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History as Realism in the Short Story and the Birth of the Modern Novel

Throughout literature scenes from history are recalled for the purpose of educating or entertaining. Short stories and tales would come from the bible or folklore. Biblical stories would be repeated just as they had been heard, and folklore showed little change from original sources. Stories were told for the sake of the moral, to educate, or to entertain. Seldom were these stories apt to describe things in great detail that were of little importance. Gustave Flaubert in his short story, "Herodias", bridges this gap. Flaubert writes with sweeping descriptions of places he had actually visited and breaks free as one of the fore front authors to begin to use history to write realism.

Flaubert's opening lines for "Herodias" set the scene in greater detail than most authors of his time would even conceive. He writes of the citadel called Machaerus, "It was built upon a conical peak of basalt, and was surrounded by four deep valleys, one on each side, another in front, and the fourth in the rear" (Flaubert 1). Few, if any, of Flaubert's contemporaries would have known what basalt was, let alone taken the time to make sure the reader knew that the fortress was built on this type of bedrock. Enid Starkie shares this view stating that "It ["Herodias"] was a piece of historical writing, with verifiable facts which cannot be invented or inflated through imagination" (Starkie 264).

After the sunrise and the people of the countryside begin their daily routines, Flaubert turns the reader's attention to one of the tetrarch's prisoners. This prisoner, a man named

Iaokanaan, later to be called John the Baptist, has been imprisoned in the citadel's dungeon before the story actually takes place.

“ ‘Herodias’, like a French Classical play, strictly observes the unity of time,” Starkie writes, “and the whole action takes place in twenty-four ours, from dawn one day to dawn the following day” (Starkie 265). It is through the “clever use of flash-back, Flaubert manages to convey—as in a classical place—a very much longer space of time”(Starkie 265). Flaubert again stands across the crevice separating other works of literature, this time the play and the short story.

Flaubert delves deeper into descriptions when the guests arrive at the banquet for the tetrarchs birthday. This part of his story reads almost like an ethnography, which may tend towards the exoticism that was prevalent in romantic writing during the time of Flaubert. However the “exotic” that Flaubert writes about is later described in acute detail. Flaubert writes an impressive guest list to the party: “At one side of the tetrarch’s pavilion were the table at which were seated his priest and officers; also a number of persons from Jerusalem . . . seated at other tables were mountaineers from Liban and many of the old soldiers of Herod’s army; a dozen Thracian a Greek and two Germans besides huntsmen and herdsmen, the Sultan of Palmyra, and Sailors from Eziongaber” (Flaubert 10).

One exotic that Flaubert takes the romanticism out of is the group of Pharisees that attended the banquet. “The Pharisees”, writes Flaubert, “Had pointed skulls, bristling beards, feeble hands, snub noses, great round eyes, and their countenances bore a resemblance to that of a bulldog” (Flaubert 12). By taking the “exotic” that was part of the popular romanticism line of thinking and writing, and then breaking it down to quantitative descriptions, Flaubert successfully manages to again include the popular under a new style of writing.

Through his flawless description of the dance of Salome, Flaubert makes it almost possible to see the movements that led to the death of the prophet, Iakanaan. The dance according to Starkie “is supposed to have been modeled on a bas-relief in the Cathedral at Ruen. This relief” he continues, “is, however, static and shows only one movement. Flaubert is far more likely to have been thinking of the dance which he had seen the courtesan Kuschiuk Hanem perform in Egypt more than twenty-five years before, the ‘Danse se l’abeille’, and which he recorded in his correspondence and in *Notes de Voyage*” (Starkie 268). This is just another ability that Flaubert had at his disposal from his years of traveling in and around the Middle East.

Some of Flaubert’s descriptions may seem broad and general, just mentioning things from the biblical story of Salome in passing. Critics will be fast to point these out as lack of historic realism. These are not omissions on Flaubert’s part, but are examples of what is considered common knowledge. Starkie agrees stating that such events “are more obscure to the modern public than they were to the people of Flaubert’s day, with their widespread interest in and knowledge of the study of comparative religion.” He continues, “In the nineteenth century there would not have been the abysmal ignorance of biblical history which exists in our modern times” (Starkie 265).

Starkie mentions a list of sources that Flaubert used to write “Herodias”. The list includes passages of the Gospels of Saint Matthew and Saint Mark, a work by Renan called *Vie de Jesus* and *Vie de Apotres*. (These are “The Life of Jesus” and “The Life of the Apostles”, respectively.) Flaubert also looked into accounts from the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, as well as the Roman historian Suetonius. Such painstaking reviews of previous works to maintain accuracy for accuracy’s sake is something in which Flaubert was innovative.

Flaubert also uses subtlety to convey great power. Mannaeus, the tetrarch's head executioner is described as having been in the service of his lord for 40 years, during which time he has carried out innumerable executions without pause. Mannaus returns after being sent to execute Iaokaaan with his teeth chattering and his body trembling. He describes an angel with a fiery sword guarding the cell. But, "priests, soldiers, and Pharisees cried aloud together for vengeance, echoed by the rest of the gathering, who were indignant that a mere slave should dare delay their pleasures" (Flaubert 14). Flaubert writes that "Again Mannaeus left the hall, covering his face with his hands" (Flaubert 14).

The subtlety comes with a single line most likely overlooked by critics. Even if they noticed the sentence it probably remained trivial. Flaubert describes the decapitated head of John the Baptist thus, "The sharp blade had cut into the jaw with a swift downward strike" (Flaubert 14). This is important because it shows the inefficiency of the executioner. During this time an official executioner took pride in the clean and professional job he could do. This included killing with one strike and neatly severing the vertebrae in the neck. Flaubert, no doubt, would have learned this on his travels or in his studies. By noting the this 40 year professional executioner who had dispatched the likes of Aristobulus, Alexander, Matthathias, Zozimus, Pappus, Josephus, and Antipater, had botched the beheading of a simple prisoner, indicates that John the Baptist, then known as Iaokanaan was a very powerful man indeed.

Flaubert in his work "Herodias" began to interweave all the popular styles of writing into one form. His observance of the passage of time is consistent with that of the French plays of his day. To this drama he adds the romantic ideas of the exotic. With these two works in place he weaves the tapestry from the yarn of biblical story and documented proof. It is the documented proof that allows Flaubert to present such biblical subject matter in a non-sermonic way.

Flaubert's use of flashback and minute detail would allow a much broader picture to be painted for his reader than is allowed in a mere play or poem. His dogged research before writing so that the images he conveyed would be as true to the original as he had experienced or envisioned, would be built upon in the coming centuries as the novel would grind out a literary niche.

Modern readers who read the works of Chrichton, Cussler, Dubrul, Clancy, or any other popular author cannot argue that these literary fruits are product of the seed that Flaubert planted in the nineteenth century. This leaves little doubt that Gustave Flaubert is indeed the "Father of the Modern Novel".

Works Cited

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