



## **The female body on the dance floor: Reclaiming power from the dance floor in Mark's Herodian daughter**

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### **Abstract**

Using dance perspective and Homi Bhabha's postcolonial ambivalence theory, this study re-reads the events that occurred during the banquet at Herod's house. Unlike previous perspectives that focuses on the gruesome murder of John by Herod, the study focuses on the banquet that resulted in the young girl to dance to the point whereby, having been intoxicated and greatly amused, Herod asks the girl what she can have as a reward. By intersecting the female body that culturally signifies gender inferiority to its ambivalence as a subject of attraction and pleasure, I develop the hypothesis that the body through its dance regained its power by becoming a somewhat equal patron; negotiating its rights and being the source of an alternative and yet subversive power. Instead of the female body being a source merely of the male's gaze and pleasure, it attained agency and power.

### **Keywords**

*Dance; ambivalence; Herod; power agency; patron*

## **Introduction**

In everyday life, the female body is culturally and discursively represented as site of erotic attraction. The music industry with its genres such as hip-hop is typical example where male artists sing while, fulfilling the cultural stereotype, the female artist dances. Noticeable in most of the videos from artists such as Nicky Minaj and many others, the attention is given to particular female body parts – the hips, the breasts and combination of visibly erotic moves. This cultural representation of female bodies as source of entertainment through erotic dance is traceable back to biblical times.

The ancient Greco-Roman culture was noticeable by the segregation of gender; they were emphasising the biological difference between a male body and that of a female. It was a tradition that “people learn to use their bodies inside their own cultural and socio-economic contexts and to interpret the bodily behaviour of others. Nonverbal behaviours convey ideologies of status, gender, ethnicity, and culture” (Clark 2009:7). During ceremonies such as the banquet the bodies of performers (usually girls) were adorned to social values, their significance in a society was undermined and this had an impact on their self-esteem. This therefore means that this “ritualization is not merely a passive display of values, but rather is itself an act of production of a ritualized agent, who in turn acts within society” (Bell 1992:96). This consequently gives the assumption that “the body is a vehicle for the social construction of reality” (Cooley 1994:5). In the same community that holds such notions about the value of a woman, the daughter’s dance was indeed a definite mark in history.

The cultural images and discourses generated by these bodies are reducing the woman as agency to objects of pleasure. It feeds into the cultural narrative that women are good where they feed the male’s gaze, either through dance or wearing revealing clothes. Females who refuse this cultural tag by wearing what is called “formal attire” are not totally off the hook because within closed doors, by wearing sexually appealing clothes in the bedroom, her body still needs to satisfy the man’s gaze, lest she is accused of her lack of sexual libido. While the story of the dancing Herodian daughter may seem to support this narrative, I contest this by saying by raising to a point of negotiating like an equal patron to Herod, her dance awakens us to the presence of alternative power and agency from the dance floor.

My perspective of dance interpreted from postcolonial ambivalence theory of Bhabha is influenced by my personal experience as a cultural Tswana dancer. I am from a Tswana culture, known for its exuberant, lively cultural dances. As a young girl and embedded within my culture, no holiday or festival would go by without community dance. To a tourist or visitor, our short skirts and band of cloth that barely covers the breasts would quickly draw the viewer as a sight of attraction. The singing, the dance, the clapping would occupy us till we all got tired and ran to our homes before dark. To us, besides entertainment, we drew agency from the fact that, through

dance the men, the women, young and old came to ululate and sometimes threw a few coins towards a dancer who would be performing better than the rest. I must say, during those days, I busked in the glory of being one of the dancers who would draw people's attention. Dance was power and agency, and through it I gained the envy and applause of many, known and greeted as the best village dancing girl. I use my experience as a cultural dancer through Homi Bhabha's ambivalence theory to re-imagine the agency attained by the Herodian daughter through her dance.

### **Theoretical perspective: Ambivalence**

Ambivalence is one of Homi Bhabha's tools of describing postcolonial relationships; asymmetric relationships between masters and slave, powerful and powerless. It arises from the question: how do we explain social interactions that arise from contexts characterised by uneven power relationships? Answers to this question range from activities of banditry to complete subjugation and silence. Eric Hobsbawm's *Bandits* is an example of insurrection and anarchy against imposition by the powerful while Michel Foucault's discussion regarding the panoptic is an example of being silenced and helpless in the presence of the powerful (Hobsbawm 1969; Foucault 2012). Homi Bhabha takes a micro-perspective, later popularised by James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990).

The basic argument is that the oppressed varies micro-activities to register their discontent towards oppression: foot-dragging, labelling, graffiti, and many various means. As a tactic, ambivalence carries the ideas of camouflage while expressing discontent, disavowal, attractive and repulsive actions which are meant to benefit the so-called Other. Within it there is an intermittent relation between mimicry, mockery and the colonized subject. The effect of this in a colonial discourse is marked by the interference of supremacy. Particularly, Bhabha in his theory points out that the disruption of the colonial relationship between the coloniser and the colonised does not depend on whether one party is complicit or resistant. Without an outward registration of total anarchy, while engaging in a rebellion through ambivalence, the colonised have a strategic way

to withstand the authority coming from the colonizers through hidden transcripts (Bhabha 2011:126).

## **Dance, social class and gender**

Homi Bhabha's theory makes us ask questions concerning the dancing Herodian daughter, about social classes within the text and how the weak, such as women, navigated their survival. Therefore, a look into the social classes revealed by the story makes us understand the story better. An individual in the Greco-Roman world was identified based on his or her lineage, gender, political, economic, and social status. This is evident from the attendees, the dignitaries and patrons to Herod who came for the banquet. Because of the vast territory under their authority, the Romans devised a system that some sections of the Empire would be ruled by kings; these were appointed rulers of a region who report to the Roman governor such as Pilate. Most probably the Herod being referred to in the story is Herod Antipas who ruled Galilee and surrounding areas. Throughout the Empire maintenance of peace was of paramount importance and that was achieved through whichever means—even brutality. To please his masters and gaining favours, Herod ruled Palestine using ultimate force. Herod had the ultimate power of life and death over everyone who was under his authority. The killing of John the Baptist, a subsection of this story that evidence the extent to which Herod could go in maintaining peace by squashing any prospect of insurrection. In short, Herod was a supreme leader of the region whose responsibility was reporting to the Roman officials within the region.

Another class that comes from the story is of the dignitaries that were invited to the banquet. We are not told the nature and occasion of the banquet, but we can assume that, based on the nature of the patrons in attendance, the event was to commemorate an important occasion or to strengthen kinship ties. To paint the importance of the occasion, Mark reports this by saying, “military commanders, high officials, and the leading men of Galilee were present” (Mk 6:21). A banquet revealed social class; a status and superiority of the host was demonstrated. It was held in a decorated setting, with luxurious tableware and various forms of entertainments were offered in order to impress the guests. In this case, the

banquet was held in the courtyard and the performance was a dance done by Herodias' daughter. For those who were invited, their obligation was to be obedient towards an authoritative figure, to reinforce their political and social kinship.

Of importance to my study is the class represented by women and slaves. Though slaves are not explicitly mentioned, we can assume that they were the labour force behind the story. In addition, entertainers (performers-poets and skits) were present to serve the guests and offer entertainment. Though of low status, slaves were known to be professional dancers. Caution must be given insofar as by virtue of association with Herod, the women in the story were not just ordinary women. However, gender identities associated with all women of that time apply to the manner in which they were represented within the story. Women were classified as the other and referred to as weaker beings. In this Greek patriarchal society, when a woman reached a certain age (around the stage of puberty), she was expected to get married. This marriage was usually organised by their fathers and designated husbands which in this case was a member of their tribe. Endogamy was their cultural practice in the ancient Mediterranean, which denotes that one had to marry within the limits of their clan with the aim of procreating and preserving the family name. For that reason, fertility was a result of a successful marriage. This expectation, or rather duty, of a woman to procreate therefore limited their prominence as it was the only thing that they could take pride in. In fulfilling the woman's cultural responsibility, the very same women who produced these heirs (which could only be males) were not allowed to inherit anything. Moreover, a male person had the authority to instruct a woman regardless of age. A woman in this era was viewed as a sexual object that was there to bear children for the family.

Even though marriage enhanced the status of women, the relationship between the wife and her husband, as Aristotle mentioned in his philosophical work, was like that of the ruler and the ruled. A husband had control over his wife and all her possessions. Different tasks were designated based on gender. Gender inequality was a custom in the Greco-Roman world. Men were generally regarded as more important than females and they held the most important positions in the society. A woman was naturally expected to do all the indoor work while the man was

busy with outdoor activities; women were not allowed to hold leadership positions.

This gender-specific partition of labour was an ethical principle, which in a way was oppressing women as their participation in the society was limited. The feminine class was defined aesthetically and at the same time was being compared to the masculine class which was defined using intellectual reasoning. This is one of the origins of the political, religious, cultural and economic inferiority of women. Furthermore, women were socialised to think that the only power they could exert was through the usage of their bodies. This is the suppression of the female bodies by which women were forced to obey. Also, the notion that “the entertainment was sexually titillating, and females present were understood to be sexually available” (Dewey 2006:24) was minimizing the value of a woman. This patriarchal cultural practice defines a female as “a being who desires sex and who is a temptation to males, and a male as the one who is susceptible to female sexuality and who must protect the females of his family in order to preserve male honour” (Anderson & Moore 1992:122).

### **Ambivalence and deconstruction of power and hierarchy through dance**

Given the asymmetric social classes, how did the young girl through her dance navigate her identity from the tag of being a mere woman to become a “patron”, negotiating a portion of Herod’s kingdom? Homi Bhabha’s ambivalence perspective suggests that, within postcolonial settings, the subaltern does not declare their true intention. Through mimicry, they appear to agree with the narrative of the master of docility and obedience. However, for Bhabha underneath the drama is a satiric drama of disavowal and total rejection. James Scott calls such clandestine subversive performances the “hidden transcript” of the oppressed. I turn now to re-reading the story of the dancing lady from the perspective of ambivalence.

We should start with what appears to be mimicry by volunteering to dance. Dances at such ancient banquets were performances preserved for hired dancers and poets, whose skills perfected throughout ages would arouse the senses of Herod and his guest (Clark 2009:7). Mark simply mentions

this, saying, “when the daughter of Herod came in and danced, she pleased Herod and the dinner guest” (Mk 6:22). The word ὀρχησαμένης is an active verb implying her own volition in coming to perform. Given that several entertainers could be present to give their best routine that night, Mark does not tell us when and which part of the procession did she thought of coming to dance. Given that her routine halted another procession, we may presume that she danced last when the dinner guests were relaxed and focused on the entertainment. An ambivalent perspective forces us to ask her intention in taking the initiative: why did she dance in what seemed to be an unplanned routine? We can plausibly assume that, as the conclusion indicates, she wanted to catch the attention of the officials. To the officials, her dance was for entertainment, yet for her she wanted to displace their attention. Indeed, she was from the royal lineage, and who would not turn their necks to witness a rare moment of Herodias’ daughter dancing?

The mimicry of this event and its ambivalence is found in the double meaning and intention of her seeking personal pride, and yet to the officials it was one of the many dances. The ambivalence of the dance needs further exploration. Mark starves us by not explaining the nature of the dance, but we can assume that, given that the guests and Herod were pleased, it suggests that it was a good dance. Mediterranean dance was important during ritual, religious, social and personal activities. One of its purposes was to offer entertainment to the audience while they are relaxing and enjoying the wine as it was in Herod’s banquet.

When the Roman citizens added dance as part of entertainment during events such as banquets, its nature and purpose was to convey feelings, emotions and a meaningful message through bodily movements. For a dance to be regarded as a complete portrayal of art, it was accompanied by music and poetry. For that reason, the body movements of a dancer were rhythmical, making use of any part of the body. Some of the movements that were observed during a dance performance included roaring, in the case where the aim is to imitate wild prototypes, as well as pivoting, and unexpected darting at the audience (Lawler 1947:344). The “principle of the art of dance was imitation” (Georgios, Christina, Aspasia, Maria & Evgenia 2017:161).

If it was a known performance, we can further assume that the crowd was involved through clapping of hands and drumming to demonstrate their approval of the dance and excitement. In the ancient Greek, a female dancer was referred to as the *orchestris*. However, this word was mostly used to refer to women who perform solo dances in exchange for money. Therefore, for Herod's daughter to offer such a performance, given that she belongs to the royal family, this would raise an eye. It was undeniably culturally unthinkable for a princess to stand before a male audience to offer a dance performance (France 2002:258). This type of dance was characterized by erotic movements portrayed through flexible motion.

The attire for such a dance included an ornamental dress that barely covers the body, to the extent that the breasts of a dancer were fully exposed. A short tunic was also part of the attire and it required the dancer to continuously do hip motion in order for the tunic to flare out. The dance involves long strides, combined with lifting of the arms and rhythm of body. This dance in the Greco-Roman world was not only to feed to the male gaze but to suggest female labour through the usage of their bodies (Olsen 2017:24). This type of dance indeed reduced females to mute sexual objects available to provide pleasure for males.

A similar type of dance took place in ancient Greek where the female sympatric entertainer would dance with the aim of evoking the god Dionysus. In this case, a dancer would wear a short leopard skin costume, which also leaves the breast and other parts of the body displayed. This dance was characterised by motion and sexuality and complemented by musical instruments. It has been a “historical practice and literary trope, offering both a kind of socially-condoned ritual inversion as well as a more threatening image of women” (Olsen 2017:22). This dance was performed during Greek symposiums where males would be having conversations, drinking and enjoying entertainment.

The bowl that was used during the symposium to drink wine had a sexually appealing image of a female performer. The purpose of this image was for men to objectify women as sexual objects so that male symposiast may receive the sexual pleasure while drinking wine just by looking at the cup. While enjoying the dance, males would emphasise the sexual nature of the dance by constantly praising women's breasts and behinds



(Olsen 2017:26). This practice had an impact on women's self-esteem as their bodily movement depended on the appraisal from male audience. The Mediterranean antiquity has recurring themes of the silencing and objectification of female dancers, viewing them as sexual objects.

Given that the mother was at the background, she may have been the instructor since the daughter was a young girl. Because of experience, performance skills were passed on from mother to daughter. Her satisfaction with the dance could not be hidden from her eyes; she was equally pleased. The narrative continues to the guests and Mark does not shy to comment, saying, ἤρεσεν τῷ Ἡρώδῃ καὶ τοῖς συνανακειμένοις (she pleased Herod and the dinner guests). The statement is the peak of the narrative from the view of the guests (Bell 1992:96). The gaze of the male figures was satisfied.

However, the ambivalence view of Bhabha requires us to go back to the story and ask: was she equally satisfied? What impact does her dance performance have on her self-esteem and self-confidence given that she was wearing revealing clothes? What happens next reveals that her intention was not receiving the applause from the guests: she was satisfied that she got the attention of dinner guests. But her intention was far more than receiving applause; it was more than the normalised expectation attached to female dancers in the ancient Mediterranean. Instantly an opportune time arose. In what seem like an intended statement from a drunk Herod he retorts, saying, ὁ δὲ βασιλεὺς εἶπεν τῷ κορασίῳ αἵτησόν με ὃ ἐὰν θέλῃς, καὶ δώσω σοι (and the king said to the girl, "ask me of anything you want and I will give it to you" (Mk 6:22). Here the ambivalence of the story is heightened. At first, she was a mere girl who took part in the dance; but now she has agency; she can, through an oath, attain vast pieces of land. It is not clear whether Herod meant his words, or it was part of entertaining the guests by parading his power and wealth. While to Herod his masculinity was shown through parading his wealth, but for the lady, if she gets land and all its resources, she would be equal to the influential equestrians who own land (France 2002:258; Dewey 2006:24).

She used her body as a vehicle to attain agency and honour. Since a female dancer in ancient Greece was considered a silent object, whose agency and subjectivity was deflated, Salome reconditioned the cultural standards of identity, construction and deconstruction through her dancing body. We

can plausibly assume that her bodily movements, bringing into place a new perspective of interpreting female body language challenged the cultural conception of femininity. Salome's performative agency indeed challenges the cultural constrain of the Mediterranean world (Noland 2009:2). From the dance of Salome, one can note the two simultaneous intentions – that is, an erotic female body that offers entertainment or enjoyment to males and a female body that is deconstructing patriarchal power structures, thereby transforming into a vocal and influential female in a male-dominated society. Significantly, bodily movements from the dance performance propose more than what meets the eye.

Mediterranean honour could be inherited (acquired) through genealogy but could also be ascribed, that is, by being admired through accomplishing something such as winning any of the great Greek games such as Olympians, Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean. Salome's dance performance is versatile, allowing her to portray an erotic female dance as expected while at the same time leaving space to fulfil her intention to kill John the Baptist. The female body in this instance could be interpreted as a vehicle that defines agency and individuality by means of performance. In addition, a female performance has the potential to offer “both personal and communal pleasure in a sphere removed from male objectification” (Olsen 2017:36).

Remarkably, power was integrated using identity construction, both in family households and the society at large in the ancient world. The concept of honour and shame in Mediterranean antiquity primarily functions together with factors such as kingship, social and economic hierarchy. Wikan (1984:636) claims that honour has to do with an aspect of a person, while shame refers to the act only. Following this model brings the understanding that “the honour of the family resides in its women, but men carry the responsibility for defending it, while women embody the potential for shame through their sexual conduct” (Osiek 2008:3). Salome's ability to elevate her status into being an equal patron in such a male-dominated society left Herod powerless. On the one hand, Herod's oath led to his own downfall which left him shameless. On the other hand, Salome gained her honour when she interacted with power, with the intention to recuperate and redefine her identity.

The request of John the Baptist's head may be read as fore-shadowing the death of Jesus, but from the perspective of ambivalence, it further cements her agency: she now has the power to bargain. No slave or woman was allowed or at a position to bargain with Herod or men in general. Why did she take the first offer of land and ascend to the position of equestrian as a property owner? From ambivalence perspective, seemingly by killing the enemy of the region, she attains similar masculinity as warrior and as patriotic. Her request displaces masculinity from the hands of Herod who had the imperial power to kill for the girl who used her dancing skills to determine John's fate and making Herod a listener and follower of her request (Karayanni 2004:1).

As the theory of ambivalence and mimicry suggests, from the moment the daughter was granted a moment to regain her identity, she accomplished her goal by making use of her attractive seductive body. She managed to make Herod and the guests' slaves to her body; attention was grasped through the dance using body movement which Jane C. Desmond in his cultural theory refers to as a primary social text which already holds meaning while constantly changing. For that reason, "movement serves as a marker to produce gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities" (Karayanni 2004:1).

## **Conclusion**

The study re-read the story of the dancing lady from postcolonial ambivalence perspective, noting that the subject or subaltern does not passively follow the dictates of power. Neither do they follow the other extreme of violence and anarchy. Instead they use clandestine strategies to deconstruct power. In the story, the dominating narrative is that of Herod who hosted the banquet to celebrate his birthday together with his officials. From this perspective the narrative is patriarchal and hegemonic. Because of Herod's power handed to him by Rome, one may assume that he always had his wish. However, through dance, we noticed how performance shifted the gaze from patriarchy to the female body, one who at first seemed to feed the gaze of men attendees. However, her dance gave her the weapon and power to ascend from being mere woman to becoming a negotiator. Instead of accepting what seemed to be an attractive offer from the drunken Herod

in the form of land, indeed, she made Herod her subject by forcing him to kill John. The power of Herod and his right to kill, momentarily, shifted to the hands of women, as if she was direct from the lineage of imperial authority. Like Herod she earned “masculinity through violence and right to kill”. The power of the Empire was displaced through a mere dance.

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