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Reinventing the Orient: Herod’s Feast and the 19th Century French Imagination

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Introduction

Accounts of Herod’s birthday celebration featuring Salomé’s lubricious dance, which culminates in the decapitation of Saint John the Baptist, appear in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, constituting the sole erotic moment in the New Testament. Mark’s report of the Tetrarch’s feast proves the more detailed of the two:

And a favorable day came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet to the officials, tribunes and chief men of Galilee. And Herodias’ own daughter having come in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, “Ask of me what thou wilt, and I will give it to thee.” And he swore to her, “Whatever thou dost ask, I will give thee, even though it be the half of my kingdom.” Then she went out and said to her mother “What am I to ask for?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist.” And she came in at once with haste to the king, and asked, saying “I want thee right away to give me on a dish the head of John the Baptist.”

And grieved as he was, the king because of oath and his guests, was unwilling to displease her. But sending an executioner, he commanded that his head be brought on a dish. Then he beheaded him in prison, and brought his head on a dish, and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. (Mark VI; 22-28)

What a spectacular surprise for Judea’s dignitaries, bargaining only for a sumptuous meal in honor of the Tetrarch Herod Antipas, to be able to experience the titillation of live entertainment by an under-aged princess followed by the gory beheading of a revered prophet in the deal!

The potent combination of food, seduction, violence and sacrilege embedded in the testimonies of this unique Oriental feast flared the imagination of European artists through centuries. No other era, however, fantasized as much about the sensational aspects and carnal undercurrents of Herod’s birthday party as the French fin de siècle. Primarily a product of religious and cultural transmissions, Herod’s legendary 1st century celebration resurfaced during the period as a disseminator of artificial constructions and ideological reinventions of the Orient.

Theoretical Framework: Said’s Orientalism and Post-Colonial Criticism.

In his seminal text Orientalism, Edward Said criticizes 19th century Western scholarship and commentaries of Eastern cultures for adopting a panoramic view of the Orient, which essentializes half the world into a single, cohesive entity by exaggerating “its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness,” (72) as well as...
underscoring its “backwardness, degeneracy,” (206) and predilection for “despotism and sensuality” (102).

According to Said, “the scope of Orientalism exactly matched the scope of empire” (104), and Europe’s objectification and feminization of the Orient as its weak and inferior “Other” through a discourse of sexuality and dominance validated colonial and imperial interests in North Africa, the Middle East and India. Moreover, Said argues that Orientalism viewed the East “as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West” (108).

Not surprisingly, the theme of Herod’s banquet carrying with it a long tradition of religious and artistic transmissions came to symbolize and synthesize in late 19th century French cultural representations the notions of exoticism, excess, sensuality, decadence, despotism and alterity that European Colonialist/Expansionist propaganda attributed to the East.

In light of Said’s critique of Orientalism and current Post-Colonial theories, this investigation seeks to examine the recreation of Herod’s feast as an allegory for the Orient in the artistic and literary imaginations of Moreau, Huysmans, Flaubert and Rochegrosse, as well as investigating Laforgue’s parody of the theme. The study primarily sets out to uncover the political, ideological, and aesthetic underpinnings of the Fin de Siècle’s complex invention of an exoticized and eroticized Orient through the trope of Herod’s banquet. Moreover, it aims to thresh out subversion and demystification of the same construction within the fabric of Modern culture.

**Salomé’s Dance in Gustave Moreau’s Artistic Imagination**

Gustave Moreau’s 1876 oil painting *Salome dansant devant Hérode* transports the viewer to the phantasmagoric world of 19th century Orientalism. This Moreau painting exhibited in the Salon of 1876 and now a part of the Armand Hammer Collection in Los Angeles detaches the instance of the dance from the string of events that occurred at Herod’s birthday feast and singles out Salomé’s performance as the focal point of the representation.

Moreau’s hazy, reddish-gold tinted *Salome dansant devant Hérode* reveals the exotic interior of the tetrarch’s palace. The intricately ornate and incongruous décor of Herod’s entertainment hall, with its eclectic mix of ancient eastern cults and its disparate iconography frozen in time, betrays an anachronistic assumption about the Orient, as well as emphasizing its lack of specificity.

Art historian Pierre-Louis Mathieu aptly points out that Moreau’s painting displays no concern for historical truth, despite the interest in archeological reconstruction typical of that period (125). In addition to presenting the Orient as spectacle, *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* also sexualizes the East by highlighting the manifest effeminacy of Herod’s court. The profusion of fertility figures and emblems of maternity create an exaggerated vision of Oriental femininity as full-bosomed sphinxes and chimeras hang from the ceiling and the many-breasted nature goddess Diana of Ephesus guards the throne. Like the eunuch by his side, Moreau’s Herod in
a long flowing garb and a veil over his head and shoulders, also seems emasculated and travestied.

Moreau's atemporal painting reflects the Orientalist tradition of objectifying the Levant and arresting its development by robbing its inhabitants of personal history and dynamic human experience. In *Salome dansant devant Hérode*, the clearly traced lines of the dancer's body, the whiteness of her skin, her frozen pose and highly ritualized dance contribute to Salomé's reification. Additionally, the play of light and dark as well as the sharpness of the dancer's contours, which contrast with the nebulous background and the fading décor of the scene, enhance the artificiality of the setting by producing a dreamlike effect.

In a note on one of his drawings, Moreau reminds himself to find some means to rid Herod of his majesty and dignity: "chercher un moyen quelconque à enlever à cette figure toute apparence de majesté et de dignité" in order to reduce the Eastern monarch—"chef politique et religieux" into an inert, impotent and lifeless relic: "Momie orientale exténue et sommeillante, aspect hieratique, sacerdotal. Idole" (Mathieu 125). Indeed Moreau successfully transposes his ideas on to canvas as he strips his Oriental characters of their soul and subjectivity.

**Moreau's Mythical Orient in J.-K. Huysmans's *A rebour***

In Huysmans's 1884 novel, *A rebours*, which contains an elaborate ekphrasis of *Salome dansant devant Hérode*, des Esseintes, the main protagonist of the narrative lends interesting insights into the construction of the Orient in fin de siècle cultural productions through his analysis of the Moreau painting. In Gustave Moreau's visual representation of the Biblical dancer, "conceived outside the Gospel accounts" Huysmans's hero finally sees materialized the "strange" and "superhuman" Salomé of his dreams (106). Whereas for des Esseintes, Salomé represents "la déité symbolique de l’indestructible Luxure" and the goddess of immortal Hysteria (106), the aging Herod appears to him as a wrinkled, decrepit, and decaying foreign God—"un dieu hindou" who remains frozen in a hieratic pose like an impotent pagan idol (105).

According to des Esseintes, by mixing disparate elements such as different architectural styles, distinct fashion trends, and incongruous religious artifacts in figuring the Tetrarch's outlandish palace and its exotic occupants, Moreau wished to remain outside of time and space in his depiction of the Orient:

> Le peintre semblait d’ailleurs avoir voulu affirmer sa volonté de rester hors des siècles, de ne point préciser d’origine, de pays, d’époque, en mettant sa Salomé au milieu de cet extraordinaire palais d’un style confus et grandiose, en la vêtant de somptueuses et chimeriques robes, en la mitrant d’un certain diadème en forme de tour phénicienne tel qu’en porte la Salammbo, en lui plaçant enfin dans la main le sceptre d’Isis, la fleur sacrée de l’Egypte, et de l’Inde, le grand lotus. (106-7)

It is indeed revealing that in *A rebours*, des Esseintes conceptualizes the Orient through Moreau's syncretic transposition of diverse fetishistic emblems and esoteric
rituals onto a single image, and interprets the dynamics of Herod’s imaginary palace through the sensual and sacrificial overtones of *Salome dansant devant Hérode*. Severed from history and religion, and shorn of spatial specificity, Moreau’s visual narrative of Judea offers des Esseintes a global perspective of Egypt, Phoenicia, and India as well. [Biblical Judea in Gustave Flaubert’s “Hérodiad”]

Inspired by Moreau’s dancing Salomé and the engravings on the façade of Rouen cathedral, Gustave Flaubert’s short story “Hérodiad” combines the historical accuracy of nineteenth-century Realism with the politically charged constructions of fin-de-siècle Orientalism. Published by Charpentier in 1877, this last tale of *Trois Contes* attempts to recreate 1st century Palestine through intricate and elaborate details about the geographical setting and the cultural context of the events leading to the beheading of Saint John the Baptist on the day of Herod’s legendary birthday feast.

In his critique of European Orientalism, Said rejects panoramic perspectives such as “collective terms” and “abstract generalities” about the East (154-55) and privileges narrative over pictorial rhetoric—”tableau vivant” (158) in decoding foreign topographies and cultures. Consistent with colonialist discourse of the period however, the opening lines of “Hérodiad” offers a sweeping view of the Tetrarch’s vast empire and freezes on the image of a vengeful, bellicose and contentious Middle East as a tired Herod looks far into the horizon beneath him at the Arab soldiers arming themselves in desert encampments:

Du côté de l’Yémen, Antipas reconnut ce qu’il craignait d’apercevoir. Des tentes brunes étaient dispersées; des hommes avec des lances circulaient entre les chevaux, et des feux s’éteignant brillaient comme des étincelles à ras du sol.

C’étaient les troupes du roi des Arabes, dont il avait repudié la fille pour prendre Hérodiad, mariée à l’un de ses frères qui vivait en Italie...(134-5)

The colonial narrative can be easily deciphered in the tetrarch’s thoughts as the text goes on to tell us that in order to extricate himself from imminent war, Herod solicits European intervention: “Antipas attendait les secours des Romains” (135). The ideological propaganda embedded in Herod’s reasoning supports the idea that political dependence on Europe proves to be the sole recourse for an unstable and despotic Orient. Hence it follows logically that colonization not only becomes the rational solution for problems in strife-ridden Middle East but also its only viable path to progress and national security.

While waiting for his Roman allies, Flaubert’s Herod plans a birthday feast as a strategy to mollify the Arabs, pacify the Jews, quell sedition, and strengthen his empire:

Les Juifs ne voulaient plus de ses moeurs idolâtres, tous les autres de sa domination; si bien qu’il hésitait entre deux projets: adoucir les Arabes ou conclure une alliance avec les Parthes; et sous le prétexte de fêter son anniversaire, il avait convié pour ce jour même, à un grand festin, les chefs de
ses troupes, les régisseurs de ses campagnes, et les principaux de la Galilée. (135)

The heterogeneous components and political tensions of Herod’s intercultural gathering are explicitly suggested through the banquet’s intermingling of race, class, profession and religion. The assembly consisting of priests, Herod’s officials and personal friends, citizens of Jerusalem, leading men from the Greek towns, the notables of Cana, Ptolemais and Jericho, Idumean herdsmen, gazelle hunters, and Herod’s old soldiers represents a variety of social and occupational standing (168-9).

The foreign visitors, namely the dozen Thracians, a Gaul, two Germans, mountain dwellers from Lebanon, the sultan of Palmyra, and sailors from Eziongaber, on the other hand, attest to the interracial and multicultural makeup of the gathering (168-9). The diversity of customs, political views, and religious codes of this mixed company echo through different groups’ reactions to certain alien practices. The Pharisees, for example, object to the floral wreaths offered to them on both political and religious grounds (169), while the guests from Sichem refuse to eat birds in deference to their avian divinity (174).

The East/West dichotomy of the social gathering is initially perceptible in “Herodias” through the difference in clothing and fashion sense of Herod’s household compared to the European guests. For his birthday feast, Antipas appears in a thickly painted black cloak, his cheeks made up, his beard trimmed into a fan shape, and his hair powdered blue and clasped with a diadem (168), while Hérodiade in her scarlet peplum, “coiffée d’une mitre assyrienne, ses cheveux en spirale” transforms into an ancient Phrygian goddess of fertility—“Cybèle accotée de ses lions” (177). In contrast to the ostentatious and extravagant attire of the Judean ruling class, the Roman dignitary Vitellus, is dressed in a plain linen toga with only a purple sash thrown diagonally over it to attest to his high position (168).

The East/West power hierarchy also becomes apparent through the dynamics of the interracial, interclass, and intergenerational relationship between Vitellus’s effeminate nephew Aulus and the Chaldean scullery boy. Even though Aulus feels attracted to the beautiful young kitchen help—“un enfant très beau,” and takes him on as his protégé, he is unable to remember the boy’s Chaldean name and simply calls him “l’Asiatique” (168). “l’Asiatique,” on the other hand, perceives his Roman lover as an extraordinary being from a superior race—“un être prodigieux et d’une race supérieure” (173).

In her article “Agape and Anorexia: Decadent Fast and Democratic Feast,” in reference to the Republican banquet held at the Palais de l’Industrie in Paris during the 1889 World’s Fair, Naomi Schor points out that this democratic feast bringing together 11,250 mayors of France and the colonies served primarily as an effort to forge national identity and consolidate the empire in fin-de-siècle France (90). Like the heads of the Third Republic, Flaubert’s Herod also uses a secular festive occasion, namely his birthday celebration to unify his people, win over potential enemies and expand his empire. However, given the Orient’s aberrant mentality, Herod’s plan...
fails pitifully and the communal eating only triggers more animosity and aggression. The seething cultural and political tensions, mount among the fractious groups at Herod’s feast, and inconsistencies in the habits of a volatile Orient become manifest in the guests’ rejection of some food items considered delicacies by others. In the midst of the regal banquet, the Pharisees work themselves up into a diabolic rage—"une fureur démoniaque" at the sight of stewed wild ass, a Mycenian favorite, and start smashing the dishes in front of them (175-76).

It is indeed revealing that the democratic act of feasting which Antipas had contrived as a peace offering to his disgruntled people should disintegrate into iconoclastic fury and destruction in Flaubert’s retelling of Herod’s feast. Additionally, colonialist / imperialist prejudice against the barbaric East and the civilized European’s contempt for the unrefined Levantine become evident in the Roman Proconsul Vitellus’s physical reaction and moral objection to Semitic intolerance and brutality:

Le caractère des Juifs semblait hideux à Vitellus. Leur dieu pouvait bien être Moloch... Son cœur de Latin était soulevé de dégoût par leur intolérance, leur rage iconoclaste, leur achoppement de brute.¹ (176)

The mob uproar dies out only at the sound of the polyphonic music as Salomè begins her dance of seduction.

In Orientalism, Said explains that “for Nerval and Flaubert, such female figures as Cleopatra, Salomè, and Isis have a special significance; and it was by no means accidental that in their works on the Orient, as well as in their visits to it, they pre-eminently valorized and enhanced female types of this legendary, richly suggestive, and associative sort” (180). Not surprisingly, mirroring the Orientalist essentialization and summation of the East into a monolithic, comprehensive whole, Salomè’s dance synthesizes diverse Asian and African influences into a single choreographic performance as she whirs like the priestesses of India, the Nubians from the cataracts, and Lydian Maenads (179). ¹⁴ Moreover, Flaubert’s tale also suggests the provocative quality of Salomè’s dance and the lustful nature of her audience by registering its libidinous impact on Herod’s jaded guests:

Et les nomades habitués à l’abstinence, les soldats de Rome experts en débauches, les avares publicains, les vieux prêtres aigris par les disputes, tous, dilatant leurs narines, palpitaient de convoitise.¹ (179)

In reference to the dance sequence in “Herodias,” Bram Dijkstra comments that Flaubert makes Salomè “into a virgin whore, instinctively mimicking in dance the details of a passion her body had not experienced in fact” (380). I would add that Flaubert’s Salomè and her dance simultaneously embody the sensual, mysterious, and feminine Orient of the French fin-de-siècle imaginary and essentialize the Orient into a single entity, namely a politicized icon of irrefutable alterity.

Along with Salomè’s voluptuous dance, which essentializes the East into a sexualized and feminized object of active (Western) male desire and dominance, the thirst for violence operates as the other powerful cultural marker of an unruly and instinctive Judea in “Hérodias.” After the dance, when Salomè, asks for the head of John the
Baptist in response to Herod’s oath to award her anything she requests (180), the desire for slaughter and bloodshed spreads quickly amongst the excited guests, and the mob can only be appeased by a ceremonious sacrifice:

La fureur d’Hérodiade dégorgéa en un torrent d’injures populacieres et sanglantes...Antipas l’imita, les prêtres, les soldats, les Pharisiens, tous réclamant une vengeance, et les autres, indignés qu’on retardât leur plaisir." (182)

Once John’s decapitated head reaches the banquet hall and is passed around for public viewing, the party ends and the guests retire. In Flaubert’s ideologically-charged, aesthetic reconstruction of the New Testament birthday feast, the emphasis on the sensual and sacrificial elements of Herod’s dinner presents the Orient as a volatile site of dangerous alterity, steeped in moral decadence and depravity.

Georges Rochegrosse and Herod’s Feast

In 1887, Georges Rochegrosse, son-in-law of poet Théodore de Banville and illustrator of the 1892 edition of Flaubert’s “Hérodiade” completed Salome danse devant le roi Hérode, now a part of the permanent collections of Omaha’s Joselyn Art Museum. In Rochegrosse’s oil painting, the social and racial hierarchies emerge through the careful positioning of the hybrid congregation with the slave-musicians seated on the ground, the Judeans gathered around a table, and the Tetrarch and his Roman dignitaries occupying an elevated platform.

The semi-circular seating of the crowd and the convergence of the audience’s lecherous gaze on to the dancing nude at the left-center of the canvas intensify the voyeuristic aspects of a spectacular and feminine Orient, while the sleeping leopard on the regal podium embodying the reign of jungle law simultaneously conveys the carnal magnetism of Salomé’s dance and the unbridled lasciviousness of the scene. Rochegrosse, however, is not the first visual artist to exploit bestial imagery to convey Salomé’s animal attraction. In Moreau’s Salome dansant devant Hérode, a black panther wearing a garland of brightly colored flowers sits facing the dancer on the stage. Similarly, the painter Henri Regnault describes his 1869 Salomé as “une panthère noire apprivoisée, mais toujours sauvage et cruelle” (Duparc 357-58).

In this decadent transmission of Herod’s feast, Salomé’s eroticized and exoticized body articulates the colonialist fantasy of a feminized, fetishized, savage and corporeal Orient, the prototypical Other of an active, male, civilized and cerebral Occident. The imperialist / expansionist construction of the sensual, inconsistent and ideologically unsound Levant is visually transcribed in Rochegrosse’s canvas through the conflation of race, gender and politics, which successfully transforms a Palestinian state banquet aimed at empire building into a wild and orgiastic, heathen peep show. [Jules Laforgue’s Fin-de-Siècle Parody of the Salome Myth.]

Jules Laforgue’s “Salomé,” the fourth tale of Moralités Légendaires, which appeared as a serial in issues 9, 10, and 11 of La Vogue in 1886, features quite a different conceptualization of Herod’s birthday party. In a letter to Charles Henry the previous
year, Laforgue writes: “Tu connais l’Hérodiad de Flaubert. Je viens de finir une petite Salomé de moi” (viii). Laforgue’s short story not only mimics Flaubert’s tale, it also parodies the fin-de-siècle’s artistic and literary fixation with the Salomé icon and its elaborate cultural constructions of the Orient through the trope of Herod’s feast.

In this fin-de-siècle pastiche of Herod’s household the outlandish eccentricities and manifest sensuality of Flaubert’s Judea are replaced by the homogeneous residents of les îles Blanches Esoteriques—the Esoteric White Isles. Similarly, the rich, meaty dishes served at the banquet in “Hérodiad,” emphasizing the carnal appetite and Epicurean pleasures of the Orient, disappear in Laforgue’s satire to favor a frugal and insipid meal reflective of the Tetrarch Émeraude-Archetypas’s more stoic, seafood diet.

Laforgue’s interpretation of the theme also ridicules the cultural and ideological positioning of the Orient as the body in the Western mind/body, reason/instinct dichotomy recurrent in the exaggerated sensationalism of fin-de-siècle representations of Herod’s feast by demystifying Salomé’s physical charms and trivializing her dance. Hence the text comically attributes Salomé’s power of attraction to colorful costuming and reduces her choreographic talents to puerile contortions:

“La jeune fille serpent, fluette, viscuseusement écaille de bleu, de vert, de jaune, la poitrine et le ventre rose tendre; elle coulait et se contournait, insatiable de contacts personnels, tout en zézayant l’hymne” (217).

Furthermore, instead of communicating through erotic body language, Laforgue’s Salomé uses her verbal prowess to deliver “un garulement mystique”—a pseudo-intellectual speech on various “théogonies, théodiceses et formules de la sagesse des nations” (233-37). However, like her infantile choreography, Salomé’s esoteric and unintelligible discourse leaves her audience equally apathetic and unimpressed. Similarly, the announcement of John’s beheading in Laforgue’s version, stirs no excitement amongst the bored guests, and when the Tetrarch sanctions the execution, the crowd heads for more enticing leisure activities, like soaking in their baths—“déjà les convives se dispersaient, causant d’autre chose, vers le bain du soir” (237).

Conclusion

Conflating notions of race, sex and ideology in their verbal and visual reconfigurations of Herod’s birthday celebration, Moreau, Huysmans, Flaubert and Rochegrosse flesh out a sensual, feminine, regressive, violent and irrational Orient, absent of subjectivity, specificity, evolution, and personal narrative. Charged with images of licentious excesses, unstable government, contentiousness, and irrationality echoing colonialist characterizations of the Arab world, the pictorial rhetoric of late 19th century interpretations of Herod’s banquet shapes the emergence of a collective French imaginary about the East.

Jules Laforgue’s “Salomé,” on the other hand, self-consciously rejects the gendered and politicized exoticism prevalent in his contemporaries’ representations of Herod’s feast as aesthetic and ideological clichés. More significantly, through the debunking
of mystification devices of Orientalist discourse, Laforgue’s parody exposes the mythical East, disseminated and perpetuated by fin-de-siècle transmissions of Herod’s banquet as an artificial construction of modern culture.

NOTES

1 Salomé was first mentioned by name in Flavius Josephus’s *The Antiquities of the Jews*, a paratext to the Bible.

2 See Mark VI, 22-28 and Matthew XIV, 6-11.

3 For a historical survey of the Salomé theme throughout the centuries, see Hugo Daffner, *Salome, Ihre Gestalt in Geschichte und Kunst, Dichtung, Bildende Kunst, Musik* (Munich: Hugo Schmidt Verlag, 1912).


6 For post-colonial readings of racial, sexual, or religious otherness and various perspectives on imperialist discourse, see Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair, (eds), *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005).

7 See http://cgfa.sunsite.dk/moreau/p-moreau14htm for illustration.

8 For a comprehensive study of Gustave Moreau’s art, see Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994). Translations of Moreau citations and other French texts cited in this study are provided in the “Citation Translations” section that follows.


10 Daffner and Zagona offer alternative sources of inspiration for Flaubert’s “Hérodias.” See notes 3 and 4.


14 It is interesting to note here that Flaubert’s letters from Egypt emphasize the sensual and sensational aspects of the Arab world through accounts of his own erotic encounter with the Egyptian dancer and courtesan Kuchuk Hanem in Wadi Halfa. In his correspondence, Flaubert reveals that he watched Kuchuk Hanem dance “L’Abeille” before engaging in sexual intercourse with her. See note 12 above.

15 Zagona offers an insightful analysis of Laforgue’s “Salomé” in The Legend of Salomé and the Principle of Art for Art’s Sake. See note 4 above.

CITATION TRANSLATIONS

a My translation: “Find some way to remove all appearance of dignity and majesty from this figure.” Henceforth all translations appearing in this study will be mine except the ones provided for Flaubert’s “Herodias.”

b “Extenuated and sleepy Oriental mummy, hieratic, sacerdotal aspect. Idol.”

c “The symbolic deity of indestructible Lechery.”

d “The painter seems to have wanted to affirm his will about remaining outside centuries, and not specifying the origin, country, or era by placing his Salome in the middle of this extraordinary palace of an incongruous and grandiose style, by crowning her with a Phoenician-tower shaped diadem similar to the one worn by Salammbo, and finally, by putting in her hand the scepter of Isis, the sacred flower of Egypt and India, the great lotus.”

e Translations for citations from Flaubert’s “Hérodiades” in this article are borrowed from A.J. Kreilshheimer’s translation of Trois Contes:

Towards the Yemen, Antipas recognized what he feared to see. Brown tents were scattered about, men with spears moved about among the horses and dying fires flashed and sparkled on the ground.

They were the troops of the Arabian king whose daughter he had put away so that he could take Herodias, the wife of one of his brothers, who lived in Italy… (72).

f “Antipas was waiting for help from the Romans” (72).

g “The Jews had had enough of his idolatrous ways, everyone else of his rule. As a result he was hesitating between two plans: soothing the Arabs or concluding an alliance with the Parthians; and on the pretext of celebrating his birthday, he had invited to a great feast on that very day the leaders of his troops, the stewards of his estates, and the notables of Galilee” (72).

h “On her head an Assyrian mitre…her hair coiled down” (100).

i “She looked like Cybele flanked by her lions” (100).

J Krailsheimer translates “l’Asiatique” as “the Asiatic” (94) but I would have chosen the more generic and common term “the Asian” for the designation.
"The character of the Jews seemed quite hideous to Vitellius. Their god might well be Moloch...His Latin heart was sickened with disgust at their intolerance, their iconoclastic rage, their brutish stubbornness" (100).

"And the nomads accustomed to abstinence, the Roman soldiers skilled in debauchery, the avaricious publicans, the old priests soured with controversy, all with flaring nostrils shivered with lust" (102).

"Herodias’ fury spewed out in a torrent of vulgar and cutting abuse...Antipas imitated her; the priests, soldiers, Pharisees, all demanded vengeance, and the others were indignant that their pleasure had been delayed” (103).

"A tamed black panther, but still savage and cruel.”

"You know Flaubert’s Herodias. I have just finished my own little Salomé.”

“The frail young snake-girl, viscously scaled in blue, green, yellow, [with] soft pink chest and belly, flowed and contorted herself, insatiable for personal contact, while lisping the hymn.”

“Theogonies, theodicies, and formulae for the wisdom of nations.”

“The guests already dispersed, talking about other things, towards the evening bath.”

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Mamoon


