

Emma Crosses the Channel

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“As we were watching the Nile dash itself against the sharp granite rocks, he gave a cry: ‘I have found it! Eureka! Eureka! I will call her Emma Bovary!’ And he repeated it several times; he savored the name Bovary, pronouncing the ‘o’ very short.”¹ Thus Maxime Du Camp, the man who accompanied Gustave Flaubert on his journey through Egypt between 1849 and 1851, records the manner in which the author of *Madame Bovary* decided upon the name of the heroine of his novel. Because Flaubert, in his correspondence, describes his painstaking search for the exact words and phrases, constantly writing and revising, it is difficult to believe that the name “Emma Bovary” derived from sudden inspiration and had neither ancestress nor model in any other work. More logical is the theory that Flaubert, in naming the principal character of his “Story of Provincial Life” Emma Bovary, was influenced by the name with which Jane Austen christened her principal character of provincial life “Emma Woodhouse.” Despite the ordinariness of their first names and the more obvious contrasts between the novels, the resemblances between the two Emmas, the relationship of the seemingly distant “Woodhouse” and “Bovary,” and Flaubert’s intellectual as well as social ties with English literature and English people suggest that the name which suddenly registered on his consciousness while sitting on a rock in Egypt had its forbear across the English channel from his homeland.

Both Emma Woodhouse and Emma Bovary are young women of energy and imagination whose horizons are limited by their sex and who expend much of their creativity in matching life with the literary fictions surrounding love and marriage upon which they have fed. The characters differ, however, in the objects of their manipulation as well as in the ultimate success of their schemes. In Jane Austen’s *Emma*, the major character attempts to manipulate those about her, her ultimate objective being marriage between suitable partners:

¹Francis Steegmuller, *Flaubert in Egypt, A Sensibility on Tour*. A narrative drawn from Gustave Flaubert’s Travel Notes and Letters (translated and edited). (London: The Bodley Head, 1972), p. 135.

‘And you have forgotten one matter of joy to me,’ said Emma, ‘and a very considerable one — that I made the match myself. I made the match, you know, four years ago; and to have it take place, and be proved in the right, when so many people said Mr. Weston would never marry again, may comfort me for any thing.’²

Despite Knightley’s attempts to dissuade her and his suggestion that Emma merely “made a lucky guess,” Emma persists, promising that she will make “only one more” marriage, “only for Mr. Elton. Poor Mr. Elton” (pp. 6–7). Since Emma Woodhouse is less than successful in arranging either this marriage or any other, the novel that documents her growth from blind egoism to eventual self-knowledge ends on an optimistic note.

In contrast, the main character in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, seeks not to manipulate others as much as to throw herself into the cauldron of life whether in her early attempts to follow the religious practices of the saints, “To mortify the flesh, she tried to go a whole day without food; and she puzzled her head for some vow to accomplish,” or in her efforts to parallel her life with those of the heroines of romantic novels.³ Although both Emmas eventually discover that life does not follow the formula of the romantic novels, Emma Bovary is more successful in imitating the behavior of the heroines. Because it is herself on whom she tests life, ultimately she is mortally burned. The novel ends tragically whereas its predecessor closed comedically.

Resemblances between the two Emmas appear in the writers’ treatment of their material and in the backgrounds of the young women. Both writers rely on satire in building their portraits. Both Emmas grow up in motherless homes and are alone with their fathers when the novels open. Both daughters are somewhat spoiled; both draw and paint as hobbies; both consider themselves superior to most, if not all, of the people in the small provincial towns in which they live; and both are strong, valuing freedom although uncertain as to how to attain it.

As to their first name: “Emma” comes from the old German “Emma” or “Imma,” according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names*, which then continues the description — “hypocoristic forms of names compounded with ‘Ermin,’ ‘Irmin’ ‘whole,’ ‘universal.’ ”⁴ It was

²Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), p. 6.

³Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Alan Russell (1950; rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1974), p. 48.

⁴E.G. Withycombe, *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 46.

introduced into England as early as the eleventh century but for a long time was usually used in the shortened form “Em” until, in the middle of the eighteenth century, Prior’s poem “Henry and Emma” revived interest in the earlier form. According to another dictionary of names, “It became popular in England following the publication of a book by Jane Austen by that name.”⁵

Although dictionaries of French names do not indicate any similar popularity of the name “Emma” in France, studies of Flaubert’s work reveal that the name was often used for domestics and also “had essentially bourgeois connotations.”⁶ According to Alison M. Turner, these associations may have contributed to Emma’s strong dislike for her name.⁷ That dislike may also have been coupled with her dislike for the fact that she was a woman, the name identifying the woman she knew best, herself. Certainly the great popularity of the name in England and the irony of its primary limitation to a particular class in France might further have influenced Flaubert in his choice of a name that had crossed the channel in a novel.

What of “Woodhouse” and “Bovary”? What possible relationship might two names separated by almost an entire alphabet have with one another? Since the translation of “wood” is *bois*, the leap from distance to proximity inspires further speculation. While “woodshed” is *bûcher*, a closer resemblance to “Bovary” may be heard in *bouveter*, a derivative of *bois* whose meaning is “to groove and tongue” or to match boards.⁸ But, if these are inconclusive and, perhaps, ephemeral relationships, the historical interaction of England and France in the life and works of Flaubert provides a more substantial argument for his familiarity with Austen’s work.

Although in his *Correspondance*, as well as in “Mémoires d’un fou,” Flaubert reveals much about his early life, there are not only gaps, but, in the latter work, according to Philip Spencer, Flaubert is less than accurate about his early years.⁹ In “New Light on Flaubert’s Youth,” Spencer describes the rich bundle of letters and manuscripts discovered in the early 1950’s that provides new insights into the relationship between Flaubert

⁵Evelyn Wells, *A Treasury of Names* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1946), p. 75.

⁶Alison M. Turner, “Why Emma? Subtlety and Subtitle in *Madame Bovary*,” *Romance Notes* 20 (1979):53.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Cassell’s New French Dictionary*, ed. Ernest A. Baker, rev. ed. by J.L. Manchon (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1951); other theories abound, including the resemblance between “Bovary” and “bovine.” See Turner, 52.

⁹Philip Spencer, “New Light on Flaubert’s Youth,” *French Studies* 8, No. 2 (Apr., 1954), 99.

and the Collier family, particularly between him and Gertrude Collier. Spencer, through a close analysis of the material, reconstructs the probable friendship between Gertrude Collier and Gustave Flaubert during the years around 1835–37. Relying on a manuscript — “Recollections of Bygone Times” — a manuscript notebook — “Written by Request,” which contains an account of youth in fictional form — and a bundle of letters, Spencer tells us of this English family who came to France in about 1823. The father was rigidly English and not at all interested in learning French. The two daughters, Gertrude and Harriet, became friends with Flaubert’s sister Caroline before getting to know the brother. There is a brief description of the first meeting between Gertrude and Caroline. When Gertrude turned to her father querying, “Isn’t she beautiful?” Caroline interjected, “I must tell you, I understand English.”¹⁰ One must assume that if Caroline understood English, her brother also must have known the language.

The Colliers met the Flauberts in Trouville. According to Flaubert the year was 1835 when Gertrude was fifteen and Gustave was “au cinquième.” Although Gertrude gives the year as 1836, she also mentions the fact that Harriet was then ailing. Spencer, on the basis of this evidence, believes that 1837 must have been the year. At this time Gertrude was seventeen and Gustave was two years younger. Since Spencer wishes to establish the fact that an intimacy existed between the two young people, he decides that 1837 seems a more logical time. For, it is in these manuscripts that Gertrude records how she and Flaubert strolled the beach and discussed their ideas, as young people at that age, during adolescence, do:

‘And you,’ he said, turning to me, as we were slowly walking up and down along the shore, ‘What do you read?’ ‘Oh, I read just to amuse myself.’ ‘Do you really? What a pity! Do not read as children read, to amuse yourself, nor as ambitious people read, to get instruction. No read to live.’¹¹

What was the literature that they were discussing?

Was Gertrude reading *Emma*? Was Gustave reading *Emma*? Or was he reading *La Nouvelle Emma*, the translation of Austen’s work that appeared in France as early as 1816?¹² Had either of them picked up the more recent translation that was published in 1833?¹³ Or would Flaubert not see this work until 1844, ’46, or ’49 when Austen’s novels went into

¹⁰Ibid., 100.

¹¹Ibid., 103.

¹²Noel King, “Jane Austen in France,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 8 (June, 1953), 1.

¹³Kate et Paul Rague, *Jane Austen* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1914), p. 53.

subsequent French editions? Since by this time, “Après quinze ans de silence, de nouvelles éditions . . . puis se multiplient, montrant que des critiques intelligent ont fini par vaincre l’indifférence du grand public,”¹⁴ it is difficult to believe that Flaubert, an omnivorous reader, had not met Emma Woodhouse.¹⁵

One further and important link, however, exists: Sir Walter Scott. Not only did Scott favorably review *Emma* as early as 1816 in the *Quarterly Review* [for October 1815], but he amplified on his statement in his “Article on Miss Austen’s Novels,” (1821) that was included in *The Miscellaneous Prose Works* published in 1849.¹⁶ In both articles, Scott praises Austen, calling *Emma* a “modern novel” through which runs “the current of ordinary life.”¹⁷ Scott writes, “Those, again, who delight in the study of human nature, may improve in the knowledge of it, and in the profitable application of that knowledge, by the perusal of such fictions as those before us.”¹⁸ Thus in Scott’s own writing, we hear a statement similar to Flaubert’s remarks to Gertrude Collier. Furthermore, in Scott’s description of Austen’s approach to her subject matter, we also hear resonances of Flaubert’s later statements of his aims. For Scott claims that in Austen’s work we observe “the art of copying from nature as she really exists in the common walks of life, and presenting to the reader, instead of splendid scenes of an imaginary world, a correct and striking representation of that which is daily taking place around him.”¹⁹ We know that Flaubert too attempted to immerse himself in experiences or situations that simulated those of his characters and that he sought to record with honesty as well as with art the reactions of his characters. In a letter of January 16, 1852, to Louise Colet, Flaubert writes:

There are in me, literally speaking, two distinct persons: one who is infatuated with bombast, lyricism, eagle flights, sonorities of phrase and

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Flaubert spent a good deal of time with the Collier sisters in 1843 when he lived in Paris. We read that he had the habit of leaving his residence in the Latin Quarter about once a week to visit friends in other parts of the city, among them the Colliers. Later, recollecting this time, he writes of having spent entire afternoons with the two women. *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857*, selected, edited, and translated by Francis Steegmuller (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard U. P., 1980), pp. 19, 25. One can only speculate that English literature, particularly the novel, occasionally entered their conversation.

¹⁶Sir Walter Scott, *The Miscellaneous Prose Works*, 18 (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell; and London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1849), 209–249.

¹⁷B.C. Southam, *Jane Austen’s Literary Manuscripts* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 20. Scott’s article from the *Quarterly Review*, 14, is quoted here.

¹⁸Scott, 249.

¹⁹Ibid., 210.

lofty ideas; and another who digs and burrows into the truth as deeply as he can, who likes to treat a humble fact as respectfully as a big one, who would like to make you feel almost 'physically' the things he reproduces. The former likes to laugh, and enjoys the animal sides of man.²⁰

As well as the similarities between the aims of Flaubert and those of Austen, as noted by Scott, the novelist functioned as intermediary between Austen and Flaubert in another way: he invaded the world of Emma Bovary. Flaubert informs us on a most direct level of his acquaintance with Scott's novels through several references in the text. We read:

And so for six months of her sixteenth year, Emma soiled her hands with this refuse of old lending libraries. Coming later to Sir Walter Scott, she conceived a passion for the historical and dreamed about oak chests, guardrooms, minstrels.²¹

Ironically, it is Scott the novelist whose work Flaubert chose to write about, not Scott the critic who praised Austen's realism. But when a writer like Flaubert whose reputation for thoroughness, for precision, and for truth to reality, is quoted as shouting, "Eureka! I have found it! I will call her Emma Bovary," one can more than suspect that he is burying beneath that single statement, a mass of facts — many of which crossed the channel with *Emma*.

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²⁰Flaubert, *Letters*, p. 154.

²¹*Madame Bovary*, trans. Russell, p. 50.