

SALOME DOES NOT DANCE  
(A Comparative Study)

Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* - both the figure and the text - is frequently considered as the most appropriate *ars poetica* of Symbolism in poetry and quoted any time a critic needs support in his arguments on its aesthetic ideas. It is a largely used common place to judge Symbolism „hermetic“, „incomprehensible“, „wanting to be inaccessible for the great public“, „refusing any link with reality“ (the withdraw into the Ivory Tower), „searching for the unique, the strange, the pure“ and „exalting deadly pale, melancholic and Narcissic figures“ like Ophelia, Salome or Judith. Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* offers innumerable possibilities to back up any of these statements which can't however reflect the complexity and depth of the thoughts of the artists of Symbolism. It is also most significant that *Hérodiade* is always mentioned when talking about the concepts of Symbolism, but hardly ever analysed in its totality. Etherial beauty, eternal virgin, the last representant of a powerful royal family in fall, the symbol of a decadent and sterile world lost in a never-ending dream - that is how the figure of *Hérodiade* is generally presented in literary opinion. The evident difficulty of reading Mallarmé's text - which only can be appreciated in the original version - does not contribute to tinge the above mentioned fixed idea about the heroin, even if it is true that the text's last part, intituled *Les Noces d'Hérodiade*, has remained in fragments and can only be found in the latest editions of the works of Mallarmé. In the present analysis I will try to place this enigmatic figure and text in a different light to help a possible renewal of their interpretation. For this purpose I chose a comparative study of some of the Salomes of Gustave Moreau and *Hérodiade* of Mallarmé.

The myth of Salome is *the supreme myth of symbolic castration* which preoccupied a whole generation, a pre-freudian one, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé and Gustave Moreau owed a significant part of their artistic production to that myth of the „femme fatale“. For Moreau and Mallarmé it meant whith no doubt a life-time fascination. „It is no exaggeration to say that the figure of Salome is outstanding in Gustave

Moreau's work, and even dominates it entirely" - says Ragnar von Holten, an eminent connoisseur of Moreau. A number of sketches, watercolours and canvases prove the artist's unflagging interest in the history of this fatal virgin, who is „the divine symbol of indestructible Luxury, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, execrated Beauty, chosen from among all by the catalepsy that stiffens the flesh and hardens the muscles; the monstrous, indifferent, irresponsible, impervious Beast, poisoning, like the Helen of antiquity, all who approach her, all who see her, all who touch her", filled in words his impressions Huysmans in *A rebours* contemplating the painting of Moreau intitled *Salome Dancing before Herod (Tattooed Salome)* executed in 1876 and exposed in the Salon of the same year with important success. Beheading being intimately linked with deflowering (in the above mentioned picture Salome holds a white flower in her hand and the head is the substitute of phallus in Freud's terms), all the fears of castration are concentrated in the frightfully beautiful, golden radiating, almost entirely naked young virgin, clothed only by a falling veil and some jewels whose coldness and sharpness evoke the arms of beheading (just like her stretched out arm) and increase her murderous power. The white - red contrast (the body of Salome and anything else in the picture) reinforces the duality of virginity and deflowering (in the painting of Moreau *Hercules among the daughters of Thepsius* have only white bodies the girls haven't been hounoured yet by the hero). Herod is sitting against a red-hot background, his face tells us he is undergoing a symbolical castration for double incest - Salome is fulfilling her mother's will, the ex-wife of Herod's brother, she is Herodias and herself at the same time. The feared king of a rich empire at this very moment is reduced to a bowed and insignificant shadow while the feminin, mother and daughter are dominating the world. Salome is indifferent towards the world surrounding her, she is totally absorbed by accomplishing her mission to inaugurate a new period in the course of the word. She has the attributes of an untoucheable goddess: the lotus and the sky-blue veil. She should be dancing but she doesn't move - her melancolic yet determined posture announces a new era by double death - the real one of the old world by the symbolic death of the new.

Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* also inaugurates a new era - in poetic art. Like Moreau's, Mallarmé's life was also accompanied through by this very myth which has become for him, in the course of the years, the symbol of Poetry itself. Modifications in the acception of the myth trace changes in Mallarmé's conceptions about poetry and poetical language. Since the myth of

Salome, called Hérodiade in Mallarmé's world, appears in his first poetical period to haunt afterwards all his artistic production and literally concludes his life with it - Mallarmé died, exactly a hundred years ago, of a spasm from the glottis while working on the last part of his *Hérodiade, Les Noces d'Hérodiade*. Interpreting the role of this myth in Mallarmé's art means to discover the new poetics whom he wanted to give birth. Is it an angelic poetry, exempt even from the hint of eroticism as critics wanted to see it for so much time? Is the poet praising virgin sterility and condemning Hérodiade to death to preserve her untoucheable integrity (and condemn poetry to silence) or is he proposing another solution?

For the first time we meet the name of Hérodiade in Mallarmé's work in *Les Fleurs*, poem of baudelairian inspiration:

*Et pareille à la chair de la femme, la rose  
Cruelle, Hérodiade en fleur du jardin clair,  
Celle qu'un sang farouche et radieux arrose!*  
(O.C., p.34)

Hérodiade appears as a bloody, cruel rose (which is the evident symbol of the female sex organ) and in an extremely condensed manner, the poet sums up the myth of Salome and St. John the Baptist: the originally white rose (*du jardin clair*) turns to red proving deflowering; this rose is (or has become) cruel, so in turn wants beheading. But these two lines reflect already that in Mallarmé's eyes the only important figure of this myth is the young virgin, whom he calls Hérodiade instead of Salome. He prefers the name of the mother for its inner musical harmony and adds the final „iade” which in the French literary tradition refers to works of the highest importance, like for exemple „Iliade” of Homere or „Franciade” of Ronsard, works summing up the history of a whole period in terrestrial life. This final „iade” is thus pointing out Mallarmé's aspiration after creating the myth of the new poetry. Giving a new name to a well-known heroin suggests that Mallarmé is intending to create a new version of the myth. His choosing the name of Hérodiade also means that Mallarmé considers that mother and daughter become one and the same figure (remember: in Moreau's paintings we can't either find trace of the mother). Herod and St. John the Baptist are also missing from this first mentioning of Hérodiade - and that will be so even in the poet's future works. The title and the style of the poem *Les Fleurs* are an open allusion to the *Fleurs du Mal* of

Baudelaire. The XXVIIth poem in the *Fleurs du Mal* offers important elements concerning the figure of Salome - Hérodiade:

*Ses yeux polis sont faits de minéraux charmants,  
Et dans cette nature étrange et symbolique  
Où l'ange inviolé se mêle au sphinx antique,*

*Où tout n'est qu'or, acier, lumière et diamants,  
Resplendit à jamais, comme un astre inutile,  
La froide majesté de la femme stérile.*

(O.C., I., p.29)

The world shown by Baudelaire is a „mineral” one, just like in Moreau's paintings or in Mallarmé's *Hérodiade*. It is the inner nature of the heroin which is made of „gold, steel, light and diamond”, which is „useless” and „sterile” (in rhyme position), but therefore sublime. That is how Hérodiade wants to but can't be. In the *Scène*, the second, but first written part of *Hérodiade* she describes herself in the same terms:

*Vous, pierres où mes yeux comme purs bijoux  
Empruntent leur clarté mélodieuse et vous  
Métaux qui donnez à ma jeune chevelure  
Une splendeur fatale et sa massive allure!*

She wants to create her self-sufficient solitude - so refuses the approaches of her old maid, the Nourrice (powerful creation of Mallarmé), she lives as a menace (and temptation at the same time) the kiss, the perfume and the touch the Nourrice wants to give her. Since Hérodiade says „*J'aime l'horreur d'être vierge*” but knows that

*Vous mentez, ô fleur nue  
De mes lèvres.  
J'attends une chose inconnue  
Ou peut-être, ignorant le mystère de vos cris,  
Jetez-vous les sanglots suprêmes et meurtris  
D'une enfance sentant parmi les rêveries  
Se séparer enfin de ses froides pierreries.*

(O.C., p.47)

These „cold stones“ are the symbol of the faded, suffocated ancient world represented vigorously by the Nourrice. Herod's palace is similar to a medieval castle in Byzance: richly adorned and perfumed with odorous herbs creating an unreal atmosphere just like on the *Tattooed Salome*. But in difference with Moreau, Mallarmé sent Herod in campaign so his palace is deserted, haunted only by the shadow of Hérodiade. All the ornaments, arms and precious stones are reflecting her figure as many mirrors in which she sees herself as a dead reflection. The view of herself as an Other (Autre) makes her experience a situation in which limits can suddenly be transgressed and she can feel the horror of duality. Her own look assimilates her to the „froides pierreries“, she is like the swan captured by the iced lake in the poem entitled *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*: reduced to an existence with memory but without life. This doubled and Narcissic being pushes her in deep melancholy reflected by the milieu in Herod's castle owed to decay. But sometimes she is struck by what she sees in the mirror:

...O miroir!

*Eau froide par l'ennui dans ton cadre gelée  
Que de fois et pendant des heures, désolée  
Des songes et cherchant mes souvenirs qui sont  
Comme des feuilles sous ta glace au trou profond,  
Je m'apparus en toi comme une ombre lointaine,  
Mais, horreur! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine,  
J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité!*

(O.C., p.45)

Nakedness and beauty, that is what the mirror reveals to her to trouble her virginity. The most troubling mirrors are however the eyes of St. John the Baptist whose figure doesn't appear but is mentioned by the Nourrice to strike Hérodiade's horror:

N.

*Viendra-t-il parfois?*

H.

*Etoiles pures,  
N'entendez pas!*

We can only suspect that he has to die for a secret glance surprising the naked heroin. But there is no dance to obtain the head dear to Hérodiade. For his eyes are the only mirrors to have an authentic image of her - an image of not a girl but a woman who will take his bloody head on her lap so proving her womanhood. His beheading initiates Hérodiade into a totally new world, a new world the revelation of which caused the death of its author, not only of St. John the Baptist but also of Mallarmé. In difference with Moreau, the feminin remains for Mallarmé the glorious directing principle of life, his Hérodiade preserves her goddess attitude, she is like the *Tattooed Salome* - without Herod and the head raised. Moreau, in his painting entitled *Apparition* (1876), shows to us the radiating head of the Saint appearing before Salome accusing her. From goddess she is transformed to a feared, wild animal, and the masculin restores its power on the universe. (An interesting parallel: *OEdipus and the sphinx* was Moreau's first exposed painting - the posture of the two figures is exactly the same in this later work.)

Mallarmé has succeeded in creating a new version of the myth, and has also proposed new poetical principles - above all in *Ouverture Ancienne*, first but second-written part of *Hérodiade* (considering *Les Noces d'Hérodiade* as an „inorganic“ part of this work). *Ouverture Ancienne* is the monologue of the Nourrice evoking the old, masculin word of Herod, referring at the same time to the *Roman de la Rose* (perhaps that explains the choice of a medieval decoration) , using „eternal“ symbols like the swan - the text is intertextuality itself. But where's the „nouveau“? What made him interrupt several times this work, frightened by its possible conclusions? The „nouveau“ is in the language itself:

*„J'ai enfin commencé mon »Hérodiade«. Avec terreur, car j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots: Peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit.*

*Le vers ne doit donc pas se composer de mots mais d'intentions, et toutes les paroles s'effacer devant la sensation.“*

(Corr.I.p.137 [Oct. 1864])

This „poétique très nouvelle“ in work produced a unique creation even in the French literature - it could not generate other texts because it touched human existence itself. The poem of Hérodiade is „composed“ of h, é, r, o,

d, i, a, d, e - so of the constellations of these letters or words of great evocating power.

( HERAUT - a *crimson tunic* decorated with groups of three golden fleurs-de-lys „J’effeuille ... Les pâles lys qui sont en moi ...” „ Ors nus fustigeant l’espace cramoisi” , ... ) This practice is a self-destructive one - and Mallarmé has been aware of it: it is not by chance that the first word of his *Hérodiade* is ABOLIE, with this empty „a” in beginning position, the „a” which remembers and commemorates death.

### Bibliography

- Baudelaire, Charles. - *OEuvres Complètes. 1-2.*, texte établi, présenté et annoté par Claude Pichois. - Paris: Gallimard, 1993. - Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. - *OEuvres complètes.* édition établie et annotée par H. Mondor et G. Jean-Aubry. - Paris: Gallimard, 1970. - Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. - *Correspondance*, vol 1. - Paris: Gallimard, 1959. - Bibliothèque de la Pléiade
- Huysmans, Joris-Karl. - *A rebours.* - Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978

### OEuvres critiques

- A művészet története: A századvég és a századelő.* - Budapest: Corvina, 1988
- Bellet, Roger. - *Stéphane Mallarmé. L’encre et le ciel.* - Seyssel: Editions du Champ Vallon, 1987
- Bachelard, Gaston. - *L’eau et les rêves: essai sur l’imagination de la matière.* - Paris: Corti, 1980
- Benichou, Paul. - *Selon Mallarmé.* - Paris: Gallimard, 1995
- Gomrich, Erich H. - *A művészet története; ford. G. Beke Margit és Falvay Mihály.* - Budapest, 1983
- Klibansky, Raymond - Panofsky, Erwin - Saxl, Fritz. - *Saturne et la Mélancolie: études historiques et philosophiques: nature, religion, médecine et art; traduit de l’anglais et d’autres langues par Fabienne Bogaert et Louis Evrard.* - Paris: Gallimard, 1989

- Kristeva, Julia. - *Soleil noir, Dépression et mélancolie*. - Paris: Gallimard, 1987
- Marchal, Bertrand. - *Lecture de Mallarmé*. - Paris: Corti, 1985
- Mauron, Charles. - *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé*. - Neuchâtel: A la Baconnière, 1968
- Pearson, Roger. - *Unfolding Mallarmé. The development of a Poetic Art*. - Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996
- Robillard, Monic. - *Le désir de la vierge. Hérodiade chez Mallarmé*. - Genève: Droz, 1993
- Starobinski, Jean. - *La Mélancolie au miroir. Trois lectures de Baudelaire*. - Paris: Julliard, 1989
- Szimbolizmus*; szerk. Komlós Aladár. - Budapest: Gondolat, 1967