

## Caroline Vander Stichele

### Murderous Mother, Ditto Daughter?

#### Herodias and Salome at the Opera

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Die Geschichte vom Tod Johannes des Täufers (Markus 6:14-20; Matthäus 14:1-12) war ein beliebtes Thema der Kunst, vor allem am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts. Der folgende Beitrag konzentriert sich auf ihre Rezeption in den Opern von Massenet (*Herodiade*, 1881) und Strauss (*Salome*, 1905). Er unternimmt eine vergleichende Lektüre der beiden Opern, wobei das Hauptinteresse den Rollen der Herodias und ihrer Tochter gilt. Darüber hinaus werden im Artikel die zugrunde liegenden Evangelientexte sowie Flauberts Erzählung *Herodias* analysiert, die Massenets Oper im besonderen als Quelle dienen. Die entsprechenden Erzählungen werden jeweils zunächst zusammenfassend skizziert. Es folgt eine Auswertung der Repräsentation der weiblichen Figuren und ihrer (angeblichen) Verantwortung für den Tod des Täufers.

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When women started to scrutinize the Bible in search of strong women they could identify with, they did not immediately consider Herodias and her daughter. The story about the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-20; Matthew 14:1-12), in which these apparently wicked women operate, was largely ignored. Only in more recent years have feminist researchers started to devote more attention to it.<sup>1</sup> The story itself, however, is well-known. Through the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance: F. van Dijk-Hemmes, 'Bezwijk niet voor de schoonheid van een vrouw... Over Marcus 6:17-29' (1983), in: J. Bekkenkamp and F. Dröes (eds.), *De dubbele stem van haar verlangen* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1995), pp. 51-61; E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *But She Said. Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 48-50; Janice Capel Anderson, 'Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter', in: J. Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark & Method. New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 103-134; Jennifer A. Glancy, 'Unveiling Masculinity. The Construction of Gender in Mark 6:17-29', *Biblical Interpretation* 2,1 (1994), pp. 35-50; B. van Soest, 'Who Dunnit: Die Rolle der Frauen bei der Enthauptung von Johannes dem Täufer. Eine feministisch-dekonstruktivistische Lesart von Markus 6,16-28', in: A. Günter (ed.), *Feministische Theologie und postmodernes Denken* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1996), pp. 133-146; I. Dannemann, *Aus dem Rahmen fallen. Frauen im Markusevangelium. Eine feministische Re-Vision* (Berlin: Alektor, 1996), pp. 125-194; A. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 210-262; C. Vander Stichele, 'Killer Queens. The Recycling of Jezebel and Herodias as Fin the Siècle Phantasies', in: A. Brenner, J.W. van Henten (ed.), *Recycling Biblical Figures* (Studies in Theology and Religion, Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 192-204; C. Vander Stichele, 'Capital Re-Visions: The Head of John the Baptist as Object of Art', in: J. Bekkenkamp e.a. (ed.), *Missing Links. Arts, Religion and Reality* (Interdisziplinäre Forschungen zu Religion, Wissenschaft und Kultur: A. Geisteswissenschaftliche Sektion, Bd. 1, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2000), pp. 71-87.

centuries it has appealed to the imagination of painters, writers and musicians. They gave their version of the story, often focusing on questions about the responsibility for John's death and on the motives of the people involved. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century there was a renewed interest in this tale. Not only writers like Gustave Flaubert and Oscar Wilde, but also painters such as Gustave Moreau and composers such as Richard Strauss, mused upon the death of John the Baptist.

Strauss's opera *Salome* (1905) is no doubt the most famous example in this genre. However, it is not the only one. Another and strikingly different interpretation is given by Jules Massenet in his opera *Hérodiade* (1881). In what follows, I will undertake a comparative reading of these operas, focussing on the roles of Herodias and her daughter. My interest in these cultural appropriations of a biblical story is informed by an interest in the cultural reception history of the Bible and especially in the 'cultural afterlives'<sup>2</sup> of biblical women. My approach to this material will be 'gender critical', in that I will study how gender affects the portrayal of the characters in question in the different versions of this story.<sup>3</sup>

The first impression one gets from these operas is that they are very different from the biblical narratives. In order to get an idea of the differences I will first analyse the gospel stories in question. Then I will take a closer look at Flaubert's story *Hérodiades*, which has more specifically served as source text for the opera of Massenet. Having studied these literary *Vorlagen*, namely the gospel stories and Flaubert, I will analyse Massenet's opera *Hérodiade* and *Salome* by Strauss<sup>4</sup>. In each case I shall summarize the story in question; then discuss the representation of the main female characters, Herodias and her daughter; and, finally, their presumed involvement in John's death.

### **The Gospel Stories**

The story about John's death occurs in two gospels, namely Mark and Matthew. Luke refers to John's death too but he does not tell a story about John's beheading. As I presume Mark's story has probably been shortened by Matthew, I will first present a narrative analysis of the

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<sup>2</sup> The expression is Exum's (*Plotted, Shot and Painted*, p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'gender critical' here, rather than 'cultural critical', as Exum does, because my focus here is on gender issues, although I see gender criticism as part of cultural criticism, which I consider to be broader in scope. But with Exum I am not interested in privileging the biblical version over other versions of the story. Cf. J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted. Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JSOT.SS 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3, Sheffield: SAP, 1996), pp. 7-9.

<sup>4</sup> In my analysis we will focus on the narrative plot as developed in both operas.

story in Mark 6:14-29, focusing on the characters and their respective roles.<sup>5</sup> Next, I will point out the main similarities and differences with the story in Matthew 14.1-12.

### *The Story According to Mark 6.14-29*

The story in Mark is the most extensive one. The immediate occasion for its inclusion is related to Jesus, whose reputation has become known to Herod (verse 14). This character is introduced here for the first time in Mark as 'King Herod'.<sup>6</sup> He is the one from whose perspective the verses 14-20 are told.<sup>7</sup> Herod hears about Jesus and gives his opinion concerning Jesus' identity relating him explicitly to another character who already appeared in the gospel, namely John the Baptist. Herod's words are given in direct speech: 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised' (verse 16). The following story (verses 17-29) explains how this beheading came about.<sup>8</sup> Herod's words also show that he assumes responsibility for John's death. This initial clarity becomes, however, blurred in the following context, as other characters appear on the scene.

In verse 17 it is stated that Herod had John arrested and put in prison. The reason given for this action is Herodias (*dia\_Hrwϕiaῖa*). What she has to do with it is further explained (*gar*) in verse 18: John had told Herod his marriage with her is illegal.<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly enough, in verse 19, it is not Herod but Herodias herself who, for that reason, has a grudge against John and wants to kill him. Now his death appears no longer as desired by Herod but by Herodias. The reader who has just been informed about Herod having killed John (verse 16) is puzzled. Even more so when the next thing s/he reads is that Herodias cannot kill John because Herod protects him! The description in verse 20 makes clear that Herod even appreciates John, as positive terms are used to describe his attitude. He considers John to be 'a righteous and holy man' and he 'liked to listen to him'.

<sup>5</sup> My frame of reference here is the so called 'Two Source Hypothesis', in which both Matthew and Luke are thought to be written later than Mark and are thought to be familiar with his Gospel.

<sup>6</sup> Unless stated otherwise, quotes are from the NRSV.

<sup>7</sup> The verb *αἰουῶ* in verses 14, 16 and 20 makes clear that he is the internal focalisator. For the notion of focalisation, see: M. Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 105. Cf. also: J. Capel Anderson, 'Dancing Daughter', p. 119. Since Herod is no longer the focalisator in the following verses 21-29, those verses cannot be regarded as his 'memories of the execution' (Thus: J. A. Glancy, 'Unveiling Masculinity', p. 38).

<sup>8</sup> The verb *ἀποκεφαλίζω* occurs both at the beginning (verse 16) and the end of the story (verse 27).

<sup>9</sup> It is the only time John is speaking in this narrative. His words are quoted. He refers to Levitical law, where this type of relation is forbidden. Cf. Leviticus 18:16; 20:21.

In the verses 17-20 the narrator explained why John had been imprisoned but not yet killed. Now he goes on to tell how Herod's execution of John came about.<sup>10</sup> The occasion is presented in verse 21 as an opportunity ( $\eta\epsilon\rho\rho\alpha\iota\upsilon\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\alpha\iota\rho\upsilon$ ).<sup>11</sup> Herod is the main actor in the following story. He organizes a banquet on the occasion of his birthday for a number of apparently important guests (verse 21). Herod is pleased ( $\eta\eta\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\upsilon$ ) by Herodias' daughter who comes in and dances and he tells the girl ( $\kappa\omicron\rho\alpha\sigma\iota\omicron\upsilon$ ) twice that he will give her what she asks.<sup>12</sup> His words are reported in direct speech (verses 22-23). The second time his offer is strengthened by the addition 'even half of my kingdom' (verse 23).<sup>13</sup> The narrator establishes, by the verb which introduces the second statement ( $\omega\mu\omicron\sigma\epsilon\upsilon$ ), that Herod is taking an oath. The daughter goes out to her mother and asks her what to request. Her mother replies: 'the head of John' (verse 24). Both the question and Herodias' answer are given in direct speech.

The girl not only goes back inside but she does this immediately and in a hurry ( $\epsilon\upsilon\theta\upsilon\lambda\omicron\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha\text{-}\sigma\omicron\upsilon\delta\eta$ ). She repeats the answer of her mother adding some striking details: 'at once' ( $\epsilon\theta\alpha\upsilon\theta\eta$ ) and 'on a platter' ( $\epsilon\pi\iota\pi\eta\kappa\iota$ ). The king is deeply grieved, yet, because of his oaths and the guests, he does not want to refuse her and commands to bring John's head (verses 26-27). As requested, the head is brought on a platter and given to the girl who, in turn, gives it to her mother (verse 28).<sup>14</sup> The concluding verse 29, mentions the burial of John's body by his disciples.

<sup>10</sup> Although it cannot be excluded that the narrator was a woman, given the cultural context, chances are higher that it was a man.

<sup>11</sup> According to J. Capel Anderson, the expression indicates that Herodias's perspective is briefly embedded in the narrator's ('Dancing Daughter', p. 120). As the related verb  $\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\alpha\iota\rho\epsilon\omega$  occurs in the same chapter at 6:31 and the same expression also occurs in 14:11 with respect to the betrayal by Judas, I consider this interpretation to be less plausible.

<sup>12</sup> She pleased ( $\eta\eta\epsilon\sigma\epsilon\upsilon$ ) Herod and his guests. Whether the verb  $\alpha\eta\epsilon\sigma\kappa\omega$  has a connotation of 'sexual pleasure' is a point of discussion. According to J. Capel Anderson ('Dancing Daughter', pp. 121-122), this is not the case, while J.A. Glancy speaks of 'incestuous pleasure' with Herod ('Unveiling Masculinity', p. 39 n. 17). The verb does not occur elsewhere in Mark, but elsewhere in the NT it is used in most cases in the general sense of pleasing someone, often God. It is, however, used with respect to a man-woman relationship in 1 Corinthians 7:33-34. Here I think a sexual aspect cannot be totally excluded.

There is some uncertainty about the identity of the girl in verse 22, as according to some textual witnesses she is Herod's daughter, according to others, the daughter of Herodias. That she is Herodias' daughter is clear from the following context where Herodias is called 'her mother' (verses 24.28). Herod to the contrary is nowhere called her father. At this point of the story, however, both options are still open. The reading 'daughter of Herod' is no doubt the *lectio difficilior* in this context.

The term  $\kappa\omicron\rho\alpha\sigma\iota\omicron\upsilon$  also occurs in the preceding chapter with respect to the daughter of Jairus (5:41-42). There it is explicitly said the girl is twelve. Bach points out that the word  $\kappa\omicron\rho\alpha\sigma\iota\omicron\upsilon$  is also used in the Septuagint version of Esther to describe Esther and the other young virgins in the harem (Bach, *Women*, p. 229 n. 20 and p. 231).

<sup>13</sup> This addition recalls the promise of King Ahasuerus to Esther in Esther 5:3 ('What is your request? It shall be given to you, even to the half of my kingdom.'), repeated in 5:6 and 7:2. For an intertextual reading of Salome with the book of Esther, see Bach, *Women*, pp. 232-235.

<sup>14</sup> Herod is at the center of power, located 'inside', while Herodias is an 'outsider'. The girl is literally a go-

*The Characters in Mark 6:14-29*

An analysis of the respective roles of the four main narrative characters makes clear that Herod is the most active character in the story, whereas John is the most passive. John is mostly the object of the other characters' actions. The two female characters can be situated in between these two male characters.<sup>15</sup> The actions of mother and daughter are clearly related to one another. However, the realisation of their desires depends on the initiative and response of Herod whose position of power is emphasized by his being repeatedly called 'king' (basileuj).<sup>16</sup> While Herod is thus defined in terms of his position, the two women are described explicitly and exclusively in gendered and relational terms: Herodias is presented as Philip's 'wife' and as 'mother', her nameless child as 'daughter' and 'girl'.

Information about the motives of the different characters is given by the narrator at the beginning of the story. We know why Herod has put John in prison and why he protects him. We also know why Herodias wants his death, but are not informed about the motives of the girl. At the beginning of the story a conflict between the interests of Herod and Herodias is signalled. As Herod is the most powerful, he can impose his will on all other characters. At the end of the story, however, it is Herodias who gets what she wanted. Her daughter's actions play a crucial role in that. Nevertheless, the power of Herod remains intact as he orders John's execution. Although he first protects John, this protection is given up in the face of other interests Herod considers more important, namely his oaths and guests: these interests cause him to withdraw his protection. Not his power but his motives have changed in the process.

At the end of the story we are left with an ambiguous impression of Herod because, notwithstanding his initial appreciation for John, he has him put to death.<sup>17</sup> Herodias, on the

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between.

<sup>15</sup> According to S. Bucher-Gillmayr, the actions of Herodias consist of plans and wishes, while her daughter is mostly asking and willing. (Cf. S. Bucher-Gillmayr, "...und brachte seinen Kopf auf einem Teller..." Das Schicksal des Johannes, Mk 6,14-29', *Protokolle zur Bibel* 4 (1995), pp. 103-116). However, as Van Dijk-Hemmes points out, Herodias is mostly a non-acting person, as she wants to kill John, but cannot do so, because she has no power (van Dijk-Hemmes, 'Bezwijk niet', p. 55).

<sup>16</sup> In v. 14 he is introduced as 'king Herod'. The title occurs again, with remarkable density, in verses 22, 25, 26 and 27 (Cf. also verse 23 'my kingdom'). Precisely in the crucial scene where John's fate is decided, Herod's powerful position is emphasized. Van Soest observes that thus the impression arises that Herod is only related to John's death through his function and not personally (van Soest, 'Who Dunit', p. 141).

<sup>17</sup> As Van Soest points out, Herod's order is not quoted. Compared with the question of his daughter (verse 25) and the description of the execution (verses 27b-28), the order by Herod is told in less detail and is also less personal. The executor serves as intermediary between Herod and John. It is not Herod himself who imprisons

contrary, appears as a more consistent although flat character. Her sole purpose seems to be John's death.<sup>18</sup> Her daughter's actions, though not explicitly motivated, are judged by the reader in that light as she helps realising her mother's interests.<sup>19</sup> Although mentioned only in passing, the daughter's dance plays a pivotal role in the story. It is the necessary condition and dramatic event that moves the plot to its fatal end.

#### *Comparison with Matthew 14:1-12*

A comparison between the version of this story in Mark with the shorter one in Matthew results in some interesting observations. The most remarkable difference between Mark's and Matthew's versions concerns Herod's attitude towards John. In both gospels Herod puts John in prison 'because of Herodias'. Next we read in Mark that Herodias wanted to kill him, but that she could not because Herod feared John (verses 19-20a). In Matthew, however, Herod and not Herodias wants to kill John. Moreover, Herod fears the people not John 'because they regarded him as a prophet' (Matthew 14:5). In Mark, on the contrary, Herod's attitude towards John is in fact remarkably positive. He considers John as 'a righteous and holy man' and 'he liked to listen to him' (verse 20): this has no parallel in Matthew.

In both gospels Herod has John killed because Herodias' daughter asks for John's head after Herod has promised her to give her what she wishes. He does not want to refuse her out of regard for his own oaths and for the guests; but, in Mark, 'the king was deeply grieved' (περίλυπος γέννητος: verse 26). Strangely enough, Herod's grief is also mentioned in Matthew (λυπηθείς: verse 9) although it does not fit here. It is Herod himself who wants John's death, although also Herodias has a clear interest in John's death. In Matthew the daughter, 'prompted by her mother' (προβιβαίσα: verse 8), asks for John's head. This motive is more explicit in Mark, where it is also said that Herodias 'wanted to kill' John because - as only Mark says - she has 'a grudge against him' (verse 19).

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John (verse 17) or decapitates him (verses 27). Contrary to both Herodias and her daughter, Herod is thus only indirectly related to John's death and to his head (van Soest, 'Who Dunnit', pp. 140-141).

<sup>18</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza observes that, while in Herod there is at least some evidence of goodness, Herodias appears as evil to the core (E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 49).

<sup>19</sup> According to Dannemann, Herodias and her daughter are described as if they are one person, with Herodias as head and her daughter as its body. With her body the daughter brings about John's death, while Herodias calls for his decapitation with her head. The brains of the daughter and the body of Herodias, to the contrary, are obscured (Dannemann, *Aus dem Rahmen fallen*, p. 188). This picture is not completely adequate, though, because the daughter explicitly states her wish as her own and she adds details to the request of her mother.

The character that gets the least attention in Mark is the girl, who does not even have a name there. She is introduced as the ‘daughter of Herodias’ only. In the shorter version of Matthew she becomes a more central character on the one hand<sup>20</sup> while, on the other hand, her initiative is reduced and she appears more explicitly as her mother’s instrument.<sup>21</sup>

### Flaubert’s Story *Hérodiade*

Having discussed the biblical stories, I will now turn to another story, which, as we will see, clearly served as a source of inspiration for the libretto of Massenet’s opera *Hérodiade*, more specifically Flaubert’s tale *Hérodiade*. Flaubert wrote this story in the Winter of 1876-1877. It was published together with two other stories in one volume entitled *Three Tales*<sup>22</sup> just a couple of months later. I will first give a summary of its plot and then analyse the role Herodias and Salome play in this story.

#### *The Story According to Flaubert*

The story itself consists of three acts, which are all three located in the citadel of Machaerus, the residence of Herod and Herodias. In the first act we find Herod waiting for the Governor of Syria, Vitellius, to come. Vitellius is supposed to help him against an attack of the Arabs. Herod has invited the commanders of his troops, the stewards of his estates, and the chief men of Galilee to a banquet taking place the same night on the pretext of celebrating his birthday. When a voice is heard Herod summons Mannaëi, his executer and inquires after Jokanaan.<sup>23</sup> Mannaëi tells him that Jokanaan had exchanged mysterious words with two visitors and that the two had left for Upper Galilee, announcing they would return with great tidings. Herod insists that Mannaëi should watch Jokanaan and make sure nobody suspects he is still alive. Then Herodias enters the scene. She has come to see Herod and tells him triumphantly that her brother Agrippa is imprisoned, something she arranged in order to get him out of their way. She reminds Herod that she even left her daughter behind in Rome to follow him.

<sup>20</sup> This is rather the consequence of the fact that there are fewer references to Herodias and that the double quotation of Herod’s words in Mark 6:22-23 is replaced by a simple reference in indirect speech in Matthew 14:7 (w<sup>h</sup>ol oghsen au<sup>h</sup>/dou<sup>n</sup>ai o<sup>4</sup>on ai<sup>o</sup>h<sup>s</sup>htai).

<sup>21</sup> The references to her going in and out (Mark 6:22.24.25a) do not appear in Matthew. Also the explicit ‘I want’ (qel w) in Mark 6:25 is absent in Matthew 14:8. In verse 8 the question of the girl and the reply of her mother (Mark 6:24) are replaced by ‘prompted by her mother’. As a result the amendment of Herodias’s request by the daughter is lost (Bach, *Women*, p. 227).

<sup>22</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales* (Transl. by Robert Baldick; London - New York: Penguin, 1961).

<sup>23</sup> Flaubert uses in his story a transcription of the corresponding Hebrew name, which is introduced as follows: ‘And Antipas, hearing a sigh of relief inquired about Jokanaan, whom the Latins call St. John the Baptist’ (*Three Tales*, p. 91). In the original French story *Hérodiade*, the name is spelled ‘Iaokanann’ (G. Flaubert, *Trois contes*. Folio classique, 424. Gallimard, 1973).

Suddenly Phanuel appears, an Essene, who according to Herodias has come to see Jokanaan. This makes her furious. She recalls how on her way to Gilead for the balsam harvest, Jokanaan had insulted her with the curses of the prophets. It is not clear to her why he is fighting her, but she is afraid Herod might repudiate her and then everything would be lost, because she married him to make her dream of a great empire come true. While she fulminates against Herod, he notices a young girl on the flat roof of a house. He catches 'a glimpse of her delicate neck, the corner of an eye, the curve of a little mouth. But he could see the whole of her figure, from the hips to the neck, bending and straightening with supple grace. He looked out for the repetition of this movement, and his breathing grew louder; flames kindled in his eyes. Herodias was watching him'.<sup>24</sup> He asks her who this girl is, but Herodias claims she doesn't know and goes away. Herod returns inside and meets Phanuel, who tells Herod that Jokanaan is a son of the Almighty. He warns Herod not to ill-treat him and urges to release him. Herod admits that, despite himself, he likes Jokanaan. Nevertheless, he does not want to set him free out of fear of Herodias, Mannaëi, and the unknown.

In the second act the Proconsul Lucius Vitellius arrives at the citadel with his troops and his son Aulus. Vitellius notices that the place looks busy and Herod tells him about the banquet taking place on occasion of his birthday. Aulus notices a cellar, and his father insists to see the underground rooms of the fortress. On their way out one of Vitellius' men notices a covered cistern, unlike the others, and inquires what is in it. Herod tells him a prisoner is kept there, and Vitellius insists on seeing him. When Mannaëi lifts up the cover, a sigh is heard and Herodias comes to see. It is Jokanaan, who raises his voice and starts cursing. Then Jokanaan notices Herodias and calling her Jezebel, he starts fulminating against her, announcing that there should not be enough pebbles to stone the adulteress. The cistern is closed again and Herodias disappears. When Vitellius hears that Jokanaan instigates the people not to pay their taxes, he is alarmed and orders sentries posted at the doors. Herod feels relieved that the fate of Jokanaan is no longer in his own hands. Then he runs into Phanuel who discloses that the constellation of the stars has made clear to him that this same night an important man would die. Fearing that he is the one in question, Herod seeks the support of Herodias, who tries to reassure him. Then he notices a bare arm emerging from under a curtain groping for a tunic left behind. 'A vague memory, which he could not quite

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<sup>24</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 97.



place, crossed the Tetrarch's mind. "Is that slave yours?" "What does that matter to you?" answered Herodias'.<sup>25</sup>

The third act is played out in the banqueting-hall, where the guests have gathered. One of the topics being discussed at the tables is Jokanaan and people like him. A certain Jesus is mentioned. Someone says he is the Messiah. When the objection is made that first Elias has to come, someone answers that Elias has come in the person of Jokanaan. The reactions are mixed. Suddenly Herodias appears all dressed up. 'But then there arose from the far end of the hall a hum of surprise and admiration. A girl had just come in... Going up on to the dais, she removed her veil. It was Herodias as she used to be in her youth. Then she began to dance'.<sup>26</sup> The girl is Herodias' daughter, Salome, whom she had instructed far away from Machaerus. Caught by desire, Herod calls the girl and promises her half of his kingdom. She does not say a word but goes upstairs, reappears and tells Herod she wants the head of Jokanaan on a platter. Herod looks terrified but he is bound by his own word and the people wait for his reaction. Mannaëi comes back with the head. After he has put it on a platter, he gives it to Salome. She takes it upstairs. The head is brought back and shown first to the rest of the company, then to Herod. The guests leave. The only ones left in the room are Herod who sits and gazes at the head while Phanael prays with his arms wide open. When morning breaks the two men who were sent out by Jokanaan come back. Phanael shows them the head on the platter. One of the men tells him to take heart. Jokanaan has gone down to the dead to proclaim the coming of Christ. The three of them leave again for Galilee, carrying the head with them.

#### *Herodias and Salome According to Flaubert*

In general it can be noted that Flaubert's presentation of the characters stays relatively close to the biblical text. Major additions concern Herodias' political ambition and the new characters of Vitellius and Phanael. Herodias' daughter is now called Salome and she appears to be older than the girl of the gospel stories. It is not clear how old she is, but she certainly is no child anymore, but an attractive young woman, a virgin, seemingly irresistible for the male spectators: 'And the nomads inured to abstinence, the Roman soldiers skilled in debauchery,

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<sup>25</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 112

<sup>26</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 120

the avaricious publicans, and the old priests soured by controversy, all sat there with their nostrils distended, quivering with desire'.<sup>27</sup>

Both Herodias and Salome show up in each of the three parts of the story. Herodias is most prominently present. She is characterized as a politically ambitious woman, who has left her first husband and daughter because Herod could offer her better prospects to realize her plans. She has the air of an empress.<sup>28</sup> She is furious with Jokanaan, fearing his influence on Herod, and feeling humiliated. Therefore she seeks revenge. Manipulating Herod through her daughter, she attains her goal: Jokanaan's death. The identity of the mysterious girl introduced at the end of the first scene and her relation with Herodias, are only revealed in the third scene. There she appears as the extension of her mother: 'It was Herodias as she used to be in her youth'.<sup>29</sup> She is presented as a young woman no longer a girl though she speaks with 'a childish air'<sup>30</sup> when she asks for the head of John on a platter.

### **Massenet's Opera *Hérodiade***

Before taking a closer look at *Hérodiade*, and the role Herodias and her daughter play in it, first a few words about the composer and this opera's *Sitz im Leben*. Jules Massenet was born in 1842 in Montaud (France) and died in 1912. As a composer, he was most productive and successful in the final decades of the nineteenth century. He is still well-known for some of his other operas such as *Manon* (1884), *Werther* (1892) or *Thaïs* (1894). In addition to twenty-seven operas Massenet also wrote ballets, piano pieces, choral works and more than two hundred songs. His music is often labelled 'melodic', 'lyrical', 'elegant' and even 'sentimental'. This probably explains why his work was largely neglected later in the twentieth century. His repertoire seems to have been rediscovered, though, in recent years, as shown by new performances of his works.<sup>31</sup>

*Hérodiade* was Massenet's sixth opera. It was first performed in 1881 in Brussels, where it was produced fifty-five times in its first year. Massenet had hoped that the première would rather take place at *La Scala* in Milan and it seems that the libretto had been written in Italian

<sup>27</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 121

<sup>28</sup> 'Between the pillars with their bronze capitals Herodias could be seen approaching with the air of an empress, surrounded by women and eunuchs carrying burning incense on silver-gilt salvers' (G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 100).

<sup>29</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> G. Flaubert, *Three Tales*, p. 122.

<sup>31</sup> See D. Irvine, *Massenet. A Chronicle of His Life and Times* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1994), pp. XVII-XIV.

first. Arthur Pougin notes in this respect: ‘What is certain is that, after the success in Italy of *Le Roi de Lahore*, and at the request of the famous publisher Giulio Ricordi, the poet Zanardi had written the original libretto, taking as subject one of the *Trois Contes* published by Gustave Flaubert - the one entitled *Hérodiade* - and that it was for this libretto that Massenet wrote his music’.<sup>32</sup> However, notwithstanding its link with Flaubert’s story, the plot of Massenet’s opera takes a very different turn.

#### *The Story According to Massenet*

*Hérodiade* consists of four acts.<sup>33</sup> The first act is situated in the courtyard of Herod’s palace. Salome appears and encounters Phaniel, a Chaldaean astrologer. She tells him that she has been looking for her mother in Jerusalem but has not found her. She has, however, met the prophet: ‘He found me one day’, she says, ‘an abandoned child, and opened his arms to me!’... ‘I was suffering, I was alone, and my heart was calmed on hearing his melodious tender voice! How can I live without you, dearly beloved prophet!’ (scene 1). Off she goes and Herod appears. He is looking for Salome, with whom he has fallen in love. Herodias appears too. She wants Herod to take revenge on John because John has cursed her. She says she wants John’s head, but Herod refuses to eliminate him. In the following scene Salome meets John and declares her love to him. He first refuses her love but, finally, he gives in although only partially, exclaiming: ‘Love me then, but as you might love in a dream of the ideal, which would plunge you into mystic fervour and transfigure the love which consumes your senses! Banish the transports of a profane feeling, uplift your soul, let it float up to heaven among perfumed clouds of incense!’ (scene 4).

In the second act we find ourselves in Herod’s room. He is unable to sleep because of his desire for Salome. Phaniel enters his room and reminds him of the political situation: ‘Misery is growing as was prophesied, and the anxious people clamour for the Messiah!’ . But Herod is confident: ‘This John will serve me; then, once the Romans are routed, I shall conquer the prophets! You will see falling at my feet the heads of all these dangerous madmen who have aspired to glory!’ (scene 6). Next we are on the public square, where Herod incites the crowd which promises loyalty to him: ‘Death or our independence, let us strike them, these arrogant

<sup>32</sup> Cf. A. Pougin, ‘Massenet’, *Rivista musicale italiana* 19 (1912), p. 945. Quoted in D. Irvine, *Massenet*, p. 112.

<sup>33</sup> In what follows, quotations come from the English translation by H. Graham. See: J. Massenet, *Hérodiade* (EMI Classics, 1995). Recorded at Toulouse (France) with the Choeur et Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by M. Plasson, featuring Cheryl Studer (Salome), Nadine Denize (Herodias), Ben Heppner (John), Thomas Hampson (Herod), José Van Dam (Phaniel).

Romans!’ At that moment the Romans arrive with their consul Vitellius, who addresses the crowd and promises religious freedom. When a group of Canaanite women arrives with Salome and John, Herod recognizes Salome. Herodias notices his reaction: ‘He recognized this child! He paled when he saw her!’ (scene 7).

The third act begins in Phanael’s abode, where Herodias comes to see him. She wants him to inform her about the star ‘to which is linked the fate of this woman who has stolen from me the love of the king’. Phanael reveals to her that the woman in question is her daughter, but Herodias refuses to believe him: ‘My daughter! She! My rival! No! No! My daughter is dead and I no longer have a child!’. Phanael responds: ‘Pitiless, fateful Queen! Go, you are but a woman... a mother – never!’ (scene 8). In the following scene we find Salome at the temple. We hear from her that John is imprisoned there. Herod appears too. He wants to save John in order to use him against the Romans. Then, noticing Salome, he declares his love to her but she rejects him. She tells him she loves another, ‘one who offends you and is stronger than Caesar and greater than the heroes’. Herod threatens her: ‘I must know this man who challenges me and I will give you both to the headsman!’ (scene 10). When John is put on trial, Herod tries to convince the prophet to take his side, but John refuses. Salome declares she wants to share John’s fate. At that moment Herod realizes that John is the one she loves: ‘He the holy prophet... is the hateful lover of Salome, the courtesan!’ (scene 12); and he condemns them both to death.

In the fourth and final act John, who is imprisoned, declares his love to Salome. ‘These words are not a blasphemy: Thou hast given me a voice to say Thy name, Lord, and a soul to harbour love!’ Salome tells him she wants to die with him, but then the high priest appears saying: ‘John! Your hour has come... Herodias wishes you to be led to execution!’; and to Salome: ‘Child, do homage to the king, for you, for your youth, he overrules the sentence and calls you to the palace!’ (scene 13). Salome and John are separated. Salome pleads, first with Herod and then with Herodias, to let John live: ‘O queen, behold my tears! A woman understands such fears! Have pity! What if you were a mother! Spare him!’ (scene 15). This appeal to her maternity awakens Herodias. She recognizes Salome as her daughter: ‘Remorse cries out to me: it is she!’ Salome, however, is unaware of this and curses Herodias: ‘My mother has broken the soul of her poor lost child’. When Herodias is about to speak the executioner appears with the bloody sword. Salome draws a dagger from her belt, saying: ‘He

died by your hand... and you will die likewise' (scene 15). At that moment Herodias discloses she is Salome's mother, but cursing her, Salome stabs herself and dies.

### *Herodias and Salome According to Massenet*

Let us now take a closer look at the women involved in this drama. Salome is presented as an abandoned child, in search of her mother. Her situation is one of lack. She suffers and is alone until she meets John. Driven by desire, she seeks to replace the wished-for, life-giving symbiosis with her mother by a symbiosis with the prophet, a self-destructive, life-taking symbiosis that will ultimately be paid for with her life. She tells him: 'What I want, John, is to tell you that I love you and that I am yours!... that I live in you and that my whole being hangs on the sound of your voice!' (Act I, scene 4). She wants to die with him: '... I shall die close to you, in your arms, o sublime martyr! I long to die... close to you... in your arms.' (Act IV, scene 13). Unfortunately for her, this will not happen. When she realizes John is dead she seeks to take revenge on Herodias, who then reveals to Salome she is her mother. So, finally, Salome finds what she was looking for: her mother; but, at the end of this quest, her life comes to an end as well. She kills herself out of love for John and out of hatred for her mother.

This first movement of the plot, namely Salome in search of her mother, is complemented by another one: Herodias seeking to kill John, who has insulted her. She tries to accomplish this through Herod. When he refuses, she replies: 'Herod, remember! Do not refuse me, you, my only love, for whom I left everything, my country and my daughter. Are you not my support and my only family?' But he does not give in and she concludes: 'Do you no longer love me? Very well, I shall achieve alone what I have resolved.' (Act 1, scene 2). When she discovers that a younger woman, namely Salome, has stolen Herod's love, she pursues the death of this rival too. When Phanuel warns her that Salome is her daughter, she refuses to believe him. Blinded by jealousy, she suppresses her motherly feelings which reappear when Salome pleads with her to spare John: 'Ah, what are you saying? Silence! What memories! It is true... Mighty gods!.. I am a mother!' (Act IV, scene 15). Nevertheless, Herodias only discloses her identity to Salome when her daughter is about to kill her. With Salome ultimately killing herself, Herodias too gets what she wants: the death of both John and her rival. However, Salome's death also deprives her of her daughter. The original situation has been inverted: a daughterless mother replaces the motherless daughter.

So far we have analysed Massenet's opera and its literary *Vorlagen*, namely the biblical stories and Flaubert. But Massenet was not writing a story, nor did he intend to simply retell the gospel story or Flaubert's: he was composing an opera.<sup>34</sup> No doubt there is more than one reason why he chose a biblical theme for his opera. He was more or less asked to create this opera to begin with, but he also showed an interest in religious themes and biblical female characters.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, this particular story appealed to the imagination of artists at the end of the nineteenth century, as is also clear from the numerous paintings depicting Salome dancing or with the head of John on a platter.<sup>36</sup> Both elements play a central role in Flaubert's story and in another literary work of about the same time, namely the play *Salome* by Oscar Wilde (1896). This makes it even all the more striking that Massenet leaves exactly those two elements out. His focus is much more on the complex character of Herodias than on Salome, who occupies the centre of the stage in Wilde's play and in Richard Strauss's opera based on that play. However, there are also striking similarities between the operas by Massenet and Strauss. But before pointing these out, we shall first present Strauss's opera.

### **Strauss's Opera *Salome***

Richard Strauss (1864-1949) who had been playing with the idea to write this opera before, saw *Salomé. A Tragedy in One Act* of Oscar Wilde in Berlin in 1902. Using the German translation of this play as his starting point, he adapted it for his opera mostly by leaving elements out in order to simplify the plot. This opera was performed for the first time in Dresden in 1905, where it caused scandal and commotion. In Vienna, its performance was even forbidden.<sup>37</sup> As I did in the previous cases, here again I will first reconstruct the plot of the story and then discuss the female characters.

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<sup>34</sup> I do not distinguish here between the writer of the libretto and the composer of the music.

<sup>35</sup> Esp. in his oratorios: *Marie-Madeleine* (1873), *Eve* (1875), *La Vierge* (1880), *La Terre promise* (1900). Cf. D. Irvine, *Massenet*, p. 325-326.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 381-398.

*The Story According to Wilde/Strauss*

Strauss's opera consists of four scenes.<sup>38</sup> The first scene is situated on a terrace in Herod's Palace, a discussion takes place between Narraboth, who is the Syrian commander of the guard, and a page of Herodias, as well as some soldiers. They comment on Salome and Herod who are inside the banquet-hall. When the voice of Jokanaan is heard from a cistern, the discussion shifts to him. Someone asks if Jokanaan may be seen. One of the soldiers answers that the Tetrarch has forbidden it. Narraboth who is looking at Salome all the time, observes that she is leaving the table and looks very troubled.

In the second scene Salome comes outside. She says she does not want to stay any longer, because the Tetrarch looks at her in a particular way: 'I will not stay. I cannot stay. Why, why does the Tetrarch watch me all the while with his mole's eyes from under his shaking eyelids? It is curious that the husband of my mother looks at me like that'. Then the voice of Jokanaan is heard again. Salome asks who that was. One of the soldiers explains it was the prophet. She wants to know if that is the one the Tetrarch is afraid of, who tells terrible things about her mother. A slave comes outside with the message that the Tetrarch wants Salome to return to the feast, but she refuses. When the sound of his voice is heard again, Salome declares she wants to speak with him. A soldier answers that the Tetrarch has forbidden to do so, but Salome insists. She turns to Narraboth to get what she wants. He finally gives in and issues orders to bring the prophet outside.

The third scene opens with Jokanaan prophesying. Salome says he looks terrible, but she is also intrigued by him and wants to take a closer look at him. Only then does Jokanaan notice her. When Salome discloses her identity, he starts cursing her: 'Stand back, daughter of Babylon! To the chosen of God approach not! Thy mother hath filled the earth with the wine of her iniquities and the cry of her sins is heard by God'. However, rather than to go away, Salome wants him to speak again. First she is fascinated by his voice, then by his body. Narraboth tries to convince Salome not to look at Jokanaan and, when he does not succeed in doing so, he kills himself. Salome insists on kissing Jokanaan, who curses her and goes back into his cistern.

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<sup>37</sup> *Herder Handbuch des Musik Theaters. Oper-Operette-Musical-Ballett* (Freiburg: Herder, 1992), p. 495. Wilde's play was originally written and published in French (1893) and later translated into English (1894). Strauss used the German translation, written by H. Lachmann.

<sup>38</sup> Quotes are from the English translation by A. Douglas. See: Richard Strauss, *Salome*. Berliner Philharmoniker conducted by Zubin Mehta with H. Zednik (Herod), B. Fassbaender (Herodias), E. Marton (Salome), B. Weikl (Jochanaan), Sony Classical, 1991.

In the fourth scene Herod comes outside together with Herodias and his court, looking for Salome. Herodias wants to go back inside. She does not like it that Herod is looking at Salome all the time, but Herod wants to stay outside. The voice of Jokanaan is heard again. Herodias wants him to be silent because he insults her. Herod asks Salome to dance for him. She says she does not want to and Herodias does not want her to either, but Herod insists: 'Salome, Salome, dance for me, I beg of thee. I am very sad tonight, therefore dance for me, Salome, dance for me. If you dance for me I will allow thee to ask of me what thou wilt. All you ask for I will give thee'. Salome wants to know if this is true and he confirms that even if she asked him for half of his whole kingdom, she would get it. Salome tells him to swear it and Herod does. Herodias tries in vain to convince Salome not to dance, but she ignores her mother and dances for Herod. When he asks her what she wants from him, she says that she wants the head of Jokanaan brought in a silver charger. Herodias now praises her daughter while Herod tries to persuade her to ask something else, but she insists on getting Jokanaan's head. In the end, Herod gives in. Jokanaan is decapitated and the head is brought to Salome. She seizes it and starts talking to it, saying she will now kiss his mouth. Herod is appalled and calls her a monster, while Herodias approves of what her daughter has done. Salome kisses Jokanaan's mouth and says: 'Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan. Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, there was a bitter, bitter taste on thy red lips. Was it the taste of blood? Nay! But perchance this is the taste of love... They say that love hath a bitter taste... But what of that? What of that? I have now kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan. I have now kissed your mouth'. Then Herod, who is on his way inside, turns around and orders his soldiers to kill Salome.

#### *Salome and Herodias According to Wilde/Strauss*

When we look at the roles of the women involved in this drama, Salome is clearly the more prominent character of the two. She appears in the second through to the fourth scenes, whereas Herodias only plays a supportive role in the fourth. Salome is introduced in the first lines of the opera through Narraboth's comment: 'How fair is the Princess Salome tonight'. (Scene 1) She is thus immediately characterised in terms of her royal status. It is clear from this first scene that Narraboth takes an interest in her. But he is not the only one. Salome's reaction at the beginning of the second scene indicates that Herod does so too. She calls him 'the Tetrarch' and the 'husband of my mother'. She dislikes his attitude towards her, though she seems unaware of the reason. Salome herself rather takes an interest in the prophet, Jokanaan. She knows that the Tetrarch is afraid of him and that he says terrible things about her mother, but she is intrigued by him -- not so much by his words as by his voice. Although



she is aware of what he is saying, she does not take offense at him, but marvels at his beauty: his eyes, his body, his hair, his mouth. Jokanaan, however, rejects and curses her, calling her the daughter of an incestuous mother. Nevertheless, through manipulating Herod, Salome attains her goal: to kiss Jokanaan's mouth. When Herod asks what she wants from him, she asks for Jokanaan's head. Herod pleads with her to change her mind, but she insists that her wish be fulfilled. She grows impatient when the head is not brought immediately. Finally, when it arrives, she does what she wanted: kiss him. Herod's initially favorable attitude towards Salome now turns into disgust and dismay. He calls her a hideous monster and, ultimately, orders her death.

As far as Herodias is concerned, her role in the plot is rather limited. She is aware of but not pleased with Herod's interest in Salome. She supports her daughter when Salome refuses to give in to Herod's proposals, but tries in vain to convince her not to dance for him. When her daughter asks for Jokanaan's head she tells her not to give in to Herod's repeated plea to change her mind. Herod pleads with Salome not to listen to her mother, but she replies: 'I do not heed the voice of my mother. 'Tis for mine own pleasure that I ask the head of Jokanaan in a silver charger, Tetrarch'. (scene 4) Herodias has her own motives for supporting her daughter's wish. She feels insulted by Jokanaan's words against her. She reproaches Herod because he is afraid of Jokanaan, although he denies that. When she asks him: 'You hear what he says against me? You allow him to revile your wife?', he answers: 'He did not speak of you at all'. (scene 4) Through her daughter, Herodias sees her chance for revenge. Finally, Herod gives in: 'Let her be given what she asks. She is indeed, ah, her mother's child'. (scene 4)

### ***Hérodiade*: A Comparative Reading**

It will already be clear from this overview of the different stories that Massenet's version has the most deviant plot. In order to get a fuller grasp of how this affects the role of Salome and Herodias, I will compare the characters, especially Herodias and Salome, as they appear in the opera of Massenet with the way those characters are presented in the gospel stories, Flaubert, and Strauss.

*Comparison with the Gospel Stories*

When we look at Massenet's opera with both gospel stories in mind, we notice that elements of both Mark and Matthew appear in it.<sup>39</sup> The four main characters reappear, but the nameless daughter now gets a name: Salome.<sup>40</sup> As far as Herod's attitude towards John is concerned, the opera differs from the gospels in a number of ways. Herod not only fears both John (Mark) and the people (Matthew), but also the Romans. He is a much more opportunistic character as well. He wants to use John in his struggle for power against the Romans, then dispose of him. When John stands trial, Herod tries to make a deal with him: 'One word!.. Would you serve my plans and my hatred?' (Act III, scene 12) It is, however, not John's refusal to do so that is the reason for his elimination, but, rather, Herod's interest in Salome. Moreover, in Massenet's version, Herod experiences no grief. The combination of Herod's own frustrated love and Salome's love for John convinces the initially reluctant Herod to condemn John: 'It is he that she loves! And I was about to save him! No, never! Death to them! O fury!' (Act III, scene 12) Finally, however, it is not Herod but Herodias who orders John's execution. As in the gospels, Herodias wants John's head but she herself, instead of her daughter, claims it from the reluctant Herod. However, although John dies in the end, it is not stated that he is decapitated. Why Herodias is after him remains vague also. Contrary to the gospels, in Massenet's opera John's criticism is directed at Herodias without his ever mentioning her marriage with Herod. Herodias recalls the content of the insult directed at her as follows: ' "Tremble," he said, "tremble, Jezebel!" "What calamities have you caused! You must account to heaven! Go, the anger of the prophet has called to the nations; soon you will bow your head before their curses!"' (Act I, scene 3)

However, more than the relation between Herod and Herodias, it is the one between Herodias and Salome that gets attention in the opera. In the gospel stories the girl is only introduced as the 'daughter of Herodias' and it is precisely on this mother-daughter relation that the opera focuses. Salome searches for her mother and Herodias cannot forget the child she left behind. Phanael's revelation that she will see her child again awakens her feelings: 'I might see her again! O Heaven! An end to my sorrow! I might see my child! Alas, I have suffered so much!.. I thirst for her caresses'. (Act III, scene 8) There is, however, no cooperation between the two women, as is the case in the gospels. They are rivals with respect to the male

<sup>39</sup> I am speaking here from a literary point of view. The question if and to what extent the stories have actually been used in writing this opera, is not relevant here.

<sup>40</sup> The name Salome occurs in Josephus' *Antiquitates* (XVIII 136f.) as the name of Herodias' only daughter from her marriage with Herod, a brother of Herod Antipas.

characters involved. Salome shows no interest in Herod, but is nevertheless considered a rival by Herodias because Salome catches his attention. Herodias' relation with Herod is, however, utterly ambiguous. On the one hand, she declares him her love but, on the other hand, she despises him for being a coward. When the Romans appear she tells him: 'You, do not be afraid: your life is dearer to me than my own. Herod, I love you! I know how to cheat them'. (Act II, scene 7) This stands in sharp contrast to what she thinks: 'The ingrate who forgot me cowers before them. He trembles, and fate crowns my wishes. What anxiety makes him avert his eyes? He trembles, but my triumph is at hand and fate will crown my desires!' (Act II, scene 7) The rhetoric of love also covers her feelings towards Salome when she tells Phanael that she wants to know about the woman 'who has stolen from me the love of the king' (Act III, scene 8). When Salome declares she wants to die with John, Herodias sees her wish fulfilled: 'O dark mystery! Does she wish to share his fate? My jealous heart hopes so! She surrenders to death!' (Act III, scene 12)

More than anyone else, Salome differs from the younger female character in the biblical story. About the only feature the two have in common is that Salome is Herodias' daughter. In the opera she does not know who her mother is, she neither dances for Herod nor asks for John's head. The major elements that characterise her in the biblical story are absent in this opera. Most striking, however, is her totally different attitude towards John. The girl from the gospels has become a young maiden, to whom John responds: 'What can your shining light wish for in the shadows of my life? What would become of your newly blossoming youth on my stony path? For you, it is the time when the rashest desires invite kisses on hungry lips; for you it is the season of love!' (Act I, scene 4) This young woman pursues her own interest, which is clearly different from her mother's! Her passionate love for John brings her into direct conflict with Herodias, who seeks his death.

John initially refuses Salome, trying to convince her to sublimate her feelings, but when he finds himself in prison she is on his mind: 'I have no regrets and yet, oh, frailty! I think of that child whose radiant features are always before my eyes, whose memory weighs me down!' (Act IV, scene 13) He rejoices when she appears: 'Lord, it is true then that I may breathe the fragrance of this heady flower, press it to my lips and whisper: I love you!' (Act IV, scene 13) This picture of John being troubled, and then giving in to love in the face of death, is equally absent from the gospel stories. In both opera and gospels, however, John finally dies. Both gospel stories end with a reference to the burial of his body, but in the opera John's death is

followed by the death of Salome, who turns the knife meant to kill her mother against herself. This unsuspected and surprising ending is something that will deserve further attention.

The preceding comparison between Massenet's opera and the gospel stories shows that Massenet has done more than provide the biblical characters with motives, in order to give them more body and turn them into people of flesh and blood.<sup>41</sup> They have remolded the story, adding new features while leaving others out. Additional sources have been used as well. The two characters not discussed here, namely Phaniel and Vitellius, do not appear in the gospels but occur in Flaubert's story *Hérodiade* first published in 1877. This story has clearly served as a starting point for Massenet's version, although, as we will see next, the plot of *Hérodiade* is different and closer to the gospel stories.

#### *Comparison with Flaubert's Story 'Hérodiade'*

When we compare Massenet's opera with Flaubert's story, the most striking correspondence concerns the characters absent in the gospel stories: the proconsul Vitellius and Phaniel.<sup>42</sup> As for the female characters, in both Flaubert and Massenet's work, Herodias despises Herod. She seeks John's death but is hindered by Herod, who protects him. Therefore she tries to attain her goal in another way. In Flaubert she uses her daughter to do so. In Massenet this scenario is not possible, because the two female characters do not know each other. Here Herodias uses the Romans, specifically Vitellius. In accordance with the biblical story, Herodias is pictured as 'mother' in both Flaubert and Massenet. Contrary to the biblical stories, in both cases she has left her daughter behind to follow Herod. More important differences appear with respect to her daughter. In both cases the daughter is called Salome and appears as the object of Herod's desire. In Flaubert, Salome is presented as the younger version and extension of her mother, with no will of her own. In Massenet they are each others rivals. Salome is now a woman with a will of her own. Her love interest in John is totally absent in Flaubert, where the two never meet. The most striking difference with respect

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<sup>41</sup> According to Rodney Milnes, the original libretto, written in Italian by Angelo Zanardi, was translated into French by Paul Milliet. The name of Henri Grémont, also mentioned on the title page, 'semi-anagrammatically concealed that of George Hartman, and presumably guaranteed him a slice of the action.' (Massenet, *Hérodiade*. Livret. Emi Classics, 1995, p. 18)

<sup>42</sup> Compared with Flaubert, the proconsul Vitellius plays only a marginal role in the opera. He only appears in Act II, scene 7; Act III, scene 12, and Act IV, scene 15, where he represents the power of Rome, although he ends up being no more than a witness at the trial of John. Phaniel is a more prominent figure, as he appears in all acts. In Flaubert, Phaniel is presented as an Essene who advises Herod and defends John and is therefore hated by Herodias. In the opera, he is presented as a Chaldaean and as an astrologer, who is consulted by both Herod and Herodias. He also knows Salome and seems to be aware of her true identity, as he wonders in the first scene: 'Does she still not know of what blood she is born?'

to Salome's role, however, is her death at the end of the opera – an event which is totally absent from both the gospels and Flaubert.

#### *Comparison with Strauss's Opera 'Salome'*

Massenet's opera is different from Strauss's in many ways. I will first discuss these differences before pointing to some remarkable similarities. Again I will focus in my analysis mainly on the representation of Herodias and Salome. Relatively speaking, Strauss stays closer to the gospel stories than Massenet. Most remarkable in that respect is Salome's dance, absent in Massenet but of major importance in Strauss. When we take a closer look, however, we can notice a shift has taken place in the function of this dance. Whereas in the biblical narrative Herodias' daughter herself seems to take the initiative to dance, in Strauss she dances upon Herod's explicit request. Moreover, in the opera she asks him to make an oath, whereas in the gospels, Herod himself takes the initiative to do so. In both cases Herod is 'trapped' by his own oath; however, in Strauss the manipulative force of the dance is enhanced by Salome's explicit intent.

A striking difference between Strauss and Massenet concerns Salome's own interest in Jokanaan's death. Although in the biblical story the nameless daughter is the one to actually ask for John's head, this request comes clearly from her mother. In Strauss this is suggested by Herod but explicitly denied by Salome, who claims she wants the head for her own pleasure. In Massenet, Herodias' desire to kill the prophet is opposed by her daughter, who prefers to die with Jokanaan. The relationship between mother and daughter, as suggested in the biblical story, is further elaborated in Strauss. Although mother and daughter clearly have a different interest in Jokanaan's death, they are cooperating *in malo*. In Massenet, the mother-daughter relationship plays an even more important role, but is conceived totally different from both Strauss and the Bible. According to Massenet, mother and daughter are not aware of their family ties and they have opposite interests with respect to Jokanaan.

The question of who bears the ultimate responsibility for John's death also gets a different answer in the two operas: in Massenet it is Herodias, in Strauss it is Salome. As for the death of John, it remains unclear in Massenet how Jokanaan is killed; his head does not feature in the story. In Strauss, on the contrary, the focus is very much on the decapitation; and Jokanaan's head plays a central role in the final scene, where Salome delivers a long monologue directed at it. A most remarkable correspondence between the operas is that both

end not with Jokanaan's death but Salome's death, although the motive for and way in which she dies are different. In Massenet she kills herself when Herodias reveals her identity as Salome's mother; in Strauss Herod orders to kill her. This correspondence between the two operas is all the more remarkable since Salome's death is completely absent from the biblical story. However, this is not the only element both operas have in common with regard to Salome. In the operas, for instance, as in Flaubert, she seems older than suggested in the Bible. Another point is Salome's interest in Jokanaan. In Massenet it is a love interest, whereas in Strauss it is a more explicit erotic interest. In both cases Salome resists Herod's advances. His interest has explicit erotic overtones in both operas as well as in Flaubert. Herodias is well aware of that, too. She disapproves of it in Strauss whereas, in Massenet, it fuels her jealousy and hatred.

The relationship between mother and daughter gets much more emphasis in the operas than in the biblical account; this shifts the focus to the female characters in the story, and as a result, Herod's role becomes less important. But not only is the focus of the story redirected, the responsibility for John's death thereby shifts from Herod to the women – the difference being, that in Massenet it is Herodias while in Strauss it is Salome who gets the blame. Surprisingly enough, Salome dies in both cases, an intriguing point which now requires some consideration.

### **Fatal Women**

The ambiguity of the biblical stories with respect to the responsibility for John the Baptist's death is resolved in the nineteenth-century interpretations by shifting the blame to one (or both) female characters. The titles of the works express who is ultimately held responsible: *Herodias* in Flaubert and Massenet, *Salome* in Wilde and Strauss. These titles also inform us about the shift in focus which has taken place, from the male to the female characters in the story. In the gospel stories the death of John the Baptist is the main reason for including the story.<sup>43</sup> The other characters – Herod, Herodias, and her daughter – are only supporting characters in the context of the gospel as a whole. In the retellings Herodias and Salome have become much more prominent.

The *fin de siècle* fascination with this 'story' seems less motivated by its religious character than by another feature, more specifically the involvement of women in the gruesome death of a particular man. It is precisely this feature that seems to make the story so appealing to

nineteenth century imagination. With little effort Herodias and Salome can be turned into perfect illustrations of a particular type of woman, namely the Fatal Woman. Although the image of the Fatal Woman is not new in itself, it gets its stereotypical character in the nineteenth century. In Flaubert's work, fascination by this type of woman is combined with a nostalgia for the presumed decadent and exotic East of antiquity. Cleopatra is a Romantic incarnation of this Fatal Woman type: she kills the man she loves.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the nineteenth century, however, Herodias becomes the new *femme fatale*, and next, Salome. The ideal male 'partner' of such cold, fatal, heartless women is the passive, masochistically suffering martyr, in this case exemplified by John the Baptist.

The images of both women are adapted to this *fin de siècle* phantasy by way of demonization. Herodias gets the features of a killer queen in Flaubert and Massenet, while Salome is presented as a vampire in Wilde and Strauss. The demonization of both women is further achieved by associating and identifying them with other evil female prototypes in the Bible. Herodias is called 'Jezebel' in both Flaubert and Massenet, while Salome is labeled 'daughter of Babylon' and 'daughter of Sodom' in Strauss and Wilde.<sup>45</sup>

The paintings of Moreau display a similar fascination with this type of woman. Two of his paintings depicting Salome were exhibited at the 1876 Salon in Paris, only a few months before Flaubert started writing *Hérodias*.<sup>46</sup> Oscar Wilde, who knew both Flaubert's story and Moreau's paintings,<sup>47</sup> further demonizes Salome by turning her into a head huntress and a vampire. She now wants John's head for the sake of her own pleasure. According to Dijkstra, 'in Wilde's symbolic drama a wholesale manipulation of the image of woman as aggressor serves as a cleansing ritual of passage designed to expose her mindless perfidy and insatiable physical need. As such the work climaxes in a categorical renunciation of any communication between male and female, and, in effect, becomes a call to gynocide'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> I prefer to speak of two versions in Mark and Matthew, as I consider the basic story to be the same.

<sup>44</sup> See M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Fontana Library; transl. from the Italian by A. Davidson; London/Glasgow: Collins, 1966: 3rd ed.), p. 230.

<sup>45</sup> For an analysis of the comparison between Herodias and Jezebel in Flaubert, see: C. Vander Stichele, 'Killer Queens. The Recycling of Jezebel and Herodias as Fin the Siècle Phantasies'.

<sup>46</sup> See J. Selz, *Moreau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), p. 53. Cf. 'Salomé dancing before Herod' and 'The Apparition' (<http://sunsite.dk/cgfa/moreau/index.html>). These paintings seem to be inspired by another work of Flaubert with a Fatal Woman, namely *Salammbô* (1862).

<sup>47</sup> D. Puffett, 'Introduction', in: D. Puffett (ed.), *Richard Strauss: Salome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 2.

This observation leads me to my second point. There is a striking correspondence between Massenet and Strauss which, at the same time, constitutes a major difference between their works and the biblical story: namely, Salome's death. This feature can be partly explained as a typical, generic element of the opera, where a woman's death is a recurrent theme. Clément remarks in that respect that the aesthetic pleasure and the seduction of music make one forget what the opera shows: how women die without even asking why, while their wonderful voice sings. But always, one way or another, they cross a rigorous and invisible line, which renders them unsupportable so that they have to be punished.<sup>49</sup>

That does not explain, however, why in both cases it is Salome who actually dies. In Strauss – as in Wilde – she is portrayed as ultimately responsible for John's death. Her death, decreed by Herod, is presented as the well-deserved punishment for this unforgivable crime. But this logic does not apply to Massenet, where Herodias is the one to pursue John's death. The question here is why Salome dies in the end rather than Herodias. If Salome had indeed killed her mother, as she first intended in Massenet's plot, 'justice' would have been done; but now we may wonder why Salome should die. Of course, a major difference between Massenet and Strauss here is that Salome is not killed but commits suicide: whereas she ends up as the victim of her own cruelty in Strauss, she takes her fate in her own hands in Massenet.<sup>50</sup> This outcome fits well in his plot. The love relationship between John, explicitly pictured as a martyr, and Salome almost requires her to die with him. Salome desires their shared death as a supreme act of love. The mother-daughter relationship complements this plot line further. Salome's discovery of her identity as the daughter of the woman who killed her beloved is the disclosure which provokes her decision to die with John, out of love for him and out of hate for her mother. Thus, the almost-murderess chooses to commit suicide.

Notwithstanding those different motives underlying the plot, the outcome is still the same: Salome dies. As if the death of John is not enough, both operas supplement it with her death. What makes her deserve this fate? What makes her so unsupportable? When everything has been said and done, the underlying message in both operas is the same. Murderous women do

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<sup>48</sup> B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 396.

<sup>49</sup> C. Clément, *L'Opéra ou la défaite des femmes* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1979), p. 116.

<sup>50</sup> In the interpretation of Strauss's opera *Salome*, which I saw in Rotterdam on September 23, 1997, Salome is not killed by the soldiers, but kills herself before they can with the dagger Naraboth had used earlier to kill himself (scene 3). This change in the final scene, makes Salome appear no longer as a victim, but as one who prefers to keep the initiative to herself and in doing so, escapes Herod's ultimate control. (Coproduction of the



not deserve to live. This is clear in Strauss, where Salome is directly responsible for John's death; so also in Massenet, where Salome is presented as a violent and therefore 'transgressive female'. She transgresses the binary gendered code of violence, according to which violence is a man's business and women don't kill.<sup>51</sup> Although she does not wish for John's death, she does intend to kill Herodias. The only thing that stops her from doing so, is the fact that this woman appears to be her mother.

One could of course object that Herodias appears as an equally murderous female, since she wants John's death in both Strauss and Massenet. Indeed, she is portrayed as an evil woman too. There is no approval of her character in the operas, nor does she get away unpunished. Salome's death deprives her of her daughter who, ultimately, is nothing less than the extension of her mother. The same blood and the same bloodlust runs through their veins. This is even more striking in Massenet than in Strauss, because Salome's 'true nature' is revealed when she wants to kill her mother. The only escape from her genetic destiny lies in self-destruction. Transgressive females therefore ultimately have no future – or so the story goes. They only reproduce themselves: murderous mother, ditto daughter. The daughter from the gospel story ( Mark 6:14-29; Matthew 14:1-12) who executes her mother's will has grown up in the nineteenth century to pursue her own will – either John's death or her own. She lives up to the expectations of her makers. Fascinated and disgusted by their own creation, they destroy her. They have created a monster that does not deserve to live. We see her stumble and fall. What can we do? Can we save her? Should we?

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*Rotterdams Philharmonisch Orkest* and the *Nationale Reisopera*, under the direction of Willy Decker, with Karen Huffstodt in the role of Salome).

<sup>51</sup> I borrow this notion from Harold C. Washington, who used it in his response at the 'Women in the Biblical World Section' on 'Women Who Kill', where I presented an earlier version of this article as paper (SBL Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 1996).