Theater Figures

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THE MIDDLE-CLASS READING public that Charles Dickens and Geraldine Jewsbury attempted to form as a domestic reading circle was only ever a fantasy. However, it was an ideological fantasy that enabled the construction of several kinds of “private” space. The psychological interior of the individual reader—the reader created in and by fiction—represented a private recess into which the public market supposedly could not reach. After mid-century, however, that fantasy became increasingly harder to maintain, and by the 1860s it had fallen apart all together. Potent as it was, the idea of a domesticated middle-class “public” of readers could not withstand the ever-increasing visibility of diverse mass readerships that were figured, variously, as “the Unknown Public,” “the Penny Public,” and “the Railway Public.” The image of the middle-class family brought together by fiction was replaced by the more frightening image of lower-class consumers with little taste but voracious appetites, and the well-disciplined reading “individual” threatened to turn into the figure that had always haunted its construction: the isolated, eroticized, addicted (and female) reader. The massification of readers and literature—no longer an open secret but the topic of highly publicized discussions over the degradation of British culture—led to an ever-more-pronounced split between high art and mass culture. “The novel” could no longer function as a simple abstraction (if in fact it ever could) and its permanent dispersal into legitimate and illegitimate subgenres only made the assumption of cultural
capital that much more important. The “literary” had never been so imperiled—or so crucial.

The next two chapters examine the role played by theater and performativity in debates over the aesthetics, politics, and effects of the novel in the last half of the nineteenth century. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on two literary debates, the “sensation novel” debates of the 1860s and the debate over lending-library censorship in the 1880s, and two “literary” novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864) and George Moore’s *The Mummer’s Wife* (1885). What these very disparate novels share, other than self-conscious attempts to establish their own literary capital and to leverage the debates in which they take part, is their source in Gustave Flaubert’s 1857 novel of petit-bourgeois reading and adultery, *Madame Bovary*. Both of these British novels adapt their French source material to reconfigure critical discussions of middle-class reading practices and the cultural role of the realist novel. That they do so in completely opposing ways, but on similarly theatrical grounds, attests to the flexibility and the potency of performance as cultural category. With its ties to the commercial bodies of the stage and the embodied reading practices of the masses, performance once again proves to be the trope against which the “literary” novel defines itself and through which it comes to understand itself. And yet it is not with a novel that I would like to begin, but with another form of culture altogether—film. By shifting media for a moment and by jumping anachronistically forward in time, I wish to underline the ways that the hotly contested, uneven developments of the nineteenth century have since been transformed into simple abstractions—the “truth” claims of realism, the value of an avant-garde, the genius auteur. Such abstractions—themselves turned into mass-market product by a new medium negotiating its own generic relations—tend to cover over a much more complex historical process of emergence that it will be the goal of this chapter to bring, flickering, to light.

The first frame of Vincente Minnelli’s 1949 film, *Madame Bovary*, asks the viewer to do something that would have come naturally to the film’s heroine—read. The film opens with a shot of text: “In 1857 there was a scandal in Paris and a trial before the law. A book had been published.” As this text dissolves into a shot of a nineteenth-century French courtroom, mimicking the process of reading by which words become imaginary pictures, it initiates the film’s conceit of providing a visual “transcript” of a written text and assures us of the ease with which Flaubertian high realism will be converted into melodramatic...
Hollywood fantasy. It is a mark of Minnelli’s gift for melodrama that he begins with Flaubert’s trial; not only does the trial itself provide high courtroom drama, but it frames the story of Emma Bovary through the novel’s own, highly dramatic, literary history. The film thereby doubles the process by which nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers came to Madame Bovary as a book famous for being at the center of a show-trial, a true succès de scandale.

The film’s prosecutor presents the case in a rhetorical frenzy of moral violation, accusing the author of “outrage against public morals and established customs,” and charging that

This man, Mr. Flaubert, has created a character, a Frenchwoman, who is at once a disgrace to France and an insult to womanhood. Emma Bovary: a woman who neglects her own child, a child that needs her, who scorns her own husband, a husband who loves her, who introduces adultery and ruin into her home. This is our heroine! This corrupt, loathsome, contemptible creature, this woman of insatiable passions, this monstrous creation of a degenerate imagination. This is the heroine we are asked to forgive, to pity—why, perhaps to love.

In response to these charges, Flaubert himself (played by James Mason) takes the stand and offers a defense of his actions, a literary manifesto of sorts. Denying the immorality of his novel and his own moral degeneracy, Flaubert claims that “I have shown you the vicious, yes, for the sake of understanding it, so that we may preserve the virtuous.” He also denies that Emma is a creature of his imagination: “monstrous she may be, but it was not I who created her. Our world—your world and mine—created her. . . . There are thousands of Emma Bovarys; I only had to draw from life.”

While this defense of the real is itself a fiction—Flaubert was never allowed to take the stand in his own defense—it nonetheless raises the main issues of the following two chapters, which together focus on the split between the popular, middle-class realist novel that reigned at mid-century and the emerging high-art novel that, eschewing both the popular and the middle class, offered a higher realism. This courtroom scene dramatizes the way in which debates over novelistic aesthetics in the latter half of the nineteenth century—in England as much as in France—took shape as debates about the obscene, the improper, and the impure. It also demonstrates how these debates turned on two highly contested and hyper-scrutinized kinds of bodies: the bodies of novelistic heroines and the impressionable bodies that read about them. These bodies required proper regulation, and courts, novelists, and critics of the period sought to provide it, offering the judgment that such readers could not
themselves supply. Central to these concerns over proper consumption and the performative effects of reading was the question of the novel's affective engagement with its audience: what was it that the novel did and should do?

The opening of Minnelli's *Madame Bovary* stages this question as a conflict between two competing discourses of literary value—one in which literature is judged by its moral and didactic function, and the other in which literature's value lies in its privileged access to truth. These two discourses coexisted compatibly, even companionably, during much of the Victorian period in realist novels that served the “good” by their devotion to “truth” (see the previous chapter’s discussion of Geraldine Jewsbury for an example), but they became increasingly wrenched apart in the latter half of the nineteenth century, thanks to a variety of factors. The unchecked growth of a market in popular cultural forms of all kinds, a proliferation of lower-class readers, and a growing frustration with the moral imperatives of middle-class culture among a new literary elite gave rise to a series of overlapping high-art movements that positioned themselves against Victorian moralizing and against the market. Fin de siècle movements such as Aestheticism, Naturalism, and Decadence each defined themselves against the popular, the moralistic, and the commercial, and they did so in part by asserting a new set of formal criteria and a new definition of literary value. By the 1880s and 1890s, morality and marketability increasingly became matters for the philistines, as high art attempted to liberate itself from such pedestrian concerns.

What we are asked to see in the opening scene of Minnelli’s film are the forces of the philistines arrayed against the lone artistic genius, whose allegiance is to a truth that can still serve public morality (“I have shown you the vicious... that we may preserve the virtuous”). The delicious irony here is that Minnelli could be said to be acting on the part of the philistines. He is, after all, engaged in translating the high-art object back into an object of mass consumption, now made safe for middle-class, mid-twentieth-century U.S. audiences, and he caters to the very mainstream that Flaubert reviled. That Minnelli can do so in the same terms that were originally used to set art apart from the mainstream attests to the success of the aesthetic project of late-Victorian and Modernist literary culture, a success that was also a defeat, as it erased the distinction between high and low that it originally worked to stabilize.

What we actually see on the screen, then, is the point at which the forward momentum of an aesthetic and cultural movement doubles back on itself, however unselfconsciously. Nor is it the first time this had happened in the strange and revealing history of *Madame Bovary*. Long before Hollywood turned to this sensational French novel, it had inspired numerous copies, parodies, and adaptations. In Victorian Britain, the set of issues that arise from
and cling to *Madame Bovary* were so intensely felt that they played themselves out again—and again. In 1864, during the height of the “sensation” craze, Mary Elizabeth Braddon published *The Doctor’s Wife*, a sentimental retelling of Flaubert’s novel that, despite its author’s reputation as the “Queen of the sensation school,” delivers all of the bourgeois virtue a court of opinion could want. Twenty years later, George Moore published *A Mummer’s Wife*, a decidedly unsentimental and naturalistic novel that, oddly enough, revisits Flaubert’s novel by way of Braddon’s.

These two novels return to *Madame Bovary* to sway British debates about the proper sphere and function of the novel. These aesthetic debates hinged on very material issues: the affective and performative body of the individual reader (a reader normally represented as female) and the collective body of the (also feminized) reading masses. While Flaubert uses the lower-middle-class reading body to construct the rational gaze of the male author and a high-cultural realist aesthetic, Braddon attempts to rehabilitate that body for her own brand of middle-brow, popular realism.

**Trying Fiction: The Display Case of Madame Bovary**

Before I turn to Braddon and the “sensation school,” I would like to consider the book and the immorality trial that started it all. Both are rich with theatrics and both betray a fascination with the performative female body. Indeed, Minnelli got this part quite right: the trial, for all of its very real charges against and consequences for Flaubert, focused on the fictional character of Emma Bovary and the embodied response of her readers. This was especially true for the prosecutor, Ernest Pinard, whose argument against the book was really an argument against Emma’s poisonous charms, charms that he considered the female reader powerless to resist. “Who is it who reads Monsieur Flaubert’s novels?” Pinard asked the court. “Are they the men engaged in social or political economy? No! The light pages of *Madame Bovary* will fall into hands that are even lighter, into the hands of young girls, sometimes married women. Well, then! When the imagination will have been seduced, when seduction will have reached into the heart, when the heart will have spoken to the senses, do you think that a very dispassionate argument will be very effective against this seduction of the senses and the feelings?” (Gendel 345). In language anticipatory of the British “sensation debates,” in which novels that “preach to the nerves” were thought to corrupt the body of the reader, Pinard seems to have confused *Madame Bovary* with the sentimental novels that Emma loves and that Flaubert indicts, much as he seems to have mistaken
Chapter 4

Emma for the sentimental heroine that she dreams of being. This, on some level, was the defense’s argument: that the prosecution had misread a book that was, in fact, short on allure and long on moral alarm. For Flaubert’s attorney, Marie-Antoine-Jules Sénard, *Madame Bovary* was a book about the dangers of female miseducation.2

What interests me here is not how each side set out to conventionalize *Madame Bovary*—the text became either sentimental trash or bourgeois conduct book, both of which seem equally problematic—but how their arguments spun on the imagined female body of the book’s main character and/or susceptible reader.3 Pinard took this a step further when he asked the court to imagine the body of the text itself: “Art without rules is no longer art; it is like a woman who throws off all garments. To impose upon art the single rule of public decency is not to enslave but to honor it” (Gendel 347).4 For Pinard, regulation is the key. The gentlemen of the court need to establish rules for art for its own sake, much as a woman would need to be protected for hers. This paternalistic vision of the unregulated and indecent female body is nothing new. Indeed, the trial played out with what, even at the time, must have been an eerie familiarity: questions of authority and law recast as the urgent need for female self-regulation, questions of aesthetic form projected onto the abject form of the female grotesque, questions of literature and politics—and especially literary politics—worked out on the level of gender. This deflection was the nineteenth century’s stock in trade, but it gained a certain urgency here from the legal venue. The court of “public opinion” within which these issues were generally negotiated here became an actual court, charged with enforcing (which is to say determining) artistic “rules.” And while nothing is quite so unavoidably about literary politics as a censorship trial, this one still managed an evasive maneuver. Its focus on character—Emma’s character—worked to occlude the novel’s aesthetic and class politics.5 The question at the trial became, “Is Emma a lure or an object lesson?” not “What is the novel’s agenda?”

Had French law allowed him to speak in his own defense, and had he been able to say what he pleased rather than what would please the court, Flaubert might very well have had something piquant to say on the matter.6 He was outraged by the trial and the morals it sought to protect and wrote to Alfred Blanche that “this book that they are seeking to destroy will survive all the better for its very wounds. They are trying to shut my mouth: their reward will be a spit in the face that they won’t forget” (Letters I, 225). Flaubert’s letters from the period of *Madame Bovary*’s difficult composition record an increasing disgust with bourgeois culture and its hypocrisy. In September 1855, Flaubert wrote to his friend Louis Bouilhet, “I feel waves of hatred for the stu-
pidity of my age. They choke me. Shit keeps coming into my mouth, as from a strangulated hernia. . . . I want to make a paste of it and daub it over the nineteenth century, the way they coat Indian pagodas with cow dung” (Letters I, 217). In many ways, Madame Bovary is just this: not an object lesson in bourgeois virtue and vice, but an abject one, a rejection of the bourgeois sphere and its cherished novel in favor of an unflinching realism. A year and a half after the Bovary trial, Flaubert wrote to Ernest Feydeau of the literary affliction and effeminacy that he perceived around him:

As far as literature is concerned, women are capable only of a certain delicacy and sensitivity. Everything that is truly sublime, truly great, escapes them. Our indulgence towards them is one of the reasons for that moral abasement that is prostrating us. We all display an inconceivable cowardice toward our mothers, our sisters, our daughters, our wives, and our mistresses. Never has the tit been responsible for more kinds of abject behavior than now. . . . Poor scrofulous swooning century, with its horror of anything strong, of solid food, its fondness for lolling in the laps of women, like a sick child! (Letters II, 14)

Not only are the terms in which Flaubert renounced the “mothercult” of nineteenth-century literature strikingly similar to those of George Moore’s attack on sentimental literature nearly thirty years later, but they remind us how self-consciously male was Flaubert’s new aesthetic.7 The omniscient, scientific, and God-like eye of the ideal, unobtrusive narrator was decidedly masculine in its realistic and rational gaze. Part of this self-conscious elevation and enclosure within the high “ivory tower” of Art was disgust with the literary market that Flaubert saw as demeaning but necessary. “A book,” he continued to Feydeau, “is . . . part of ourselves. We tear out a length of gut from our bellies and serve it up to the bourgeois. Drops of our hearts’ blood are visible in every letter we trace. But once our work is printed—goodbye! It belongs to everybody. The crowd tramples on us. It is the height of prostitution, and the vilest kind. But the platitude is that it’s all very fine, whereas to rent one’s ass for ten francs is infamy. So be it!” (Letters II, 15).

The spectacle of grotesque female consumption that makes up much of Madame Bovary (the greedy consumption of books, luxury goods, sensations, and finally poison) covers up an anxiety about anguished and visceral male production made cheap by the filthy paws of the bourgeois consumer. Against this world of trampling consumers, scrofulous cowards bound to the tit, Flaubert sought to create a world, and an aesthetic, inviolate and apart, a world in which the vile prostitution of authorship would be transformed into the cul-
tural currency of male genius. To do so, Flaubert required another sort of body: the abject female body, tied to the market and to the masses, and destined for the trash-heap of history:

“Woman, what have I to do with thee?” is a remark that I find more splendid that any of the celebrated sayings of history. It is the cry of the pure intellect, the brain’s protest against the womb. And it has this to be said for it: it has always aroused the indignation of idiots. . . . Our “mother-cult” is one of those things that will inspire future generations with helpless laughter. So too our reverence for “love”: this will be thrown into the same trash-bag with the “sensibility” and “nature” of a hundred years ago.

Dividing the male brain from the female womb, Flaubert seized the authority of the “pure intellect” to observe, describe, and dispatch the impure body. He became the “anatomist” of literature, skilled in the dispassionate analysis that English critics came to call “morbid anatomy” and which one French caricaturist represented as the art of the coroner. In “Flaubert dissecting Emma Bovary” (see figure 4) Lemot depicted Flaubert standing beside Emma’s prone body, her sentimental heart dangling from his raised scalpel, her heart’s blood filling the author’s inkpot.

In Flaubert’s right hand, an oversized magnifying glass suggests the scientific gaze with which the author-as-coroner scrutinizes his subject, turning raw “material” into art.

Flaubert’s Scalpel

What Lemot literalized is what readers of Madame Bovary have always known: in the process of elevating the novel and the novelist into the realm of high culture, Emma gets the sharp end of the scalpel. Her body, more than any other, bears the brunt of Flaubert’s disgust with the bourgeoisie and bears the weight of his literary ambitions. And what a body it is. For all of her character’s dreamy sentimentiality, Emma Bovary is one of the most relentlessly and explicitly physical heroines in nineteenth-century literature. Through Emma, the novel collapses the supposedly internal (and bourgeois) realm of sentiment with the exterior (and equally bourgeois) realm of matter. Nowhere is this collapse felt more keenly than in the representation of reading. Madame Bovary undoes entirely any desired separation between reading and consumption, depicting the female reader as a glutton for physical and mass-marketed sensations. Indeed, the story of Emma Bovary’s addictive pleasures—her sentimental reading, conspicuous consumption, and adulterous liaisons—reads like a nightmare reversal of previ-
ous efforts to cordon off “reading” from “matter” and (however paradoxically) to define bourgeois identity against the consuming practices that made the category possible in the first place. In Flaubert’s demystifying take on things, “reading matter” takes on a decidedly fleshy and commodified valence.

The connection that *Madame Bovary* makes between reading and consumption (in its various forms) has been too well documented to require rehearsal here. Indeed, the novel has become a critical *locus classicus* for discussions of appetitive reading. What is less discussed, and more interesting for my purposes, is the other metaphor that Flaubert uses to figure the collapse between sentiment and materiality: theatricality. Setting the stage for both Moore and Braddon, Flaubert treats bourgeois sentiment—and sentimental reading—as an act performed by the body and according to conventional scripts. Emma is characterized both by the imaginative removal from the world that so often marks the bourgeois reader and by her voluptuous immersion in the worldly. Her attitude is always double as she observes the very scenes in which she performs. In scene after scene (religious, marital, adulterous) she is
both detached spectator and corporeal spectacle. Of course this doubleness is familiar from previous chapters as the pose of the actress and the hysterical, but it is remarkable here for the way it presents itself as the very condition and logic of bourgeois identity. Theatricality, once the apparent scourge of that identity, loses its exceptional and oppositional status and becomes, instead, the rule by which bourgeois culture operates and through which it recognizes itself. Take, for example the scene in which Emma first meets Léon, the young clerk who will become her second lover. The two sense in each other kindred sensibilities and their conversation quickly turns to the arts. Léon describes the intimate experience of reading: “I’m absolutely removed from the world at such times. . . . The hours go by without my knowing it. Sitting there I’m wandering in countries I can see every detail of—I’m playing a role in the story I’m reading, I actually feel I’m the characters—I live and breathe with them” (95). Emma agrees enthusiastically: “I know! I feel the same!” This is not only the first rumbling of attraction between future lovers, but also the process of identification through which they come to recognize each other as apparently singular people of taste, marked by their exquisite sympathies and their divorce from the vulgar herd. That the very conventional terms with which they mark their individuality are also theatrical terms seems key: bourgeois identity formation, like reading, is seen as a second-order performance, in which the players fail to recognize how hackneyed is the script they follow. As Flaubert wrote to a friend of this scene, “It is something that could be taken seriously, and yet I fully intend it as grotesque. . . . The irony does not detract from the pathetic aspect, but rather intensifies it” (Letters I, 171). What in another novel might be played straight—the quintessential bourgeois scene in which reading signals and cements identity and relationship—is here uncovered as role playing. And, as in so many of her scenes, Emma discovers “herself” through acquiescence. Hers is an identity built on repetition (and, in its theatrical sense, répétition); she lacks fresh emotion but she can avidly follow a lead. It is worth noting that when Jules de Gaultier named the condition Bovarysme after Emma, it meant not the eroticized and poisonous reading that it has come to mean, but the act of imaginative self-fashioning—the habit of taking on fictitious personalities.

While Emma Bovary is certainly “theatrical” in all of the ways that had become conventional by mid-nineteenth century—she is insincere, self-conscious, and showy—it is her very conventionality that marks her as most invidiously performative. She is a woman “incapable of understanding what she didn’t experience, or of recognizing anything that wasn’t expressed in conventional terms” (49). Her sentimentality, that which in her own mind sets her apart from the “vulgar” provincials, is always reproduced, always rehearsed. For this reason, memory takes on a particularly strong charge, as it allows
Emma to repeat and replay experience. Here she is, for example, in another recognition scene:

The comparison [between Charles and Léon] returned to her mind almost with the sharpness of an actual sensation, and with the increased perspective conferred on things by memory. Watching the brightly burning fire from her bed, she saw once again, as at the scene itself, Léon standing there, leaning with one hand on his slender, flexing cane. . . . She found him charming; she could not take her mind off of him; she remembered how he had looked on other occasions, things he had said, the sound of his voice, everything about him; and she kept saying to herself, protruding her lips as though for a kiss: “Charming, charming! . . . Isn’t he in love? Who could it be?” she asked herself. “Why—he’s in love with me!” (115–16)

In its marked visuality and physicality, Emma’s memory plays out like a theatrical revue; she watches the characters “as at the scene itself,” but with “increased perspective,” and she responds physically. She “could not take her mind off of him,” and even the strange wrench of this phrase recalls the eye (which here is the “mind’s eye”), held captive by sentiment. This is a recognition scene (“he’s in love with me!”) that puts its emphasis on recognition. As Emma restages live experience as mental theater, we witness the process by which canned images are opened up for consumption and through which sentimental convention is warmed over.

One of the important paradoxes here, as elsewhere in the novel, is that Emma, for all of her quivering emotionality, is incapable of any raw emotion. She is also, importantly, incapable of that sympathy which in previous novels served as the hallmark of the idealized middle-class reader. This, indeed, is one of the strangest things about Emma: although she is highly romantic, she is not properly imaginative—or rather, her imagination is so tightly bound by convention that it narrows her sympathies, rather than enlarging them. What should be readerly sympathy—the ability to enter more fully into the feelings of others and so to cement interpersonal and civil relations—is instead a complete withdrawal into an eroticized narcissism. In a reversal of the hoped-for effects of reading, Emma’s diet of sentiment yields a complete inability to feel for anyone but herself. Proximity breeds not domestic affection but contempt: “the closer to her things were, the further away from them her thoughts turned. Everything immediately surrounding her—boring countryside, inane petty bourgeois, the mediocrity of daily life—seemed to her the exception rather than the rule” (66). In Emma, the private, self-regulated subject becomes the gluttonous hysteric, walled off from the life around her, but forever on the watch.
Had Emma the power to analyze her detachment, to enjoy her spectatorship as such, and to ironize her quotation of convention, she might have been a far different sort of cultural performer, a provincial flaneuse. That the novel makes this last category unthinkable, not just for Emma but as an identity, reminds us that these are the politics of the brain against the womb, and that there is only room for one anatomist in the story. Emma may be marked by self-consciousness, but never self-awareness, and the distinction is crucial. Hers is not the cutting theatricality of the cynical cultural outsider (who is also the high-cultural insider), but the vapid role playing of cultural stereotype, as we see in the famous Agricultural Show scene, in which Emma and Rodolphe ridicule the self-importance of the petit bourgeoisie while they engage in the most banal of flirtations. The scene is set up theatrically: Rodolphe, who has decided to throw over his mistress, “an actress he kept in Rouen” (147), for seemingly “fresher” charms, leads Emma up to the second floor of the town hall, where the two sit in a window that overlooks the square. Emma, who first laid eyes on Rodolphe while leaning out her own window (“she often did this: in the provinces windows take the place of boulevards and theaters” [143]), readily takes the position of spectator as her suitor begins a knowing commentary on “the show” taking place below them. As Rodolphe rails against the littleness of bourgeois morality (“Our duty is to feel what is great and love what is beautiful—not accept all the social conventions and infamies they impose on us” [163]), and as the speakers below discuss cabbages, Flemish manure, and the happy coupling of art and commerce, Emma succumbs to the most conventional and bourgeois language of seduction (“Why should we have met? How did it happen? It can only be that something in our particular inclinations made us come closer and closer across the distance that separated us, the way two rivers flow together” [167]). While Emma and Rodolphe adopt a spectatorial superiority, that is, Flaubert offers them up as spectacle, visible not only from the crowd below but also from the cultural high ground above, where the couple appears not as sinners or romantic rebels, but as the very pinnacle of convention.

Another famous scene of seduction, this one set in an actual theater, best displays the connections that the novel makes among conventionality, consumption, reading, and performative response.\(^{13}\) When Emma descends into illness and depression after Rodolphe ends their affair, she is prescribed an enlivening dose of theater, following a debate between the pharmacist and the priest that rehearses the main nineteenth-century positions about theater as either tonic or toxin.\(^{14}\) For Emma, a performance of *Lucia di Lammermore* is just what the doctor ordered. The opera reawakens her voluptuous imagination, treating both mind and body by treating the mind as the body and
Mesdames Bovary

bringing together her lives as consuming reader, spectator, and bodily performer. From the first strains,

She was back in the books she had read as a girl—deep in Sir Walter Scott. She imagined she could hear the sound of Scottish pipes echoing through the mists of the heather. Her recollection of the novel made it easy for her to grasp the libretto; and she followed the plot line by line, elusive, half-forgotten memories drifting into her thoughts only to be dispelled by the onrush of music. She let herself be lulled by the melodies, **feeling herself vibrate in the very fiber of her being, as the bows of the violins were playing on her nerve strings.** (251, my emphasis)

Her response is physical, instrumental, as the “echo” of remembered reading sounds through the heather/theater and activates Emma's consuming nostalgia. Even the vulgarity of the male lead, who has “a touch of the hairdresser about him” (252), does nothing to diminish Emma's pleasure, based as it is on vulgar practices of reading and spectating. She is transported: “Her heart drank its full of the melodious laments suspended in the air against the sound of the double basses like the cries of shipwrecked sailors against the tumult of the storm. Here was the same ecstasy, the same anguish that had brought her to the brink of death. The soprano's voice seemed but the echo of her own soul, and this illusion that held her under its spell a part of her own life” (252). Emma recognizes in the performance her own affect and her own story, not only because she projects these things there, but also because they originate in the same fictional conventions. The soprano can “echo . . . her own soul,” because Emma's soul is itself an echo, resounding so clearly that “Emma herself uttered a sharp cry that was drowned in the blast by the final chords” (253).

One of the beauties of this section is how Emma attempts to resist her own performative response, and how Flaubert presents this resistance as yet another layer of bourgeois performance. Imagining herself as a jaded sophisticate (“Now she well knew the true paltriness of the passions that art painted so large” [254]), Emma “did her best to think of the opera in a different light: she resolved to regard this image of her own griefs as a vivid fantasy, an enjoyable spectacle and nothing more; and she was actually smiling to herself in scornful pity when from behind the velvet curtains at the back of the stage there appeared a man in a black cloak” (254). Here again, as in the scene at the Agricultural Show, we are afforded the pathetic spectacle of bourgeois self-deception. Emma is not jaded, or sophisticated, and she is ridiculed for adopting the smile of scornful pity that should be ours alone. Of course, the lure of theater

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proves too strong to resist: “Her resolution not to be taken in by the display of false sentiment was swept away by the impact of the singer’s eloquence; the fiction that he was embodying drew her to his real life, and she tried to imagine what it was like—that glamorous, fabulous, marvelous life that she, too, might have lived had chance so willed it. They might have met! They might have loved!” (254). The slide from embodied fiction to “real life” is effortless for Emma, as it is a distinction she herself rarely makes. So too the distinction between box and stage is hazy as she imagines the theatrical gaze reversing. Emma becomes its erotic object and the opera star becomes a potential lover: “A mad idea seized her: he was gazing at her now! She was sure of it! She longed to rush into his arms and seek refuge in his strength as in the very incarnation of love; she longed to cry: ‘Ravish me! Carry me off! Away from here! All my passion and all my dreams are yours—yours alone!’” (255). What Emma’s erotically invested viewing illustrates, beyond the obvious collapse of live performance and performative living, is how unsublimated are Emma’s desires. Reading and theater consume her, but they do not satiate her; her erotic demand always exceeds their supply. Rather than shielding her from the sins of the flesh, her imaginative investments are already fleshy and yield themselves to more material concerns. It makes sense, then, that immediately after Emma utters her mental plea, Léon arrives to carry her off. His presence banishes the opera from her mind, as the “whole poor story of their love” (256) blends with and finally supercedes the tragic love story on stage. By the famous mad scene, Emma has lost all interest: “the soprano, she felt, was overdoing her role” (257). It perhaps goes without saying that Emma’s contempt is a form of necessary misrecognition. As she enters into the drama of her final affair, building up to her own mad scenes and operatic suicide, Emma cannot afford to be upstaged; her emotions are “real.”

The presentation of Emma’s theatricalized identity, of the all-consuming need of the performative reader turned erotic performer, is not necessarily new to the nineteenth-century novel. We have already seen several examples of errant women whose disgrace is staged in similar ways. What is new is that Flaubert provides no counterexample, no reformed reader whose well-regulated consumption and well-turned mind resist material corruption, no middle-class ideal who proves the rule to the performer’s abject exception. As Flaubert’s prosecutor realized, there is no rule but Emma. Flaubert the anatomist cuts the legs out from under the bourgeoisie, preempting their signature move—abjection—by moving the abject from the margins to the center. Indeed, Flaubert’s true outrage against public morals was to depict the bourgeoisie as constituted by the very things they sought to exclude—not constituted through exclusion of, but by identification with, the abject. Nowhere is this clearer than in the
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grotesque spectacle of Emma’s death, the bodily excess of which is justifiably famous, and in the carnivalesque figure of the blind man that accompanies it. As she lies dying of the arsenic poisoning that is all too clearly emblematic of her toxic strategies of consumption, Emma hears the refrain of the blind beggar whose oozing sores and scabby, shredded skin have marked him as the very embodiment of the abject and as Emma’s particular terror. Unsuccessfully ejected from the town, this repressed figure now returns, singing, under the window of Emma’s death chamber: “A clear day’s warmth will often move / A lass to stray in dreams of love” (369). It is worth quoting the entire scene that follows:

Emma sat up like a galvanized corpse, her hair streaming, her eyes fixed and gaping.

To gather up the stalks of wheat
The swinging scythe keeps laying by,
Nanette goes stooping in the heat
Along the furrows where they lie.

“The blind man!” she cried.

Emma began to laugh—a horrible, frantic, desperate laugh—fancying that she saw the beggar’s hideous face, a figure of terror looming up in the darkness of eternity.

The wind blew very hard that day
And snatched her petticoat away!

A spasm flung her down on the mattress. Everyone drew close. She had ceased to exist. (369–70)

This scene can easily be read within the logic of carnival, in which the grotesque figure of the beggar inverts and undoes the supposed purity of the sacramental death scene, but we can also read it as a grotesque parody of performative response.16 As at the opera, Emma experiences a galvanic kick; she is moved—literally—by what she hears. While the vulgar, bawdy tune undoes her pretensions to operatic grandeur, Emma laughs—not, apparently, in a voice all her own, but in a strange ventriloquy of the beggar’s own characteristic laugh. In her dying moments, Emma enacts a horrifying collapse. She is both the perfectly responsive audience, taken over altogether by something outside herself, and the inert spectacle of pure, irresponsible materiality.

I have been arguing that Emma’s death scene is, in fact, a scene, in keeping with the life that preceded it. It is worth asking ourselves whom that scene is meant to please, and how, since the issue of audience response is key both within the text and within its legal history. As others, including the prosecutor Pinard, have pointed out, the novel offers no character with whose point
of view we might want to identify. Even the position of bemused spectator is troublingly occupied by characters who fail to understand the full extent of their embourgeoisement. The only position left is that of the super-spectator, the God-like author and all of those willing (and hoping) to exclude themselves from the tainted circle of the bourgeoisie. At the final remove, Flaubert the master anatomist offers up Emma’s body as a sort of shibboleth; only those with proper taste will know what to see there. In this light, the trial makes sense as an extended postmortem, in which various experts—all men of supposed taste and certain privilege—tried to sort out what Emma’s body might have meant for the body social. If the trial’s focus fell on the “light hands” and minds of those female bodies that the court considered the weakest link of the social body, it should come as no surprise. This was one way to cover over, or at least cover up, the distressing fissures that Emma’s story provokes within the culture of male privilege itself. The raw spectacle of Emma’s death unifies and constructs a new elite: men of pure taste, prepared to swear off the tit and the market, and to prostitute themselves no more.

It is within this logic of renunciation—itself a logic of abjection—that we need to understand Flaubert’s famous claim that “Madame Bovary c’est moi.” Flaubert is Emma Bovary only insofar as her abjection secures the boundaries of male genius: the reverse, “Madame Bovary ce n’est pas moi,” is equally true. We might also, however, be tempted to think about this famous claim in terms of performance, as Baudelaire did when he wrote “To accomplish the tour de force in its entirety, it remained for the author to divest himself (to the extent possible) of his sex, and to become a woman. The result is a marvel; for despite his zeal as an actor he was unable to keep from infusing male blood into the veins of his creation, and Madame Bovary . . . remained a man.” Even though Baudelaire describes the performance as something of a botched job, it is easy to see why Flaubert might find the image of the author as female impersonator troubling in a number of ways, and indeed his letters from the period of Madame Bovary’s composition betray an anxiety about the overidentified, hysterical, and corporeal authorship that Flaubert calls “the masked ball of the imagination” (Letters I, 180). He writes, for example, on December 23, 1853, about his intense physical connection to the novel: “At six o’clock tonight, as I was writing the word ‘hysterics,’ I was so swept away, was bellowing so loudly and feeling so deeply what my little Bovary was going through, that I was afraid of having hysterics myself. . . . My head was spinning. Now I have great pains in my knees, in my back, and in my head” (Letters I, 203). While the age’s moral censors worried about embodied female reading, Flaubert worried about embodied writing, a hysterical and feminizing enactment that represented the antithesis of his ideal

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of intellectual composition. He dealt with the threat in a characteristic
manner, turning nerves into narrative omnipotence. He concludes the letter
of December 23 like this:

For better or worse, it is a delicious thing to write, to be no longer yourself but
to move in and out of an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for
instance, as man and woman, both lover and mistress, I rode in a forest on an
autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the
leaves, the wind, the words my people uttered, even the red sun that made
them almost close their love-drowned eyes. (Letters I, 203)

Here, the author embodies his characters, not as an actor or an impersonator,
but as divine presence sweeping through all things in a “universe of [his] own.”
He is language itself, he is the very sun that Flaubert so often uses as a
metaphor for male creativity. Flaubert thus turns the feminizing threat of
performative, bodily response into the performative utterance of divine
authorship: Let there be.

The position of the God-like author allows Flaubert to turn a potentially
fatal identification between authorial impersonation and petit bourgeois the-
atrics into an opportunity for theorizing the withdrawal of the artist. The man
who thought that he must have been a showman in a past life—“I am sure that
in the Roman empire I was the leader of a troupe of strolling players, one of
those who went to Sicily to buy women to make actresses of them, and who
were at once professor, pimp, and performer” (Letters I, 169–70)—is in this
one not a peddler of flesh but its creator, not a theatrical impresario but the
divine dramatist himself:

An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere
and visible nowhere. Art being a second Nature, the creator of that Nature
must behave similarly. In all its atoms, in all its aspects, let there be sensed a
hidden, infinite impassivity. The effect for the spectator must be a kind of
amazement. “How is that done?” one must ask; and one must feel over-
whelmed without knowing why. Greek art followed that principle. . . . You
were not encouraged to identify with the dramatis personae: the divine was the
dramatist’s goal. (Letters I, 173)

The dramatic method, for which Flaubert looks not only to God but also to
the gods of pure art, the Greeks, gives the artist a panoptic invisibility, com-
plete control without sullying contact. Appealing to classical models,
Flaubert conceives art as a purifying medium, one in which devotion to form
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will sanctify the artist and protect him against the fleshy forms of the impure world, the bourgeois masses with their mother cult and their markets. Intellectual, artistic, and formal distance is the key: “when the values of the flesh and those of the mind are far apart, howling at each other from a distance, like wolves, we must, like the rest of the world, fashion ourselves an egoism (but one that is nobler), and live inside our den. Each day I feel a greater distance between myself and my fellow men; and I am glad of it” (Letters I, 196–97). Flaubert’s “nobler egoism” is an intellectual defense against the “values of the flesh,” the brain against the womb once more. Aesthetics thus becomes the basis for a new classicism, a utopian future in which art becomes the cornerstone of civilization and the new morality. As Flaubert looks forward to what he calls the “dazzling intellectual light” of the works of the future, the “slough of mud” that is the bourgeois present conspires to drown him (Letters I, 159). Madame Bovary was a first public attempt to wipe off the foul mud of bourgeois convention, to put the abject back into the bourgeoisie where it belonged, and to elevate the author to the high panoptic tower of the divine dramatist. That the public was not yet ready for the dominion of pure art became clear not only at the trial, but in the subsequent rewritings of Madame Bovary that likewise focus on impure reading, the materiality of mass consumption, and the performativity of reception.

Sensational Appearances

When popular author Mary Elizabeth Braddon decided to launch her career as a “literary” novelist with a laundered, English version of Madame Bovary, she made one of the truly peculiar and fascinating choices in the long history of cross-cultural adaptation. Indeed, given the antibourgeois politics of Madame Bovary, given its scathing critique of middlebrow morals and reading practices, and given its masculine poetics of style and form, it seems both quite perfect and somewhat perverse that Braddon would choose Bovary as the text on which to base her desired transformation from best-selling sensation novelist to literary artist: perfect because Flaubert represented the pure vocation of the artist to which Braddon sometimes aspired; perverse because Braddon was famous for the rapid-fire production of the very sort of pulp fiction that Bovary vilifies. As the undisputed queen of the “sensational school,” Braddon embodied the market-driven writer that Flaubert considered the worst type of prostitute. She wrote for the sensation-hungry working- and middle-class markets, she wrote in a style that subordinated aesthetics to plot and that was aligned with female writers and readers, and she wrote, by her own admission, both in
a great hurry and for money. Braddon wrote, moreover, in the novelistic genre most allied with theatricality—not only in its clear ties to stage melodrama, but also in its evocation of the embodied reader response that critics feared would turn reading into enactment.

Although anti-sensationalist discourse has been well documented and discussed in a number of recent studies, it is worth noting how fully this discourse reversed previous accounts of what “the novel” could be and do—or, rather, how loudly this discourse amplified critical fears about the downside of novel reading. If previous fears about the novel were somewhat muffled by the generic diversionary tactics addressed in the last chapter (twinning, splitting, etc.), and if the figure of theater worked to absorb many of the noisiest attacks, the antisensationalist panic quickly (and sensationally) turned whispers into screams. Sensation novels necessitated the swift and surgical separation of high and low novelistic forms. They were attacked and dismissed on the very grounds that constituted the domestic novel’s claim to moral high ground: privacy, interiority, individuality, realism, health, purity, withdrawal from the market, and difference from mass theatrical entertainment. Condemnations of the sensation novel were frequently phrased in implicitly comparative terms, as with a London Quarterly Review piece on “Recent Novels: Their Moral and Religious Teaching,” which charges that “instead of refining, they deprave the taste, that they enfeeble rather than strengthen the intellect, that they stimulate the very feelings which they should have sought to repress, and that the recreation which they profess to furnish frequently degenerates into the worst forms of intellectual dissipation” (102). What made sensation novels all the more dangerous—and, one senses, insulting to the critical establishment—was that they delivered their disease and depravity through the very channels formed by and for domestic realism’s program of reform. In a Macmillans article on “Recent Novel Writing,” the author states that novels “presuppose that the hearts and minds of their readers are what they are. . . . The ordinary reader cannot despise them, for they complete his own half thoughts, and give them back to him with a fluency and force of language which he knows he cannot approach” (208). While the Macmillans writer (“T. A.”) holds out hope that the novel might rise above the “unprecedented circulation in worthless books” (204) and once again “minister to culture . . . for the great and growing middle class” (208), other critics were not so sure. To use the critics’ own rhetoric of disease, they feared that the purity of domestic realism had left the nation’s reading bodies—all trained in letting fiction into their most private parts—open to the infection of sensation. When, for example, Margaret Oliphant writes in Blackwood’s that what makes the fleshiness of sensation fiction so repulsive is “that this intense
appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food” (“Novels,” 259), she only repeats in outrage what had once been said in praise of domestic fiction—it represents the female mind to itself and so forms the “natural” sentiments.

Whereas novel reading was once the cultural adhesive that held together the middle-class family and nation, sensation novels were felt to be “destructive of all domestic properties” (“Sensation Novels,” 565) as Oliphant puts it with a slight note of hysteria. She elsewhere warns that if English novels fall away from their much-lauded status as “family reading” the resulting need for censorship will require “a revolution in all our domestic arrangements” (“Novels,” 258). Indeed, the very serialized arrangement whereby English families congregated over the latest installment of their favorite novel was seen as a major culprit in sensational degradation. As Oliphant writes, “The violent stimulant of serial publication—of weekly publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situations and startling incident—is the thing of all others most likely to develop the germ, and bring it to fuller and darker bearing” (“Sensation Novels,” 568). Similarly, the writer for The London Quarterly Review holds that “Our magazines are largely to blame for the multiplication of this species of literary trash . . . [writers] are compelled to produce a certain portion at regular intervals, and it is almost necessary that every portion should produce some sensation” (“Recent Novels,” 102). Even the top circulating libraries come under attack as purveyors and cultivators of commercial trash. In his article on the “morbid phenomena” and “commercial character” of sensation, H. L. Manse charges that “the circulating library has been the chief hotbed for forcing a crop of writers without talent and readers without discrimination” (436). In such attacks, Charles Mudie—whom even Geraldine Jewsbury thought something of a prig and whom George Moore would excoriate as the most cowardly and effeminized censor in the business—comes off as a bold enemy to public morals and health. The Medical Critic, for example, diagnoses a “morbid and prurient curiosity” in readers, and blames “competing publishers, and cheap paper, and Mr. Mudie” (“Sensation Novels,” 514), while an article on “Our Female Sensation Novelists” claims that Mudie has created the need for domestic censorship: “Husbands and fathers at any rate may begin to look about them and scrutinize the parcel that arrives from Mudie’s” (367). What such fears about the modes of sensation fiction’s production and circulation make glaringly explicit is literature’s tie to the mass market, which was apparent over the course of the century, but which had been covered over, explained away, or simply ignored in various ways. No one
could ignore sensation's slavery to the market, and antisensational rhetoric is often at its most florid (and pathologizing) when it comes to the question of literature's commodity form. Perhaps Manse illustrates this best when he writes that sensation novels are “indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause; called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease and stimulate the want which they supply” (435). He writes, further, that “a commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season” (436). Manse continues in this vein until he arrives at a truly abject conclusion: “There is something unspeakably disgusting in this ravenous appetite for carrion, this vulture-like instinct which smells out the newest mass of social corruption, and hurries to devour the loathsome dainty before the scent has evaporated” (446). Through its association with the diseased “appetites” of the vulgar public, sensation reverses the metaphor of taste—the mark of distinction and “culture”—to reveal the morbid palate of the necrophagous masses.

We should note how much Flaubert might have liked all this: the carrion, the vultures, the scent of abjection. It was all up his rhetorical alley. But while the language of disgust is here aimed at the market’s cheap productions and tasteless consumers, it has an entirely different goal than Flaubert’s attacks on the same. While Flaubert castigated the vicious mediocrity of the bourgeoisie in order to construct an oppositional and masculine space for high art, antisensationalist discourse was produced by and for the protection of the middle classes—and particularly middle-class women and girls. The sensation debate as it unfolded in England was, at least in the beginning, a discussion about upholding the very values that Flaubert reviled. In Flaubert’s terms, it was a discussion in praise of the tit. When the issue of purity was raised in antisensationalist discourse, it was not to laud artistic purity but to guard the purity of England’s female readers, and when the language of filth was used it was not to attack but to defend notions of bourgeois femininity: “Nasty thoughts, ugly suggestions, an imagination which prefers the unclean, is almost more appalling than the facts of actual depravity, because it has no excuse of sudden passion or temptation, and no visible boundary. It is a shame for women so to write; and it is a shame to the women who read and accept as true representation of themselves and their ways the equivocal talk and fleshy inclinations herein attributed to them” (Oliphant, “Novels,” 275). In England, the elevation of art over middle-class morality and the defense of artistic manliness would have to wait for the end of the century.
Flaubert’s “divine drama” was likewise nowhere to be seen. As its association with the appetitive masses would have us expect, the sensation novel was tied to the most vulgar forms of popular theater. The writer (“E. B.”) of an 1874 *Argosy* article on “The Sensation Novel” writes that “what gives success to the novelist to-day is the same that brings audiences to theatre—sensation. Of this we find traces everywhere, and often it is productive of much harm” (143). Oliphant laments that literature has sunk to the level of sensationalist melodrama: “We swallow the poorest of literary drivel—sentiments that are adapted to the atmosphere of the Surrey theatre—descriptions of society which show the writer’s ignorance of society—style the most mean or the most inflated—for the sake of the objectionable subjects they treat” (“Novels,” 261). Making a familiar move of discrimination and reclassification, Oliphant claims that “the novels which crowd our libraries are, for a great part, not literature at all” (261).

The sensation novel’s ties to melodrama have been admirably documented by Patrick Brantlinger and Elaine Hadley. What interests me here is how the devaluation of sensation novels through their alignment with theater became especially acute around Mary Elizabeth Braddon, who had once been a professional actress. While Braddon downplayed her career on the boards, reviewers quickly got wind of her theatrical past and used it to amplify and explain what was commonly held to be her vulgarity. An essay on “Mrs. Wood and Miss Braddon” that discredits Braddon for enjoying “a popularity discreditable to the public taste” (99) also notes that she had been “a provincial actress” (99), and Henry James’s review of Braddon’s work begins by remarking on Braddon’s connections to “the dramatic profession” and concludes that “[Her novels] betray an intimate acquaintance with that disorderly half of society which becomes every day a greater object of interest to the orderly half. They intimate that, to use an irresistible vulgarism, Miss Braddon ‘has been there!’” (594). The author of “Our Female Sensation Novelists” writes of Braddon’s “war against steady, unexcited well-doing” and puts it down, in part, to “theatricals, not simply play-going, but life behind the scene” (366). The same writer, who mourns the days when proper young women “felt it good to shrink from publicity” (352), claims that Braddon brings the thieving practices of the stage to the profession of novel writing: “Playwrights take anybody’s story—it belongs to them to make it fit for the stage; and the world is essentially a stage to Miss Braddon, and all the men and women, the wives, the lovers, the villains, the sea-captains, the victims, the tragically jealous, the haters, the avengers, merely players. We could extract pages fit, as they stand, for the different actors in a melodrama, vehemently and outrageously unnatural” (368). While Braddon was frequently accused of both writing melodrama and committing plagiarism (the vulgar
opposite of creative “genius”), the above quote is peculiar for the way it alters the language of “nobody’s story” that we saw applied to fiction in previous chapters. Whereas fiction takes “nobody’s story” and generously makes it into a kind of collective emotional property available to all, Braddon’s fiction appropriates anybody’s story and makes it her own. Theater’s lack of copyright legislation is seen as undercutting the propriety of fiction, just as Braddon the actress-turned-novelist could be seen to do.

Even favorable reviews of Braddon’s work made use of theatrical figures. The Saturday Review’s discussion of The Doctor’s Wife explains the author’s remarkable productivity—which was usually frowned upon as a symptom and agent of the market’s disease—by way of a striking acrobatic analogy: “The feats of the acrobat upon the high rope are productive of far more giddiness to the breathless spectators below that to the cool and practiced performer overhead. Far from courting repose after each new miracle of agility or strength, it seems as if there was even less and less need of breathing space or relaxation,
and the delighted shouts of the crowd do but stimulate to fresh efforts and more heavenward flights” (571). In a figure that would horrify a scopophobic author like Flaubert (or Dickens, or Scott, or Burney) Braddon is portrayed as a public performer—a circus performer no less—who enacts her feats of daring-do for “the crowd” below. This is not particularly flattering (for the author or her audience), but it is fairly representative of Braddon’s treatment by the critical establishment. When *The Mask* ran a highly complimentary “portrait” of Braddon in its regular “album” feature, editors Lewis and Thompson illustrated the article with a caricature of Braddon as an equestrian circus performer, wearing the tutu, tights, and décolleté of popular theater’s ballet girls and jumping through the hoops set up by her ringmaster/publisher/lover John Maxwell (see figure 5). Each hoop bears the name of a Braddon novel and the caricature bears the caption, “Her Daring Flight.” While it is worth remembering that *The Mask* caricatured everything through the trope of performance, this author-image seems particularly remarkable for the absence of all things authorial: pen, papers, books, dignity. Braddon’s “genius” was figured in most reviews as a kind of crowd-pleasing performance—a counterfeiting of true acts of literary invention and singularity. In the *North British Review*, Fraser W. Rae sneeringly records that “by the unthinking crowd she is regarded as a woman of genius” (180) and adds, “if the test of genius were success, we should rank Miss Braddon very high in the list of great novelists” (180).

Braddon was both aware of and sensitive to her depiction as theatrical curiosity and market whore. Theater is a topic in a large number of her books (including *The Green Curtain, The Black Band, Dead Sea Fruit, Hostages to Fortune, Strangers and Pilgrims, Aurora Floyd, A Lost Eden, A Strange World, Rough Justice, and Lucius Davoren*), in which we most often see professional theater propped up at the expense of play-acting in the typical move separating good theater from bad theatricality. The Doctor’s Wife is not one of those books. Indeed, *The Doctor’s Wife* is not properly a book about theater—but it is not about theater in much the same way that it is not about adultery, sexuality, or commodity consumption: it is not openly about these things, so that it can be a book about reading, which tropes them all. In its acute generic self-consciousness, *The Doctor’s Wife* tries to beat the critics—and Flaubert, perhaps—at their own game. By directly thematizing sensational reading and writing, the novel represents a preemptive strike in the battle over cultural legitimacy. In her first “serious” novel, Braddon attempts to raise cultural capital for herself and for popular fiction. She does this, however, not by selling out theater but by making performative reading the constitutive act of a new kind of popular, feminine genius.
Before, during, and after the serial composition and publication of *The Doctor's Wife*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote frequently to her literary idol and mentor, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, of the conflicted desires that led her to hunger for both artistic and commercial success. On the one hand, her letters speak scathingly of the pressures of the market, the degraded taste of her public, and the effect that both of these things had on her writing. On the other, they record an ambition for continued popularity and financial reward. In May 1863, Braddon wrote to Bulwer-Lytton: “The ‘behind the scenes’ of literature has in a manner demoralized me. I have learnt to look at everything in a mercantile sense, & to write solely for the circulating library reader, whose palette [sic] requires strong meat, & is not very particular as to the quality thereof. . . . I want to serve two masters. I want to be artistic & to please you. I want to be sensational, & to please Mudie’s subscribers” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” 14). Elsewhere, Braddon associates market success with melodramatic tactics. On April 13, 1863, she writes to Bulwer-Lytton that “I fear I shall never write a genial novel. The minute I abandon melodrama, & strong, coarse painting in blacks & whites, I seem lost & at sea. Perhaps this is because I have written nothing but serials, which force one into overstrained action in the desire to sustain the interest” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” 13). *The Doctor’s Wife* was Braddon’s attempt to find out if she could write something other than melodrama, but it was also her attempt at serving two masters: she would “elevate” sensation by art and popularize art through sensation. Her approach was similarly hybrid. She took the high French realism of *Madame Bovary* (which “struck [her] immensely in spite of it’s [sic] hideous morality” [Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” 22]) and wed it to the domestic realism so popular on her side of the channel. As she wrote to Bulwer-Lytton in January 1864, “I venture to think you will like my new story ‘The Doctor’s Wife’ . . . better than anything I have yet done, because I am going in a little for the subjective” (19).

The critics, for their part, *did* like *The Doctor’s Wife* better than anything Braddon had yet done—which is not to say that they liked it immensely, or without reservation. While the strongly negative critical reaction that Braddon feared never materialized, Braddon was right to expect that the critics would not be able to forgive her for her former work. Praise for the novel was comparative and backhanded: *The Saturday Review*, which called the work “a novel of character” and approved of its stress on the “inner or subjective realm of passion and feeling,” wrote that “The first thing we are conscious of, in taking up *The Doctor’s Wife*, is a change of tone and subject matter which it exhibits as compared with the lady’s previous writings in general” (571); and the *North
British Review said of The Doctor’s Wife, “It proves how very nearly Miss Brad- don has missed being a novelist whom we might respect and praise without reserve. But it also proves how she is a slave, as it were, to the style which she created. ‘Sensation’ is her Frankenstein” (197). The Athenaeum seemed annoyed that Braddon should even claim “to rank amongst writers of morality” and called the novel “immoral,” “foolish,” and derivative of her previous work (495). Braddon, however, thought the The Doctor’s Wife her best pro- duction, and she felt that popular and critical response to it would determine the course of her future career. She wrote to Bulwer-Lytton in September 1864, as The Doctor’s Wife was nearing the completion of its yearlong run in Temple Bar, “I am especially anxious about this novel; as it seems to me a kind of turning point in my life, on the issue of which it must depend whether I sink or swim. . . . I am always divided between a noble desire to attain some- thing like excellence—and a very ignoble wish to earn plenty of money—and so on & so on” (Wolff, “Devoted Disciple,” 25). If Braddon turned to Bovary to doctor the French novel’s “hideous morality” for her English public, she also turned to it to doctor her own image and, perhaps most importantly, to heal the rift between artistic excellence and the monetary gain that comes from playing the crowd.

The Doctor’s Wife performs a major operation on the plot of Madame Bovary, although the bones of Flaubert’s story remains visible. The novel opens on George Gilbert, a country doctor of mediocre talents and imagination (but not at all the quack of Flaubert’s Charles), who falls in love with a young woman of singular beauty and addictive reading habits, Isabel Sleaford. Isabel welcomes the marriage as the proper trajectory of a sentimental heroine, but she finds herself disappointed with the mundane reality of married life. Much like Emma, Isabel falls in love with a shiftless neighboring aristocrat, Roland Lansdell, and believes that her prince has finally arrived. When Roland asks Isabel to run away with him, however, Isabel refuses out of bruised romanticism and moral scruple (primarily the former), and returns to her husband. After a couple of swift twists in the melodramatic plot, Isabel outlives both her husband and her lover, inherits her lover’s tremendous fortune, and becomes a wealthy benefactress with nary an ounce of arsenic in sight.

In numerous ways, Isabel is an English Emma Bovary: she receives her most important education from the circulating library; she luxuriates in melancholy romanticism; she is given to the occasional bout of hysteric; she has a yen for expensive consumer goods and a plan for interior redecoration; and she has a taste for poisonous books, if not pharmaceuticals. She is, moreover, every bit as much the actress as Emma. Before she marries George Gilbert, Isabel even dreams of leaving her governess job for a life on the London
stage: “Sometimes, when the orphans were asleep, Miss Sleaford let down her
long black hair before the little looking-glass, and acted to herself in a whis-
iper. She saw her pale face, awful in the dusky glass, her lifted arms, her great
black eyes, and she fancied herself dominating a terror-stricken pit. Some-
times she thought of leaving friendly Mr. Raymond, and going up to London
with a five-pound note in her pocket, and coming out at one of the theatres
as a tragic actress” (74). Not surprisingly, Isabel’s theatrical dreams are con-
tioned by her fictional reading. It never occurs to her, for example, that she
would have to learn the craft of acting because she “had read a good many
novels in which timid young heroines essay their histrionic powers, [and] she
had never read of a dramatically-disposed heroine who had not burst forth a
full-blown Mrs. Siddons without so much as the ordeal of a rehearsal” (74).
In keeping with Emma Bovary, Isabel understands her life through the
twinned tropes of reading and theater. So, for example, she sees her husband
as but “a secondary character in the play of which she was the heroine” (99),
and when she first meets Roland Lansdell and his beautiful cousin, Lady
Gwendoline Pompfrey, Isabel instantly pictures them “in one of the stock
scenes always ready to be pushed on the stage of her imagination. She fancied
them in the midst of that brilliant supernumerary throng who wait upon the
footsteps of heroes and heroines” (134). Something interesting about Isabel’s
theatricality is how little it distinguishes between fictional, theatrical, and his-
torical character. Dickensian heroines show up as frequently as Shakespearian
ones in Isabel’s own repertoire, and she is as likely to cast her lover in the role
of Byron or Napoleon as in that of Earnest Maltravers or any of Shakespeare’s
tragic heroes. This collapse of categories, and its concomitant withdrawal from
“real life” can be glimpsed in Isabel’s lovesick musings, when she “left the
house affairs to [the housekeeper], and acted Shakespearian heroines and
Edith Dombey before her looking-glass, and read her novels, and dreamed her
dreams, and wrote little scraps of poetry, and drew pen-and-ink profile por-
traits of Mr Lansdell” (156). As though to underscore the vicariousness with
which Isabel experiences life, her imaginative “scenes” are generally staged
before a mirror so that she can perform the roles of both spectacle and appre-
ciative audience. Her dominant fantasy in the early days of her acquaintance
with Roland Lansdell is of what might have been: she might have been a great
actress; he might have seen her play Desdemona (or Juliet, or Edith Dombey)
and he might have “fallen in love with her from the stage box” (155).

When Roland does fall in love with Isabel, he chooses to leave England
rather than compromise her. He sends a letter to which Isabel responds in a
characteristically theatrical manner—one perfectly in keeping with Emma’s
melodramatic response to Rodolphe’s letter of farewell. Isabel imagines that
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“The curtain had fallen, and the lights were out; and she had nothing more to do but to grope blindly about upon a darkened stage until she sank in the great vampire pit—the grave. A pale ghost, with somber shadowy hair, looked back at her from the glass. Oh, if she could die, if she could die!” (222). Her suicidal imaginings are of course full of Ophelia: “Would she be found floating on the stream, with weeks and water-lilies tangled in her long dark hair? Would she look pretty when she was dead?” (222). Although she ponders “Hamlet’s question,” it is clear that what Isabel cares about is making a spectacular corpse—and not in Emma’s abject sense, either.

What keeps Isabel from following Emma’s suicidal example is finally the same thing that brought her to the brink: her theatrical romanticism. Isabel considers an overdose of laudanum, but reasons that “death by poison was only a matter-of-fact business as compared with the still water and the rushes, and would have a very inferior effect in the newspapers” (226). Indeed, what sets Isabel apart from Emma altogether is that her reading—both fictional and dramatic, but in either case performative—acts not as pure poison but as pharmakon: it is her poison and her cure. Isabel’s addictive reading and theatricalized persona turn out to be the very things that shield her from the harsh materiality of Emma’s fate. This in part has something to do with what Isabel reads—she does not “feed on garbage” (28), but rather favors the novels of Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, and Thackeray, along with the poetry of Byron and Shelley—and with how she reads it. Isabel reads absorptively, passionately, and quite physically, not only acting out favorite scenes but blushing and trembling in reader response. She also reads obsessively and possessively, rereading favorite novels over and over again, and coming to identify more fully with their characters than with the actual people in her life. She reads, in other words, in a similar way to Emma and in the very way that had antisensational rhetoricians worked up to such a hysterical pitch. While Isabel has a more discriminating palate than the girls and women over whom sensation’s critics worried so loudly and often, she nonetheless gorges herself on a steady diet of imaginative reading. And yet, surprisingly, nothing terrible happens to her, despite the novel’s protests that (as friend and sensational novelist Sigismund Smith says) “she reads too many novels” (30).

Instead of leading her to adultery, bankruptcy, and suicide, Isabel’s reading saves her, both by sublimating her erotic and consumer desires and by elevating her above the more tawdry realities of her life. Early in the novel, for example, she runs errands for her stepmother in their dingy London neighborhood: “she carried her ideal world wherever she went, and was tending delirious Byron at Missolonghi, or standing by the deathbed of Napoleon the
Great, while the shop-man slapped the butter on the scale, and the vulgar people hustled her before the greasy counter” (29). This might be the effect of her “intellectual opium-eating” (29) but it certainly appears medicinal, especially considering her family’s poverty and criminality. In the antisensational logic of the novel, Isabel’s supposedly diseased relationship to fiction is contrasted to Sigismund’s apparently healthy one: “Perhaps there never was a wider difference between two people than that which existed between Isabel Sleaford and her mother’s boarder. Sigismund wrote romantic fictions by wholesale, and yet was as unromantic as the prosiest butcher who ever entered a cattle-market. He sold his imagination, and Isabel lived upon hers” (28). The point here, I think, is that Isabel lives—not just that she feeds off her imagination in the novel’s metaphor of consuming fiction, but that she survives on it. One of the things that her reading helps her ignore is the very “cattle-market” in which she herself is the thing that could go for wholesale: romantic narrative works its usual magic of providing its consumers an apparent escape from the market. Indeed, Sigismund Smith makes a version of the healthy-escapism argument to George Gilbert:

Don’t suppose I want to depreciate the value of the article. A novel’s a splendid thing after a hard day’s work, a sharp practical tussle with the real world, a healthy race on the barren moorland of life, a hearty wrestling-match in the universal ring. Sit down then and read Earnest Maltravers, or Eugene Aram, or the Bride of Lammermore, and the sweet romance lulls your tired soul to rest, like the cradle-song soothes a child. No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their live are to be paraphrases of their favourite books. (30)

While this is the novel’s official word on the benefits and dangers of reading popular romances, it is worth noting that Isabel—the “poor foolish girl” of whom Smith is talking here—actually manages to avoid danger through reading. While Emma Bovary’s reading leads to spendthrift commodity consumption, Isabel’s leads to another form of “interior decoration” altogether: “she fancied she had the right to furnish the secret chambers of her mind according to her own pleasure” (183). True, Isabel’s romantic “furnishings” lead her into a compromising position with Roland Lansdell, but when she finally realizes his intentions reading comes to the rescue: “And Beatrice Portinari, and Viola, and Leila, and Gulnare, and Zelica, what of them? The visions of all those lovely and shining creatures arose before her; and beside them, in letters of fire, blazed the odious word that transformed her fond platonic worship, her
sentimental girlish idolatry, into a shame and a disgrace” (262). Isabel’s realization is itself configured as an act of reading, as her imagination finally spells out adultery. Isabel Gilbert, the narrator insists, “was not a woman of the world. She had read novels while other people perused Sunday papers; and of the world out of three-volume romance she had no more idea than a baby” (253). She most clearly has never read French novels, for “The possibility of deliberately leaving her husband to follow the footsteps of this other man, was as far beyond her power of comprehension as the possibility that she might steal a handful of arsenic out of one of the earthenware jars in the surgery, and mix it with the sugar that sweetened George Gilbert’s matutinal coffee” (276).

There is something deliciously perverse, or perhaps just highly sensational, about the Bovary character poisoning her husband rather than herself—and it could easily happen in another of Braddon’s novels. But The Doctor’s Wife explores the possibility only as an impossibility, a negation. Indeed, this latter section of the novel is defined by things Isabel refuses to do: commit adultery or suicide, abandon her husband, and (most fascinatingly) reform her reading. This is the point in a novel about deluded, quixotic reading that the heroine should recognize the price of her romanticism and the value of reality. And, indeed, this all comes very close to happening in the scene in which Isabel grows up: “The sweet age of enchantment is over; the fairy companions of girlhood, who were loveliest even when most they deluded, spread their bright wings and flutter away; and the grave genius of common-sense—a dismal-looking person, who dresses in gray woollen stuff, warranted not to shrink under the ordeal of the wash-tub, and steadfastly abjures crinoline—stretches out her hand, and offers, with a friendly but uncompromising abruptness, to be the woman’s future guide and monitress” (277). Two pages later, we learn that “she could not become quite a woman all in one moment; the crossing of the mystic brook is not so rapid an operation as that. Some remnants of the old delusions hung about her, and merely took a new form” (279). If Isabel hangs onto her saving delusions, who can blame her when the transition to adulthood looks so much like a pantomime, with its fairies and mystic brooks? In fact, nothing about Isabel’s “adult” life is any less melodramatic than her previous experiences—if anything, her melodrama only gains speed at this point. The novel’s sensation plot kicks in and Isabel’s criminal father—the notorious counterfeiter, Jack the Scribe—returns to demand money from his daughter: “‘You!’ she gasped in a whisper; ‘you here!’ ‘Yes, me! You needn’t stare as if you saw a ghost’” (310). Of course he would return as a ghost (quite apt not only for sensational plotting but for Isabel’s Hamlet fixation) and, after he bludgeons Roland to the brink of death, Jack the Scribe exits in the character of Nemesis. The narrator writes that “here he drops out of my story, as
the avenging goddess might disappear from a classic stage when her work is

done. For him too a Nemesis waits, lurking darkly in some hidden turning of
the sinuous way along which a scoundrel walks" (396). With the melodramatic

moments coming thick and fast, Roland has a lingering death scene, which fol-
lows quickly on the heels of George’s death by cholera, and Isabel descends

into a very spectacular faint: “she felt the ground reel suddenly beneath her
feet, and saw the gradual rising of a misty darkness that shut out the world,

and closed about her like the silent waters though which a drowning man goes
down to death” (395). She has her drowning, at last—and at least.

What makes these melodramatic scenes so very different from the closural
scenes of *Madame Bovary* is that we are asked to read them as genuinely mov-

ing. *The Doctor’s Wife* does not give us the meretricious theatricality of an
Emma Bovary that can best be enjoyed from a divine distance, but rather the

affective performance of a heroine who learned her lesson. That lesson, I think,

has more to do with the values of invested reading than it does with the dan-
gers of romance. In the last pages of the novel, we learn that Isabel has inher-

ited Roland’s fortune, traveled the continent, and returned a wiser woman who

is ready to undertake the improvement of her estate and the building of model
cottages, and so forth: “There is a great gulf between a girl of nineteen and a

woman of five-and-twenty; and Isabel’s foolish youth is separated from her

wiser womanhood by a barrier that is formed by two graves. Is it strange, then,

that the chastening influence of sorrow has transformed a sentimental girl into

a good and noble woman—a woman in whom sentiment takes the higher form

of universal sympathy and tenderness?” (402). The sentiment that Isabel

learned from books and plays has under the influence of grief (and vast amounts

of money) become the proper sympathy that Isabel needs to be a proprietary

individual. Absorptive reading and melodramatic sorrow have given her the

emotional education needed to become a sympathetic landowner.30

What Braddon does not do, then, is to cure the performativity of sensation

by rewriting it as the cool drama of Flaubertian authorial reserve. Instead, she

turns Flaubert’s drama into reformed (and reforming) Victorian melodrama.

And where Flaubert creates the dramatic style as an effort to keep the author’s

performative body well offstage, Braddon puts authorship front and center by

pairing her allegory of literary consumption with one of fictional production.

Two of the male characters, Roland Lansdell and Sigismund Smith, are

authors. Smith, taken by many to be Braddon’s fictional alter ego, is a writer

of “penny numbers” who happily takes to the continuous and inky labor of

producing page after page for an insatiable market of literary consumers (none

of Flaubert’s bleeding viscera here). Smith expressly aligns himself with the

popular market and with melodrama: “I would rather be the author of [a

Mesdames Bovary

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melodrama], and hear my audience screaming with laughter from the rise of the curtain to the fall thereof, than write a dull five-act tragedy, in the unities of which Aristotle himself could find no flaw, but from whose performance panic-stricken spectators should slink away [before] the second act came to its dreary close. I think I should like to have been Guilbert de Pixérécourt, the father and prince of melodrama . . . the man who reigned supreme over the playgoers of his time and has not ceased to reign” (47). At least one of the things that Smith does in this novel is to assure us that The Doctor’s Wife is not of the same breed as his potboiling productions. It has too few murders (only one), too close a focus on character at the expense of plot, and, were there any question, contains the declaration “This is not a sensation novel” (358). But his presence also suggests a not-entirely-satirical rethinking of genius along the lines of popularity—just the lines, in other words, that Flaubert defined it against. As Smith says, with admiration, “Pixérécourt was never a great man; he was only a popular” (48). In Smith, Braddon seems to hedge her bets: if she can’t come off as a literary genius in The Doctor’s Wife, she can at least formulate a concept of popular genius.31

What is remarkable about this jolly, likeable character is how fully he embodies the vices of popular authorship (materiality, mediocrity, exhibition) and how handily he turns them into virtues. Sigismund’s writing is tied to the most vulgar matters of material production: pages of copy churned out to deadline, printer’s boys waiting outside the door, and ink—plenty of ink. While on a visit to Isabel, Sigismund complains that “I don’t think any one ever imagined so many ink-bottles compatible with so little ink. . . . I’ve had my best ideas balked by perpetual hairs in my pen, to say nothing of flies’ wings, and even bodies. There’s nothing like unlimited ink for imparting fluency to a man’s language; you cut short his eloquence the moment you limit his ink” (218). Imaginative authorship is here reliant on ink supply and customer demand, and the fly bodies clogging the flow of ideas only remind us that (as Sigismund says) “in penny numbers one body always leads on to another” (194). For a sensation author, Sigismund explains, bodies are an occupational hazard, but the body that most interests me here is the authorial one: Smith’s own body turns out to be a perfect model for invested, performative authorship. Indeed, Sigismund literally enacts the imaginative events about which he writes. He makes “frantic gashes” (12) at his shirt collar to determine in which direction a character should slit his own throat (from left to right) and he blocks out the action of his novels like a stage director. When, for example, he visits the ruins of Waverly castle, “His friends found him on one occasion stretched at full length amongst crisp fallen leaves in a recess that had once been a fireplace, with a view to ascertain whether it was long enough
to accommodate a body. He climbed fearful heights, and planned perilous
leaps and ‘hairbreadth ’scapes,’ deadly dangers in the way of walks along nar-
row cornices high up above empty space; such feats as hold the reader with sus-
pended breath, and make the continued expenditure of his weekly penny
almost a certainty” (203). Here, indeed, is the author as acrobatic performer—
an image eerily similar to the Saturday Review’s description of Braddon in the
review of this novel discussed above. Rather than making him cheap or ridicu-
ous, however, Sigismund’s theatrical authorship leaves him deeply satisfied,
since it allows him to “do” the things about which he writes. He in fact pre-
scribes a dose of novel writing to Isabel as a way of sublimating her unaccept-
able desires for Roland: “Since I’ve taken to writing novels, I don’t think I’ve a
desire unsatisfied. There’s nothing I haven’t done—on paper. . . . If I were a
young lady, and . . . had a romantic fancy for a person I ought not to care
about, I’ll tell you what I’d do with him,—I’d put him into a novel, Izzie, and
work him out in three volumes; and if I wasn’t heartily sick of him by the time
I got to the last chapter, nothing on earth would cure me” (229). Not only
does Sigismund thoroughly enjoy the authorial performance that Flaubert
called “the masked ball of the imagination,” but he also sees it as healthy and
curative—and not only for the author, but also for the public. Through Sigis-
mund, Braddon explicitly invokes and inverts the antisensationalist rhetoric
of disease. As Sigismund tells Isabel, “there’s a kind of righteous indignation,
and a frantic desire to do something splendid for his fellow-creatures, like vac-
cinating them all over, or founding a hospital for every body, which a man feels
when he’s writing” (188, my emphasis). Smith goes on to say that these feel-
ings of purpose and nobility “ooze away when [the] copy has gone to the
printers” (188), but the passage is nonetheless descriptive of how fiction
works as vaccination for both Sigismund and Isabel: imaginative actions take
the place of real ones. In this homeopathic theory of writing and reading, sen-
sation inoculates the mind against the body.

Another function Smith’s authorial figure serves is to balance out the
novel’s other model for authorship, the solitary Romantic poet, embodied here
by Byron (Isabel’s dead hero) and Roland Lansdell, who is not only Isabel’s
lover but also the hypersensitive author of the tortured romantic verses, “An
Alien’s Dreams.” If Smith represents the relentless production of the “low”
pulp market, driven by the insatiable passions of the female reader, Lansdell
presents us with a gentle parody of “high” male literary culture. To be sure,
Roland is not a professional writer, but this is exactly the point: the aristocratic
and woozy self-involvement of his high romanticism is less healthy for its
reader, Isabel, than the sensationalized products of Sigismund’s honest labor.
Moreover, Roland is clearly not a genius of any possible stripe. Although Isabel
considers him a “modern Byron,” there is no question that Roland is either a
great man or a popular one.

I’d love to say that The Doctor’s Wife encodes some secret portrait of
Flaubert in its pages, but Braddon’s vision of the literary sphere leaves high
realism well out of it. Instead, she stakes her claim to an alternate literary
ground, a middle ground somewhere between pulp and pomp. Admittedly,
this is just the middlebrow and middle-class ground that Flaubert wanted to
desecrate, or at least see well daubed. What interests me about The Doctor’s
Wife is not that it “sanitizes” Bovary’s adultery plot, making it palatable for an
English reading public, but that it rewrites Flaubert’s narrative of grotesque
female consumption as one of reformed and profitable desires. Isabel becomes
an educated consumer and, in her new role as Lady Bountiful, a figure of tri-
umphant middle-class morals and tastes. She becomes just the kind of well-
regulated, properly educated woman that Sénard, Flaubert’s defense lawyer,
claimed that Madame Bovary was meant to inspire and create. This might not
be a radical rethinking of Flaubert’s antibourgeois politics and aesthetics—it is
perhaps the opposite—but it is a nice poke in the divine dramatist’s panoptic
eye all the same.

Perhaps even more insulting to Flaubert’s vision, however, is Braddon’s sug-
gestion that Isabel might have her own kind of genius, one very much tied to
her reading and to her romanticism. Mr. Raymond, the novel’s resident
philosopher, phrenologist, and sage, sees in Isabel the spark of greatness: “That
girl has mental imitation,” he says to himself, “the highest and rarest faculty of
the human brain—ideality and comparison” (82). He thinks that “these bright
faculties might not be the best gifts for a woman. It would have been better,
perhaps, for Isabel to have possessed the organ of pudding-making or stock-
ing-darning” (82). Although Raymond fears that marriage to a country doctor
will be death to Isabel’s gifts, he reasons rather sadly that “Society wants com-
monplace people; and I really doubt if it might not very comfortably dispense
with those gifted beings, who are perpetually running about with flaring
 torches men call genius, setting honest men’s hayricks—in the way of old prej-
udices and time-honored delusions—on fire” (83). Although Raymond sets up
genius in a familiar way—in contradistinction to the commonplace—he
locates Isabel’s genius in the very trait that makes her an overinvolved reader:
her mental imitation. This is the same trait that critics of sensation feared and
pathologized in the female reader, and yet Braddon elevates it—and her many
readers, who saw themselves in Isabel—to the level of genius. Whereas
Flaubert used the performative body of the abject female reader to necessitate
and prop up his idea of the brilliant male artist, Braddon sees in that body its
own (and her own) particular artistry.
This chapter has been about the ways in which the performing and performative body centered debates about the novel’s agency and propriety during the 1850s and 1860s. It has also been about how that body acted as a fulcrum for the raising of literary, authorial, and cultural capital. If Braddon’s efforts to elevate her authorial profile with *The Doctor’s Wife* were not completely successful, her failure to do so reflects not only her critics’ inability to grant the “Queen of Sensation” new literary territory but also her own refusal to abandon sensation altogether. It also anticipates the devaluation of both popular novels and female authors in the literary market of the fin de siècle, to which we will turn in the next chapter. Before we do, though, it is worth taking a parting glance at the last pages of *The Doctor’s Wife*, in which Sigismund Smith relates his completion of *Bella, the Ballet-Girl*: “she poisoned herself with insect-powder in a garret near Drury Lane, after setting fire to the house and grounds of her destroyer; she ran through a hundred and thirteen numbers, and [my publisher] has some idea of getting me to write a sequel. You see there might be an antidote to the insect-powder, or the oilman’s shop-boy might have given patent-mustard by mistake” (404). Saving Emma Bovary yet again, Braddon imagines an “antidote” to Flaubert’s toxic realism in Smith’s resurrecting sensations. Brought to life by the demands of the crowd (hungry readers like Emma herself), the heroine lives again—until, that is, George Moore gets his hands on her.