



# Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, André Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama

By Katherine Brown Downey

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Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and André Gide's *Saul* have been considered critically in the traditional contexts of authorial oeuvre, biography, or "thought." These plays have been treated with embarrassed respect, dealt with only because of the importance of their authors. That Wilde and Gide made use of biblical material seems to discomfit their critics; that they had done so at a time when biblical drama was prohibited has rarely been addressed. Traditional critical treatments seek to smooth over the plays' aberrant qualities. This study takes them seriously as aberrations and investigates Wilde's and Gide's claims that these plays are works of faith, by considering them as participating in the history of biblical drama.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

"Perverse Midrash is a fascinating study, of both scholarly and critical depth, raising the question of why drama with biblical themes was banned in England and France during the Reformation era and remained banned until virtually our own time. This is of course a large issue and it takes Katherine Downey through several centuries of archival material, but she focuses sharply and in great detail on two plays: Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and André Gide's *Saül*. Both her conclusion and, en route, her methodology are exceptionally coherent and cogent. She concludes that the fear responsible for the ban on biblical plays was not a fear that playwrights would pervert the Bible narratives, but rather that they would expose perversities already present in Scripture; and when, in our last fin-de-siècle, Wilde and Gide finally broke the ban, that situation is precisely, she demonstrates, what did emerge." -Jeffery M. Perl, editor of *Common Knowledge* (Jeffery M. Perl)

"Here we have a deliciously unique and engaging cross-disciplinary study, centered around two notorious plays from the turn of the 20th century. But in Downey's capable hands the plays become examples of serious, insightfully perverse, readings of the ancient biblical texts from which the plays come, along the way demonstrating that those ancient texts themselves possess complexities too often hidden from the traditionally religious reader. Biblical scholars, theater historians, and cultural critics will learn much that is new from this extraordinarily fresh essay." - John C. Holbert, Lois Craddock Perkins Professor of Homiletics, Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas (John C. Holbert)

"Sometimes it takes one to know one. Oscar Wilde and André Gide, writers thought scandalous and subversive in their day, responded with unique sympathy to scandal and subversion in the Bible. With elegant simplicity, *Perverse Midrash* writes a fascinating chapter in the linked histories of the Bible and Western literature and theater." -Jack Miles, Pulitzer-Prize winning author of *God: A Biography* (Jack Miles)

'I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in fin de siècle literature, the rise of early modernism as a movement, or a biblical drama.' (Alison Jack, *Expository Times Expository Times*)

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#### About the Author

Perverse Midrash is Katherine Brown Downey's, first book. She is working on a second about the Victorian-era Anglican cleric F.W. Farrar.

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