

Homais, Homœopathy and *Madame Bovary*

by Hela Michot-Dietrich

The pharmacist in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) appears to play a definite role in what is perceived to be an attempt by the author to ridicule homœopathy, which was already part of French medical reality at the time of the appearance of this novel.¹ The founder of homœopathy, Samuel Hahnemann, had left his native Germany in 1835 to settle in Paris, where he died in 1843 at the age of 88, highly respected by a minority among the medical doctors and a great many former patients.² His new approach to the practice of medicine, introduced early in the nineteenth century in Europe, was to spread throughout the world. It became popular in nineteenth-century USA that it took the American Medical Association a full century to succeed in stifling it almost completely.³ Homœopathy elicited much criticism on the part of the medical establishment of the day, its holistic approach to healing going contrary to the increasing trend toward specialization in the medical profession; and the submolecular substances used as remedies were snugly denigrated as being placebos by the positivistic materialists representing the state of the art of medical science in Europe and elsewhere. Homœopathy was then and is today a controversial subject. It was much discussed in medical circles in the past century. We should thus not be surprised, given *Madame Bovary's* medical context, that some interesting links seem to connect homœopathy with the pharmacist in Flaubert's great novel, as the following investigation will illustrate.

Speculation on Homais' name has led many literary critics to conclude that he represents *homo ridiculus*, all the while parading under the guise of eminent respectability. Yet, there seems to be another play on his name that would

allow us to conclude that, the above finding notwithstanding, Flaubert must have had in mind to ridicule also the new direction in the healing arts known as homœopathy. No more than a regional difference in pronunciation is needed to equate the *homé* of the French word *homéopathie* with Homais. The German physician's name, Hahnemann, lends itself to further speculation. The German *-mann* is the equivalent of the Latin *homo* and, of course, it means *homme* in French and thus may concur with the generally accepted sleight contained in the pharmacist's diminutive name. *Hahn* means *rooster* and this combination can easily lend itself to a disparaging play on the meaning of such a name, the rooster being the strutting member of the gallinaceous bird family. Detractors of homœopathy might thus ridicule Hahnemann and his discovery as that of a vainglorious representative of the medical profession in the same manner in which Flaubert ridicules Homais as a vainglorious, strutting member of the human species - not to mention the fact that the rooster is often used to symbolize the French people, whom Flaubert also disparages in the personage of his pharmacist. Flaubert presents Homais as the epitome of the despicable French bourgeois who prides himself in his knowledge of modern science, who seems willing to sell his soul to the devil and who is devoured by the ambition of obtaining the recognition the order of the cross bestows on its holders. Homais finally prostitutes himself, turning in the wind like a weather-vane (often made of a metal rooster), and is awarded the coveted cross by the king, as the final sentence in *Madame Bovary* attests.⁴ This reward comes to him partly on the basis

Reprinted from the Stanford French Review with the kind permission of the Editor, Professor Alphonse Juillard.

Hela Michot-Dietrich teaches literature at the State University of Binghamton in New York.

of his "dévouement sans bornes" during the cholera epidemic (645). Hahnemann had published his finding on camphor as a homœopathic remedy in cases of cholera before the cholera epidemic that raged through France in 1832, and "while the profession was struggling with its conscience laymen seized upon it and used it extensively. In France the price of camphor skyrocketed to thirty francs an ounce, and the government had to cancel the import duties on it."⁵

We also know that Homais on occasion usurped the role of the medical practitioner and gave illegal medical advice in the back room of his pharmacy (404). Since Hahnemann's fame included numerous contributions to pharmacology, notably a pharmacological lexicon published in 1793,⁶ the parallel between Homais the pharmacist and Hahnemann the physician becomes even more convincing. It is thus not impossible that such knowledge and considerations contributed to Flaubert's choice of name for his less than admirable pharmacist. Furthermore, Hahnemann's competition with pharmacists, whom he did not trust to prepare the homœopathic remedies according to his instructions, his numerous quarrels with the authorities over the homœopathic physician's right to prepare their own remedies, are well known to students of the history of homœopathy. Yet, it is not our intention to equate Hahnemann with Homais but merely to show the latter as a meek and timid follower of Hahnemann's doctrine of homœopathy. He is shown to be a vacuous representative of his profession, much as Hahnemann was considered, by his enemies, to be a vacuous representative of the medical profession, unable to keep pace with the latest scientific methods.

There is, however, further evidence in *Madame Bovary* supporting the contention that Flaubert intended to ridicule homœopathy through the person of Homais. The latter is characterized as an ardent advocate of progress all the while he seems unable to grasp the full implications of what modern positivistic science represents in Flaubert's days. Homais proves his poor mastery of scientific facts when he tells that the temperature in Yonville never reaches more than 25-30 degrees centigrade. He proudly announces this to be the equivalent of 54 degrees fahrenheit! "(mesure anglaise)" (398). It is, of course, equivalent to 77-86 degrees fahrenheit. This error is a considerable one on the part of a man who prides himself on his scientific competence. Homais also ascribes to the newly emerging science of chemistry an all encompassing role. He is proud of being a chemist and declares that the composition of fertilizers, the fermentation of liquids, the analysis of gases and miasmata, and the knowledge of molecular interaction of all bodies in nature enter into the realm of chemistry (447). Hahnemann, an eminent chemist in his own right, before his discovery of homœopathy, had published several articles on chemical topics, and his miscellaneous writings include a diatribe against

drinking coffee,⁷ an essay on arsenic poisoning (Emma poisons herself with arsenic!) and how to detect it in criminal cases,⁸ and one on testing wine⁹. The latter is matched by Homais's opusculé on cider (642), Normandy's equivalent of wine, and his "art de soigner les vin malades" (414). Homais's preoccupation with the interplay of climate and agriculture might today, from an ecological point of view, seem much less exaggerated than it must have appeared to Flaubert and his contemporaries. It is clearly Flaubert's intention to ridicule Homais when he has him explain to Mme Lefrançois how important it is to ask yourself whether or not it is advisable to interfere with the balance in nature by pulling out plants and replanting them where they previously did not grow (447). Similarly, homœopaths were (and still are) laughed at for their ridiculous notions of curing people with remedies that not only do not interfere with nature, but follow nature's course, and whose chemical components were considered nil by the modern scientists. Homœopaths have always insisted that a cure can only be effected by aiding nature in its efforts to maintain or regain a certain dynamic balance.

As we follow Homais's comments in the novel, we notice that, during Emma's first illness, his advice to Bovary is contrary to the then current methods of treatment. He advocates gentle measures, "pas de médication oiseuse! du régime, voilà tout! des sédatifs, des émoullients, des dulcifiants" (516). Curiously enough, Bovary's fear of killing his patients makes him shy away from the heroic medicines of his day and Homais, with one exception, that of Hippolyte's operation, has a similar repugnance to strong medical interventions. Homais's socialistic idea expressed in his precocious exultation at the supposed success of the botched clubfoot operation serves to further illustrate the vainglorious bourgeois' meager intellectual faculties. When Homais praises Bovary for having brought to the poor what "fanaticism previously promised to only a few privileged persons" (448), it is obvious that Flaubert intends to expose anew the incompetence of such bungling progressive practitioners as Bovary and his driving force, Homais. However, what the latter somewhat awkwardly advocates in the preceding quotation supports a position held by the representatives of homœopathy. Homœopathic remedies being as inexpensive as they still are, treatment of the poor through homœopathy was and is one of the goals of the true followers of this healing art. It was Hahnemann's dream, as early as 1810, to have homœopathic remedies prepared under strict government supervision and distributed free to all who required them!¹⁰ It goes without saying that such recommendations could only provoke the ire of the powerful pharmaceutical guilds of his time.

The most surprising element to be found in *Madame Bovary* is, however, that despite the apparent

sleight at homœopathy, Flaubert presents a clear homœopathic case history in each of Emma's illnesses. Her first illness is diagnosed as a "cerebral fever" (517) and the symptoms Flaubert describes are all listed in Kent's *Repertory of Homœopathic Materia Medica*,¹¹ a reference work used the world over by practising homœopaths to help them find the remedies indicated for curing the sick. When we consider the totality of Emma's symptoms, a requirement in the evaluation of a case for homœopathic cure, we see that they point to *Hyoscyamus*, *Nux Vomica*, *Causticum* and *Lachesis*. *Hyoscyamus* is most highly represented and is particularly fitting to Emma's melancholy inclination. Of course, none of the above homœopathic remedies were used to save Emma. It is a testament to her robust health in general that she survives not only her severe illness, but also the additional stress of mustard plasters and cold compresses which constitute the milder forms of medical treatment in Flaubert's days. Surely, a few doses of *Hyoscyamus*, administered as taught by Hahnemann in his *Organon of Medicine*,¹² would most likely have cured her in fewer than the 43 days she required (516) and would have prevented the relapse. Interestingly enough, Clarke lists as one of the main accusations pointing to the usefulness of *Hyoscyamus* in a given case, "suppressed lactation,"¹³ and we know that Emma did not breastfeed her baby, since Berthe was farmed out to a wetnurse soon after her birth (408). It is also entirely conceivable that Emma's excessive romantic yearning for an unattainable, ideal love, such as the one she believed to have found with Rodolphe, is the expression of the underlying psora which, in the end, has her lose control over her actions and could have driven her to suicide, even without the financial disaster that finally pushes her to the extreme solution of poisoning herself with arsenic. Upon reading about *Hyoscyamus* in the *Materia Medica*, it becomes obvious that this had to be Emma's remedy during her first illness. In Clarke's *Materia Medica*, we read, for example, the following instructions:

"Melancholy from unfortunate love...Fright followed by convulsions...Desire to run away from the house at night...complete apathy...Perversion of every action. Vertigo...attacks of cerebral congestion with loss of consciousness...loss of appetite...vomiting...heart's action violent; tremulous; irregular...pulse intermitting... Uncommon sinking of strength. Fainting fits (repeated attacks). (934-47)"

These symptoms find their reflection in Flaubert's careful description of Emma's condition. We read that Emma had "les battements de coeur qui la frappaient à grand coup de bélier, s'accéléraient l'un après l'autre à intermittence inégales" (513). "Elle voulait réellement s'appliquer à ce travail, compter les fils de la toile" of her napkin (514) "avait le long du corps de mouvements convulsifs...Elle s'évanouit encore" (515). The symptoms of the cerebral fever

are given as "l'abattement d'Emma, car elle ne parlait pas, n'entendait rien et même semblait ne point souffrir" (517). After her relapse, "il lui survint des vomissements" (517). "Ce qu'elle aimait autre fois, à présent lui déplaisait" (519), and she falls into a state of excessive religious fervor following the recollection of the vision she had while being given the final rites during her illness (520). When we juxtapose the symptoms from Clarke to those from Flaubert, we can see their agreement. The melancholy from unfortunate love is a symptom reflected several times in Emma's life, since her love for Bovary may well be considered an unfortunate one. This symptom thus becomes, homœopathically speaking, a leading one for her case. Emma's fear that Charles may know about her having wanted to elope with Rodolphe is followed by convulsions. After she finds out that Rodolphe betrayed her, she wishes to run away and end up in the attic contemplating suicide. But she did run away many times during her affair with Rodolphe and always at night...The complete apathy corresponds to the "abattement," the perversion of every action to her counting the threads in her napkin, to her disliking now what she used to like and, above all, to her perverted religious fervor. The fact that a fictitious character can have such a clear-cut homœopathic remedy picture attests to Flaubert's masterful realism in creating Emma. Did not Flaubert himself, state, when speaking of the author's role and about Emma,, that "tout ce qu'on invente est vrai"?¹⁴ It is, however, quite plausible that the accuracy of the homœopathic remedy picture stems from Flaubert's insight into his own condition, since he is frequently quoted as having stated that "Madame Bovary, c'est moi".¹⁵

When Homais, during Emma's first illness, cautions Charles against the use of any of the supposed medicines (*prétendus remèdes*) which, while meant to attack the illness, attack the temperament, and when he characterizes Emma as having a sensitive temperament, he speaks like a true homœopath! He illustrates this kind of sensitivity by referring to his friend's dog who goes into convulsions when exposed to the odor of tobacco (516). Of course, references to such sensitivity are not the exclusive domaine of homœopaths and this passage would not support our contention were it not reinforced by yet another example indicating a homœopathic bent in Homais. During Emma's second and fatal illness, her poisoning with arsenic, after Dr Canivet's prescription of an emetic and Dr Larivière's verdict that there is no hope of saving her, Flaubert has Homais cite "pèle mêle les cantharides, l'upas, le mancenillier, la vipère" (620). The names Homais mentions on this occasion happen to translate to the homœopathic remedies *Cantharis*, *Upas*, *Euphorbia* and *Vipera*. They all turn out to be homœopathic remedies that might be useful in helping a patient overcome arsenic poisoning and they fit Emma's acute symptoms at that

time, so carefully described by Flaubert (612-23). *Cantharis* is an especially well suited homœopathic remedy for an acute case such as Emma's final illness. It might well save the life of a person afflicted with Emma's symptoms before the administration of Dr Canivet's emetic. It is this passage which must alert any homœopath reading *Madame Bovary* to the homœopathic connection.

Although there appears to be no direct reference to Hahnemann or to homœopathy in Flaubert, *Correspondence*,¹⁶ the circumstantial evidence in *Madame Bovary* is so convincing that we must see Flaubert's aversion to homœopathy as a fact. Such speculation is further corroborated by the lack of any direct mention of homœopathy in *L'éducation sentimentale* (1869). At the end of the novel, we learn that:

"Pellerin, après avoir donné dans le fouriérisme, l'homœopathie, les tables tournantes, l'art gothique et la peinture humanitaire, était devenu photographe; et sur toutes les murailles de Paris, on le voyait représenté en habit noir, avec un corps minuscule et une grosse tête."¹⁷

The juxtaposition of homœopathy to séance tables again suggests the opinion Flaubert must have held regarding homœopathy. Furthermore, Pellerin is the painter who could never make up his mind as to what style to imitate, whose final portrait of Rosanette was created to embarrass Frederic and in whose painting of her dead child "le rouge, le jaune, le vert et l'indigo se heurtaient par taches violentes, en faisaient une chose hideuse" (437).

Of course, Pellerin's swelled head (*grosse tête*) shown on the advertisements for his new profession, photography, illustrates the ironic ambiguity inherent in a person who believes his head to be the most important part of his anatomy, while others perceive him as a pompous egotist in search of fame by any means. The fact that these ads are seen all over Paris attests that he has attained this fame. As in *Madame Bovary*, where we learn of Homais's fame (*la croix*) in the conclusion of the novel, Pellerin's celebrity is mentioned at the very end of *L'éducation sentimentale*. Even though Pellerin is a character of lesser importance than Homais, he is presented in a manner not unlike that by which the pharmacist is characterized: his professionalism is shown in a questionable light and his dabbling in various artistic styles in Fourier's utopian ideas and especially in homœopathy and seances further denigrates his character. As we can see, Flaubert knew about homœopathy in the years when he was completing *L'éducation sentimentale*. The evidence presented in this essay allows us to conclude that he must have known of it at an earlier time, when he was writing *Madame Bovary*. Consequently, it is entirely plausible that Flaubert intentionally imposed the homœopathic connection on

Homais because he most likely shared with his father and brother, both of whom were allopathic physicians, the general contempt for those who are professing this gentle approach to healing so far removed from what the positivistic scientists of his day could conceive. No wonder Homais had to be characterized as a *fumbling* scientist, since modern representatives of the medical profession could not admit to the power of the invisible, the power homœopathy has captured in its remedies and which has become scientifically conceivable only since we have come to know the power of the split atom. □

References:

- 1 Michel Conan-Mériadec, *L'homœopathie aujourd'hui, vous connaissez?* (Vecchi, 1984)175
- 2 Artur Braun, *Methodik der Homœopathie* (Regensburg: Johannes Sonntag, 1975) 25
- 3 Martin Kaufman, *Homeopathy in America: The Rise and Fall of a Medical Heresy* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1971).
- 4 Gustave Flaubert, *Oeuvres* (Gallimard, 1951) 1:642. All further references to the novel are indicated in parenthesis within the text.
- 5 Harris L Coulter, *Divided Legacy: The Conflict between Homœopathy and the American Medical Association* (Richmond: North Atlantic Books, 1973) 263
- 6 Samuel Hahnemann, *Apothekerlexikon* (1973; rpt. Ulm/Donau: Karl F.Haug Verlag, 1971)
- 7 Samuel Hahnemann, *Kleine medizinische Schriften* (1829; rpt. Heidelberg: Karl F Haug Verlag, 1971) 2:52-75
- 8 Samuel Hahnemann, *Ueber die Arsenvergiftung, ihre Hulfe und gerichtliche Ausmittlung* (1782; rpt.Heidelberg: Arkana Verlag, 1983)
- 9 Samuel Hahnemann, "Ueber den Einfluss einiger Luftarten auf die Gahrung des Weines," *Crells chem Analen* 1 (1788)4. See also "Beitrage zur Weinprüfungslehre," *Scherfs Beitrage Polizei und Volksarznei* (Leipzig: 1792) vol.3.
- 10 Samuel Hahnemann, *Organon der Heilkunst* 6th ed.(1843; ed.6B, Kurt Hochstetter, Heidelberg: Haug, 1974)150
- 11 James Tyler Kent, *Repertory of Homœopathic Materia Medica* (1877; rpt. Calcutta: Setu Dey, 1983)
- 12 Hahnemann, *Organon der Heilkunst*.
- 13 John Henry Clarke. *A Dictionary of Practical Materia Medica* (Homœopathic Publishing Co 1900).
- 14 Edouard Maynal, "Introduction," *Madame Bovary* (Garnier, 1961) xxiv.
- 15 Maynal xxi.
- 16 Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance* (Conard, 1926-1933).
- 17 Gustave Flaubert, *Oeuvres* (Gallimard, 1951) 2:454.