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Introduction: fin de siècle, fin de famille?

> Vous croyez entendre un soupir, c'est une citation, – serrer une femme sur votre cœur, c'est un volume.[1]

> En ce moment, tous les littérateurs, et les plus dissemblables comme talent, affirment descendre de Flaubert . . . Ah! s'il était vivant, comme ils tairaient cette prétendue descendance![2]

8 May 1880 . . . Amidst the numerous *faux débuts* which might be said to have inaugurated the *fin de siècle*, perhaps none has the capacity to engage scholars of French literary and cultural studies alike more productively than the death of Gustave Flaubert. Indeed, few names resonate more profoundly in the echo chamber of nineteenth-century family life (and the fictional representation of its discontents). A point of rupture which was at the time far more conspicuous in its public splendour, and towards which present-day cultural analysts and readers of poetry might turn more immediately, is the burial of Victor Hugo on 1 June 1885, not least because this facilitated the self-liberation of Mallarmé's *Crise de vers*. In Roger Shattuck's words, 'By this orgiastic ceremony France unburdened itself of a man, a literary movement, and a century'.[3]

However, critics of the novel, not least those whose reading responds in varying ways to the paradigm of bourgeois fiction enunciated in Tony Tanner's classic account of *Adultery in the Novel*, will need little persuasion about the importance of Flaubert for the generation of Naturalist novelists who published in Paris in the final decades of the century.[4] In very different ways *Madame Bovary* and *L'Education sentimentale* examined the issues of marital ennui and extra-marital seduction, and the *fin-de-siècle* imperative of retrospection compelled Zola *et al.* to respond to these accounts of unhappiness. Ever since Denis de Rougemont's famous study of the representation in the West of unhappy desires, it has been a critical commonplace to assert the permanence of the theme of adultery.[5] As Catherine Belsey notes, 'people like reading about desire';

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indeed, 'in this field everyone is an expert'.[6] In the terms of Léon Jaybert's study, *De l'adultère dans les différents âges et chez les différentes nations*, 'L'adultère est de tous les temps et de toutes les nations, parce que toujours et partout il y a eu des passions aveugles et des unions mal assorties'.[7] More specifically, though, Tanner's account of such transgression in the 'bourgeois novels' of Rousseau, Goethe and Flaubert is only the most famous of a number of analyses which highlight the theme's particular urgency, seen as coincident with the rise of the middle classes in much of Europe and as prior to the birth of Modernism. This urgency is merely set into relief by the self-conscious literary perversity of Gustave Droz's bestseller *Monsieur, madame et bébé* (1866) which, in Zeldin's words, 'proposed to do what no one else had done: write about love in marriage'.[8] What needs to be defined is the relationship between claims about the apparent ubiquity of the theme of adultery and the historical specificity identified within the bourgeois novel.[9]

Tanner suggests that a shifting of social norms around the turn of the century is reflected in a 'move from the more realistic novel of contract and transgression . . . to what might be called the novel of metaphor'.[10] In Tanner's terms, 'as bourgeois marriage loses its absoluteness, its unquestioned finality, its "essentiality", so does the bourgeois novel'. This notion of a shift is echoed in Adam Phillips's book, *Monogamy*: 'Since the second half of the nineteenth century a lot of people have become agnostic about monogamy.'[11] The disaffection with the 'novel of contract and transgression' which inspires the development of Modernist prose is sketched by Tanner in terms of a triple impulse, embodied by Lawrence, Proust and Joyce. This image of literary practice in mutation needs to be clarified by a more exact historical and geographical focus on the precise manner in which bourgeois realism reached its culmination with the advent of naturalism towards the end of the nineteenth century, and then waned. As Maupassant observes in a piece which anticipates the publication of Zola's *Pot-Bouille*:

> Le sujet n'est pas neuf; il n'en apparaît que plus intéressant, l'adultère ayant toujours été la grande préoccupation des sociétés, le grand thème des écrivains, le grand *joujou* de l'esprit des hommes. Et on ferait une bien curieuse étude en recherchant de quelle façon, tantôt plaisante et tantôt tragique, les générations successives ont jugé les manquements à cet accouplement légal qu'on nomme le mariage.[12]

The subject is today far from moribund as a source of literary inspiration, and quite naturally those so-inclined will also be able to cite examples of subsequent texts which still manipulate the motif of adultery in

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more banal ways (most visibly in the form of television soap operas). However, this may articulate merely the residual influence of family structures fashioned largely during the bourgeois century, or in other words the extent to which we still find classic family narratives so readable and habitable.

Beyond (or rather behind) the canonical nineteenth-century versions of Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert, researchers will also find an array of commonplace examples by figures such as Kock, Feuillet, Champfleury, Cherbuliez, and Ponson du Terrail.[13] It may not be simply because of its multiple manifestations that adultery in nineteenth-century fiction holds such fascination. This motif also acquires a symptomatic quality when we analyze a culture established by the disestablishment of 1789, and engaged in an obsessive quest for political legitimation through property and propriety. As Lynn Hunt explains, the revolutionary value of *fraternité* is merely the most conspicuous sign of the way in which 'the French had a kind of collective political unconscious that was structured by narratives of family relations'.[14] Implicit in the conceptualization of the home as 'référence ultime, unique bastion des convenances et des hiérarchies',[15] the metonymical relationship of family to state clearly raises the stakes in the fictional analysis of the transgression which most directly threatens the *foyer*. Jules Cauvière, for example, a professor at the Institut Catholique de Paris, defined the home as the 'molécule initiale de la société civile'.[16] Moreover, male paranoia about wifely adultery implicitly acknowledges the limits of what might be termed the bourgeois culture of possession. Krafft-Ebing, for instance, says that female infidelity 'is morally of much wider bearing, and should always meet with severer punishment at the hands of the law. The unfaithful wife not only dishonours herself, but also her husband and her family, not to speak of the possible uncertainty of paternity.'[17] As Flaubert writes to Louise Colet on 13 March 1854:

> Où y a-t-il . . . une virginité quelconque? Quelle est la femme, l'idée, le pays, l'océan que l'on puisse posséder à soi, pour soi, tout seul? Il y a toujours quelqu'un qui a passé avant vous . . . Si ce n'a été le corps, ça a été l'ombre, l'image. Mille adultères rêvés s'entrecroisent sous le baiser qui vous fait jouir . . . Et dans la vraie acception du mot tout le monde est cocu – et archi-cocu.[18]

The inventory of objects of desire in Flaubert's opening question suggests the metaphorical association between forms of possession which operates in and on nineteenth-century French culture: firstly, sexual–domestic control over women; then, decadent cynicism about 'intellectual property'; finally, mastery on land and sea upon which

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depends the colonial adventure (the reference to 'le pays' perhaps also implying land-ownership to which the bourgeoisie aspires in avaricious imitation of the aristocracy it wishes to depose).

As Maupassant realizes, the fabled anxiety of influence habitually imposed upon authors is experienced by *fin-de-siècle* writers as a pervasive state in such a self-consciously degenerative culture. Like Flaubert he wonders whether an idea can ever be truly original:

> Il faut être, en effet, bien fou, bien audacieux, bien outrecuidant ou bien sot, pour écrire encore aujourd'hui! Après tant de maîtres aux natures si variées, au génie si multiple, que reste-t-il à dire qui n'ait été dit? Qui peut se vanter, parmi nous, d'avoir écrit une page, une phrase qui ne se trouve déjà, à peu près pareille, quelque part. Quand nous lisons, nous, si saturés d'écriture française que notre corps entier nous donne l'impression d'être une pâte faite avec des mots, trouvons-nous jamais une ligne, une pensée qui ne nous soit familière, dont nous n'ayons eu, au moins, le confus pressentiment?[19]

Such a corrective from this latter-day La Bruyère articulates the fears of those who wrote (and those who write) about late nineteenth-century fiction. Though Mallarmé might have been able to target Hugo, Flaubert appears to have been more resistant to parody, not least because of his own parodic strategies. Earlier critics are clear-sighted in this regard. André Maurois quotes Thibaudet's description of Flaubert as 'le Cervantès du roman français' and develops this comparison in the context of the Spaniard's parodic verve:

> Vers 1850, le public français, déçu par la monarchie et par la république, par le drame lyrique et par le roman historique, par les excès de la passion comme par ceux de la révolution était tout prêt à goûter un livre qui brûlerait ce qu'il avait adoré, tout comme le public espagnol avait été prêt au temps de *Don Quichotte* à accueillir une parodie des romans de chevalerie.[20]

It is in the ambivalence of parody that we may measure the ambivalence of Flaubert's treatment of adultery, a motif much cited, exciting readers and inciting litigation, which nevertheless revels in its own vainness and vanity.

Beyond the realm of literature, the debates of politicans and intellectuals in the early years of the Third Republic inflect as much as they reflect a crisis of family values, in which our own *fin de siècle* – and indeed *fin de millénaire* – cannot help but find its embarrassed reflection. To the extent that legislation can be viewed in hindsight as a precipitation of such debates, readers of family fictions cannot ignore the *Loi Naquet* of 1884. This is important not only because in practical terms it might have freed unhappy couples in numbers and ways which the previous laws on

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separation did not permit, and redefined the liberational quality sometimes ascribed to adultery, but also because it signalled the fragility of state-sponsored idealism about the indestructibility of the married couple. However unrecognizable as an adequate divorce law it might appear to a late twentieth-century audience, the *Loi Naquet* did articulate an admission on the part of the French state that the family unit was not indissoluble. Roddey Reid suggests that the notion of 'crisis' is really just a general effect of modern discourse: 'The so-called modern domestic family . . . has been always already dysfunctional, in crisis, *en miettes*, porous, and open to the outside . . . [It] has existed only insofar as it has been lamented in discourse as loss or absence and thus desired'.[21] Even if one acknowledges Reid's argument that the term 'crisis' should not conceal a counterfactual (or should one say 'counterfictional'?) idealism in narratives of familial discontents, it would be hard to deny the historically specific role of legal issues such as divorce, cohabitation and paternity suits in the reconstruction of the material social fabric of the Third Republic (which is of course fought out through opposed discourses). Indeed, here one might recall Tanner's admission of 'the absence of historical and sociological material' in his own landmark study.[22]

It is at the intersection of these twin parameters of cultural retrospection and historical crisis that the narratives of domestic disorder explored in this book unfold. Central in the tradition of the novel of adultery to which Zola, Maupassant, Huysmans, Hennique, Bourget and Charpentier respond is, of course, the tale of the seduced wife on which critics have understandably focussed. Yet such a narrative pattern also implies the importance of the role of the seducer. A *nouvelle* typical in this regard is André Theuriet's 'Paternité', published in two parts in the *Revue des deux mondes*.[23] It tells of the return of the bachelor, Francisque Delaberge, from Paris to the provinces. As government inspector sent back to his home region he develops a rivalry with Simon Princetot which is exacerbated by their pursuit of the widow, Camille Liénard. In fact Simon was born shortly after Delaberge's affair with Mme Micheline Princetot of the *Soleil d'Or* at Val-Clavin twenty-six years earlier. The physical resemblance between these men only adds to Delaberge's suspicions, as does Micheline's keenness for him to return to Paris before he can discover the truth of his paternity. But the truth comes out and Francisque understands the *enjeux* of paternity which otherwise may so easily have remained latent: 'Il comprenait de quel poids les anciennes fautes que nous croyons vénielles pèsent plus tard sur nos

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destinées. Ces amourettes que nous traitons si légèrement au temps de notre jeunesse, laissent des semences éparses qui peuvent, dans l'âge mûr, devenir autant de plantes envahissantes et meurtrières'. For Simon embodies the *lex talionis*, the nemesis of the father's guilty desire, which inverts the classical tale of sexual transgression so that Delaberge feels 'comme un nouvel Œdipe' (though he is in fact the father in this tale of generational jealousy). Even when the old laundry woman from the *Soleil d'Or*, Zélie Fleuriot, confirms his suspicions in chapter 7 and Marceline finally admits this illegitimate paternity in response to his plea, 'vous seule pouvez m'en donner la certitude', doubt is never quite erased, for his ex-lover teases him with the implication of her own married status: 'est-ce qu'on est jamais sûr?' Perhaps Simon is the product of a legitimate sexual encounter. In one of those philosophical moments where authorial and protagonistic positions collude, Delaberge asks, 'Dès qu'on pénètre dans ces mystères de la filiation, peut-on jamais posséder une certitude? L'adultère a cela de fatal qu'il laisse toujours planer une ombre sur la véritable origine de l'enfant'. Subsequently Delaberge realizes that he must return to Paris without disturbing the amorous designs of the next generation. Whereas Camille Liénard initially saw herself as the 'trait d'union entre ses deux convives', by the end of the tale the sexual syntax has been refashioned so that Delaberge realizes that 'je puis servir de trait d'union entre ces deux cœurs qui se désirent et n'osent se l'avouer'. In fact it is the love of the paternal seducer for his biological son which dare not speak its name, and when Simon drives him to the train station in the final chapter he simply gives his son his watch and hence the future it will measure. He can only momentarily return to biological paternity, whether it is real or fictional, and it is certainly not a place which he could call home.

It is quite clear from Champfleury's *Histoire de l'imagerie populaire* that literary tales of the adulterous wife often both reflect and dictate popular narratives of misogyny. This is evident in the appendix which Champfleury devotes to the mythical Lustucru (or as it is recomposed: L'Eusses-tu-cru): 'Lustucru, au dix-septième siècle, avait entrepris d'adoucir le caractère des mauvaises femmes.'[24] His means, though, are far from gentle: 'Lustucru proposait d'envoyer cette tête [de femme] chez le forgeron et de la reforger à coups de marteau, jusqu'à ce que l'ouvrier en fît sortir les principes pernicieux.' The reaction invited by this figure fuels a war of the sexes to which the novel of adultery does in a strong sense belong. Champfleury cites a number of rejoinders to the myth such as *Lustucru massacré par les femmes*, *L'invention des femmes qui fera*

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ôter la méchanceté de la tête de leurs maris, and Saumaize's play of 1660, *Véritables précieuses*. He even wonders whether the misogynist tradition can be tracked in *Bibliothèque bleue* titles such as *Méchanceté des filles* and *Misères des maris*. Lustucru might well be seen as the patron saint of patriarchal fictions which take it upon themselves to diagnose and cure the female malady of immorality. In this vein of violent misogyny, the infamous pamphlet by Dumas fils, *L'Homme-Femme* (1872), advises deceived husbands to kill their wives. The attendant double standard is demystified by that *fin de siècle* version of Stendhal's *De l'amour*, Paul Bourget's *Physiologie de l'amour moderne*: 'Un des plus étonnants cynismes de l'homme consiste à prétendre que la faute de la femme est pire que la sienne – parce qu'il peut en résulter des enfants – comme si, entre une maîtresse qui devient enceinte et l'amant qui l'engrosse, il y avait la plus légère différence de responsabilité.'[25]

Léon Jaybert's history of adultery until the Second Empire also provides the classic answer to the question 'Pourquoi cette différence?': 'Un mari est-il adultère, il manque à ses serments; mais sa faute ne fait à sa femme qu'un tort très passager et bien faible, surtout quand elle l'ignore. La femme est-elle adultère, et le mari l'ignorerait-il momentanément, l'ignorerait-il toujours, les résultats peuvent être bien différents.'[26] The *Grande Encyclopédie* is unambiguous in its article on 'Famille' about the relationship between the certainty of lineage and the cohesion of society:

> Quand le mariage s'est consolidé, régularisant l'union de l'homme et de la femme, s'effectue une véritable révolution par *la reconnaissance de la paternité* et la substitution de la parenté masculine à la parenté féminine . . . La solidarité entre parents et enfants étant une force, une cause de résistance dans la lutte pour l'existence, les lignées où elle est le plus intense prospèrent et survivent aux autres; le sentiment de la paternité progresse d'une génération à l'autre.[27]

In his 'réflexions en faveur des femmes' however, Jaybert goes on to blame the Donjuanism allegedly characteristic of French society:

> C'est là la principale excuse de la faillibilité des femmes . . ., partout on cherche à les séduire . . ., partout on emploie mille moyens pour y arriver . . ., on tire parti contre elles de la faiblesse que l'on a fait naître, excitée, encouragée . . ., on applique son amour-propre à surprendre leur vanité . . ., on met son bonheur, sa gloire à les faire succomber . . ., et ensuite on se plaint d'avoir trop bien réussi . . . et, le dirons-nous à la haute de la société . . ., celui qui compte le plus de victimes est souvent le plus recherché.

Indeed, our analysis of the Don Giovanni fictions of Emile Zola's *Pot-Bouille* (1882) in chapters 1 and 2 and Guy de Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*

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(1885) in chapter 3 of this book suggests ways in which this tradition of adultery in fiction might be reconsidered not merely as a defensive misogyny typical of patriarchy but also as an indulgence of male fantasies of promiscuity. As Rachel Fuchs reminds us, 'Throughout the nineteenth century at least one-quarter of all births in the department of the Seine were to single mothers, and Paris had one of the highest illegitimacy rates in the western world'.[28] Our revision questions the tendency of previous critical practice to analyse such fiction simply from within the family unit. Though of course men's seduction of women to whom they were not married might produce children who could be seen in biological terms as illegitimate, in the legal terms of nineteenth-century France only the seduction of unmarried women would show up in these statistics, for the status of paternity was attributed automatically to husbands, thereby erasing visible demographic markers of female adultery. By attending to male fantasies of seduction, we might then take account not only of manifest general forms of patriarchal domination within that culture but also of particular issues, not least the debate over paternity suits (*recherche de paternité*) which resurfaces as a key feminist issue during the early years of the Third Republic.

In order to develop a comprehensive account of the pattern of sexual relations in the late nineteenth century, this study moves beyond adultery in fiction to suggest how tales of infidelity can be read in the wider context of sexuality's material (in this case socioeconomic and legal) as well as psychoanalytic determinations. The latter have been amply elucidated by Naomi Segal and Alison Sinclair's analyses of adultery in fiction.[29] Naturally there are accounts of the novel of adultery informed by relevant historical data but, unfortunately, such illuminations of social, family and legal history have usually been absorbed in a theoretically unambitious design.[30] But the vast project of recent social history and theory allows us to reconstruct this network of sexual relations in ways which unpick the moral alignments of bourgeois culture.[31] Such alignments are both articulated and contested by those novelists whose very intensification of realist ways of seeing takes 'the order of mimesis' to breaking point.[32]

In particular, the spatial model which distinguishes so powerfully between the private and the public domains (typically gendered female and male respectively) reflects not only the approachs of much modern social theory but also from another perspective the prejudicial dispositions of many nineteenth-century social commentators. As Reid notes: 'The distinction between public and private (and male and female)

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became part and parcel of a new process of social mapping whereby the middle groups now constituted themselves through discourses and the practices of the new social sciences and philanthropy as middle class over and against the urban labouring classes.'[33] According to the socio-medical account of the causes of wifely adultery offered by J.-P. Dartigues, '[La femme] règne dans l'intérieur du gynécée, tandis que l'homme est formé pour vivre au dehors',[34] and as Peter Gay asserts, 'There were literally thousands of such pronouncements, in several languages, scattered across publications in every civilized country'.[35]

This closeting of female existences was not only a means of imposing social order; it also represented a danger for the well-oiled machine of intersubjective relations, and Alain Corbin offers pertinent examples of the contemporary pathologisation of female *pudeur*: 'Physicians described the clinical symptoms of "ereuthophobia", modesty of the second degree: a morbid fear of being unable to refrain from blushing. . . . The same type of anxiety was at the root of the "white ailment" in women, that is, the refusal to go out of the house for fear of being seen by strangers'.[36] The 'white ailment' was not an anomalous idiosyncracy (rationalised by doctors as the 'irrationality' of women), but in fact a symptom of the spatialisation of power in terms of private and public domains. Public space, and thus also the world of prostitution, belonged in this way to husbands. In the most extreme instances, it becomes the playground of the wayward husband, as it does for Baron Hulot in *La Cousine Bette*. Moreover, for women to escape the home for affective, sexual reasons was, in the paranoid patriarchal imagination, but a step from the professional liberation of housewives. In Colette Yver's *Princesses de science* (1907) Thérèse's husband is wracked with jealousy when his wife, a doctor, returns after visiting a patient one night:

> A six heures, le bruit d'une porte qu'on ouvrait le fit sursauter. Thérèse était devant lui toute fraîche sous sa voilette, fleurant l'humidité matinale, frissonnant un peu dans sa jaquette de drap; et ce retour de l'épouse, au petit matin, le soin qu'elle prenait d'assourdir le bruit de ses bottines, tout avait un air clandestin, malséant, qui rappelait les romans d'adultère.[37]

This spatial model will allow us to contrast on the one hand the paradoxical conservatism latent in the inward disposition of incestuous fiction and, on the other, adultery's rupture of the symbolic divide which attempts to house female desire within the safe space of the *foyer*. To find such a blithely comforting reaction afforded by the very archetype of sexual transgression, incest, we need only recall the euphoric tonality of the narrative of uncle–niece incest in Zola's *Le Docteur Pascal* (1893) which

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is treated in chapter 4. In symbolic terms, it may be said that whereas incest imprisons desire within the domestic space, as if the walls around the home were impenetrable, adultery has little regard for this rigid division of private and public, inverting as it does the institutionalised binarism inside/outside. Adulterous desires are, so to speak, transmural.

This distinction between inside and outside is reflected in much family history and family theory.[38] David Cheal identifies specifically 'the nineteenth-century separation of public and private spheres', 'the ideological exaggeration of the contrast between "the home" and "the world" that developed during the nineteenth century'. This distinction is said to be characteristic of 'modernization'. Cheal recounts how theorists and historians have linked it 'to other kinds of dualism, such as those of the political and the personal, the instrumental and the expressive, and male and female'. An influential example of the critique of the private/public binarism is to be found in Lynda M. Glennon's *Women and Dualism*:

> The technocratic society splits selfhood into the instrumental and expressive self; it divides social life into public and private spheres. It presupposes polar opposites. An increase in one's instrumentality *must* mean a decrease in one's expressivity, and vice versa. The assumption that this choice must be made is the crucial logical link to conventional views about male and female roles.[39]

In reality, 'the division . . . dissolves into a multitude of overlapping and interdependent contexts for social interaction'. Jürgen Habermas has stressed the tendency for market transactions to invade the private sphere.[40] More specifically, Cheal cites the networks of female friendships and the way in which a wife's performance in a traditional domestic role could help to further her husband's career. Another form of 'enjambement' between private and public that undermines this conjugal relation, however, is, of course, adultery.

The politics of public space in the Third Republic has been well mapped, not least by Kristin Ross in her study of Rimbaud. She argues that, 'the Commune raises its fist against conventional spatial hierarchies – between distinct Parisian *quartiers*, country and city, and, by implication, that global carve-up of terrain between France, the imperial metropolis and its client colonies'.[41] Gaston Bachelard's model of interiors and exteriors, however, allows us to interrogate the relationship between public space and the domestic realm. In practical terms, the sites of this drama of inside and outside are the doors and windows which facilitate the passage between public and domestic space. Bachelard notes:

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