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 **Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, and the German Press 1902-1905**

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ARTICLE

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Fig. 1 Marcus Behmer's drawing of Salome Illustration from Hedwig Lachmann's translation Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, and the German Press 1902-1905 W. Eugene Davis Purdue University REINTEKPEETATION of the German reception of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is overdue. This has little to do either with the passing of a century since the author's death or, scarcely three years later, the unparalleled flowering of *Salome* on the German stage. Much more than chronological considerations make it imperative to conduct this investigation, for the complex nature of the German critical response to Wilde's one-act tragedy has been misunderstood. The rise in Wilde's reputation over the past decade has led to several reappraisals of many aspects of *Salome*, including the matter of the startling popularity of the play in Germany and Austria. It would appear that, unlike the French and English, for the German public the synergy created by awareness of Wilde's fall and early death together with this stage demonstration of his creative vision led to a passionate embrace of the play. *Salome*, in other words, struck a resonant chord which resounded for

several years for German playgoers and critics. What merits reconsideration is what lies behind this amazing sympathy. Theories have not been wanting. Rather, a single theory concerning the effects of an odd mixture of elements—race, sex, gender and inevitably politics—on the Wilhelmian viewers of this play has taken root. The recent German critic Rainer Kohlmayer, in a study of the reception of Wilde's comedies, observes that *Salome* combines the much-discussed fin-de-siècle problem of sexuality and the "New Woman" figure in a single focus, "which one might characterize ... as 'the demonization of the erotic.'"¹ He supports this by discussing Marie-Luise Becker's influential article "Salome in der Kunst des letzten Jahrtausends" which, he argues, shows profound influence of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations reprinted in the *Wiener Rundschau* edition of Hedwig Lachmann's influential German translation of the play: "It is remarkable how strongly Becker's interpretation of Wilde's play is influenced by Beardsley's illustrations, which precisely emphasize the perverse and brutal aspects of the piece, totally opposite from Wilde's own conception of *Salome*!"² Kohlmayer stresses Becker's interpretation of Wilde's *Salome* as "Weib und Tigerin" (female and tiger). He backs up his point ably, but neglects to consider the fact that when the first book edition of the German translation appeared later that year, the illustrator was not Beardsley but Marcus Behmer, whose vision of the characters and situations of the play, though arguably influenced by Beardsley, were uniquely his own. Figure 1 is of Behmer's interpretation of *Salome* cursing and rejecting Jokanaan. Then too, his claim is excessive simply because it minimizes the power of the play itself. So while his point regarding Becker's interpretation is valid, it is claiming too much to say that the view of Wilde's *Salome* as "female and tiger," which characterized the early German stage reception, originated in Beardsley's unconventional illustrations. Then too there is the matter of whether this was indeed the dominant approach of the reviewers. Even so, Kohlmayer raises an interesting question. Could critics and reviewers of the German press, writing about the 111 performances of *Salome* given in Germany in the 1903-1904 season, in the wake of Wilde's fall in 1895, his imprisonment in Reading Prison, his self-exile to France after his release and his death in 1900, have responded with anything like objectivity to this play? Sander L. Gilman, in "Opera, Homosexuality, and Models of Disease: Richard Strauss's *Salome* in the Context of Images of Disease in the Fin de Siècle," answers this question with a firm "No!" He sees anything but objectivity and balance in the German and Austrian critical reception of *Salome*—play and opera. His major interest is in Strauss's opera and only secondarily in Wilde's drama. Even so, he leaves a clear impression that German critics of the play saw it in only one context: "the context of images of disease in the Fin de Siècle."³ What...



Fig. 1. Marcus Behmer's drawing of Salome
Illustration from Hedwig Lachmann's translation.



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