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978-0-521-47560-0 - Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative

Alice Bach

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In the expanding field of feminist literary studies of the Bible, this work represents a shift in the paradigm of biblical study. While scholars have traditionally privileged the Bible and isolated it from ideological scrutiny, this readable study applies cultural perspectives to a group of biblical texts revolving around the “wicked” literary figures in the Bible – the wife of Potiphar, Bathsheba, Delilah, Salomé – and suggests what it is that makes them different from biblical heroines who kill – Esther and Judith.

Alice Bach has designed an approach to these texts that is kaleidoscopic – its function is to find new arrangements, ones that allow the reader to move outside the self-referential loop of reading the Bible only against itself. Most importantly, Bach argues that biblical characters have a “life” in the mind of the reader independent of the stories in which they were created. Thus, the reader becomes the site at which the texts and the cultures that produced them come together. In her final chapter, Bach follows the cultural history of the biblical figure Salomé, using visual representations as well as films, in order to explain the fluctuations of interest in, and the varieties of interpretation of, this biblical character.

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For Mieke Bal and Ed Greenstein

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Illustrations

- 1 Beardsley's enormous overbearing Herodias/Salomé figure is transfixed by the dripping bodiless head. Note the eyes of the Baptist, closed perhaps in ecstasy, rather than death? *page 242*
 - 2 In this Beardsley interpretation, the Herodias/Salomé figure is almost the opposite of the one in Illustration 1. She is not rooted to the ground. She seems to be performing an ethereal dance with the object of her affection, the head of the Baptist. Note the lightness of the drawing in comparison with the heavy, cloaked female figure in Illustration 1. 243
 - 3 Found at the end of Wilde's *Salomé*, this drawing echoes a pièta, with the sacrificed figure a female. The figure on the left is probably a caricature of Wilde himself, leading the viewer to share in Beardsley's sardonic comment on the play's ending. The pièta imagery is clearly tongue in cheek since the sarcophagus is a powder box, adorned with the fluff of a powder puff. 247
- [Illustrations 1, 2, and 3 are from Oscar Wilde, *Salomé*, a tragedy in one act. Kline/Roethke Collection. London: printed for Ellen Matthews and John Lane, 1894. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries, Stanford University.]
- 4 Salomé (Alla Nazimova) and Herod at the banquet. 255
 - 5 Herod (Charles Laughton) regrets his offer to Salomé. 256

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- 6 Rita Hayworth screaming when she realizes she has been tricked into being the Salomé of the doxa story instead of the Christianized good girl with box-office appeal. 260
- 7 The cinematic head, replete with all the horror Rita's scream requires, served up to an eager audience. 261

[Illustrations 3, 4, 5, and 6 are screen shots from *Salomé* (1953) directed by William Dieterle, written by Harry Kleiner and Jesse Lasky Jr., produced by Buddy Adler, Columbia Pictures.]

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Note

Transliterations from Hebrew and Greek are not scientific in order to make them more accessible to the general reader.