*Flaubert’s Crime*

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What do men think they’re doing, when they pretend to be women?

The question arises, in compelling comic form, as I sit looking through the images in my daughter’s gap-year photo-album. Here are two young men, smiling for the camera, proudly shirtless and handsomely tanned. Each is wearing a borrowed bra and holding up a beer. The boy on the right is wearing a turquoise blue, and the boy on the left a salmon pink, the cups conspicuously limp and empty. Beyond the simple joy of youthful, beery cross-dressing, what is happening here? What are these men doing, messing about with the vestimentary code of sexual difference?

In some young male friendship groups, cross-dressing is a traditional Saturday night joke.. Gleeful peer-group cross-dressing is one of those potent, archaic cultural inversions that make up the repertoire of the carnivalesque. It’s mutually endearing and effortlessly reversible. On the other hand, when cross-dressing takes the form of a solitary individual practice, this pretending-to-be-a-woman might mean something different. In this other mode, it’s no joke. It’s not merely the outer appearance, it’s the inner truth of the woman that is the focus of the simulation.

Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857), whatever its other merits, is a classic instance of the male-authored cross-gendered text. Yet it broke many of the rules for that venerable fictional form. In an earlier age Richardson and Rousseau had lent the old adultery plot both a new aesthetic dignity, and a compelling intimacy of focus. Flaubert’s version managed to be sharply imperative, harshly ironic, and insidiously intimate; it was written against the grain of the female-centered genre fiction of the day; and it was also powered by a muted indignant compassion at the contemporary subjection of women. Such intelligent duplicity made for a most productive text. Anna Karenina, Isabel Archer, Hedda Gabler, Sue Bridehead and Molly Bloom are each variously descended from Emma Bovary. All of these women, variously middle-class and literate, were voiced by men. All of these women wanted something different, something more than the diminished life of marriage. Freud would eventually put the question at its simplest: 'What does a woman want?' Flaubert, to do him justice, had at least *asked* the question.

And thereby got himself into serious trouble. Sustained privately over several years, the lingering, psychic masquerade of femininity may have consequences, both emotional and ethical. When, as in *Madame Bovary*, such cross-gendered imaginings are conscientiously chronicled and published in the guise of a novel, under the real name of a man from a respectable family, the consequences may be singularly unpleasant.

Accordingly, in January 1857, the author of *Madame Bovary* was prosecuted for 'offenses à la morale publique et a la religion' [Flaubert, *Oeuvres,* ed. Thibaudet & Dumesnil, (Paris: Gallimard, 1951) Vol, 1, page 615] [‘for offences against public morality and religion’.] Though the prosecution ultimately failed, the trial itself stands as a major episode in the history of censorship, as well as in the more diffuse history of indignation. Fortunately for posterity, a verbatim transcript of the trial was commissioned by the defence. Thereafter, in compliance with Flaubert’s wishes, that transcript has always been appended to French editions of the novel. Thus, for the first generation of readers of *Madame Bovary* in book form, the meta-textual legal drama of the trial was always a conspicuous supplement to the text of the novel itself. In the many hours of speeches, for and against, a whole structure of feeling, let us call it conjugality, was laid bare. The trial raised a host of questions about reading, realism, emotion, imagination, gender and judgment.

The services of an expensive lawyer were required, to keep the delinquent scribbler and his accomplices out of trouble. This discursive pretending to be a woman, under whatever high-minded pretext, threatened to bring punishment down upon the pretender. The salaried agents of public morality would demonstrate that this toying with gendered subject positions was not what the imagination was for. Such matters were sacred; they were the foundations of religion, morality and family life.

Flaubert’s crime, his primary cultural transgression, was that he had ‘done’ Emma Bovary’s voice. Done it with such insidious authenticity, such seductive intimacy, such textual-erotic magic, that conventional moral judgment upon the adulterous woman was rendered powerless. Pinard, the lawyer leading the prosecution, offered an eloquently anguished analysis of this process:

Qui est-ce qui lit roman de M. Flaubert? Sont-ce des hommes qui s'occupent d'économie politique ou sociale? Non! les pages légères de MB tombent en des mains plus légères, des mains de jeunes filles, quelquefois de femmes mariées. Eh bien! lorsque l'imagination aura été séduite, lorsque cette séduction sera descendue jusqu'au coeur, lorsque le coeur aura parlé au sens, est-ce que vous croyez qu'un raisonnement bien froid sera bien fort contre cette séduction des sens et du sentiment? [Oeuvres 1: 631-2]

Who exactly will be reading Monsieur Flaubert’s novel? Will they be men engaged with political economy and social questions? No! the most insidious pages of *Madame Bovary* will fall into the hands of the least educated, the hands of young girls and married women. Well! Once the imagination has been seduced, once this seduction has reached down into the very heart, once the heart has spoken to the senses, then do you believe that cool reason will have any power against this seduction of the senses and the feelings?

By way of illustration, Pinard quoted the following passage from the novel:

Elle se repetait: J'ai un amant! un amant! se délectant à

cette idee comme à celle d'une autre puberté qui lui serait survenue. Elle allait donc enfin posséder ces plaisirs de l'amour, cette fièvre de bonheur dont elle avait désespéré. Elle entrait dans quelquechose de merveilleux, où tout serait passion, extase, délire... [Oeuvres 1: 623]

She repeated, 'I have a lover! a lover!' delighting at the idea as if a second puberty had come to her. So at last she was to know those joys of love, that fever of happiness of which she had despaired! She was entering upon a marvelous world where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium.

In these passages, thanks to the ambiguities of free indirect discourse, Flaubert appeared to be in collusion with Emma Bovary. This persistent collusion was the author’s primary cultural transgression. Pinard speaks again:

Qui peut condemner cette femme dans le livre? Personne. Telle est la conclusion. Il n'y a pas dans le livre un personnage qui puisse la condamner. [...] Le condamnerez-vous au nom de la conscience de l'auteur? Je ne sais pas ce que pense la conscience de l'auteur. [Oeuvres 1: 633]

Who can condemn this woman in the book? Nobody. Such is the conclusion. There is not in the book a character who can condemn her […] Would you condemn her in the name of the author’s conscience? I do not know what the author’s conscience thinks.

Once you are under Emma’s skin, dear reader, you may not remember how to find your way out again, back into your real life, your gendered body, and your unmistakable voice. The truth of this textually induced metamorphosis can be expressed very simply: *Madame Bovary, c’est toi*.

In a wider context, this trick of transgressive identification connects with the familiar modernist emphasis on authorial impersonality. As one of his biographers, I would argue that Flaubert’s proclaimed impersonality, a defining feature of many a subsequent realist project, was originally devised, while writing *Madame Bovary,* to cover his tracks. He wanted to be invisible. This is a more devious stratagem than mere impersonality. Invisibility is the word for this desire to appear to have been absent from the scene of writing. He could say to his accusers, 'That wasn't me. I wasn't there. I'm innocent.'

Consider, for a moment, how Flaubert hated the contemporary forms of cultural visibility that were increasingly expected of any writer. Flaubert avoided being photographed. He never gave interviews. He vetoed illustrated editions of his novels and he scorned the idea of staging *Madame Bovary*. His Emma Bovary was not available to be prosaically visualized. She was not made for the eye. Both author and character were to remain evocatively dis-embodied, creatures of the mind, perfect psychic artifacts with only a tenuous link to the real. It’s audacious. But if it works, this strange new species of textual thing will fit you, as reader, like the proverbial glove.

Beyond anything merely peculiar to Flaubert, there was also of course a larger history to be considered. After Flaubert, in much cosmopolitan-modernist writing, the invisibility of the artist and the impersonality of art are acclaimed as the cherished principles of the new serious novel. From Flaubert to Joyce, via Henry James, we encounter a strategically expatriate imagination at work. Exiled from their national culture, excluded from the dominant imperial-masculine gender roles available within that culture, these writers work quietly against the grain, dedicating their imaginations to the experimental and mischievously transgressive representation of feminine consciousness. The romantic, insurgent, anti-bourgeois ethos of an earlier generation of artists had run its course. Now there was serious work to do, inside the citadel of the collective psyche, in the places where sexual difference was codified and regulated.

I suggest that the doctrine of impersonality was devised to conceal the audacity, the perversity, and the impudence of that procedure. To conceal it from the reader and from the law, but also, and perhaps more deviously, to conceal it from themselves. In an age of anxiously conservative gender roles, when the matrimonial corset was being ever-lovingly tightened, the man who played at being a woman, however decorously textual the simulation, ran a certain risk. Trafficking in such precarious gender fantasies, you were wise to cover your tracks. The threat of prosecution for immorality, specifically for the deviant imagining of a liberated feminine *eros*, shadowed the serious art of fiction for a hundred years, from the Bovary trial in 1857, to the Chatterley trial in 1963. It is in this context of a pervasive cultural anxiety about femininity that I propose scrutinize the strangeness of *Madame Bovary*.

Amongst many other things, *Madame Bovary* is a paradox at the very origins of this peculiar modern tradition. The novel is programmatically impersonal, according to Flaubert’s letters. And yet, both in its origins and in its effect upon the reader, *Madame Bovary* is not at all impersonal. We have the author’s word for it. ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi!’. The colloquialism is interesting. He didn’t say, ‘I am Madame Bovary.’ He said, ‘Madame Bovary, that’s me.’ But what did Flaubert mean when – so famously, so mysteriously, so teasingly, he made this confession? Who was he talking to? And what was the question to which this remark was the startlingly simple answer?

Flaubert’s comment was off the record. It is not to be found where it might be expected, among his letters. It’s buried, in a footnote, to one of the first big books about Flaubert. In 1909, twenty-nine years after Flaubert’s death, René Descharmes, one of the first generation of Flaubert scholars, published *Flaubert: sa vie, son caractère et ses idées avant 1857 (*Paris: Ferroud, 1909). That book was written just in time to draw upon the reminiscences of those-who-had-known those-who-had-known Flaubert himself. In that book, on the page in question, Descharmes is arguing that Flaubert’s characters meet with disaster because they are perpetually seduced by fictions of their own creation. In this process, says Descharmes, Flaubert drew upon ‘his own moral sufferings’ and all his work is thus a ‘disguised confession’. So much for impersonality. Then there’s the footnote. It says:

Someone who was a very close friend of Amélie Bosquet, a woman who corresponded with Flaubert, told me recently that Mlle Bosquet asked the novelist where he had found the character of Madame Bovary. He had replied most emphatically, repeating himself several times, ‘Madame Bovary, c’est moi! D’après moi.’

(Descharmes 1909, 103 n3.)

That’s the source: an un-named ‘very close friend’ of a friend of Flaubert. At third hand, the full sense of the original utterance is entirely lost from view. The primary source of Flaubert’s remark, Amélie Bosquet, died in 1904 at the age of 89. Based in Rouen, a few years older than Flaubert, Amelie Bosquet was the author of realist novels of contemporary working class life; she had quarreled irrevocably with Flaubert soon after the publication of *L’Education sentimentale* in 1869. She objected to being caricatured in that novel as a scrawny feminist hack. So the original conversation, between Flaubert and Amélie Bosquet, probably took place some time in the early 1860’s, fairly soon after the publication of *Madame Bovary*.

Amelie Bosquet’s question was simple. She was asking, ‘Who is the real Emma? Who is the model for this wonderfully convincing creation?’ Flaubert’s answer simply emphasizes creation. Emma came from within. Considering that Emma will subsequently become, in both the French and the European literary traditions, the pattern of the desiring woman, it is supremely interesting that a female author is questioning the source and perhaps the authenticity of this male creation. In response, her creator insists that she is not simply a copy of somebody out there. She is everything that her creator has learned, in thirty odd years, about the condition of women. She is how he has imagined a woman’s life, drawing on the whole circle of women that he has known and loved. There is no single, true story, out there. The truth of the story is much more interesting. It lies within.

*Madame Bovary* is also ‘d’après moi’, in the further sense that a painted portrait is modeled on – but is not a copy of – an individual subject. We shall never know the subsequent course of Flaubert’s conversation with Amélie Bosquet. And yet we can recover much of its probable substance by listening in to an earlier exchange of letters between Flaubert and one of his first women readers.

The year is 1857, the week before Christmas. In a comfortable bourgeois salon, in a somber provincial town, Marie Leroyer de Chantepie has just finished reading a new serial story called *Madame Bovary* in the most recent number of the *Revue de Paris*. Mademoiselle de Chantepie is in her mid-fifties, an heiress with a modest income from inherited property. She is intelligent. She is unfulfilled. She is a great reader of novels. Not the mediocre romantic kind. She reads serious contemporary fiction: 'For the last thirty years I have been reading everything produced by the best authors known to me.' Nobody in her social circle shares her tastes, or has any interest in her ideas. Accordingly, Mademoiselle de Chantepie sometimes writes to authors whose work she admires. Twenty years previously, after reading George Sand's *Lelia*, she had initiated a long correspondence with that pleasingly responsive author. She is now writing an appreciative letter, the first of many, to the not-yet-notorious author of *Madame Bovary.* That admiring letter, preserved among Flaubert’s correspondence, is of great psychological interest. I shall quote it at some length.

Monsieur, Abonnée et lectrice assidue de la Revue de Paris, j'y lis depuis sa première publication votre drame si saissisant de vérité, intitulé *Madame Bovary*. J'ai vu d'abord que vous aviez écrit un chef-d'oeuvre de naturel et de vérité. Oui, ce sont là les moeurs de cette province où je suis née, où j'ai passé ma vie. C'est vous dire assez, Monsieur, combien j'ai compris les tristesses, les ennuis, les misères de cette pauvre dame Bovary. Des l'abord je l'ai reconnue, aimée, comme une amie que j'aurais connue. Je me suis identifié à son existence au point qu'il me semblait que c'était elle et que c'était moi. Non, cette histoire n'est pas une fiction, c'est une vérité, cette femme a existé, vous avez dû assister à sa vie, à sa mort, à ses souffrances. Pour moi, monsieur, vous m'avez fait voir, je dirais presque souffrir tout cela. Il y a trente ans que je lis, toutes les productions écrites dans cette éspace de temps par les meilleurs auteurs qui me sont connues. Eh! bien, je ne crains pas d'affirmer qu'aucun livre ne m'a laissé une impression aussi profonde que celle que je viens d'éprouver à la lecture de *Madame Bovary*. [...] Ah, monsieur, où donc avez-vous pris cette parfaite connaissance de la nature humaine, c'est le scalpel appliqué au coeur, à l'ame, c'est, hélas! le monde dans toute sa hideur.

[Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), Vol. 2, pages 654-55)]

Monsieur, as a subscriber to and an assiduous reader of the *Revue de Paris*, I have been reading ever since its first publication your strikingly truthful drama entitled *Madame Bovary*. I saw from the first that you had written a masterpiece both natural and true. Yes indeed, such are the ways of this province where I was born, and where I have spent my life. Monsieur, you will appreciate, I am quite sure, how intimately I have understood the sadness, the boredom, the wretchedness of that poor lady. From the beginning, I recognized her and I loved her as though she were a friend I might have had. I so identified with her experiences that it was just as though she were me. No, surely this story cannot be fictional, it must be true, this is an actual woman, and you must have witnessed her life, her death and her sufferings. You have made me see it all, Monsieur, I would say almost made me suffer it all. For the last thirty years I have been reading everything produced by the best authors known to me. Well, I have no hesitation in stating that no other book has made such a deep impression on me as that which I have just experienced in reading *Madame Bovary.* [...] Where have you acquired your perfect knowledge of human nature, it’s a scalpel applied to the heart, to the soul, it is alas the world in all its hideousness.

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This letter, dated 18 December 1856, three days after the publication of the final installment of the novel, testifies to the powerful effect that *Madame Bovary* had upon one of its first women readers. 'No other book has made such a deep impression on me': if this is more than a pleasing exaggeration, then this first generation reader had responded perfectly, just as Flaubert had once hoped and imagined that his women readers might.

In September 1852, at a very early stage in the composition of *Madame Bovary*, he had written to his lover, Louise Colet,

Tu parles des misères de la femme. Je suis dans ce milieu. Tu verras qu'il m'aura fallu descendre bas, dans le puits sentimentale. Si mon livre est bon, il chatouillera doucement mainte plaie féminine. Plus d'un sourira en s'y reconnaissant. J'aurai connu vos douleurs, pauvres âmes obscures, humides de mélancolies renfermée, comme vos arrière-cours de province, dont les murs ont de la mousse.

[*Correspondance* 2: 147]

You talk about the miseries of women. That's the very place I'm in. You shall see that I will have had to go down deep, into the sentimental slime-pit. If my book is any good it will gently tickle many a feminine wound. One or two will smile when they recognize themselves. I will have known your sufferings, poor obscure souls, damp from your stifled sorrows, like your provincial back yards, where the moss grows on the walls.

The letter breaks off with this nicely prophetic image. Flaubert could have been describing the 'obscure soul' that subsequently appeared in the person of Mademoiselle de Chantepie. As ever, there is exuberant imaginative energy at work in Flaubert's epistolary prose. It goes down into that satiric-excremental 'slime-pit', then a mischievously erotic tickling of 'many a feminine wound', then a great leaping up and onto the highest plane of romantic pathos, in that archaic exalted vocative mode, mischievously borrowed from Chateaubriand.

Gratified to be told now that he had indeed chronicled the secrets of the female soul with such imaginative authority, Flaubert responded graciously to his admirer:

Avec une lectrice telle que vous, Madame, et aussi sympathique, la franchise est un devoir. Je vais donc repondre à vos questions: MB n'a rien de vrai. C'est une histoire *totalement inventée*; je n'y ai rien mis ni de mes sentiments ni de mon existence. L'illusion vient au contraire de *l'impersonnalité* de l'oeuvre. C'est un de mes principes, qu'il ne faut pas s'ecrire. L'artiste doit être dans son oeuvre comme Dieu dans la création, invisible et tout-puissant; qu'on le sent partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas.

With a reader such as yourself, Madame, a reader so sympathetic, frankness is a duty. I shall therefore answer your questions: *Madame Bovary* is not a true story. It is totally invented; I have not added anything of my own feelings or my own life. The illusion, if there is one, arises au contraire from the *impersonality* of the work. That is one of my principles. You do not write of yourself. The artist should be in his work like God in his creation, invisible and all-powerful; you sense him everywhere, but you do not see him.

[*Correspondance* 2: 691)

Within the week, Flaubert received a large parcel from the town of Angers. The parcel contained a portrait of Marie Leroyer de Chantepie, three volumes of her published writings, and a letter that further explained her deep moral affinity with Emma Bovary. She loved Emma ‘like a sister’ and she had wept for three days, she said, over her death.

Mes chagrins, mes ennuis, mes aspirations, furent celles que vous avez si bien dépeintes dans Madame Bovary [...] et mon excessive sensibilité, mon ardente imagination, m'ont toujours fait désirer l'impossible. [...] l'amour de l'art et de la litterature sont ma seule consolation. [...] Je suis encore affligée d'une cruelle maladie de l'âme. Je ne sais si je dois vous le dire! Peut-être sourirez-vous, mais non, je crois trop à l'excellence de votre coeur pour ne pas penser que vous me plaindrez et me consolerez. Je n'ose dire à personne ce mal étrange qu'on traite de folie.

My sorrows, my vexations, my aspirations, have been those which you have described so well in *Madame Bovary* […] Excessive sensibility and an ardent imagination have always led me to desire the impossible [...] The love of art and literature are my only consolation. […] I am afflicted still with a cruel sickness of the soul. I do not know if I ought to tell you this. Perhaps you will merely smile, but no, I do so believe in the goodness of your heart that I know you will pity and console me. I do not dare to tell anyone of this strange affliction which people regard as a form of madness.

[*Correspondance* 2: 695]

Since the death of her mother, whom she had nursed for twenty years, Mademoiselle Leroyer described how she had acquired a houseful of blissfully idle dependents, an unemployed Polish refugee, an elderly Latin master and an assortment of destitute friends and relations, fourteen people in all. Harassed by her greedy, quarrelsome household, estranged from her gossiping provincial neighbours, unable to go to confession, Mademoiselle Leroyer suffered from all the symptoms of neurotic guilt: migraine, hallucinations and thoughts of suicide. The theatre was her only pleasure. Yet she had never been to Paris, such was her fear of imaginary dangers. Her letter ended with an impassioned plea for Flaubert's sympathy: ‘Console me, advise me.’ [*Correspondance* 2: 687]

Flaubert accepted. He stepped into the priestly-therapeutic role with remarkable enthusiasm. ‘Je I love you,’ Flaubert wrote to her in 1863, ‘for your ideas, your feelings and your sufferings.’ [*Correspondance* 3: 331]. In return, she idealized him from a safe distance, listening in mute adoration to the shadowy, heroic tale of Flaubert’s inner life as he unfolded it to her by letter over a period of twenty years. Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie was the most virginal, the most wretched and not the most sophisticated of the female readers who sought the friendship of the author of *Madame Bovary*. Be that as it may, Flaubert asserted in later years that these disembodied, epistolary relationships with women counted high among the intangible rewards of authorship.

Mademoiselle de Chantepie initiated a conversation with the author who had provided her with such perfect imaginative nourishment. Emma Bovary is likewise a great reader. In the convent before her marriage, she reads Walter Scott and dreams of aristocratic romance. No other ‘real’ authors are mentioned among her reading, though it is implied that she read the fiction of the day. We may take this to include the popular novels of the early 1830’s: most significantly, Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831), Sand’s *Indiana* (1832), and Balzac’s *Eugenie Grandet* (1833). For all her great investment in the imaginary, Emma remains untouched by the coded messages of female emancipation that were to be found between the lines of these texts.

*Madame Bovary* stages many delicately nuanced scenes of reading. I propose to consider one in particular, for its enigmatic intensity. On the eve of disaster, as her affair with Leon reaches its finale, Emma indulges a taste for books that testify to a state of morbid, solitary, hallucinatory eroticism.

Madame était dans sa chambre. On n'y montait pas. Elle restait là tout le long du jour, engourdie, à peine vêtue, et, de temps à autre, faisant fumer des pastilles du sérail qu'elle avait achetées à Rouen, dans la boutique d'un Algérien. Pour ne pas avoir la nuit auprès d'elle, cet homme étendu qui dormait, elle finit, à force de grimaces, par le reléguer au second étage; et elle lisait jusqu'au matin des livres extravagants où il y avait des tableaux orgiaques avec des situations sanglantes. Souvent une terreur la prenait, elle poussait un cri, Charles accourait. -- Ah! va-t'en! disait-elle.

Madame was up in her room. Nobody went in to her. She stayed there all day long, sluggish, half naked, and, every so often, burning oriental pastilles which she had bought in Rouen, from a shop run by an Algerian. To avoid having that man lying asleep up against her body every night, she managed, after many a grimace, to banish him up to the second floor; and she used to read until dawn, bizarre books, full of orgiastic set-pieces and blood-thirsty adventures. Terror-stricken, she screamed. Charles would rush in.

-O, do go away! She’d say

(*Madame Bovary*, 3- 6)

What is Emma reading here? Is this a coded reference to Sade? The description of Emma’s reading certainly fits Sade’s *Justine* (1787 & 1791). There is just enough detail to prompt recognition in those who knew about such things, but not enough detail to provoke a general scandal at the expense of the author.

The passage in question could also describe any one of the early nineteenth century pornographic texts that were often erroneously attributed to Sade in order to increase their attraction. Be that as it may, Sade’s *Justine* was also a cross-gendered text, though narrated in the first person. The female complaint, a first person narrative of persecution, has a spacious pre-modern history, whether gleefully pornographic, as in *Justine*, lugubriously compassionate, as in Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748), or insidiously knowing, as in Laclos’s *Les Liasons dangereuses* (1782). The complaint, as a cross-voiced genre, may have contributed to the disconcerting intimacies of *Madame Bovary*.

Is it plausible though, the idea that Emma could be reading Sade? Does she have the privacy? Does she have the contacts? I have heard the interesting suggestion, from one colleague, that if Emma had read Sade, *really* read Sade, she could have avoided the arsenic, taken up residence in Rodolphe’s chateau, and lived a life of consummate sexual satisfaction. Emma thus triumphant is a most appealing counter-factual denouement. However, it would require Emma to escape from the fictional genre in which she has her being. Whatever the fond wishes of her readers, Emma is condemned, by genre logic as well as by petit-bourgeois ideology, never to know that liberation.

Sometimes female characters do escape from the primary text in which they are held. We know that Molly Bloom once staged a threatening guest-appearance in the dream-life of her masculine creator. In March 1856, just as he was putting the finishing touches to the manuscript of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert had one such curious and disturbing dream. It was all about women and death, and it induced a state of infantile terror in the dreamer. Unmanned by his visions of the night, Flaubert woke in some distress to find himself completely hoarse. ‘I have quite lost my voice,’ he declared plaintively.

This dream evidently had a special significance for him. He wrote a copiously detailed account of it on waking. This was Flaubert’s private oneiric epilogue to the not-yet-published *Madame Bovary*. In the course of his dream, on account of some indeterminate crime against women, the dreamer is persecuted by an aggressive composite female figure who fuses all three generations of Flaubert’s immediate family history, his grandmother, his mother and his sister. Flaubert found that he lost his voice on waking, an appropriate fairy-tale punishment for a man who had trespassed so audaciously into the realm of women.

I shall quote just the first sequence, and the postscript of Flaubert’s dream. The full text is dated 3 March 1856, and it is included in most collections of his letters.

J'étais couché dans un grand lit Louis XIV à balustres d'or et garni aux quatre coins de plumes d'autruche. Quoiqu'il n'y eut pas de vent, les plumes se balancaient. Les ornements se sont en allés et je suis resté à plat sur un simple matelas. Près de moi s'est trouvée, je ne sais comment, une vieille femme hideuse, les paupières rouges, sans cils ni sourcils. Un voile de larmes couvrait ses pupilles flamboyantes passant et repassant devant comme une gaze qui eut était montée sur des ressorts. Par un acte de sa volonté, elle me tenait comme cloué dans le lit.

A mes pieds, en dehors du lit et couchée en travers comme les chiens sont sur les tombeaux, était (ou plutot je le sentais) ma mère dont la présence me protégait. Je ne la voyais pas, mais je la pressentais.

Et la vielle me regardait. Je me retenais de dormir, j'étais accablé et je sentais que si le sommeil me prenait, c'était ma fin; la vieille se précipiterait sur moi. Pour éviter son contact (quoique le lit fut tres large) je me ratatinais couché sur le flanc et les genoux au menton. Néanmoins je sentais l'extremité de son ongle, l'ongle pointu de son gros orteil, avec la callosité de son autre talon. C'était affreux! Et toujours devant moi les yeux rouges, terribles, archilubriques.

Elle marmottait ces mots de Saint-Amant que Gautier avait répétés la veille (dans la pièce au fromage):

Cadenas, Cambouis, Coufignon.

Je me sentais vaguement entrainé, comme lorsqu'on sommeille en chemin de fer ou en chaise de poste; ça allait très vite d'un mouvement égale, doux, et je n'apercevais aucun *locomoteur*, ni rien au monde que la vieille et les draps dans lesquels j'etais couché et qui étaient indéterminés, qui ne finissaient point.

Je me suis endormi, puis réveillé, et la vieille (poitrine nue!) m'a dit, 'J'ai vu pendant que tu dormais ton sein gauche, ton téton gauche, ton petit téton', et elle a piqué vers moi et sur moi son doigt pointu comme une aiguille, répétant, 'Cadenas, Cambouis, Coufignon.'

Je crevais! et je n'ai jamais eu si grand-peur de ma vie. Puis elle m'a tiré une langue démesurée (pour en faire une), la langue se recourbait comme un serpent: elle était verte et couverte d'écailles.

La présence de la vieille à mes côtes me faisait la sensation que vous fait le soupirail d'une cave humide. Il s'émanait de toute sa personne un grand air glacial et je grelottais autant de froid que d'épouvante. [*Correspondance* 2: 606-7]

I was lying in a large Louis XIV bed with a little gold balustrade, decorated with ostrich feathers at its four corners. Though the air was still the feathers were waving about. These trappings disappeared and I was left lying on a bare mattress. Right next to me I don't know how there was a hideous old woman with red eyelids and no eyelashes or eyebrows. A veil of tears covered her flashing eyes, the veil moving up and down like a piece of gauze attached to a set of springs. By the force of her will she was holding me as if I had been nailed to the bed. At my feet, not on the bed, lying crossways, the way dogs are shown on tombs, there was - or rather I sensed her - my mother, whose presence was protecting me. I could not see her, but I knew that she was there.

And the old woman was looking at me. I was stopping myself falling asleep, I was exhausted and I knew that if I succumbed then I would be finished. The old woman would pounce on me. To avoid touching her though the bed was very big I was curled up on my side with my knees at my chin. Nevertheless I could feel the end of her toenail, the pointed nail on her big toe, and the hard skin on her other heel. It was dreadful! And those terrible red eyes still gazing at me, utterly lubricious.

She was muttering the line from Saint-Amant that Gautier had recited the day before, in the piece about cheese: Cadenas, Cambouis, Coufignon.

I felt myself being vaguely carried along, as you do when you're dozing on a train or in a carriage; going very swiftly with a smooth gentle motion, and there was no perceptible vehicle, nor anything in the world apart from the old woman and sheets in which I was lying and which were indeterminate, were never-ending.

I fell asleep, then I woke up and the old woman - bare-breasted! - said to me: ‘While you were asleep I saw your left breast, your left nipple, your little nipple’, and she pointed at me and she poked me with her finger which was pointed like a needle, repeating the phrase: Cadenas, Cambouis, Coufignon.

I was dying! And never in my life have I felt such fear. Then she stuck out her huge tongue, stuck it out at me, the tongue curving like a serpent: it was green and covered in scales.

That old woman by my side had an effect upon me like being near the grid over a damp cellar. From her whole body there flowed a great icy draught and I was shivering as much from the cold as from terror.

That repeated mock-portentous tri-syllabic phrase, ‘cadenas cambouis coufignon’, is almost but not quite nonsense. It's a line from a poem by Marc-Antoine de Girard, Sieur de Saint-Amant (1594-1661), a poet best known for Bacchanalian tavern-songs. There was a slight Flaubert connection: Saint-Amant was born in Rouen.

More immediately, those three ominous words have supposedly been transposed from a recitation 'the day before'. Supposedly, because the words in question are not in the Saint-Amant poem about cheese, though they do match the metre of the poem, and there is an associative link between cheese and the second of the three words.

The three words are a nonsense sequence, and nonsense is a fertile medium in which unconscious thoughts can find ingenious, enigmatic expression. Dreams and jokes both play with words. The verbal social currency of waking life is re-coined, condensed and displaced, according to the logic of the dream-work. Analysing one such dream, Freud remarked that 'a long chain of thoughts and associations led off from each syllable of this verbal hotch-potch.' (Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. & trans. J. Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1953) Vol. 4, page 297). *Wortklumpen* was Freud's word, here translated as hotch-potch. *Klumpen* is a noun meaning *lump* or *clot*.

Returning to the three words spoken in Flaubert's dream, we observe two salient phonological features. Each of the three repeated words has three syllables; and the first syllables play a tune with the sound ca-ca-cou. Semantically, the first two words are commonplace. *Cadenas* is just the word for a padlock. (Things forbidden? Spaces locked?) *Cambouis* means *axle-grease*, but it's also the slang-word for *smegma*. (Bodily residues? Sexual disgust?) *Coufignon* looks like a nonce-word. It is actually a lightly disguised version of *troufignon*, meaning *arse-hole.*  *Trou fignon*: little tiny hole.

By this point in the analysis, the theme is obvious: residues and orifices, the genital and anal. I note that the words have also reversed their affect. Originally festive, they occured in a convivial, Rabelaisean, masculinist drinking-song. In the dream, they are mysteriously threatening. The dreamer is at risk of being penetrated by the creature muttering the words. I quote, from near the end: ' [...] she pointed at me and she poked me with her finger which was pointed like a needle, repeating the phrase: Cadenas, Cambouis, Coufignon.'

I surmise that these three words draw their power from their link to the darkest materials of Flaubert’s family history. Flaubert’s mother's mother was called Camille Cambremer de Croixmare. Her name, or at least the syllabic pattern of her name, echoes here in ‘cadenas cambouis coufignon'. Camille died soon after childbirth in 1792. Her motherless child - one day to become Gustave Flaubert's mother - was then passed around, like an awkward parcel, for most of the years of her childhood. As an adult, according to Flaubert, his mother was a forever *glacial* presence. To add to the mortality that beset the female line of the family, Flaubert’s beloved younger sister, Caroline, died soon after childbirth, in March 1846. The tenth anniversary of her death was impending on the night of the dream. The triple phrase, ‘cadenas cambouis coufignon’, stutters on the first syllable of her name.

This phrase, in its enigmatic three-ness, can be construed as either menacing or reproachful. Or indeed, as both. It can be unfolded, associatively, disconcertingly, as a condensed history of maternal mortality, of life-in-death subjection, physiological and psychological. The chanting dream-figure of 'the hideous old woman...with the huge tongue, curving like a serpent' has clearly usurped the phallus and is about to use it, punitively, on the dreamer.

In conclusion, we may evoke the life-size white marble portrait bust of Caroline Flaubert that stood in the room where *Madame Bovary* was written. Immaculately lifeless, this cold material thing presided over the whole meticulously immaterial process of composition. The memory of Caroline’s lingering death from puerperal fever fed into the lingering fictional death of Emma Bovary. Emma’s death by arsenic poisoning is exquisitely punitive in its leisurely, lucid dissolution of the flesh. In his novel, Flaubert had placed himself in perfect control of the elusively mortal body, mind and voice of a woman. But in his dream, the unruly feminine threatened its revenge.

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