

Motherhood and Sexuality in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

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Abstract: In her article "Motherhood and Sexuality in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*" Amanda Kane Rooks examines the narration of relationships in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* between Emma's role as mother and her sexuality. Rooks argues that this narrative relationship provides a space where the association between the oppressions of motherhood and women's sexuality can be better understood. Further, Rooks posits that Flaubert's narrative condemns the nineteenth-century Western predilection for constructing a relationship of mutual exclusivity between motherhood and sexuality, while it exposes socially sanctioned performances of motherhood and sexuality as allied, perverse manifestations of the same repressive ideological system.

Amanda Kane ROOKS

Motherhood and Sexuality in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

Since Gustave Flaubert's trial in 1857 for offending public "moral sensibilities," his novel *Madame Bovary* has been associated with tensions between bourgeois convention and women's sexuality in/and marriage (see, e.g., Chodorow and Contratto; LaCapra; Ladenson). While a great deal of scholarship dealt with Emma Bovary's "illicit" desires in light of such tensions, less attention has been extended to the relationship between her sexuality and her role as mother. While Emma's function as mother certainly may not be perceived as a dominant focus of the novel — indeed, the apparent lack of narrative space allocated to her child is striking in itself — it is difficult to ignore the ways in which her sexuality shapes, and is shaped by her role as a mother. In the study at hand I examine the relationship in *Madame Bovary* between Emma's role as mother and her eroticism and sexuality. I argue that this narrative relationship and what it suggests provides a space where the associations between motherhood and sexuality can be better understood. I contend that Flaubert's narrative condemns the nineteenth-century predilection for constructing a relationship of mutual exclusivity between motherhood and sexuality while it exposes socially sanctioned performances of motherhood and sexuality as allied, perverse manifestations of the same repressive ideological system.

As related sites of contestation in the early nineteenth century, motherhood and sexuality were subject to appropriation by scientific, moral, medical, clerical, and literary authorities, all competing and contributing to a dramatic transforming of sexuality and gender into public discourse. The cultural milieu to which Flaubert was responding was one characterized by change and unrest where ideologies surrounding middle class sexuality and gender were concerned. As working conditions in the Western world shifted in response to industrialization, the divide between private and public spheres became more pronounced, as did the differentiation between gender and sexualities. Such distinctions allowed for a dramatic sentimentalizing of domesticity, where the home became a safe haven against a cruel world and where Mother, the Angel of the House, would preside (see Thurer 182-210). The "new" mother was defined by her purity, her superior morality, and selfless devotion to her husband and children. For example, in 1850 George Henry Lewes claimed the import of women's relegation to the domestic realm to the functioning of a more liberal society and argued for a woman's worth to be measured by her ability to nurture: "The grand function of woman, it must always be recollected, is, and ever must be, Maternity: and this we regard not only as her distinctive characteristic, and most endearing charm, but as a high and holy office — the prolific source, not only of the best affections and virtues of which our nature is capable, but also of the wisest thoughtfulness, and most useful habits of observation, by which that nature can be elevated and adorned" (155).

I posit that the model of sanctified motherhood, surfacing time and again in various mid-century public debates, pediatric texts, and women's advice manuals on home economics and child-rearing (see, e.g., Popiel 89-98), would have influenced Flaubert's construction of women's sexuality in *Madame Bovary*. At the same time that maternity and child rearing were enjoying unprecedented distinction, scientific and moral investigation was cementing new ideas of orthodox sexuality. Flaubert's novel was scandalous given the widespread belief in women's innate lack of sexual drive compared to men's. Such a view was propounded, for example, by William Acton in his 1867 *The Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, where he claimed that "the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind ... The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel" (144). Although Acton's views were shared by many of his contemporaries, the Victorian era was one in which varied and contradictory versions of sexual difference and women's sexuality were visible. Indeed, as Sally Shuttleworth argues, the maternal/sexual ideal, advocated by the likes of Acton, "far from guaranteeing, by its seemingly unchallengeable status, areas of agreement over ideological conflict ... acted as a focal point for many of the most problematic areas of Victorian ideology (31; see also Trudgill). The mid-nineteenth century saw a range of public commentators eschewing the stereotypes surrounding women's sexuality including the pro-sensuality movement, which would continue to gain momentum over the course of the century (see Allen and Osgood

<<http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/documents/allen-osgood.pdf>>; Dubois and Gordon 17-19).

An obvious reading of *Madame Bovary* might focus on the myriad examples in which the narrative appears to construct Emma's sexuality in opposition to her motherhood. Emma's apparent preference for the pursuit of illegitimate sexual experience over her child begins early with the blunt announcement of her pregnancy immediately juxtaposed with her yearning for a life "of adventure, for masked balls, for shameless pleasures that were bound ... to initiate her to ecstasies she had not yet experienced" (57). Emma's regard for her unborn child is described as having been "impaired from the start" (74): such maternal reluctance is perhaps more concretely realized in Emma's refusal to provide physical nurturance to her infant, choosing instead to consign Berthe to the poor wet nurse, Mère Rollet, who takes care of her charges in a wretched hovel at the edge of town. Interestingly, it is this location where Emma's sexual fantasies first physically manifest as her would-be lover Leon marvels at the sight of a "beautiful woman in her silk dress in the midst of all this poverty" (78). Emma is left blushing and the sexual attraction between the two appears to propel her out the door and away from her child "wiping her shoes at the door" (78) upon her departure. Emma's decision to have her daughter suckled in such dirty, impoverished surroundings replete with evidence of overcrowding, malnourishment and disease (including the "poor puny little boy, his face covered with a scrofulous rash" [77]), seems an almost hyperbolic expression of her disinclination to motherhood. Indeed, Flaubert's derisive rendering of the practice of putting one's child to a wet nurse is reflective of a shift in mid-nineteenth century medical and social opinion which saw the nursing of one's own child in the home become fashionable and, in due course, essential for upper and middle-class women (see Sussman 307-08).

The episode at the Rollet cottage is but one of many instances in the novel where Emma appears to reject her child in preference for her lover. In another episode we read about Emma's ruse of using piano lessons in order to conduct regular trysts with Leon in nearby Rouen. Given that women's musical education was considered useful chiefly in terms of its provision of the skills necessary to instruct their children in music, Emma's method of subterfuge constructs her sexual affairs as directly antagonistic to her ability to mother. Further, when Emma spends the entire night with Leon in Rouen, Berthe refused "to go to bed without her mama, [and] sobbed as though her heart would break" (217). Emma's interior sexual imaginings, too, are constructed at odds with her child who interrupts her mother's "dreams" by coughing in her cot (158). While Berthe asks for her mother in the evenings, Emma spends her time alone in her bedroom, reading "scenes of orgies" in her "lurid novels" (227). It is during one of her night time sexual reveries contemplating the "tumult" within (95) that Emma pushes her imploring child away with her elbow, resulting in a small wound on Berthe's cheek as the child falls into a chest of drawers. While Emma participates in outward shows of anxiety over her child's well being, she "seemed very stupid to herself, and very kind to have been so worried just now at so little" (96). Emma's acknowledgment of her "motherly" posturing positions her at odds with the mid-nineteenth century maternal ideal and its requirement of mothers' single-minded devotion to their children.

Although Flaubert constructs a relationship of irreconcilability between motherhood and sexuality, the narrative draws out a distinct connection between these two facets of women's experience. Indeed, Janette Suzanne Johnson's contention that Emma's sexual passions "are more powerful than any maternal or domestic attentions" (165) seems untenable given Emma's tendency to fuse her maternal and sexual identities. Flaubert's exposé of the interrelationship between cultural perceptions of motherhood and sexuality are at their most marked and ironic in episodes where the boundaries between child and lover are collapsed, where the lover becomes the symbolic substitute for the child and the child the symbolic substitute for the lover. A number of scholars note the peculiar contrast between Emma's apparent lack of maternal instinct towards her own child and her dramatic bestowment of maternal affections towards her lover Leon (see, e.g., Gallagher; Johnson; Segal). If Emma fails to fulfill her duty as mother to her child, she proves herself able to conform to society's expectations of maternal nurture via her sexual relationship with Leon: "She showered him with every sort of attention ... she was worried about his health, advised him how he should behave ... She inquired like a virtuous mother about his companions" (223).

Just as Emma embodies both lover and mother, Leon is described in emasculated, child-like terms. Emma admires Leon's "shyness" and "the soft skin of his cheek" (188) and he is variously referred to as "over-excited" (187), a "child" (209, 184) who "did not dare to question her" (222). At

one point he is likened to a suckling infant "drawn irresistibly down into the whiteness of her breast" from where he would "gaze at her smilingly, his face uplifted" while "she bent over him" (209). Meanwhile, Emma "scarcely kissed" (211) her own child upon her return from a rendezvous with her lover. Drawing on the work of Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca, Edward J. Gallagher notes Emma's "surfeit of maternal concern" for all the men in her life with whom she has sexual contact and refers to examples such as Emma's tendency to chastise Charles for his irritating personal habits and her eager consoling of Rudolphe upon his revelation of having lost his own mother (39). Yet, if Emma is unable to find gratification in the "compulsory" bond with her own child, her misplaced maternal affections also fail to satisfy. Much like the thankless child asserting its identity against the mother, Rudolphe will ruthlessly abandon her and Leon will eventually "revolt ... against the daily increased absorption of his personality into hers" (223).

It is not Emma's overbearing maternal affections alone which suffocate her lovers, but the observance of the precepts of romantic love. The romantic novels Emma devours, with their frequently defiant sexual performances, serve as a narrative counterpoint to dominant nineteenth-century notions of women's sexuality; yet, they also prove reactionary and ineffectual. Flaubert illuminates the way in which the myth of romantic love circumscribes sexual expression through Emma's frequent attempts to transpose the fictional eroticism she encounters onto real life. Emma's literary education in sensual and erotic love begins in her girlhood at the convent where her consumption of prohibited novels defines for her the nature of courtly love, replete with "persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions ... somber forests, heart-aches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses" (32). She envisions herself "like those long-waisted chatelaines who, in the shade of pointed arches, spent their days leaning on the stone, chin in hand, watching a white-plumed knight galloping on his black horse from the distant fields" (33). Like the fictional heroines she encounters, Emma brings her lovers gifts of roses and trinkets and bestows upon them "every sort of attention, from exotic foods, to little coquettish refinements in her dress and languishing glances" (223). Rudolphe fulfills Emma's romantic ideal via his carefully chosen apparel and practiced declarations of love. However, such outward manifestations are revealed to be entirely affected and insincere. Although Emma might be charmed by Rudolphe's displays of romantic fervor, her first lover describes her cruelly as "gaping after love like a carp on the kitchen table after water" (106). Later, Emma again attempts to fulfill her literary fantasies, this time with Leon and with more vigor on her part, becoming herself "the mistress of all the novels, the heroine of all the dramas, the vague 'she' of all the volumes of verse" (209). However, this too soon proves futile as she and Leon grow weary of one another and Emma finds "again in adultery all the platitudes of marriage" (231; on adultery in *Madame Bovary* see, e.g., Dermitzakis <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1035>>). It would appear that the unviable, perverse expectations of the nineteenth century sexually "passionless" woman inspire Emma's equally perverse, oppositional romantic delusions (for more on the Victorian ideology of "passionlessness" see Cott 219-36). Indeed, the impact of Emma's reading practices, in conjunction with the paradoxical inversion of maternal and romantic affections evident in her sexual encounters, exposes the absurd nature of the culturally inherited scripts of both maternal and romantic love, where human desire (whether it be for one's child or one's lover) is obscured by a set of hollow and contrived behaviors.

Flaubert exploits the dissolution of the boundaries between child and lover via various characters' interactions with Berthe. While Emma, for the most part, ignores her child, her sporadic and ardent attentions towards Berthe are evocative of her fervent passions towards her lovers. Emma is described as "seized with the desire to see her little girl" (76). After seemingly having spent her desire on her daughter, "that evening Rudolphe found her more reserved than usual" (141). Leon too exploits Berthe as a substitute lover, kissing her (rather than Emma) "several times on the neck" (98) upon his departing visit, a narrative episode suffused with sexual tension. As Naomi Segal notes, "the nearest ... the first love-affair ... can come to consummation is the substitute affection of a child-proxy" (126). The adult lovers' sublimation of forbidden desire sees the child transformed into an object upon which they will enact their sexual impulses. In this way, Flaubert infers not only the eroticized undertones of various cultural prescriptions for motherly behavior, but, perhaps more disturbingly, the potential for the deflection of particular human desires to lead to far more disturbing modes of human engagement.

While Berthe the child is sexualized, Emma the lover is infantilized. Emma's unaffected, child-like demeanor can be seen in her "pouting lips" (21), "that she had a habit of biting when silent" (16); she licks the bottom of a liquor glass with "the tip of her tongue passing between her small teeth" (21), and she engages in self-suckling behavior after pricking her finger on a sewing needle (16). Tony Williams notes Flaubert's exploitation of Emma's mouth in various narrative episodes, contending that such descriptions create an "impression of repressed vitality and sensuality" (148). Yet again, the distinction between child and lover is blurred, as Emma's behavior is imbued with both girlishness and eroticism. It is interesting to note that these child-like performances are mirrored in Emma's romantic books, most markedly in the volume containing the image of a "man in a short cloak, holding in his arms a young girl in a white dress" (33), an image noteworthy for its suggestion of the virginal docility required of the woman lover. Here, again, Flaubert implicates the ways in which cultural prescriptions for human sexual desire allow for the intrusion of exploitative patterns of relating between individuals. In this case, the sexual titillation on offer through the childlike innocence of both Emma and the romantic heroines she emulates calls into question the constructed relationship of dominance and submission (typical of adult/child interaction) expected of sexual engagement between women and men.

One of the most remarkable examples of the shifting transpositions of lover and child in the novel can be found in the representation of Emma's mock prince, the orphaned servant boy Justin. The narrative abounds with suggestions of Justin's sensual yearnings towards Emma: he "greedily" watches Emma's undergarments being laundered, marveling at her "dimity petticoats ... and the drawers with running strings, wide at the hips and narrowing below" (151) and stands, silent, at Emma's bedroom door watching her dress while she has "no inkling that love ... was pulsating right there, under that coarse shirt, in that adolescent heart open to the emanations of her beauty" (173). Emma's care of Justin when he faints is evocative of a sensual seduction, as she "opened the collar of his shirt, spent 'some minutes moving her light fingers about the young fellow's neck' and 'moistened his temples with little dabs, and then blew delicately upon them" (105). In response to these suggestive acts, Justin's "eyeballs disappeared in their whites like blue flowers in milk" (105), a reaction decidedly consistent with the behavior of one in the throes of erotic passion. Emma's approach to Justin during her attempt of suicide is also reminiscent of the performance of a clandestine sexual act. Emma approaches the Homais residence "in an ecstasy of heroism, which made her almost joyous" (248). She asks Justin for the key to the store "in a low voice that was sweet and melting: 'I want it; give it to me'" (248). She begs Justin to stay and urges him to be quiet for fear of being caught and all the while he finds her "extraordinarily beautiful and majestic as a phantom" (248). Justin's infatuation with Emma is particularly interesting when examined in light of his status as an orphan. The "phantom" he sees in Emma could well be the specter of his absent mother, another instance in the novel where Flaubert probes the prescribed nature of the mother-child and the erotic/sexual relationship. Certainly, the aforementioned erotic and sexual exchanges between Emma and Justin could just as well be applied to a description of the nineteenth-century ideal mother fussing over her needy child.

Justin is the only one of Emma's "lovers" who comes close to fulfilling the romantic ideal found in her romance novels. While Emma reclines on her deathbed, a grotesque distortion of her languorous fictional heroines, Justin morphs into her earlier fantasized "knight galloping on his black horse" (33) as he rides to fetch the doctor. Just as Emma's novels see "horses ridden to death on every page" (32), Justin "so spurred Bovary's horse that he left it foundered and three parts dead by the hill" (251). Flaubert sets Justin apart from Emma's other, underserving lovers, including Rudolphe, who "was quietly asleep in his chateau; and Leon, away in the city, [who] also slept" (268). Meanwhile, "on the grave between the pine-trees a child was on his knees weeping, and his heart, rent by sobs, was panting in the dark under the weight of an immense sorrow, tender as the moon and unfathomable as night" (268). Justin becomes the archetypal hero of Emma's fiction, one of the noble lovers "weeping like fountains" (32). Yet he, like Emma, falls victim to a perverse set of romantic performances gleaned from books: Justin carries in his pocket an illustrated book on "conjugal love" (197). It is Justin's romantic illusions which inform his erotic approach to Emma on the night she consumes the arsenic, a moment of sexual fervor (and child-like compliance) that enables his pseudo lover (and mother) to take her own life.

In fulfilling Emma's romantic ideal, Justin resembles the boy child Emma wishes she had produced instead of a daughter. Emma fashions her imagined son in the image of the lovers in her stories, he

will be "strong and dark," able to "explore all passions and all countries, overcome obstacles, taste of the most distant pleasures" (74). Emma's ambivalence towards her actual child seems attributable to its sex and a pattern of neglect is established early as Emma immediately "turned her head away and fainted" (74) upon receiving the news she had given birth to a daughter rather than a son. It might be determined that, again, Flaubert contrives a connection between Emma's sexuality and her capacity to mother as she desires a son to fulfill her sexual fantasies, a surrogate lover who might appease the sexual frustrations found in her marriage to Charles. Such a reading supports Segal's contention that Emma's daughter "represents a failure of her [mother's] hopes of vicarious freedom" (129) and that Emma's unbound sexuality is "repeatedly ... punished, not least in the birth of a daughter whom she ... can never love" (117). According to Segal, "in male-authored texts, bad women have daughters" and are left "to grapple with the distasteful mystery (to patriarchy, the absurdity) of a female self-reproduction" (115). Yet, Flaubert seems to exploit the gender of Emma's child by implicating not just Emma's sexual yearnings in her preference for a male child, but also her clear understanding of the impending thwarted desires a daughter would face. In her fantasies of a son, Emma notes that while "a man, at least, is free," a woman "is always hampered ... always drawn by some desire, restrained by some rule of conduct" (74). The narrative does not vilify Emma for her lack of maternal feeling toward her child; rather, Flaubert narrates her neglect as a tragic consequence of her resistance against the restraints her society places upon women. As Elaine Hoffman Baruch points out, unlike Charles, Emma cannot be satisfied with the domestic (and relatedly sexual) prospects that lay ahead for a daughter (343). For Baruch, "it is not that the mother is selfish so much as that she is in despair ... and although this is never stated directly, perhaps she is in despair for her child too" (343).

Emma's alleged "despair" is ultimately warranted as the narrative's resolution finds Berthe orphaned, dispatched to live with her poor aunt, and sent to work in a cotton mill, one of the lowliest forms of employment available in the nineteenth century. Scholars have frequently read Berthe's tragic fate as serving a cautionary function, as a cruel incarnation of Emma's obligatory punishment for her sexual transgressions. Johnson, for example, criticizes the novel for condoning the Christian myth of the Fall where "woman's sexual indulgence causes the suffering of humanity (194). In so doing, she denounces what she sees as Flaubert's perpetuation of the construct of women's "dangerous" sexuality and views Berthe's final predicament as the ultimate censure of her mother. Bill Overton likewise considers Berthe as purely symbolic of the mother's sin and posits Emma's ostensive lack of maternal inclination as indicative of the basic assumption that she is "a bad mother" who is exploited as "an instrument of authorial punishment" (62). Yet, such readings deny the capacity for the mother's sexuality to agitate dominant and restrictive modes of thinking. I argue that even if Emma is condemned by society, the very existence of her story motivates the transgression of dominant paradigms. And, indeed, Flaubert renders Emma a sympathetic heroine. Readers surely appreciate her passion for heightened existence, her rejection of what is on offer through the cult of domesticity, and her refusal to accept a sensual life that would ultimately amount to little more than "one habit among other habits, like a familiar dessert after the monotony of dinner" (37).

Although we might sympathize with Emma for being "in despair" over Berthe's limited future prospects, her repulsion towards her daughter is difficult to ignore. In an interesting inversion of the romantic image of the mother in a state of adoring repose over her angelic child, Flaubert has Emma remark "how ugly this child is!" (95) in internal monologue as she observes her sleeping daughter. Perhaps the most disturbing evidence of Emma's rejection of her child can be found in this very episode as Flaubert not only highlights Emma's attitude of cold rejection, but also creates a subtle inference of her contemplation of infanticide. This latter claim is inferred through the image of Emma in silent and disapproving reverie standing over the form of her sleeping child for a chillingly inordinate amount of time, a narrative episode juxtaposed with the conversation occurring between Charles and Homais in regard to "the various dangers that threaten childhood" (96). What Emma sees as she gazes upon her offspring is also telling: the image of Berthe's unconsciousness ("big tears lay in the corner of the half-closed eyelids, through whose lashes one could see two pale sunken pupils" [96]) creates an ominous connection between the tragic fate of both mother and daughter in its similitude to later descriptions of Emma's face on her death bed. In disconcerting semblance of her sleeping daughter, Emma, in the throes of death, is described as having "big tears ... [and] dilated eyes ... [that] looked vaguely about her" (250).

What is interesting in such narrative episodes is Flaubert's utilization of bodily fluids: this motif serves not only to evoke a connection between mother and daughter, but is also a means of expressing Emma's maternal antipathy and her assertion of her sexual self. In response to Emma's contrived show of motherly devotion at the wet nurse's house, the infant Berthe vomits on her mother's collar. Later, Emma is unable to summon any maternal feeling towards the desperate Berthe who reaches for her mother, as "a small thread of saliva drooled from her lips" (95) triggering Emma's violent rebuff, which produces more bodily fluids, this time in the form of blood from Berthe's wound. The narrative utilization of Berthe's bodily excretions coincides with references to Emma's sexuality. As mentioned previously, Emma would rather fantasize about her lover than console her drooling daughter and her earlier demonstration of motherly devotion at the wet nurse's home is designed more to elicit a response from Leon than to comfort her infant. It would appear that the fluids of Berthe's body threaten to dissolve the corporeal boundaries existing between mother and child and, in their association with Emma's sexual transgressions, symbolize the Victorian child's hold over mothers' sexuality. The novel's use of the motif of bodily fluids evokes Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject: both Berthe's bodily fluids and Emma's sexual transgressions constitute a "terror that disassembles" on account of their refusal to "respect borders, positions, rules" (4-5). Emma's aversion towards her daughter represents not only Emma's assertion of sexual agency, but also, ironically, her sense of repulsion at this very prospect. If Emma's yearning for a male child is in part owing to her seeing her own tragic fate perpetuated through a daughter, then her aversion towards Berthe is necessarily a manifestation of her self-loathing. Just as Berthe's bodily excretions do not respect the boundaries between mother and child, Emma's sexual misconduct represents her refusal to respect the broader boundaries of her society. Berthe's abjection highlights Emma's own alliance with the abject. Ultimately, Emma's rejection of her daughter mirrors her own fate and exposes the uncomfortable relationship she has with herself in embodying that which her society finds objectionable.

The reader's potential disapproval regarding Emma's troubling indifference towards her child is further destabilized by Flaubert's construction of those mothers who do fulfill obediently the ideal of motherhood. The representation of the narrative's first *Madame Bovary* (Charles's mother), for example, denies readers any reasonable alternative to Emma's conduct. *Madame Bovary* senior's devotion to her child is initiated early in the novel's opening chapter: "his mother always kept him near her; she cut out cardboard pictures for him, told him tales, entertained him with monologues full of melancholy gaiety, chatting and fondling in endless baby-talk" (10). This character's presumably frustrated erotic and sexual life is implicated in her mothering style as the description above is preceded by an account of the various shortcomings of her husband including a cruel neglect of his wife that involves sexual infidelities with "all of the village harlots" (9). *Madame Bovary* senior's relationship with her husband has seen her once "lively ... expansive and affectionate" (9) qualities transformed into obstinate pride and "dumb stoicism" (9). The description of her socially sanctioned form of mothering is also offset by Flaubert's commentary on the motivations behind her maternal behavior: "in her life's isolation she transferred on the child's head all her scattered, broken little vanities" (10). *Madame Bovary* senior's tendency to focus her sexual desires on her child continues into Charles's adulthood as she considers her son's love for his wife "a desertion of her tenderness, an encroachment upon what was hers" (37) and eventually fulfills the prediction that such a mother will ultimately "take vengeance for her crippled life by tormenting her child" (Kaplan 410).

Evidence of Charles's "torment" at the hands of his mother abounds in the narrative: *Madame Bovary* senior has a habit of "seek[ing] refuge with her son" (155) after "frightful scene[s] with her husband" (155), she accuses Charles of loving his wife "better than me" (217) after one of her many quarrels with Emma, and insists her son sell Emma's clothes shortly after her daughter-in-law's death in order to ease his financial burdens. It is the death of her son's wife that finds *Madame Bovary* senior temporarily triumphant as she fantasizes her appropriation of Emma's expected role: "she would come to live at Yonville, she would keep house for him, they would never part again. She was affectionate, rejoicing in her heart at regaining some of the tenderness that had wandered from her for so many years" (268). Charles, however, resents his mother's interference, reneges on the plan to offer his daughter up to her care, and denies her access to both her son and granddaughter. While Emma's disregard for her mothering role in her pursuit of sexual pleasure may have indirectly led to her tragic demise, *Madame Bovary* senior's overzealous assent to the role of mother as mandated by the cult of

domesticity leads to an analogous fate, at least in terms of the way it necessitates a ceasing of the relationship between mother and child.

The mother with whom the novel most frequently juxtaposes Emma is the dignified yet odious good wife, Madame Homais. Flaubert constructs Madame Homais as a parody of the ideal mother: "She was the best wife in Normandy, gentle as a sheep, loving her children, her father, her mother, her cousins, weeping for others' woes" (80). Flaubert offers no amount of praise for this character whose strict adherence to the cult of motherhood inspires some extreme measures on her behalf: "The knives were not sharpened, nor the floors waxed; there were iron gratings in front of the windows and strong bars across the fireplace. In spite of their spirit, the little Homais could not stir without some one watching them ... and until they turned four they all were mercilessly forced to use padded headwear" (96). Madame Homais's embodying of the appropriate mother role is further linked to her distinct lack of sexual appeal. The claim that she is the "best wife in Normandy" is immediately offset by a description of her as "slow of movement, such a bore to listen to, so common in appearance, and of ... restricted conversation" (80), an upshot which leaves readers in no doubt over the limited appeal of the socially sanctioned roles available to women at the time. Further, Leon is said to have "never thought she might be a woman to anyone, or that she possessed anything else of her sex than the gown" (80). Although Emma's sexuality serves as a contrast to the passionless Madame Homais, as well as to the sexually deprived Madame Bovary senior, it is when she, too, attempts to don the cloak of divine motherhood that Flaubert makes clear the relationship of dependence existing between the virtuous mother and her alleged oppositional counterpart, the salacious lover.

While Emma's sexuality appears to render her overall mothering performance wanting in terms of the social mores of her time, it is her attempt to remedy her disinclination to maternity via frequent pretenses at virtue that find her, paradoxically, even more sexually potent. The sexual overtones of Emma's occasional shows of passion for her child have already been mentioned, including, of course, the important seminal erotic episode occurring at Mère Rollet's that cements Leon's sexual infatuation with Emma. Soon after this, Emma has her daughter returned to the house and embarks upon an attempt to assuage her desire for Leon via a firm resolution toward virtue. Leon notes how Emma's "talks, her manners, everything changed ... she took interest in the housework, went to church regularly, and looked after her maid with more severity" (88). Much like the tortured heroines of her sentimental fiction, "the more Emma grew conscious of her love, the more she repressed it, hoping thus to hide and to stifle her true feeling" (90). Despite what Flaubert may have Emma internally profess as the motivation for her newfound propriety, it is here where the novel exposes the tendency to fetishize performances of virtue, to sexualize the pretense of frigidity, as Emma's virtuous behavior will act as a further aphrodisiac to her would-be lover: "She seemed so virtuous and inaccessible to him that he lost all hope, even the faintest. But, by thus renouncing her, he made her ascend to extraordinary heights. She transcended, in his eyes, those sensuous attributes which were forever out of his reach; and in his heart she rose forever, soaring away from him like a winged apotheosis" (89).

The narrative suggests the allure of Emma's extravagant displays of moral rectitude lies in the "ineffable seduction" (190) of the potential for "yielding virtue" (190). Emma's contrived performances of virtue provide for sexual arousal in response to the prospect of that very virtue surrendered. Flaubert demonstrates how the virtuous woman is simultaneously and necessarily the sexual woman, how in actively repressing her sexual desires, she inevitably comes closer to them. What Emma's virtue amounts to is a fusing together of the elements which comprise that most enduring of dichotomies: virgin/whore. Flaubert exploits oppositional modes of thinking as they exist in Biblical thought and ideology by affiliating his heroine with the Madonna. Emma carries a medal of the Virgin on her person during her erotic exchanges with Leon, one that she hangs over the neck of her lover in the vain hope that "heaven would take her part" (223). Emma's conduct constitutes a paradoxical fulfillment of the new standards for mothers epitomized in the Madonna, one that allows her to embody both virgin and whore, mother and lover. Nancy F. Cott notes how the new emphasis on women's role in religious observance in the early nineteenth century was accompanied by a dramatic shift from a focus on women's innate potential for moral disorder owing to their alignment with Eve, to an insistence on their purity and overall moral superiority as embodied in the Madonna (227). Yet, the timing of Emma's utilization of religious iconography associates her with the fallen Eve while aligning simultaneously the relationship between the lovers with that of the Christ child and his virginal mother. Here, *Mad-*

ame Bovary poses a challenge to the idolization of mothers embedded in the image of the Virgin and, once again, Flaubert offers a demonstration of the "sin" implied in any image of virtue.

The Madonna/whore's raptures over her child/lover extend beyond Emma's intimacies with Leon. As Emma's lovers each prove themselves incapable of satisfying her, she turns to the interchangeable figures of Christ and the Father to fulfill her erotic and romantic aspirations. In her discussion of the role of sexual morality and religion in the novel's trial, Barbara Vinken foregrounds what she refers to as Flaubert's construction of Emma as an "'inverted' Sponsa Christi, a narrative technique that was largely responsible for the novel's charge of incitement to sexual immorality" (765). Emma's seemingly audacious advances are evident during her temporary confinement to her sick bed following the withdrawal of Rudolphe's erotic attentions: "she fainted with celestial joy as she advanced her lips to accept the body of the Savior presented to her" (171). Rudolphe may have failed to elope with Emma, but "God the Father, resplendent with majesty" will order "to earth angels with wings of fire to carry her away in their arms" (171). Further, the narrative's transposition of Christ and Lover is anything but subtle: "when she knelt on her Gothic prie-Dieu, she addressed to the Lord the same suave words that she had murmured formerly to her lover in the outpourings of adultery" (172). The association between Emma's virtue and her sexuality reaches its extreme expression as Flaubert communicates her apparent humility before god via an undeniably erotic discourse: "she saw within herself the destruction of her will opening wide the gates for heavenly grace to conquer her" (171). Emma's interpretation and observance of religious doctrine, her eroticized devotion to Christ, echoes the hollow performances of love inspired by her romance novels. While the transposing of the language of eroticism onto the realm of the divine may have incensed many a nineteenth-century reader, what Flaubert's fiction provides is a provocative (if ironic) expression of the relationship existing between taboo and discourse itself. In the same way he exploits his heroine's "virtue" (and indeed the way he exploits the novelistic form itself), Flaubert demonstrates how the church's very insistence on sexual self-denial enforced via an image of divine maternity in fact served to galvanize mothers' sexuality into public discourse.

The attempted legal indictment of *Madame Bovary* established Flaubert as a key player in the shifting discourses surrounding the construction, form, and preservation of bourgeois gender roles in mid-nineteenth century France. Through its illumination of the tensions existing between motherhood and sexuality, *Madame Bovary* serves as a powerful remonstrance against society's attempts to contain various forms of women's behavior and life experience. In utilizing a woman who seeks meaning in a space that merges both sexual desire and motherhood, Flaubert offers a reproach to the relationship of irreconcilability constructed between these two allegedly distinct domains. More importantly, he suggests that socially sanctioned performances of motherhood and women's sexuality are similarly upheld by a perverse logic that requires of women a consistent attitude of passivity, compliance, and adoration, with a necessary attendant anxiety over "sinful" sexuality. Just as Flaubert exposes Emma's sporadic demonstrations of motherly devotion as superficial, he renders her performances of erotic and sexual love as equally shallow and insincere. Ultimately, both institutionalized motherhood and the terms of legitimate (and illegitimate) sexuality in the nineteenth century are exposed as distinctly perverse social prescriptions which are inadequate in terms of their capacity to cater to genuine human desire and experience.

In conclusion, Flaubert's challenge to the institutional and social parameters which confine women extends further than mere deliberate condemnation wrought in fiction. In terms of its commentary on the cultural operation of repression and taboo, the novel both addresses and embodies the ways in which discourse is able to bring the denied subject into sharper relief, regardless of whether or not, in this case, Emma is ultimately punished for her transgressions. In this way, Flaubert's fictional exploration of mothers' sexuality, and others soon to follow — e.g., Wood's 1861 *East Lynne*, Tolstoy's 1878 *Anna Karenina*, Chopin's 1899 *The Awakening*, etc. — exposes the Victorian era as one characterized more by preoccupation rather than austere and widespread denial where mothers' sexual desires are concerned. The tragic folly of various nineteenth-century fictional heroines serves as part of a broader revelation of the price to be paid for the forceful attempt to appropriate particular human desires and experiences. Hence in *Madame Bovary* a deflection of desire in response to dominant modes of representation paves the way for exploitative and destructive patterns of behavior. As Flaubert's narrative reveals, the forbidden will inevitably both beguile and destroy the subject.

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