



Gustave Moreau, 'Salomé dancing before Herod' (1876)

The premise for the story

“Herodias’ is set in Judea (southern Palestine) at the time of Jesus’ ministry. Subject to Rome, the Jewish people are smouldering with messianic hopes of liberation. Herod-Antipas, their puppet-king, the protagonist of this tale, is scheming to ensure his own political survival. Antipas has divorced his first wife, daughter of the king of the adjacent desert kingdom, in order to marry his niece Herodias, formerly the wife of his half-brother. The marriage has offended his former father-in-law and alienated his Jewish subjects. Jokanaan (John the Baptist [or *Iaokanaan* in the French]), a radical Jewish religious leader, has publicly reproached Antipas for this marriage, insisting that it transgresses Mosaic law. Herodias has pushed her husband into imprisoning Jokanaan. This is the point at which the story begins.’ (Geoffrey Wall’s notes in Flaubert 2005: 108)

Discussion

- Based upon your reading of the story, how would you characterize Herod-Antipas’ relation with: a) Herodias b) the Romans c) Jakanaan?

Characterization in the story:

Comment upon Flaubert's techniques of characterization, focalisation and narration as they pertain to the representation of following characters:

Mannaeï

'A man appeared, naked to the waist like a masseur at a public bathhouse. He was old and thin and very tall and at his side he carried a cutlass in a bronze scabbard. His hair was held back with a comb, which emphasized the height of his forehead. His eyes were dulled with sleep but his teeth shone white and he walked lightly over the flagstones on the tips of his toes, his whole body as lithe as a monkey's and his face as expressionless as a mummy's.' (Flaubert 1997: 73)

'Un homme se présenta, nu jusqu'à la ceinture, comme les masseurs des bains. Il était très grand, vieux, décharné, et portait sur la cuisse un coutelas dans une gaine de bronze. Sa chevelure, relevée par un peigne, exagérait la longueur de son front. Une somnolence décolorait ses yeux, mais ses dents brillaient, et ses orteils posaient légèrement sur les dalles, tout son corps ayant la souplesse d'un singe, et sa figure l'impassibilité d'une momie.' (Flaubert 2007: 107)

Herodias

'She paced about the terrace, white with anger and unable to find the words to express her frustration.

It had also occurred to her that the Tetrarch might give in to public opinion and decide to renounce her. If that happened, all would be lost. Ever since childhood she had dreamed of ruling over a great empire. This is what had prompted her to leave her first husband and marry this one, who she now thought had been deceiving her.

'Much good it did me, marrying into your family!' she said.

'My family is as good as yours,' said the Tetrarch blandly.

Herodias felt the blood of her ancestors, that noble line of kings and priests, boiling in her veins.

'But your father was a floor-sweeper in the temple at Askalon and the rest of your family were just shepherds, robbers or muleteers, a rabble, and in thrall to Judah since the time of King David! My ancestors have beaten yours in battle! [...] She accused him of being indifferent to insults, too tolerant towards the Pharisees who were betraying him and a coward in the face of his own people who detested her.' (Flaubert 1997: 77–8)

'[...]elle parcourait la terrasse, blêmie par sa colère, manquant de mots pour exprimer ce qui l'étouffait.

Elle songeait aussi que le Tétrarque, cédant à l'opinion, s'aviserait peut-être de la répudier. Alors tout serait perdu ! Depuis son enfance, elle nourrissait le rêve d'un grand empire. C'était pour y atteindre que, délaissant son premier époux, elle s'était jointe à celui-là, qui l'avait dupée, pensait-elle.

— J'ai pris un bon soutien, en entrant dans ta famille !

— Elle vaut la tienne ! dit simplement le Tétrarque.

Hérodiade sentit bouillonner dans ses veines le sang des prêtres et des rois ses aïeux.

— Mais ton grand-père balayait le temple d'Ascalon ! Les autres étaient bergers, bandits, conducteurs de caravanes, une horde, tributaire de Juda depuis le roi David ! Tous mes ancêtres ont battu les tiens ! Le premier des Makkabi vous a chassés d'Hébron, Hyrcan forcés à vous circoncrire !

Et, exhalant le mépris de la patricienne pour le plébéien, la haine de Jacob contre Édom, elle lui reprocha son indifférence aux outrages, sa mollesse envers les Pharisiens qui le trahissaient, sa lâcheté pour le peuple qui la détestait.’ (Flaubert 2007: 111–12)

Salomé

‘The Tetrarch was no longer listening to [Herodias]. He was looking down at the flat roof of a house on which he could see a young girl and an old woman. The woman was holding a parasol with a reed handle as long as a fishing rod. In the middle of the carpet a large travelling basket lay open, full to the brim with waistbands, veils and jewelled pendants. From time to time the girl would lean forward and brandish something from the contents of the basket in the air. She was dressed, as was usual for Roman girls, in a pleated tunic and a peplum with emerald tassels. Her hair was held back by blue ribbons and from time to time she put her hand up to it as if it were too heavy for her. The shadow from the parasol fell across her, half hiding her from view. Now and then Antipas caught brief glimpses of her delicate neck, the corner of an eye, the shape of a little mouth. But he could see the whole of her upper body from her hips to her neck, so lissom and supple as she leant forward and then straightened herself again. He waited for her to repeat the movement; his breathing quickened and his eyes lit up. Herodias stood watching him.’ (Flaubert 1997: 78)

‘Le Tétrarque n’écoutait plus. Il regardait la plate-forme d’une maison, où il y avait une jeune fille, et une vieille femme tenant un parasol à manche de roseau, long comme la ligne d’un pêcheur. Au milieu du tapis, un grand panier de voyage restait ouvert. Des ceintures, des voiles, des pendeloques d’orfèvrerie en débordaient confusément. La jeune fille, par intervalles, se penchait vers ces choses, et les secouait à l’air. Elle était vêtue comme les Romaines, d’une tunique calamistrée avec un péplum à glands d’émeraude ; et des lanières bleues enfermaient sa chevelure, trop lourde, sans doute, car, de temps à autre, elle y portait la main. L’ombre du parasol se promenait au-dessus d’elle, en la cachant à demi. Antipas aperçut deux ou trois fois son col délicat, l’angle d’un œil, le coin d’une petite bouche. Mais il voyait, des hanches à la nuque, toute sa taille qui s’inclinait pour se redresser d’une manière élastique. Il épiait le retour de ce mouvement, et sa respiration devenait plus forte ; des flammes s’allumaient dans ses yeux. Hérodias l’observait.’ (Flaubert 20017: 112–13)

‘From under a curtain facing them a bare arm emerged, a young and very attractive arm which might have been carved in ivory by Polyclitus. It groped around, rather awkwardly yet at the same time with perfect grace, feeling for a tunic that had been left on a stool by the wall.

An old woman drew the curtain aside and passed the tunic through.

The Tetrarch remembered something he had seen not long before, but he could not quite place it.’ (Flaubert 1997: 92)

‘Sous une portière en face, un bras nu s’avança, un bras jeune, charmant et comme tourné dans l’ivoire par Polyclète. D’une façon un peu gauche, et cependant gracieuse, il ramait dans l’air, pour saisir une tunique oubliée sur une escabelle près de la muraille.

Une vieille femme la passa doucement, en écartant le rideau.

Le Tétrarque eut un souvenir, qu’il ne pouvait préciser.’ (Flaubert 2007: 130–31)

Herod-Antipas

‘[Antipas] had gathered [these weapons] together in case his enemies formed an alliance against him. However, the Proconsul might very easily imagine or assume that they were fighting the Romans and so he tried to think of ways of justifying himself.

Perhaps he should say that these arms were not his, that many of them were used for defending themselves against marauders, that they were needed as protection against the Arabs or that they had all belonged to his father. And instead of walking behind the proconsul he walked on quickly ahead.’ (Flaubert 1997: 84)

‘Il les avait rassemblées en prévision d’une alliance de ses ennemis. Mais le Proconsul pouvait croire, ou dire, que c’était pour combattre les Romains, et il cherchait des explications.

Elles n’étaient pas à lui ; beaucoup servaient à le défendre des brigands ; d’ailleurs il en fallait contre les Arabes ; ou bien, tout cela avait appartenu à son père. Et, au lieu de marcher derrière le Proconsul, il allait devant, à pas rapides.’ (Flaubert 2007: 122)

Jakonaan/Iaokonaan

‘A human being lay stretched on the ground, his long hair running down into the hair of the animal hides which covered his back. He got to his feet. His forehead touched the grating which had been fastened horizontally over the pit and from time to time he disappeared back into the depths of his lair.’ (Flaubert 1997: 87)

‘Un être humain était couché par terre, sous de longs cheveux se confondant avec les poils de bête qui garnissaient son dos. Il se leva. Son front touchait à une grille horizontalement scellée ; et, de temps à autre, il disparaissait dans les profondeurs de son antre.’ (Flaubert 2007: 125)

“[...] the scourge of the Almighty shall not cease! Your limbs shall be turned in your own blood, like wool in a dyer’s vat. He shall tear you to pieces as with a new harrow and scatter your flesh in shreds upon the mountains.”

Who was this conqueror that he spoke of? Could it be Vitellius? None but the Romans were capable of such a massacre. People began to protest: “Enough, enough! Silence him!” (Flaubert 1997: 88)

‘et le fléau de l’Éternel ne s’arrêtera pas. Il retournera vos membres dans votre sang, comme de la laine dans la cuve d’un teinturier. Il vous déchirera comme une herse neuve ; il répandra sur les montagnes tous les morceaux de votre chair !

De quel conquérant parlait-il ! Était-ce de Vitellius ? Les Romains seuls pouvaient produire cette extermination. Des plaintes s’échappaient :

— Assez ! assez ! qu’il finisse !’ (Flaubert 2007: 126)

Aulus

‘Aulus was leaning over the edge of his couch, his forehead bathed in sweat, his face green and his hands clutching his stomach.’ (Flaubert 1997: 97)

‘Aulus était penché au bord du triclinium, le front en sueur, le visage vert, les poings sur l’estomac.’ (Flaubert 2007: 139)

The guests at the banquet

‘Ammonius, a pupil of Philo the Platonist, thought they were stupid and said so to some Greeks who were joking about oracles. Marcellus had come over to join Jacob and was telling him of the joys he had experienced as a baptized follower of Mithras. Jacob urged him to follow Jesus. Palm and tamarisk wines, the wines of Safed and Byblos, flowed from jars into bowls, from bowls into cups and from cups into thirsty mouths. Soon everyone was chatting away happily with their neighbours and beginning to relax.’ (Flaubert 1997: 97)

‘Ammonius, élève de Philon le Platonicien, les jugeait stupides, et le disait à des Grecs qui se moquaient des oracles. Marcellus et Jacob s’étaient joints. Le premier narrait au second le bonheur qu’il avait ressenti sous le baptême de Mithra, et Jacob l’engageait à suivre Jésus. Les vins de palme et de tamaris, ceux de Safet et de Byblos, coulaient des amphores dans les cratères, des cratères dans les coupes, des coupes dans les gosiers ; on bavardait, les cœurs s’épanchaient.’ (Flaubert 2007: 139–40)

Critical perspectives

‘It is important to remember that the reader sees [things] largely as Antipas [does]; [...] This means that we are made to share his bewilderment at all the difficulties confronting him.’ (Raitt 1992: 62)

‘the opacity of *Hérodiad* is increased by the self-effacing reticence of the narrator.’ (Raitt 1992: 72)

Reflection

Now that you have looked closely at Flaubert’s approach to characterization in this story, reflect on the following questions:

- Which of these characters would you be most interested in exploring creatively and why?
- Which techniques would you employ and why?
- Which wider ideas in the story would you seek to explore through characterization?

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Close reading and creative activity: the banquet scene

Read the section that covers Salomé's entrance and dance (passages available as PDFs on QMplus):

French, pp. 142–45 'Les panneaux de la tribune d'or se déployèrent tout à coup [...] Le Tétrarque s'affaissa sur lui-même, écrasé.'

English, pp. 100–02 'Suddenly the panels in the golden balcony were folded back and Herodias appeared in a blaze of candlelight [...] The Tetrarch sank back on his couch, stunned.'

- What is your initial response to this scene?
- The different stages of Salomé's dance evoke different feelings: which are they?
- Which techniques of characterization does Flaubert use in this passage? Give examples.
- Which techniques of focalization does Flaubert use in this passage? Give examples.
- How would you characterize the position and role of the narrator in this passage (and in the story more broadly)?
- Why do you think that the story is called 'Herodias', rather than 'Salomé', or 'Herod-Antipas'?
- List ten descriptive elements in the scene which might feed into a creative rewriting (e.g. Sounds? Visual elements? Movements?). How might you go about finding additional inspiration to enrichen a creative rewriting of this scene?

NB. Assignment task

3C) Rewrite the culminating dance scene in 'Hérodiade' ('Herodias') to explore Salomé's views, feelings and perceptions. Accompany your piece with a reflective commentary.

Preparation for next week:

Passages from the *Roland* and *La Princesse de Clèves* will be posted on QMplus. Please read these before coming to class.

Preparation for the final week:

Find relevant secondary materials and prepare a brief presentation (2–3 mins) on how they will inform your creative response.