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The cliché, the discourse, and desire of the other in Madame Bovary

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It is commonplace to refer to Emma Bovary as an avid reader of bad literature. Emma was nonetheless familiar with the great writers of the time (Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand, Walter Scott, Eugène Sue, Balzac, George Sand, and Lamartine), but what definitely left an imprint on her mind were the clichés of such romances (Amossy and Lyons 41–44; Audert 38–53; Bersani 96–97; Ramazani 274). In this article, it is argued that the rather unique story of Mademoiselle de La Vallière’s affair with Louis XIV, which Emma discovers on some painted dinner plates (38), may have been the most representative romantic cliché Madame Bovary ever retained, for all the other romantic images Emma comes across in her readings “always” summon up “the remembrance of the plates painted in honour of Louis XIV” (40). In this sense, the cliché mediates not only the discourse of the Other, as identified by Laurent Adert (38–53), but also, as I shall argue, the desire of the Other, which patterns and informs the vicissitudes of Emma Bovary’s adulterous life.

The painted dinner plates come into the picture when, one day on the way to the boarding school at the Ursuline Convent in Rouen, Emma and her father stopped at the local inn, “where, at their supper, they used painted plates that set forth the story of Mademoiselle do la Vallière” (38). Louise Françoise de La Baume Le Blanc de La Vallière (1644–1710) was Louis XIV’s mistress from 1661 to 1667, when she was supplanted by Mme de Montespan (Houssaye; Lair). Accordingly, Mademoiselle de La Vallière withdrew from court and became a nun (Clément). The painted plates depicting the story of Mademoiselle de la Vallière fulfill the typographical and rhetorical functions of the cliché (Amossy and Rosen 5, Zijderveld 7) not only as the ready-

made prototype for Emma's adulterous vicissitudes but also, respectively, as the emblematic representation of the Other's discourse and desire, which Emma attempts to adopt as her own. The inscriptions on the dinner plates, which summarily "glorified *religion*, the *tendernesses of the heart*, and the *pomps of court*" (38; emphases added), must have contained information that fostered Emma's romantic fantasies: The intrigues of a courtesan's life, the tender linguistic and physical expressions of her love affair with the king, and perhaps the tragic revelation that Mademoiselle de la Vallière ended up becoming a nun.

During her first adulterous affair, a desperately-in-love Emma makes the mistake of using clichés to proffer her devotion to Rodolphe, reenacting Mademoiselle de La Vallière's passionate affair with Louis XIV: "I am your servant, your concubine! You are my king, my idol!" (209). When Rodolphe hears this, he sees in Emma all the past mistresses he ever had: "He had so often heard these things said that they did not strike him as original" (209). The cliché lacks, as Rodolphe's Emma, "the charm of novelty, gradually falling away like a garment, laid bare the eternal monotony of passion, [which] has always the same forms and the same language" (210). In reference to Emma's clichéd terms of endearment ("the tendernesses of the heart" [38]), "Rodolphe did not distinguish, this man of so much experience, *the difference of sentiment beneath the sameness of expression*" (224, emphasis added). Before Rodolphe, Léon had fallen prey to Emma's romantic clichés (115). He would later make a similar observation.

When Rodolphe breaks up with her, Emma reenacts Mademoiselle de La Vallière's desire "to become a saint" (235). Mademoiselle de La Vallière embodies the truly clichéd representation of the desire of all other women in the same circumstances Emma finds herself: "[I]n the pride of her devoutness Emma compared herself to those grand ladies of long ago whose glory she had dreamed of over a portrait of La Vallière, and who, trailing with so much majesty the lace-trimmed trains of their long gowns, retired into solitudes to shed at the feet of

Christ all the tears of hearts that life had wounded” (237). Despite the circumstances that led her to such a life change, Mademoiselle de La Vallière really understood the meaning of a devout life while Emma resorts to religion for the wrong reasons, for she did not comprehend the mystery of faith. As Jonathan Culler puts it, “One does not simply decide to become a saint [...] and if saintliness were the proper object of a decision, the way to become a saint would not be to purchase the equipment” (188). The oddity of Emma’s actions lies not in her desire but in its mode of realization—to recite rosaries, to wear amulets, and to kiss a crucifix every night—(Herschberg-Pierrot 345), which reveals how clichéd Emma’s view of reality had become.

After Rodolphe, Emma rekindles her romantic liaison with Léon after a chance encounter at the opera in Rouen. During a conversation that parallels the one they had had three years before, Emma tries to sound more philosophical, and Leon seems to understand, like Rodolphe, that “speech is a rolling-mill that always thins out the sentiment” (258). Nevertheless, those words would renew their feelings. In the famous cab ride episode during which Léon and Emma consummate their passion, the cliché, reinstating its mechanics of reproduction, defines the “already-done.” To convince Emma that there is nothing wrong with making love in a cab, Léon’s *coup de grâce* is a cliché: ““It is done [in] Paris”” (267).

As the story of Mademoiselle de La Vallière exemplifies, the cliché proliferates not only through the “already-seen,” but also through the “already-said” and, for that matter, the “already done.” While Emma tries to follow Mademoiselle de La Vallière’s prototypical example, she cannot live up to it. Accordingly, the cliché, as a depersonalized appropriation of the desire and discourse of the Other, becomes an instrument Emma uses to escape the shortcomings of her own existence. The desire of the Other does not coincide however with Emma’s modes of realization, and this incompatibility sheds new light on the function that the cliché plays in Emma Bovary’s life.

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