II

Narcissism and the Theater of the Psyche

. . . maintenant le livre
essaiera de suffire, pour
entr'ouvrir la scène intérieure
et en chuchoter les échos.

MALLARME

READING THE “SCÈNE”

Only one part of Hérodiade saw print during Mallarmé's lifetime. In 1870 the “Scène,” bearing the title “Fragment d'une ancienne étude scénique d'Hérodiade,” appeared in Le Parnasse contemporain.¹ Thirty years later Mallarmé reassembled the “Scène,” along with other fragments of the poem, under the new title Les Noces d'Hérodiade, Mystère. Thus, in spite of the early decision of 1865 to abandon all theatrical ambitions regarding this poem, Hérodiade, it would appear, remained intimately linked to a theatrical motif. According to Mallarmé, the change
in genre from tragedy to poem would not inhibit his continued exploitation of a series of dramatic devices within the work: "les vêtements, le décor, l'amueblement, sans parler du mystère" (C, 1:174). Conceived at approximately the same time, "l'Après-midi d'un faune" entertained a similarly ambiguous relationship with the stage: "Je le fais absolument scénique," wrote Mallarmé, "non possible au théâtre, mais exigeant le théâtre" (ibid., 1:116).

Not surprisingly, I have found a certain amount of critical disagreement regarding the dramatic value of Hérodiade and, more specifically, the "Scène." For some, this classical dialogue between a narcissistic princess and her childhood nurse "cries out for stage presentation." This view is generally shared by those critics who have a marked interest in Mallarmé's dramatic theory and its rapport with the evolution of symbolist drama. Still others, troubled by the timeless and ambiguous ambiance of the "Scène," regard it as "indéfendable" from a dramatic viewpoint. Despite these differences, there is a general tendency to isolate the "Scène" from the rest of Les Noces and to read it within a realist framework. The following remarks by two critics exemplify this attitude:

It [the "Scène"] dominates the entire triptych by its dramatic intensity and its realism.

Le dialogue échangé dans la "Scène" . . . est censé se dérouler dans la réalité: au point de vue de la forme, il ne s'agit ni d'une remémoration du passé ni d'une présomption de l'avenir.

Now, there is no question that the "Scène" is the most readable segment of Hérodiade. By virtue of its classical dramatic form (speakers are identified and given parts) and its relative lack of variants, the "Scène" functions for many readers as a stabilizing point of reference in an otherwise alogical and extremely esoteric text. When considered as a dialogue between two characters, the "Scène" provides, in one critic's words, an "objective confirmation" of Hérodiade's ambivalent personality. Two basic movements can be readily ascertained: First, a contrasting play between the old nurse's spontaneous, earthy manner and Hérodiade's cold inviolability. By refusing her nurse's attempts at physical contact, Hérodiade projects the image of an
autonomous self. This narcissistic pose is then shattered by the
heroine's ambivalent monologue before her mirror and by her
emphatic denial of all previous assertions of self-sufficiency at
the "Scène"'s conclusion:

H.
Vous mentez, ô fleur nue
De mes lèvres!
J'attends une chose inconnue
(N, 70)

All of the aforementioned critics react to this seemingly
sudden reversal by reverting to narrative structures. Two slightly
different interpretations are generally offered. First, it is argued
that this "unknown thing" can only be an encounter with the
head of John the Baptist—the third character in Les Noces. If the
loss of the heroine's virginity can be projected into the future,
then the "Scène," can be read as an intermediary stage of pure
antithesis. Thus, for Sylviane Huot, Herodiade's narcissism, as
depicted in the "Scène," creates a structural tension which
demands resolution: "... le narcissisme, tout en y proclamant
encore sa suffisance, phrophe"tise sa rupture, et sa fin dans
l'avènement du couple . . . . " Here, prophecy is a proleptic,
linear force that carries the reader toward a satisfactory conclu-
sion. A second proposal, vaguely reminiscent of the biblical
reading of Salome, situates an erotic rendezvous between lovers
sometime before the "Scène." In this way the heroine's anxiety,
as well as the Baptist's decapitation, can be sufficiently motivated
by the logic of crime and punishment. These two critical ver-
sions merge in their mutual aspiration toward a final synthesis
between the severed head and the virgin, usually identified as
the respective symbols of genius and beauty. In all cases, the in-
tegration of the psyche functions as a metaphor for poetic closure
and the creation of a self-sufficient, narcissistic text.8

To ensure the integrity of text and self, this idealist
criticism must exclude certain segments of the work while reap-
propriating others. Eliminated are those heterogeneous
elements that disrupt "storytelling," generating instead a bar-
rage of either/or structures. As an example, one could cite the
late variant that suggests that Hérodiade's nuptials are not only
solitary but incomplete: "Elle s'arrête au seuil solitaires noces"
Rather than establish a consecutive order of events, the manuscript dramatizes a confusion, or even a confrontation, of temporal modes. Thus, in the early stage directions for the “Scène,” Mallarmé suggests that parts of the dialogue be treated as a dream. And, in the late fragments for the “Finale,” it becomes virtually impossible to determine whether Hérodiade’s drama is real or imagined: “au loin elle se réveille— / (rien de tout cela est-il arrivé)” (N, 139).

The occultation of this latent dynamic between text and variant goes hand in hand with a reassimilation of alterity on a strictly thematic level. As a “parfaite opération dialectique,” the plotting of Hérodiade’s becoming would necessarily involve the confrontation, absorption, and denial of an Other. Once alienated in the Baptist, Hérodiade, insists Richard, “doit . . . l’effacer [the Baptist] . . . si elle veut se récupérer en lui.”

Transposed into psychoanalytic terms, Hérodiade’s identity is contingent on the rupture and reaffirmation of an invincible narcissism.

Although some have described this movement as the “dialectic of Mallarmean narcissism,” I am inclined to view it as the narcissistic ruse of criticism. For it is as if Hérodiade’s fondest wish is performed by the critic. Such narratives work toward the exclusion of the erotic and the promotion of the perfect work of art: “une œuvre poétique qui reconstituerait, dans une beauté inaltérable, l’univers phénoménal tout entier.”

NARCISSISM RECONSIDERED

Le plus grand nombre des plaisirs que j’éprouve, lesquels viennent de moi-même et y finissent, ont un caractère essentiellement fictif.

MALLARME

When Mallarmé chose to keep the “Scène” rather than replace it with a more elliptic version (as he did the “Ouverture
ancienne”), he implicitly tapped an alternative source of drama. For the insertion of these now “vieux vers” into a dense network of pure equivocation creates a rippling effect that upstages even the most convincing narcissistic pose. Identity slips, is indeed pulverized, when the subject, as Valéry puts it, “is no longer the cause of the form but one of its effects.”12 Or, to paraphrase Lacan, when the character does not speak language but is himself spoken by it.13 In the “Scène” the best way to illustrate this decentering of the subject is to reconsider the script of narcissism. I will situate my reading by first discussing Freud’s model and its elaboration by modern French theorists.

The internal dynamics of narcissism become highly visible as soon as it is considered as both a desire and a strategy. Since Freud viewed the strategy as working both for and against the desire, he distinguished two forms of narcissism. What he identifies as “primary narcissism” is a state of absolute unity that precedes the constitution of the subject. During this stage the ego is a “reservoir” that continually stores up “the whole available quota of libido” (S.E., 23:150). According to Freud sleep, by its “reactivation of intrauterine existence,” offers the closest approximation of this objectless state (ibid., 19:222). Yet this buildup of libido in the ego eventually reaches a level where it becomes “unpleasurable.” At this point the libido overflows and the ego, contrary to its initial desire for absolute closure, begins to form object-relations. Thus, Freud concludes: “The development of the ego consists in a departure from primary narcissism and gives rise to a vigorous attempt to recover that state” (ibid., 14:100).

It is, then, the urge toward this primal, objectless condition that constitutes the motor force or desire behind all narcissistic endeavors. This regressive movement toward the reduction of tension and the absence of stimuli is called the “Nirvana principle”—a tendency that, in Freud’s view, ultimately links narcissism with the death drive.14 Primary narcissism, writes Laplanche, is a “primal myth of return,” a “primal fantasy” that cannot be proved.15 Freud deduces it from the regressive tendencies perceptible in “secondary narcissism.” By studying certain psychoses, hypochondria, and infantile megalomania, Freud came to recognize a basic pattern in all secondary narcis-
sistic relations. In each instance the ego appears to abandon its relationships to objects by withdrawing its libido and transforming itself into its own object of desire. I say "appears" because the object is not forgotten but decathected and internalized under the form of an idealized specular image: "This ideal ego is not the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. (...) As always, where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed" (S.E., 14:94).

In his essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915), Freud analyzes an extreme form of narcissistic identification. Instead of successfully detaching itself from the lost object or loved one, as in mourning, the melancholic's ego identifies itself with the object, incorporates it, and loses control. Since the ego has also incorporated the ambivalence attached to the object, the melancholic experiences a lowering of self-esteem symptomized by severe self-accusations and criticisms. An internal rivalry begins in which "the ego debases itself and rages against itself" (S.E., 14:257). Later, in "The Ego and the Id," Freud explains the logic behind these symptoms: Every time an object-cathexis is replaced by an identification, the ego must somehow placate the demands of the id. In order to regain control, the ego attempts to negotiate the id's loss by "forcing itself . . . upon the id as a love-object" (ibid, 19:30).

What is essential here is the idea that narcissism is a project that aims at unity through the incorporation of difference. The desire to annihilate desire and thus return to a state of nondifferentiation (a "dégre zéro") only results in the perpetuation of that desire and the internal splitting of the ego into subject and object. Proposed is a view of the ego as divided against and alienated from itself. The far-reaching implications of the theory come to the fore with Jacques Lacan's claim that, from its very inception, the ego constitutes itself through a narcissistic identification with an ideal image. During the "mirror stage," the infant makes a primary identification with a specular image—a figure more perfect than himself. Lacking in motor control, the helpless infant prematurely anticipates the unity and coordination of this idealized Other. Formed is an intrapsychic rivalry.
By obtaining recognition in the mirror, the child is thus assured of what he believes to be his own identity. This first identification, a misrecognition (méconnaissance), is, for Lacan, "root-stock" for all later identifications: "... cette forme situe l'instance du moi, dès avant sa détermination sociale, dans une ligne de fiction, à jamais irréductible pour le seul individu." Because of this initial formation of the subject, narcissism, writes Lacan, "impose sa structure à tous les désirs fût-ce aux plus élevés."

Moving back and forth between the positions of subject and object, the ego continues its clandestine pursuit of a phantasmatic mythical unity. The multiple roles (active, passive, subject, object) that write the script of narcissism are played out at the level of the body. Far from passionless, narcissism (the cathected ego) strives to order a sexuality that is fundamentally autoerotic. According to Freud, the autoerotic phase of sexuality begins when the infant loses a first exterior object that has functioned as a source of pleasure. This is the maternal breast. In order to compensate this loss, pleasure is sought through self-stimulation of the erogenous zones. By eventually concluding that all future object-relations have as a prototype the infant-at-the-breast and that "the finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it" (S.E., 7:222), Freud posits a strong link between sexuality and fantasy. Since the lost object can never be recovered in its original form, the sexual object is always only a substitute. Thus, sexuality (autoerotic and narcissistic) is itself an imaginary construct in which the first object of desire "has been replaced by an object reflected within the subject."

This overview of narcissism, with its emphasis on the structuring powers of fiction and fantasy, enables us to take a new look at the "Scène." Following in the tracks of Narcissus, Hérodiade has severed all relations with the external world by withdrawing her libido. To all appearances, she has achieved autonomy, becoming herself her own object of desire "Oui, c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleursis, déserte!" (N, 68). Like Mallarmé's Igitur, she seeks Nirvana—"un calme narcotique de moi pur longtemps rêvé" (O.C., 435). Motivated and shaped by this regressive fantasy of purity, Hérodiade's narcissism invokes the Freudian model. To achieve immortality, she must negate
the fact of her birth. This desire to disappear and to retreat to a place of nondifference is, as we have seen, the mark of primary narcissism:

Même pour n’aller que jusqu’à la fenêtre
Elle n’a pas aimé, cette princesse, naitre

(N, 156)

The intense ambivalence that surrounds the heroine’s birth is underscored by the rhyme naitre/fenêtre. What is sacrificed at birth is the prenatal state, the “lost narcissism” of childhood, the phantasmic period in which it was believed that the ego included everything. To deny this loss, Hérodiade assumes what resembles a foetal position: “Pour, le soir, retirée en ma couche, reptile / Inviolé . . .” (ibid., 69). Within the confines of this protective, embryonic space, “Notre reine enfant” (ibid., 169) momentarily convinces herself of her own omnipotence:

Je me crois seule en ma monotone patrie
Et tout, autour de moi, vit dans l'idolâtrie
D'un miroir qui reflète en son calme dormant
Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant . . .
O charme dernier, oui! Je le sens, je suis seule.

(ibid., 69)

This passage stands out in the “Scène” as a moment of relative calm and stability. By strategically placing herself at the center of her universe, Hérodiade projects an image of complete solitude and mastery. But the passage also provides a sample or model of the workings of the text with its variants. Beginning with a close examination of those details in the published version (the last draft of the “Scène”) that arouse suspicion, we find that the heroine’s deficiencies become all too apparent. First, it should be noted that it is the mirror and not Hérodiade that is given the role of subject. The mirror is idolized because it bestowed identity on everything else. Since Hérodiade cannot be the subject, she attempts to become the object of every reflection. Through identification with a specular image, Hérodiade sustains an illusion of totality and power. Looking for herself in the eyes of her mirror, Hérodiade, in Lacanian terms, is imme-
diately situated “dans une ligne de fiction.” Projected is an Ideal Self: “Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant. . . .” The heroine’s desired transparency is metaphorically captured by the impenetrable surface of the diamond, an image that is reinforced by a buildup of hard sounds (d’s and t’s) throughout the passage. At the same time, however, the cluster of sibilant s’s of the last line (“Je le sens, je suis seule”) gives off a fragmenting effect. It is useful here to remember that, for Mallarmé, “S” is “la lettre analytique; dissolvante et disséminante par excellence” (O.C., 855). In this context the letter is over-determined as well by its figural dimension. Since “S” retraces the curves of the recoiled serpent, it evokes the near-perfect circularity of the womb. Signaling a regressive movement toward a more primal state, the shedding of skin (“la chair inutile,” N, 69) may be read as the desire for non-being and death. Thus, Hérodiade’s desire to see herself everywhere results in the production of multiple self-images that distort, and inevitably dismantle, any illusion of narcissistic plenitude.

The ambiguity of this segment of the “Scène” emerges in the clash between the published version and its textual variants. As was noted in the first variant cited (N, 158), Hérodiade wants to avoid the window at all costs. This fear recalls Mallarmé’s poem, “Le Pitre châtifié,” (O.C., 31) in which the leap through the window (Fenêtre/naître/n’être) is tantamount to death. Opting for the indecisive posture of what the “pitre” calls “le mauvais Hamlet,” Hérodiade, in another variant, prefers to remain in “cette mandoline au ventre” (N, 159). Mallarmé often uses the image of a hollow-bellied instrument to designate a locus of pure potentiality.19 Like the maternal womb, this melodious v/entre situates Hérodiade at a crossroads between life and death. That her position is indeed precarious is reaffirmed in the opening lines of the “Scène.” It is quite conceivable that, in order to insure immortality, Hérodiade has bound her desires, transforming her body into a static symbol of beauty:

Le blond torrent de mes cheveux immaculés
Quand il baigne mon corps solitaire le glace
D’horreur, et mes cheveux que la lumière enlace
Sont immortels, ô femme, un baiser me tûrait
Si la beauté n'était la mort . . .

(ibid., 63)

Yet another variant, later suppressed, suggests that from the outset Hérodiade's glacial refuge is not really her own:

Je me crois seule en ma monotone patrie

(ibid., 164)

Whereas the choice of “patrie” evokes patriarchal power and dominion, the accumulation of m’s with soft nasal sounds in the same verse recalls the maternal womb of the variants. From this blending of masculine and feminine elements emerges the figure of a phallic mother, a fantasy already suggested by the virile image of the reclining serpent. Mallarmé’s remarks on the letter “m” support this view: “M traduit le pouvoir de faire, donc la joie, mâle et maternelle; puis . . . le nombre, la rencontre, la fusion . . .” (O.C., 960; my italics). Again, a contrasting play of letters and variants combines to undermine Hérodiade’s autonomy by producing an alternative reading of the text. Finally, a third variant, also crossed out, reveals that the impenetrable fortress is indeed inhabited by an equivocal figure. Recovered by “Hérodiade au clair regard de diamant” is:

Hérodiade au clair sein double de diamants*

(N, 164)

Proceeding from variant to poem, we note a systematic repression of otherness, doubleness, the maternal body, and the ambivalence directed toward this body. Threatening Hérodiade with total destruction, the regressive desires articulated in the variants (the tendencies of primary narcissism) have, in the “Scène,” been rapidly overturned in favor of the mesmerizing contemplation of the mirror.

What is uncovered by this initial demonstration of the play between texts is the overwhelming presence of a double dis-

*All italicized words in quotations from Les Noces indicate those crossed out by Mallarmé in that particular draft.
course that continuously sends out contradictory messages. Whereas the published version tends to uphold the narcissistic project, the textual variants consistently work against it. As we have seen, the blocking out of words by editorial selection does not cancel out their influence in the “Scène.” Through the processes of displacement, condensation, and the obsessive repetition of letters, the repressed elements inevitably return. In the movement from variant to poem, Mallarmé creates a “milieu, pur de fiction” (O.C., 310), a superimposing of written surfaces or space of limitless productivity. With the progressive erasure/repression of the bottom-most layers, there is a corresponding increase of polyvalent, poetic effects. The surface of the “Scène” becomes charged with an excess of meaning. It is in this sense that one can appreciate Mallarmé’s belated description of Les Noces as a haunted text. According to the 1898 preface, the poet’s primary intention was to isolate his heroine “. . . dans le fait même terrible, mystérieux—et faire miroiter ce qui probablement hanta . . .” (N, 51; my italics).

Cut off from any particular source or speaker, language breeds uncertainty and haunts. The narcissistic illusion of solitude and self-containment is decisively shattered by the shimmering effects of what can be called an unconscious discourse—the persistent flickering of a “miroitement, en dessous” (O.C., 382). That Hérodiade’s icy contemplation of her mirror (the symptom of her narcissism) still bears the imprint of this more archaic text (the “air ou chant sous le texte”) is borne out by the displacement of “sein double” to “regard de diamant.” By the end of the “Scène,” the heroine’s thoughts can no longer conceal the “immuables textes inscrits en sa chair” (ibid., 288). The crystallized memories of her childhood, these “ors ignorés” buried “Sous le sombre sommeil d’une terre première” (N, 68) begin to burst and split apart. Significantly, Hérodiade now links the melting and separating of her precious childhood gems to the transgressive energies of language. Addressing her own lips, she cries:

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

(ibid., 70)

The "Vous mentez, ô fleur nue de mes lèvres" means that all assertions in the work can be simultaneously read in multiple directions. In its capacity for endless duplicity, fiction, this "Glorieux Mensonge," is an unarrestable force that breaks into the character and subverts her mastery. The most graphic example of this sort of linguistic alterity and its power over characters is the language of prophecy that speaks continuously through the old nurse/sibyl. This is the text-within-the-text that Hérodiade is compelled to decipher. Further analysis of these textual tentacles will demonstrate that the drama that is the psyche is played out in the hesitations of language, that is, in the resonances between the "Scène" and the work itself, the heroine's narcissistic pose and the production of the discourse it seeks to dissimulate.

Early on in the dialogue, Hérodiade is both agitated by and magnetically drawn toward certain subterranean influences that appear anonymous and prophetic:

Par quel attrait  
Menée et quel matin oublié des prophètes  
Verse, sur les lointains mourants, ses tristes fêtes,  
Le sais-je?  

(N, 63-64)

This tableau, the first of many, stresses Hérodiade's curiosity—a trait she associates with childhood: "Allume encore, enfantillage?" (ibid., 70). "Désolée des songes" (ibid., 65), she attempts to penetrate the secret of her origin, the source and logic behind her present existence. This accounts for the frequent use of the verbs "connaître" and "savoir" as well as the hypothetical tone in which the "Scène" is cast. As an "enfant attentive au mystère éclairé de son être" (ibid., 212), Hérodiade actively seeks out her memories which are, as she says to her mirror, entrapped "Comme des feuilles sous ta glace au trou profond" (ibid., 65). Locked into a state of perpetual suspension in the frozen waters of her mirror ("Eau froide dans ton cadre gelée")
ibid., 65), these half-erased texts (the play on “feuilles”) of her psyche retain the capacity for spontaneous eruption.\textsuperscript{20}

The mirror, which initially appeared as the emblem of narcissism (the guarantor of identity and psychic integration), is not as homogeneous and pure as was thought. Like the jewels, it is a versatile object that can at any moment collapse and melt, transforming itself into a gushing fount. Much to Hérodiade's horror, this is what periodically transpires:

Mais, horreur! des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine,
J'ai de mon rêve épars, connu la nudité!
(N, 65)

The melting of the mirror, the overflow of its immutable frame, the multiplication of reflecting surfaces that disfigure and distort, and the subsequent loss of perspective are all movements that betray the hidden dynamics of the “Scène.” All signal the dismantling of Hérodiade's “autonomous” identity and, more specifically, the dissolution of her narcissistic project. The more we read the “Scène” in terms of its volatile imagery and variants, the more we begin to recognize the complex paradigm of narcissism described by Freud.

Throughout the “Scène,” Hérodiade appears to scorn the blatant sensuality of her nurse. To the latter's impious offerings of incense and perfumes she curtly replies: “. . . ne sais-tu / Que je les hais, nourrice, et veux-tu que je sente / Leur ivresse noyer ma tête languissante?” (A\textsuperscript{N}, 65). For the most part, however, emphatic orders of “Reculez!” and “Arrête dans ton crime” (ibid., 63 and 66) are immediately followed by demands for attention, recognition, approval (“Nourrice, suis-je belle?” ibid., 65), and even physical contact (“mais n'allais-tu pas me toucher?” ibid., 66). Calling her nurse “Pauvre aïeule” and “femme,” Hérodiade displays a certain intimacy toward the old woman who, confused by these inconsistencies, addresses her mistress with both the tenderness of a mother (“mon enfant”) and the deference of a servant (“Reine,” “Madame”). A continual vacillation between the use of “Vous” and “Tu” on the part of both characters reinforces these basic contradictions.

Hérodiade, it seems, cannot establish her identity without
recognition from her nurse. All of her thoughts, phantasies, and desires are to pass through the filter of the nurse's perception:

\[\ldots\] tu m'as vue, ô nourrice d'hiver,
Sous la lourde prison de pierres et de fer
Où de mes vieux lions traînent les siècles fauves
Entrer, et je marchais, fatale, les mains sauvès,
Dans le parfum désert de ces anciens rois:

(N, 64)

As in the "Ouverture ancienne," the nurse is recognized as having divinatory powers:

Quant à toi, femme née en des siècles malins
Pour la méchanceté des antres sibyllins

(ibid., 69)

Yet, for the most part, the nurse's oracular vision is distorted and unclear. In the "Ouverture ancienne," she cannot decide whether the voice she speaks and hears is her own or another's: "Une voix, du passé longue évocation, / Est-ce la mienne prête à l'incantation?" (N, 147). Similarly, the nurse of the "Scène" is most often the victim of perceptual doubt. In the opening lines, she is unable to determine whether Hérodiate lives or if she is merely looking at a shadowy figure from the past, a princess wandering "dans un âge ignoré" (ibid., 63). Soon after, she compares her forgetful mind to the fading pages of an old book: "Pardon! l'âge effaçait, reine, votre défense / De mon esprit pâle comme un vieux livre ou noir . . ." (ibid., 65). It seems that the role of the nurse's senility is to forget Hérodiate's prohibitions, thereby allowing bits and pieces of the heroine's past to reappear. But if the nurse's vision is so unreliable, why is it the object of so much concern? For, be it faulty or not, it is indeed the problematics of this perception that structure the entire "Scène." All of the action takes place as if projected on a large screen in which characters view themselves perform. As soon as the images on this screen become too vivid and troublesome, there is a quick shift toward the mirror, which functions as a secondary, protective shield:
Underlying Hérodiade’s need to be seen is, then, an overwhelming fear of being seen and of the act of perceiving in general. The following examples are taken directly from the “Scène”:

H: O jour qu’Hérodiade avec effroi regarde! (N, 66)
N: Vous errez, ombre seule et nouvelle fureur,
   Et regardant en vous précoce avec terreur
   (ibid., 66)
H: . . . si le tiède azur d’été, ( . . . ) Me voit dans
   ma pudeur grelottante d’étoile,
   Je meurs (ibid., 69)
H: . . . clos les volets, l’azur
   Séraphique sourit dans les vitres profondes
   (ibid., 70)
H: Mais aussi, des soirs, dans ta sévère fontaine
   Horreur, j’ai contemplé ma grande nudité.
   (O.C., 1444)

Although these fears are allayed by a displacement toward the mirror, it is nevertheless the nurse, and not the mirror, who assures Hérodiade of her identity. The psychical import of the old woman’s dim-sightedness and oracular gifts cannot be overstated. It is only when Hérodiade corrects or broadens the nurse’s perspective that she is able to perceive herself as she imagines being seen: H: “Mais as-tu vu quels furent mes effrois?” (N, 64). In matters of perception, she appears to reason for the nurse: “Si tu me vois les yeux perdus au paradis / C’est quand je me souviens de ton lait bu jadis” (ibid., 68). By manipulating the nurse’s vision, Hérodiade attempts to censor and control its content. This strategy, however, proves unsuccessful, for the nurse’s prophetic powers can neither be silenced nor effaced. Dismissed by her mistress immediately following the “Scènes” conclusion, the contorted and ghostly figure of the old sibyl remains firmly rooted to the spot:
Vain secret ténèbreux encore là sur pied
Evanoui comme un séculaire plumage
s'endommage
Silencieusement mais demeuré figé
Dans l'hésitation vaine à prendre congé
( ibid., 73)

Considered apart from the rest of Les Noces, this bizarre and contradictory portrait of the nurse appears unmotivated. Perhaps this accounts for the critical tendency to downplay these inconsistencies, drawing instead a clear-cut opposition between Hérodiade's frigidity and youth and the nurse's sensuality and age. Yet this view of the characters as "Deux extrêmes incompatibles" is maintained only by disregarding the interactions between text and variants. What the "Scène" attempts to mask, and apparently quite effectively, is the liminality of its characters—the blurring of their contours as they merge with one another across an excessive permutation of attributes and desires. Just as Hérodiade's virginity is tinged with eroticism, the variants offer a paradoxical description of the old sibyl as a "mère" who "n'a jamais conçu" (N, 154). Equally unstable is the opposition youth/age. In a variant for the "Finale," Hérodiade is said to evoke "la beauté humaine de la vie—qu'on ne dépasse pas en même temps qu'elle représente la vieille chair" (ibid., 112; my italics). Although the nurse, by her feebleminded and clumsy manner, her transgressive behavior and demonic presence, might appear to be Hérodiade's antithesis, she is really a projected image of what Hérodiade was, is, and could become. In the nurse, Hérodiade encounters the entire set of narcissistic object-choices as outlined by Freud: One desires "what one is, once was, would like to be" and "someone who was once part of oneself" (S.E., 14:90).

A series of notes found interspersed throughout the manuscript draws attention to the crucial role played by the nurse in the formation and development of Hérodiade's identity. All of the following quotations appear to be spoken by Hérodiade:

1. disparais toi / ma hantise / de ce que je ne / serai pas et / bannis / la femme /
   Nourrice je crois / t'appela-t-on (N, 97)
2. Vain fantôme / de moi-même /  
   Celle que je ne / serai / pas /  
   — qui tournes / tout autour (ibid., 98)
3. Profil de mon / destin inconnu / que j'ignore /  
   premier en moi (ibid., 104)
4. Vieux fantôme de la mort qui / me hante (ibid., 199)

What emerges from these passages is the subject's avowed incorporation and continued interaction with an Other. Internalized is the Self and its mirror-image in the form of an intrapsychic rivalry (“Celle que je ne serai pas”), a primary relation of pure difference (“premier en moi”). Efforts at repression (“disparais toi”) have proven futile, and the all-pervasive presence of this phantom female (“qui tournes tout autour”) continues to haunt Hérodiade’s psyche.

But what is the basis for this identification between a queen and an old servant? Throughout Les Noces the reader is given only a few details concerning Hérodiade’s early years. In the “Ouverture” there is mention of an “enfant exilé en son coeur précieux” (N, 152) and “un roi qui salarie / . . . la gorge ancienne / et tarie” (ibid., 152). The illusion to a wet-nurse is then repeated in another note, which replaces the king with a celibate father who is described as “oubliieux de la gorge adorable et tarie” (ibid., 232). This lack of a precise familial configuration focuses more attention on the nurse, who appears as the only remaining link to the heroine’s past. In the absence of any reference to a real mother, Hérodiade uses the nurse to re-imagine her childhood:

   Du reste, je ne veux rien d’humain, et sculptée,  
   Si tu me vois les yeux perdus au paradis  
   C’est quand je me souviens de ton lait bu jadis.  
   (ibid., 68)

This image of the child-at-the-breast, although meant to be pleasurable, is ridden with ambivalence. The past participles “perdus” and “bu,” as well as the rhyme “paradis/jadis,” emphasize the separation from, rather than the communication with, this now-withered breast. The term “jadis” is frequently used by Mallarmé to evoke a past period of innocence and bliss which
remains part of the character's memory. In the “Scène” this moment is a privileged one because it is the only instance in which Hérodiade's pleasure appears directly connected with another person. Assuming the stance of an immobile statue (“sculptée”), Hérodiade reevokes this memory through conscious recall. Although the loss of perspective (“les yeux perdus”) can be equated with complete satisfaction, it also denotes a passive position in which Hérodiade becomes vulnerable to the demands and desires of the nurse who controls the flow of milk.

This is not the only place in Les Noces where an oral fantasy appears. In the last lines of the “Prélude,” the breast and the ambivalence that surrounds it constitute the only visible trace of an otherwise mysterious past:

L'ordinaire abandon sans produire de trace
Hors des seins abolis vers l'infini vorace
Sursautant à la fois en maint épars filet
Jadis, d'un blanc, et maléfique lait.

(N, 60)

As in the passage of the preceding page, the use of “jadis,” this time set off at the beginning of the verse, emphasizes that the milk, which has long since dried up, continues to influence the metaphors of the text. The presence of the nurse in this oral fantasy is signalled by the terms “abolis” and “maléfique.” “Abolie” constitutes the first word of her incantation in the “Ouverture” and, in a variant for the “Scène intermédiaire,” she is described as a “maléfique plumage” (ibid., 195). The anarchic spurt of an evil milk into “maint épars filet” recalls both the “rêve épars” of Hérodiade’s mirror and the figure of the “sein double” that stalks the variants. Insisted upon in both of these retrospective fantasies is the relationship between satisfaction (“L’ordinaire abandon”), lack (“des seins abolis”), and desire. What is remembered is not the object itself but its irrevocable destruction and loss. The temporary fulfillment of an instinctual need (hunger) leads only to the creation of an ever-greater desire, the dimensions of which are comparable to the “voracity” of the “infinite.” In several of Mallarmé’s other poems, the boundlessness of the “Azur” expresses this eternal and absolute character of desire.

The associative logic of Hérodiade’s reveries is beginning
to emerge. For the loss of the breast is at every level a repetition of the traumatic separation experienced at birth. Appearing as the backdrop for all of Hérodias’s fantasies, each successive split only reopens what psychoanalysts call the “narcissistic wound,” that is, the painful reminder of the subject’s origin and continued dependency on another. Thus, Hérodias’s identification is not with the nurse herself but with that moment of rupture that her presence revives. Through the rhythmic giving and withdrawal of the breast, the nurse has come to represent the very juncture or break between pleasure and unpleasure, satisfaction and hunger. According to one variant, the nurse embodies a rhythmical spacing: “La vieille qu’elle bannit est toute l’intervalle de vie vieillesse etc.” (N, 124). The sense of “écart” or distance between points evoked by “intervalle” is reinforced by the proliferation of v’s in the verse as well as the concave shape suggested by “valle.” The first instance of disjunction is, in this sense, intimately linked to the maternal body. It becomes increasingly apparent that the nurse’s function is entirely allegorical. Within the contours of her haunting, decrepit figure, the rhythms of life and death (“la vieillesse”), presence and absence, past and future, intersect and overlap. As the voice of prophecy in the text, the nurse is a linguistic marker that signifies death-in-life by deferring it: “Du moins ce ponctuel décor assigne-t-il / Comme emblème sur une authentique nourrice / Affres que jusqu’à leur lividité hérissé” (ibid., 60). Her breasts figure only as a “trace” of an even more archaic body that appears anonymous and fragmented: “la gorge ancienne,” “des seins abolis,” and “d’un lait . . . maléfique.” Functioning as part of Hérodias’s oneric landscape, the old sibyl is a product of condensation. Like one of Freud’s composite dream-figures, she is a haphazard collection of contradictory traits and gestures, a “vieille ombre” (ibid., 199), an “entremetteuse” (ibid., 128) who inadvertently exposes the fissure or separation from which desire, language, and identity are born.

It remains for us to demonstrate that the published version of the “Scène” is itself a transposition or disguised repetition of the oral identifications and womb fantasies of the variants. The oral instinct, although repressed, continues to flow endlessly through the metaphorical and metonymical structures of the
text. This is in keeping with Freud's observation that the repression of the "original object of a wishful impulse" is "frequently represented by an endless series of substitutive objects, none of which, however, brings full satisfaction" (S.E., 11:189). The inward-outward pulsations of Hérodiade's desire, as it passes from one object to the next, is evidence of its continued clandestine circulation. We have observed this rhythmic movement in her ambivalent behavior toward the old nurse. But the latter is only one link in the chain of surrogate objects. At each turn of the dialogue there is a series of breaking-points during which Hérodiade lapses into self-indulgent reveries of varying intensity. The mirror scene, for example, is bracketed by a reference to the princess as "très rêveuse" (O. C., 1444) and a cue for her to wake up and resume the dialogue as soon as the dream turns to nightmare. It is during these moments of regressive introspection that the heroine's vulnerability becomes most visible. With each break in dialogue she is inevitably brought back to the "trou profond" of her mirror identity.

In this permutation of memory and fantasy, the reader witnesses both the elaboration and dismantling of desire. Freud sets forth a similar framework when he describes fantasies as "protective fictions" and "psychical façades" that "bar access" to infantile memories while providing "self-relief." Laplanche and Pontalis note that, in Freud's scheme, fantasies constitute a "privileged point" at which to observe "in the raw" the subtle shifts between unconscious, preconscious and conscious systems. One has the impression of a layered structure in which the various strata continue to combine and edit the primary texts of childhood. This formation is further complicated by the influx of enigmatic familial myths, elements of a "parental unconscious" subject to constant reinterpretation.

These commentaries will prove useful in aligning the production of fantasy with the revision of Mallarmé's manuscript. To this end, I will examine in detail one of Hérodiade's most extensive fantasies that, occurring near the opening of the "Scène," is again precipitated by her inexplicable attraction to a dubious past. Beginning with the image of a winter sunrise and its outpouring of subdued colors ("Verse, sur les lointains mourants, ses tristes fêtes"), this first scene portrays Hérodiade as a
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prisoner, walking through the perfumed desert of her "vieux lions"—"ces anciens rois." The use of "lointains mourants" suggests that here, as in the "Ouverture ancienne," Mallarmé has intentionally confused dawn with dusk: "De crépuscule, non, mais de rouge lever" (N, 152). Is the spectacle observed in the sky an "évanouissement vespéral ou matinal—on ne saura jamais—" (ibid., 139)? The overall effect of this sustained ambiguity is the total suppression of temporality (". . . l'on ne sait plus l'heure," ibid., 152) and the crossing over of all beginnings with ends. As in several of Mallarmé's poems, the setting and rising of the sun figures as a "mise-en-scène" for the psychological and sexual dramas of the self. In this first part of the "Scène," the memory of this celestial "jaillissement," recalling the gushing of the nurse's evil milk "vers l'infini vorace," is perpetuated in the "languides débris" which make up Hérodiade's reveries. A sudden switch from this legendary past to a more personal present generates a second tableau that continues to build on the first. Moving between exterior settings and interior decors, Mallarmé inserts a sequence of incongruous images and actions: the plucking of flower petals, a pond with a spraying fount, lilies, lions, the folding back of a dress, Hérodiade's feet, and, finally, a turbulent sea. The inundation of the sky, repeated in the "jet d'eau" of the fountain, is here accompanied by a plummeting perspective ("le regard . . . / Descendre") that guides the observer's eye, linking the various segments of the tableau.

The main difference between the exterior scene and the psychological landscape is one of emotional impact. The initial feeling of remorse at daybreak has, in the second tableau, become pleasure:

Je m'arrête rêvant aux exils, et j'effeuille
Comme près d'un bassin dont le jet d'eau
m'accueille

(N, 64)

While dreaming of exile, Hérodiade stops to engage in the production of more fantasies. A quick shift to the present tense and the use of "comme" signal the inmixing of memory with daydream. Projected onto the surrounding world is the decor of the
psyche—"les pâles lys qui sont en moi" (ibid.). As in previously-examined segments, pleasure is associated with both a flowing liquid and a rhythmic breaking as she drops the lily petals (now bits of herself) one by one into the pond. The erotic overtones of "effeuiller," suggesting a kind of metaphorical strip-tease, lead into a masochistic fantasy of defloration and rape which is reinforced by the verbs "m'a/cueillir" and épris." This connotation is further developed in the "Finale," where the purity of the lily, dishonored by the presence of "l'inexplicable sang," is "A jamais renversé de l'une ou l'autre jambe" (ibid., 78). In his early poem "Les Fleurs," Mallarmé also compares Hérodiade's body to the parts of a flower:

Et, pareille à la chair de la femme, la rose  
Cruelle, Hérodiade en fleur du jardin clair,  
Celle qu'un sang farouche et radieux arrose! 

(O.C., 34)

The transformation of an active subject into a passive object of desire continues in the third stage of the fantasy. Here, the lions reappear to perform the ludic gesture of spreading back the folds of Hérodiade's dress. Although it appears that the violation is ocular ("et regardent mes pieds . . ."), we cannot determine who performs it:

Les lions, de ma robe, écartent l'indolence  
Et regardent mes pieds qui calmeraient la mer.  
Calme, toi, les frissons de ta sénile chair, 

(N, 64)

The interpolation of "de ma robe" indicates that the lions could very well be printed on the fabric of the dress. This idea is supported by a later statement in the "Scène" in which the "frisson blanc" of Hérodiade's nudity is said to emerge from the eroticized "calices" of her dress. Equally uncertain is the identity of the wearer of the dress. In the "Ouverture" the nurse's dress is also inscribed with the figural motifs of a tapestry: "... avec un passé de ramages / Sur ma [a variant shows "ta"] robe blanchie en l'ivoire fermé" (ibid, 146). The association "indolence-robe" is
further strengthened by a manuscript note in which the dress clearly functions as a metonym for the breast: "robe couler/seins/de moi-même/reculer/jamais elle" (ibid., 106). Is it, then, Hérodiade's own body movements or those of another mysterious, feminine presence that make the dress move? This continual slippage ("couler"/"reculer") between self and other, garment and body, make it impossible to determine the active subject from the passive object. Just as Hérodiade is both imprisoned and "toute-puissante," her lions are simultaneously viewed as protectors ("Mais qui me toucherait, des lions respectée" ibid., 68) and plunderers.

What the surface structure of the fantasy attempts to mask is another, more serious, transgression. It is not the forbidden perception of Hérodiade's feet that offends but the very brief allusion to a wished-for (the conditional tense) encounter between these feet and the maternal figure of the restless sea. Note the rhymes and homonyms of "calmerait/mer/mère/chair/chère." Like the dress, Hérodiade's "roses talons" are obliquely related to the maternal body and, more specifically, to the rhythmic alternation of the maternal breast. This association is repeated in a variant for the "Finale" in which a phantasmic dance of feet and breasts is performed in a "lieu nul":

\[
\begin{align*}
et cela fait—sur 
\text{un pied l'autre,} 
\text{eux-mêmes} 
\text{sur les pieds} 
\text{seins} 
\text{une sorte de danse} 
\text{effrayante esquisse}
\end{align*}
\]

\( (N, 114) \)

Symbolically reenacted by this dance are the oscillating rhythms of the oral cycle, a configuration that resurfaces over and over throughout Les Noces. The displacement toward the feet (a highly eroticized image for Mallarmé)\(^{28}\) does not alter the desire, which is one of contact. Rather than sever her relationship with this phantom mother, Hérodiade becomes herself the object of maternal desire. For it is only by appeasing this
primeval Sea-Mother that Hérodiade can fuse back into the peaceful waters of the maternal womb.29 A parallel passage near the "Scène"s conclusion supports this reading:

... clos les volets, l'azur
Séréphique sourit dans les vitres profondes
Et je déteste, moi, le bel azur...

Des ondes
Se bercent et, là-bas, sais-tu pas un pays
Où le sinistre ciel ait les regards haïs
De Vénus qui, le soir, brûle dans le feuillage;
J'y partirais!

(ibid., 70)

Here, the maternal image is broken into two sets of images that intertwine. By means of a rejet, "le bel azur / Des ondes," the ironic and dispassionate gaze of the blue sky is perpetuated in the rocking motions of the waves. Again, cradling movements suggest the already-distant world of prenatal bliss. Like the "miroir en son calme dormant" (ibid., 69), the locus of Hérodiade's omnipotence, this country where Vénus, by implication, "ne brûle pas," is a fictional paradise motivated and shaped by the regressive desires of primary narcissism. Since the desire for complete reintegration with a non-desiring maternal body is tantamount to death (a variant reads "Allons au doux tombeau des songes mes talons," ibid., 163), it can never be completely fulfilled.

Returning now to the text of the "Scène," we find that with this passing reference to the sea everything comes to a grinding halt. Turning abruptly to her nurse, Hérodiade commands:

Viens et ma chevelure imitant les manières
Trop farouches qui font votre peur des crinières,
Aide-moi, puisqu'ainsi tu n'oses plus me voir,
A me peigner nonchalamment dans un miroir.

(N, 64)

By means of metonymy (the lion's mane is now Hérodiade's disheveled hair) and the defensive mechanism of projection (note the double displacement between "tu" and "vous" encompassing "votre peur des crinières"), Hérodiade achieves once
more distance and a semblance of autonomy. Within the confines of the mirror ("dans un miroir"), where even physical contact is permitted, the heroine works to restructure a specular unity, however temporary. For the "jet d'eau" of Hérodiade's fountain (the figuration of self and other), frozen and framed by her looking glass, is to melt and erupt shortly hereafter: "des soirs dans ta sévère fontaine / "J'ai de mon rêve épars connu la nudité (ibid., 65).

There are many ways in which the associative strands of this first fantasy feed into other sections of the "Scène," and Les Noces. By confronting it with other textual fragments, we discover that proximity to the mother and to all that she represents (memories of physical contact and nourishment as well as separation and loss) motivates a fair amount of imagery. In one subtext, for example, Hérodiade's wedding feast is made to serve the supreme narcissistic fantasy—the incestuous consumption of self with other:

_Incestueux_

Le mets _délicieux_ qu'on goûte l'un à l'autre
supérieur et l' à soi-même

( _N_, 173)

What this interminable layering of metaphors demonstrates is a work of transformation and textual process, an infinite regression toward other texts. Not only does Hérodiade's desire proceed from without, it is always presented in the form of a hermetic text to be deciphered. This cryptic "discours de l'Autre" is the language of prophecy, the "temps prophétique qui pleure sur l'enfant" ( _N_, 152), the anonymous straying voice of the nurse's incantation. The desire conveyed by these phantom texts is always experienced as something external, an alien force threatening inundation and total engulfment. It is the magnetic force exerted by a "matin oublé des prophètes" that, like the spilling of celestial milk, streaks the sky with its "tristes fêtes" (ibid., 64). Synonymous with an unarrestable liquidity (milk, water, blood, tears, and melting wax) that builds, overflows, and then rebuilds, desire is preserved and reactivated by the libidinous properties of language.
In the "Scène" itself, desire is encoded by the language of flowers and precious stones. Frozen into crystallized objects or fetishes, these fragments of metal and glass project the image of a superior, narcissistic body—pure, eternal, immense, and impenetrable:

Oui, c'est pour moi, pour moi, que je fleuris,

déserte!

Vous le savez, jardins d'améthyste, enfouis
Sans fin dans de savants abîmes éblouis,
Ours ignorés, gardant votre antique lumière
Sous le sombre sommeil d'une terre première,
Vous, pierres où mes yeux comme de purs bijoux
Empruntent leur clarté mélodieuse, et vous,
Métaux qui donnez à ma jeune chevelure
Une splendeur fatale et sa massive allure!

(N, 68-69)

The pose is predictably deceptive. In light of previous discussion, these first lines could be read in reverse: "Non, c'est pour vous, pour vous, que je fleuris, déserte!" The prevalent phantasm of the variants still persists in the distinctively maternal "vous." Note the combining of soft nasal vowels and concave shapes with images of sleep and primeval soil. As evidenced by the metaphorical-metonymical movement of the passage ("Comme," "Empruntent," "donnez"), Hérodias is neither whole nor autonomous. In Laplanche's words, she has merely redirected this mythical body "back towards" herself, making it "enter into" herself "as fantasy." To incorporate such volume ("jardins," "Sans fin," "abîmes"), various body parts become distended, the hair taking on a lustrous "massive allure," the eyes now endowed with a "melodious" shine. Hérodias cannot re-member the lost object without dis-membering herself.

If Hérodias is a "shadow princess," it is because she never stops fantasizing. As her nurse says: "Vous errez, ombre seule et nouvelle fureur, / Et regardant en vous precoce avec terreur" (N, 66). The continual production of fantasy allows the reservoir of childhood memories ("joyaux du mur natal," ibid., 65) to circulate freely within the "Scène." Efforts at censorship prove futile, as each fantasy inevitably ignites or remotivates an entire
string of sinister, reversible, and exceedingly volatile subplots.

With his heroine's closing remarks, Mallarmé not only exposes the ruse of narcissism but extends its problematic toward the general functioning of language. Immediately following Hérodiade's admission of deceit ("Vous mentez, ô fleur nue de mes lèvres!") is a double hypothesis:

J'attends une chose inconnue
Ou peut-être, ignorant le mystère et vos cris,
Jetez-vous, less sanglots suprêmes et meurtris
D'une enfance sentant parmi les rêveries
Se séparer enfin ses froides pierres.

(N, 70)

It is a sweeping interpretation, one that does not further our knowledge but leaves us dangling ("Ou peut-être") between an "unknown thing" and the indeterminate sifting of childhood reveries. To choose either proposition is to miss the point. With this statement the text attempts to reappropriate itself, to contain all possibilities, to systematize its "otherness." Like the narcissist, language is a part parading as a whole.

The drama of narcissism is, then, in every respect, a drama of language, a dialogic struggle between the self and its mirror image, the child and its creator, the fragment and the work. Structured in and around a vast network of other, cryptic, authorless texts, (dreams, prophecies), this "Fragment d'une ancienne étude scénique" mirrors the problematic of narcissism as discussed by Freud. Just as the narcissistic ego is already constituted by a preexistent frame of representation (the alienating ego-ideal), so is the writing of the "Scène" imbedded in a larger, contextual space (drafts, variants) that consistently intrudes upon and dislocates its narrative structure. Like the Self in pursuit of the lost object that will complete it, the text endlessly pursues the missing referent that will insure its narcissistic integrity. The quest is, however, undercut by the very aesthetic that generates Les Noces. For restaged in the continual contraction and expansion of text is both the pursuit of meaning and its imminent failure—a "drame, latent, [qui] ne se manifeste que par une déchirure affirmant l'irréductibilité de nos instincts" (O.C., 321).