Review

Author(s): Diana Knight
Review by: Diana Knight
Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/3733203
Accessed: 20-01-2016 19:12 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The promise of an introductory guide to such an important novel by such an important contemporary critic was bound to provoke curiosity and high expectations. Ever since its publication, Madame Bovary has attracted some of the finest critical writing of all theoretical persuasions, and if the fashion within Flaubert studies has turned more recently to L’Éducation sentimentale and Bouvard et Pécuchet, this is perhaps partly because the novel’s ability to sustain ever-renewed readings seems to have come to a temporary halt. Could Stephen Heath unblock this situation, and, in particular, how would he handle the constraints of a series format committed to a full account of the novel’s historical, cultural, and intellectual background and of its influence, as well as to a close reading of the text (the whole package to be aimed at students at all levels and at general readers, not to mention non-readers of French)? And how could Heath go beyond all the existing monograph introductions to Madame Bovary, with which Cambridge University Press was presumably asking him to compete?

In many ways Heath has risen to the challenge and produced a tour de force study which packs an extraordinary amount into its hundred and fifty pages, every one of which combines a perfect balance of lucidity and subtlety. Heath plays along with the traditional aim of an all-round introduction: some biography, some literary apprenticeship, the literary context, the long years of composition, the trial, and the immediate critical response. A brief final chapter (‘Sequels and Effects’) works even harder to meet editorial criteria by proving the novel’s status as a ‘landmark of world literature’ through a powerful account of Madame Bovary’s impact on subsequent generations of creative writers through to the present day. Heath leaves himself some eighty pages in the middle of his close reading of the text, to cover the inevitable themes of psychological, marital, social, and metaphysical dissatisfaction, and to convey the tension of their ideological and artistic inscription in the text. This tension is tracked by Heath through Flaubert’s recourse to an uncertain narrative voice, and more generally through Flaubert’s more abstract grappling with his difficult conception of impersonality and ‘style’. Heath refers admiringly to Sartre’s L’Idiot de la famille (and to Sartre’s notes on Madame Bovary for the unwritten fourth volume), and makes the hysteria which is shared by Emma and Flaubert into a key link between the content and creation of the novel. Indeed, Heath’s general strategy seems to have been to distil the best and most interesting writing on Flaubert, choosing his own (excellent) examples where possible, but sometimes covering very familiar ground indeed. At this level I confess myself disappointed by what is undoubtedly the best introductory study available for undergraduates or other newcomers to the novel. Heath has left himself almost no space for an original response. Whether this is the fault of the series, or whether Madame Bovary needs a new historical and theoretical context for a critical rebirth, remains unresolved. Certainly I personally hope that Heath will go on to write a different sort of book on Flaubert.

University of Nottingham

Diana Knight