Humanities Institute
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# Salammbo (1862)

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880)

From *Madame Bovary* to S*alammbo.*

Flaubert's first novel, *Mme. Bovary* (1856), ended up in court on a charge of obscenity, facing public opinion which was keenly sensitive to the depiction of dubious morals. The prosecution, in the present case, fell back on the argument that the unabashed portrayal of adultery undermined the whole value of Flaubert's fiction. Flaubert's defense, which was successful in winning him an acquittal, maintained that Flaubert's first novel was essentially a cautionary tale, packed with salubrious advice on what to avoid in marriage. A final version on that issue would necessarily involve our final perception of*Salammbo,* the surprise card in the deck of Flaubert's opus, the opening of a new kind of Romanticism, thickly blended with realism. On the quite distant horizon (1830-1870) lay the onset of truly realistic fictions, like those of the Goncourt brothers, who preceded their fictions with investigative visits to factories. Who went to the real, to find the real.

Suffice it to say that the tonal shift, which takes over Flaubert's fiction, as he breathes deeply on the far side of his acquittal, is sharp and sudden. In M*adame Bovary* Flaubert immersed himself in a cultural landscape with which he was intuitively familiar, the just industrializing, but still agricultural, basin of farmlands around Paris. After the legal troubles that followed the publication of *Madame Bovary*, when he was tried and acquitted on charges of "immorality", Flaubert sought a less controversial subject for his next novel. In 1857, Flaubert decided to conduct research in Carthage, in North Africa. In a letter to Madame de Chantepie, dated 23 January 1858, he described his anticipation*: "I absolutely have to go to Africa. This is why, around the end of March, I will go back to the country of exotic dates. I am giddy with excitement. I will once again spend my days on horseback and my nights in a tent. What a happy breath I will take as I get onboard the steam boat in Marseilles!"* From 12 April to 5 June 1858, Flaubert traveled to Tunisia, to explore the locations of a new novel.

The French moment in history, through which Flaubert envisaged this new aesthetic move, was rich with new versions of world understanding. We were at the moment of rapid development of the first stages of the French Oceanic Empire (French Polynesia) which, along with the recently added African territories—Cote d'ivoire, Chad, Equatorial Guinea—were turning Africa into a player on the world stage. African art and culture were trend setting in Parisian galleries, and the sciences of archaeology were drawing world attention to the richness of World Heritage. (Such brilliant harvests as the Musee de l'homme in Paris, founded in 1937, were to indicate the vast richness France was promising itself from the kinds of movement outward in which Flaubert set joyfully off.)

Story

It might seem fanciful to link *Madame Bovary* to the tale of *Salammbo* yet we can put nothing beyond the imaginative reach or firmness of Flaubert. Mme Bovary is no favored moon goddess, drawn from the goddess cults of the pre Christian Near East, but rather a just pre contemporary housewife driven crazy by her dreams of glamor, sexual fulfillment, and admiration. Who then is Salammbo? She is a priestess of the moon goddess, daughter of the powerful Hamilcar, sleek symbol of beauty—is that not the sexual self-dreaming of Bovary'?--and the interiorized -sexual idol of the mercenaries who over warm the initial books of the novel. Is not Salammbo the inner expression of the pure beauty goddess that the humble Mme. Bovary carries within her?

It is plausible that Flaubert the bachelor might find his way back to a moon goddess, harvest of his own scholarly reading—and especially of his reading in the third century B.C. Greek historian, Polybius, whose *Histories* were the chief source of knowledge of the Punic Wars, and of the growth of the Roman

Republic. What however, boggles the mind, is the lushness of the language Flaubert brings to the description of the events that pack the story of Salammbo. The mind of the *Bova*ry reader is sure to drunken on the language with which it is invited into the world of Salammbo, which opens onto a turbulent scene in the gardens of Hamilcar, the Carthaginian leader of a pack of mercenaries, hired troops of Hamilcar who have suffered defeat at the hands of the Roman navy, who have not been paid, and who are hungry and exhausted. The first chapter storms us with a Brueghelian blend of angry mercenaries from every part of the Mediterranean culture world—Greeks, Nunidians, Syrians, Ligurians—all languages pouring forth through the grassy parks of Hamilcar's palace.

The jelling of the turbulent tribe occurs gradually, and only after Flaubert has expended on us his richest torrents of descriptive language—flowering vegetation, extravagant hair and robe styles, profusions of exotic tropical fruits from hanging branches. The reader of *Bovary* will wonder from where this tropical exuberance will have come in the mind that created M*adame Bovary*. An answer may be that the fervent dreams of the self-destructive middle class Frenchwoman, Mme. Bovary, sprang from the same powderkeg as that which created the exquisite beauty queen, Salammbo—the lady who descended in her divine serpent enfolded radiance the long palatial staircase of the palace of her father Hamilcar. None other than this radiance of Tanit was the goddess of the moon; before long to serve as idol for a roving band of mercenaries, whose center and focus, but not home, is Carthage. There is tremendous potential for violence, in this moving human storm.

At the advice of the Elders of Hamilcar's Palace, the mercenaries agree to make their ways to the nearby City of Sicca. There they camp out and put in itime. Mathô lies in his tent all day long at Sicca. He is in love, and since he has no prospect of ever seeing Salammbô again, he despairs. Finally the wily Spendius profits greatly by Mathô's inaction, ingratiating himself with the giant warrior. This will prove to be the crucial entanglement of Matho with the goddess incarnate.

At Sicca an there is another doughty suitor for the attention of Salammbo; the .huge warrior Hanno. With great dignity he addresses the crowd, telling them of Carthage's intent to pay later and urging them all to return to their homes. At this point Spendius leaps up as a volunteer the warrior's speech translator—no one has understood Hanno's dialect —and remodels the warrior's speech, twisting it into an exhortation to march back to Carthage'

Soon the excitable barbarians are on the march again, this time to besiege Carthage. At their head ride Mathô, Narr' Havas, and Spendius, now a leader. Among those who watch the young girl, Salammbo, none is more attracted than Narr' Havas, a Numidian chief sent by his father to Carthage to serve with Hamilcar. Although he was in Carthage for six months, this is his first sight of Salammbo. The sight is electrical.

As the unrest grows, Spendius goes to Mathô with a project of his own. He is sure he can find a way to get Matho into the city. With their powerful strength the two men find their ways into the city's aqueduct system where Spendius finds a loose stone in the pavement over the aqueduct that supplies the city with water. With his giant's strength, Mathô lifts the stone, and the two swim with the current in the darkness until they come to a reservoir inside the city itself. Then Spendius reveals his project. He and Mathô are to steal the zaïmph, the mysterious veil of Tanit, goddess of the moon. The Carthaginians put their trust in Tanit and Tanit's strength lies in the veil, so Spendius hopes to demoralize the city. By stealing the veil Mathô is fearful of committing sacrilege, but he is obliged to take the veil in order to see Salammbô.

The two men steal into Tanit's sanctuary and Mathô seizes the veil. Then quietly Spendius leads the trembling Mathô, who wears the sacred robe, into Salammbô's sleeping chamber. It is a profoundly anticipated moment, both sexual and spiritual.

As Mathô advances with words of love to Salammbô's bed, the terrified girl, who is at this point girl and not a goddess-- awakens and shouts an alarm. Instantly servants come running. Mathô flees, but while he wears the sacred veil no one dares to lay a hand on him. Mathô leaves the city and returns to the barbarians with his prize, the veil if not the girl.

Hamilcar returns to Carthage in time to organize the defense of the city, and the siege melts away. The barbarians are short of food, so they march to Utica to demand supplies. Only loosely bound to Carthage, Utica is glad to harass Carthage by aiding its enemies. Newly supplied with arms and food, the barbarians are a more formidable host. Hamilcar, however, brings his army out of Carthage and joins the battle on the plain. Although the Carthaginians are few in number, they are disciplined and well led. They engage the barbarians several times, always indecisively. Finally, by a stroke of luck, the army of Hamilcar is trapped, and the barbarians surround the city's defenders. Flaubert, who as we know from Madame Bovary, is a master at the depiction of entrapment and desperation, excels at creating the sense of military claustrophobia.

Meanwhile Salammbô is goaded by the high priest into retrieving the sacred veil. Disguised and with a guide, she makes her way into the barbarian camp, under priestly injunction to do whatever might be necessary to reclaim the robe. Finding Mathô's tent, she goes in and asks for the veil, which hangs among his trophies of war. Mathô is thunderstruck and stammers out eager protestations of love. Remembering the commands of the priest, Salammbô submits to Mathô. While the Libyan sleeps, she takes the veil and goes unmolested into her father's camp.

Hamilcar notices immediately that the thin golden chain linking his daughter's ankles is broken, and in his shame he promises her to Narr' Havas, who long since deserted the barbarians and returned to help Hamilcar. The marriage, however, is delayed until after the final defeat of Hamilcar's enemies. Hamilcar, wary of the stalemate in the battle, leads his followers back to Carthage, and the barbarians again lay siege to the city. Spendius seeks to end the siege by breaking the aqueduct. Thirst and famine threaten the city from within. When pestilence breaks out, the children of Carthage are burned in sacrifice to Moloch. Moloch is appeased, and torrential rains save the city.

With help from his allies, Hamilcar begins to reduce the forces of the enemy. A large part of the mercenary army is trapped in a defile in the mountains and left to starve. Mathô is taken prisoner.

On the wedding day of Narr' Havas and Salammbô, Mathô is led through the city and tortured by the mob. Still alive but with most of his flesh torn away, he staggers up to the nuptial dais of Salammbô. There he falls dead. Salammbô recalls how he had once knelt before her, speaking gentle words. When the drunken Narr' Havas embraces her in token of possession and drinks to the greatness of Carthage, she lifts a cup and drinks also. A moment later she falls back on the wedding dais, dead. So die the warrior and the priestess who by their touch profaned the sacred robe.