

5. (g) – “Discuss [clothing] in any literary work or works of your own choice.”

The Role of the Shoe in *Madame Bovary*

To state that *Madame Bovary* is ‘about’ the shoe would be to squeeze and buckle the novel into something it is not. Flaubert’s novel is concerned with much more than the shoe. It is ‘about’ a woman struggling to liberate herself from a banal bourgeois society, an oppressively mediocre husband, an unachievable desire for Romance; it is ‘about’ social and political change in France, female adultery, reading and boredom, morality and the lack thereof. And yet, whilst it would be ill-fitting to say that *Madame Bovary* is ‘about’ the shoe, much of what I have said the novel is ‘about’ might be represented by a tight clasp, a varnished heel or glass slipper. The shoe and all that lies within acts as a source of sexual desire, inspiring romantic feeling, even adultery. Emma’s lovers (and indeed Flaubert himself) fixate on her “dainty heel” almost fetishistically: they buy her shoes, scrub and rub her shoes, delight in the “bare foot” as they do only a moment later in the “whiteness of her breast”. The slipper too acts as a symbol of the desire for Romance and fairy tale which consumes Emma throughout *Madame Bovary*. “Dangl[ing]” and “tapping” her slipper in the ashes of the hearth she wills herself into the cinders, the shoes, of *Cendrillon*. More fundamentally, the dainty shoe constricting the barefoot can serve as an emblem for Emma, buried alive, corseted in male narration, male gaze and a stifling and male-dominated society.

It seems to be *Madame Bovary*’s edges and frills, most pertinently her shoes, which inspire desire. All the men who perceive Emma in the context of her sexuality appear fixed on the sight, sound and texture of her slippers. Charles’ first pangs of romantic feeling are articulated through the memory of her “little clogs on the clean-scrubbed kitchen flags”, the sound of her “wooden soles...clack[ing] smartly on the leather boots she wore”. Léon notes, before the “fine pores of her white skin”, a “foot clad in a small black boot”; Rodolphe admires her “dainty little foot”; Maitre Guillaumin, her “sole curving as it steamed”. Justin’s fervid and “meticulous clean[ing]” of Emma’s boots seems not only symbolic of a desire to preserve her tainted reputation, her “elegant boots clogged with mud”, but, as a repeated “rubbing” motion, suggestive of masturbation. The shoe does not merely arouse sexual feeling, however, but seems at times to act as a metonym for the vagina, even a synecdoche for the female body. Bettelheim describes how those encountering *Cinderella* will, on some subconscious level, associate the glass slipper with the female genitalia: “A tiny receptacle which some part of the body can slip and fit tightly can be seen as a symbol of the vagina.”¹ Emma’s admirers appear to perceive her shoes much as they understood *Cendrillon*’s as children. Flaubert describes how Rodolphe “glimpsed – just between that black hem and the black foot – the delicacy of a white stocking, like a *snippet of nakedness*”. Léon watches and is seduced by her “dainty shoe...dangl[ing] from the toes of her barefoot” as he only a moment later “gaze[s]...into the whiteness of her breast”, and whilst Joseph “gazed avidly at...knickers with draw-strings...he *does her boots*”. It seems, then, that the genitalia and the foot, the undergarment and the shoe, become confused for her male (re)viewers, even her author. As a glimpse of her feminine sexuality and nakedness, the shoe kindles desire, motivating marriage, even adultery. On many levels, Emma internalises this male, ‘Flaubertian’ way of thinking. She perceives shoes in the same way that hers have been perceived by author and lover. Repulsed by Charles’ “thick boots, with two great creases at the instep”, she is “charm[ed]” by Rodolphe’s “high boots of soft leather”. It is what the shoe reveals socially that stimulates Emma sexually: tightly laced in her mind, the male’s shoe acts as a barometer of his social stature and sexual potency. Charles’ ability to cure others’ body beneath their boots, moreover, reveals his virility and appeal to Emma. Just as his healing of Père Rouault’s leg brings the two together, his failure to cure Hippolyte’s club foot confirms Emma’s estrangement. Whilst it is tempting to perceive Emma’s shoe as supremely feminine, moreover, it too is possible that the shoe might represent the male, as well as female, genitalia. Whilst Bettelheim links the shoe to a girl’s “penis envy”², Geoffrey Wall writes of Flaubert’s “anxious fantasy that the phallus may be lost or even attach itself to the woman’s body”³. Whilst Wall’s criticism somewhat disregards the way the shoe often seems conspicuously feminine, that Emma’s shoe might be perceived as phallic can be linked to her apparent androgyny. As the novel develops, she becomes increasingly androgynous, even masculine. In an early scene, she finds Charles’ lost riding crop, and wears a lorgnon “like a man”. She plays with cigarettes, drinks brandy, wears male dress to a masked ball. Léon “bec[omes] her mistress rather than she becoming his”. Rather like Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, it is, paradoxically, her feminine sexuality which allows her a masculine dominance and seductive potency. This masculinisation, perhaps, is why both heroines cannot survive. Peeking from below her skirts, Emma’s slipper serves as an androgynous symbol of

female and male sexuality – of female delicacy and “daintiness” facilitating phallic power – and thus Madame Bovary’s ability to stand, literally and metaphorically, in the shoes of both genders.

Yet the shoe does not serve solely as a social barometer or source of concupiscence, as a symbol of the male and female genitalia and Emma’s apparent androgyny. More importantly, the slipper seems emblematic of Emma’s fairy tale yearnings, her Romantic desires and expectations, which, rather like the shoe itself, both motivate and constrict her, driving external action whilst preventing internal development, throughout the novel. Flaubert’s letters as he wrote *Madame Bovary* describe his re-reading of Perrault’s “charming, just charming” (Cor.3:67) fairy tales; fairy tales which, it appears, would then permeate his novel. It seems no coincidence that the name of the most obvious paternal figure in the novel should bear reminiscence of the ‘father of fairy tales’: as Père Rouault fathers Madame Bovary the woman, Perrault too seems to father *Madame Bovary*, the novel. Emma, rather like Don Quixote, is reared on, and later held within, stories of Romance which she does not fully understand. In her formative years, she gathers, magpie-like, elements of Walter Scott, of Balzac, Sand and Lamartine muddled with anonymous “love-songs of the last century”, “long chapters...about love, lovers, loving”. Although it is not certain she read Perrault, her fantasy seems coloured by his fairy tales: by “gentlemen brave as lions”, “maidens swooning in secluded lodges”, “virgins...[behind] the bars of a Gothic cage”, a “silken rope”. Bettelheim describes a child who forced herself into the shoes of Cinderella, who proclaimed she did “all the hardest work in the house” and “prepared...for the ball”⁴. It seems that Emma experiences a similar process. She is recurrently depicted, and hence later imagined, by a fire. Interestingly, it is often not initially lit. Flaubert describes how “once [Emma] was in the kitchen, she [would make] for the fireplace” where Félicité “raked up the red embers buried under the ashes”. Seated by the fire, she appears to will herself into the position of *Cendrillon*, who too would “sit down there in the ashes and cinders”⁵. She conjures her fairy tale as she read of phoenixes ‘rising from the ashes’. Her frail attempts at housework, her phases of cleaning, sacrifice and benevolence, too can be held up as symptomatic of this. For, if she imitates the first parts of *Cendrillon*’s story, why should her fate not be true of the rest? She darts in her *hirondelle* between Rouen and Yonville l’Abbaye, between provincial conformity, *idées reçues* and fantasy, as Cinderella races twice from domestic reality to fairy tale prince. Léon is metamorphosed into a “different man, a phantom put together from her most ardent memories, her favourite books...he lived in the *big blue country* where silken rope-ladders swing from the balconies”. Rodolphe is likened to “The Viscount”, princes, Léon. Emma’s lovers lose their identity as, strapped into her Romance, they are buckled into the boots of the Young Prince. But most pertinently, it is through the shoe that she places herself, literally and metaphorically, in the glass slippers of *Cendrillon*. Flaubert describes how, before Léon, she “would swing [her leg] in the air... [so that] the dainty shoe...would dangle from the toes of her bare foot”. Willing her shoes to fall before her lover, she too seeks, expects, escape through an abandoned slipper. Her satin shoes from La Vaubyessard, painfully present and far from the Viscount, are both the relics of a past, unfulfilled hope and the seeds to an even more insatiable desire. And yet all her endeavours are, ultimately, unsuccessful. As her lovers fail her, she desperately moves from one shoe to the next, trying each pair, wearing them out, discarding them “at an enormous rate”. Her attempts at house work, at knitting, stitching, dusting, are short-lived; “she picked it up, put it down, went on to something else”. She is a confused, abortive *Cendrillon*, and as the novel develops, she finds herself slipping from the shoes of *Cendrillon* to the Ugly Sisters. As they butcher their feet to fit into Cinderella’s slipper, so too does Emma, in desperation, compromise and sacrifice herself, first metaphorically in adultery, then literally in suicide and as her hair is cut for Charles, leaving “several little holes in her skin” and “patches of white in that beautiful black hair”. She reverses *Cendrillon* and moves from one attending the ball to one ‘living among the ashes’. The “big blue country” of her fantasies shifts into the arsenic’s “blue jar” and she devours the blue world which, ultimately, has devoured her. Thus, the shoe, which cradles, hinders and motivates, is an apt symbol for Madame Bovary’s destructive fairy tale, the slippers she fits and forces herself into, and her tangled relationship with Romance.

And if Emma’s intangible desires are represented by the shoe, Emma, perhaps, is left as the foot. For she is circumscribed not merely by her ‘Romantic yearnings’, but is varnished and cosseted by lovers, husband, gender, title, class, even author. Images of incarceration, of “stifling”, “cramped” claustrophobia, permeate the novel. She, immured in her marriage, is the “espalièred apricot-trees...held between clay walls”. Rodolphe “grip[s] her hand, and he felt it warm and trembling like a captive dove that strives to take wing again”; it is “the *walls* of the house [which] seemed to carry [Léon’s] shadow”. That her lovers and husband are likened to walls is somewhat apt: in demarcating limits and restrictions, they encourage progression and, to an extent, transgression. The same can be

said of shoes. Emma describes her marriage as “just like the buckle of the complicated set of straps which cramped her every step”. Her engagement to Charles promises escape, and results in incarceration, but it is this entrapment which then motivates her: “Every effort to curtail it served but to augment it...domestic mediocrity drove her to sumptuous fantasies, marital caresses to adulterous desires”. Whilst the shoe is given to slaves when emancipated as a symbol of apparent freedom, it is also emblematic of a cramping, cossetting western convention. The shoe, then, seems at the heart of the tangled relationship between freedom and captivity which marriage in a patriarchal society both offers and breeds. More obviously, though, it is a means of repression. In Charles’ Rousseauesque childhood, he is allowed to “run about *without any shoes*...like young animals do”. The shoe, then, seems representative of the suppression of primitive, natural instincts by (bourgeois) society. In psychological terms, the dominion of the superego over id-driven desires. And as Charles is forced to “get into line”, to throw down his hat as it is “*the thing to do*” and to move from barefoot to wearing “sturdy boots” in the first pages of the novel, so Emma – who, even in and after death, remains tightly clasped within slippers – constantly reminds of her incarceration. “The idea of having a male child was like an anticipated revenge for the powerlessness of her past...a woman is constantly thwarted”, Flaubert writes in free indirect style, paradoxically both giving a woman a voice whilst controlling, filtering it through his own. Flaubert only allows the reader to *hear* Emma, an untouched voice, after her marriage starts to disintegrate: “oh, why, dear God, did I marry him?” she states simply. Like her three coffins, she is cocooned in three layers of male narration and male story. Charles stands on either side of her; Homais finishes and triumphs; Flaubert writes. Homais, the archetypal bourgeois *homme*, chooses her epitaph: Madame Bovary, ‘*amabilem conjugem calcas*’. Emma is remembered not as herself, but as her social position, and all this position distorts and demands. The shoe, thus, can serve as an emblem of the bourgeois, male perspective which curtails Emma and, framing her, frames a lie. If the shoe is a male, in particular a ‘Flaubertian’ fantasy, Emma’s foot held within the attractive slipper is symbolic of a woman immured in the male gaze. Male sexual desires and bourgeois social expectations are projected onto, buckled and strapped around, Madame Bovary.

Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary* with one of Louise Colet’s shoes on his desk. When lost, it is rumoured that he would sniff the slipper for inspiration. The novel, it appears, was partly borne out of a shoe, and to me this seems hardly surprising. Louise’s slipper, like Emma’s, serves as a synecdoche for the female body, and arouses sexual, as well as poetic, potency. The shoe lies at the heart of the tangled relationship between Emma and her fairy tale, lovers and author. For each, it is unclear whether the slipper they slip onto *Madame Bovary* facilitates freedom and movement, or straps in captivity. As Flaubert lowered his nose to his lover’s shoe, he too, both literally and metaphorically, placed himself into the shoes of Madame Bovary as he filtered his voice through hers and, insisting “Madame Bovary, c’est moi!”, wrote in *discours indirect libre*. The shoe, thus, seems symbolic not merely of Emma’s apparent androgyny, but also, increasingly, of Flaubert’s; of the intricately looped, strapped relationship between character and author. More widely, a fixation with the shoe is symptomatic of an author, and novel, fixated on change and continuity. Writing at the time of a fast-encroaching industrialisation, a relentless modernity which was rapidly homogenising French community, the shoe is at once emblematic of a desire to record the brisk steps of French society, and to preserve, buckle and savour the *Moeurs de Province*. Despite my professions that I should and would not reduce and buckle Flaubert’s novel to a slipper, it seems indisputable that the role played by the shoe in *Madame Bovary* is multifaceted and fundamental.

(2,498 words excluding title and bibliography)

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