

The dancing daughter and the head of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29) revisited. An interdisciplinary approach*

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Mark 6:14-29 and Matthew 14:1-12 recount the death of John the Baptist¹. Herod had him imprisoned for denouncing as incestuous his marriage to Herodias, the former wife of his brother. During a banquet, Herodias' daughter dances before Herod, who is so enchanted that he promises her a favor. At her mother's behest, she asks for the head of John the Baptist². The king honors her request and has the head delivered to her on a plate (*in disco*), which she gives to her mother. When the disciples of John discover about his death, they bury his headless body.

In this essay I treat the motif of the dancing girl from an interdisciplinary perspective. The figures of Salome and John the Baptist have had an incalculable impact on both exegesis and art history. Furthermore, the motif cluster of 'beheading' and 'dancing' is freighted with anthropological gender archetypes. This essay proposes an interdisciplinary hermeneutic that I have elsewhere called 'interspaces'³. The concept of 'interstitial space' releases new energy enriches our motifs from textual, visual, gender and anthropological paradigms⁴.

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¹ A selection of exegetic studies: J.-J. DELORME, *La tête de Jean-Baptiste ou la parole pervertie: Lecture d'un récit (Marc 6, 14-29)*, in *La bible en littérature*, a cura di P.-M. BEAUDE, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 1997, pp. 293-311; D. DORMEYER, *Der gewaltsame Prophetentod des Täufers und die weiteren Umstände (Mk 6, 17-29)*, in *Epitomauto: Studies in honor of Petr Pokorný on his sixty-fifth birthday*, a cura di J. KERKOVSKY, Praha, Mlýn, 1998, pp. 96-106.

² M. DOTTIN-ORSINI, *Salomé (appelée Hérodiade ou Hérodiades)*, in *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires*, éd. B. BRUNEL, Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 1988, pp. 1232-1243.

³ B. BAERT, *Interspaces between word, gaze and touch: The bible and the visual medium in the Middle Ages: Collected essays on Noli me tangere, the woman with the haemorrhage, the head of John the Baptist*, Leuven, Peeters, 2011.

⁴ W.J.T. MITCHELL, *The family of images*, in *Images: A reader*, a cura di S. MANGHANI – A. PIPER – J. SIMONS, London, Thousand Oaks, 2006, pp. 296-299.

In the first two parts of this essay – *Decapitation, dance, text* and *The girl dances: a motif* – I examine the exegetical readings of the mother text as developed by Girard and Focant (among others). The analysis of the text foregrounds a number of strategies that transpose to the iconological and anthropological disciplines as (respectively) gender paradigms and archetypes in my third and fourth part: *Salome's dance and iconology* and *Salome's dance and anthropological archetypes*. These interdisciplinary transpositions generate the hermeneutic key to a new reading of the motif as I will reflect upon in the conclusion.

Decapitation, dance, text

The story of John the Baptist's death is also included in the historical writings of Flavius Josephus (37-after 100)⁵. In his *Antiquitates Judaica* (V, 2), he writes: "Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded to the Jews to exercise virtue both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism [...] Now, when many others came to crowd about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his [John's] power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause [...] Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned". Josephus further states that many of the Jews believed that the military disaster which fell upon Herod at the hands of his father-in-law Aretas (the father of Phasaelis), was God's punishment for his unrighteous behavior⁶. In the same chapter, the historian summarizes the genealogy of Herod and Herodias. In this list, the name Salome appears for the first time: "But Herodias, their sister was married to Herod Philip, the son of Herod the Great, who was born of Mariamme, the daughter of Simon the high priest, who had a daughter Salome; after whose birth, Herodias took upon her"⁷. Flavius Josephus depicts John as a sort

⁵ W. WHISTON, *The complete works of Josephus*, Grand Rapids, MI, Kregel Publications, 1981, p. 382; M. HARTMANN, *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers: Eine exegetische und rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studie auf dem Hintergrund narrativer, intertextueller und kulturanthropologischer Zugänge*, Stuttgart, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2001, pp. 254-355; C. FOCANT, *Les mises en récit par Marc et par Flavius Josèphe de la mort de Jean le Baptiste*, in *Graphè: La Bible, Arts, Littératures, Philosophie*, 16 (2006), pp. 15-26.

⁶ W. WHISTON, *The complete works*, cit., p. 382.

⁷ *Ivi*, p. 383.

of extra⁸. He functions as an agitator; someone who in Herod's eyes constitutes a danger to the internal stability of the realm⁹.

Analysis of the evangelical tradition is an important point of departure in this essay, because precisely these texts have led to the rampant *Nachleben* of John's decapitation in literature and art. The redaction of Mark offers a suitable handhold for pushing through to important themes in the story, such as the division of time, the birthday, the young girl's dance and naturally the finale with the platter¹⁰.

In the versions both of Mark and of Flavius Josephus it is possible to speak of an "analeptic" technique¹¹. In Mark, the story of the death of John the Baptist is presented at the beginning of the New Covenant and the arrival of the Kingdom of God, while at the same time functioning as a flashback. In Flavius Josephus, the passage is inserted in a retrospective look at Herod's empire. Of course Josephus is writing from a political, historical point of view, and wants to show how John was experienced as a threat to the establishment. This distrust with respect to a prophetic "outcast" ultimately leads to his death. Mark, however, uses the flashback for another reason. He brings the reader back to the period between the mission of the disciples and their return (Mk 6:7-13 and 6:30-31).

The "analeptic" technique posits a tension between John and Christ. Because who is this John the Baptist anyway? The report that John had "risen from the dead", as Luke writes (Lk 9:8), links him with the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament (Eccl 48:5). He is hermit and prophet, just like Elijah of Mount Carmel: "With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him" (Lk 1:17)¹². Moreover, Mark calls John "righteous" and "holy", which are also epithets of Christ.

Flavius Josephus also praises John for the fact that he sought to exhort the Jews to righteousness. John possesses a particular strength: *dynamis*. *Dynamis* literally means "to be capable of". According to Hippocrates (460-377 BC), it simply means the capacity of the emotions. *Dynamis* is a strength transmitted by touch, springing from one entity to another independently of the person. The word does not come from the biblical tradition, but was probably introduced by

⁸ C. FOCANT, *La tête du prophète sur un plat ou l'anti-repas d'alliance (Mc 6, 14-29)*, in "New Testament Studies", 46 (2001), pp. 334-353: p. 335.

⁹ J.A. GLANCY, *Unveiling masculinity: The construction of gender in Mark 6:17-29*, in "Biblical Interpretation", 2 (1994), pp. 34-50: p. 38.

¹⁰ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé: Anthropologie du banquet d'Hérode*, Tours, Lume, 2008, p. 31.

¹¹ C. FOCANT, *Les mises en récit*, cit., p. 17.

¹² "[...] 'to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord'".

Hellenism¹³. Christ is also associated with *dynamis* in the gospel of Mark – in the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, for example (Mk 5:24-34)¹⁴.

All of these intertextual references cause the reader to waver: is John then equal to Christ? Is Christ a reincarnation of John? The answer lies in the flashback, because in the death of John the Baptist it becomes clear that a true prophet has been silenced, but that this silence already announces the truth of the Word. In the analeptic motion of Mark's version there is a hidden complexity that relates both to the present and the past, to the death of one man and the arrival of another – in short, to a threshold figure that has come to point towards the true Messiah.

John the Baptist went before Christ. He baptized Jesus and recognized that He was the Messiah. When John's disciples were angry at Jesus for baptizing as well, John answered them: "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him'" (Jn 3:28). But "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist", says Christ himself about John in Matthew 11:11. John is the Forerunner, the *prodromos*, the *precursor* of the Savior. Consequently, he is also the mediator. As a transitional figure, he is the bridge between the Old and the New Testament. He is the last of the prophets and came before the first martyrs (*protomartyr*). John belongs both to the Old and the New.

Luke, however, recognizes John's pivotal function from his very conception (Lk 1:5-45). He tells how John the Baptist was born to Elizabeth, who was considered barren. Her husband Zechariah was a priest of Abijah. The angel Gabriel appeared to him during a sacrifice of incense to announce the arrival of his son John. At the annunciation of John, Zechariah is struck dumb. His lost voice passes into the prophetic voice of his son. Already in the womb, the boy would be filled with the Holy Spirit, said the angel. He would be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah. This is followed by the episode of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary and Mary's meeting with Elizabeth. On this occasion, the child, John, leaped in Elizabeth's womb, making her cry out to her cousin Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Lk 1:42).

For all these reasons, narrative time in the gospels has the character of a typology¹⁵. From patristic times, the death of John the Baptist was interpreted as

¹³ The so-called power of the *mana* that regards the relationships between representatives of the spiritual world and of mankind; J.M. HULL, *Hellenistic magic and the synoptic tradition*, Naperville, IL, A.R. Allenson, 1974, pp. 87, 108.

¹⁴ B. BAERT, *Wenn ich nur sein Kleid möchte anrühren: Die Frau mit dem Blutfluss in der frühmittelalterlichen Ikonographie (Mark 5:24b-34parr)*, in "Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte", 62-1 (2010), pp. 52-76.

¹⁵ C. FOCANT, *La tête du prophète*, cit., pp. 334-353.

a prefiguration of the passion of Christ, since John the Baptist himself was seen as the typological Forerunner of Christ. Ambrose of Milan (c. 340-397) explains for his sister Marcellina in his *De virginibus*: “The memory of Saint John the Baptist is not to be passed over hastily; it is important that we should notice who was killed, and by whom, and for what reason, how, and on what occasion. The just man is killed by adulterers; the death sentence is passed on the judge by the guilty. And so the reward of the dancing-girl was the death of the Prophet”¹⁶. I isolate here an important argument by Augustine (354-430). In his 288th sermon *In natali Ioannis baptistae (De voce et verbo)* the author puts the following words in the mouth of St John: “‘I am not the Christ, he said, nor Elijah, nor the prophet’. And the question came: Who are you, then? He replied: ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord’”¹⁷.

Likewise, the decapitation of John is the prototype for Christ’s death that will bring salvation. Christ’s crucifixion is whitewashed by Pilate, just as Herod also pushes away guilt. The plot is an awkward, violent way to get rid of the just [...] The murder of the speaker is useless against the word¹⁸. That the intrigue unfolds during a banquet only contributes to its prefigurative character. Referring to the Last Supper or even to the miracle of the loaves, the death of John the Baptist is enlarged to the point of being an inversion. Camille Focant develops in this way the thesis of the meal of the perverse alliance or the antithesis of the meal of the alliance¹⁹: the inversion of the feast in the perverted meal, the inversion of the covenant with Christ and the inversion of the message²⁰. Dormey-

¹⁶ *De virginibus* III 5:25-6:31; J. QUASTEN, *Patrology: The golden age of Latin patristic literature*, Westminster, MD, Christian Classics, 1988, vol. 4, p. 167.

¹⁷ See <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/index2.htm> (accessed 2013, March 26); A.A.R. BASTIAENSEN, *He must grow, I must diminish (John 3:30): Augustine of Hippo preaching on John the Baptist*, in *Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome*, a cura di F. GARCIA MARTINEZ, Leida, Brill, 2003, pp. 13-26; B. BAERT, *He must increase, but I must decrease: On the spiritual and pictorial intertwining between the Johannesschüssel and the Vera Icon (1200-1500)*, in *Meditatio – refashioning the self: Theory and practice in Late Medieval and Early Modern intellectual culture*, a cura di K. ENENKEL – W. MELION, Leida, Brill, 2011, pp. 323-366.

¹⁸ “A chemin emprunté par la violence pour emporte le juste [...] Le meurtre du parleur ne peut rien contre la parole” (J.-J. DELORME, *La tête de Jean-Baptiste*, cit., p. 302).

¹⁹ “Le repas de l’alliance perverse ou l’antithèse du repas de l’alliance” (C. FOCANT, *La tête du prophète*, cit., pp. 346ff.).

²⁰ J.C. Anderson extends this inversion in a feminist sense: “Jesus and John are female. They are sources of food who bleed and feed just as women bleed and feed” (J.C. ANDERSON, *Feminist criticism: The dancing daughter*, in: *Mark and Method: New approaches in biblical studies*, a cura di J.C. ANDERSON – S.D. MOORE, Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 1992, pp. 103-134: p. 133).

er even goes so far as to formulate an “anti-gospel of Herod”²¹. The motif of the plate that is related to the banquet reinforces this inversion to an anti-Eucharist. On the other hand, the plate and its association with sacrifice initiate a proleptic movement toward the ultimate sacrifice of Christ.

The fact that John’s death takes place on a *Dies natalis* – namely, on Herod’s birthday – forms part of the analeptic dynamic around the *prodromos* and the *protomartyr*²². The birth of a king is placed opposite the death of a martyr. But the death date of a martyr is at the same time his or her rebirth, and therefore also a *Dies natalis*. The birthday motif refers to a Greco-Roman custom²³. Birthdays were celebrated with a banquet, which is related to the sacrificial meal. Birthdays were moreover days of reconciliation and redemption, by analogy with the redemption of the celebrant from the womb²⁴. Royal birthdays in particular were oriented toward sacrifices to appease the gods and toward liberation (sometimes literally, because prisoners were often freed on that day). The birthday at court was in other words a chosen moment, a real “occasion”: the *eukarios* that makes a revolution possible²⁵. Herodotus (485-425/420 BC, *Historia*, 1, 119) tells how “occasion” is personified by the god Kairos²⁶. The winged Kairos holds a scale in one hand and a pair of scissors and/or thread in the other. Kairos is volatile and capricious; the god can only be grasped once.

In the gospel narratives, however, the occasion of Herod’s birthday has a negative outcome. It is highly unusual to request a death at a birthday celebra-

²¹ D. DORMEYER, *Der gewaltsame Prophetentod*, cit., pp. 96-106.

²² C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., pp. 61f.

²³ H.G. ZAGONA, *The legend of Salome and the principle of art for art’s sake*, Genève, Droz, 1960, p. 129; J.D.M. DERRET, *Herod’s oath and the Baptist’s head*, in “Biblische Zeitschrift”, 49, 9 (1965), pp. 46-59.

²⁴ CENSORINUS, *De Die Natali*, ed. F. HULTSCH, Leipzig, Teubner, 1867, p. 5; M. DERRET, *Herod’s oath*, cit., p. 56.

²⁵ The word *eukarios* is also used in the episode of Judas’ betrayal, which is framed by the prefigurative movement of Mark’s episode; H.G. ZAGONA, *The legend of Salome*, cit., p. 120.

²⁶ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., *passim*.

I cannot go deeper into the complex patterns of Kairos and the *Nachleben* of this peculiar Greek god; see: F. DURRBACH, *Kairos*, in *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines: Tome troisième, première partie*, a cura di C. DAREMBERG – E. SAGLIO, Paris, Hachette, 1900, pp. 787-788; A. ALLAN, *Situational aesthetics: the deification of Kairos, son of Hermes*, in *Personification in the Greek world: From Antiquity to Byzantium*, a cura di E. STAFFORD – J. HERRIN, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, pp. 123-134: p. 125: “Kairos is the point at which temporal and spatial planes intersect. [...] It refers to proportion and measurement, something fitting, appropriate, suited to the situation”.

tion (after all, it is a day of reconciliation). The lamentable outcome has crept in through the foolishness of the oath. One might ask why Herod did not seek to break or otherwise escape his oath; he was after all deeply uneasy with the request to have John killed. According to Jewish tradition, breaking an oath was taboo, but the Pharisees could have it annulled for compelling reasons²⁷. In the text it is suggested that the oath was also borne by the guests at the banquet; hence the social pressure was immense.

An additional complication in the narrative is the incest taboo. In the episode of John the Baptist, the incest taboo is interpreted according to Leviticus 20:21: "If a man takes his brother's wife, it is impurity; he has uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless". It is the argument for John to accuse Herod of sinning against blood by sleeping with his brother's wife. Incest and blood relationship traverse the passage. It is after all the daughter of Herodias who is incited to demand John's head. The girl is called *korasion*, a term usually used for young girls²⁸. In Mark 5:23-35, the daughter of Jairus is also called *korasion*, and in this text is contrasted with an older woman who has already suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years²⁹. By analogy, some exegetes also estimate Salome's age to be about twelve, an age that contrasts with that of her mother in the narrative³⁰. It is an age of caesura: the girl is at the threshold of fertility and coming of age, of leaving the protection of her mother's wings.

²⁷ M. DERRET, *Herod's oath*, cit., pp. 46-59; B.D. SCHILDGEN, *A blind promise: Mark's retrieval of Esther*, in "Poetics Today", 15, 1 (1994), pp. 115-131. In Jacobus de Voragine's 13th-century *Legenda Aurea*, the oath is thematized as an ambivalent danger that one must treat in a highly ethical fashion. Herod's oath is, according to the author, evidence of his double-mindedness: on the one hand Herod hides behind the duty of the oath, while on the other he is glad to have an excuse to kill John; W.G. RYAN, *Jacobus de Voragine: The Golden Legend: Readings of the Saints*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton Univ. Press, 1993, vol. 2, p. 133; see also JACOBUS DE VORAGINE, *Jacobi a Voragine Legenda Aurea*, ed. T. GRAESSE, Dresden, Impensis Librariae Arnoldianae, 1846, p. 356; G.P. MAGGIONI, *Legenda Aurea*, Firenze, SISMEL, 1998.

²⁸ J. PSICHARI, *Salomé et le décollation de Saint Jean-Baptiste*, in "Revue de l'histoire des religions", 12 (1915), pp. 131-158: p. 152; R. GIRARD, *Scandal and the dance: Salome in the Gospel of Mark*, in "New Literary History", 15, 2 (1984), pp. 311-324; C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., p. 45.

²⁹ M.R. D'ANGELO, *Gender and power in the Gospel of Mark: The daughter of Jairus and the woman with the flow of blood*, in *Miracles in Jewish and Christian Antiquity: Imagining truth*, a cura di J.C. CAVADINI, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1999, pp. 83-109.

³⁰ J.C. ANDERSON, *Feminist criticism*, cit., pp. 103-134.

The girl dances: A motif

The girl dances³¹. Only two words are devoted to the event; in Mark this is sufficient³². John's head is in fact her payment³³. In all cultures the performative character of dance is charged with a connection to celebration, to giving thanks or reconciliation with the gods, but also with a connection to excess and the enormity of the trance³⁴. In Christianity as well, dance has always retained its ambiguity. On the one hand, it is preserved as a psalmodic medium of praise. In the proto-gospel of James (c. 150), Mary dances in the Temple, and Athanasius of Alexandria (295-273) calls dance the soul's means of rising to God³⁵. But dance can also be diabolical, expansive and – according to the Church – dangerous³⁶. In spite of notions like these, dance nevertheless continued to be an in-eradicable component of liturgical and other popular religious celebrations – including those concerning John the Baptist³⁷.

In the narrative context of John the Baptist's beheading, dance also becomes a perversion, and the close relationship between dance and the sacral is diverted toward horror and excess. This passage in Mark shows the rising tension and the trophy – death itself – to which dance can lead. This ambiguity with respect to dance constitutes its very strength, and is emphatically expressed in the advice of Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389): dance not like the daughter of Herodias, but like David³⁸.

³¹ J. PSICHARI, *Salomé*, cit., p. 138, does not know of any example of a king's daughter dancing at a banquet.

³² C. FOCANT, *La tête du prophète*, cit., p. 335.

³³ M. DOTTIN-ORSINI, *Salomé*, cit. The dance is associated with John the Baptist in another context. Mt 11:17 and Lk 7:32 tell the story of flute-playing children and the arrogance of not dancing: "It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn'" (Mt 11:17). "They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep'" (Lk 7:32).

³⁴ L. DEBARGE, *De la danse sacrée aux liturgies dansantes*, in "Mélanges de science religieuse", 49, 3-4 (1992), pp. 143-161.

³⁵ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., p. 131.

³⁶ E.L. BACKMAN, *Religious dances in the Christian church and in popular medicine*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1952.

³⁷ G.F.C. HECKER, *La danzomania: Malattia popolare nel Medio-Evo*, transl. V. Fassetta, Firenze, Ricordi, 1838.

³⁸ R. WEBB, *Salomé's sisters: The rhetoric and realities of dance in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, in *Women, men and eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, a cura di L. JAMES, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 119-148: p. 135; *Contra Julianum* 2, PG 35, col. 709c.

The excessively sober evocation of this dance in the text stands in stark contrast to the sensual interpretations later ascribed to Salome in word and image³⁹. In Mark's original version, however, we are dealing with a child who has no adult desires. "Salome is a child. She has nothing to do with the dance of the seven veils and other *orientalia*"⁴⁰. Girard develops the motif of the dance in Mark's intrigue from the concept of "mimetic desire". The child is a blank page and imitates her mother. She takes over the wish, the head of John the Baptist, from Herodias. From the moment she is filled with this mimesis, the girl changes (she crosses the threshold, as it were), but the temporal experience of the text also changes. The girl *hastens* back and *immediately* demands John's head. The acceleration reflects the intensification of the plot that will converge on death. "At first she is a blank sheet of desire, then, in one instant, she shifts to the height of mimetic violence"⁴¹. The passage enacts itself in a series of moments, passing from the silence of the king's oath to the mimesis of the mother, culminating the hasty fulfillment of the mother/daughter wish.

The girl's innocence and the very impossibility of her desiring something herself lead to a gruesome irony: she demands John's head literally. There is a question of metonymy. The transferrable meaning of the mother's words is not understood, and the mimetic desire is fulfilled in all its directness⁴². If the dance does not belong to the individual girl, if even her desire is not authentic, the platter – *in disco* – nevertheless comes to her "exclusively"⁴³. The platter is the result of a misunderstanding and therefore gruesome in its banality. On account of the misunderstanding, the girl must actually bring the head, and cynically enough that is best done on a platter. But at that very moment the motif of the platter becomes so powerful that it overshadows everything that has gone before in the narrative. In its astonishing cruelty, the platter is the ultimate nightmare of a dance and an oath. The platter causes all other motifs in the narrative – the birthday, the oath, the food and the dance – to converge in an all-consuming maelstrom out of which the *anti-alliance* and the typology of sacrifice were able

³⁹ H. ZAGONA, *The legend of Salome*, cit., *passim*; E. KURLUK, *Salome and Judas in the cave of sex*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 1987, pp. 189-258; J.C. ANDERSON, *Feminist criticism*, cit., pp. 103-134.

⁴⁰ R. GIRARD, *Scandal and the dance*, cit., pp. 311-324.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 314.

⁴² On that point I return to the ambivalent role of the "opportunity" and the oath. M. DERRET (*Herod's oath*, cit., p. 56) refers to typical Jewish irony in the evasion of rules. If no tree may be cut down on a certain day according to the Midrash, do not say "cut down that tree", but "bring me the roots of that tree tomorrow". In Mark's story, irony plays a role in the pronouncement "bring me the head of John the Baptist" instead of "kill him". The king's daughter is not (yet) capable of recognizing irony and actually gives the head of John the Baptist (= metonymy).

⁴³ R. GIRARD, *Scandal and the dance*, cit., p. 317.

to escape in a form that was even more powerful. At the end of a process that began with the sober words “the girl dances”, the head on a platter becomes the object of inversion in salvation history.

The 6th-century gospel fragment from Sinope is one of the earliest illustrations of the biblical *passus* in connection to John’s death. The miniature shows an executioner handing the head on a platter to a woman (Salome?) at the banquet, where Herod sits at the left [fig. 1]⁴⁴. Two disciples are contained in an enclosed space. The scene is flanked by two *ex cathedra* figures who point to a text. At the right, near David, Psalm 116, verse 15, is cited: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful ones”. At the left, near Moses, is a verse from Genesis: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind” (Gen. 9:6). The handing over of the platter – a stream of blood from the neck is clearly visible – takes place in the center of the illustration. It forms the fulcrum of the gaze into the past and the gaze into the future: the death of the prophet installed as mediator of the New Era. His decapitation is the transitional moment itself⁴⁵. The miniaturist has also attempted to capture the moment just after the beheading; the blood is still flowing. The blood refers to the death of Christ, and the fact that the blood is flowing makes of this typology a truly active event: an impact of the revolution of salvation that flows forward in time. It is coming; it has begun; it is happening now.

To conclude. The *Dies natalis*, the banquet, the oath and the dance all sprint toward the unavoidable death of the last prophet. The girl is an intermediary, an innocent, but when she obeys and gives away the platter, an irrevocability comes to the surface – quickly, conveniently – that marks the greatest of revolutions. The hermeneutics of such a revolution can only be embodied by the head of heads: the new Elijah, the Forerunner of Christ. Or to put it in the words of Ambrose again: “Behold, O most harsh king, a sight worthy of thy banquet. [...] Those eyes are closed, not so much by the condition of death, as by horror at thy indulgence. That golden mouth, now bloodless, speaks no longer the condemnation thou could not bear, and of which thou art still afraid”⁴⁶.

⁴⁴ E.D. SDRAKAS, *Johannes der Täufer in der Kunst des christlichen Ostens*, München, Hueber, 1943, p. 56; C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., p. 76; Paris, BnF, Ms. Suppl. Graec. 1286, fol. 10v.

⁴⁵ On the side of the room with the apostles there is a painted decoration: a circle in a square reserve with pointers: a sundial. Later in this essay we shall see that the liturgical calendar of John is related to the solstices.

⁴⁶ *De virginibus* III 5:25-6:31; J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, cit., p. 167.

Salome's dance and iconology

Salome's dance obviously became a prominent motif in art. Although a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this essay, I mention some examples to elucidate the iconological and the anthropological foundation of the dance.

An early representation of the dancing girl can be found in a Chartres misal from the 9th century [fig. 2]⁴⁷. The girl dances with hands held high, while beside her John the Baptist is beheaded. In the next scene, the girl carries the platter to her mother. Oddly enough, the miniaturist has not represented John's head as such, but rather a wooden tablet with a *drawing* of the head. Below, his body is carried away. In other words, John's head is depicted not as a flesh-and-bone head, but in an already "iconized" state. The miniaturist suggests the transition from reality to icon, the emergence of the image in the instant that the new covenant is sealed. Possibly the artist's choice was based on the Greek text, where the platter is referred to as a *pinax* (Mat 14:8 and Marc 6:25), literally a tablet used for writing or drawing. In Luke, the word also appears in the passage where Zechariah writes the name of his son on a tablet, or *pinakidion* (1:63). Zechariah was struck dumb between the conception and the birth of John the Baptist. His voicelessness, the absence of the archetype of wind/breath/speech, is suggestive of infertility. John's head is "autonomized" on the *pinax* bearing his name. The beginning and the end of John's life are thus connected, much as word (*logos*) and image become one in the Christian visual tradition of the Incarnation.

On the 12th-century portal of the baptistery of Parma we find a sculpted banquet of Herod and his guests [fig. 3]⁴⁸. Salome dances at the right, a demon whispering in her ear as if she were possessed. At the left, someone brings a large vessel that anachronistically suggests the urn – *testa* – in which Herod will place the head and in which it will later be found in Jerusalem. On the southern portal of the baptistery of Florence by Andrea Pisano (1290-1348), three compartments are dedicated to the ill-fated feast [fig. 4]⁴⁹. The first shows a table with three men, flanked on the left by a musician, and by a stylized, dancing Salome on the right. Herodias is not present. The second compartment repeats the setting, this time with Salome kneeling to present the head to Herod. The third is devoted to the platter's presentation to the mother. The scenes are highly effective in their economy. The first Salome wears a snake around her shoulders, perhaps referring to seduction and evil. In subsequent scenes she retains a firm grip on John's head, which is placed on Herod's table. The connection between dish and ban-

⁴⁷ Paris, BnF, cod. Lat. 9386, fol. 146v.

⁴⁸ Benedetto Antelami (1150-1220), c. 1196; K. MERKEL, *Salome: Ikonographie im Wandel*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1990, cat. 15, ill. 3.

⁴⁹ C. 1330; *ivi*, cat. 302, ill. 42-44.

quet is very narrowly established here. John's head is turned toward Herod. For his part, however, Herod does not touch the dish so presented, shocked and dismayed as he is. Herodias, by contrast, receives the platter with both hands, but here the head is not turned toward the public, which is thus involved in the key scene and real highlight of the narrative: this woman's perversion. From the high Renaissance onward this perversion will gradually contaminate the figure of Salome as well. From then on she will be typified iconographically as the seductive *femme fatale*. During the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, the girl is innocent and submissive to her mother's wishes⁵⁰.

Between the 12th and the 14th century, when the motif of the dancing Salome developed further, the dance itself began to be more specific. In the church of St Jean in Lyon, an early 13th-century stained-glass window shows the dancing Salome bending over backwards [fig. 5]⁵¹. An earlier example could already be seen on the bronze doors of San Zeno in Verona [fig. 6]⁵². This acrobatic position was referred to as the "hysterical arch". The arch or "bridging" is a recurrent position of the body in spastic episodes, but also – as seen here – in the aversive therapeutic dance of the tarantella⁵³.

The 14th-century mosaic in the cycle decorating the baptistery of San Marco in Venice attests to a second branch of imagery in which the dancing Salome holds the platter above her own head [fig. 7]⁵⁴. She is splendidly dressed in an ermine-trimmed red gown. She blesses with her left hand, which means that the "blessing" is negative. Further on we see Salome for a second time, serenely bearing the head on a platter and handing it over to Herod and his lover in a most regal fashion. Herodias is symmetrically depicted with respect to her daughter, but her expression is false, her clothing green. It is worthy of note that there are two receptacles. The first, belonging to the executioner, is more a *tazza*: a dish on a foot. The second, borne by Salome, is a platter (*in disco*). John's body is ambiguously depicted, arms bent forward. He seems to reach for his own head, thereby suggesting re-capitulation and *kephalophoria*. In the scene at the far right the body is being buried.

⁵⁰ M.L. DUNKELMAN, *The innocent Salomé*, in "Gazette des Beaux-Arts", 133 (1999), pp. 173-180.

⁵¹ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., ill. p. 176; K. MERKEL, *Salome*, cit., p. 224, ill. 25.

⁵² Bronze, c. 1100; *ivi*, cat. 431, ill. 1.

⁵³ C. INGRASSIA, *Danseurs, acrobats et saltimbanques dans l'art au Moyen-Âge: Recherches sur les représentations ludiques, chorégraphiques et acrobatiques dans l'iconographie médiévale*, Ph. D. diss., Paris, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1989, vol. 1, pp. 57-66.

⁵⁴ 1343; K. MERKEL, *Salome*, cit., cat. 429, ill. 39.

The mosaic stands in a tradition in which Salome literally dances with the platter, contrary to the content of the mother text. Earlier examples can be found in an 11th-century silver relief in the Vatican [fig. 8]⁵⁵. There the platter rests effectively on Salome's crown; in her other hand she holds serpents. The ceiling fresco of 1255 from the baptistery of Parma shows the same situation, but without snakes⁵⁶. The dance is the so-called *kaloumenij pinakidos* mentioned in the *Deiphnosophista*⁵⁷. Nevertheless, the effect of head upon head is positively gorgonian. In fact, the Salome types that come in direct contact with the head are petrified beings that restore the primal identity of the female sex to its capacity (and taboo) concerning the uterus and the *diva matrix*. The artists may have visualized these hidden layers on the basis of the attribute of snakes and the red, "bleeding" dress. The fact that this iconography usually occurs in baptisteries has in the first place to do with the patron saint, John the Baptist. From the point of view of the iconographic programs in these spaces, the strange consequence arises in which baptism is actually staged against the background of sacrificial blood and dance. The symbolic spectrum of these two elements permits us to associate them with purification and healing, rebirth and resurrection, with the advent of a new order of being (*rite de passage*). The connection between water, blood and dance articulates a deep and almost unnamable fascination with the human body, with wellbeing and the liquidity of bodily fluids, a fascination that pulsates secretively behind the dogmatic pendants of the sacraments and the official religious experience of sacral space.

As a motif, Salome's dance is connected with the "empty" undesiring girl, while – characteristically for this medium – it also announces a convergence whereby the guests at the banquet are "contracted" around a single fetish: the head⁵⁸. The dance makes possible this connection or *anti-alliance*, as Focant calls it. Girard points out that, since the nature of the dance is not described, the dance as such is not characteristic of the girl. It is not so much hers, but rather belongs to the female gender in general. As a medium that connects and hypnotizes, the dance is the feminine equivalent of male rhetoric. Both apply schemata as a means of persuading or effectuating change⁵⁹. However, in this instance the dance is voiceless and morally ambivalent. In the text of Mark, the voiceless-

⁵⁵ From a book binding for the baptistery of Florence; *ivi*, cat. 332, ill. 19.

⁵⁶ Before 1270; *ivi*, cat. 287, ill. 13.

⁵⁷ ATHENAEUS, *Deiphnosophistae*, 7 voll., a cura e trad. di C.B. GULIK, London, W. Heinemann, 1957; M. HARTMANN, *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers*, cit., pp. 162-168.

⁵⁸ R. GIRARD, *Scandal and the dance*, cit., p. 317.

⁵⁹ R. WEBB, *Salomé's sisters*, cit., p. 137: "The female body in motion may be eloquent, even persuasive, but this non-verbal communication is not the moral equivalent of the word". The Greek church fathers, such as Basileos of Seleucia (4th century, Oratio XVI-II in Herodiadem, PG 85, col. 228c), recognise in the girl the mute female pendant to

ness of the dance merges into the voice of a mimetic desire: “I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter”. The voice that will prophetically result in the silencing of the voice of voices: that of the last prophet. In Focant’s words I can conclude that “his reduction to silence was staged at the end of the story by the display of his severed head on a plate”⁶⁰.

Salome’s dance and anthropological archetypes

Dance had an important function in the narrative construction of the gospel story. The contemporary reader would certainly recognize this motif from the perspective of his or her cultural background⁶¹. In his *Deipnosophistai*, Athenaios of Naucratis (3rd century BC) tells of a banquet among intellectuals, forming a highly appropriate source concerning the customs of Herod’s time⁶². It teaches us that banquets in ancient Greece were typically enlivened by male and female dancers (known as *horchijstridai*). The dancing women might also be prostitutes⁶³. This does not mean that dance was considered morally objectionable – a perception probably arose much later from the Christian impulse with respect to pagan customs and banquets with dancers. But as we have seen, dance receives a fairly neutral treatment in the gospel of Mark. What is strange is that the young girl is of royal blood and hence not from the lower classes of acrobats or prostitutes. She is moreover a family member and still quite young. *That a girl from the royal family makes such an appearance, is indeed to be seen as a positive provocation that demanded an equally positive response* (Hartmann)⁶⁴.

Research on this ritual association has been done by Claudine Gauthier. She discusses anthropological archetypes that allow us to see the ancient sacrality of dance in general and Salome’s dance in particular as part of purification within the (menstrual) *rite de passage*⁶⁵.

Salome was originally nameless. Her role in the story is more *persona* than personality. She is the *korasion*, a dancing girl at a banquet. In Jewish and Hel-

the male word. She is a voiceless, objectified woman who owes her existence to the male gaze (R. WEBB, *Salomé’s sisters*, cit., p. 140).

⁶⁰ “Sa réduction au silence étant théâtralisée en fin de récit par l’exhibition de sa tête coupée sur un plat” (C. FOCANT, *Les mises en récit*, cit., p. 17).

⁶¹ M. HARTMANN, *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers*, cit., pp. 162-168.

⁶² ATHENAEUS, *Deipnosophistae*, cit., v. 4:128-131, 4:130, 4:628-632.

⁶³ K.-W. WEEBER, *Tanzen*, in *Alltag im Alten Rom: Ein Lexikon*, a cura di K.-W. WEEBER, Zurigo, Artemis, 1995, pp. 353-355: p. 353.

⁶⁴ „Dass ein Mädchen aus der königlichen Familie solchermaßen in Erscheinung tritt, ist in der Tat als eine positive Herausforderung zu sehen, die eine ebenso positive Antwort erheischte“ (M. HARTMANN, *Der Tod Johannes des Täufers*, cit., p. 168).

⁶⁵ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., pp. 117-127.

lenistic tradition the first *menses* of a young girl mark a critical turning point⁶⁶. This was viewed as a very fragile period that could turn out positively or negatively – in sickness, melancholy or epileptic attacks, for example. Purification rites were thus recommended.

The trophy of Salome's dance – the bearded, hirsute head of John – is according to some anthropologists the cephalomorphization of the menstrual flux. Julia Kristeva's discussion of Ovid's wild, spiny coral reefs springing from the blood of the Medusa is entirely fitting here, for she associates this occurrence with the ritually menstruating girl: the *korallion* or *korè*⁶⁷. The head is gorgonic, blood that is taboo and bestially hirsute that requires control over its intrinsic wildness and epileptic dangers. These dangers can only be efficiently checked in the remedy of the Bacchic dance and in the *cruor* – the allowing of blood to flow – of the sacrificial beheading. Here the spectrum of dance once again touches the spectrum of the sacrificial blood offering.

In his *Cyropedia* (VIII, 7), Xenophon describes the sacrificial banquet of Cyrus, which is accompanied by ritual dancing and an orchestra before the victims' throats are cut⁶⁸. There is thus a context in which music, dance and the throat form part of a single cluster. The role of women in this constellation is performative⁶⁹. There are exceptions in Dionysian rituals, however, in which women are allowed to take an active role in the throat cutting. But only an older woman may serve as priestess of the *cruor*. And only a prepubescent girl may assist⁷⁰. In short, the ritual handling of blood and flesh is in this case reserved for those women who no longer or do not yet menstruate.

The women who will venerate the threshing basket during the Thesmophoria festival in honor of Demeter first perform a cleansing blood sacrifice⁷¹. Demeter demands that they wrap themselves in the blood of the sacrificed flesh⁷². After-

⁶⁶ F. VOSSELMANN, *La menstruation: Legends, coutumes et superstitions*, Paris, L'Expansion scientifique française, 1936; T. BUCKLEY – A. GOTTLIEB, *Blood magic: The anthropology of menstruation*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988; *Menstruation: A cultural history*, a cura di A. SHAIL – G. HOWIE, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

⁶⁷ J. KRISTEVA, *Visions capitales*, Paris, Reunion des musées nationaux, 1998, p. 40.

⁶⁸ See also Sophocles' *Electra* (vv. 280-281).

⁶⁹ C. GAUTHIER, *Saint Jean et Salomé*, cit., p. 195.

⁷⁰ M. DETIENNE, *Violentes eugénies: En pleines Thesmophories: Des femmes couvertes de sang*, in *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec*, a cura di M. DETIENNE – J.-P. VERNANT, Paris, Gallimard, 1979, pp. 183-214.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Baubo, an ugly old woman, wants to console Demeter, goddess of fertility, who laments the abduction of her daughter Persephone in the underworld. Demeter mourns and so makes the earth infertile, but Baubo pulls her skirts up over her head and shows

ward the women would rest for three days to favor menstrual flux. This unusual practice is to be explained by the fact that the Greeks equated the menstruating body of woman with the bleeding of animal sacrifice. It is thus a monthly occurrence that gushes red fluid, a secret discontinuity, an interruption that evokes uterine activity. On Greek amulets one often finds inscriptions that are meant to invoke the womb⁷³. An early Byzantine charm goes: “Womb, Black; Blackening, as a snake you coil, and as a serpent you hiss, and as a lion you roar and as a lamb, lie down”⁷⁴. The charm asks the uterus to calm itself, to shrink⁷⁵. The amulets and the sayings must be situated against a background of conviction that the uterus is an animated being, a demon, an animal that must continually be soothed, appeased (ill. 9)⁷⁶.

The motif of the dancing girl who receives a trophy in the form of a gorgonic head is thus complex and paradoxical: disease-carrying, epileptic and eroticizing but beneath that flows the fascination for visible blood that springs from positive to negative, fertility to filth, red to black, fragrant to malodorous, like the trophy that is passed from daughter to mother, from a younger to an older woman. The trophy is in fact a “stumbling block” within the narrative framework and by extension within cultural history.

I use the term stumbling block deliberately. In Greek, *skadzein* means to stumble or limp. By extension, the *skandalon* (the scandal) in its earliest meaning is none other than an obstacle that attracts and repels, related, thus, to the “stumbling block”. According to Girard, Mark incorporates the idea of the *skandalon* in the motif of the dance. “The movements of dance seem to untangle for us the otherwise unyielding knot of our desires. The art of the dance simul-

her genitals. Upon seeing that the old woman’s genitals have taken on the form of a handsome youth, Demeter bursts out laughing, and the earth begins to bloom once more; G. DEVEREUX, *Baubo: La vulve mythique*, Paris, J.-C. Godefroy, 1983, *passim*.

⁷³ J. SPIER, *Medieval Byzantine magical amulets and their tradition*, in “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes”, 56 (1993), pp. 25-62 (ill. 40/4d: a silver ring, and also on a lead amulet, both from Corinth); J. SPIER, *Late antique and early Christian gems*, Wiesbaden, Reichert, 2007.

⁷⁴ J. SPIER, *Medieval Byzantine magical amulets*, cit., p. 30.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 43; this portrait is often octopus-like (see above).

⁷⁶ According to A.A. BARB, *Diva matrix: A faked gnostic intaglio in the possession of P.P. Rubens and the iconology of the symbol*, in “Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes”, 16, 3-4 (1953), pp. 193-238 (pl. 6a), these ideas go back to Mesopotamian archetypes. The amulets also protected men, who were infected by a “womb”, such as the one for the Russian Basileos. See also: B. BAERT, ‘*Qui a touché mon manteau?*’ *La guérison d’une femme atteinte de flux de sang (Marc 5:24b-34) à la croisée du Texte, de l’Image et du Tabou dans la culture visuelle du haut Moyen-Age*, in “Archaevs: Study in the History of Religions”, 13 (2009), pp. 1-30; B. BAERT, *Wenn ich nur sein Kleid*, cit., pp. 52-76.

taneously excites and appeases desire. Desire does its best to turn the truth into a scandal"⁷⁷. Where the dance is oriented toward the untangling or liberation of the knot, the scandal causes one to fall, to limp, to become tied up in knots. The head of John the Baptist is the result of that *skandalon*. In that sense the head incorporates the "knot" of human desires and preoccupations, a "knot" that only could become visible, untangled, in the interspatial approach of exegesis, literature, art and anthropology as a whole.

In conclusion

Regarding the *Decapitation, dance, text* where I examined the exegetical readings of the mother text as developed by Girard and Focant (among others), it became clear how the martyrdom on the royal birthday, the occasion arising from an incest taboo and the shimmering of an "empty" girl who topples into the bearer of the *anti-alliance*, give this biblical narrative a unique tension, a tension that implodes in the constantly returning motif of revolution and transition for the sake of revelation. The opportunity for the decapitation presents itself suddenly and it is seized instantly. The head of John the Baptist becomes a trophy signifying the moment of moments, epitomized in the fulfillment of a gruesome oath that cannot be broken. The *Dies natalis*, the banquet, the oath and the dance all hurry towards the inevitable death of the last prophet.

The girl dances is a motif. She is the intermediary, innocence personified, but when she obeys and takes hold of the platter and presents it to her mother, an inevitability arises in the greatest of turnarounds. The hermeneutics of such a revolution can only be embodied by the head of heads: the new Elias, precursor to Christ.

These essential interpretations were transposed and re-enacted into iconological, anthropological and gender fields: In *Salome's dance and iconology* it became clear that the simple words "girl" and "dance" produced a process in which the head on the platter became the symbol of the God become flesh; the head, in its autonomy, is "captured" as an image. The girl has allowed the image to "autonomize" and it has come to symbolize its gruesome capriciousness. Hence it would appear that images do not emerge slowly, but suddenly, fleetingly, fluidly, like blood flowing from a wounded throat.

In *Salome's dance and anthropological archetypes* the decapitation and the sacrificial victim proceeded one last spectrum: the blood of sacrifice and dance. Dance plays a literary role in the synoptic gospels. It is precisely through the impact of the dance that Herod binds himself to a promise. Dance functions as a

⁷⁷ R. GIRARD, *Scandal and the dance*, cit., pp. 315-316.

sort of trap that reaches further than expected: it leads to the trophy of death. Iconographically a contraction takes place between dance and trophy, between cause and consequence. We see not only representations of the dancing Salome, but also of the dancing Salome holding above her head John's head *in disco*. The pictorial language has a contaminating effect on the mother text, displacing the girl's neutral dance in favor of a macabre dance of seduction.



Fig. 1. Bible of Sinope, 6th century. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Ms. Suppl. Graec. 1286, fol. 10v.



Fig. 2. Dancing Salome, first half of the 9th century, Carolingian missal for Chartres. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cod. Lat. 9386, fol. 146v.



Fig. 3. Banquet of Herod and his guests, 12th-century portal. Parma, Baptistery.



Fig. 4. Banquet of Herod, Andrea Pisano (1290-1348), southern portal. Florence, Baptistery.



Fig. 5. Dancing Salome, early 13th-century stained-glass. Lyon, St Jean.

Fig. 6. Dancing Salome, ca. 1100, bronze doors. Verona, San Zeno.





Fig. 7. Dancing Salome, 14th century, mosaic. Venice, San Marco.



Fig. 8. Dancing Salome, 11th century, bookbinding, silver. Vatican, The Vatican Museums.



Fig. 9. Uterine amulets. After A.A. Barb, "Diva Matrix", in *The Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 16 (1953), pp. 193-238.