizen was killed – and by the hand of an executioner who was not even sober. – I don't say that he should not be struck by the axe; but I do ask that he fall victim to the law rather than a prostitute. – Remember that the aim of your power is terror, not diversions for frivolous women. – Why, judges, should I tell you now of their various amusements, their dances their contest in shame to see whether the praetor or the whore capered more indecently?⁴⁶

Another student offers a more gruesome picture of the aftermath of the execution:

Amid the sodden remains of a lavish feast, amid food that drunkenness rejected, they carry the head of a man, newly lopped off. Together with the filth and litter of the diners, together with the sawdust scattered during the banquet, is swept up human blood.⁴⁷

Flamininus himself is accused "of debauchery, of play-acting, of buffoonery"⁴⁸ by one student. Another claims that Flamininus was drunk, and lacked courage.⁴⁹ A third charges him not with *lèse-majesté*, but with wastefully catering to his own gluttony, neglecting the material needs of the people in his charge:

⁴⁶ Seneca, 241.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 237.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

In his province he organizes a banquet. The feast is lavishly arranged with splendid appointments: silver cups are set off by gold ones. What more need I say judges? The province felt the preparation of that banquet, to its cost.⁵⁰

By far the most common critique of Flamininus, however, is that his actions are determined by a whore. “He gave her a murder,” says one student, “in return, maybe, for a single kiss.”⁵¹ “It was at the whim of a whore that you pronounced sentence on accused men, unless you are readier to behead men for her sake than to judge them,”⁵² accuses another.

As this line of attack continues, more and more emphasis is placed on the immorality of the whore herself. The teacher Montanus says that “[t]he majesty of the Roman empire... lies in the lap of whores; the ruler of our praetor is a common prostitute, whose lips no-one has scrupled to enjoy – unless he shrank from polluting his own.”⁵³ One student puts the sentiment into a terse statement: “...*she* made him cruel.”⁵⁴

At the end of the exercise, Flamininus is condemned by the students not on a charge of *lèse-majesté*, but for being as immoral as the whore. This critique does as much to blemish the character of the whore as it does Flamininus the murderer. Says one student:

An ally of ours was executed by a praetor of the Roman people in private, at night, on an improvised tribunal, when he was perhaps drunk and not even properly shod – or maybe he did everything in due form so that the whore could have a complete performance.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., 241.

⁵¹ Ibid., 237.

⁵² Ibid., 239.

⁵³ Ibid., 243.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 241.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 259.

Another student remarks, “A praetor of Rome, fattened up in that funeral feast, was roused from a whore’s lap by the blow of an axe.”⁵⁶ A third student appeals to sympathy for the executed man, while condemning the whore: “The accused was condemned for the law’s sake, and died for a brothel’s.”⁵⁷ One student explicitly lays the blame at the feet of the whore, ignoring Flamininus’ role in the execution: “You were accused by a Roman knight, judged by Roman knights, pronounced guilty by a praetor: killed by a whore.”⁵⁸

The majority of statements in this exercise are *against* Lucius Flamininus. Those arguments made *for* Flamininus are ridiculous: that he had been drunk, and therefore did not have control over his actions;⁵⁹ that his execution of the prisoner was a reaction to the taunting of his guests;⁶⁰ and that he had the man executed in case the whore should ask him something even more deplorable should he refuse her request.⁶¹ Only one defense of Flamininus’ actions makes any sense for a contemporary reader: Flamininus did not think it would matter where the man were executed, as he was condemned to die anyway.

That very few statements were made in support of Flamininus is an indication of the popular understandings of the Flamininus story. Seneca’s redaction of the lengthy rhetorical exercise points to a concise outline of this popular version of events. Lucius Flamininus hosted a banquet for other senators, with at least one whore present. The party was drinking, and the whore requested that Flamininus behead a man for her pleasure. Generally understood to be a licentious and immoral man, Flamininus complied. A

⁵⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 263.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 253.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 255.

⁶¹ Ibid.

prisoner condemned to die was brought up from the prison, and beheaded at the dinner table. Flamininus was subsequently charged with *lèse-majesté*. According to the students, not only was Flamininus guilty of *lèse-majesté* against the Roman empire, he was also an inept ruler, whose decadence and depravity were offensive on a private as well as public level.

Perhaps most important, though, is the sentiment found throughout Seneca's text that Flamininus' main crime was being seduced by a whore. Through this seduction, he becomes as immoral as a whore. The whore is the determinant of what constitutes immorality and decadence. She is actually the guilty party.

PART THREE: Comparison of the Biblical, Historical, and Roman narratives

Josephus' recounting of the execution of the Baptist adds very little to the biblical Salome narratives. Aside from naming Salome, Josephus' only compliment to these narratives is that he relates how the Jewish people felt that Herod's military defeats were retribution for his immoral execution of John the Baptist.

Each of the multiple versions of the Lucius Flamininus narrative, however, bear striking similarities to the gospel narrations of the Salome story.⁶² Both the gospel and Roman narratives describe a case where a criminal is brought up from prison, and beheaded in court during a decadent Roman banquet, at the behest of a love interest.

Not only are the plots mirror images of each other, but the depictions of the characters in the story also bear conspicuous similarities. For example, one of the students in Seneca's redaction of the Lucius Flamininus story refers to the condemned

⁶² See table 1, p 52.

criminal as “[an] ally of ours.”⁶³ The student’s empathetic alignment with the condemned criminal parallels Christian empathy with John the Baptist.⁶⁴

In each account, the banquet is hosted by the main character, a ruler of one of the Roman provinces. The gospel accounts name this Roman ruler as the ‘king’ Herod; in the Roman legends, the ruler is Lucius Flamininus. Both Lucius and Herod are well-respected by neither their peers nor by the people they govern. Both are presented as immoral, decadent, thoughtless, and inept. Both are governed in their political decisions by their sexual appetites.

There is a focus in each of these narrative traditions on the repercussions of licentious actions. Herod’s fear and guilt over the death of John the Baptist are a direct result of his sins of sensuality; and Herod’s military defeats were considered by the Jewish people to be punishment from God. The Roman legends demonstrate how Lucius’ immoral acts of sensuality lead to severe repercussions: vice, criminal murder, expulsion from the Senate, and a charge of *lèse-majesté*.

Both the Salome and Lucius Flamininus narratives have as secondary characters highly-sexualized love interests. In the Roman legends, Lucius Flamininus is besotted by one of a paramour, a whore, or a servant boy. The gospel accounts divide this one love interest into two: Herod’s wife Herodias, and her daughter Salome. In each case, however, the woman/lover is presented primarily as a sexual object who instigates the Roman or Herodian ruler’s actions and helps to characterize this ruler as inept and immoral.

⁶³ Seneca, 259.

⁶⁴ Grant, 629; Grant and Luccock, 736-37; Harrington, 609.

Table 1: PLOT COMPARISON OF EARLY SALOME NARRATIVES

“GOSPEL OF MARK” (c. 60-65 CE)	“GOSPEL OF MATTHEW” (c. 70-85 CE)	JOSEPHUS’ ANTIQUITIES (94 CE)	CICERO’S DE SENECTUTE (c. 44 BCE)	SENECA’S CONTROVERSIA 9:2 (c. 35-39 CE)	PLUTARCH’S PARALLEL LIVES (100 CE)
scene set at banquet	scene set at banquet	scene set at the stronghold Machaerus	scene set at banquet	scene set at a banquet	scene set at banquet (Livy); scene set at drinking-bout (Plutarch)
seduction by dance	seduction by dance	no dancing mentioned	no dancing mentioned	one of the thirty speakers mention dancing	no dancing mentioned
beheading requested by sexually alluring character (stepdaughter)	beheading requested by sexually alluring character (stepdaughter)	beheading not requested	beheading requested by sexually alluring character (paramour)	beheading requested by sexually alluring character (whore)	beheading requested by sexually alluring character (Plutarch: servant boy; Valerius Antias: woman; Livy: paramour)
prisoner possibly beheaded at court	prisoner possibly beheaded at court	prisoner beheaded at court (Machaerus)	prisoner beheaded at court (Gaul)	condemned criminal beheaded at court	prisoner beheaded at court; (Livy: Gaulish deserter)
prisoner killed in prison	prisoner killed in prison	no specific location given	no specific location given	condemned criminal killed in banquet hall	prisoner killed in banquet hall; (Livy: Gaulish deserter)
severed head presented at banquet	severed head presented at banquet	severed head not presented (not specified that the execution was performed by beheading)	severed head not presented	severed head not presented	severed head not presented
Herod relied on family connections	Herod relied on family connections	Herod relied on family connections	Lucius Flamininus relied on family connections	no mention of Lucius Flamininus’ family connections	Lucius Flamininus relied on family connections
no political repercussions mentioned	no political repercussions mentioned	negative political repercussions: defeat in war	negative political repercussions: disgrace to gov’t; expelled from Senate	legal and political repercussions: criminal murder; charged with <i>lèse-majesté</i>	strong political repercussions: expelled from Senate; disagreement within the Senate; disrepute
moral/spiritual repercussions: John’s death; Herod’s fear and guilt; sins of sensuality	moral/spiritual repercussions: John’s death; Herod’s fear and guilt; sins of sensuality	moral/spiritual repercussions: none mentioned, although allusions made by Josephus’ alignment with Jewish people	moral/spiritual repercussions: sensuality leads to vice and sin	moral/spiritual repercussions: licentiousness, lust, and drunkenness; denial of blood sacrifice to Emperor	moral/spiritual repercussions: licentiousness, lust, and gluttony
focus on morality	focus on morality	focus on history	focus on morality	focus on rhetoric	focus on history

With the notable exception of Seneca's narrative, both Roman and Jewish accounts of the Roman ruler also determine how the *other* figures in the stories are characterized. We have seen how the characters of Salome and Herodias are dependent in their characterizations upon the gospel portrayals of Herod. The same holds true of two of the Roman legends. In Cicero's text, the paramour who requests an execution at the dinner table is immoral by her own actions, to be sure. But her characterization, other than this abstract immorality, is wholly dependent upon Cicero's characterization of Lucius as "alien to virtue,"¹ and engaging in "an act of gross sensuality."² Plutarch also characterizes Lucius' lover by his portrayal of Lucius in much the same way as Cicero. The servant boy is wanton primarily in his relationship to the licentious and immoral Lucius.

Seneca's redaction of events, by contrast, places much more emphasis on the whore than on Lucius himself. In fact, by Seneca's account, the whore is the reason why Lucius exhibits such decadence and sensuality in the first place. This is significant for two reasons. First, the emphasis on the role of the female instigator is mirrored in the gospel portrayals of Herodias.³ Seneca's account was written only twenty to thirty years before the Gospel of Mark, and only thirty to fifty years before the Gospel of Matthew. From this, we can assume that Seneca's representation of the whore were part of popular understandings of her role around the time that Matthew and Mark wrote their gospels, which demonize Herodias in much the same way that Seneca demonizes the whore. Second, Lucius' lover as described in the Roman legends is split into two characters in the gospel accounts – Lucius' lover becomes in the gospel narratives both Herodias and

¹ Cicero, paragraph 27.

² Ibid.

³ Johnson and Buttrick, 426-27; Grant and Luccock, 735-737.

Salome. Herodias embodies the maliciousness and murderousness of the Roman legends' portrayals of Lucius' lover, while Salome embodies her sensuality and sexual appeal. Therefore, Seneca's emphasis on the whore reflects not only on Herodias, but on Salome too. She exemplifies for the early Christian audience those attributes of immoral sexuality and sensuality that are found in Seneca's narration of the Lucius Flamininus story.

It is quite likely that the Salome narratives found in the gospels of Matthew and Mark are based on myths that were being popularly told in the Mediterranean world at the time.⁴ As the Roman legends predate the gospel narratives by at least two hundred and forty-four years, and as they were being popularly recounted throughout the Roman Empire, it is safe to assume that the gospel writers, themselves living in the Roman Empire, were familiar with the story of Lucius Flamininus. Moreover, Mark's gospel narration of the Salome story, upon which Matthew's gospel was based, was probably intended for a non-Jewish (possibly Roman) Christian audience, for whom the Flamininus legend would have been well-known political and cultural history.

In their striking parallels to the biblical narratives, these Roman legends form a part of the larger discourse around Salome. Aspects of the legends are apparent in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, especially the sensualization, the decadence, and the arbitrariness of the execution itself. These same nuances, ingrained in the larger Salome discourse, are subsequently expanded upon by contemporary storytellers. Therefore, for example, although there is very little sexuality or sensuality in the gospel narratives proper – the only sensuality evident is in the pleasure of Herod and his guests at Salome's dance – we can see how a contemporary reconstructionist like Tom Robbins might expand the hints of sensuality and sexuality offered in the historical Salome narratives.

⁴ Grant, 630. See also Ceroke, 238;

PART FOUR: Early Church Reconstructions of Salome: St. John Chrysostom

Several Church fathers in early Christianity took up the story of John the Baptist, and subsequently the figure of Salome, in their sermons, homilies, or philosophical treatises.⁵ Few, however, used this narrative as often, or with as much force and contextual relevance, as St. John Chrysostom. Further, Chrysostom's powerful voice within the discourse of early Christian theology and morality makes his statements on the character of Salome particularly important to her larger discursive characterizations.

Three hundred years after the gospels of Matthew and Mark were written, St. John Chrysostom (c 354-407 CE), bishop of Constantinople from 397 to 404, took up the themes of sexuality and sensuousness found in the Roman legends. Chrysostom was well-known for applying biblical texts to the social and personal lives of his congregation in his sermons.⁶ He often used his interpretations of the gospel narratives of the Salome story to dramatize his commentaries on the evils of his society.

The context of Chrysostom's life directly affected how he understood the Salome story. The Emperor Theodosius constructed a church in Alexandria dedicated to John the Baptist, following severe vandalism to what had purportedly been the Baptist's tomb.⁷ These two events resulted in renewed interest among Christians in the life, teachings, and execution of John the Baptist. The people to whom Chrysostom was preaching would have been familiar with the Salome stories, and using them to highlight social ills had certain dramatic potential.

⁵ See for instance the work of St. Gregory Nazianzen, esp. "On St. Basil," trans. Leo P. McCauley et al., *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 22, eds., Roy Joseph Deferrari et al. (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1953); also "Soul and Body," <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Troy/1789/greeks.html#3> (July 14, 2003).

⁶ Robert Wilken, "John Chrysostom," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1990), 495.

⁷ <http://www.operaworld.com/special/salome.shtml>

Further, many of Chrysostom's life experiences bore striking resemblances to the circumstances of the Baptist's life. Like John, Chrysostom adopted a life of ascetic worship, living for six years as a hermit, two of those years in solitude.⁸ Chrysostom was also considered to be a great speaker – like John, he was able to draw a crowd.⁹ The most marked resemblance, however, is the way Chrysostom tactlessly critiqued the licentiousness, greed, and injustice of the Emperor's court. In particular, Chrysostom condemned the actions of the Empress Eudoxia, comparing her to both Jezebel and Salome.¹⁰ Chrysostom was banished to a village near the Black Sea, dying of “exhaustion and maltreatment” on his way to his new parish.¹¹

In the four documents in which Chrysostom uses the Salome narrative,¹² two distinct themes emerge: he makes allusions to Salome/Herodias, often conflating their characters, when condemning the actions of the Empress Eudoxia; and he interprets the narrative in light of the actions of his congregation, condemning their lasciviousness and vulgarity.

Chrysostom's most extensive characterization of Salome is found in his treatise, “The Gospel of St. Matthew.”¹³ This homily is largely a plea to his congregation to renounce their immoral and depraved ways, by comparing them to the three transgressors – Herod, Herodias, and Salome – in Matthew's account of the Salome narrative. In high

⁸ F. Van Ommeslaegue, “Chrysostom,” *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol 3, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987). 466.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Wilken, 496.

¹¹ Van Ommeslaegue, 466.

¹² These four documents are: “The Gospel of St. Matthew [Homily XLVIII],” “Homilies,” “Homilies on Second Corinthians [Homily XXVIII],” and “Treatise to Prove That No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself.” Please refer to the bibliography for publishing information on these texts.

¹³ St. John Chrysostom, “The Gospel of St. Matthew [Homily XLVIII],” *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol X: Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (1851), ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Sir George Prevost (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 296-303.

drama, Chrysostom tells us that Salome is acting in communion with the devil. She is shameless – as the reason why Herod’s marriage to Herodias was illegal and immoral, Salome should have hid herself, not made a spectacle through her dancing.¹⁴ She is an “immodest damsel,” a “corrupt harlot,”¹⁵ engaging in a “diabolical revel,” a “satanic spectacle,” and “lawless dancing.”¹⁶ Dancing itself is considered an act of the devil: “For where dancing is, there is the evil one.”¹⁷ God gave us feet for walking sedately, says Chrysostom, “not that we may jump like camels (for even they too are disagreeable when dancing, much more women)...”¹⁸ Simply dancing, then, regardless of her motivation, makes Salome a vile woman, in league with the devil.

For Chrysostom, dancing women seem to be damnably unpleasant simply in their spectacle. But dancing for the purposes of the devil, as Salome has done, endangers not only the souls of the dancers, but also those of the spectators who take pleasure in these entertainments. Dancing women such as Salome are “wolves”¹⁹ bent on capturing the souls of men.

This homily is directed to male parishioners who have fallen away from the path of virtue. Chrysostom critiques the “drunkenness and luxury” of the “devilish” theatre of Herod’s court, full of “depraved spectators” and “irrational pleasure.”²⁰ He then makes allusions to the same type of corruption at the court of the current Emperor.²¹ Chrysostom speaks directly to those men lacking in virtue: “Hearken,” says Chrysostom, addressing

¹⁴ Ibid., 299.

¹⁵ Ibid., 300.

¹⁶ Ibid., 297.

¹⁷ Ibid., 299.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 301.

his audience, “as many as are unduly excited about women.”²² This comparison was commonly made by Chrysostom, and is also found in his “Homilies,” where he writes of dancers as corrupters of the souls.²³

Yet, even though he speaks to the men of the congregation, Chrysostom places much more emphasis on those who are the cause of this fall – dancing and seductive women. Herodias, he says, is even “more accursed than Herod... For such is the nature of the unchaste among women; none so audacious and so savage as they.”²⁴

In this particular homily, Chrysostom does not conflate the characters of Salome and Herodias directly. They share many of the same characteristics, but they are consistently differentiated by name. In his later “Homilies on Second Corinthians [Homily XXVIII],”²⁵ however, Chrysostom conflates the two characters, constructing a Herodias/Salome hybrid figure. He characterizes Herodias as a “polluted and all-polluted woman”²⁶ who “subdued”²⁷ her husband, leading him into sin. While dramatizing the scene of Salome’s dance, he adds extra dialogue to Herodias’ character, and has her utter the words of Salome:

For this woman was not so much disturbed before she had cast John into prison, as she is troubled after he is bound, and she is urgent, saying, “Give me here in a charger the head of John.” And wherefore so? ‘I fear,’ she says, ‘lest there be any hushing up of his murder, lest any should rescue him from his peril.’ And wherefore requirest thou

²²Chrysostom, “The Gospel of St. Matthew [Homily XLVIII],” 300.

²³ St. John Chrysostom, “Homilies,” *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 33, eds. Roy Joseph Deferrari et al, trans. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1957), 184.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ St. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on Second Corinthians [Homily XXVIII],” *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol XII: Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (1848), ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Talbot W. Chambers (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1989), 407-411.

²⁶ Ibid., 409.

²⁷ Ibid.

not the whole corpse, but the head? ‘The tongue,’ she says, ‘that pained me, that I long to see silent.’²⁸

Chrysostom has turned the two characters into one – as is found in the Roman legends mirroring the gospel accounts. A few paragraphs later, however, Chrysostom differentiates the mother from the daughter. Salome is now the one to request the head. However, here she is given the personality and motivations of her mother:

What is more polluted, what more accursed, what more immodest than that damsel? What a voice she uttered in that theatre of the devil, in that banquet of demons... Therefore surely it is that she demandeth his head, wishing to set up a bright trophy of fornication; and give it to her mother. Seest thou the wages of dancing, seest thou the spoils of that devilish plot?²⁹

This conflation is also found in Chrysostom’s “Treatise to Prove that No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself,” where he writes that John’s head was “made the reward of a harlot’s dancing.”³⁰ In the gospel accounts, the reward is not Salome’s but Herodias’. When we compare the portrayals of Salome as they are found in the two homilies on the Gospel of Mark and on Second Corinthians, this conflation of Salome’s character with Herodias’ makes the young girl seem even more vicious and vile. She has not only seduced the tetrarch Herod, she has done so with all of Herodias’ manipulations and deceits on her shoulders.

For Chrysostom, Salome’s evil is conflated with that of Herodias. They are both embodiments of the devil, and as such, minor distinctions of personhood seem not to be

²⁸ Ibid., 410.

²⁹ Ibid., 411.

³⁰ St. John Chrysostom, “Treatise to Prove that No One Can Harm the Man Who Does Not Injure Himself,” *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Saint Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies And Letters; Homilies on the Statues* (1889), ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W.R.W. Stephens (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1989), 274.

necessary to illustrate for his audience the evils of lust, dancing, and women. In fact, these evils are worse in the eyes of Chrysostom than the lack of virtue apparent in the men of his congregation, as they are symbolized by the figure of Herod. Herod is criticized, but never to the extent to which Chrysostom condemns Herodias/Salome.

Chrysostom has dramatized the gospel Salome narratives to make them relevant to a contemporary audience. He has adopted and amplified the sexuality and sensuousness that is only mildly alluded to in the biblical accounts of the Salome narrative, but is strenuously emphasized in the Roman legends of Lucius Flamininus, and used these allusions to form the crux of his characterization of Salome. It is upon her female sexuality that Chrysostom's portrayal of Salome is built, even though her sexuality is but a minor detail in the gospel accounts to which he refers.

PART FIVE: The Larger Discourse of Popular Reconstruction

Biblical reconstructions exist in particular contexts. An author or artist does not attempt a reconstruction outside of a social and cultural milieu, and that milieu figures into the reconstruction itself. Moreover, each subsequent reconstruction can draw from a multitude of sources: the original texts, the stories that have fed those original texts, commentaries on the texts, popular perceptions of the meanings of the texts (which in themselves have social and cultural contexts), and earlier reconstructive attempts. Each of these figures into the larger discourse of a particular biblical narrative or character.

The biblical accounts of the Salome narrative are very much open to such reconstructions. They are mere outlines of much deeper stories coming from two different cultures, Roman and Jewish. Although written with strong dramatic style, the

biblical accounts have loose ends, half-formed characters, and little background information. They spoke to the faith of a particular audience, and as that audience has changed, so has the story needed to be dramatized in new and contemporary ways to have relevance to a new audience. We have seen this reconstructive process as it was engaged by Chrysostom. The same process occurs in contemporary reconstructions.

Moreover, contemporary reconstructions in turn alter the ways in which a contemporary audience reads the historical sources. Having read Tom Robbins' reconstruction of Salome, a biblical reader will return the gospel accounts of the story, and read them with different eyes, bringing to the story a new set of symbolic structures, meanings, and nuances.

Understanding the ways in which past and the present biblical interpretations dynamically influence each other, post-structuralist feminist biblical scholars have often attempted to redress the initial oppressions done to women in the biblical texts and early commentaries. In these attempts, there is an effort to influence the subsequent portrayals of biblical women in contemporary popular reconstructions. This process entails much more than merely changing biblical language to be gender-inclusive, and pointing out the ways in which women are marginalized in the biblical text. As I have shown in my exploration of the Salome/Lucius Flamininus narratives and their commentaries, there exist layers of stories, of cultural contexts, and of different interpretations of the texts – all of which dynamically influence the ways in which the Salome narratives are understood today. All of these layers must be analyzed and critiqued in order to reconstruct a holistic and liberatory reconstruction of the Salome story.

CHAPTER TWO

TOM ROBBINS' SALOME

Tom Robbins' reconstruction of Salome extracts aspects of her character as it is represented in the historical interpretations described in the preceding chapter. Using four feminist hermeneutical devices, Robbins identifies particular elements – especially elements of sexuality and sensuality – of the biblical Salome narratives and Roman legends, elaborating on these to recreate her character. Robbins' representation of Salome is developed from a romantic feminist perspective, one that adopts certain aspects of the biblical construction of her character and rejects others, in order to illustrate his romantic feminist ideology. This contemporary Salome serves two functions. Within the structure of the novel proper, her character and actions give meaning to the other characters and plotlines. On a larger ideological scale, Robbins' construction of Salome underscores his romantic feminist ideals, privileging the feminine principle of the divine.

PART ONE: Romantic Feminism in *Skinny Legs and All*

Robbins casts the biblical character as a modern girl – a shy and nerdy, but ultimately seductive, teenage bellydancer, hired to dance nights at a restaurant/sports bar across from the New York United Nations building. Robbins' Salome is seductively shy, schoolgirl-sexy, and able to induce states of spiritual enlightenment in her audience as she dances.

The restaurant where Salome dances is called Isaac & Ishmael's. Owned by Abu, a Palestinian Muslim, and Spike, a Jew, Isaac & Ishmael's (or the I & I) is a symbolic statement against the violence and enmity between these two religious traditions. In fact,

head waitress Ellen Cherry nicknames the restaurant “Jerusalem.” The restaurant is failing, however, and is often the target of aggressive demonstrations and bomb threats in opposition to the owners’ message of dialogue and non-violence.

In order to boost business, Abu and Spike buy a big screen TV, hire a band, and eventually engage a belly dancer – Salome. The restaurant patrons love watching Salome’s performances, and as business escalates, the restaurant grows in notoriety.

On New Year’s Day, the same day as a major and nationally televised football game, Salome promises to perform “The Dance of the Seven Veils,” a purportedly legendary dance the patrons have been begging to see. Passionate conflict develops as the football fans debate with the Salome-fans over which event the restaurant should host, mirroring the conflict over space in Jerusalem. Fans of both Salome and football are presented in the novel as religious fanatics, and the conflict ensuing such fanaticism constructs the bar as a microcosm of the Middle East. The restaurant owners suggest a compromise: Salome will perform in the main bar, while the football game will be broadcast in a makeshift patio.

Salome begins to perform, and we watch her dance through the eyes of the lead character, Ellen Cherry. As Salome whirls and dips and drops her seven veils one by one, the audience achieves seven stages of spiritual enlightenment. Robbins forces his readers’ attention to the whirling and arching girl, illustrating for them in no uncertain terms the spiritual growth which Salome’s dance inspires in her onlookers. This, we realize, is the object of Salome’s dance: to marry the erotic with the spiritual.

Salome’s performance and the football game, begun at the same time, also end at the same moment. Leaving the restaurant, the bar patrons are in a mental and spiritual

muddle. They are tranquil, spiritually serene, and feel as though 'a veil' has been lifted from their eyes, like the veils that flew from Salome as she danced. Once in the street, Salome's audience is confronted with a scene of riotous revelry by celebrating sports fanatics. Having followed Salome's dance, as readers we are acutely conscious of the aggressively violent celebration of the football fanatics, and are sympathetic to the contrast between this violence and spiritual serenity of the bar patrons.

The plotline involving Salome is secondary to three other, ultimately converging, storylines. Her actions and characterizations give meaning to the other plotlines in the novel. The main action involves Ellen Cherry Charles, an artist-waitress from Colonial Pines, Virginia. After having studied only one semester of fine art at college, she is run out of school by her fundamentalist Baptist father and uncle. Upon discovering that art students use nude models, they accost Ellen Cherry in class and brand her a harlot, chanting "Jezebel! Jezebel!"¹ as they scrub the makeup from her face. Ellen Cherry develops a deep-seated affinity to the biblical queen Jezebel as a result of this event. Angry and humiliated, she leaves for Seattle, marries her high-school sweetheart, Boomer Petway III, and moves to New York City so she can fulfill her dream of becoming a 'real' artist.

Ellen Cherry's husband is a wild-dancing, fun-loving welder who "knew zip about art, cared zip about art, and, moreover, discouraged her from pursuing *her* interest in it."² In fact, Boomer describes Ellen Cherry's art as "hand-painted hallucinations that

¹ Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 24.

² *Ibid.*, 21.

don't do nothin' but confuse the puddin' out of a perfectly reasonable wall..."³ Notwithstanding his antipathy to art, Boomer has seduced Ellen Cherry into marriage by fashioning for her a highly impractical giant roast turkey, once a silver Airstream motor home: "...it was the fashioning of the turkey, the phenomenon of its existence, that was his gift to the bride."⁴ Boomer's giant roast turkey was, in fact, art. And when a New York art dealer sees Boomer's giant roast turkey, he is hailed as an artistic genius. Boomer makes it rich as the toast of the New York art scene, and is commissioned to sculpt a piece for a public square in Jerusalem, coincidentally funded by the owners of Isaac & Ishmael's. Ellen Cherry, the 'real' artist, is out of luck.

Boomer's success causes tension between the newlyweds, and Boomer leaves Ellen Cherry. She is despondent, unable to paint, and broke. Refusing to take Boomer's money, the filthy lucre of what she considers false-art, Ellen Cherry is forced to find work. She takes a job waiting tables – at Isaac & Ishmael's, where she will eventually recover her ability to paint, reaffirm her connection to Jezebel, begin an affair with her boss, rediscover her love for her husband, and witness Salome's dance.

The third plotline involves Ellen Cherry's uncle, a Baptist preacher named Buddy Winkler. Uncle Buddy, the same uncle who had shamed Ellen Cherry out of art school, is 'hell-bent' on bringing about Armageddon. With a voice as seductive as a saxophone, Uncle Buddy's popularity soars when he is offered a nationally broadcast radio show. Preaching hell and damnation, the Reverend Uncle Buddy conspires with a group of militant Zionists to force Armageddon. He plans to bomb the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Through this, he wants to bring about the building of the third temple,

³ Ibid., 31.

⁴ Ibid., 5.

prophesied to herald the second coming of Christ. With Boomer in Jerusalem, Uncle Buddy is able to use him, unwittingly, as a liaison.

The fourth plotline in Robbins' novel involves a motley group of objects that, suddenly able to locomote, are traveling from Midwest America to Jerusalem. Painted Stick and Conch Shell are religious relics of the First and Second Temples, having once been used by Queen Jezebel's priests and priestesses in worship of the goddess Astarte. They are awoken from a 2000-year trance by the love cries of Boomer and Ellen Cherry. Traveling from Seattle to New York, the newlyweds make a honeymoon pit stop, intending to picnic in a cave. At Ellen Cherry's request, Boomer cries out "Jezebel!" during their lovemaking, and Painted Stick and Conch Shell are awoken from their trance. Hearing the rustling of Painted Stick and Conch Shell in the back of the cave, Ellen Cherry and her husband flee to the giant roast turkey, leaving behind a single purple sock, a can of beans, and a silver spoon. After some awkward introductions, Conch Shell and Painted Stick perform a magic ritual on Dirty Sock, Can o' Beans, and Spoon, giving them, too, the ability to locomote.

Boomer's chanting of "Jezebel, Jezebel" have led Conch Shell and Painted Stick to believe that the building of the Third Temple is nigh, and that it is time for them to return to Jerusalem. Unfamiliar with the modern world, they invite Sock, Can o' Beans, and Spoon to accompany them, and to serve as guides. As the five objects travel toward New York, and on to Jerusalem, Conch Shell and Painted Stick describe their roles as ritual objects of goddess-worship in the First and Second Temples, relating at the same time the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as understood from their perspectives. Once in New York, the five objects are unable to secure passage to Jerusalem, and

remain for many months in the basement of a Catholic church, hoping to find Ellen Cherry that she might take them to their final destination.

The four plotlines dovetail in four ways. Salome, Ellen Cherry, Uncle Buddy and the five animate objects all eventually find themselves in New York City. Secondly, each storyline incorporates in a meaningful way the city of Jerusalem: Salome's dance and religious traditions are intertwined with the location; Ellen Cherry's husband leaves her to move there, and at the end of the novel, Ellen Cherry herself moves to Jerusalem to be reunited with him; Uncle Buddy plans to bomb it; and the animate objects plan to travel there to witness the building of the Third Temple. Third, Robbins uses each of the plotlines to expound on the distinctions between 'truth' and 'illusion,' between art and commercialism, between spirituality and religion, and between patriarchy and a more matriarchal culture. As I discuss shortly, these juxtapositions serve to underscore the feminist perspective adopted by Robbins in this novel.

Most importantly, however, each of these plotlines depends in large part on Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils to provide them with meaning. Ellen Cherry's conflict with art, and her inability to paint after her separation with Boomer, are resolved when she constructs a mural in Isaac & Ishmael's – a mural that inspires Salome to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils. New York art dealer Ultima Summerville pointedly describes this mural as "a portrait of nighttime consciousness, ...of the feminine side, of the right brain, of intuition."⁵ It "accentuated feminism's soft dark

⁵ Ibid., 430.

underbelly.”⁶ The mural is inspired by Salome’s dancing, and in its turn the mural stirs Salome’s desire to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils:

[The mural] was not unlike – and one is forced to say this – the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. Salome, when she arrived for her Friday night performance, took one long, captivated look at it and consented to dance the Dance of the Seven Veils.⁷

As she observes Salome’s dance, utterly unaware that it is her own mural that has inspired the performance, Ellen Cherry journeys through seven stages of spiritual enlightenment. At the end of this dance, all of Ellen Cherry’s conflicts are resolved – she is no longer confused about her role as artist, as wife, as lover, as daughter, and as Jezebel. Ellen Cherry is able to embody, in her own way, the feminine principle, and leaves New York to follow Boomer to Jerusalem, in the “Fertile Crescent”:

The dance was ending. Salome executed one last passionate pirouette, slapped both feet resoundingly against the floor, then staggered to a stop. She stood facing, but not looking at, the audience; her eyes downcast, her mouth gasping, her entire respiratory system convulsing, her legs wobbling as if about to give way.... The room was silent, transfixed.

Ellen Cherry’s condition was not measurably superior to the dancer’s. She was tremulous, flushed, in a kind of trance. She was in the room and not in the room. Her mind whirled endlessly upon a dance floor of ideas. Instinctively, she sensed that once the last of the veils had dropped, some greater more all-inclusive secret should have been exposed; she should have been squinting at the contours of the Mystery. Thus, she squinted at poor Salome, who continued to stand there, shaking, panting, dressed in angel chaps of sweat....

The dance was over. The veils were all dropped. The cascades of epiphanies had ceased. The inner voice was mute, and that was fine, it had given her more than enough guidance, more than enough understanding, more than

⁶ Ibid., 437.

⁷ Ibid., 425.

enough to figure out for herself. Nevertheless, she believed that she would try to summon it one more time....

Consider the anatomy of the Middle East, said the inner voice. Hasn't it been called the Fertile Crescent, the primordial uterus from which the human race emerged? Well, look, at it today, consider it now. Of all the places on the planet, it is the most feverish, hot pain-racked, tense, dilated, bloody, traumatized, stretched to the point of ripping. Remind you of something? The "trouble" in the Middle East is nothing but natal contractions... something great, something wondrous, something completely unimaginable is there aborning....

The next evening, [Ellen Cherry] flew to Jerusalem.⁸

After witnessing Salome's dance, Ellen Cherry is finally able to live in harmony with her sexuality, and with her husband, who himself is an embodiment of the masculine principle:

Ellen Cherry was awaiting the return of her husband. Each morning, after they'd had their sex and breakfast, Boomer dug into his spy bag, selected a disguise, and went down to the plaza by the Old City's Jaffa Gate....

When he came home, he delighted in making love to Ellen Cherry while still wearing the disguise *du jour*. She admitted that that could occasionally be exciting, such as the time that he'd dressed in drag as a nun, but today he was dressed as a municipal rat catcher, and she knew that she was going to have to draw the line....

Meanwhile, there was so much to think about. All that had been revealed to her – and to who knew how many others? – when Salome danced the Dance of the Seven Veils.⁹

Ellen Cherry's association with Queen Jezebel also serves to unite her to Salome. As I described in chapter one, the biblical characters of Salome and Jezebel have sometimes been conflated in early religious rhetoric. Robbins adopts this fusion, but subverts the negative moral and sexual connotations ascribed by early Church fathers.

⁸ Ibid., 468-469, 473-475.

⁹ Ibid., 477-478.

Throughout the novel, Robbins gives each of these biblical women reprieve from their tarnished reputations, reconstructing both of them in a positive light. Robbins' narrator comments on the biblical story of Jezebel through the reflections of Ellen Cherry:

The ambitious Jehu, having secretly murdered Jezebel's son (Ahab, in the meantime, had died in battle) came riding up to the palace. When Jezebel heard of his unscheduled visit, she according to Scripture, "painted her face and tired her head and looked out a window." Another translation had her painting her "eyes" and "arranging her hair." In any case, there she was, freshly groomed, looking out at the Hebrew rebel, when he incited "two or three eunuchs" to "Throw her down." "Her blood splattered the wall," according to the gory old Bible, and Jehu left her in the courtyard for the dogs to eat while he went inside and helped himself to the wine. After a few flagons, he must have felt a prick of guilt because he ordered his flunkies to go bury her, but by that time the mutts had left nothing but "her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands."

Ellen Cherry was as mystified as the fly that wasted a day following a plastic horse. What had Queen Jezebel done to earn the distinction as our all-time treacherous slut? In the Bitch Hall of Fame, Jezebel had a room of her own; nay, an entire wing. For fixing her hair and applying makeup? Was it implied that she went to the window to *flirt* with the rebel warrior? And if so, was that so wicked that it should wreck her reputation for three thousand years? The trimillennial lash-bat?

As Ellen Cherry walked the rain-rippled pavement of Seattle... she bore upon her back the weight of a skull, a pair of feet, and the palms of her hands. The nails of the feet were lacquered vermilion, a pretty ribbon fluttered from a lacuna in the skull. And she would wonder as she walked, "What is the Bible trying to tell us?"

That Satan is a hairdresser?

That Elizabeth Arden ought to be fed to the poodles?¹⁰

Not only does Robbins call into question traditionally vilifying representations of Jezebel's character in this retelling of the biblical narrative, he also positions Jezebel as being a model of behaviour and identity for Ellen Cherry.

¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

Salome is also historically reconstructed, although not at great length, both by the narrations of Painted Stick and Conch Shell, who alleviate her of all guilt at the expense of her mother,¹¹ and by Spike and Abu, who associate her with peace and the revelation of mystery.¹² And like Jezebel, Robbins' contemporary reconstruction of Salome, in the form of the young girl who dances at Isaac & Ishmael's, is also presented as a model of behaviour. It is by learning from Salome's dance, and by emulating her embodiment of the divine feminine principle, that Ellen Cherry is able to reconcile herself to her own femininity, and to her association with Jezebel.

The similarities between Salome and Jezebel are alluded to in three ways. First, both biblical women reside in the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. Both the historical and contemporary Salomes dance in this room:

Here, [the historical] Salome walked around with a big red fish held high up over her head. Old Father spanked her with a ballet slipper, sending her to bed without milk or honey. Dance was changed in this room, too.¹³

Like her historical counterpart, Robbins' contemporary Salome also dances in the room of the wolfmother wallpaper when she dances the Dance of the Seven Veils. Here, too, "Jezebel beat her kohl-encrusted lashes against the window pane."¹⁴

Second, Robbins often describes Jezebel and Salome in similar ways. For instance, he places a descriptive focus on the eyes of both Jezebel and Salome. Jezebel is consistently described in reference to her kohl eye-makeup. Robbins' descriptions of Salome also often focus on her eyes: she would "roll her eyes,"¹⁵ she would "alternately

¹¹ Ibid., 243.

¹² Ibid., 401-02.

¹³ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴ Ibid., 282.

¹⁵ Ibid., 340.

glare at and shrink from the audience,”¹⁶ she dances with “eyes demurely downcast.”¹⁷ She is described as having “*marquise au chocolat* eyes.”¹⁸ As Salome waits to begin the Dance of the Seven Veils, her eyes are almost the only part of her body uncovered:

... eyes were nearly all that one could see of her. Salome was so thoroughly swaddled in scarves of gauzy purple silk that only her hands, her bare feet, and her eyes were exposed.... Her eyes, which resembled shot glasses of warm Hershey syrup, were given over to ansoopia, which is to say, were rolled almost violently upward (think of the heavenward eyeballings of first-time sinners or the traumatic posturing of El Greco saints).¹⁹

Third, both Robbins’ Jezebel and his contemporary Salome worship the goddess Astarte. Jezebel initially worshipped Astarte overtly, in her Phoenician religious tradition.²⁰ Later, once she had married into Hebrew culture, Jezebel worshipped Astarte slightly more surreptitiously, through Conch Shell.²¹ The contemporary Salome also worships Astarte, albeit indirectly, through her use of a tambourine. Having sought information from Middle Eastern musicians, Abu relates how the tambourine was once a devotional instrument of Astarte:

“That gentleman tells me they have no tambourine because they have no woman with the orchestra. He tells me that the tambourine is the sole feminine instrument of the Middle East. Before Mohammed came, it was associated with Astarte, the Goddess. Is that not interesting? One of the other musicians said that the tambourine is a female due to the fact that it makes a pretty jingle and is designed to be spanked. That is the more recent patriarchal attitude, I suppose”....

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 343.

¹⁸ Ibid., 428.

¹⁹ Ibid., 454. This quotation also discloses another descriptive similarity between Salome and Jezebel. Several times in the novel, Robbins mentions that all that remained of Jezebel after she had been murdered and eaten by dogs were her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands (2 Kings 9:35). Like Jezebel, Salome only reveals her eyes, feet, and hands.

²⁰ Ibid., 51.

²¹ Ibid., 99-100.

Abu... fed Ellen Cherry a tidbit about how, during a period of musical inactivity enforced in the seventh century by Mohammed, approval was given only to the *ghirbal* and the tambourine, the latter without jingles, since the instrument with jingles was forbidden. "That is what the new religion did to Arabic culture," said Abu. "It left the drumbeats but took away our jingles."²²

Playing her tambourine, Salome is worshipping the goddess Astarte, perhaps unconsciously, although the revelations she inspires in her audience as she dances are consistent with ideologies espoused by Conch Shell and Painted Stick in their veneration of Astarte.

Both Salome and Jezebel are historically reconstructed. Robbins describes both of the biblical women in similar terms. And both of these women worship, in their own way, the goddess Astarte. The similarities between Salome and Jezebel serve to underscore the way in which Ellen Cherry's fate is united with Salome. Robbins' reconstructions of Salome and Jezebel are such an intricately interwoven tapestry, that Ellen Cherry's association with Jezebel accentuates the intimate ways in which Ellen Cherry is influenced by Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils.

Salome's dance also influences the fates of the other characters in the novel. Like Ellen Cherry, Uncle Buddy's conflicts are resolved at the end of Salome's dance, albeit rather abruptly. Not having seen the performance itself, the Reverend Uncle Buddy walks into Isaac & Ishmael's just as Salome's dance has ended. He arrives to find Salome standing, alone and completely naked, on the stage. Growling and muttering "Beast! Great Fornicator! Whore of Babylon!"²³, Uncle Buddy charges the bandstand, grabbing Salome by the throat. A police officer in the bar shoots him dead, abruptly ending Uncle

²² Ibid., 311-12.

²³ Ibid., 470.

Buddy's plans for Armageddon. Significantly, Salome and the police officer are also shot during the melee. Unlike Uncle Buddy, however, Salome and the police officer both recover.

The impact of Salome's dance upon the five objects is peripheral, but still significant. The two sacred relics of the temple are awaiting a change in human consciousness, heralded by the building of the Third Temple. Salome's dance inspires this change in consciousness. More concretely, however, the three other objects, once having belonged to Ellen Cherry and Boomer, are reunited in various ways with their owners, as a result of the Dance of the Seven Veils. After Salome's performance, Ellen Cherry leaves the restaurant, walking toward the Cathedral, where Dirty Sock is still lingering. Ellen Cherry does not see Sock, but he sees her. And although this chance encounter, recognized only by Dirty Sock, is transitory, Robbins leads the reader to understand that it is a significant meeting. It is another instance of the interconnectedness of all things – a theme running through this novel. Can o' Beans is ferried to Jerusalem by Conch Shell, where he is deposited near the statue constructed by Boomer. There, Can o' Beans regularly sees Ellen Cherry, who has traveled to Jerusalem as a result of having seen Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils, and Boomer. Spoon is transported with Painted Stick to Jerusalem with in a shipment from Uncle Buddy to Boomer. Once in Jerusalem, Spoon is found by Boomer, who returns her again to Ellen Cherry.

The only main character not directly affected by Salome's dance is Boomer Petway. In fact, not only does he never actually see her dance, but throughout the novel, he is portrayed as someone who already knows the spiritual secrets uncovered by the Dance of the Seven Veils. Boomer has achieved enlightenment through his appreciation

of laughter and irony, a strong sense of male sexuality, and an innate distrust of institutions. These characteristics are also elements of 'trickster' figures. In fact, Boomer is even referred to at one point as "trickster."²⁴ These characteristics construct Boomer, in contrast to Salome, as the quintessential human embodiment of what Robbins sees as the masculine principle. Robbins makes this comparison between the two explicit, when he describes Boomer as, like Salome, "seem[ing] to have succeeded wildly without really working at it..."²⁵ In only one way does Salome's dance affect Boomer, and that marginally: once Ellen Cherry has seen Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils, and developed her own sense of the feminine principle, she and Boomer are able to exist in harmony.

While there are often similarities woven into his reconstructions of biblical history and biblical figures, and the relationships of these historical figures to contemporary characters, Robbins also fills this novel with contrasts.²⁶ Living beings are contrasted with inanimate objects that locomote and converse with each other. Each of these objects has an innate sense of being, and their senses of self, in many ways presented as enlightened senses of self, are in contrast to the endearing and bumbling actions of their human counterparts. The past is contrasted with the present. As Conch Shell and Painted Stick travel through the countryside with Dirty Sock, Can o' Beans, and Spoon, they learn about the modern situation in Jerusalem, while teaching their three

²⁴ Ibid., 31. Note, too, that the sculpture of Pales that Boomer constructs in Jerusalem is described as "trickster" – Ibid., 421-22.

²⁵ Ibid., 396.

²⁶ Hoyser and Stookey, 128-131.

companions the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as they saw it from their position as ritual objects.

Robbins also crafts philosophical juxtapositions in his novel. Art is contrasted with material gain and practicality. Patriarchal social and religious structures are contrasted with what Robbins sees as holistic matriarchal structures. 'Truth' is contrasted with 'illusion.' Religion is contrasted with spirituality. Consistent with his other novels, in *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins flogs what he considers to be the dying horse of religion, demonstrating again and again that a personal, individual spirituality is far preferable. Indeed, the final stage of enlightenment afforded by Salome's dance is an awareness of,

...the illusion that you could get somebody else to do it for you. To think for you. To hang on your cross. The priest, the rabbi, the imam, the swami, the philosophical novelist were traffic cops at best. They might direct you through a busy intersection, but they wouldn't follow you home and park your car... [Divinity] was as different for everybody as it was the same, so everybody had to take control of their own life, define their own death, and construct their own salvation.²⁷

And perhaps the most important of his contrasts in this novel, male is contrasted with female.

All of Robbins' philosophical juxtapositions, especially those between religion and spirituality, between patriarchal and matriarchal structures, and between male and female, are cemented by his commentary throughout the novel on yet another philosophical contrast: the distinctions between masculine and feminine principles.²⁸ As I

²⁷ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 468.

²⁸ Robbins distinguishes between male/female and masculine/feminine. In his novel, some female characters embody masculine traits, and vice versa. Unless they somehow reclaim their 'rightful' gender-defined characteristics, however, these characters remain unfulfilled and unhappy.

have previously elaborated,²⁹ the feminine principle is archetypal femininity, an aspect of divinity that unites what Robbins perceives as being quintessentially feminine attributes. For Robbins, the feminine is ultimately found in the “room of the wolfmother wallpaper.”³⁰ First described in the prelude, the room of the wolfmother wallpaper is where Robbins finds ‘real’ reality, not the illusionary reality constructed by humanity’s perceived need for institutions.³¹ *This* reality is of the matriarchal tradition that, for Robbins, embodies an earth-mother goddess spirituality that affirms “the centrality of human beings’ [individual and communal] connection to the earth.”³² Femininity is found to varying degrees in a number of characters: Ellen Cherry, her mother Patsy, and Spoon. But the feminine principle is only fully embodied in two characters: Conch Shell and Salome, both of whom worship, in their own ways, the goddess Astarte. The male characters who actively harmonize their masculinity with the feminine, worshipping the feminine principle, are ultimately those who are able to achieve enlightenment through Salome’s dance. Only one masculine character, Boomer, is able to achieve enlightenment without the benefit of having witnessed the Dance of the Seven Veils, and this he does through laughter – which for Robbins, is itself a key characteristic of the masculine principle. Those who do not worship the feminine principle in themselves, in their mates, or in nature – like Uncle Buddy, Dirty Sock, and Ultima Summerville – are doomed to unfulfillment, loneliness, and in the case of Uncle Buddy, death.

The single thematic element throughout all of Robbins’ juxtapositions is an appreciation, a glorification, a *deification* of the sexual feminine principle. Robbins’

²⁹ See “Introduction,” 6-11.

³⁰ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 1.

³¹ Hoyser and Stookey, 127, 133-34.

³² *Ibid.*, 133.

romantic feminist ideologies are apparent in this deification of the feminine. From this feminist perspective, Robbins glorifies traditional western images of femininity in contrast with masculinity, particularly those aspects of the feminine that are sexual or sensual. Robbins accentuates male and female stereotypes, but alters the values traditionally associated with these stereotypes. In Robbins' novel, the feminine principles of sexuality and sensuality that are associated with the female stereotype are in fact a form of divinity.³³

Robbins' deification of the feminine is most overtly expressed in the character of Conch Shell:

Conch Shell had been first out of the niche. She had dropped in such a manner that she landed on the hard tip of her spire, thereby avoiding any cracking or chipping of her body or lips.... Slowly, she had fallen over to rest on the lower ridges of her body whorls. She had lain like an odalisque, lounging upon her whorled side, affording an unobstructed and, perhaps, immodest view of her tannish outer lip, her creamy inner lip, and the heavenly pinks of her opening, her aperture.

³³ The romantic feminist perspective is maintained in almost all of Robbins' novels, especially his earlier work. In *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) and *Jitterbug Perfume* (1984), the main female characters embody the strongly sexualized feminine principle to an excessive degree, and are the 'teachers' of all men who have not learned to worship this feminine principle. In his 1980 novel, *Still Life With Woodpecker*, Robbins constructs a more intricate relationship between the main characters embodying the masculine and feminine principles, where each learns to worship the joining of the two principles. While the overriding theme in this novel is a merging of masculine and feminine, the feminine principle is itself closer to divinity. This fusion is also a central theme in Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), as Sissy Hankshaw learns to appreciate her own embodiment of the feminine principle through her relationships with men. She only arrives at a full realization of her femininity when she begins an affair with The Chink, who represents the masculine principle. Although *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* presents a variety of feminist perspectives, the one proven to lead to spiritual and social renewal is a feminism that advocates a glorification of the feminine principle, as it exists both in contrast to and in conjunction with the masculine. In *Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas* (1994), none of the characters represents the feminine principle—the main female character, Gwen Mati, is in fact the very opposite, embodying a stilted version of the masculine principle. Gwen suffers as a result, until she is taught by the male lead to embrace her femininity and feminine sexuality. In some of his later work, however, Robbins moves away from the archetypal and highly sexual feminine principle. The three main female characters in his 2000 novel, *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates*, are essentially asexual: one a grandmother; another a Catholic nun; the third the Mother Superior of an order of sisters, who was paradoxically once Matisse's model for the "Blue Nude (Reclining)." As with Robbins' earlier female characters, all three women lead the main (male) character to wisdom and enlightenment, but not this time with their sexuality.

To Can o' Beans and Dirty Sock, who had been expecting something scaly and wired, the pink glow of Conch Shell was heavenly indeed....

The conch shell is the voice of Buddha, the birth-bed of Aphrodite, the horn that drives away all demons and draws lost mariners home from the sea. Colored by the moon, shaped by primal geometry, it is the original dreamboat, the sacred submarine that carries fertility to its rendezvous with poetry.

Shaped by primal geometry? No, the conch shell *is* primal geometry. Its perfect logarithmic spiral coils from left to right around an axis of fundamental truth. A house exuded by the dreams of its inhabitant, it is the finest example of the architecture of imagination, the logic of desire.

A calcified womb, a self-propelled nest, the conch shell outlasts its tenant, its builder, to go on alone, reminding the world's forgetful of their watery sexuality.

Mermaid's tongue. Milkmaid's ulcer. Courtesan's powder box. Ballerina's musk. With its marvelous pinkness, the glow from Conch Shell's long, smooth, folded aperture saturated the cave. It was a bonbon pink, a tropical pink; above all, a feminine pink. The tint it cast was that of a vagina blowing bubble gum.³⁴

Conch Shell is female sexuality and divinity. As the human counterpart to Conch Shell,

Salome too is described in similar terms of her divine and sexual femininity:

She appeared without warning and with a minimum of fanfare, dressed in a filmy harem pajama of flaring chiffon over which she wore a considerably more opaque two-piece meta-costume consisting of a brief halter-top and girdle, brocaded in silver and gold and spangled with tinkly disks and flowers. Riding low upon her hips, the girdle afforded an optimum view of belly skin, although her navel was masked by an isolated rosette of brocade, a stylized chestnut burr whose quills protected something round and sweet and altogether fertile, some Mesopotamian seed-nut not yet sprouted. Circling her wrists were alabaster and metal aerodromes housing buzzing squadrons of unseen bees; circling her ankles were beads and bells; while her neck was ringed by a reef of paste jewels from whose nadir was suspended a larger island of gold....

³⁴ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 60-61.

From her painted toenails to her head of short, black ringlets, she measured five-three or five-four. Generally speaking, her body was slender and serpentine: her breasts were small and appeared to be still developing, but she swelled at the hips, presenting a pelvis fully capable of accommodating childbirth. Despite rather bushy eyebrows, her face was gorgeous. She had the complexion of a night-blooming lily, dense lips that might have been molded from the meat of muskmelons, a longish nose that in its curl and grace resembled the scroll of a small violin, cheeks and chin whose juxtaposition of delicate bone to carefree baby fat combined the elegance of a racehorse with the robustness of a mule; and mammoth liquid brown eyes, whose luster and latent heat could convince a chemist that chocolate, if not a living organism, was at least a fossil fuel.

But it was her manner as much as her looks that turned men's hearts in to squirrel cages. First onstage, Salome appeared like a startled doe caught in the headlights of an onrushing truck. Timid and uncomfortable, she would fidget, flick her hair, roll her eyes, nervously cinch her tambourine, pluck at the seat of her girdle, and alternately glare at and shrink from the audience. In no aspect, however, did her shyness of self-consciousness inhibit the free movement of her body once she began to dance. The effect was that of a seduction victim who, because she is virginal, betrothed to another man, or contemptuous of her seducer, mentally recoils from his sexual attentions, only to find her body enthusiastically responding in spite of herself. If there existed in the universe any display with a stronger guarantee of igniting the male libido, it had yet to be catalogued.³⁵

Robbins' consistent glorification of female sexuality, coupled with his high-sexual and seductive description of Salome, who later dances enlightenment into the minds and souls of her audience, constructs a Salome who is not only sexual, but divinely so. This is substantiated by Robbins' references to divine biblical traditions. In the following quotation, Robbins associates Salome's sexuality and fertility with the divine fertility of Abraham and Sarah:

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

The tambourine bangs; the tambourine jingles; the girl – awkwardly, self-consciously – dances, and the audience sense the weight, the weave, the odor of an ancient blanket that has been thrown over it, perhaps the blanket upon which Abraham spread the legs of Sarai and Hagar.³⁶

Salome is innocent, but wise; young, with breasts still developing, but fertile; shy, but seductive; human, but possessing a “timelessness”³⁷ that equates her with divinity. She is the human embodiment of the innately paradoxical feminine principle that Robbins situates over and against the masculine principle. Conch Shell is *aided* by Painted Stick, but he is clearly relegated to the role of divine assistant. Similarly, Salome dances to a mostly male audience, and the reactions of the audience clearly fuel her dance, but like Painted Stick and Conch Shell, Salome’s male audience is merely assisting to her already divine performance. This glorification of the feminine is consistent with Robbins’ romantic feminist perspective, which esteems traditionally “feminine” characteristics above and over traditional “masculine” characteristics. In *Skinny Legs and All*, the most important “feminine” characteristics for Robbins are primarily sexual.

Robbins not only adopts a romantic feminist perspective in this novel; he also clearly critiques more radically political feminisms. Throughout the novel, Robbins ridicules feminisms that he perceives as failing to recognize women’s abilities to embody the feminine principle, feminisms that focus on the socially political at the expense of the purely individual and spiritual. At one point, the morning after a particularly gratifying sexual encounter, Ellen Cherry is talking to her mother on the phone:

“Mercy me, *you’re* sounding bright-eyed and bushy tailed.”

“I am?” Ellen Cherry was disappointed that her supposedly secret glee was so blatantly evident.

³⁶ Ibid., 322.

³⁷ Ibid., 341.

“Lord, yes, you are, honey. Now tell me: couldn’t be ol’ Boomer’s back in town, could it?”

“Why, no, mama, he’s not. Where’d you get that idea?”

“It wasn’t any idea. Just a stab in the dark, that’s all. Wondering what’d tipped your giggle box on its side. Leave it to ol’ prefeminist Patsy to think there was a blessed man involved.”³⁸

In fact, there *is* a man involved in Ellen Cherry’s happiness. Patsy’s self-deprecating depiction of herself as “prefeminist” notwithstanding, Robbins is demonstrating here his antipathy toward more political feminisms that would argue that a woman’s happiness is not mainly dependent upon sexual satisfaction. Plainly, Ellen Cherry’s happiness is largely dependent upon sexual satisfaction, and Robbins clearly demonstrates his sympathies to lie with “ol’ prefeminist” Patsy’s understanding of the situation. Robbins’ own romantic feminist perspective entails a merging of the divinely feminine with the masculine in order to achieve true happiness and fulfillment. From this perspective, Robbins ridicules feminisms that underestimate what he perceives as the primary necessity of sexual fulfillment in a woman’s life.

This romantic feminist perspective is most evident in Robbins’ portrayal of Salome. As I have demonstrated above, she is, like Conch Shell, entirely feminine and highly sexualized. A blend of innocence and feminine sexuality, Salome is seductive, but is not seduced; she has an arcane and ancient wisdom, but retains the self-conscious mannerisms of an adolescent girl. She is “representative of the archetypal earth-mother goddess.”³⁹ In his description of Salome, Robbins pointedly situates divinity in her quintessential feminine sexuality:

Salome... had a quality that was timeless. Although innocently young, there was the suggestion of years of

³⁸ Ibid., 336.

³⁹ Hoyser and Stookey, 131.

experience behind her. She even seemed wise, not in any conscious or formidable way, but rather as if something strangely meaningful clung to her, a secret knowledge or hidden wisdom; a bright creative power and a dark destructive power, neither of which she had to think about, for she didn't think quite so much as she was thought.⁴⁰

This last line is telling: "she didn't think quite so much as she was thought." I more fully develop this point in chapter three, however, it is important to note here that Robbins' characterization of Salome is in at least one way comparable to the biblical representations of her character: although divine, Robbins' Salome is a plot prop, a carefully constructed symbol. While ideas and wisdoms and principles are embodied in *her*, Robbins never actually affords Salome the opportunity to fully embody herself.

The chief distinction between Salome and the other main female characters is not just that she is constructed as the human embodiment of the feminine principle. The main difference is that she is more a symbol than an actual character. However, Robbins' Salome, while a plot prop for the other characters and storylines in the novel, is not easily dismissed. She may be little more than a symbolic statement, but she is a symbolic statement that informs all of the other characters. Robbins' primarily sexual objectification of Salome cannot be shelved and ignored. In fact, Robbins goes to great lengths to underscore Salome's importance to the narrative, while still constructing her predominantly as a symbol, with the task of furthering the growth of the other characters.

⁴⁰ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 340, 341.

PART TWO: Robbins' Use of Historical Salome Narratives

Robbins' construction of Salome as a mere plot prop to the rest of the action and as a significant contributor to the growth of the other characters are not the only ways in which his portrayal of the girl mirrors the biblical narratives. Robbins adopts many other characteristics of the two biblical Salomes, as well as characteristics of the female figure in the early Roman legends of Lucius Flamininus, in his construction of Salome. The parallels between the different constructions of her character shape the ways in which each of these narratives is read. As I discussed in the introduction, Michel Foucault's post-structuralist paradigm of discourse entails that each statement in a discourse, in this case each narrative of the Salome figure, informs every other statement in the discourse. By adopting certain characteristics of the biblical and pre-biblical figures of Salome, Robbins reinforces these characteristics in the overall discourse around Salome.

While the Roman legends of Lucius Flamininus do not mention the age of the paramour/whore, in both the biblical narratives and in *Skinny Legs and All*, Salome is described as a young girl. Robbins' historical reconstruction of Salome places her age at sixteen.⁴¹ Matthew and Mark identify her as the stepdaughter of the tetrarch Herod. As the stepdaughter of a high-placed Roman official and the daughter of an eminent political wife, that Salome is not yet married possibly indicates that she was most likely quite a young woman.⁴² In each of the biblical representations of her character, she is easily influenced. In Mark's account, Salome is a calculating and manipulative young woman. Not only her own desires, but also those of her mother influence her in these manipulations. Similarly, Matthew's account depicts Salome as a young girl entirely

⁴¹ Ibid., 243.

⁴² Witherington, "Salome," 907.

controlled by her mother. Herodias dictates all of her actions, except the final presentation of the Baptist's head.

Robbins adopts both of these characteristics – young and easily influenced – in his portrayal of Salome. She is described as shy, nervous, naïve, and self-conscious in the way of adolescents. This Salome, like the biblical Salome, is also easily influenced by her family. She only begins to dance when requested by her uncle, the bandleader at Isaac & Ishmael's.⁴³ This bandleader is the one who engages in negotiations with Spike and Abu on her behalf – he determines when she will dance, how long she will dance, and what she will be paid for dancing. However, Robbins undermines this single-faceted depiction of Salome near the end of the novel. As in the Gospel of Matthew, at the end of the Salome narrative the young girl, to a slight degree, takes control of her decisions and actions. In Matthew's gospel, Salome decides to present the head of the Baptist to her mother, dramatically changing the ways in which her character is read. In Robbins' novel, Salome alone makes the decision to perform the Dance of the Seven Veils, changing not only the way she herself is understood by the reader, but also changing the lives of all the characters around her. In this way, Robbins is not drawing from Mark's representation of Salome as a power-hungry and manipulative young woman. Rather, Robbins' adopts Matthew's representation, which casts Salome as a young woman who grows from someone completely under the control of her family to a young woman who is learning to make her own decisions. This, however, is the only way in which Robbins depicts Salome as a self-determined character; and even in this, she is influenced to

⁴³By making Salome's primary influence be her uncle, Robbins is drawing an allusion to the Hebrew Testament story of Queen Esther, just as do the biblical Salome narratives. In the Hebrew Testament narrative, Esther's uncle dictated her actions.

perform the dance not by her own internal growth, but by the mural painted by Ellen Cherry.

The characterizations of a Salome who is easily influenced by outside forces is built upon a depiction of her as innocent. While Mark's illustration of Salome is not as an innocent girl, Matthew portrays her primarily as such. Robbins draws from this portrayal, and constructs a Salome whose innocence underscores many of her other primary character traits – her sexuality, her naïveté, her shyness, and her mystery. This mystery is emphasized in *Skinny Legs and All* by Robbins' refusal to reveal Salome's real name. In the novel, the adopted moniker "Salome" is a conceit of the dancing teenager, a stage name. She never gives her real name. Here, Robbins is expanding upon the biblical narratives, in which Salome remains nameless. However, while in the gospel renditions of the story, Salome's namelessness serves to reduce the importance of her character, in Robbins' novel, leaving Salome unnamed has the opposite effect. One of Salome's main characteristics is indeed her mystery, and by referring to her solely as Salome, Robbins highlights that mystery, constructing a character who is more of a divine archetype than a real person.

Throughout his reconstruction of the biblical narratives, Robbins consistently reaffirms one aspect in particular of the traditional interpretation of Salome's character: her sexuality. In the biblical narratives, Salome's sexuality is nothing more than a device with which the authors were able to speed along the plot. Mild allusions to her sexuality in the gospels serve more to call attention to the licentiousness of Herod's court than to characterize Salome herself. While the same is true of Robbins' novel – Salome's female sexuality is always put into contrast with patriarchal and oppressive expressions of

sexuality – he cultivates this aspect of her personality, making it central to her character. Chrysostom did much the same in his commentaries on the Salome narrative, and these commentaries have informed the larger discourse around Salome's character. Robbins draws from this discourse, and emphasizes Salome's sexuality in his reconstruction.

Robbins rejects two aspects of the earlier depictions of the Salome figure in his reconstruction: the characterization of Salome as a manipulator, and as an exhibitionist. Early Roman narratives and early Church interpretations of Salome depict this figure as an exhibitionist. The biblical narratives do not present a girl who is at all shy about dancing in front of a banquet hall of men, despite her placement in society. While the early Roman legends do not describe the Salome figure as a dancing girl, she is consistently portrayed as one who is not unwilling to put her sexuality in the spotlight in order to achieve her ends. These narratives also depict a girl/woman who is manipulative. The gospel narratives, to two different degrees, illustrate a character who is willing to manipulate either to have John the Baptist beheaded, or to have the blame shifted entirely to her mother. The Roman narratives, in particular Seneca's *Controversiae*, portray a woman who manipulates with her sexuality in order to achieve what she desires.

Robbins' Salome is neither manipulative nor exhibitionist. In fact, Robbins goes to great lengths to demonstrate how she is the antithesis of these characteristics. She is shy, she is innocent, she is otherworldly – all the while embodying a strong sexuality. Robbins' Salome, however, does not use her sexuality to manipulate; nor does she exhibit her sexuality and sensuousness for the pleasure of exhibitionism. Salome herself does not emphasize her sexuality – it is Robbins who reaffirms Salome's sexuality, as a device to bring about spiritual enlightenment for her audience and for the readers.

Robbins also reconstructs many of the other characters in the biblical Salome narratives, as well as facets of the plot. In many ways, these are secondary reconstructions of the biblical Salome story that largely serve to confirm Robbins' portrayal of Salome as a valid alternative interpretation. These secondary reconstructions also serve to substantiate his romantic feminist deification of the feminine principle. In *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins' reconstructs the characters who most influence Salome: Herodias, Herod and John the Baptist.

Ellen Cherry's mother, "ol' prefeminist" Patsy, serves as Robbins' Herodias. Unlike in the biblical narrative, Patsy has very little interaction with Salome. In fact, she only sees the belly dancer once, never speaks to her, and in no way influences Salome's decision to dance. However, Robbins' construction of Patsy does bear resemblances to the biblical Herodias. For instance, as in the early church interpretations of the Salome narrative, Patsy and Robbins' Salome are sometimes conflated. Like Salome, Patsy is a dancer, albeit an amateur go-go dancer, whose aspirations of dancing professionally were dashed by her fundamentalist Baptist husband, and whose only audience is now the hall mirror.

Patsy is also associated to Herodias through her relationship to Ellen Cherry. As I have previously demonstrated, early church fathers often compared Jezebel's character to that of Salome, sometimes conflating the two. Robbins, too, associates Jezebel and Salome. Ellen Cherry relates her identity to that of Jezebel, and as Ellen Cherry's mother, Patsy then takes on the role of mother to the Jezebel figure. In this capacity, Patsy is the one to support Ellen Cherry in her desire to become an artist, to advice Ellen Cherry to embrace her female sexuality, and by example to prepare Ellen Cherry to embody to

some degree the feminine principle illustrated through Salome's dance. While this characterization of Patsy as a modified version of Herodias does not directly influence Salome, it does influence Salome's counterpart – Jezebel – as she is embodied in Ellen Cherry.

Robbins' two other character reconstructions are more directly influential in his characterization of Salome. John the Baptist is refigured in the character of the Reverend Uncle Buddy. Like John the Baptist, Uncle Buddy is a religious fanatic, 'crying out in the wilderness' of the streets of New York City about hell, damnation, and the imminent return of the saviour. And again like John the Baptist, Uncle Buddy's fanaticism is punished by death following Salome's dance. Unlike the biblical accounts of John the Baptist, however, Uncle Buddy is not an admirable character. In fact, Uncle Buddy is demonized as a religious fanatic, a man whose fanaticism is dangerous both to himself and to those around him.

Robbins also associates Uncle Buddy with Herod. Like Herod, he is licentious and immoral. Aroused by Patsy, Ellen Cherry, and biographies of Tammy Faye Bakker, Buddy, again like Herod, gives lip service to the religious party line, but does so primarily for his own power. And in the end, Buddy aligns himself more closely with political leaders than with his religious tradition, just as Herod chose faithfulness to Rome over his Jewish heritage.

Robbins also subverts traditional interpretations of the character of Herod in the character of Lt. Shaftoe. Lt. Shaftoe is the police officer who shoots Uncle Buddy/John the Baptist, and is himself shot following the Dance of the Seven Veils. Like traditional understandings of Herod, Shaftoe is initially a man without strong religious conviction.

He prefers the religion of football to any spiritual tradition. However, unlike the biblical Herod (and unlike Herod's other doppelganger, Uncle Buddy) Shaftoe is redeemed once he witnesses Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. After seeing this dance, he comes to realize that his secular humanism is not a fulfilling path. Shaftoe converts from a football fanatic to an enlightened spiritual seeker.

In each of these secondary biblical reconstructions, Robbins challenges traditional interpretations the characters, replacing them with representations that reflect his romantic feminist ideologies. His characterization of Patsy reveals a Herodias no longer constructed as a bad influence on a young and naïve girl. Herodias becomes, through Patsy, a woman guiding her daughter toward self-fulfillment and a knowledge of her role as an embodiment of the feminine principle. Robbins' portrayal of Uncle Buddy as John the Baptist undermines the traditional interpretations of the Baptist as a pious and venerable man, whose death is to be mourned. In Robbins' reconstruction, Uncle Buddy is a dangerous man, whose fanatical religious convictions reject the feminine principle necessary for humanity to achieve peace and harmony. Uncle Buddy is also dangerous in his personification of Herod, as he justifies his oppressive political actions with religious rhetoric. By contrast, Robbins' construction of Herod in the figure of Lt. Shaftoe serves to highlight his romantic feminist ideologies. Robbins subverts traditional understandings of Herod's character as unilaterally lascivious and amoral, replacing this illustration with one that frames Herod as a character who grows through his experience of the feminine principle, to become a fulfilled and spiritual man.

Not only does each of these secondary biblical reconstructions subvert traditional interpretations of the characters, but Robbins' reconstructions also serve to maintain the

deification of the feminine principle that he builds throughout the novel. This deification, embodied in the figure of his reconstructed Salome, is sustained and amplified by the plot and secondary character reconstructions of the Salome narrative. Salome's personifications of the feminine principle and of female sexuality are rendered increasingly legitimate as more of the other elements in the novel reflect the superior spirituality that Robbins' attributes to the feminine principle.

PART THREE: Hermeneutic Techniques in Robbins' Reconstruction

Robbins does not merely adopt various aspects of the historical Salome narratives and reject others. He uses an assortment of hermeneutic devices in his deconstruction of the biblical, pre-biblical, and post-biblical Salome figures, and in his subsequent reconstruction of her character. These hermeneutic devices determine how he is able to reconstruct her character in the novel, emphasizing certain aspects of the biblical texts, reframing them in various ways, and drawing from them alternative stories. Robbins uses four hermeneutic techniques in particular in his reconstruction of Salome: a hermeneutics of suspicion; a hermeneutics of sensuality; a hermeneutics of laughter; and a hermeneutics of desire.

Approaching a text with a hermeneutics of suspicion is part of a deconstructive process that questions the reliability and trustworthiness of both the narrator and author of a given story. Feminist biblical scholar and theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has defined a hermeneutics of suspicion as "a deconstructive practice of inquiry that

denaturalizes and demystifies linguistic-cultural practices of domination...”⁴⁴ Such an approach to a biblical text

...does not take the kyriocentric text and its claim to divine authority at face value, but rather investigates it as to its ideological functions in the interest of domination...⁴⁵ A hermeneutics of suspicion has the task of disentangling the ideological functions of kyriocentric text and commentary.⁴⁶

A hermeneutics of suspicion challenges both the author’s account of the story and the ideologies espoused by this account.

Using a hermeneutics of suspicion in a narratological inquiry of a text, a reader questions the narrator’s articulation of the story, his knowledge of historical, present, and future events, and his placement of the characters within the plot. A suspicious reader also questions the author’s omniscient knowledge of events, his construction of the characters, as well as his construction of the narrator.⁴⁷ Essentially, a suspicious reader questions everything as it is related by the author and narrator. The suspicious reader assumes that there exist a variety of stories, behind the version of the narrative as the author has written it, each of which illustrate different ideological principles. She presupposes that these alternate stories can be discovered and articulated by acting on her suspicions of the trustworthiness of the author and narrator.

⁴⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 176.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 176.

⁴⁷ As I am dealing in this research project with biblical gospels, roman legends and the fictional work of a male novelist – all of which are written and narrated by men – I will refer to ‘author’ and ‘narrator’ with the male pronoun in my discussions of narrative and discourse theory. However, I have otherwise replaced the traditional male generic pronoun with the female pronoun throughout this work, in order to subvert the mainstream use of the male pronoun as generic.

In order to adopt such a suspicious interpretive framework, a reader must first set herself apart from the 'ideal reader' envisioned by the author.⁴⁸ As feminist biblical scholar Alice Bach has articulated, the author of a biblical text has an ideal audience in mind, a set of readers that the author assumes will share his ideologies and cultural belief systems.⁴⁹ This ideal reader, constructed by the author and implicitly addressed by the narrator, is one who not only shares the author's ideologies, but who also has faith in the narrator's articulation of the story. Often, the actual reader of a text will unconsciously align her perspective with that of the author's ideal reader. Schüssler Fiorenza claims that

since readers align themselves with the dominant voice and model presented by the kyriocentric text, a hermeneutics of suspicion critically analyzes such dominant strategies of meaning making.⁵⁰

Bach has patterned a technique by which the actual reader may distance herself from the author's ideal reader, in order to better evaluate the text with suspicion. Drawing from the work of Gerald Prince,⁵¹ Bach has assigned to the author's ideal reader the designation of "narratee."⁵² Bach gives the narratee, or ideal reader, a consciousness that is present within the narrative itself. In this way, the narratee becomes another character in the story, one who is in most cases unnamed and invisible.⁵³

⁴⁸ Alice Bach, "Signs of the Flesh," 355.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 176. While it is often true that an actual reader will align herself with the ideal reader of a text, Mieke Bal has also stated that the *actual* reader of a text will be more or less distanced from the perspective of the *ideal* reader, depending on how many of the social, political, and gender codes the actual reader shares with the narrator. The greater the disparity between codes, the greater the distance between the perspectives of the ideal reader and the actual reader. For more information, refer to Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference*.

⁵¹ Gerald Prince, "Introduction to the Study of the Narratee," *Reader-Response Criticism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 7-25.

⁵² Bach, "Signs of the Flesh," 352.

⁵³ Ibid.

By recognizing the narratee as a character within the story, a suspicious reader is better able to discern the hidden intent of the author, as he articulates the story through the narrator.⁵⁴ The suspicious reader is also able to distance herself from the perspective of the narratee, and to approach the story from an alternate perspective, one not aligned with the narrator and author. From this position, the reader opens up the possibility of questioning the narrator's version of the story.

Having distanced herself from the narratee, the reader is inserting yet another character into the story. The reader herself becomes another unnamed and invisible character in the narrative, and is able to observe the action as it unfolds from alternate perspectives. As a second invisible character within the story, the reader is free to move around: she is able to change positions, to watch the action from a variety of angles, to shift her focus from the perspective directed by the narrator. From this fluid and adaptable position, the suspicious reader is able to entertain a host of alternative articulations of the story.

Robbins uses this technique throughout *Skinny Legs and All*. In this novel, he displays a marked suspicion of the reliability of the biblical narrators and authors. Without making any distinctions between narrator and author, Robbins questions their ability to adequately relate the stories of Salome and Jezebel, and in fact of the entire history of the early Judeo-Christian tradition. Adopting a strategy of suspicious interpretation of the biblical text, Robbins "investigates it as to its ideological functions in the interest of domination."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 175.

From this position of suspicion, Robbins puts the biblical narration of these stories in dialogue with other historical sources. In the case of his deconstruction of the Salome narrative, the primary outside historical source is Josephus' account of John the Baptist's execution. However, Robbins also uses other unnamed historical sources for alternative interpretations of the place of women, and of female sexuality, in early Middle Eastern cultures (mainly Phoenician and Hebrew), framing an understanding of these cultures from the perspectives of the women themselves.

In deconstructing the biblical history surrounding the Salome and Jezebel narratives, Robbins recognizes the arbitrariness of the author's single narratological point of view. He recognizes too the oppressive ideological limitations associated with that point of view, especially the obliteration of the woman's perspective of the action, and the oppressive gender politics resultant from this. Schüssler Fiorenza has stated that "a hermeneutics of suspicion is concerned with the distorted ways in which wo/men's actual presences and practices are constructed and represented..."⁵⁶ Acknowledging the extent to which the biblical Salome and Jezebel narratives censor the female perspective, in his reconstructed version of events, Robbins dissociates himself from the ideal reader, and 'listens' to the story from different perspectives. He situates the point of view, not with the biblical narrator, but in three other alternate places:

- 1) The story of Jezebel is told from the vantage point of Conch Shell and Painted Stick, ritual objects used by Jezebel in the service of the goddess Astarte. These objects do not tell the story from a Jewish perspective, but as male and female worshippers of a pagan deity. In their version of the Jezebel narrative, she is not a painted harlot, murderess, or immoral pagan. Rather, Jezebel is portrayed by Conch Shell and Painted Stick as a very spiritual devotee of Astarte. She is a

⁵⁶ Ibid., 176.

woman who, the victim of a patriarchal culture, had been taken from her own country, religion, and culture, and married to a Jewish king. In this account of her life, Jezebel's worship of Astarte is not a manifestation of her immorality. Her actions are not vindictive, but rather reasonable responses to patriarchal persecution and an enduring devotion to her religious beliefs and traditions.⁵⁷ The objects' retelling of the Jezebel story informs Robbins' reconstruction of the Salome story in two ways: first, it reconstructs the history of women's spiritual and sexual roles in biblical Jewish culture, of which Salome is a part; second, it reinforces Robbins' audience's willingness to approach the biblical texts and their commentaries with suspicion, and to submit to Robbins' alternate interpretation of these texts.

- 2) The socio-political climates surrounding the biblical narrations of the Salome and Jezebel stories are related by two political radicals, Spike and Abu. Like that of Conch Shell and Painted Stick, this alternate biblical narration reconstructs the roles of women and of female sexuality in Judeo-Christian history, in this case from a human perspective. We saw an example of this earlier, when Abu reconstructed the importance of the tambourine as a feminine instrument in the worship of Astarte.⁵⁸ Spike and Abu reframe the socio-political climates of the biblical texts, without privileging what Robbins perceives as a patriarchal Jewish perspective. Rather, they privilege Robbins' female-centered spirituality. This alternate version of history informs Robbins' reconstructed Salome in the same way as does the narration of Conch Shell and Painted Stick: it places female roles and feminine sexuality in the foreground, and it reinforces the novel's reader's own suspicion of the biblical narrators.
- 3) Unlike the other reconstructions illustrated above, the story of Salome is only superficially reconstructed historically. The Salome narrative is, however, dramatically reenacted in the present tense of the novel. Robbins modernizes the principle characters in the biblical Salome narrative, and reframes the plot to unfold in a contemporary setting. Robbins changes more than just the setting of

⁵⁷ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 49-52, 99-100.

⁵⁸ See "Chapter Two," 73.

the plot and the names of the principle players. By changing the narrative point of view, and the position from which the audience ‘hears’ the narration, Robbins effectively changes the ideologies communicated through the biblical Salome stories. Having previously established a climate of suspicion in his audience, through the socio-political and religious reconstructions described above, Robbins is easily able to adopt a mantle of credibility in his reconstructions of the characters, plot, and ideologies of the Salome narrative. This reconstruction favours Robbins’ ideological belief in the superiority of the feminine principle over the masculine as an aspect of divinity.

Guided by the romantic feminist perspective he adopts throughout the novel and using a hermeneutics of suspicion, Robbins’ deconstructive process locates areas in the biblical narrative where the positive and divine aspects of femininity and female sexuality are either omitted, or framed as evil and destructive. The feminine principle, especially as it is manifested in female sexuality, is subsequently privileged in his reconstructions. As Robbins’ reconstructed Salome is the human embodiment of the feminine principle of divinity, this is particularly evident in his retelling of the Salome narrative.

Robbins’ focus on female sexuality in his reconstruction of Salome is in part a result of his use of a hermeneutics of sensuality. A hermeneutics of sensuality places priority on elements of sexuality (not to be confused with gender) and sensuality in a given text.⁵⁹ Using a hermeneutics of sensuality affords a reader the opportunity of

⁵⁹ For elaborations on the hermeneutics of sensuality, a variety of sources and examples exist. See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 2 vols., trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990). In volume one of this work, Foucault refers to this process as a hermeneutics of desire. However, as I demonstrate shortly, others have appropriated this term to mean something quite distinct, and so I have adopted the alternate term “hermeneutics of sensuality” to refer to this particular process. A hermeneutics of sensuality and Foucault’s hermeneutics of desire refer to the same hermeneutic technique. See also, Bach, “Introduction: Man’s World, Women’s Place: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible”; Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible*; Esther DeBoer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1977); Kevin Harris, *Sex, Ideology and Religion: The Representations of Women in the Bible* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984); Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphore* (London:

privileging these elements, placing them in the foreground, and exposing the aspects of the narrative that have heretofore hidden these elements from view. This hermeneutic device is the method by which Robbins is able to uncover in the biblical narrative elements of female sexuality and sensuality.

As I demonstrated in the first chapter of this work, there is very little of either sexuality or sensuality in the biblical narrative proper. However, elements of these are found in the mirroring Roman legends, and in early church interpretations of Salome's character, each of which inform the larger discourse around Salome. Robbins uncovers the elements of sensuality and sexuality in Salome's character, foregrounding them in his characterization of her. In Robbins' reconstruction of the Salome figure, she is primarily a sexual being. Indeed, as I demonstrate earlier in this chapter, she is the embodiment of both ultimate female sexuality and the feminine principle.

This characterization of Salome as a primarily sexual being is consistent with Robbins' fidelity to a romantic feminist perspective. From Robbins' feminist position, a strong and healthy female sexuality, as an aspect of the feminine principle, is quintessentially divine, especially as that sexuality exists in contrast and in conjunction with its counterpart, male sexuality. Salome's sexuality, evident as she dances, is fueled by the spectatorship of the men in the audience, and the manifestation of their male sexuality:

The harder she danced, the more vividly she projected the image of the passive, slightly unwilling, recipient of male energy; and yet at the same time (though time had ceased to exist) she represented an agent of calamity, a cunning danger to all men. And through the veil of blue smoke and

HarperCollins, 1993); William E. Phipps, *Genesis and Gender: Biblical Myths of Sexuality and their Cultural Impact* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989); Sandra Rushing, *The Magdalene Legacy: Exploring the Wounded Icon of Sexuality* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1994).

red light, and white steam off the *falafel* trays, every expressionless face – locked in its zone between ego and release, anxiety and delight – every face was thrust up at her.⁶⁰

By focusing on the dynamic relationship between male and female sexuality exhibited during Salome's dance, and the ways in which this dynamic relationship deifies the feminine principle, Robbins attempts to 'rescue' female sexuality – and by consequence the feminine principle – from their biblical omissions, vilifications, and criticisms.

Robbins' feminine principle exists in contrast to, and in a dynamic relationship with, the masculine principle. For Robbins, the masculine principle is largely exemplified by humour, and is revealed through a hermeneutics of laughter. Boomer Petway, the human embodiment of the masculine principle in this novel, is primarily characterized by his sense of humour.

For Robbins, humour is more than the primary characteristic of the masculine principle, however. It is also a tool by which he is able to subvert biblical exclusions and demonizations of the feminine principle. A hermeneutics of laughter engages the biblical text in two ways, both deconstructive and reconstructive. In its capacity as a tool for deconstruction, a hermeneutics of laughter is a critical and suspicious exploration of humour in the biblical texts, as well as in Judeo-Christian history, uncovering hidden elements of humour that are already extent within the text and/or tradition.⁶¹ In its reconstructive capacity, a hermeneutics of laughter is a tool by which a biblical

⁶⁰ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 341.

⁶¹ See for example Elton Trueblood, *The Humour of Christ* (Norwich, UK: Fletcher & Son, 1964); J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

reconstructionist may inject elements of humour into the text and/or tradition, for the purposes of subverting mainstream and oppressive ideologies.⁶²

Humour can be used as a narratological tool to subvert mainstream ideologies that are absurd, oppressive, or both. Literary theorist Northrop Frye claims that “humor is intimately connected with the theme of the absurd or irrational law that the action of comedy moves toward breaking.”⁶³ Philosopher John Morreall seconds this opinion, saying that humour is able to liberate people from the constraints of social mores and moral codes:

When we look at our own culture with a sense of humor, we see our customs, which we often take for granted as the natural way to do things, as just one possible way of doing things. Humor may even override moral constraints.⁶⁴

Uncovering what is potentially humorous in the biblical text, and reframing the biblical narrative itself in a humorous light is a technique used by Robbins throughout *Skinny Legs and All* to critique social mores, religious and political institutions, and their oppressive moral characteristics. Robbins reveals humour in the biblical text through the reconstructions of Jewish history by Conch Shell, Painted Stick, Spike and Abu. For example, Robbins incorporates humour into Spoon and Can o’ Beans’ recollection of Conch Shell’s narration of Salome’s dance:

[In the Second Temple,] Conch Shell served as a chalice to cup the juices of existence. Painted Stick was a rod for psychic lightning, a post to which the Milky Way was moored.

Passing under the hated Roman eagle, ignoring its military talons the way the other pilgrims did, young Jesus would have witnessed those ceremonies. In contrast to the hypocrisy, doctrinairism, and corruption that was becoming

⁶² Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*.

⁶³ Frye, “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths,” 169.

⁶⁴ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 102.

rampant among the Temple hierarchy (and that would soon incite him to open revolt), Jesus must have found the rituals nourishing. On the other hand, they may have made him uncomfortable. Certainly, those who were to establish a religion in his name were uncomfortable with them. For those who would pray but not dance, fast but not feast, baptize but not splash, flog but not fuck, for those who would buy spirit but sell soul, crown Father but deceive Mother, those men found Herod's Temple a threatening place at vernal equinox and under a harvest moon.

As Can o' Beans recounted the rites, all that he/she had learned about them from the reticent stick and shell, Spoon felt a teensy bit uncomfortable, herself. There was a beauty and grace in them that appealed to her refined sensibility, but they made her queasy, nonetheless. The part that really made her squirm, however, was the part about Salome. How the teenage Salome had driven her stepfather, poor beleaguered King Herod, over the brink of sanity the night she danced the Dance of the Seven Veils, skinny legs and all.

"That must have been some dance," said Can o' Beans. "Herod never got over it."

"Oh but ma'am/sir, it wasn't just that lewd hootchey-kootch that sickened Herod. He was already suffering from melancholy and rejection. Why, to entice Salome to dance, he had to promise to behead John the Baptist. Served up the head on a silver platter. Ooo, isn't that just to gross! A human head on a dish like a pot roast. I can't bear to think about it."

"It was Herod's wife, supposedly, Salome's mother, who wanted John the Baptist killed."

"No matter. Herod agreed to it. Just to get a good look at that young girl. Kiddie porn, they call it nowadays..."

"She was sixteen. In that era, a sixteen-year-old was in every respect a woman."

"Not the point, begging your pardon. The point is that it was Herod's own accumulated wickedness that drove him crazy, not some shameful feminine display."

"Perhaps you're right, Miss Spoon. Who knows what causes the human brain to split its britches[...] In any event, the king of Judea had a lot of spit in his harmonica. By the time Salome's dance was done, he was playing a feeble tune, indeed. Defiant Jews cut down the Roman eagle from the Temple while he was still alive, slobbering and raving on his couch.

“Good for them. Finally, he was too drunk and depraved to stop them from cleansing God’s house.”

“Well, the eagle was gone, but the Temple didn’t change all that much. Miss Conch still poured at festival times, and Mr. Stick was always on hand if some priest should take a notion to stir the stew of sex and stars...”⁶⁵

Here, Robbins uses humour as a tool to facilitate a critical deconstruction and reconstruction of the story. In this narration of the historical Salome story, Robbins largely replicates the biblical plot, as well as the traditional interpretations of events. Herod already “beleaguered” by his political responsibilities, Herodias’ desire to have John the Baptist killed, Herod’s promise to Salome of the Baptist’s head – all of these mirror the biblical narrative. However, Robbins adds a few details not found in the biblical narrative, like that Herod had promised the Baptist’s head to Salome *before* she danced, Salome’s age, and that Salome danced “The Dance of the Seven Veils,” changing in part the plot of the story.

Despite the inconsistencies between the passage quoted above and the biblical Salome narratives, the most glaring variations are not plot-oriented, but ideological, and are communicated principally through Robbins’ injection of humour. By portraying Herod in a humorous fashion, Robbins effectively removes Salome from the spotlight of early Christian vilification. Herod becomes the one vilified. Via his use of a hermeneutics of laughter, in this instance Robbins is able to restate his romantic feminist ideal of the feminine principle as divine. This is further substantiated by Robbins’ juxtaposition of the idealistically portrayed feminine and matriarchal religious traditions of Conch Shell and Painted Stick, with the humorously disparaged patriarchy and sexual reticence of the Judeo-Christian traditions. Robbins is able, through a reconstructive hermeneutics of

⁶⁵ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 242-244.

laughter, to subvert what he sees as “absurd or irrational,”⁶⁶ or even potentially dangerous, in the Judeo-Christian traditions.

Frye says that,

the movement from... a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally... a movement from illusion to reality... Hence, the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the illusions caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage.⁶⁷

Robbins uses a hermeneutics of laughter in his treatment of biblical plots and characters in order to promote such a movement from what he sees as “habit,... bondage, [and] arbitrary law.” Robbins’ ideology espouses a social and religious climate that accentuates the feminine, and through humour, attempts to subvert social and religious traditions that inhibit full expression of the feminine. In fact, not only does Robbins use laughter to destabilize what he perceives as oppressive patriarchal social and religious institutions, he also mirrors Frye by characterizing these institutions throughout the novel as “veils” and “illusions” that obscure humanity’s vision of “reality.” These veils and illusions are lifted as Salome discards her veils during her performance of *The Dance of the Seven Veils*.

Robbins’ focus on female sexuality and the deification of the feminine principle is not only a result of his use of the hermeneutics of sensuality. Nor does he subvert traditional discourses around Salome solely through his use of a hermeneutics of laughter. Robbins also utilizes a hermeneutics of desire to achieve these ends. A

⁶⁶ Frye, “Archetypal Criticism,” 169.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

hermeneutics of desire refers not to emphasizing what is sexual or sensual in a text, but to the desire of a reader to see in a text what she wishes to see.⁶⁸ John Havea writes:

Reading is a hermeneutics of desire. We read for the desires of literary characters, of the narrator, and of ourselves. When these desires clash, we take sides, but we are not obliged to always side with the narrator, nor with the divine literary character. This reading for desire echoes a popular critique of structuralism and semiotics: the refusal to read behind the systems of signification and textual structures.

To desire a text is to surrender to it, not in submission, but in commitment to wrestle with it in so far as we can (response-ability), like Jacob at Peniel, hoping to limp away with a reading. And because the act of surrendering involves resistance, at least the resistance to other desires, we are always readers in/of texts...⁶⁹

In his reconstruction of Salome, Robbins *desires* to rescue her from centuries of vilifying and disparaging characterizations. Robbins enters into the biblical text, and into the larger discourse of Salome, and wrestles with the desires of the biblical authors, narrators, and commentators in order to uncover a meaning in the text that speaks to his own desires, his own romantic feminist ideologies. Using a hermeneutics of desire, Robbins is able to reread the biblical texts and their early interpretations with a new eye, emphasizing previously overlooked aspects of the narratives that reflect what he would like these texts to say.

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, in *History of Sexuality*, defined “hermeneutics of desire” as our contemporary tendency to define sexual behaviours as either moral or perverse. For Foucault, this is contrasted with the ancient Greek “aesthetics of existence,” which refers to “a way of life whose moral value did not depend either on one’s being in conformity with a code of behavior, or on an effort of purification, but on certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected,” *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 89. In reference to literary and narrative analysis, however, a hermeneutics of desire has been defined as the desire to wrestle with a text, and to construct personal and fulfilling meanings from that text. See John Havea, “To Love Cain More Than God, In Other Words, Nod-y Gen 4:1-16,” http://www.tongatapu.net.to/tonga/convictions/christianity/gen4_1_16.html [August 29, 2004].

⁶⁹ Havea.

Robbins desires that the biblical texts reflect his own religious and political ideologies. For Robbins, these ideologies include a deification of the feminine principle and promotion of his romantic feminist agenda. Unable to locate these in mainstream and traditional interpretations of the biblical Salome narrative, Robbins approaches the texts and their traditional interpretations with suspicion, and ferrets out aspects of what he perceives as a liberatory female sexuality.

This liberatory female sexuality is illustrated in his construction of Salome as the personification of the feminine principle. Using the four hermeneutical techniques described above, Robbins builds on the elements of sexuality and sensuality found in biblical, post-biblical, and Roman characterizations of the Salome figure. However, Robbins subverts traditional interpretations of these elements by framing them as positive traits that affirm a healthy spirituality, and by infusing the elements of sexuality with divinity.

Salome's female sexuality exists in its most powerful form in conjunction with male sexuality and the masculine principle. It is this spiritual message that lies behind Robbins' reconstruction of the Salome figure: that by deifying the feminine principle, and by exploring the dynamic relationship of male and female sexuality, we will be able to achieve religious, spiritual, and social harmony, as well as personal self-fulfillment.

CHAPTER THREE

A FEMINIST LITERARY-BIBLICAL CRITIQUE OF TOM ROBBINS' SALOME

Robbins' reconstruction of Salome as an archetypal embodiment of the divine feminine principle corresponds to his romantic feminist agenda. His contemporary Salome glorifies what is customarily considered "feminine" in the western traditions. In his effort to reconstruct a biblical figure that articulates this romantic vision of feminist liberation, Robbins' work is indisputably successful. What *is* disputable, however, is whether his romantic feminist perspective adequately addresses regimes of domination and oppression, and subsequently whether Robbins' biblical reconstruction functions in the process of feminist liberation from oppression.

Schüssler Fiorenza defines oppression, oppressive power and domination as "the ability of one person or group to dominate and exploit the other,"¹ often substantiated by an "ethics of domination," where "one's sense of importance, goodness, and worth depends on the negation of those qualities in someone else, who must be in some way insignificant and inferior if I am to be important and great."² She claims that emancipatory discourses "insist that the humanity of both oppressor and oppressed is severely deformed by the power of domination which liberation theologians have named structural sin."³ According to Schüssler Fiorenza, *Christian* emancipatory discourses also must recognize that 1) 'the oppressed' refers most often to women and children;⁴ and 2)

¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 87.

² *Ibid.*, 88.

³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 44. Here, Schüssler Fiorenza writes that "... more than half of the poor and hungry in the world are women and children dependent on women. Women and children represent

within a Judeo-Christian culture, “the Bible still functions today as a religious justification and ideological legitimization of patriarchy.”⁵

In order to destabilize the ways in which women, children, and other marginalized peoples are oppressed by the biblical text and its interpretations, Schüssler Fiorenza advocates adopting a “critical interpretation for liberation.”⁶ Such a critical biblical interpretation must use a hermeneutics of suspicion to explore “how the bible is used to incalculable mindsets and attitudes of submission and dependency as ‘obedience’ to the will of G*d [sic] that dispose us to accept and internalize violence and prejudice.”⁷ A hermeneutics of suspicion, as I articulated in the preceding chapter, attempts to recognize the underlying assumptions and goals of the biblical authors and narrators. It also acknowledges the rhetorical nature of the biblical texts: “... the Bible is a cacophony of interested historical voices and a field of rhetorical struggles in which questions of truth and meaning are being negotiated.”⁸ In acknowledging the rhetorical nature of the biblical texts, admitting their attempts to influence the reader to a particular point of view, the critical biblical reader is able to distance herself from the ideal reader, and read alternate truths and meanings into the text.

the majority of the ‘oppressed,’ and poor and Third World women must bear the triple burden of sexism, racism, and classism. If liberation theologians make the ‘option for the oppressed’ the key to their theological endeavors, then they must articulate that ‘the oppressed’ are women.”

⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, xi. Schüssler Fiorenza admits, however, that different forms of feminism have different understandings of the ways in which the Bible can be used as a tool of oppression. For further information, refer to the introduction of Schüssler Fiorenza’s *Bread Not Stone*, as well as to “Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Women’s Bible*” in her volume, *Searching the Scriptures*, vol. 1.

⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman’s Bible*,” 8.

PART ONE: Universal Woman and the “Scarlet Lady”

Using a hermeneutics of suspicion to read Robbins' reconstruction of Salome, I find that Robbins adopts these attributes of a feminist biblical interpretation in his reconstruction. He has attempted, through his reconstruction of Salome, to subvert ethics of domination and structural sins in Western culture that arise from oppressive interpretations of the biblical texts – although he confines his criticisms primarily to those ethics of domination and structural sin that are sexual in nature. He has critiqued institutionalized religious traditions that operate through dogma, and that perpetuate these ethics of domination. Through his construction of the various characters in *Skinny Legs and All* and the ways in which the happiness of each individual character is dependent upon the spiritual freedom and fulfillment of the other characters, Robbins has demonstrated that in patriarchal systems of oppression, both oppressor and oppressed are negatively affected by structures of domination and submission. He has further related that women – again, especially in reference to women's sexuality – are the ones primarily oppressed in these structures. In his deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the biblical Salome narrative, Robbins has adopted a hermeneutics of suspicion, challenging the reliability of the biblical author/narrator, and questioning the rhetorical stance of the biblical text. He has distanced himself from the ideal reader, and read alternate truths and meanings into the text. Robbins has adhered to the basic requirements of what need be done for a critical interpretation for liberation. And yet, he has not provided his readers with a liberatory reconstruction of the Salome narrative. While he has undertaken the *tasks* of a feminist interpretation of the biblical text, he has not done so with an eye to

egalitarian feminist liberation. Robbins has simply replaced one form of oppression with another.

Robbins' reconstruction of Salome affirms his belief in the spiritual supremacy and deification of the feminine principle. In *Salome*, he has constructed a model of divinity for both men and women – for women to emulate, and men to adore. From Robbins' romantic feminist perspective, this is indeed liberatory for women. He sees women's sexuality as having been oppressed by patriarchal systems of domination, and believes that in order to redress this oppression, Judeo-Christian cultures need to embrace the sexual differences between men and women, glorifying female sexuality and the feminine. It is this very glorification of "the feminine" that is troublesome to a critical biblical interpretation for liberation.

In this reconstructive process, Robbins' has adopted what Claudia V. Camp disparagingly refers to as a "sublimationist hermeneutic."⁹ Such a hermeneutic, even though it often names itself as feminist,

posits an essential distinction between the masculine and the feminine. Rather than denigrating the feminine, however, as androcentric interpretation would do, it exalts what it takes to be female traits as equal to or higher than the male.¹⁰

Schüssler Fiorenza claims that such an exaltation of the feminine is harmful for three reasons: first, it perpetuates unattainable images of women; second, it solidifies women's role as Other; and third, it maintains constructions of a universal, monolithic,

⁹ Claudia V. Camp, "Feminist Theological Hermeneutics: Canon and Christian Identity," *Searching the Scriptures, Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and abstract definition of 'woman' that does not correspond to the lived experiences of actual women.

Feminist cultural theories of essentialist theologies that glorify "true womanhood" and "the feminine," whether their godfathers be Goethe, Schleiermacher, Jung, Tillich, Lacan, Derrida, Teilhard de Chardin, or Pope John Paul II, have valorized abstract universal Woman as body, sexuality, maternity, or nature, or as feminine archetype, essence, or divinity. Yet in their attempt to construct a positive discourse on Woman, these theories or theologies of the feminine have kept in sustained circulation the discourses of classical Western philosophy and theology on gender asymmetry, gender polarity, and gender complementarity—discourses that understand Man as the subject of history, culture, and religion while seeing Woman as the Other.

This essentialist European-American elite male discourse on Woman as the Other of Man—the politics of Otherness—has also been perpetuated by women's and gender studies. A theoretical approach that professes to read the Bible *as a woman* remains within the dualistic framework of Western culture and often assumes an essentialist understanding of woman.¹¹

Robbins does not read the biblical Salome narrative "as a woman." However, through his reading of the text as a man *deifying* the ideal woman, he does reconstruct Salome to "glorify 'true womanhood' and 'the feminine,'" and in doing so, has "valorized abstract universal Woman... as feminine archetype, essence, or divinity." Moreover, this is no accident: Robbins has intended to construct just such a Salome. Throughout his novel, Robbins systematically advocates a return to what he believes to be "traditional," matriarchal religious adoration of the feminine and female sexuality, as it exists in relation to the masculine and male sexuality.¹² Robbins' glorification of 'the

¹¹Schüssler Fiorenza, "Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman's Bible*," 13-14.

¹² Robbins' push toward a matriarchal social and religious system as an alternative to the patriarchal oppressions of the Judeo-Christian traditions is chiefly demonstrated in the arguments of Conch Shell and

feminine' continues to exist in polarization to the normative 'masculine,' and because of this, his reconstructed Salome continues to exist as Other. In this case, her Otherness is cloaked in filmy chiffon, paraded in front of a largely male audience, and called "divine."

In *Skinny Legs and All*, the masculine principle, to which Salome's embodiment of divine femininity is contrasted, is characterized primarily by laughter. Robbins communicates the masculine principle chiefly through his construction of Ellen Cherry's husband, Boomer. And just as Salome has a non-human counterpart in Conch Shell, so does Boomer share his representation of the masculine principle with a non-human counterpart: the sculpture he creates of the trickster figure, Pales. Robbins employs a hermeneutics of laughter to deconstruct oppressive sexual norms and mores in the Judeo-Christian traditions, and uses humour in his reconstruction of these sexual norms and mores. However, he situates the subversive power of humour squarely with the masculine principle. Positioning the feminine principle in contrast to the masculine principle restricts women's access to the power of laughter and humour. Within the dualistic paradigm of masculine/feminine constructed by Robbins, the only access women have to this power of subversion is through their embodiment of the feminine principle, existing in dynamic relationship with the masculine. It is the dynamic relationship between masculine and feminine principles that is exemplified by Boomer's sculpture of Pales.

Painted Stick. Throughout the novel, they relate their version of the rise of Judaism in the Middle East. From their perspective, the perspective sanctioned by Robbins' narrator, the earlier Babylonian matriarchal religious system was spiritually and socially superior to the turmoil and oppressions established by the domination of Judaism over all other religious traditions. The stories of Conch Shell and Painted Stick are substantiated by parallel arguments from other characters in the novel. Spike and Abu expound at length on the atrocities of Judaism and Islam, speaking like adoring lovers of a long-lost tradition that venerated the feminine. Uncle Buddy's dangerous religious fanaticism – mirroring that of John the Baptist, who heralded the coming of Christ – is contrasted with Patsy's go-go dancing, strong female sexuality, and innate woman's knowledge. Ellen Cherry and Boomer struggle in their relationship, until Ellen Cherry witnesses Salome's dance, and with the wisdom afforded her by this witness, she is able to embody the feminine principle, and substitutes Salome's matriarchal religious tenets for her previously held Christian beliefs.

However, even in this dynamic relationship between masculine and feminine, the structures of power are unbalanced: women – now embodying the feminine principle – do not *control* the power of humour; they continue to be dependent upon men to supply whatever humour might be used to destabilize systems of oppression. In this case, whatever constitutes a system of oppression, as well as what form a rebellion through humour will take, are determined by the perspectives of the men who embody the masculine principle, since they control the power of humour. In Robbins' conception of a dynamic relationship between masculine and feminine, women control the power of sexuality, in itself male-constructed; men control the subversive power of humour. Only by aligning themselves to the masculine principle, are women able to use the liberating effects of laughter, and only within the parameters determined by men.

Further, by constructing a divine feminine principle in opposition to the masculine principle, Robbins is not subverting the mainstream "male gaze" of patriarchy that defines our world. Rather, he is reinforcing it, simply shifting the focus of the male gaze from masculine to feminine. In Robbins' reconstruction, it is still the male doing the gazing. This tactic does not challenge patriarchal oppressions, but instead substantiates them:

Feminists have long recognized the importance of gender as an analytic category. They have noted that "male" and "female" are defined in relation to one another and that both definitions underwrite patriarchy.¹³

As Schüssler Fiorenza articulates, in a patriarchal social system, essentialist definitions of 'Woman,' however liberatory their intent, "understand Man as the subject... while seeing

¹³ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, "Literary-Critical Methods," *Searching the Scriptures, Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 244.

Woman as the Other.”¹⁴ By defining the divinity of the feminine over and against that of the masculine, Robbins is privileging masculinity as the yardstick by which divine femininity is measured.

Robbins’ definition of what constitutes ‘ideal womanhood’ and ‘divine femininity’ is not only oppressive in its submissive role to masculinity. Robbins’ feminine principle in itself is an unattainable model for female behaviour. In his reconstruction of Salome, Robbins has adopted the idea of the Christian “White Lady”¹⁵ – manifest in the Virgin Mary, the embodiment of virtue and holiness; a paradox of virginity and motherhood, innocence and wisdom; often elite, white, educated, and refined; to which all woman should hope to attain – and transformed the White Lady into a “Scarlet Lady.” Robbins’ redefined Christian archetype of female holiness is constructed as elite, refined, innocent, wise, and highly – *impossibly* - sexualized. Just as the ideals of the White Lady present an unattainable model of womanhood, so do those of Robbins’ Scarlet Lady. Through his construction of Salome as the Scarlet Lady, Robbins endorses a universal and ideal model of female sexuality that does not correspond to women’s lived experiences of their sexualities, experiences that are neither universal nor ideal.

In her role as the Scarlet Lady, Robbins’ Salome is more than simply an unattainable ideal. Her universalism is also problematic. The lack of ambiguity in the characterization of such a model reduces Salome to a mere object, albeit a divine one. In *Skinny Legs and All*, Salome is both 1) objectified through the male gaze, and 2) an object without the opportunity to grow and change. The construction of Salome as a

¹⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, “Introduction: Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman’s Bible*,” 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

universal 'object' is highlighted, as I demonstrate in more detail shortly, by Robbins' narration of her Dance of the Seven Veils, wherein she is a passive object of enlightenment. This objectification is reinforced by his description of the ways in which Salome is watched as she dances: "...she didn't think quite so much as she was thought."¹⁶ Salome does not watch; she is watched. She does not do; she is done through. She does not think; she is thought. Robbins' objectification of Salome as she dances strengthens the patriarchal male gaze established throughout the novel by the opposition of masculine and feminine principles.

As a model for female behaviour, not only is Salome unattainable, but the very *attempt* to attain the position of sanctified Scarlet Lady maintains patriarchal structures, and restricts women's freedom to define and redefine our identities. Says Rita Nakashima Brock,

... it is important to avoid the tendency to read stories about biblical women and men as examples of role models, as those who tell us how to be women and men. This tendency to find models often seems to happen especially to female characters, whose infrequent appearance as actors in the text seems to encourage elevating them, even when the biblical text does not present them as models. Making them such tends to sanitize them and to limit what they can tell us. The full ambiguity of their stories gets lost when we reduce them to heroes, searching for messages or moral principles to guide our actions.¹⁷

A universal archetype of 'Woman' presents a tyrannical ideal of womanhood and femininity – unchangeable, essentialist, and unassailable. A *holy* universal archetype of female is even more insidiously unassailable. By framing Salome as an alternative to the

¹⁶ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 341.

¹⁷ Rita Nakashima Brock, "Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom," *Searching the Scriptures, Volume One: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 72.

White Lady, Robbins is not only invoking an archetype, he is also invoking the authority of the Church, and of the divine. With this triple authority, Robbins takes a particular situation – his reconstruction of Salome’s Dance of the Seven Veils, and the characterization that follows from this situation – and universalizes it as an unchanging model of behaviour for all persons and contexts:

By ascribing universal implications to specific historical texts and cultural situations, the mythical archetype establishes an ideal form for all times, an unchanging pattern of behavior and theological structure for the community in which it serves as Sacred Scripture.¹⁸

Such a model of behaviour reduces women’s options for action when faced with shifting forms of oppression. And as it is cloaked in holiness, it carries with it the seemingly unarguable authority of God.

Robbins is using an existent theological structure, one that idealizes the White Lady, to give authority to an alternate theological structure, one that transfers this idealization from White Lady to Scarlet Lady. The behaviour advocated by modeling Robbins’ Scarlet Lady/Salome, in itself oppressive, maintains his alternate theological structure; meanwhile, the theological structure justifies modeling behaviour on the archetype of the Scarlet Lady. In his attempt to subvert one system of sexual oppression, Robbins’ has constructed a circular and self-fulfilling argument for an alternate system of sexual oppression.

Robbins’ reconstruction of Salome as archetype of the divine feminine principle is dangerous and oppressive in a multitude of ways. This archetypal model of behaviour perpetuates unattainable images of ideal womanhood, images that do not correspond to the lived experiences of women. Further, it solidifies women’s role as Other, as Robbins’

¹⁸ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 10.

definitions of the feminine principle and female sexuality continue to exist over and against that of the male. Third, Robbins' invocation of the holy White Lady in his construction of Salome as the Scarlet Lady gives his reconstruction an authority that inhibits critical questioning of Salome as a model for female behaviour.

PART TWO: Robbins' Narratological Authority

Robbins further establishes almost unquestionable authority in his reconstruction of Salome through two other sources. In the first place, he adopts many of the dominant stylistic elements of biblical narration. These characteristics, in and of themselves, carry with them a sense of unquestionable divine omniscience, and thus truth. By adopting these stylistic elements, Robbins is also able to assume the narrative power of biblical authority itself. Secondly, Robbins' historical reconstructions of the emergence of Judaism and of Salome's dance serve to substantiate his reconstruction of Salome herself with a mantle of historical 'factuality.' This mantle of historical factuality is further cemented by the narratorial authority with which Robbins recounts such histories.

Alice Bach outlines three major characteristics of the narratorial method used by biblical authors. These authors almost always use the third person omniscient voice, which is the vehicle through which they achieve the three following characteristics. Within the biblical narrative, the narrator is able to "move outside time and space."¹⁹ The biblical narrator is also privy to the thoughts and judgments of God.²⁰ Moreover, the

¹⁹ Bach, "Signs of the Flesh," 353.

²⁰ Ibid., 352.

biblical narrator “engages in extra-presentational acts –‘judgments, generalizations about the world...”²¹ which give him the power of judgment usually reserved for God. In fact, Bach argues that these three characteristics create a narrator that is knowledgeable *beyond* God: like a deity, the narrator exists outside the mortal boundaries of time and space; to compound this deification of the narrator, he not only has omnipotent knowledge of the events and characters in the story, but also of God him/herself. Furthermore, the narrator engages in acts that are considered to be the sole property of God. Insofar as the narrator possesses knowledge *of* God, as well as the same knowledge *as* God, he has knowledge *beyond* God. With this extra-divine knowledge, the biblical narrator has for his audience the authority of divine truth. As his readers, we are disinclined to question the gaze presented for us, to question the narrator’s version of the truth. We are essentially “seduced” into believing his articulation of the story. We become what Bach calls “ideal readers.”²²

Like the biblical authors, Robbins also uses the third person omniscient voice, giving his narrator the tools to adopt the privileges of the biblical narrators. Robbins’ narrator exists outside of time and space. The storylines in *Skinny Legs and All*, related by the narrator through the perspectives of a variety of characters, move intermittently through four time periods: aspects of pre-Judaic culture are articulated by the narrator through Conch Shell and Painted Stick; alternatives to the Hebrew Scriptures’ version of Judaic history are related by the narrator through Spike and Abu; early Christianity history is recounted by the novel’s narrator himself; and parts of the story in the most important time period to the novel, the present-day Judeo-Christian culture of

²¹ Ibid., 354.

²² Ibid.

contemporary North America, are communicated by the narrator through the perspective of Ellen Cherry. The narrations of pre-Judaic, Judaic and Christian histories are interspersed throughout the present-day plotlines of the novel, complementing and supplementing the intended meanings and ideologies of these plotlines. Sometimes, the histories are told in a historical context, as when Conch Shell and Painted Stick relate their roles in the First and Second Temples. During this type of narration, the reader is transported to the time period through the recounting of events. At other times, the histories are told as overt supplements to the present-day narration; in which case, the reader stays within the present time period, and learns of the recounted history from a distance. For instance, as Ellen Cherry discusses a recent bomb threat to the restaurant with her employers, Spike and Abu diverge into a historical explanation of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils:

“Somebody is just doing this for old times' sake,” Abu said, smiling. “Who would have thought that religious terrorists could be sentimental?”

“No,” said Spike. “I'm thinking it's the cops what're making the threat. They got a party scheduled and are short on liquor.”

“You all aren't taking this very seriously,” said Ellen Cherry....

“Of all people I'm taking it seriously,” [Spike] said. “But I'm thinking it's just some *shikker* what's mad because our little lady's not doing the Dance of the Seven Veils.”

“What is it with this dance?” asked Ellen Cherry. “Everybody's going on about it like it was free sex and ice cream, but nobody knows spit about it.”...

“But it is an actual dance,” put in Abu. “And apparently it is included in her repertoire.”

“Well, what's so special about it? Isn't it out of the Bible or something?”

It was barely three o'clock, but traffic was already gridlocked at the Forty-ninth Street exit from the East River Drive. The blaring horns and racing engines were so loud

that Ellen Cherry flirted with earache straining to hear Abu's explanation. "No, it is mentioned nowhere by name in the Bible, although Josephus the historian records that it is the dance performed by the biblical Salome at the birthday party of her stepfather, Herod."

"The party where John the Baptist's head jumped out of the cake?"

"So to speak. Salome, incidentally, is the same Semitic word as *shalom* or *salem*. In other words, 'peace.' Thus our beloved city, Jerusalem, is both the House of Peace and the House of the Dancing Girl."

"Of what?"

"The Dancing Girl."

"That's sweet," said Ellen Cherry.

"I like it," said Spike.

Abu went on. "The dance itself predates Herod and that particular Salome, his stepdaughter. In fact, it is very ancient and thoroughly pagan. It is connected to the myth of the cyclic death of the sun god. His moon goddess travels to the underworld to rescue him, but to get him back she has got to drop one of her seven articles of clothing at each of its seven gates."

"Why?"

"I have no clue. But the reenactment of the story apparently continued well into Roman times. Supported by the Hebrews. A dancer would drop a veil at each of the seven gates of the Temple in Jerusalem. At the seventh gate, she was in her birthday suit, though we need not suppose that to be the reason Herod requested the dance at his birthday party. I have read that the veils represented layers of illusion. As each veil peeled away, an illusion was destroyed, until finally some great central mystery of life was revealed."

"What?" asked Ellen Cherry. "I missed that."²³

This passage, and others like it, serves two functions. In the first instance, it confirms Robbins' narrator's knowledge of events, knowledge that transcends limits of time and space. The narrator, using Spike and Abu as mouthpieces, is equally knowledgeable about North American and Middle Eastern cultures, past and present. Secondly, this type of passage establishes a direct relationship between Robbins'

²³ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 401-02.

reconstructed history and the present day. The relationship between past and present aids in constructing and validating a cyclic discourse around such themes as female sexuality, spiritual enlightenment, and the Dance of the Seven Veils, which in turn establishes a foundation for the narrator's articulation of Robbins' romantic feminist veneration of the divine feminine principle. In this particular passage, Robbins sets up the Dance of the Seven Veils with "peace", also linking Salome/shalom/salem and her dance, with its display of female sexuality, to spiritual enlightenment. These associations are authenticated for the reader by the narrator's timeless knowledge of past and present.

Robbins also mimics the biblical narrators by presenting his own unnamed narrator as being on the inside track with universal truths, with the divine. Robbins' narrator is privy to the knowledge and judgments of deity. In the first chapter of *Skinny Legs and All*, Robbins' narrator, through the consciousness of Conch Shell and Painted Stick (although not in their actual voices), historically reconstructs biblical condemnation of the worship of Baal.²⁴ Claiming that Baal was worshipped only as the consort of the goddess Astarte, herself worshipped across cultures, Robbins undermines the power of patriarchal monotheistic Judaism by comparing the power of God to that of the goddess:

In comparison, "God," as we moderns call Yahweh (often misspelled "Jehovah"), was a Yahny-come-lately who could never approach her enormous popularity. She was the mother of God, as indeed, she was the mother of all.²⁵

Robbins then continues to demonize both patriarchal Judaism and its monotheistic god, by demonstrating how the rise of Judaism led to the destruction of goddess worship, thereby imprisoning contemporary Western society and religion in patriarchal oppression:

²⁴ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 49-51.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

Because the Goddess was changeable and playful, because she looked upon natural chaos as lovingly as she did natural order, because her warm feminine intuition was often at odds with cool masculine reason, because the uterine magic of her daughters had since the dawn of consciousness overshadowed the penis power of her sons, resentful priests of a tribe of nomadic Hebrews led a coup against her some four thousand years ago – and most of what we know as Western civilization is the result.... men control the divine channels now, and while the control may be largely an illusion, their laws, institutions, and elaborate weaponry exists primarily to maintain it.²⁶

Robbins' narrator here is indeed privy to the knowledge and judgments of deity, although unlike in the biblical texts, this deity is not God. In fact, the divine knowledge of Robbins' narrator undermines the divinity of the Judeo-Christian God. The one striking similarity between Robbins' narrator and the biblical narrator is that each is privy to the knowledge and judgments of their godheads. Relying on his knowledge of the intentions and judgments of the divine, Robbins' narrator recounts for his audience the 'true' story of the rise of Judaism.

When Robbins' narrator uses the consciousness or voice of a character to relate the divine knowledge of 'god,' he demonstrates for the reader the ways in which he is privileged with that same knowledge. There are occasions in the novel, however, when Robbins' narrator speaks in his own voice, not using any of the other characters as mouthpieces. In these instances, Robbins' narrator takes on the third characteristic of the biblical narrators as delineated by Bach: he assumes for *himself* the power of judgment of God, engaging in "extra-presentational acts – 'judgments, generalizations about the

²⁶ Ibid., 50.

world...”²⁷ Robbins’ narrator does not only know what God is thinking, the narrator is thinking it for himself.

The voice of Robbins’ narrator is found in this god-like capacity at the beginning or at the end of most chapters in the novel. In these places, the narrator steps out of the structure of the narrative sequence. He comments upon the preceding action, and makes prophecies concerning future events. In a passage shortly following the quotation above, Robbins’ narrator un.masks himself, saying,

Why wasn’t Ellen Cherry aware of all this? Why wasn’t the mass of humankind aware of it? Because veils of ignorance, disinformation, and illusion separate us from that which is imperative to our understanding of our evolutionary journey, shield us from the Mystery that is central to being.

The first of those veils conceals the repression of the Goddess, masks the sexual face of the planet, drapes the ancient foundation stone of erotic terror that props up modern man’s religion.

But, listen now. If Painted Stick and Conch Shell are permitted to leave the cave where they’ve been sleeping... Salome might dance in the Temple again. And if nobody stops Salome from dancing, that first veil may one day soon be dropping.²⁸

In this instance, Robbins’ narrator is not merely speaking with the knowledge of a divinity separate from him, but is taking on the mantle of divine knowledge himself. He has omniscient intelligence of the awarenesses of both Ellen Cherry and all of humanity. He knows what “veils” lay between humanity and the ‘true’ “Mystery.” He knows what lies behind those “veils of ignorance, disinformation, and illusion.” And he issues obscure prophecies, cloaked by the words “if” and “may”: *if* Painted Stick and Conch Shell leave the cave, *if* Salome dances in the Temple, the veil of illusion that lies between

²⁷ Bach, “Signs of the Flesh,” 354.

²⁸ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 51-52.

humanity and Truth *may* drop. Robbins' narrator does not gain this knowledge from his relationship to the godhead. Rather, he owns this knowledge in his role as a godhead himself.

In that Robbins' narrator possesses all three of the characteristics of the biblical narrators as articulated by Bach – 1) knowledge that transcends time and space; 2) knowledge about the actions, beliefs, and judgments of the divine; and 3) knowledge of his own that is considered to be divine knowledge – this narrator exists in a state of knowledge that is *beyond* that of God/the divine. By affording his narrator these characteristics, Robbins has more than mirrored stylistic elements of the biblical narrators. He has also borrowed the authority associated with these characteristics, bestowing that authority of knowledge, of Truth, upon his own narrator. This inherent authority – derived from the narratological style used – is supplemented by the authority of biblical canonization. The Bible has for millennia been perceived as god-given Truth. As Robbins adopts the narratological style of this “book of Truth,” he also adopts the authority associated with that book.

Robbins marries this adopted biblical authority with the authority of reconstructed historical ‘factuality.’ Schüssler Fiorenza has referred to feminist historical reconstructive methods that seek to reconstruct women’s history as “hermeneutics of remembrance.”²⁹ Feminist historical reconstruction seeks to create a distance between the world of the biblical text and the world of the reader, increasing our knowledge of the historical context of the text, a historical context that provides an alternative to the positivist, male-centered contexts often otherwise provided:³⁰

²⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 15.

³⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 143.

It seeks to displace the kyriocentric dynamic of the biblical text in its literary and historical contexts by re-contextualizing the text in a different socio-political-religious historical context in order to make the subordinated and marginalized “others” visible, and their repressed arguments and silences “audible” again.³¹

A feminist historical reconstruction seeks to both create a distance between the reader and the historical world of the biblical text, in order to destabilize positivist historical assumptions; and at the same time to bridge that gap, by making the new context accessible to the reader.³²

Through his historical reconstructions of the Jezebel narrative and of Judeo-Christian Middle Eastern history, Robbins engages in such a hermeneutics of remembrance. As we saw in the passage wherein Robbins reconstructs the rise of Judaism over and against its earlier matriarchal religious counterparts,³³ he recontextualizes the setting of the biblical narratives that relate this event, giving voice to the marginalized Others heretofore silenced. Robbins employs this same method in a recontextualization of Hebrew move into the Land of Canaan, speaking through the voice of Spike:

“Holocaust? We Jews perpetrated our own holocaust, I’m telling you. When? Who against? Over three thousand years ago against the Canaanites, that’s when and who. How is the Land of Canaan turning suddenly into the Land of Israel? By what sale, what deal, eh; what magic trick? By a holocaust. The Hebrews escaping from Egypt invaded Canaan and killed everybody, the whole country, old men, women, children, little babies what were in arms. A million, we butchered. Look it up. In history, maybe the first recorded act of genocide. The only Canaanites left alive were a few what were good for slave labor.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ refer to “Chapter Three,” 121-22.

“Wow!” said Ellen Cherry. “That’s pretty heavy. But that was a very long time ago. And, anyway, weren’t the Jews just taking back their homeland; you know, fighting to recover their promised land from these Canaanites?”

“Ha! So who is telling you this? The ghost of Moses, maybe? A homeland the Hebrews have never had. We’re nomads, already. Our tribes shlepped through this Canaan, lived there among its inhabitants for a while. Then, most of them moved on to Egypt. So, a long time passed, and then the Hebrews were slaves of the pharaoh, too bad for us, and this guy Moses told them, ‘Hey, we’re getting out of this mess, we’re going to escape.’ And the Jews said, ‘Okay, but where’s it to that we’re escaping, already?’ ‘To Canaan,’ Moses said. ‘Canaan is our rightful home in case you’ve forgotten it. God spoke to Abraham personally and said, “I promise you the Land of Canaan. You are my number one people what I’ve chosen, and Canaan is the place I’ve set aside for you, for your own forever.” Good. Only nobody read the fine print, which said that to move into our new home, we had to slaughter hundreds of thousands of human beings what were living there at the time.’”

“You’re not exaggerating, Mr. Cohen? Wasn’t Canaan kind of a wilderness area that was open for settlement?”

“Hoo boy! You young people today, you’re knowing nothing very much. An advanced civilization, we’re talking about here. Already two thousand years old when the Hebrews invaded it. A lot of our culture comes from Canaan. You believe, darlink, that God told Moses go invade an advanced civilization, pilfer its territory, and kill all its people? Suppose in Westchester you had a nice house, and I stayed there the weekend as your guest, and then years pass and one day I come back and say, ‘God promised me your house.’ You would believe such a cockamamie story? No, you would not. So, okay, I murder you and your kids and your grandmother what’s in a wheelchair and your cat and your dog and your three goldfishes. And I say to the neighbors, ‘It’s my house now, don’t be peeing on my law.’ Hoo boy!”³⁴

Robbins is attempting here to subvert traditional historical understandings of the Hebrew move into the Land of Canaan, giving voice to the vanquished Canaanites who had been living there at the time. While because of its anti-Semitic qualities, both in its

³⁴ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 251-252.

narration and in its content, this particular excerpt fails as a liberatory historical reconstruction, it does serve to further demonstrate the ways in which Robbins engages the hermeneutics of remembrance in his historical reconstructions. In this passage, and in others like it, Robbins deconstructs traditional historical understandings of the biblical text's context, and reconstructs it from the perspective of the marginalized Others of the biblical narrative. In so doing, Robbins creates a new distance between the biblical text and the reader, who can no longer take for granted a traditional, positivist historical context. At the same time, he bridges that gap, making his reconstructed history accessible to his readers through a modern comparison.

Although Robbins uses the methods of a feminist historical reconstruction, the liberatory power of his reconstructions is in some ways subverted by the strong biblical tone of his narratological voice. Rather than destabilizing a positivist historical perspective, and opening up the possibility of a variety of *other* historical interpretations, Robbins destabilizes positivist historical perspectives, and as a result of his dominant narratological voice, replaces these with his own unilateral, god-spoken, versions of 'true' history. Robbins' historical reconstructions are no more open to interpretation and alternate contextualization than are the traditional positivist histories he is rewriting. Robbins' reconstructed history takes on the authority of fact. While this authority is largely derived from the voice with which the reconstructed history is spoken, it in turn feeds the very narratological authority that first created it. Robbins' narratological authority and the veils of factual authority on his reconstructed histories exist in a dynamic relationship, wherein each contributes to the authority of the other.

Moreover, Robbins uses this borrowed authority, by which he renders his historical reconstructions as 'fact,' to articulate his romantic feminist ideologies and vision of the feminine divine. Northrop Frye states that

Perhaps the entire historical aspect of the Bible may be thought of as a husk or context of certain laws, the histories being mainly illustrations of what happens when they are or are not observed.³⁵

The histories of the Bible, then, are contexts by which are delivered 'divine' laws and ideologies. By reconstructing these histories, and cloaking them in with the rhetoric and authority of the divine, Robbins is able to further establish the 'truth' of his own ideologies.

In the end, Robbins uses several tactics by which he asserts the authority of his reconstruction of Salome. In his construction of her as the Scarlet Lady, he adopts the authority of a recognizable archetype, of the Church, and of the divine. Robbins also derives authority in his use of narratological stylistic techniques borrowed from the biblical narrators, which further give him the authority of the biblical canon. And in his use of historical reconstruction, by which he frames his revisioned Salome, Robbins substantiates his existent narratological authority with the mantle of positivist historical factuality.

³⁵ Frye, *The Great Code*, 216.

PART THREE: Narratological Authority, Character Construction, and the Dance of the Seven Veils

Robbins' use of narratological authority in his reconstruction of Salome as the human embodiment of the feminine principle culminates in his depiction of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils.³⁶

Already having constructed Salome as an archetypal figure of female divinity, Robbins reinforces the parts of this archetype that are of the earth-mother goddess through maternal imagery that he weaves around the dancing girl. She is described as dancing while "pushing and contracting her pelvis, as if straining to expel a child."³⁷ Robbins highlights her fertility, describing her belly as a "haptic demimound."³⁸ Throughout his depiction of the Dance of the Seven Veils, Robbins' Salome is breathing heavily, exhausted, sweating, but straining to continue – as a woman in childbirth, or orgasm. Finally, the entire dance is performed, not only in the bar, but also in the room of the "wolfmother wallpaper," the room that gave birth to everything we know,³⁹ and of which, while she dances, Salome is mistress.

Robbins' vision of ideal womanhood, of the divine feminine principle, is not confined solely to childbirth. His feminine principle is also innocent, and paradoxically, highly sexualized. The description of Salome offered while she dances combines these elements. As Salome begins to dance, with animal instinct she "[emits] a low, soft howl,"⁴⁰ shaking her tambourine. This tambourine, described earlier in the novel, is

³⁶ Refer to "Appendix," 145-152.

³⁷ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 455.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 458.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 455.

associated with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, itself associated with arcane sexual knowledge. When he refers to the tambourine, Robbins always includes references to the rattlesnake: “*Serpent à sonnettes. Rattleslang. Culebra de cascabel. Skallerorm. Klapperschlange. Rattlesnake.*”⁴¹ As Salome shakes her tambourine during one of her first performances at the bar, Robbins describes the reaction of the audience:

It was clear to every Adam in the restaurant, every Adamu in the bar, that she was the one who'd made friends with the Snake, that she'd let it lick the blood of her first menstruation, that she ... *oooo eee*, that she ... *oooo eee*, that she now knew what the serpent knew.⁴²

The passage describing the Dance of the Seven Veils opens with references to animal sexuality and the rattlesnake-tambourine. Salome's sexuality and paradoxical innocence is further cemented throughout Robbins' description of the Dance of the Seven Veils. Salome is described as having “eyes... wide and hot.”⁴³ As she began her dance, she “whirled and dipped and whirled again, slapping and whirling simultaneously...”⁴⁴ As her first veil drops, exposing her genitalia, Salome,

went on whirling and dipping and swooping and arching, and each time she arched, they found themselves looking into the prettiest and pinkest little slit that anyone could ever imagine, its folds delicate and mysterious, its tiny stinger aimed at them like the gun barrel of a felonious orchid, the curly pelt around it as sleek and moist as the welcome mat at the Bermuda Triangle Hilton.⁴⁵

Robbins' highly sexualized description of Salome continues throughout his narration of the Dance of the Seven Veils. Salome dances with “[v]ulva exposed and

⁴¹ Ibid., 335.

⁴² Ibid., 341.

⁴³ Ibid., 455

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 456.

sweetly agape.”⁴⁶ Her breasts are “perfectly formed,”⁴⁷ “oversize tulip bulbs bathed by a fine spring rain.”⁴⁸

Salome’s sexuality is contrasted throughout with her innocence – the two existing in harmony, in fact feeding each other. Salome’s perfectly formed breasts are “young girl’s tits.”⁴⁹ She is referred to, not as a woman, but as a “girl” with an adolescent’s “snotty disposition and skinny legs.”⁵⁰ The last veil to drop is from her face, and when it falls the full force of her sexual beauty is revealed; and paradoxically, so is the full force of her innocence: “it was as if the girl had opened her mouth and burped out a bird-sized butterfly.”⁵¹

Salome’s characterization as simultaneously innocent and sexually wise is given a divine quality in two ways through the content of the description. As she drops each veil, she sings a song of no words, as though she were in the throes of religious and/or sexual ecstasy:

Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Zinga doppa dop lop zinga
*Eh, eh-eh, eh eh zeeee*⁵²

This addition to the description of her dance adds atmosphere to the religious nature of the dance. It also brings the reader into the “room of the wolfmother wallpaper,”⁵³ where she can watch Salome dance from *inside* the narrative. We are seduced into the novel’s world.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 458.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 464.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 461.

⁵¹ Ibid., 467.

⁵² Ibid., 455.

⁵³ Ibid.

Robbins also highlights the divinity of his paradoxical characterization of Salome through the transmissions of spiritual enlightenment that the audience receives while watching Salome's dance. As each veil falls from Salome's body, the audience receives an awareness of one aspect of divine truth. The reader is told of this through the voice of Ellen Cherry, who receives spiritual enlightenment, veil by veil, without any exertion of her own:

The veil had not lain long on the floor when Ellen Cherry began to... well, to receive ideas. Spontaneously, without preamble, things occurred to her; thoughts entered her mind, one might say, except that they were both more vivid and full-formed than the thoughts she was accustomed to entertaining, and they were permeated with information that she hadn't realized that she possessed. It was as if they were somebody else's thoughts, zapped into her own brain, where instantly they took hold and became her own.⁵⁴

Ellen Cherry, the audience, *and the reader*, are given – as if from Heaven above – layers of spiritual knowledge that are transmitted through Salome, in the language of her dance. Not surprisingly, the nature of the spiritual knowledge given is in accordance with Robbins' own feminist beliefs: that individual spiritualities are superior to religious institutions; that institutions of all sorts are oppressive; that in order to live in harmony, societies must learn to revere the masculine and feminine sexual principles.

In essence, this is the *content* of Robbins' description of Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. Salome is presented as Scarlet Lady: paradoxically innocent and wise, childlike and sexual. She embodies Robbins' vision of the divine feminine principle, existing in contrast to the masculine principle. As I've described earlier, this type of description is oppressive to women.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 456.

The way in which he illustrates Salome's dance, his narratological style, makes the contents of this passage even more problematic. Robbins' narrator is not merely *descriptive*, but *proscriptive*. He proscribes the ways in which, as readers, we are to unquestioningly accept his reconstruction of Salome, as well as the spiritual 'realities' that are transmitted through her dance.

As readers, we are invited into the world of the novel at the very beginning of Salome's dance, when Robbins opens the passage with a depiction of the 'room of the wolfmother wallpaper.' This room is first described in a prelude that opens the novel. Hoyser and Stookey claim that

readers enter *Skinny Legs and All* through the gateway offered by its "prelude," a short and lyrical passage filled with imagery at once familiar and strange. The prelude is intended to draw readers into "the room of the wolfmother wallpaper," and thus the novel's narrative voice issues invitation through its use of direct address (wherein the reader is called "you")....

It is by clearly setting off this passage that Robbins is able to purposefully use it as a point of entry not into the plot itself, but into the novel.... The use of the prelude as a portal to the novel and its ideas is thus analogous to the book's description of Salome's dance as a point of entry for Ellen Cherry and the others into a world of revelations.⁵⁵

By invoking the 'room of the wolfmother wallpaper' throughout the Dance of the Seven Veils, Robbins is reasserting that the reader is *inside* the novel; that we, too, are privy to the transmissions of spiritual enlightenment offered to Salome's audience.

The reader's position within the novel is further cemented by the situation of the narratorial voice in the figure of Ellen Cherry. As the main character in the novel, the reader is inclined to associate herself, as "narratee" with Ellen Cherry. She is a presented

⁵⁵ Hoyser and Stookey, 126-27.

as a character who is open to learning from the people around her. In his description of the Dance of the Seven Veils, Robbins situates both the narratorial voice and the narratee in Ellen Cherry: she articulates what she is seeing, or rather, what she is being shown. Ellen Cherry is both spectator and the home of the narratorial voice. As the reader is inclined to situate her own presence in the novel with the character of Ellen Cherry as narratee, the reader is *disinclined* to question Ellen Cherry as the home of the narratorial voice.

While Ellen Cherry is the home of the narratorial voice, she is not the narrator proper. Robbins maintains a third-person, omniscient narrator in his descriptions of Salome, the dance, and the forms of spiritual enlightenment offered to the audience and the reader. This narrator relates the events as they are perceived by Ellen Cherry, but she herself is not the narrator.

The narrator in this passage maintains the biblical and historical authority that Robbins has built throughout the novel. Robbins further reinforces this authority by occasionally withdrawing his narrator from the voice of Ellen Cherry, addressing the reader directly, as when he describes the 'room of the wolfmother wallpaper.' As I have previously demonstrated, in the instances when Robbins disassociates his narrator from the other characters in the novel, the narrator establishes his knowledge of reality as existing *beyond* God. This ultra-divinity, evoked periodically throughout the description of the Dance of the Seven Veils, sets a tone of divine revelation that enhances the already existent authority of the narrator.

The reader is thus situated in the novel in two ways: she is in the 'room of the wolfmother wallpaper,' in other words, a place where divine revelation takes places; and

she is seeing events unfold from the perspective of Ellen Cherry, who is the home of the biblically authoritative narratological voice. From this dual position, the reader is disinclined to question the narrator's version of events, his construction of Salome, or his description of spiritual reality. The narrator's "judgments"⁵⁶ and "generalizations about the world"⁵⁷ are presented as absolute and unquestionable truth, being told to the reader by a godlike narrator.

Disinclined to destabilize the narrator's version of events, the reader's gaze follows that of narrator. The narrator's gaze is not only directed in one place – Salome – and centered within one character – Ellen Cherry – but the symbolism surrounding the description of the Dance of the Seven Veils is of fixed gazes and forced tunnels of vision. We enter the story through 'the room of the wolfmother wallpaper,' itself symbolized in a mural Ellen Cherry has painted directly behind the bandstand. A person viewing this painting enters it through the beak of an owl.⁵⁸ As this viewer's gaze into the painting is directed by the owl's beak, so is the gaze of the novel's reader into Salome's dance directed by its entry point through 'the room of the wolfmother wallpaper' – the room dominated by the narrator who exists beyond God.

The authority constructed into in the voice of Robbins' narrator makes it difficult to engage the text with a hermeneutics of suspicion. As in the biblical texts, the narrator of *Skinny Legs and All* seduces his audience into believing his articulation of the story. This seduction clips the readers' wings, restricting our ability as readers to argue with the perspective forced upon us by the author.

⁵⁶ Bach, "Signs of the Flesh," 354.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*, 424.

The reader is inclined to believe not only the narrator's version of events, but also the image he presents of Salome as she dances. This Salome embodies a divine feminine principle that undermines an egalitarian feminist ideal; that maintains women's construction as Other; that presents an unattainable model of womanhood; that is constructed as an archetypal, static object, carrying with her an innate sense of unchangeable holiness. Not only is Robbins' reconstruction of Salome oppressive to women in and of itself, but he also supplements that oppression through a narration that makes use of biblical narrative techniques that restrict alternate interpretations of events.

Robbins uses a hermeneutics of suspicion to undermine the biblical versions of the Salome story, destabilizing biblical authority, as well as the authority of early interpretations of the story. However, by adopting much of that biblical authority in his reconstruction of her character, Robbins perpetuates many of the same oppressions as the biblical narratives and their early interpretations. The biblical texts objectify Salome's sexuality, using it as a means of illustrating the decadence of Herod's court. Robbins also objectifies Salome's sexuality, using it as a model of behaviour for women, and a means by which both men and women may achieve spiritual and social harmony. Early Church interpretations of the Salome story present a single-faceted woman, a sexual vixen aligned with the devil. Robbins' Salome, while not demonized, is also a single-faceted woman/girl, a sexual vixen – whom Robbins aligns not with the devil, but with divinity. Like the biblical texts, Robbins uses the character and actions of Salome to elucidate a moral lesson. The lesson may be different, but Salome is still cast in the role of a tool by which this lesson is illustrated. The biblical narrators refuse Salome a voice as they recount her actions. Robbins' narrator similarly restricts Salome's voice – she does not

speak her own story. Salome is watched and described by the narrator through Ellen Cherry, not through her own understanding of her actions.

Robbins presents his reconstruction of Salome as liberatory, as an alternative to the oppressive biblical version of her story. However, Robbins has merely replaced one set of oppressions with another. Furthermore, having imbued his narratological voice with the borrowed authority of biblical and historical authenticity, Robbins restricts his readers' ability to approach his reconstruction with suspicion. In this, Robbins not only constructs an alternate oppressive Salome, his narratological style impedes critical examination of this Salome.

CONCLUSION: CASTING A WIDER NET

Phyllis Bird has written that in assessing a self-described feminist interpretation of biblical text, we must be wary of accepting heroic portrayals of biblical women as examples of a feminist read, simply by dint of their heroism. Bird finds that there is a dual criterion in judging whether or not a 'feminist' read incorporates feminist ideals:

[T]he essential signs or ingredients of feminist interpretation are *systemic analysis* of gender relations and a *critique* of relationships, norms and expectations that limit or subordinate women's thought, action and expression. Highlighting of women alone, either as heroines or victims, does not constitute feminist interpretation, in my view, if it lacks systemic analysis. On the other hand, gender analysis alone, without critique of the asymmetrical distribution of power and prestige within the society is not feminist interpretation, although it may be essential to a feminist reading.

If the combined criteria of systemic gender analysis and critique of androcentric and patriarchal privilege establish a reading as feminist, or at least as indispensable to such an identification, the adequacy of the reading must still be tested.¹

Responding to Bird's claim that "the adequacy of [a feminist] reading must... be tested,"² I find that Robbins sets Salome up as a heroine, one who embodies divinity and inspires divine revelation for those who witness her dancing. Robbins does not engage in a critical "*systemic analysis* of gender relations and a *critique* of relationships, norms and expectations that limit or subordinate women's thought, action and expression."³ His "*systemic analysis* of gender relations"⁴ is not critical from a radical feminist perspective,

¹ Phyllis Bird, "What Makes a Feminist Reading Feminist? A Qualified Answer," *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Harold C. Washington et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 129.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

in that it continues to objectify women's sexuality as it exists in relationship to male sexuality. While Robbins critiques "relationships, norms and expectations"⁵ through his reconstruction of Salome, his very critiques themselves "limit... women's thought, action, and expression."⁶

Robbins offers his readers a "critique of the asymmetrical distribution of power and prestige within the society."⁷ However, in response to his critique, he offers a model of behaviour that reinscribes asymmetrical distribution of power. Rather than situating the axis of power in gender relations with the male and male sexuality, Robbins shifts that axis of power to female sexuality. In his unilateral description of the feminine and female sexuality as 'divine,' Robbins continues to objectify women's sexuality.⁸

Further, by offering his vision of divine and sexually open femininity as a model of behaviour and a path to spiritual fulfillment, Robbins neglects the contexts of social and religious patriarchy in which this model of behaviour would be played out. It is one thing to assert that women's sexuality has been oppressed by patriarchal social and religious norms. It is quite another to suggest that women assert their divinely sexual natures, and release themselves from all sexual inhibitions, for the good of humankind. This type of behaviour is not only *questionable* in its liberatory power for both men and women. Sexual liberation as it is articulated by Robbins is *dangerous* for women in the oppressively patriarchal context in which we live. Robbins' fictional male characters may accept this liberated female sexuality, without offering threat to the sexually liberated women he describes, but this is not a situation often played out in the 'world outside of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A friend of mine, in a discussion of Robbins' glorification of women and female sexuality, has said that, "He puts women on a pedestal, just high enough so he can look up their skirts."

Tom Robbins.’ In the real, patriarchally oppressive world, women face very serious violent and sexual threats by adopting such ‘liberated’ models of ‘sexual freedom.’

Robbins’ reconstruction of Salome fails the litmus test for what constitutes a feminist read. His Salome reinscribes oppressive visions of “woman” as Other, positing her femininity and sexuality over and against that of the male. Through Salome, Robbins offers unattainable models of womanhood, femininity, and sexuality, failing to account for the social dynamics that would necessarily accompany such radical transformations. He presents all of this with a narratological style that borrows authority from two sources: the biblical text, whose authors themselves use a narratological style that is oppressive and restrictive; and from the divine image of the White Lady, which he reconstructs in Salome as a Scarlet Lady.

Robbins’ reconstruction of Salome also reaffirms the focus on sexuality that is at the core of the larger discourse surrounding Salome. Whether Salome is portrayed as lascivious, manipulative, *manipulated*, virginal, innocent, or over choreographed,⁹ the heart of representations of her character has consistently remained her sexuality. Says Alice Bach,

[O]ne motif recurs: the young woman who could awaken the sleeping passions of men, ‘bewitching, subjugating more surely his will with her unholy charm, as of a great flower of concupiscence born of a sacrilegious birth, reared in a hothouse of iniquity.’¹⁰

Robbins maintains this focus on her sexuality, sustaining a discourse that has existed around Salome since the early Church fathers’ commentaries on the biblical Salome narrative. I have shown how as early as 397 CE, St. Chrysostom referred to

⁹ For a full analysis of the various representations of Salome and her sexuality in film and fin de siècle art, refer to Alice Bach, “Calling the Shots: Directing Salomé’s Dance of Death.”

¹⁰ Bach, “Calling the Shots,” 116.

Salome's sexuality as a primary, and very negative, characteristic. That he does so in his sermons and homilies without much introduction indicates that his audience was very likely well prepared to imagine a highly sexualized Salome. Roman legends that parallel the biblical narrative, dating as early as 184 BCE,¹¹ also portray the Salome-figure, in the form of a courtesan or lover, as primarily sexual, again with negative connotations. The focus on Salome's sexuality has consistently remained at the heart of the discourse around her since these early commentaries. Even though Robbins attempts to frame Salome's sexuality in a liberatory manner, as we have seen, his feminist exercise falls short. In the end, his very attempt to liberate Salome – and by extension, women who would follow her model of behaviour – sustains a two thousand year old oppressive discourse objectifying Salome's sexuality.

In his adoption of biblical narrative structures, plot, characters, and narratological styles, Robbins reframes the biblical narratives themselves. Having read Robbins' reconstruction of Salome, one may reread the biblical text (or read it for the first time) carrying Robbins' interpretation of her character into the biblical narrative. No chronological order exists in a post-structuralist understanding of discourse: all statements are continuously interdependent upon each other for meaning, without any linear or chronological consistency. Thus, not only does the biblical narrative inform Robbins' reconstruction, but Robbins' reconstruction in turn informs the biblical narrative. Bach addresses this dynamic quality of the construction of meaning in her analysis of biblical narratives as portrayed in Hollywood film:

[C]ultural representations of biblical figures affect one's interpretation of biblical narratives. If one stores a

¹¹ Cicero's *De Senectute* was written in 44 BCE; Seneca's *Controversiae*, a rhetorical commentary on the Roman legends, was written between 35-39 CE; Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* was written in 100 CE.

collection of images of a particular literary figure, or setting, or style of costume, that collection is not stored mentally in a chronological order. It does not matter whether I have seen Rita Hayworth's Salomé before viewing Gustave Moreau's painting or after reading the version in the Gospel of Mark. All of the representations collide and coalesce in my construction of the figure of Salomé.¹²

Given the interdependent nature of statements within a discourse, a biblical reconstruction such as Robbins' further solidifies a dominant discourse that, with biblical authority, objectifies Salomé's sexuality.

From a post-structuralist understanding of the nature of discourse,¹³ Robbins' Salomé does not only exist within a discourse about Salomé. All discourses are inter-related, and interdependent. Accordingly, the Salomé discourse – and Robbins' reconstruction of her character – exists in a dynamic relationship with a variety of other discourses: for example, discourses of female sexuality, female divinity, patriarchal sexual and social oppressions, practices of Christianity and martyrdom, the role of women in church and worship, eroticisation of 'the Orient,' the religious power of dance and ritual, and innumerable others. All of these discourses, and all of the statements within these discourses, inform the Salomé discourse, and at the same time are informed by it. Robbins' reconstruction of Salomé then, has far-reaching consequences, as its

¹² Alice Bach, "'Throw Them to the Lions, Sire': Transforming Biblical Narratives Into Hollywood Spectaculars," 1. See also Paul A. Soukup and Robert Hodgson, eds, *From One Medium to Another: Communicating the Bible Through Multimedia* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997). Although the majority of articles in this collection are constructed in order to answer the question, "How can the message of the Holy Scriptures be faithfully translated and communicated from one medium to another?" (p. 3) – itself problematic from a feminist perspective (what, for instance is *the* message of the Bible? Is there a single, faithful translation?) – the articles also offer insights into the ways in which popular "translations" both *inform* and are *informed* by the biblical text.

¹³ As I have articulated in the introduction to this project, my understanding of post-structuralist paradigms of discourse is derived from Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

oppressively unilateral vision of female sexuality and its divine powers enters into so many other discourses.

In the end, while Robbins attempts to construct a contemporary Salome who is a model of feminist liberation, his reconstruction lacks an awareness of the systemic nature of patriarchal oppressions that go beyond female sexuality. In fact, his reconstruction in many ways reifies patriarchal sexual oppressions of women. Robbins' use of biblical narratological styles gives his reconstruction an almost unquestionable authority, an authority that is especially powerful in a contemporary religious climate where popular biblical reconstructions can often carry more weight than the biblical text itself.¹⁴ Moreover, the power and authority of Robbins' reconstruction is insidiously dangerous in its self-proclaimed, but ultimately faulty, capacity as a liberatory model of divine female sexuality. Robbins' reconstruction is illustrated in a voice of historical, religious, and political authority that has the power to seduce his readers into approaching his Salome as liberatory, when in fact it is not.

It is vitally important for scholars engaging in feminist biblical analysis to incorporate biblical reconstructions such as Robbins' into their field of study. These reconstructions, often portrayed as liberatory can just as often reify oppressions that are found in biblical texts and their traditional malestream interpretations. Robbins' popular reconstruction of Salome for example, with its assumed biblical authority and as a powerful voice within the discourse of biblical interpretation, must be subjected to the same critical analyses as the biblical Salome narratives. Feminist biblical scholarship has often critically explored the history of biblical reconstructions, as well as the dynamic

¹⁴ Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 88, 98.

ways in which such popular reconstructions engage with practices of Christianity. Most feminist biblical scholarship, however, stops short of exploring the influence of popular biblical reconstructions on the biblical text itself. As two important voices within the discourse of biblical interpretation, the biblical narratives and their contemporary reconstructions are engaged in dynamic dialogue that constantly changes the meaning of the biblical texts for the reader. In its dialogue with biblical reconstructions, the meaning of the biblical text becomes fluid and changeable. This fluidity must be recognized as a subject of analysis that is important to feminist biblical scholarship if we are to continue to explore new methods of emancipatory biblical interpretation.

APPENDIX A

Excerpt from *Skinny Legs and All* by Tom Robbins (pp. 455 – 469)

Imperceptible to the audience, she [Salome] emitted a soft, low howl. She rattled her tambourine.

Then, she danced.

This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. The room where your oldest living ancestor, the monarch amoeba, holds court in the irrigation ditch at the foot of the bed.

Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Zinga doppa dop lop zinga
Eh, eh-eh, eh eh zeeee

As her bare feet slapped on the floor in time to polyrhythms more ancient than Petra, Salome whirled and dipped and whirled again, slapping and whirling simultaneously, and, moreover, pushing and contracting her pelvis, as if straining to expel a child. Her eyes were wide and hot, and the purple scarves swirled all around her. She danced thusly for close to twenty minutes before the first veil fell.

For some reason, Ellen Cherry, Spike, Abu, and practically everyone else in the room had assumed that the first veil dropped would be the upper one; specifically, the one that obscured her nose and mouth. They assumed erroneously. When it finally fell, fluttering to the floor like the skin of a moon-snake, it bared not her face but her loins.... Ellen Cherry blushed. She had sunbathed nude with waitress girlfriends in Seattle, but she'd never really focused, been virtually forced to focus, on another woman's pudendum. It was both fascinating and discomfiting....

Everybody was shocked, even the unshockable. Yet nobody acted to stop the performance. Nobody. And Salome went on whirling and dipping and swooping and arching, and each time she arched, they found themselves looking into the prettiest and pinkest little slit that anyone could ever imagine, its folds delicate and mysterious, its tiny stinger aimed at them like the gun barrel of a felonious orchid, the curly pelt around it as sleek and moist as the welcome mat at the Bermuda Triangle Hilton.

The veil had not lain long on the floor when Ellen Cherry began to... well, to receive ideas. Spontaneously, without preamble, things occurred to her; thoughts entered her mind, one might say, except that they were both more vivid and full-formed than the thoughts she was accustomed to entertaining, and they were permeated with information that she hadn't realized that she possessed. It was as if they were somebody else's thoughts, zapped into her own brain, where instantly they took hold and became her own.

Earth, it occurred to her, was a sexual globe. Unique in a solar system of dead rocks, snowballs, and gasbags, Earth was a theater, a rotating stage upon which a thick green scum of organic life acted out countless, continual scenes whose content, whether explicit or oblique, was almost wholly sexual....

Despite an often ostentatious masculine display that would indicate otherwise, the sexual drama (or melodrama or farce) was largely, historically, directed by the female. That was particularly true among human beings, in which species the male had gone to ludicrous and often violent lengths to compensate for what struck the more insecure of men as an inferior sexual role. One of the lengths to which they went was the establishment of patriarchal religion and the recasting of a father figure as the producer of the show, although from the very beginning, the cosmogonic principle had been feminine. Those men, envious and anxious, not only fired the Great Goddess (who smiled upon all manner of sexual expression, including that which moderns were to label "promiscuous" and "pornographic"), but they also spent thousands of years and billions of dollars trying to conceal the fact of her existence....

Yes, that's it! thought Ellen Cherry Charles.

*Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Zop de bango zee whee winga
Eh, eh-eh, eh eh haiii*

This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. This is the room where the boys slept inside their blowguns to avoid being bitten by the bats, for whom the girls sewed tiny velvet suits.

Vulva exposed and sweetly agape, Salome danced on, whirling and arching, until, after another twenty minutes or so, a second veil was pulled loose and tossed gracefully to the floor. This veil had covered her waist and belly, a belly that seemed at once round and flat, a haptic demimound already familiar to her fans, although until that moment they had never drawn dew from the saucy well of its bare navel. Almost immediately, Ellen Cherry received another intellectual transmission.

“Human beings do not have dominion over the plants and animals.” That was the message that seemed to flash on her mental screen....

Yes, that's it! thought Ellen Cherry.

*Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Wop za whoppo zeena za-za
Eh, eh-eh, eh eh eeeng*

This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. The room swept by a broom made from language. A room where the dust mice are as luminous as grapes.

The third purple cloth to float free from the whirling form of the dancing girl – Salome was whirling more now and arching less – had been wound about her neck and shoulders. Sure enough, as it settled upon the floor, like the filmy soul of a dirty sock landing in a polyester paradise where such earthly woes as toe jam and clothes dryers were only bad memories; sure enough, as it settled in a gossamer heap near the scuffed black shoes of the mesmerized Shaftoe, Ellen Cherry felt another brainstorm coming on.

She understood suddenly, and for no particular reason of which she was aware, that it was futile to work for political solutions to humanity's problems because humanity's problems were not political. Political problems did exist, all right, but they were entirely secondary. The primary problems were philosophical, and until the philosophical problems were solved, the political problems would have to be solved over and over and over again...

Exactly! Yes, that's right! thought Ellen Cherry.

Eeena eeena eeena eeena
Eh eh-eh eeena wop

This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper. The room where volcanoes filled the ashtrays with their fine cinders, and the keyhole itself was a fumarole....

[S]he felt now as if she had reached an understanding in several significant areas, had reached it suddenly, effortlessly; had reached it – and this was the queerest part – during the hour and twenty minutes that she had spent watching Salome dance. If there was a connection between the revelations and the dancing, she could not conceive of it. She had to admit that the girl, despite her snotty disposition and skinny legs, was amazing, whirling like that for well over an hour, but Salome's impact certainly was not on the *mind*. In fact, the girl was making her rather horny, she who had never been tempted by other women before. And that made it all the more extraordinary that she was simultaneously entertaining big abstract thoughts. Only they weren't self-generating thoughts so much as they were – Well, it was as if a coating of something was being pulled off her corneas and she was seeing things for which the eye game had barely prepared her....

Eeena eeena eeena eeena
Eh eh-eh eeena zop

A fourth veil came undone, circled several times the gyrating torso of the dance (it had somehow been wrapping both of her arms) like a gaseous cloud of star stuff orbiting a galaxy, before finally breaking the gravitational attraction and wafting toward a new home on the edge of the bandstand. Ellen Cherry understood then that religion was an improper response to the Divine.

Religion was an attempt to pin down the Divine. The Divine was eternally in flux, forever moving, shifting shape. That was its nature. It was absolute, true enough: absolutely mobile. Absolutely transcendent. Absolutely flexible. Absolutely impersonal. It had its god and goddess aspects, but it was no more male or female than it was star or screwdriver. It was the sum of all those things, but that sum could never be chalked on a slate. The Divine was beyond description, beyond knowing, beyond comprehension. To

say that the Divine was Creation divided by Destruction was as close as one could come to a definition. But the puny of soul, the dull of wit, weren't content with that. They wanted to hang a face on the Divine. They went so far as to attribute petty human emotions (anger, jealousy, etc.) to it, not stopping to realize that if God were a being, even a supreme being, our prayers would have bored him to death long ago....

Yes! I see it now, thought Ellen Cherry. The religious training I was given as a girl was a form of child abuse.

And she thought she heard somebody next to her say, "Yeah! That's right! I see it now!"

*Eeena eeena eeena-eeena ai
Eh, eh-eh, wop wop haj*

In the room of the wolfmother wallpaper, a woodpecker flies in through the transom and leaves three farts: one on a hot skillet, one in a bottle, and one between the strings of an autoharp. Room service.

The founding of a religion is an elaborate version of pitching coins into a wishing well or spitting off a bridge, Ellen Cherry was thinking. I guess people have an innate superstitious urge to want to fill a void. As she was thinking this, Salome began shedding veil number five, releasing it as she whirled. It had concealed her ankles, calves, knees, and lower thighs, that section of the dancer's body Ellen Cherry had snidely characterized as overly thin. With the falling of that scarf, there vanished the last vestiges of any illusions one might have retained about money....

Then the tambourine banged like a fist on a jewel box, and Salome entered the extended series of exquisite whirls that would climax with the dropping of the cloth from her breasts.

"Mmm. Nice tits," remarked the bartender, a sentiment that echoed around the room. They were a young girl's tits, only slightly larger than Ellen Cherry's, but they were as perfectly formed as the wheels of a bicycle and seemed to subscribe to no theory of gravity. Glistening with perspiration, they resembled oversize tulip bulbs bathed by a fine spring rain. They heaved from Salome's exertion like jellyfish in a choppy tide, a

condition that some found prurient and others distasteful. In any case, none took their eyes off her...

Eena eeena, eeena-eeena haj

Beneath the floorboards of this room, schoolgirls operate a diamond mine. Every card on the table is the queen of diamonds. And the wallpaper howls at the moon.

Revelations were starting to overlap. Ellen Cherry was just thinking about how no amount of money could buy security, and if it could, it would be a bad bargain at any price, since security was a form of paralysis, just as satisfaction was a form of death; she was thinking something in that category when the sixth veil flew away from Salome's likable, lickable breasts, and abruptly her mind was occupied with notions of time, history, and the afterlife. She saw that the past was a recent invention, that people sacrificed the present to a future that never really came, that those who tied all of their dreams to an afterlife had no life for there to be an "after" of; saw that time was a meadow not a highway; that the psyche was an all-night restaurant, not a museum or a church; and that on every conceivable level, belief in a hereafter was hazardous to health. Moreover, the world would not be destroyed, at least not until the sun pooped out in about two billion years – and by then there would be other options.

"But what about Judgment Day?" Ellen Cherry found herself whispering.

Every day is Judgment Day. Always has been. Always will be.

"Anything else?"

Yes. Just this. The dead are laughing at us.

"Wow," said Ellen Cherry Charles.

*Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh yeeh
Zinga dopla dop lop zinga
Eh, eh-eh, eeena-eeena ai*

This is the room, all right, but the candles have burned down, the lamps are dry, and the blue neon has blown a fuse. The wallpaper might as well be stone. In the

blackness there can be heard a low, perpetual rattling and a *click click click*. It is Jeaebel's bones. Or else the rolling of the dice.

The teenager was completely naked then, except for the purple veil that masked her face... Nobody moved, and above the whine, drone, and drumming of the orchestra, no sound was audible except for Salome's labored breathing. She had been dancing for more than two hours and was obviously near exhaustion. The dance appeared to be winding down. The whirls were elongated, slow and dreamy now, although they'd lost little if any of their impact. She turned as if knee-deep in fruit pulp, and the hypnotized audience followed her as helplessly as if she were the cufflinks of Mandrake the Magician....

When the seventh veil flew away from Salome's face, it was as if the girl had opened her mouth and burped out a bird-sized butterfly. Ellen Cherry's first thought was, *How beautiful she is!* Her second thought was, *Everybody's got to figure it out for themselves...*

The illusion of the seventh veil was the illusion that you could get somebody else to do it for you. To think for you. To hang on your cross. The priest, the rabbi, the imam, the swami, the philosophical novelist were traffic cops, at best. They might get you through a busy intersection, but they wouldn't follow you home and park your car....

It was as different for everybody as it was the same, so everybody had to take control of their own life, define their own death, and construct their own salvation. And when you finished, you didn't call the Messiah. He'd call you.

Um, well, okay, thought Ellen Cherry, *I guess I understand. But wait a minute. This isn't all? Surely there's more? There must be something else.*

The dance was ending. Salome executed one last passionate pirouette, slapped both feet resoundingly against the floor, then staggered to a stop. She stood facing, but not looking at, the audience; her eyes downcast, her mouth gasping, her entire respiratory system convulsing, her legs wobbling as if about to give way. Oddly, nobody, not even her chaperone, made a move to support her or cover her nakedness. The room was silent, transfixed.

Ellen Cherry's condition was not measurably superior to the dancer's. She was tremulous, flushed, in a kind of trance. She was in the room and not in the room. Her mind whirled endlessly upon a dance floor of ideas. Instinctively, she sensed that once the last of the veils had dropped, some greater, more all-inclusive secret should have been exposed; she should have been squinting at the contours of the Mystery. Thus, she squinted at poor Salome, who continued to stand there, shaking, panting, dressed in angel chaps of sweat. And she thought, *Come on, now. What's the punch line? There's got to be something else.* Until, finally, a voice inside her said:

"We're making it up."

Who? What?

"Us. All of us. It. All of it. The world, the universe, life, reality. Especially reality."

We're making it up?

"We make it up. We made it up. We shall make it up. We have been making it up. I make it up. You make it up. He, she, it makes it up."

Okay, I'm an artist, I can accept that. In theory. But how do I apply it to my daily life?

"You'll have to figure..."

It out for myself. But hold on. Please don't go away. Can't you at least leave me with some advice?

"You need more?" (The inner voice was incredulous.)

Yes. Please. A little more. A speck more in the line of practical advice.

"Very well. The trick is this: keep your eye on the ball. Even when you can't see the ball."

You're kidding, thought Ellen Cherry Charles.

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