

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.

MICHAEL DANAHY

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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

mocking description of the unction Emma receives, it is particularly difficult to grant that within six short paragraphs Flaubert melodramatically changes from condemning her to redeeming her. His mockery seems consistent to me, reflected in a detail from the death throes that immediately follow the mirror scene, the entire tongue that protrudes from her mouth.

Nor does Emma's response to the blind beggar's song do much to suggest self-awareness or "newly acquired knowledge." Thornton declares that Emma is demystified by the coupling of the menacing image of the blind man and the "death mask" that she has just discovered in her hand mirror. Yet when Emma hears the blind beggar's song, her "rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré" communicates less her demystification than at best her terror, at worst her lunacy. Her laugh is not one of self-deprecation, frequently a means to register self-recognition. If it were, she'd likely identify herself with the young girl of the beggar's song who goes into the fields to work but, Greensleeves-fashion, loses her petticoat to the wind while she is losing something else among the furrows of the field. And Emma's laugh would be self-mocking, not "atrocious." Instead of seeing herself in the song, she sees "la face hideuse du misérable" and, consistent with her hallucinatory habits, imagines him to be other than what he really is: her mind's eye sees him as a menace "qui se dressait dans les ténèbres éternelles." Such a menacing image can precipitate self-recognition as a projection of guilt. But Emma's "atrocious, frantic, and desperate laugh" lacks the sobriety, the measured distance, or the steady focus that might well accompany genuine guilt and self-recognition. Appropriate to the fantastic world of her romantic dreams, the blind man's menacing image is one of sheer terror, a nightmare figure denying her the hope of self-recognition, as the desperateness of her laugh indicates to me.

A more telling rejection of Emma's self-discovery lies in Flaubert's ironic use of the blind beggar. Be it the Viscount, Léon, Rodolphe, Lagardy, or even God, Emma keeps envisioning an ecstatic lover who will come to ravish her completely in one orgasmic last spasm. That Flaubert times the beggar's arrival in Yonville at the very moment of Emma's convulsions strikes me as devastatingly ironic. Not only does it yoke the convulsions of love to Emma's death spasms but it also yokes her unquenchable expectations of the arrival of an "amant" to the hideous beggar whose raucous voice courts her from the pavement beneath her bedroom. Thornton's perceptive analysis of the "disappearing men" who perform as Emma's lovers might well have gone on

to note that Flaubert here insists on a detailed and grotesque male visage that Emma cannot erase—except by dying.

That Flaubert extends his novel three chapters beyond Emma's death also argues, I think, against her having any "newly acquired knowledge." And despite the trenchancy of his satire of Emma, his sympathy and admiration for her can be argued if his romantically obsessed heroine is contrasted on the one hand to her lovers, who have no dreams, however tacky, to which they commit themselves, and on the other to those equally obsessed men whose specific egoistic goals (i.e., fame for Homais, money for L'heureux, and "art" for Binet) lack the virtue of Emma's pursuit of human relationships, however eroticized, hallucinatory, harmful, or narcissistic. But these arguments lie beyond the scope of Thornton's useful essay, which, for me, stubs its toe because of the sudden cure he grants Emma's narcissistic virus.

GERRY BRENNER

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Mr. Thornton replies:

Michael Danahy poses some interesting questions about the social background of *Madame Bovary*, but his letter contains two serious misreadings of my article. First, I do not present the "male sex" as the "norm for reality"; the norm for everyone in the novel is the received ideas of the bourgeoisie. Second, I do not present a chauvinistic bias epitomizing "what happens when critics fail to take into account the humanistic insights of contemporary women's studies." I agree completely with Danahy that unbiased critical responses to women in literature are scarce in male-dominated criticism, and I sincerely hope that the situation is changing. Unfortunately, Emma Bovary is a poor choice to put forward as an example of a fictional "victim." Mme Arnoux and Félicité, yes, but Danahy does not seem to realize that it is precisely who Emma is as a person that draws the generally negative attention of critics.

The conflict between Danahy's views and my own emerges from his conviction that Emma is a "victim." Citing psychological and sociological explanations for her behavior (with echoes of the terminology of that master chauvinist, Freud), Danahy simply ignores the narcissism, frivolity, and meanness of spirit that define Emma's character. To be more specific, he focuses on credible examples of social and familial repression, but he does not try to account for Emma as a lousy mother, a