

PERFORMING THE FUNCTION OF A CLINICIAN AS A WRITER: GUSTAVE FLAUBERT AND MADAME BOVARY

M. Colledge, Senior Research Fellow, Nuffield Institute for Health, Centre for Research in Primary Care, University of Leeds

Saint-Beuve, an eminent nineteenth century literary critic, referred to Flaubert's writing as a literature of the scalpel, dissecting not only the text but the characters within themselves, getting beneath their skin, describing their feelings and their social encounters with medical metaphors: 'Son and brother of distinguished surgeons, M. Flaubert handles the pen like others the scalpel. Anatomists and physiologists I meet you at every turn.'¹

In his novel *Madame Bovary*,² descriptions of death and love are crafted like a pathologist would give a description of a diseased organ. Not only does he dissect the characters, but also the text, sweating hours over a single word, sentence or comma.³ Two strong influences on this style were his childhood experiences and the later onset of his epilepsy.^{4,5}

Flaubert (1821-1880) was born in Rouen on the first floor of the corner apartment in the special wing of the Hôtel Dieu, the municipal hospital. His father Achille-Cleophas was the director and chief surgeon of the institute, one of the new practitioners to emerge from the *École de Sante*, in Paris, which developed as a result of the changes in the political organisation of medicine in post-revolutionary France. He was a distinguished pupil and came to the attention of Duputryen who recommended him for the post at the Hôtel Dieu.⁶ For the first 25 years of his life Gustave lived with blood, suffering and death. The billiard room on the first floor (now a medical museum) opened out onto a ward. He also had a ringside seat for dissections. Reflecting on his childhood experiences, he writes: 'The dissecting room of the hospital gave out onto our garden. How many times my sister and I used to climb the trellis, cling to the vines, and peer curiously at the cadavers on their slabs.'⁷

The main narrative plot of *Madame Bovary* depicts Emma Bovary, an overtly sentimental young woman whose unrealistic fantasies on life and love cause her to be dissatisfied with her dull, doctor husband. She has two hopeless love affairs and finally dies from a self-administered dose of arsenic. The novel, which is set in a rural doctor's practice in a Normandy village, was written at a time when medicine was evolving within a political and social sphere to control the nation's health, following political change in post-revolutionary France which led to the emergence of medicine as a liberal and protected profession. A two-tier hierarchy was established in the medical body, either doctors and surgeons who had qualified in one of the new schools of medicine, or *Officiers de Sante* who had practised, under supervision, in a military hospital or had been a doctor's assistant or pupil. Distinctions between quacks and practitioners remained blurred for some time until they were all assimilated into the new regime.⁸

The social structure of the medical hierarchy is illustrated in the novel's characters, ranging from Larivière, the famous surgeon, to the village pharmacist, Homais. In the middle we have Canivet, the provincial surgeon, and Charles Bovary, an *Officier de Sante*. Homais reflects on the

ambiguity and flux in the medical profession at the time, describing himself as a pharmacist, journalist and writer of scientific manuscripts. He declares a belief in scientific progress; his conversations are peppered with pseudo-scientific terms. After reading a paper on a new surgical technique he instigates the operation on the club-foot of Hippolyte, the stable-hand. By taking the operation into the public domain, he hoped to bring fame and fortune to himself and the village. Both Charles Bovary and Hippolyte are persuaded to take part in this experiment through the force of public pressure. Charles sends to Rouen for a copy of Duval's famous text *Traité pratique du pied bot*⁹ for guidance on the operation. This was Flaubert's source for much of the technical information to describe the operation and came from his father's library. Flaubert's father had once, unsuccessfully, attempted to cure a girl of club-foot by encasing her deformity in a contraption of metal and wood.¹⁰ The book, now situated in the Flaubert Museum Hôtel Dieu, Rouen, has been underlined on page seven. 'We have cut the Achilles tendon in order to cure the club-foot.' The book presented a complicated array of diagnosis which confused Bovary and played some part in the operation's dreadful outcome: 'While he struggled with the equinus, varus and...valgus...katasterephopody...'¹¹

Bovary cuts the tendon; the boy feels no pain. Homais prepares an article outlining the operation for the local paper. Five days later the boy is in agony. Days later the foot becomes gangrenous and Canivet, a provincial surgeon, has to be sent for to amputate Hippolyte's lower leg. Sarcastically, he lectures Homais and Charles: 'That's what you get from listening to the fads from Paris...we are not so clever out here, not we!...We are no specialists we are practitioners, we would not dream of operating on someone who is in perfect health!'¹²

The secondary medical education of the time left doctors like Charles Bovary not able to cope with the new idea of a classificatory and a rationalistic approach to medicine and surgery, prescribed by the medical elite. For an *Officier de Sante* it was a question of knowing what to do after observing, and experience was integrated at the level of memory and repetition.

Flaubert's literary style has been attributed to his epilepsy. In 1908 the neurologist, Pearce Bailey, presented a study of Flaubert's epilepsy which linked his convulsions and the resulting aura to his writings.¹³ Flaubert wrote in 1853 that when he described the poisoning of Emma Bovary: 'I had so distinctly the taste of arsenic in my mouth, was so thoroughly poisoned myself, that I vomited my whole dinner.'¹⁴ Throughout the writing of *Madame Bovary* the author continually puts himself in Emma's place: 'Madame Bovary, c'est moi!'¹⁵ However, it is not clear that Flaubert was truly epileptic, but it is established he suffered from a nervous condition that was diagnosed as 'hystero-epilepsy' at the time.¹⁶

His father was autocratic and domineering, not only in



FIGURE 1

Caricature of Flaubert, scalpel in hand, dissecting Mme Bovary. Explorer Archives, Lauset Collection.

his approach to medicine, but also in family matters. Despite Flaubert's lack of interest in a legal career his father insisted he attend law school rather than medical school in Paris. His disgust and boredom with the subject, combined with frustration and despair, promoted the seizure that secured his return home to his writing. The diagnosis of epilepsy allowed him to take refuge in his disease and provided the seclusion necessary for writing. Significantly, after his father's death, he had no more attacks until he was 50, when his home was occupied by the Prussians.

His descriptions of Emma's feelings in the novel are based on the then clinically accepted diagnosis of 'Hysteria', and reflects his own depression and feelings of 'ennui'. His definition of hysteria was taken from the *Dictionnaire des Sciences Médicales*¹⁷ in his father's library and the volume appears in the novel on the 'dusty shelves' of Charles Bovary's surgery. Emma, in a state of hysteria, deliberately takes a fatal dose of arsenic. Ironically, an important text published just after *Madame Bovary* by Dr Pierre Briquet, *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l'hystérie*, proposed arsenic as 'a treatment to be tried' for the condition of hysteria.¹⁸ In his description of Emma's death Flaubert's language has an exactness that could be deemed as clinical. Her death is witnessed by all the medical characters including Dr Larivière, the famous surgeon. With him, medicine is a matter of sight: 'his gaze, sharper than a lancet, penetrated straight into your soul.'¹⁹ He watches Emma die without emotion, without a

therapeutic move.²⁰ It is at this moment that a crucial textual transaction occurs. Larivière's death scene gaze mimics that of the narrator and his literary style. Emma dies thus: 'She soon began vomiting blood. Her lips became drawn. Her limbs were convulsed, her whole body covered with brown spots, and her pulse slipped between the fingers like a stretched thread, like a harp string about to break.'²¹

In his expansive psychoanalytical biography of Flaubert, the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre suggests that the tension between Gustave and his father stemmed from his refusal to allow him to follow in his footsteps to a medical career.²² Flaubert's breakdown could be attributed to his medical disinheritance and he gains a literary revenge on his father by portraying him in a less than favourable way as Larivière. In his correspondence he likens himself to Larivière and claims to 'feel at home only in analysis - in anatomy, if I may call it such'.²³ Thus, the son succeeds to his father's position by performing, as a writer, the functions of a clinician.²⁴

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Dr Debbie Lawlor, Senior Registrar in Public Health, Nuffield Institute and Dr Richard Neal, University of Leeds, for their helpful comments and support when writing the paper. Also thanks to Anita Colledge for proof reading and editing the paper.

Please note, Malcolm Colledge is funded through the NHSE Northern and Yorkshire. Views expressed in the paper are those of the author and not necessarily of the NHSE.

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