Salomé: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman

Salomé was the icon of the ideology of the decadents. She fascinated many artists, most notably Moreau and Beardsley, but also many lesser-known painters. Flaubert, Heine, Mallarmé, Huysmans, and Laforgue recreated her image and that of Herodias as well. Why? Mario Praz says, "It is curious to follow the parabola of the sexes during the nineteenth century: the obsession for the androgyne type towards the end of the century is a clear indication of a turbid confusion of function and ideal. The male, who at first tends towards sadism, inclines, at the end of the century, towards masochism." He says of Wilde's Salomé, "It is childish, but it is also humoristic, with a humor which one can with difficulty believe to be unintentional, so much does Wilde's play resemble a parody of the whole of the material used by the decadents and of the stammering mannerism of Maeterlinck's dramas—and, as a parody, Salomé comes very near to being a masterpiece." But then he remarks on her "vampire passion," her "sensual cruelty," and her "monstrous passion."

In view of recent discussions about androgyny, one wonders why there is so little mention of the androgyne in nineteenth-century painting. Visually it is evident in the paintings that the androgyne is a feminized male; furthermore, this figure is often the suffering artist and is usually being tormented by a sphinx or a witch or some form of the wicked woman. John and Salomé in Wilde's play can be viewed as types of these figures.

But the most important point to be made concerns the social relevance of the androgyne. The late nineteenth-century revival of this figure reflects not simply a psychological change in the male self-image.
from sadistic to masochistic, as Mario Praz suggests. It is a fearful response to woman’s desire for political equality. It is really not merely a coincidence that an interest in androgyny has arisen twice in recent history, at times when women were actively seeking equality and power. As Oscar Wilde said, “Just as it is only in art-criticism and through it that we can apprehend the platonic theory of ideas, so it is only in art-criticism and through it that we can realize Hegel’s system of contraries. The truths of metaphysics are the truths of masks.”

The contrary most clearly demonstrated here is that Wilde’s Salomé bears very little resemblance to the Salomé of Beardsley’s drawings, Moreau’s paintings, or the description of them in Huysmans’ _Au rebours_. Late nineteenth-century painting, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the decadents, mannerists, and symbolists, had presented either the virgin or the whore as its image of woman. There are some interesting variations, of course, but in either guise, she is usually associated with death. The revival of all the mythological, historical, and royal figures of perverse and powerful women from Sappho to the sphinx, at a time when the social, legal, and political position of women was at a low ebb, is more than ironic.

Wilde deliberately creates a contrary image of Salomé. Or rather, he demystifies the image and makes her into a real person. The image making process itself was a way of dehumanizing woman. Wilde’s Salomé is not exactly a wholesome heroine, but then John, Herod, and Herodias are not exactly “healthy” human beings. What he has done in his play is to revise the Bible so that Salomé shares equally in John’s role as precursor to Christ. The idea of a female precursor is antithetical to traditional Christianity; it touches on such a sensitive nerve of patriarchal religion that the superb wit of Wilde’s joke was lost on his contemporaries.

The fact that this was indeed Wilde’s intention is most clearly revealed in his presentation of Salomé’s death. His stage directions include the curious demand that she be “crushed by the shields of the soldiers.” One is rather distracted in the reading of the text by the Beardsley illustration in which a bald Pierrot (in black pajamas)
and Satan are tucking a naked Salomé with an androgynous Medusa-like head and a perfect female body into a coffin made from an eighteenth-century powder box. The point of Wilde's instructions is the attempted annihilation of Salomé's body by the defenders of the state's power. Their shields crush her as if she were the attacking enemy, as if they are defending themselves against her. This bold stroke of genius on Wilde's part is most often ignored in productions of both the play and the opera. But it is the most important piece in the puzzle of the meaning of the play. (Roman shields were also offensive weapons used against barbarians. Zoe Caldwell's 1982 interpretation of Medea as an Eastern barbarian witch plays on the same theme.)

Richard Ellmann, in his provocative and interesting essay "Overtures to Salomé," quotes Gomez Carillo as saying that Wilde originally intended the play to be called La Décapitation de Salomé, "thus slighting John by precisely equating the two deaths." The battering of Salomé's body by the soldiers' shields is as much a fitting punishment of her perverse sensuality as the severing of Iokanaan's head is a punishment for his perverse spirituality.

This reading is in keeping with Ellmann's "Iokanaan is not Ruskin, but he is Ruskinism as Wilde understood that pole of his character—It is Salomé, and not Pater, who dances the dance of the seven veils, but her virginal, yet perverse sensuality is related to Paterism." But his assumption that Herod is made the hero of the play because he survives them both does not do justice to Wilde's rewriting of the biblical story. Wilde's deliberate setting of the play so that the rise of Christ will coincide with the fall of Rome, and Salomé's demand for John's head as an act of revenge for her father's death and for Herod's treatment of her as an object of lust suggest that Herod, as the representative of old decadent Roman authority, will be destroyed by Christianity.

Wilde's Salomé is a historical myth as well as a morality play. We are as sure that Herod and what he represents are to be destroyed as we are that the old gods are destroyed and Valhalla with them after the deaths of Siegfried and Brünhilde in Götterdämmerung.
Some critics think that Wilde identified himself with Herod, but this is another case of the Beardsley drawings (which make the same identification) distracting us from the text of the play. Herod is such a barbarian, so nouveau riche, greedy, voluptuous, superstitious, so eager to impress his Roman guests, that a good actor can make him comic and tragic at the same time. Strauss found him much easier to deal with than Iokanaan. Certainly his catalogue of the treasures he will give Salomé is both an attack on corrupt materialism and a joke at the expense of the fetishism of the decadents. (He offers her an emerald larger than Caesar's, fifty white peacocks fairer than Caesar's, topazes yellow as the eyes of tigers, onyxes like the eyeballs of a dead woman.) What pleasure could a virgin derive from the head of the prophet, Herod asks Salomé, unless it were his downfall, as has been prophesied? Herod's power, debauched as it is, still represents the authority against which both John and Salomé struggle. He has made it necessary for John to be imprisoned in the celibacy of his prophet's role and for Salomé to be imprisoned in her role as sex object.

Both our eyes and our ears have deceived us about Oscar Wilde's Salomé. Beardsley's insolent drawings are an attack on Wilde, the person. Wilde is the voyeur, the man in the moon; Beardsley's Salomé is an eighteenth-century transvestite, a decadent Belinda from The Rape of the Lock. It is precisely because Beardsley's work was a satire on Wilde, because his elegant and witty lines provoke laughter or shock, not a deeper interest, that they have appealed to a public which fears the Salomé of the poet. Generations of music critics, embarrassed by what they invariably call the "nastiness" of Wilde's play, have been at a loss to explain the source of inspiration for Richard Strauss's brilliant opera. Wilde, the unknowing librettist, is dismissed as a collaborator. Phrases such as "based on" and "founded on" obscure the fact that Hedwig Lachmann's libretto is a nearly exact translation of Wilde's play, differing only in several omissions for the sake of dramatic brevity. The most notable omission is the early conversation among the soldiers which describes the twelve-year imprisonment of Salomé's father in the cistern which holds John the Baptist, and his subsequent murder on the order of Herod and Herodias by
the black executioner. Strauss's omission of this vital scene robs the opera of the theme of revenge. The ring of death and the black arm of the executioner rising from the cistern with the head of Iokanaan become tragically symbolic in Wilde's play; in the opera they are picturesquely mysterious.

Strauss himself pointed out the source of his musical inspiration in the haunting opening lines of the play: "How beautiful is the Princess Salomé tonight!" The motif for Salomé's demand for the head of Iokanaan resounds similarly from the text itself. Wilde anticipated the possibilities for exact musical interpretation. In De Profundis he wrote of "the refrains, whose recurring motifs make Salomé so like a piece of music, and bind it together as a ballad."

My aim here is to establish the seriousness of Wilde's play. We are not at all reluctant to rank Strauss's opera with Wagner's. I believe that Wilde's play ranks with those of Ibsen. The source of tragic beauty lies in the image of woman that Wilde has created in Salomé. She transcends the visual debris of decadents, Pre-Raphaelites, and symbolists as easily as Strauss's Salomé transcends Pelleas and Melisande. She is an allegorical Old Testament Hedda Gabler, and John and Lovborg are examples of how each woman kills the thing she loves.

Salomé was the icon of the ideology of the decadents, if they can be credited with an ideology at all. But Wilde converts her image to its opposite, transforms her from sinner to saint, and makes her a real person as well. The critics who try to place Wilde's play in the mainstream of decadent art are puzzled by its failure to fit. For Wilde may have been inspired by Moreau's "graven images," but he refused to worship them. Still less did he propose to worship false goddesses. He said that the artist's only duty to history is to rewrite it, and that is just what he did. His Salomé is a revisionist's historical figure.

For the decadent painters and poets both history and society were female. Philippe Jullian says it would be a mistake to see vice in this art because it reveals "a compulsive need to escape from a materialist society." But the interesting question is, Why were history and society female for these artists? Salomé was not the only icon of this
ideology. Both the poetry and the paintings abound in figures of witches, lesbians, cruel sphinxes, chimeras, sirens, vampires, Helens, Ledas, Europas, and Medusas. There were imaginary Ophelias for the sadists and imaginary Mona Lisas for the masochists—not to mention everyone’s favorite androgyne, the fainthearted suffering artist. Wilde’s Salomé is clearly out of place here. Beardsley may have drawn a Salomé who was ugly and perverse, but he didn’t read the play. That Salomé is not in Wilde. It is difficult for us to think of Wilde as a “healthy” artist, but that is exactly what he was. For Wilde both history and society were corruptly masculine. His Herod is a perfect example of the way he thought about authority.

Oscar Wilde did not approach women with fear and loathing. He liked strong women. The son of Speranza, who called herself an eagle and thought of herself as Joan of Arc, wasted and out of place rocking a cradle, was attracted by heroic women. He said, completely seriously, that the women he most admired were Queen Victoria, Lily Langtry, and Sarah Bernhardt. All three women were powerful figures in the history of their time. Political, sexual, and artistic power, which these three women represent, were rare in females of their period.

The decadent artists who depicted women as either “the flower beneath the foot” or the destroying vampire (and these figures are the extreme embodiment of virgin and whore) were responding to the rumbles of discontent from European women. Women’s expression of the desire for equality was met with *Sesame and Lilies*, which encouraged them to remain on their pedestals, or with Moreau’s *Sphinx*, which articulated the nightmare of the destructive woman. As consciousness of women’s oppression rose in the nineteenth century, artists expressed their fears of the forms woman’s revenge would take. The limited imagination saw women’s oppression as mainly sexual, and it imagined her revenge as violently so. It took an intelligent and sensitive man, Oscar Wilde, to see that there was a link between the suffering artist and the aspiring woman. They were bound by society’s image of them in stereotypical roles, but the artist did not often recognize his sister.

The revolutionary potential of female desire is the theme of Wilde’s
Salomé. It is both a history play and a morality play in which the Liebestod or love-death themes of Ibsen and Wagner are pushed to the extreme. John the Baptist, the poet-prophet, refuses to recognize his kinship with the adolescent young woman Salomé. She wants to share his spiritual life. Knowing no value except the physical, she sings his body's praises in a parody of the Song of Songs. (Even Richard Ellmann finds it “perverse” that a woman should praise a man's body in biblical language.) John converts her but rejects her. Salomé is in an adolescent crisis. Herod and Herodias have murdered her father; she is attracted by the spirituality of John; she wants revenge for her father's death; and she recognizes John's wish for death and her own.

Some critics have objected to Wilde's freehanded use of history. He has purposely telescoped three Herods into one. He wished to juxtapose the rise of Christianity with the fall of the Roman Empire in order to write in Salomé a kind of Christian Götterdämmerung. Salomé demands John's head in order to bring about Herod's downfall, for Herod is the hated figure representing authority and the state. Salomé is a political play in which the poet-prophet and the aspiring woman artist die in order to bring about the revolution. The radical element in Wilde's rewriting of the biblical story is his giving Salomé as much power as John in preparing the way for Christ's coming.

There is one appropriate drawing by Beardsley, done after the others as a frontispiece, in which John and Salomé are cowering in comradely innocence before Herod's face in the moon. The moon is the shaping image of the play. Salomé serves Diana or Astarte in her fierce chastity, but she has a wry sense of humor. All the characters who do not serve her fear her, and the moon is described as cold, destructive, and female. Except by Salomé. She describes the moon as “like a little piece of money.” Virginity is considered Salomé's only asset, and she knows it.

Wilde's stage directions include another cold circular image, the cistern, where Salomé's father died, and from which the chaste and prophetic John rises. The womb/tomb image becomes baroquely sexual and religious when the black arm of the executioner rises from the
cistern with the head of John on a silver platter (the moon has been described as silver, but now it turns blood red).

One can, of course, interpret Salomé as a kind of Jungian anima contrasted to the narrow spirituality of the poet-prophet. Iokanaan then becomes the animus against Salomé’s sensuality. She is willing to become his disciple, but his narrowness of vision will not expand to include the daughter of Herodias among the worshipers in his new religion. This defines him as merely a precursor of the Christ who, when he comes, does not say “Touch me not” to Mary Magdalene. In this reading, Salomé’s lecture to Iokanaan’s bodiless head (balancing his earlier lecture to her while he kept refusing to look at her) that “the mystery of Love is greater than the mystery of Death” anticipates a much more human Christianity than John’s ascetic, self-denying vision will allow.

But if the play is read as a parable of the woman artist’s struggle to break free of being the stereotype of sex object, Salomé does succeed. Neither Herod nor John can see her as herself; to them she is only her mother’s daughter. In her identity crisis, she finds appealing the Iokanaan whose voice reviles her mother and rises from the tomb of her murdered father. Her Hamlet-like concentration on death and revenge causes her to ignore her young would-be lover, who commits suicide. Overcome by the strangeness of Iokanaan’s emaciated and ascetic beauty, she tentatively tries to sing of his beauty. He ignores her song. Her dance is her second attempt at artistic expression, but it also fails as art, for her motives are not pure. When she finally has John’s head on a silver platter, an exact reflection of “the woman in the moon” in its bodiless chastity, she has created as object of art, a glittering image of chastity. She has shown John as only half a man, but she has done more by disassociating herself from the moon-goddess.

Salomé says she has lost her virginity to John; she becomes a kind of earth mother. Yeats saw her as an embodiment of this figure. Ellmann quotes the preface to *A Full Moon in March*:

“the dance with the severed head suggests the central idea in Wilde’s *Salomé* . . . it is part of the old ritual of the year: the mother goddess and the slain
As both virgin and mother, the Judean princess has become even more openly a primitive Christian precursor. (In a typical Wildean paradox, when the precursor of the Virgin Mary is a nymphomaniac, the precursor of Christ is a prig.)

Although Oscar Wilde’s work has suffered from some unfortunate autobiographical readings, especially by those concerned with what Ellmann genteelly called his “predisposition,” his life does yield an interesting approach to Salomé. Salomé is like Wilde’s mother, Speranza, in her fiery youth, her zeal for martyrdom, and her thwarted desire for artistic expression. In his biography of Wilde, Jullian cites Speranza’s love for veils and jewels. She must have seemed remarkably like the series of Salomé paintings by Moreau, which were Wilde’s inspiration. José Pierre, co-author of Gustave Moreau, speculates in it about beheading as symbolic castration “connected in the depths of the masculine consciousness with the castratory function of the mother.” Moreau was very attached to his mother and had difficulty relating to other women; the figure of Salomé dominates all of his work. Pierre points out that Freud “was convinced that Judith could not have beheaded Holophernes if he had not succeeded in seducing her,” and in other paintings of that decapitation critics connect “her real or imaginary deflowering with the beheading of the hero-poet.” In Wilde’s play, Salomé believes she has been deflowered by John. Interestingly, Wilde is the only artist of the period (Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, Moreau, and Huysmans also recreated her) who kills Salomé in the end.

In 1891, the year in which Wilde wrote Salomé, he had become fascinated by Ibsen, largely through the American actress Elizabeth Robins, whom he had met at his mother’s house in London. He helped her to raise money for her subscription performances of Hedda Gabler and The Master Builder that year, attended the performances, and encouraged her efforts. Unfortunately most admirers of Wilde have cared more for his life than his work, and, indeed, they have emphasized some details of his life over others. The fact that he admired both Ibsen and Wagner and devotedly attended performances of their plays and operas does not fit in with the picture of the aesthete
and the dandy. And Salomé cannot be dismissed as merely decadent. The reviewers saw its connection with Ibsen’s *The Master Builder.* William Archer, soon, one hopes, to be recognized again as the great critic he is, saw the influence of Ibsen at work—and how like Hilda or Hedda Salomé really is. The revolutionary content and social relevance of the drama are evident. Far from being obscene, it is a social tragedy akin to Ibsen’s *Ghosts.* Its biblical setting put off critics who had begun to associate revolutionary ideas with the gloomy realistic stage sets of Ibsen.

Salomé was Oscar Wilde’s “New Woman.” She was a biblical Hedda Gabler. The Baptist, as a principled autonomous creative artist, evoked the same fury and jealousy in her, the prisoner of a socially determined sex role, as Lovborg did in Hedda. In fact one may attribute her demand for his head, her fascination with his hair, and her symbolic rape of the prophet-artist as revenge. Rather than morbid necrophilia, it is a parallel to Hedda’s wish to crown Lovborg’s head with vine leaves as she drives him to a death which turns out to be a humiliating and debauched one and destroys his manuscript. Both women, condemned to spiritual death as sex objects and thwarted in artistic expression by their culture, kill the men they love. The men, who are also punished by society for breaking the stereotypes, are condemned to suffer their own humiliations. Salomé and Hedda destroy not their masters but their brothers.

The dance, with its historical connection to prostitution, is Salomé’s only art form. It exactly parallels Nora’s tarantella in *A Doll’s House.* Both heroines are reluctant to perform their ritual obeisance to their masters, but in the end choose this degrading act rather than find no means at all of artistic expression. Here, when the women’s struggle is so explicit in both scripts, one must make a distinction between the dancer and the dance. A performance of the Strauss opera in Chicago captured Wilde’s intelligent spirit. Anja Silja sang and danced the role in a cold Nordic spirit of anger and frustration. Salomé was not the only English “New Woman” who was directly derived from Ibsen.

In her jealousy, revenge, and fury Salomé is as savage as Hiordis in Ibsen’s *The Vikings,* as triumphant in receiving the dead body of
her hero as Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung*. Salomé dies crushed by the shields of the soldiers of the state; and they are protecting themselves from her. Their annihilation of her is an act of defense. She is the enemy of the state. The characters of both Hiordis and Brünnhilde, derived from the Nordic myths, suggest, like Salomé, that witches were women betrayed by love, and that they were anarchists and destroyers of the men and societies which had kept them prisoners of their own bodies. The message of Wagner's *Ring*, Ibsen's plays, and Wilde's *Salomé* is that love and death are intimately connected in a repressive society. They dramatize the death of the family through murder, incest, infanticide, syphilis, and hereditary insanity. The nineteenth century's greatest fear, that the family would fail as a stable and cohesive social force, is their common revolutionary theme.

Wilde disliked Beardsley's drawings. He told Ricketts:

> They are all too Japanese, while my play is Byzantine. My Herod is like the Herod of Gustave Moreau—wrapped in jewels and sorrows. My Salomé is a mystic, the sister of Salammbô, a Sainte Thérèse who worships the moon; dear Aubrey's designs are like the naughty scribbles a precocious schoolboy makes on the margins of his copybook.²⁰

Beardsley was the wrong artist to illustrate *Salomé*.²¹ And, although Wilde may have derived his inspiration from Moreau's paintings and Huysmans' description of them, the fact remains that *Salomé* transcends its imaginative origins. Wilde's Salomé is neither Huysmans' "incarnation of undying Lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria" nor "a great venereal flower raised in a hot-house of impiety." She is, as Wilde said, a mystic, a saint. Beardsley's drawings are a perverse misrepresentation. Wilde said they were "flowers of evil." They do not represent the chaste and insatiable desire for spiritual transport which Salomé embodies.

When one thinks of Bernini's statue of St. Theresa and its plastic representation of sexual and religious ecstasy, and how perfectly it suits Crashaw's poem on this theme, one wishes for Wilde's Salomé.
the same visual image. Rodin, whom Wilde admired greatly, could have captured Salomé in sculpture. I suggest that we look at the play with the inner eye, concentrating on Wilde’s own images of moon and cistern, love and death. Let us accept the image that Oscar Wilde has given us of Salomé the New Woman, the frustrated artist, who kills the thing she loves in order to bring into being a new and healthy culture.

Some questions still arise in the attempt to revive interest in Salomé. Despite Borges’ comment that “Wilde’s technical insignificance can be an argument in favor of his intrinsic greatness,” one stumbling block is the language. The childishness of the language does support Praz’s argument about pornography. However, the language is also incantatory, and sets a mood for the silent violence of sacrifice, much like a Martha Graham dance of a Greek tragedy. There is as much silence in the play as there is rhythmical baby talk (the young Syrian makes no suicide speech, but falls ritualistically between John and Salomé; Iokanaan has his head severed in absolute silence; Salomé’s dance is silent). The quarreling of the Jews, the nagging of Herodias, the alternating prophesying and denunciations of John, Herod’s whining, begging, and boasting, Salomé’s lovesongs—are primitive human noises, cries and whispers about love and death. And Wilde is less a playwright than the orchestrator of these human voices, as the pitch and volume of their pain and pleasure increase and decrease.

Pornographic reification may also be the source of the repetition of the hollow, ugly word “thing,” used by each character to describe the object of or the emotion of love and desire, predating the hollow thud of Wilde’s most famous line, “Each man kills the thing he loves.”

As Borges says, “his perfection has been a disadvantage; his work is so harmonious that it may seem inevitable and even trite.”

Alfred Douglas, its translator, was struck with the musical form of the play. “In reading one is listening: listening, not to the author, not to the direct unfolding of a plot, but to the tones of different instruments, suggesting, suggesting, always indirectly, till one feels that by shutting one’s eyes one can best catch the suggestion.” William Archer was intrigued with the play’s “brief melodious phrases, the chiming repe-
tions, the fugal effects." He felt that there is "at least as much musical as pictorial quality in Salomé," that it has "all the qualities of a great historical picture—pedantry and conventionality excepted." Like Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts, Wilde's Salomé has revised a few scraps of a common story from the rubbish heap of history and shaped them musically and visually into a formal design which enables us to make a new interpretation of the past.

The play is both static and dramatic, more like dance-drama or opera than a contemporary English play. Berlioz' Les Troyens or Wagner's Tristan und Isolde are closer to Salomé than any play of Pinero or Henry Arthur Jones. Flaubert's Hérodias and Massenet's Hérodiade certainly influenced Wilde, as well as Moreau's paintings, which even moved Wilde to look for Salomé's image in Titian, Leonardo da Vinci, and Dürer. He probably also knew of Wagner's use of the Christian legend of Herodias, the wandering Jewess, as Kundry in Parsifal. But Wilde's conception of Salomé is truly original.

In 1903 Strauss saw the Max Reinhardt production of Salomé with Gertrud Eysoldt in Berlin. Wilde's use of motivic words and phrases gave Strauss a ready-made libretto exactly suited to his talents. The repetition of the word "Princess," of the phrase "Do not look at him/her," of the images of the moon, Iokanaan's eyes, mouth, and hair, and Salomé's feet "like little white doves" were all motives which Strauss found waiting for him.

The opening scene is a parody of a troubadour's courtly love laments, with Narraboth bemoaning the coldness and beauty of his princess. As her knight he will be rewarded with "a little green flower"; both the artificiality and diminution of the convention are being mocked here. Strauss envisioned Salomé as a "sixteen-year-old princess with the voice of an Isolde." He composed the opera all at once, except for Salomé's dance (the critics disagree on whether the music for the dance or the music for John's prophecies is the weakest section of the opera). Strauss himself said, "You know, Jochanaan is an imbecile. I've got no sympathy at all for that kind of man. I would have preferred above all that he would appear a bit grotesque." Interestingly, and much to the distress of the critics, Strauss linked
the motives of Christ's coming and Salomé's desire, perhaps unconsciously. But the linking underscores the argument first stated by Wilde himself that Salomé is a mystic, a St. Theresa. She declares that she has been ravished by John—and thus speaks in terms of a religious/sexual conceit such as "never chaste except thou ravish me." As the first nun of the new religion she brings to her conversation all the sensuality, Jewish mysticism, and Oriental passion that we associate with Spanish Catholicism.

Strauss's motif of the quarreling Jews, his "hubbub" theme, has been interpreted by some as anti-Semitic. Some of my colleagues have suggested that this might be a possible explanation for the popularity of the opera Salomé in Germany and the complete disregard for the play in England and America. But the opera is more complex than this. The shock of the idea that Christ is the Messiah, which sends the first Jew right out of key (as Norman Del Mar points out), is balanced by Herod's similar response when the Nazarenes remark that Jesus has raised people from the dead. Herod of course is frozen in fear because he has murdered his brother, Salomé's father. While this reaction is clearly linked to the soldier's discussion of the murder in the first scene of Wilde's play, it is an odd note in the opera.

Strauss's motives point out to us the effectiveness of Wilde's themes: Salomé's last soliloquy nostalgically incorporates her love for Iokanaan as a teacher as she asks his head, "What shall I do now, Iokanaan? Ah, wherefore didst thou not look at me?" (Narraboth has entreated Salomé not to look at John; his page has begged him not to look at Salomé; Herodias has insisted that Herod stop looking at her daughter; Salomé shudders at the thought of Herod looking at her "with his mole's eyes.") Strauss emphasizes by repetition how Iokanaan has prophesied that Salomé will be crushed to death by the shields of Herod's soldiers. That the opera is Strauss's most brilliant is generally accepted; nagging moral doubts are still solved by blaming Wilde.28

It is interesting to note that although the Lord Chamberlain banned a London production of the opera in 1907 (just as Wilde's play had been banned29), the opera had met with great success all over Europe (sometimes staged with a star of Bethlehem lighting up the backcloth
Maud Allan danced her own version of *The Vision of Salomé* in Vienna in 1904 and throughout the Continent until 1908 when she played the Palace Theatre in London for 250 performances. Although her dance was based on Flaubert’s interpretation, she was accused of sharing Wilde’s perversions. In 1918, J. T. Grein (of the Independent Theatre which had produced Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and given a first hearing to G. B. Shaw) caused a furor of anti-German hysteria with his production of Wilde’s *Salomé* starring Maud Allan. Noel Pemberton Billing, M.P., in a published attack on Allan, declared that her performance was encouraging perversion in women and pointed out her German training as evidence of a plot to corrupt the English. In court Maud Allan claimed that she saw Salomé’s passion as symbolic of spiritual awakening. Allan’s name was eventually cleared of lesbian allegations, but not before many doctors had had their say in court about the immorality of Oscar Wilde and his play. Obviously what was on trial was lesbianism itself. Nothing overt in the play indicates that Salomé was a lover of her own sex. She kills a man, therefore she must be a lesbian, runs the reasoning of the trial. Beneath this fear is also a fear of women’s violence. Oscar Wilde writes from the lesbian position.

Maud Allan’s interpretation of Salomé was in keeping with Wilde’s. Even Strauss wrote, “Anyone who has been in the Orient and has observed the decorum of its women, will appreciate that Salomé should be played as a chaste virgin, an oriental princess, with but the simplest, most dignified gestures, as if her shipwreck on encountering the miracle of a brave new world is to arouse compassion and not horror and disgust.” Sarah Bernhardt, in rehearsal with Wilde for the abandoned production, sensed this. Although she was over fifty at the time, she was going to wear her Cleopatra costume and dance in a static position. “It is heraldic,” she said, “like a fresco, and the words should drop like a pearl in a crystal bowl. That is right, no rapid movements, and stylized gestures.” Sarah Bernhardt embodied the image of Salomé for the last romantics of the nineteenth century. Lorrian wrote, “Yes, she is surely the daughter of Gustave Moreau, the enigmatic Sarah, sister of the Muses, who carried the decapitated chiefs, of Orpheus
and of those Salomés, willowy and bloody, the Salomé of the famous water-colour, the Salomé of the Apparition, whose triumphant and coruscating costume she wore even in Theodora."—33

The political interpretation of Salomé, in which the prophet and the young woman who lusts after his body are agents of the revolution and martyrs to the cause of freedom, has been made before now. In the Kamerny Theatre production in Moscow in 1917, Alexandra Exter combined this view with Constructivist technique to produce extraordinary costume designs and a curtain described by Oliver Sayler as a "bold piece of Cubist work—it sets the aggressive, tragic, passionate keynote of the play, with a sharp pointed sun-like arc in white against a black background and above it to the right three flaming banners in red—military pennons set dead against the wind."—34 This is a far cry from the Salomé of Moreau or Beardsley.

The theme of the struggle for power in Wilde’s play, as well as the severed head and the passionate love song, haunted Yeats, despite his denigration of Wilde. A Full Moon in March is the most obvious example, but most of the other plays were influenced by Wilde as well. Yeats’s static and symbolic dances and songs lack the breadth of Wilde’s imagination. In Yeats’s play the Queen and the Beggar-King fight each other for power. The man is killed because his love song is not powerful enough, although there is a suggestion of fertility rites and rebirth in the legend in which the drop of blood from the severed head begets a child in the woman’s womb. In Wilde the man and the woman are both martyrs to a higher cause; their personal tragedy prepares the way for human happiness.—35

Perhaps Salomé is now rescued from the charge of decadence, even though one may say with Thomas Mann that in Wilde’s case “aestheticism was the first manifestation of the European mind’s rebellion against the whole morality of the bourgeois age.”—36 As Max Beerbohm said, Wilde should have rewritten the whole Bible, then there would be no more skeptics.

Why, one wonders, did Wilde ignore both the biblical blame placed on Herodias and most versions of the story, which depict Salomé as the instrument of her mother’s revenge? If Salomé is a destructive
Narcissa in his play, she also represented the fear of the lesbian to a fin-de-siècle culture which witnessed the rise of public lesbianism in the salons of Paris, and the association in the public mind of dance itself (in the work of Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, and Isadora) as a lesbian art form. Wilde's play depicts woman's rage at objectification by both kinds of patriarchs, powerful kings and Christian ascetics. Only a little leap of the imagination transformed this furious girl into a suffragette with a rock in her hand.