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 **Elements of a Mystery Play in *Madame Bovary*: *mœurs de province***

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Abstract

In *Madame Bovary* anti-clerical Homais recognizes that the Bible, like mystery plays, is offensive. Consequently, he does not want scripture to fall into the hands of his daughter Athalie. His remarks and other spicy details suggest elements of a farcical mystery play in the story of adulterous Emma.

Elements of a Mystery Play in *Madame Bovary: mœurs de province*

Peter S. Rogers

WHEN I CONSIDERED THE STUDIES on language dedicated to *Madame Bovary: mœurs de province*, its categorization as a document of realism, and the portrayal of Flaubert as a realist, I found that readers had generally ignored the novel's extensive religious discourse.¹ A recent encyclopedia devoted to Flaubert makes no mention of *Madame Bovary* under the rubric for the Bible.² Yet it is the relation of sacred scripture to the mystery play that is discussed in the first reported exchange between the pharmacist and the pastor of Yonville-l'Abbaye.

At the end of the second part of *Madame Bovary*, Father Bournisien and Homais discuss the comparative merits of music and literature. The pharmacist approached the topic with the pastor when he noted the priest's silence regarding the suggestion that Charles take Emma to the opera in Rouen. The pastor felt that music was less dangerous than literature. It is then that Homais takes up the defense, not of novels or of poetry, but of the theatre as he expands on its moral value as well as its ability to present virtue in a pleasing manner. He explains himself: "*Castigat ridento mores*, Monsieur Bournisien! Ainsi, regardez la plupart des tragédies de Voltaire: elles sont semées habilement de réflexions philosophiques qui en font pour le peuple une véritable école de morale et de diplomatie."³ Recommending Voltaire as the example of a writer offering moral education is quite a proposition for the pastor to hear, especially since most of his works were on the Catholic index of forbidden books. The priest's reaction to Voltaire does not silence Homais, who argues that, even though a particular work may not be excellent, this is no reason to condemn all plays. Bournisien insists that the theatre is a place of temptation. *Madame Bovary mère* had already protested that Emma was reading "de mauvais livres, des ouvrages qui sont contre la religion et dans lesquels on se moque des prêtres par des discours tirés de Voltaire" (Flaubert, *Bovary* 219). Flaubert leavens his mystery play with contrasting opinions on the use of Voltaire, but an opinion on one book unites priest and pharmacist.

Homais does not understand why the Church excommunicates actors since they performed in plays that were an integral part of the liturgy. "Oui, on jouait, on représentait au milieu du chœur des espèces de farces, appelées mystères, dans lesquelles les lois de la décence souvent se trouvaient offen-



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