

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Modes of Vision in *Madame Bovary*

To the Editor:

The Absurd, in prose undeniably well-reasoned, has penetrated the pages of *PMLA*. In Lawrence Thornton's "The Fairest of Them All: Modes of Vision in *Madame Bovary*" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 982–91), the male sex is made the norm for reality: to cease contact with men is to lose contact with reality. But Emma's modes of vision, the only ones available to her, do not distort but mirror her world. For her mental processes are the result of sexual bias. She wants a son "comme la revanche en espoir de toutes les impuissances passés. Un homme, au moins, est libre . . .," and to Rodolphe she says, ". . . vous êtes libre, riche." The female, in contrast, she sees as "empêchée continuellement. Inerte et flexible . . ., elle a contre elle les molleses de la chair avec les dépendances de la loi."

Sensitively recording the harsh reality that dominates her imagination, Emma evinces her need to resist, by the only means available, that is, by indirection, the psychological and social privileging of the male. Thus, a mimetic process, rather than the counterfeiting of metalinguistic fantasies, constitutes the deep structure of her consciousness. Contact with real men has left her unsatisfied emotionally and sexually. Her contacts with them cease because she has taken the true measure of the male-dominated world.

Thornton's article epitomizes what happens when critics fail to take into account the humanistic insights of contemporary women's studies. The victim is blamed for disorders that are properly analyzed in relation to the social and psychic devaluation of women. Over the years, scholars have amassed a long, varied, often contradictory, and faultfinding list of bovarisms to explain her alleged defects without examining either the men in her life or the masculine preponderance in determining her consciousness. "Madame Bovary kills herself because of her failure to find a situation worthy of her vocabulary," wrote Leo Bersani in 1970. Others have been eager to name disembodied metaphysical entities like the Power of Illusion or the Power of Reality, instead of father, husband, lover, priest,

usurer, and their self-serving, dehumanizing expectations and destructive treatment of her. In this way, shortcomings of the masculine order have been re-labeled and turned into shortcomings of the heroine. Thornton's article adds an "affliction" allied with "homoeotericism" to the list of Emma's failings.

Some readers may no longer need to discredit what Emma sees and feels. Right after she has gobbled down arsenic, we learn that "elle s'en retourna comme apaisée, et presque dans la sérénité d'un devoir accompli." Who instilled and reinforced so lethal a sense of duty? To whom does she owe such mortal obedience? In the crisis that provokes her decision, three images in particular explode in the disturbed mind of this only child: that of her father, whose chief emotion has centered on the death not only of his wife but of his privileged child, the all-important firstborn male heir; that of L'heureux, the salesman and extortionist; and that of Rodolphe. These are her "father figures," invested with full authority to set up role demands for her. But the others, her husband and her first love, Léon, also possess behavioral norms by which they judge Emma a failure in turn as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, mother, and mistress. Thornton's disappearing-man motif is less significant than the institutionalized appearances of males who determine the unrealistic, self-defeating roles that she "should have" played better.

Emma has been seen as "malade," her father's word, by husband, lover, priest, pharmacist, and moneylender. Each of their constant reminders intensifies her awareness of the standards of excellence she is expected to meet. "Le Devoir avant tout . . .," "Les mères doivent . . .," "elle devait à présent joindre ses souffrances à celles de Jésus Christ. . . ." Internalizing these norms, Emma yields to the low self-evaluation that they produce. If Emma acquires a negative self-image, the reason is that she perceives the masculine sense of her failure to live up to the role demands that the men have imposed on her. Earlier in the process, "Elle aurait voulu que Charles la battît, pour pouvoir plus justement le détester, s'en venger." Not only does she truly register the normative signals of her masculine environment but she accurately understands that when

she does not do as she is supposed to, a negative value is put on her.

Poisoning herself is therefore the perfect dramatization of this psychic swallowing, for it symbolizes both the role demands ingested and the morbid self-esteem that results from her attempt to live up to norms formulated outside the self. Without advocating suicide, I suggest that Emma goes out with a rather clearheaded assessment of female helplessness. As she comes to poison herself emotionally, ingesting failure as her fate, her mental processes are consistent with reality as the narrator has set it up.

The genius of Flaubert's ironic realism is that he presents information in a way that allows us to take a view of Emma that differs from his and that transcends the ideological limits of his time. While the narrator discounts Emma's credibility at times and presents her undoing as irreversible, the objective status of the oppression that is registered by the narrator in and through Emma's mental processes enables us to recognize the legitimacy and significance of what Emma feels just before her suicide: "Quelque chose de belliqueux la transportait. Elle aurait voulu battre les hommes, leur cracher au visage, les broyer tous. . . . Cette idée de la supériorité de Bovary sur elle l'exaspérait. . . . l'envie lui vint de retourner chez L'heureux: à quoi bon? d'écrire à son père; il était trop tard. . . ."

The survival of an Emma Bovary perhaps depends on her becoming more self- or female-centered. In any event, Thornton's mistake is in categorizing the novel as a fantasy. Not only does that classification leave intact the masculine privilege of defining reality, as opposed to fantasy, it also serves an androcentric purpose by making it easier for readers to forget the challenge to human imagination posed by the story of such an unhappy female, one who, insists the author, lived and breathed (and died) all across mid-nineteenth-century France.

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To the Editor:

Lawrence Thornton's "The Fairest of Them All: Modes of Vision in *Madame Bovary*" impressively draws together several ways by which mirror imagery exposes Emma's thoroughgoing narcissism. But the concluding section of his paper sees Emma "awakening to reality," achieving insight on her deathbed; Thornton contends that she "discovers the nature of the dream she has lived," becomes "demystified," and so dies "with her newly acquired knowledge." This conclusion not only undermines

his thesis concerning Emma's narcissism but leaves me mystified; I question both its value and its validity. I admit that Flaubert's scathing treatment of Emma tends to draw out our humane feelings and so causes us to look for some redemptive traits in her. To grant her insight, however, as Thornton does, covertly argues that she experiences an anagnorisis. And that in turn requires us, I believe, to observe Emma suddenly translated from the ranks of the satirized to the pantheon of tragic heroines—or at least to its vestibule. Perhaps such a case can be made for her, but I fail to see it. Nor does Thornton try to make one. Nevertheless, he does argue her insight on the basis of two events that lend themselves to an altogether opposite reading: Emma's deathbed viewing of herself in a hand mirror and her response to the blind beggar's song.

Insofar as Thornton analyzes Emma's narcissism by observing her before different kinds of mirroring devices, his conclusion requires explanation of the difference between Emma's deathbed mirror scene and previous mirror scenes. Neither in the novel nor in his paper do I find any justification for arguing that Emma's view of herself on her deathbed differs from the one she has had earlier. Thornton appears to find proof of Emma's self-recognition in the big tears that fall from her eyes after she bends over her mirror for a while and in her sigh as she lets her head fall back on her pillow. Those details seem to me to underscore Emma's incorrigible narcissism: the tears and sigh record her vanity, her distress at the effect the arsenic and the prolonged agony of her dying have had on her once lovely face. Or else they express one more of the romantic clichés to which Emma is especially susceptible: the heroines of her reading and imagination die, not stoically, but usually with oversized tears and languishing sighs. Moreover, Emma's tears and sigh seem yet another convention of the operatic death scene that Flaubert parodies in his sustained presentation of Emma's death.

Emma, of course, "regarda tout autour d'elle, lentement, comme quelqu'un qui se réveille d'un songe." But Flaubert's diction is lancet-sharp. That is, Emma looks slowly around only "as one who awakens from a dream" (my italics). Flaubert does not write that Emma "awakens from a dream," much less, as Thornton would have us acknowledge, that she "awakens from the dream she has lived." Indeed, Flaubert doesn't even permit us the notion that Emma awakens from a literal dream; a close reading of the text reveals that she hasn't even been asleep but has been conscious all through the priest's administration of extreme unction, which precedes the mirror scene. And given Flaubert's