Introducing Emma Bovary

The Western literary canon includes a small number of characters who embody the tensions in our culture and help define the way we think about ourselves. Odysseus, Hamlet, Don Quixote, and Faust top the list, with only a few comparable female characters. Emma Bovary, one of the best known, has sometimes been called a “female Quixote” because of her larger-than-life yet delusional fantasies. Any new translation of Gustave Flaubert’s novel Madame Bovary (1857), which gave life to her, is a significant event. But a translation, and its reception, may also be troubling. They can, however, make us take a fresh look at the lasting power of Emma Bovary.

In 1849 a young Norman woman named Delphine Delamare died by her own hand, of poison. Her suicide was the subject of much gossip, and a friend of the writer Gustave Flaubert drew his attention to it. Flaubert, then thirty, had settled into his family’s country home, outside Rouen, to concentrate on fiction writing. We can only guess why Delphine’s grim story caught his imagination. The wife of a country doctor, she had married unhappily, continued her search for love, run into debt and, finally, chose death to end her troubles. This story of adulterous sex and money – natural tabloid companions – became the core of the novel we know as Madame Bovary, a book that Flaubert spent five years writing. One might fairly say that Flaubert was Emma Bovary’s first translator, turning, as he did, aspects of Delphine’s life into fiction.

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Iconic characters cannot be separated from their stories. Flaubert’s plot is deceptively simple – a domestic odyssey gone wrong. Young Emma Rouault, who lives with her self-absorbed father on a small Normandy farm, agrees to marry Charles Bovary, the sincere but doltish local medical officer. With little aptitude for marriage or homemaking, she moves into his house, where his mother rules, and soon drifts into dreams of romance and a more glamorous life. An affair with the handsome Viscount Rodolphe – an unrepentant rake – only exacerbates her fantasies, and, inevitably, he ends their dalliance.

Disappointed by her husband’s lack of ambition, and unable to make a bond with her baby daughter, Emma falls into another affair, this time with a passive but not unattractive clerk, Léon Dupuis. As her daily life flattens out, her longings flourish, and Emma turns to shopping as an escape from ennui. Borrowing money, she nearly bankrupts her family. After swallowing arsenic, Emma dies a hideous death, leaving a trail of suffering behind her, with the repellent local pharmacist Monsieur Homais about to receive the Legion of Honour for his public career. What makes Emma’s story more than a commonplace tale of adultery are the subtle irony and wealth of detail with which Flaubert conveys Emma’s confining world and psyche.

It’s often noted that Flaubert said of his heroine “La Bovary, c’est moi.” Readers and writers have been saying much the same ever since, even when Emma’s troubles seem a little too close for comfort. Along with numerous translations of her story into more languages than I can count, there have been several movie versions – also translations, into the conventions of film. Hollywood took on Emma in Vincente Minnelli’s lavish but banal black-and-white Madame Bovary (1949), starring Jennifer Jones, with a cameo by James Mason as Flaubert. (In order to circumvent postwar censorship, the screenwriters gave their movie a preachy frame, where Flaubert/Mason defends his choice of subject matter as moral.) The late French director Claude Chabrol filmed his version in 1991, starring a miscast, laconic Isabelle Huppert, who doesn’t quite suggest Emma’s desperate energy – Isabelle Adjani, with her frantic dark eyes, would have been ideal. A curious Russian version, Save and Protect (1989), with a gross, middle-aged, Siberian Emma, was directed by Aleksandr Sokurov, and has been played in art houses and university film courses; oddly, it best captures the novel’s hovering gloom.
MADAME BOVARY

ISABELLE HUPPERT

A FILM BY
CLAUDE CHABROL

HUPPERT IS ASTOUNDING... AMONG THE YEAR'S BEST
— Rolling Stone
Louis Jourdan, as the wealthy scoundrel Rodolphe Boulanger, and Jennifer Jones, as the tragically deluded Emma, in *Madame Bovary* (1949).
And Emma has inspired a wide range of writers. From Woody Allen, in his 1977 magic-realist short story “The Kugelmass Episode” (about a nebbishy young man who encounters Emma outside of Flaubert’s book, in a rented suite in Manhattan’s Plaza Hotel, and soon tires of her complaints), to Mario Vargas Llosa, the Nobel Prize-winning Peruvian novelist, whose study of Flaubert’s heroine, *The Perpetual Orgy*, is a gallant love letter, “*La Bovary, c'est nous.*”

*Madame Bovary* is a book I know like an old friend, yet I’m amazed by each rereading. For the last decade I’ve taught it in a second-year university course about the imagination, in a fourth-year seminar about concepts of love, and in a graduate course about modernism. A study of the destructive nature of romantic obsession as well as a critique of self-serving bourgeois values, the novel has a power to disturb students like none other I know. A product of her unique moment in time, yet a universal figure, Emma is too much like all of us for students to ignore. They may dismiss her as “a bad mother” or “a sleaze bag” (their most common objections) while feeling superior to her self-deceptions, but they still want to believe that erotic love will shape their own lives for the better, and after discussing the book they come to understand – if not identify with – Emma’s longings. I often think that *Madame Bovary* may be the most important book I teach, so I approach any new translation with hope and caution.

LYDIA DAVIS brings an impressive resumé to her work. A MacArthur Fellow with an award from the French-American Translation Foundation for her version of Marcel Proust’s *Swann’s Way*, and a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters from the French government, Davis is also the author of several short story collections, recently republished as *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (2009). Her stories often focus on dissatisfied middle-aged women who might be the great-great-granddaughters of Emma Bovary. But unlike her sad, sour heroines, she is a celebrity of the first rank in today’s literary firmament. When Davis’s translation of *Madame Bovary* was brought out in England, the publisher announced a “3-City Author Tour,” as if Flaubert had come back from the grave.

Most reviewers of the new *Madame Bovary* treated Davis with awe. The American novelist Jane Smiley, known as a satirist, wrote a much-reprinted review (it appeared in the *Globe and Mail*), explaining that she’d previously read other translations of *Madame Bovary* but was “not terribly moved.” Emma, she claimed, is a man’s idea of a woman,
and “not that illuminating to actual women,” though somehow, almost miraculously, a female translator had saved her from Flaubert and “returned Emma Bovary to us” as a character who merits attention. The *New York Times* assigned Davis’s translation to Kathryn Harrison, a novelist best known for her memoir *The Kiss*, about an incestuous love affair with her father. Under the title “Desperate Housewife,” Harrison wrote mainly a plot summary, comparing Emma to Anna Karenina; without mentioning other translations, she concluded: “It’s a shame Flaubert will never read Davis’s translation of *Madame Bovary*. Even he would have to agree his masterwork has been given the English translation it deserves.” Not to be outdone, *New York Magazine* ran a three-page feature about Davis, with colour photographs, under the title “Knee-Deep in ‘Bovary’: Flaubert’s Obsessive Masterpiece Finally Gets the Obsessive Translation It Deserves” (note the addition of “finally” to the praise).

Of course Davis’s publisher placed a large advertisement in the TLS, quoting Kathryn Harrison. A month later its reviewer, Tadzio Koelb, called the translation “very good,” but one that “falls a touch on the literal side.” More thoughtful and apt, the novelist and critic Jonathan Raban discussed Davis’s translation in an essay for the *New York Review of Books* entitled “Flaubert, Imperfect”: “It’s likely to be remembered as the version in which the translator tried to out-Flaubert Flaubert in her coolness toward her raw material.”

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**HY** does a book’s reception matter? First, it tells us something about the reviewing culture of our day. Despite the fanfare over Davis’s work, there’s no need to discard significant achievement from the past for a present effort that is little improvement. While no classic translation, whatever its merits, should prevent another translator from the challenge of Flaubert’s French original, anyone reviewing a new translation – Davis claims to be the twentieth translator – ought to know something about previous versions.

Francis Steegmuller, one of the great twentieth-century translators, produced a *Madame Bovary* (1957) that has yet to be surpassed (it’s available in a Vintage paperback). Steegmuller also translated the definitive two-volume edition of Flaubert’s letters, and, like Lydia Davis, also wrote fiction (his short stories often appeared in the pages of the *New Yorker*). His study *Flaubert and Madame Bovary: A Double Portrait* (1939, with revisions in 1950 and 1968) remains one of the
best places to begin reading about Flaubert, along with Frederick Brown's biography, Flaubert (2006). There may be a small irony here. In Fragments (2010), a collection of poems, notes, and letters by Marilyn Monroe (yes, Marilyn Monroe), one of the final pages is a photograph of four books from her personal collection, including Steegmuller's Madame Bovary, with the phrase “In a new and definitive translation” printed across the bottom, and Steegmuller’s name in large capital letters. While it’s the job of publishers to sell books, that’s not the job of reviewers, who ought to be responsible to their readers; this responsibility extends to editors when they assign books for reviewing.

Apart from Smiley’s casual anti-male remarks, and Harrison’s unsupported panegyric, their reviews suggest a careless reading of any translation of Madame Bovary. As I point out to my students, Flaubert’s presentation of his heroine – from the start – is not unsympathetic. He titled his novel Madame Bovary, not Emma Bovary, and Emma is in fact the third Madame Bovary in the book (the other two are her husband’s mother and his first wife, an elderly widow). Flaubert shows that Emma is caught in the conventions of her time (in Steegmuller’s translation the subtitle of the book is “Patterns of Provincial Life”). A version of the Cinderella figure, Flaubert’s motherless Emma is not an empty vessel but rather someone who has absorbed the sentimental pieties and junk culture of her era; and, like most people, she had little choice.

Flaubert’s first description of her focuses on her hands – a kitchen maid’s rough hands – but her suitor Charles also notices her fine fingernails: “They were almond-shaped, tapering, as polished and shining as Dieppe ivories.” The conflict in her life is therefore established. And when Charles looks at her eyes, he sees that “she had an open gaze that met yours with fearless candor.” Emma’s desire to escape her harsh country life should capture any reader’s sympathy. After she marries Charles, and arrives at his home from their wedding festivities, she finds the dried bridal bouquet of his deceased first wife still on the bedroom bureau, and there’s no doubt that Flaubert recognizes Emma’s plight; one might even think of him as a proto-feminist. Perhaps Jane Smiley overlooked such passages on her previous readings of the novel.

And the translation itself? Avoiding modern slang, Davis wisely keeps to Flaubert’s language and time. English, however, has a differ-
Even in 1949, nearly a century after the novel's publication, the plot of *Madame Bovary* remained highly controversial. In an attempt to mollify the motion picture censors, Vincente Minnelli's film incorporated Flaubert's obscenity trial, with James Mason playing the author and defending his story of a woman brought to ruin by the hypocrisy of the world around her.

ent sound and syntax than French, and her precision can fall flat. Davis's rigid adherence to Flaubert's use of the imperfect tense (the *imparfait*) peppers the text with "would" and seems unnatural in English, even pedantic. While Flaubert showed little interest in metaphor or lyrical prose, he didn't write choppy sentences. And too often Davis's rendering of dialogue is awkward, if literal. When Emma, her husband, and Monsieur Homais compare country life and food with that of the city, the sentence in Davis is, "'Because of the change in regimen,' agreed the pharmacist, 'and the resulting perturbation of the whole system.'" Steegmuller wrote, simply, "'Because of the change of diet,' agreed the pharmacist, 'and the way it upsets the entire system.'" The first version makes the reader pause unnecessarily, the second doesn't. Dull passages like this are common in Davis's Flaubert.

Yet in her interview for *New York Magazine* Davis dismissed other translations of *Madame Bovary*: "Two of the most popular, Steegmuller and Hopkins – they're not bad books. They're well written in their own way. But they're not close to what Flaubert did." This remark raises
questions about what a translation can achieve – about what, in fact, it is. Any book needs to inhabit the language it’s translated into, and that language has its own agenda. (Jonathan Raban rightly saw “a deliberately postmodernist spirit” in Davis’s translation.) Davis has also admitted that she dislikes Emma, and has even referred to the novel itself as “a great book – so called.” Such reservations might have been a warning to her. A related matter may be Davis’s own fiction. In an essay for The New York Review of Books, the poet and critic Dan Chiasson praised Davis’s Collected Stories but admitted that she is often thought of as “a cold writer,” noting that “her stories can seem like impersonal, even cruel personal ads,” and are “more forensic than empathic” – spot-on criticism. Davis may have forgotten her debt
to Flaubert’s irony (a debt shared by many modernist and post-modernist fiction writers), or want to disavow it.

In Davis’s *Madame Bovary* I miss the sardonic lilt and rounded smoothness of Steegmuller’s prose. Yet when her translation appears in paperback – with some of the glowing endorsements I’ve quoted – it is likely to be the edition that most bookstores order and keep on their shelves. University courses, where *Madame Bovary* has much of its life and sales, may go on introducing students to Emma with already familiar translations, but other readers meeting her through Davis won’t know what they’re missing. I wish I had a sweeter conclusion, but reviews and promotion do matter. Fortunately, for now, Steegmuller’s translation of *Madame Bovary* remains in print.