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Salome as an Independent Woman

The most obsessive of all centuries for the development of the Salome theme and her images was the 19th century, especially its second part. This century liberated Salome and established her identity independently from that of John the Baptist. If previously she danced for the sake of John the Baptist--for the sake of narrating his Passion--in the 19th century she began to dance for her own sake, for the sake of the dance alone and in order to impress and to please the audience, us. She herself became an icon and a cult. The irony is however that the 19th century enslaved European women, especially French women, and it was France that produced more images of Salome in art and literature than any other country. The more that women became dependent on men, the more Salome became independent of John and more she danced her own dance.

The theme of woman dominated the art and literature of the second part of the 19th century. As in Christianity, there were two main trends. One represented an idealized woman, either inaccessible and pure, chaste, and exceedingly religious. The other tended to represent woman as a monster, the seducer and a destroyer of men, a symbol of evil and perversity. We find idealized and dreamy images of woman in Maurice Denis, Aristide Maillol, Alphonse Mucha, in the later works of Puvis de Chavannes, and even in the works of Gustave Moreau—La Sulamite, Orphée in the musée d'Orsay—and Paul Gauguin.

However, the bulk of artists created a woman-destroyer, seducer, predator etc. The image of Woman became central in the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who created a new type of a Madonna—a woman who, with her penetrating glance and long red hair, was at once divine and earthly, divine and demonic. The demonic woman is seen in the art of German Franz von Stuck, Austrian Gustave Klimt, Belgium Fernand Khnopff, Norwegian Edvard Munch and French Gustave Moreau. Although Gustave Moreau also created inaccessible women—Galatée—who were not evil, the demonic beauty or the beauty of anguish incarnated in women is present in his works—Eve, Dalila, Salomé, Messaline. All these artists depicted women as seductive evil destroyers, the lustful executioners of men.

The 19th century was fascinated with the appearance of fragile, but strong, intelligent and dominating women, who in stories told about them, were always associated with blood and murder. It

had a proliferation of images of Delilah, traitorous lover of Samson; of Jazabel, a dangerous foreigner and destroyer; of Judith, heroic murderess of Haloferne; of Cassandra, Cleopatra, Lilith and Lamia and of course Salome. This treatment differed profoundly from treatment of women in the Renaissance when the strong or supposedly dangerous women were transformed in beautiful muses, an inspiration for artists.

The 19th century images of women undoubtedly demonstrate a fear of women, directly related to social changes and to the image of women then predominant in the society. In the 19th century, women began to enter the workforce, became more active in the life of society, and could be easily perceived by men as their competitors. Not only were men sexually dependent on women, for reproduction – essential for the propagation of human species, but now men also had to compete with women who they considered to be sub-species. Man had to compete with woman for social recognition and for his place within society, all of which could previously be assumed to be his alone.

France, the country that produced more than any other country, misogynistic images in art and literature in the second part of the 19th century, was the first to give birth to the Feminist movement, which instilled even greater fear and reaction in men. The birth of Feminism in France, however, was directly related to women's dependency on men. Zinaida Vengerova, a Russian literary critic and journalist, who lived in France at the turn of the 19th century, explains in her article "Feminism and Woman's Freedom" that in France "The French woman has been created by the demands of French men and as such is, by her nature, an absolutely passive creature. She does not have any life of her own and exists exclusively in relation to man, her master and her slave, which two roles are essentially the same because the power of the French woman, however great it is in social life, in art and in the ideals of French men, is in reality spiritual slavery."[i] Vengerova demonstrates how French literature reflects the psychology of French men in relation to women and she stresses the fact that the French man was a creator of the French woman. Vengerova believes that French literature preaches that "Man should live for abstract interests; a woman, for a man."[ii] Hence, "when news came to France about the ability of women in other countries to work, participate in social life, occupy professions that had up to that point been considered the exceptional privilege of men and simultaneously become equal members of society independent of traditional societal and family roles, … the concept of external freedom as promised by emancipation caused working [French] women to struggle to obtain it from their Motherland, and thus the question about feminine freedom in France transformed itself into an aspiration to improve the conditions of the working woman," [iii] since in France the life of working women was miserable. Working French women were despised by women who, because of the French constitution which

treated them as minors and deprived them of all human and property rights, believed that it is their birth right to live off men, and if a woman failed to do so, she was a failure. French working women were also despised by men, because men perceived working women as the most miserable creatures, failures who failed to find a husband and live off them, men – fully and completely a social expectation – instead they had to work and to earn their living. These working women were subjects of many psychological and physical abuses and were subjects of general contempt. As Vengerova explains: “Feminism in France is directed mainly toward the improvement of a woman's economic life and toward giving her an opportunity to survive as an independent worker when fate fails to realize her life-ideals of security and social status through marriage.”[iv]

In France the protests against the laws that deprived French women of any rights first reverberated in 1848. However, no one paid attention to those protests especially because of the power of a then existing opinion expressed by well-respected French writer Pierre-Joseph Prudhon, who perceived woman as “the courtesan or the housewife.” However, in 1860 the question of the condition of women in France was again brought to public attention, this time by Marie Deraim, the first literary French feminist and an active defender of women's rights. In her own right, she was a writer and a journalist, a literary critic and a playwright. In 1878, Marie Deraim was the representative of the congress of women's rights. Because of her efforts, women were accepted as members of Freemasons and she was instrumental in establishing a mixed Freemason obedience. In 1890th there were a number of women like Louise Michel, Pauline Mink and Jeanne Chmaal, for whom woman's freedom was the part of their political campaign and convictions.

Thus, the birth of a Feminist movement in a country like France, known as “the most central and the most cultured,”[v] in which a woman existed only for a man, could only terrify its male population, which consciously or subconsciously began to defend its “birth right,” to apply its power and strength to limit the invasion of society by that dangerous and at the same time necessary “race,” "woman's race," as they called it. The first male reaction was that the ideal solution would be to exterminate that race (gynocide) but if not possible, women should be locked up and eliminated from the social scene. One of the most effective vehicles to fight a supposed feminine invasion was art, literature and any other public expression. The 19th century is notorious for its fantasies of feminine evil, which especially blossomed in *fin-de-siècle* culture and especially in France, although they also existed, perhaps, to a lesser degree in other countries.

The 19thcentury's striking aggressivity and hatred mixed with an admiration toward what some male writers called “woman's race” used the image of Salome to caution humanity against the danger

of women. The images of women in the 19th century, against which the society revolted -- the "idols of perversity" -- were products of society, of the Napoleonic code and men. The image of Salome, of a dancing girl who murders through her dance, charm and beauty, became one of the most popular images of the *femme fatale,* symbols of beautiful destroyers. These images played a crucial role in creating a myth of woman in the 19th century, but they also depicted a woman of the 19th century as she appeared to men, partly because she was shaped to become such by social conditions and male's efforts. The 19th century produced 2.789 works of art and literature in which Salome is the central figure.

The image of Salome encompassed a variety of characteristics, which reverberated with the 19th century spirit. The 19th century aspired to prove that "woman's race" – the notion invented in the 19th century -- was an inferior race. This view of woman, however, is not original. Its origins are found in the Bible and later in the writings of the church fathers. The French magazine *la Revue blanche* published in 1895 an article under the title "Of the inferiority of woman – as of justification of her subordinate state according to recent scientific statements" to clearly assert that there are obvious scientific reasons why woman is inferior to man. That article written by August Strindberg is also a cry of the triumph of man over woman and a clear attempt to silence the feminists. Strindberg writes: "It was reserved to our times to discover, among other things, that woman biologically is a limited version of a man; it is obvious that her physical development stopped between the adolescence and full virility"[vi] … The pretention of a woman to be equal to a man is only a sign of a despotic demand. She aspires to bring man down to her level, since she is incapable to rise up to him. A (a man) and B (a woman) leave from the point C. A leaves with the speed of 100, B with a speed of 60. When will B catch A? The solution: Never!"[vii]

Schopenhauer's thoughts on this subject are not less reassuring. In his attempt to fight "woman's race" and feminists he states his beliefs in the following way: "The notion of the European Lady should not exist . . .Women should only be used in household. Young girls should be trained to aspire to that. They should not be shaped by arrogance but by work and submission." [viii]

A 19th century medical doctor, Cesar Lombrose, explains, "The physical difference in men and women means the inferiority of a woman." In his book *La Femme criminelle et la prostituée* (The Criminal Woman and the Prostitute) he is convinced that "a female dominates a male only in the case of inferior animals, especially in the case of insects such as spiders, bees, ants; when we go up the scale of the animal world, when the differences between sexes increase, like in humans, the superiority of a male over a female becomes obvious."[ix]

The image of Salome fits different characteristics that could supposedly prove the inferiority of women. 19th century literature often perceived woman as a vampire, bloodsucker and cold-blooded murderess. Mireille Dottin Orsini writes: “The vampire male always remains a vampire, except for a few cases when he is feminized. As a vampire he is described a super natural being, a living dead who feeds himself with human blood and who can be destroyed only by the stake that would pierce his heart. This notion applied to a woman becomes very large and very banal. It could mean any real woman if she is perceived to be dangerous for a man, for his health, his fortune, his intelligence, his honor, his soul... That is in that the figure of a vampire might be associated with the notion of a *femme fatale*, and at the turn of the century the concept of vampirism could be envisioned as a purely feminine specialty.”[x] Mireille Dottin-Orsini gives many examples of women being perceived as vampires, bloodsuckers and murderesses in literature and art. She points out that in relation to Salome's story “The prophet's beheading reminds the bite of the vampire on the throat.”[xi] The 19th century has a number of literary and artistic examples of Salome's vampire behavior.

The 19th century perception of Salome’s supposedly vampire tendencies appear in the play *The Love Council*, a satire on the Catholic Church, written in 1894 by Oskar Panizza, a German psychiatrist. In this play Salome, the most immoral woman of hell--a part of a Devil's harem--together with the Devil, although at the request of God, Jesus and Virgin Mary, gives birth to syphilis, as a punishment for humanity's immersion in sin. The result of the Devil's and Salome's union is personified in the “Spouse,” the irresistibly beautiful woman who begins by contaminating with syphilis the Pope and eventually all humanity. In the play, Salome admits to the Devil that she immerses her fingers in the blood of John's head on the platter and she delights in having the platter overflow with blood.

Salome's passionate kiss of the head of John the Baptist in Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* is also of a vampire nature. Holding John's head, she simultaneously triumphs and cries by saying: “I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on my lips. Was it the taste of blood?... Nay; … it was a taste of love.”[xii]

A French Symbolist painter Gustav-Adolf Mossa created a number of Salomes, each with its own particularity. However, Salome's vampire tendencies are the most pronounced in his 1901 *Salome*, in which Salome licks the blood from the sword used to behead the prophet. His 1906 witch-like *Salome*, dressed in red, the color of blood, with fingers in the shape of scissors and blood stains all over the painting has also the nature of a vampire. She is the bloodsucker. *Salome* vampire-like is a pastel by Levy-Dhurmer, created in 1896, in which Salome's passionate kiss of the Prophet's dead head resonates fully with the kiss of Wilde's Salome.

A variety of images and literary works present a woman as a cold-blooded murderess and state that it is a natural state of woman's character. Cesar Lombroso is fully convinced that any normal woman is a latent criminal; a tendency that appears once the superficial polish of civilization is fractured.[xiii]

Mossa's 1908 Salome, an imitation in pose of Aubrey Beardsley's *Salome's toilette*, depicts Salome as a natural murderess. In this painting Mossa portrays her as his contemporary, an upper class woman, who enjoys reading and the comfort of life and who looks perfectly innocent and common, except that one of the items of her house décor is the bloody head of John the Baptist laying on the bloody sword at her feet. The head, the blood and other attributes are as innocent for her as the book and beautiful objects around her: the head with the bloody sword under it is merely interior decoration. She is insensitive to her bloody right hand, murder being the natural part of her nature.

Two paintings of Franz Von Stuck's voluptuous *Salomes* dancing with joy over the head of John the Baptist laying on the platter by their feet could also fit this description. In both cases, we see the murderess celebrating with joy the murder she has just committed, although one might say using modern terms that legally Salome wouldn't be guilty of murder; at most, perhaps conspiracy to murder.

The 19th century also saw Salome as a courtesan or even a prostitute, which is, according to that century's theorists, the innate condition of a woman. Woman was depicted as hungry for gold that she could get through the male seed. She was a "virgin vampire, adolescent lusting after seed, unconscious whore who drained the veins of man's intellect. She was out to atrophy his head... Symbolic castration, woman's lust for man's severed head, the seat of the brain, that 'great clot of seminal fluid' Ezra Pound would still be talking about in the 1920s, was obviously the supreme act of the male's physical submission to woman's predatory desire."[xiv] Salome, the example of one of these creatures, was prostituting herself through her dance, a tool of seduction, the means to reach her "gold," her goal: the death, the blood and the head, the seat of the brain. Salome undoubtedly masterfully knew how to use her predatory instincts.

In 1905 Pablo Picasso's drawing of Salome, she is throwing her legs in the air, as described by the church fathers, and she dances naked, while the executioner, sitting behind her, holding the head of John the Baptist on the platter, is looking at her with languish, lust and admiration ready to do anything she desires (page 103, Salome Catalogue). The drawing of Henri-Léopold Levy, *A Sketch for Salome,* also depicts her dancing naked. Jules Desbois's sculpture in bronze, *Salome,* is an image of a naked Salome, whose sensuality, like in Flaubert's *Herodias,* is overwhelming for the viewer. Franz Von Stuck's *Salome* is dancing half naked and her dance is sensual, seductive and irresistible. Fritz Erlet's sculpture, *Dance,* which represents a half naked woman holding the head in her lap, is undoubtedly

Salome, dancing her provocative and fatal dance, a dance of death and seduction. Hugo von Habermann's 1896 Salome (or “Herodias”) goes further. She is a naked beast dancing with untamed lust while holding with passion and admiration the head of John, who she has seemed to have lured into death the same way as she would lure into death any other man who is looking at her irresistible dance, her naked body and her lustful nature.[xv]

Salome had another characteristic, which was very appealing to the 19th century spirit. She was portrayed as a Jewess. Although historically Salome and her family worshiped a pagan religion, Herod Antipas was a tetrarch of Galilee, thus a governor in the land of Hebrews, under the Roman Empire. Hence the 19th century artists, who mirrored an ideology of the century, depicted Salome not only with the attributes of a woman, of a *femme fatale*, but also, of what they called then, attributes of a Jew.

In the emerging capitalism of the 19th century, Jews were finding their place as business owners, merchants and bank owners – for centuries the only professions opened to Jews. Their success was seen threatening by their gentile compatriots. The 19th century sets as one of its goals to prove that Jews were a race and a race of degenerates. To establish degenerate Jewish nature, among a number of characteristics attributed to Jews, was that theirs was an effeminate race, lacking maturity like “a woman’s race.” Who could be more degenerate then a Jewish woman? In art, women, especially those who hold swords and behead men, were depicted more and more with attributed to Jews “Jewish features.” Bram Dijkstra, for instance, believes that, in Albert von Keller's painting “Love,” the woman casually holding the sword with which she has just decapitated her lover, whose head, as a forgotten and neglected object, is laying on the floor, is both Salome and Judith rolled in one, and, according to him, she is painted with Semitic features. “[xvi]

Dijkstra stresses that “While the theme of Salome as a bestial virgin Jewess, whose dance revived the dead embers of carnal life in even the most chaste of men, was passed around among the writers of the period's most determinedly purple prose, the painters became involved in their own scientific-archeological explorations of the link between gender and race in the reals of degeneration.”[xvii] Dijkstra tells us that Friedrich Fuchs, in *Venus* (1905), a two-volume study of the representation of a woman in art, “commended the French painters of the later 19thth century for having been among the first to emphasize Salome's Semitic origins. He pointed to these painters' concern for bringing out Salome's 'racial nuances' and marveled gratefully at their 'ethnographic thoroughness,' which he linked to the Orientalist vogue among French painters.” Dijkstra also quotes an anonymous writer of *Famous Pictures Reproduced* in which that writer, commenting on Jules

Lefebvre's *Salome,* states that she represents “an essentially Semitic type of the antique period, with the sensuous and soulless beauty of the tigress rather than the woman, bearing the charger which is to receive the head of John the Baptist, and the sword which is to decapitate him, as indifferently as if it were a dish of fruit.”[xviii]

But what made Salome, perhaps, the most Jewish of all, is that all the buyers of the most beautiful paintings of Salome were believed to be Jews. In France, a number of 19th century articles not only point it out but also find it offensive, since according to them, Jews were deprived of a taste and were insolent enough to dare to pretend to understand art and to acquire its most beautiful productions. For example, a French writer Jean Lorrain who also wrote about Salome and presented her with all the features attributed to a woman in general and to Salome in particular, stresses that all Moreau's Salomes went to collections of Hayems and Ephrussis, the collectors of Jewish origins. The famous *L'Affaire Salomé* occurred in France in 1912, when *Mona Lisa* was stolen from the Louvre (it was found a year later though). As Mireille Dottin Orsini describes it, “this curious business opposed the anti-Semite Leon Daudet to a converted Jew Arthur Meyer, as well as Mona Lisa to Salome, the Jew.”[xix] Mona Lisa was stolen from the Louvre at the time when Henri Regnault’s *Salome* was for sale at the auction and was ready to be acquired by an American merchant for 480,000 francs, Arthur Meyer, the editor of the journal *Le Gaulois* hoped that the Louvre or any other French museum would buy it, especially because Regnault was a famous French painter killed during the war with Prussia in 1871. Leon Daudet, the member of the extreme right journal *Action française* was furiously fighting this idea boldly implying that Jews supposedly stole *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre in order to replace her with *Salome*, the Jew, and that if the Louvre or any other French museum would buy Regnault’s painting of *Salom*e, it would be an insult for the French nation. Daudet won and an American merchant bought Regnault’s *Salome* and *Salome* ended up in the United States, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The production of Salome images decreased after the WWI. The War occupied people's mind so there was not the time and energy left to fight “a woman,” a “woman's race” and everything associated with it. Now men had to fight for their own survival, for the survival of their nations and culture. The energy than had been lavished on defining gender differences and “woman” as the enemy was now directed at a different enemy.

A very limited number of Salomes were produced after WWI, and, Salome’s appearance after WWII was even less frequent. The issue of economic competition was difficult for critics to frame because of the critical role that women played in WWII. Progressive movements in the second half of

the 20th century established ethical positions that brought parity between the genders socially, professionally, legally and parentally, though these changes did not occur simultaneously in all countries. Thus changes in social attitudes changed the status and the portrayed images of women, and changes in the ways in which men and women perceive gender have changed both the production and interpretation of Salome-based art. Social and aesthetic theories based on questionable 19th century scientific inferences seem silly today and the art which illustrated such inferences has become a curiosity. Performance art, like Strauss' *Salome* offers the director and singers an opportunity to interpret a 19th century work in a variety of ways that are not hamstrung with 19th century social attitudes. While the *femmes fatale* has remained an archetype in modern art and literature, and examples may exhibit human depravity in characterization, such characters are more likely to be interpreted as instances of human psychology and ethical breaches, rather than offering proof of gender characteristics. In visual arts, the interest in Salome is more likely to be only a name and her story, only a subject in order to convey modern art trends and artistic searches. Jean-Sylvain Bieth's 1988 abstract sculpture *Salome* carries little of the dramatic narrative of its 19th and early 20th century cousins. In this sculpture Salome's sensuality, seductiveness and other attributes of the *femme fatale* are reduced to three quadrangles in blue, red and white.

One modern image however deserves special attention. *Salome,* by Russian painter Sergei Chepik, shows a female figure that provocatively naked, irresistibly beautiful and shamelessly evil. Being a contemporary figurative painter, largely influenced by the second part of the 19th century artistic tradition, he remains faithful to that tradition without bringing in his particular social or personal perception of an image of woman in general and of Salome in particular.

[i] Zinaida Vengerova, "Feminism and Woman's Freedom," *Russian Women Writers*, edited by Chrisitne D. Tomei, translated by Rosina Neginsky, Volume 2, Garland Publishing, INC., 1999, page 895.

[ii] Ibid., page 905.

[iii] Ibid., pages 896-897.

[iv] Ibid., page 897.

[v] Ibid., page 895.
[vi] Mireille Dottin-Orsini, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1993, pages 301. All quotes from Dottin-Orsini are translated by Rosina Neginsky.
[vii] Ibid. page 342.
[viii] Ibid. page 341.
[ix] Ibid., page 352.
[x] Ibid, page 277.
[xi] Ibid., page 277.
[xii] Oscar Wilde, "Salome, Branden Publishing Company, Boston, MA 02147.
[xiii] Mireille Dottin Orsini, page 264.

[xiv] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in fin-de-siècle culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1986, page 375.
[xv] Ibid., page 386.
[xvi] Ibid., page 400.
[xvii] Ibid., pages 386-387.
[xviii] Ibid., page 387.
[xix] Mireille Dottin Orsini, page 328.