Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880–1930

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The Most Thrilling and Fascinating Book of the Century’

Marketing Gustave Flaubert in Late Nineteenth-Century England

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Few nineteenth-century writers have been considered more resolutely ‘highbrow’ than Gustave Flaubert. For Virginia Woolf, ‘there can be no two opinions as to what a highbrow is’, and Flaubert embodied it. Moreover, critics have insisted on Flaubert’s contempt for anything approaching the ‘middlebrow’, despite the fact that the term was only coined in the 1920s. James Winders refers to Flaubert’s ‘well-known scorn for the bourgeois middle-brow mentality’ and Allen describes his novels as ‘scathing critiques of middlebrow morals and reading practices’. Flaubert’s highbrow credentials have been used to illustrate the splintering of the reading public in the late nineteenth century. In the years after 1860 the vanguard of the dominant intellectual, literary and artistic culture of Britain defined itself in terms of a rejection of provincial – that is, basically native – values. Flaubert is repeatedly portrayed as having been either ignored by the majority of Victorian readers, or accorded at best occasional, mostly negative attention. George Moore, Walter Pater and Henry James were his main champions, reinforcing the aura of exclusivity surrounding him.

Yet Flaubert’s appeal to a broad range of late-Victorian readers was much wider than has been assumed, and the manner in which his fiction was consumed sheds light on the emerging, amorphous, category of the middlebrow. Although unequipped with the language of the three ‘brows’, Walter Besant had, in ‘Literature as a Career’ (1892) anticipated such divisions by distinguishing between the literature of ‘the highest kind’ produced by ‘not a dozen living writers’, the lower standards which appeal to the better class, the class whose literary taste is not so keen, so subtle, as that of the first class, yet is sound and wholesome, and finally the lowest standards of the penny novelettes. Flaubert did
exist amongst the middle strata of readers who were drawn to delight in the 'intellectualism' of the nineteenth-century avant-garde, not the kind of formularic entertainment seen as the hallmark of the lowbrow. The dissemination of Flaubert's novel *Salammbo* (1862) in 1869, England sheds light on publishers' growing awareness of this new readership. The novel is set after the first Punic War against Rome, when Carthage relied on the help of mercenaries. Denied pay, the mercenaries begin a violent revolt, during which their leader, Mâtho and the Carthaginian general's daughter, Salammbo, fall in love. The revolt is crushed, Mâtho captured and tortured, and Salammbo dies of shock. Victorian critical reactions ranged from disgust to mild approval, echoing the similarly lukewarm responses across the Channel. The novel re-emerged in the British literary marketplace in 1886 with two competing translations published by Vizetelly and by Saxon & Co. Publishers' increasing eagerness to issue affordable translations of French fiction assumed that readers would appear who were sufficiently curious to look beyond native wares but insufficiently equipped to handle them in their original form.

McPherson's discussion of how late-Victorian anthologies helped to develop the idea of the middlebrow has shown that, on the one hand, anthologized English literature was seen, by some, as a way of supplying higher literary culture to those in educational settings. On the other hand, it was sometimes thought to contribute to a middling reading culture that devalued English literature and had the unwelcome potential to shift hierarchical literary boundaries.

Translations of French works occupied a comparable position. Vizetelly's translation presented itself as an attempt to supply avant-garde French culture to serious readers who may previously not have been exposed to it, and was lauded accordingly. Saxon's edition embraced the middling's interest in what was fashionable and consumable, and was lambasted for it. The very different treatment given to what was ultimately a similar product foreshadows the middlebrow by displaying the literary value and ephemeral literary taste.

*Salammbô* was not the first of Flaubert's works to prompt reflections on middlebrow values. His most notorious novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857), principally drew attention in England through the trial (and acquittal) of its author for immorality. Most reviewers condemned the novel as 'garbage', and even those who gently defended it felt there was little danger that timid English readers would seek it out. However, critics soon spotted novelists reworking *Madame Bovary* for Victorian readers. Jean-Baptiste Mâtho and Fanny Bovary met Beatrix's criteria for the class of purged of adultery, these novels met Mâtho's criteria for the class of literature that drew on more challenging works while remaining 'sound and wholesome', ye; critics were unsure what to make of their tenuous link with the avant-garde masterpiece.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, serialized in *Temple Bar* between January and December 1864, was probably the first repackaging of *Madame Bovary* for English readers, substituting Isabel Gilbert's mild flirtations for Emma's adultery. Braddon's letters suggest that, tired of being accused of lowering the standards of contemporary fiction through sensation novels, she saw Flaubert as her ticket to a more respectable literary sphere. For Pykett, *The Doctor's Wife* shows Braddon attempting to bypass the sensation genre by adapting for an English setting and a middlebrow audience the plot of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

Critics have so far failed to note that other late-Victorian novels were thought to have been inspired by Flaubert. At least eight other novels were explicitly compared to *Madame Bovary* between the late 1870s and late 1980s. The theme that prompted such comparisons was not adultery (the women never go beyond flirtation) but female dissatisfaction. Katharine Macquoid's three-volume novel *Louisa* (1885), published by Bentley, is set in Italy. Its eponymous heroine, a bored housewife, marries an Italian count for financial security and becomes drawn to an Englishman, who favours another lady. For *The Saturday Review*,

In her ridiculous passion for the fine eyes of Francis Hobart she resembles Mrs Bovary, or rather, perhaps, Miss Braddon's Anglicized version of that extremely French heroine. For *Louisa*, we may remark, is warranted not to raise a blush, and may be read in the schoolroom, or even in the nursery.

The critic seems uncertain of Macquoid's cultural credentials, as well as those of the *Saturday Review* 's own readers: there is an assumption that a reference to 'Mrs Bovary' will be understood, but this is quickly replaced by Braddon's more accessible version. Both Braddon's novel and Macquoid's are marked above all by the 'wholesome' quality that Besant had earmarked as a pre-middlebrow signifier, and it is this that provokes disdain from the critic who has signalled his own familiarity with highbrow literature.
The aspirations of these novelists were scrutinised. George Saintsbury reviewed Mary Emily Cameron's *The House of Achendorf* (1878):

It may, perhaps, seem odd when we say that in reading it we were frequently reminded of *Madame Bovary*, now of *L'Educatrice Sentimentale*. The association, of course, mainly one of contrast. Miss Cameron is not yet a mistress of her craft, and she does not know how to tell a story. But in her selection of a long career of very ordinary failure for her subject and in her details of the minute ways and oddities of country life, she has in some sort fallen on the track of the greatest of living novelists.  

The notion that the comparison may 'seem odd' reveals Saintsbury's confidence that the distinct status of the two novelists will be clearly recognized by readers, yet he struggles to explain it. The difference becomes one of command: while the 'greatest of living novelists' is in control of his material, Cameron is not a 'mistress of her craft' and displays signs of high literary achievement by accident.  

In Murray Gilchrist's *Frangipani: The Story of an Infatuation* (1893), a husband murders his wife when he falls in love with the alluring and inconstant Frangipani. For *The Academy*, puzzlingly, 'it reminds us in many ways of *Madame Bovary*', but has not the justification of that masterpiece: namely, that it is a profound study of modern life and character. Here again, the status of Flaubert's work is unquestionable, but the status of the inferior product is far more elusive. As with Saintsbury, who defines Cameron by 'contrast', the middlebrow seems to have become conspicuous by what it lacked, rather than what it contained. Both reviewers, strikingly, describe being 'reminded of *Madame Bovary*', suggesting once again that it is not the novelist who has sought the parallel, but the reviewer's superior knowledge which has suggested it. At least one critic saw this Flaubertian trend as a form of over-reaching, which recalls Nicola Hume's argument that the middlebrow novel 'is an essentially parasitical form, dependent on the existence of both a high and a low brow for its identity, reworking their structures and aping their insights'.

Hume provides the additional nuance that twentieth-century middlebrow was often 'gleefully mocking highbrow intellectual pretensions'. These novels are more uneasy about the literary models they were evoking. Their obsession with the theme of dissatisfaction and inappropriate reading is striking: yearning for experiences and literary fare beyond one's intellectual and social status, as their heroines so frequently do, is repeatedly shown to be dangerous. In 1896, *The Times* reviewed Francis Griibble's *The Things That Matter* (1896), and observed that 'Mr Griibble has sat at the feet of Flaubert and we have an English edition of a "Madame Bovary", although in this case the lady keeps straight'. Griibble's heroine, Eleanor, is raised to read more widely than other girls in her sphere. As a married woman in London, she encounters Bohemian circles, decadent literature, and New Women. Letting literature influence her life, she contracts typhoid and realizes too late the error of her ways, she commits suicide. The reviewer misses the point that, despite the similar theme of impressionable female readers, the novel in fact reverses Flaubert's novel, fiercely disparaging the avant-garde and experimental in order to uphold bourgeois values. Together, these novels end up rejecting precisely the kind of literature that Flaubert wrote, by rewriting *Madame Bovary* as a celebration of middle-class values and cautionary tale against social and literary transgression. They function, it could be argued, as advertisements for the emerging category of the middlebrow, urging readers to find fulfillment within its pages.

Advertising also drew attention to the two translations of Flaubert's *Salammbo* published in 1886, the year that 'the number of adult novels rose sharply to 755 and marked the Inauguration of a boom that, with occasional variations, was to continue until just before the First World War'. *Salammbo* possessed an in-built ability to attract a disparate readership. The novel's setting after the First Punic War enabled Flaubert to exhibit his research through elaborate descriptions; the love story contributed exoticism and eroticism. These were not enough to win over many who encountered the work in its original French; even Braddon was forced to confess to Bulwer Lytton: 'I never lend the book to anyone who didn't stick in the middle of it'. This did not deter Saxon & Co. and Vizetelly from trying their luck with a translation.

Late nineteenth-century translations provide a clear opportunity to trace the origins of the middlebrow, as they opened up previously inaccessible or intimidating texts to a new readership. For much of the century, English gentlemen had been expected to learn French; it was a necessary standard accomplishment among wealthier English women, a similarly standard accomplishment among wealthier English women, and, therefore, a necessary skill for their governesses. Most middle-class libraries 'expected their readers to read such material in the language it was written'. As Cummins has argued, 'the ability to read French was used as an indicator of class, which, in turn, was presumed to be an index of both literary taste and some sort of moral inoculation'. Much of the scholarly attention on Henry Richard Vizetelly has focused on his condemnations in 1888-89 for the publication of Zola's
obicne' novels. As Cummins has shown, the condemnation was intended to preserve Zola solely for readers who knew French; in other words, the novels were being translated for the public in connection with Salammbo, that 'many French novels are being translated which it would be well to leave, as far as the public is concerned, in the obscurity of a foreign language'. 

Of Vizetelly's translator, Chartres, little is known. He is probably John Smith Chartres, born in 1862, who trained as a lawyer and married the polyglot writer Annie Vivanti in 1892. Vizetelly must have been satisfied with his efforts, since he was employed again in 1894 to translate The Heptameron. For reviewers, and possibly readers who recognized the Vizetelly 'brand', the translator's identity was less meaningful than that of its publisher. Henry Richard Vizetelly (1820-94) had long-standing ties with France. His brother James published translations from French political writers and exiles such as Victor Hugo in the 1830s. Following a period during which he launched publications including the twopenny weekly Illustrated Times, Vizetelly moved to France, where he worked as a correspondent for British periodicals. He returned to London in the 1870s and launched a new incarnation of Vizetelly & Co., assisted by his sons. As Portebois has shown, Vizetelly thought carefully about the diversity of the reading public in the 1880s: 'most of the titles were offered in numerous formats: with or without illustrations, in cloth binding or paperback, from pocket book to large royal paper sizes with ornamental covers blocked in various colours'. Although the company sought to exploit the commercial opportunities of the growing reading public, however, it was ideologically invested in disseminating formally and thematically experimental French literature, for which Henry Vizetelly was prepared to go to prison.

The person behind the second Salammbo translation was May (sometimes Mary) French Sheldon (1847-1936), who both published and translated the novel. In contrast to the seasoned Vizetelly, Salammbo was the first book published by Sheldon's English company Saxon & Co., which she founded with her husband Eli (1849-92). The wealthy couple travelled regularly between New York, Paris and London, and moved in a circle of eminent explorers and philanthropists. One of her closest friends was the explorer Henry Stanley, who maintained a steady flirtation with her, and she enjoyed a period of celebrity following her 1891 expedition to East Africa, during which she styled herself the 'White Queen'. Sheldon was given to boasting about her intimacy with luminaries: amongst her many assertions were the stories that she was Isaac Newton's descendant, had saved Garibaldi's life, been taught singing by Jenny Lind and elocution by Charlotte Cushman.

Sheldon's story about the genesis of her Salammbo translation must be taken cautiously. In 1923, she visited Universal City to inspect the set for a film adaption of Hugo's Notre-Dame. The Los Angeles Times reporter covering her visit stated that she 'was one of that favoured group of cosmopolitan artists who gathered at the knee of the master, Hugo'. The article states that she was best known for the task to which Hugo himself assigned her: Flaubert's Salammbo had gone without English translation for many years due to its difficult style, and Hugo persuaded Mrs Sheldon that she could do it. It required three years of the hardest work she ever did, during which she wrote nothing else.

It is not implausible that Hugo admired Salammbo enough to encourage the dissemination of the novel in English; Hugo and Flaubert had a high regard for each other. Whatever Hugo's role, Sheldon proclaimed further support for the work: Flaubert's heirs. The translation was authorized as the translated work on its title page and, according to Sheldon, a copy was placed in Flaubert's tomb by the French government. She seems to have tested the work with an American audience, in an 1885 edition published by J W Lovell, before publishing it in London, where she settled the following year.

Sheldon did not share Vizetelly's ambition of disseminating French literature abroad. Saxon & Co. was mostly used to publish her own writings, including her novel Herbert Severance (1889) and an account of her African expedition (1892). In fact, Saxon & Co. were precisely the type of small company that benefited from the late-Victorian expansion of the literary marketplace. They became known above all for a successful series of sixpenny reference books labelled 'Everybody's Book of', which included volumes on proverbs, curious facts, acting charades and conduct. The titles move between the educational and entertaining: titles such as Do You Know It? If Not, You Should! (1894) tap into the aspirational market, while Everybody's Book of Short Poems (1890) recalls the literary anthologies identified by McPherson as a Victorian way of a cultural ladder but a ladder available at affordable prices.

The label 'Everybody's book of . . .' recalls Friend's assertion that 'where
highbrow excludes, middlebrow includes, even welcomes. Although *Salammbo* seems an anomaly among Saxon & Co.'s output, it can be read as participating in a similar ambition as the 'Everybody' series to meet the expectations of its readers, namely their desire to sample more complex fare, receive an education in French literature, and be entertained in the process.

The contrast between the two translations is telling. Sheldon's first print run was 7,000 copies; Vizetelly's is unknown. Sheldon's translation cost 6/-, whereas the Vizetelly edition was 2/6. Vizetelly's translation sought to make the work seem accessible yet simultaneously alluring for connoisseurs. It was cheap and could be found at 'Railway Bookstalls' yet was 'beautifully printed on vellum-texture paper' and would 'form a handsome specimen of English typography'. The appeal to connoisseurs suggests that Vizetelly may have been uneasy in pitching for the middlebrow market that the work's status as a translation seemed to impose on it, and which the work's presence among the tourists and commuters using railway bookstalls implied. Sheldon, in contrast, displayed no such unease. She embraced commercial strategies, launching enthusiastically into advertising, extending the reach of the work by participating in a theatrical adaptation of the play, and drawing attention to other adaptations such as paintings. She also stressed the work's connections with the illustrious: the wealthy businessman philanthropist Henry S Wellcome is listed as the copyright owner, the work is dedicated to 'my friend' Stanley, and is championed in a preface written by the American Edward King. Stanley's close friend. The attraction of her translation is not the quality of its paper and typography, but its worldly connections. Both translations reflect the 'hybridity of the middlebrow' by drawing on the literary elite (in Vizetelly's case) and social elite (in Sheldon's), while remaining attentive to the work's commercial appeal.

The two translations further demonstrate the diversity of the emerging middlebrow readership, with Vizetelly seeming to pitch her work at readers who had ambitions to be highbrow by engaging seriously with French literature, whereas Sheldon anticipated readers being less interested in understanding Continental fiction than following English fashions. Vizetelly subtitled the translation 'A Realist Romance of Ancient Carthage', and in doing so placed the work alongside other translated realist novels published by the company. Vizetelly & Co. made much of the French pedigree of their publications, labelling their series 'French Sensational Novels', 'Popular French Novels', and 'Zola's Realistic Novels'. An advertisement situated *Salammbo* within their 'Realistic Novels' series, alongside *Madame Bovary*. Sheldon was less interested in presenting her translation as an English, rather than an American, work, despite its parallel American publication and endorsements. In the 1880s, there was a wariness of cheap, badly produced American translations, from which she tried to distance herself, unsuccessfully - the *Daily News* referred to her translation as 'a vulgarized American importation'. More strikingly, Sheldon described the novel on its front page as having been 'Englished' rather than translated. For many reviewers, this was proof of her incompetence; the *Westminster Review* was not alone in pointing out that the expression is unfortunate, not only because the verb 'to English' does not exist, but because the language into which he has rendered 'Salammbo' is anything but English. The term 'Englished', however, was accurate insofar as Sheldon was seeking to repackage the novel for English consumption.

Rather than encouraging readers to encounter the different and the foreign, as Vizetelly does, Sheldon implies that the foreign has been familiarized and brought to domestic readers. For example, Edward King's preface connects Flaubert to a English literary heritage by venturing 'the exquisite humanity of all the central figures in this book... is here and there almost Shakespearean'. Sheldon sent a complimentary copy to Wilkie Collins, who politely wrote back that her translation of 'Salammbo' has given an English book to English readers, and she was sufficiently pleased with this description to include it in an advertisement for the translation.

The two translations further differed in their critical engagement with Flaubert's novel. Although both make a case for the work being Flaubert's strongest achievement, Vizetelly encouraged a studious, cautious approach, whereas Sheldon's version, via King's preface, expressed unqualified approval. In an appendix, Vizetelly included a selection of critical responses giving the reader background in *Newbes Lunds* and critical context, such as Sainte-Beuve's response in *Revue Contemporaine*, together with Fehreiner's disparaging critique in the *Revue Contemporaine*, together with Flaubert's own responses. These exchanges are dense and challenging, exchanging information on Carthaginian archaeology and close readings of Flaubert's style Chartres's preface also addresses the novel's weaknesses, from the 'unsatisfactory character' of Salammbo to the improbabilities. King, conversely, encourages an uncritically novel's 'improbabilities'. King, conversely, encourages an uncritically novel's 'improbabilities'. King, conversely, encourages an uncritically novel's 'improbabilities'.
who reads ‘from a bodily position of alertness’, with the leisurely middlebrow reader ‘relaxing into his book and chair’. In a similar way, the Vizetelly translation implied an amount of effort from its readers: the Saxon edition required that they enjoy it and act as recipients for the sensations it was able to provide.

This divergence resulted in the publishers presenting their translations as generically different: as a work of realism for Vizetelly, and as a romance with theatrical overtones for Sheldon. Chartres's preface repeatedly applies the realist label to the novel, and seeks to educate the reader into the nuances of the term. Flaubert, he begins, ‘may be called the creator of realism in modern French literature’. Chartres then explains that ‘realism in art is simply minute and impersonal presentation’, and whereas ‘scrupulousness of description’ existed in Balzac, Flaubert ‘added impersonality and perfected the new literary creed’. Chartres labours the point: ‘Flaubert then was undoubtedly a realist, he was a realist, it is true, and, later, “Salammbo” [sic] is to the full as realistic as “Madame Bovary”’. The term itself had originated in nineteenth-century France, and came into wide circulation in the 1860s, shortly before Madame Bovary was published. These repetitions display an awareness that the term was not without controversy in England, notably due to its association with Zola, and acknowledge the reader’s appetite to find out more about the genre while being reassured about it. Chartres further induces the reader into highbrow values by offering distinctions between literary realism and middlebrow interpretations of it. He dismisses ‘clever copyists – unimaginative though faithful presenters of fact’, and persuades the reader that ‘there is the same distinction between Flaubert’s work and that of many imitators of his method as there is between a waxen figure at Madame Tussaud’s and a masterpiece of portraiture by Millais’. The image places on the one hand a middle-class leisure activity, where customers pay to encounter the famous men and women they could never have personally accessed, who in turn can be infinitely reproduced. On the other hand, he places the work of art, distinguished by its uniqueness. Chartres, ironically, evades the possibility that a translation might also be seen as a ‘copy’, made available to those for whom the original was not accessible.

Saxon & Co., however, targeted the kind of reader who might enjoy Madame Tussaud’s. King sides with the bulk of English readers uncomfortable with French ‘realism’: ‘Flaubert has been called by some the father of naturalism... But to my thinking he is more accurately described, in the phrase of a recent writer, as “that lingering lover of the romantic school, elevated, despite himself, to the high post of

portiff of realism”’. Whereas Chartres yokes Salammbo and Madame Bovary together, King distances them, insisting that the realist method by employed by Flaubert in the latter ‘would not serve to describe the spirit which dictated Salammbo’. Other than Shakespeare, King compares the work to cultural references that would have been within the general reader’s reach: ‘there is also in his work the same grand and thrilling sense of combination of vast subjects to be found on the canvases of Huber... and it is “like an exquisite piece of Greek sculpture”. Such references separate Flaubert from the specific context of controversial French realism, and instead present him as a recognizable contributor to European culture. He uses terms that would have resonated with contemporary readers: the protagonists provoke ‘sympathy’ and, enthuses, ‘so long as men battle and women love, so long will the story of Hamilcar and of Spendidus, of Mabo and Salammbo... be read with strong emotion and with avidity. It awakens only noble thoughts’. As with Sheldon’s reference books, the preface assumes the reader’s desire to be simultaneously educated and entertained. King highlights the spectacular, theatrical dimension of the work: Flaubert here works as a ‘magician’, and provides for the readers a ‘spectacle’. The novel, he asserts, ‘would make an illusory play’.

King’s references to spectacle were appropriate: at least two separate productions of Salammbo were performed in Britain, the first in 1871, and the second in 1885. In 1871, the Athenaeum announced that a spectacular play called “Salambo”, founded. It is to be supposed, on the well-known romance of M. Gustave Flaubert would be performed at the Holborn Theatre in May. This version was in fact a burlesque interpretation by Ambrose Clarke and, the Pall Mall Gazette later reported, the Holborn audience clearly knew nothing of M. Flaubert and his novel, and did not follow with much interest the loves and adventures told in dull doggerel of his royal heroine. In 1871, Flaubert’s small circle of readers could be simply contrasted with the huge ranks of the reading public unaware of him, with no awareness of a middle ground. Fourteen years later, another attempt was made. On 11 November, Salammbo was performed at Ladbrooke Hall with the American actress Miss Huse as Salammbo and George Temple as Mabo. The play was based on Sheldon’s American translation and, according to at least one periodical, Sheldon may have adapted it herself. It is entirely possible that this was an attempt on Sheldon’s part to provoke interest in the project, before the English version of her translation entered the market, and at least two periodicals felt that the play had created an appetite for the translation. Whatever her participation in the venture,
there is a suggestion that the middle-class public first needed to have 'heard' of Flaubert before serious interest in a translation could exist.

Both translations were widely advertised, and these publicity campaigns provide the clearest evidence of the frictions that accompanied the development of middlebrow publications. Vizetelly does not appear to have been fully convinced of the existence of a middle-class public interested in translations of avant-garde French works, and was more comfortable pitching to either the highbrow or the popular market. Indeed, Ernest Vizetelly later commented that the company struggled to interest the public in 'cheap translations of works of high repute in France ... though a large amount of money was spent in advertisements', and discovered that 'if French fiction was to be offered to English readers at all it must at least be sensational', such as affordable translations of Gaboriau, the author of hugely popular detective stories. On the other hand, the more popular works sold well. On the other hand, the Vizetelly firm was ideologically committed to fighting late-Victorian middle-class values. After all, it was Vizetelly who had published George Moore's pamphlet Literature at Nurse (1885), which attacked phillistines, decried Mudie's moral and commercial control of the literary marketplace and lambasted the prudishness of the English novel. Moore addressed Mudie: 'I hate you because you are the great purveyor of the worthless, the false and the commonplace'. The attack hastened the end of Mudie's monopoly, thereby ironically leading to the expansion of the literary marketplace that would give rise to the middlebrow. Artistically, Vizetelly therefore nurtured highbrow values: commercially, it made sense to explore the opportunities created by the expanded readership. This ambivalence led to confusion in Vizetelly's marketing of Salammbô. Sheldon, however, had no such qualms.

Sheldon's translation was announced well ahead of its March 1886 publication; Vizetelly's version had been planned for a later date but, on 20 March, the 'early publication' of Flaubert's 'Realistic Novel' (see Figure 9.1), now scheduled for early April, was announced. This seems to have concerned Sheldon, as Saxon & Co. began swamping periodicals with increasingly excessive advertisements (see Figure 9.2). It was almost inevitable that the two works would be advertised side by side; this occurred in the Athenæum on 3 April. On one page, a reader could read that:

the Public and the Trade are respectfully requested to defer giving their Orders for the English Translation of Gustave Flaubert's 'Salambo' until they have had an opportunity of comparing the English edition with the American importation. The translation shortly to be
published by Vizetelly & Co., is the work of an accomplished French and Classical scholar and an earnest admirer of Flaubert's Writings. The volume, printed with the greatest care, will moreover form a handsome specimen of English typography, and will contain a finely etched Portrait of Flaubert, from a drawing made by his niece.  

Turning the page, the reader would have seen an advertisement for Sheldon's 'Romance', supported by the following quotations:

'Flaubert's works have inspired more pictures in the French Salon during the past few years than any book except the Bible.' - Times

'No novel ever issued probably had such universal and sudden effect.' - Standard

'M F Sheldon's Translation has the exclusive authorization of Flaubert's heirs, to whom royalty is paid by the publishers.'

Vizetelly's adverts play on the wariness for cheap American imports and accentuate the scholarly quality of their version, of value to students of French literature and bibliophiles. As Sheldon's adverts multiplied, Vizetelly became increasingly restrained in their adverts, choosing to adopt a quietly confident stance. Sheldon's adverts, meanwhile, played on the idea of her translation as a fashionable and time-sensitive event: one announced in May 'the popular verdict. First edition of 7,000 nearly exhausted. Second Edition Now in Press' and, in June, another named the translation 'The Literary Sensation of the Year'. Sheldon's advertisements also focused on reader responses. In The Times, the novel was praised, implausibly, as a 'glowing story of love, passion, and war. The most thrilling and fascinating book of the century'. Another advertisement quoted a long statement from Sheldon's intimate friend Stanley:

Once again my blood has coursed furiously through the veins, as it did when a boy Ivanhoe's magic pages first burst upon my enraptured sense. Now, as then, I know what power lies in a stirring book. Heart and brain beat and throb in unison with every movement portrayed. Sheldon's translation of Salammbô is one of the most remarkable and fascinating books I have ever come across.

The parallel with Scott reassures the reader by strengthening the novel's relationship with the historical novel rather than realist experimentation. Sensations are emphasized, making the reading of the novel less an intellectual activity than a physical experience. Finally, Sheldon drew attention to her support from respectable institutions. In one of their advertisements, Sheldon announced that praise for the translation had been 'received from many of the most learned men in the Church, Literary and Political worlds', and, in another, had received 'the unqualified praise of the highest authorities in the land'. Some of these quoted authorities included the German Orientalist Professor Max Müller ('It reads extremely well') and the Persian Ambassador Prince Malcolm. In the rare occasions when Vizetelly submitted longer adverts, they merely emphasized literary value: 'Salammbô has now been dealt with by a master of the literary art.'

The press's response to the two translations demonstrates that the publishers were successful in communicating their vision of the translation. Vizetelly's version was praised as being far superior to the 'serious' press, while Sheldon received the support of popular journals and regional newspapers. Among the former was the Saturday Review, who jeered: 'Perhaps Mr. Sheldon's Salammbô is not the very worst translation from the French that ever was published. It is certainly the worst we have ever seen.' For the Athenaeum, 'Mr. Sheldon's knowledge of English ... is not exactly perfect'; the Westminster Review concludes that the translation by Mr. Sheldon is by no means a good one. His knowledge of French and English seems to be alike imperfect whereas the Chartist version, 'from Messrs. Vizetelly's series of English versions of celebrated French romances', shows that 'the translator has thoroughly understood the original'. The emphasis in the latter on Vizetelly's catalogue points to the significance of his established reputation as a disseminator of French literature. These responses focus on accuracy; when they publish excerpts from Sheldon's work, it is to point out her errors. However, Sheldon had her defenders too. Just as the leading periodicals echoed Vizetelly's emphasis on scholarliness, the popular and regional press both picked up Sheldon's emphasis on sensation and the experience of reading. The Dundee Courier, for example, announced that 'those who like sensational scenes and descriptions will find them in abundance in this powerful story'. The Penny Illustrated Paper applauded Sheldon's 'glowing and thrilling English version of the romance', dedicated to 'a man of heroic mould' - the latter clause indicated the value of Sheldon's associating the project with the adventurer. In readers' minds, Sheldon's associating the project with the adventurer reassured the reader by strengthening the novel's relationship with the historical novel rather than realist experimentation.
notice as being the superior of the two translations; the Celtic Magazine described the work as ‘mastery’. The Birmingham Daily Post announced that this translation would become ‘the favourite novel of the coming season’, and reported ‘the rush which has been made for it at the libraries’, echoing the reader’s hope to keep up with fashion. The notice added that ‘the fascination of the scenes where the heroine exercises her magic rite ... is more powerful than any of Bulwer’s deepest mysteries.’

Many of the periodicals that attacked Sheldon’s version were critical of her advertising methods as well as the translation itself. One critic complained that the translation had been announced by ‘methods hitherto principally associated with Pearl’s Soap’. For the Saturday Review, the marketing campaign was ‘one of the most audacious attempts at puffery recently devised in English’. Another wrote that ‘We do not know any recent instance of absolutely shameless puffery to be equalled to the instance afforded by Mr Sheldon’s translation of Flaubert’s “Salammbo”’. Such responses deplored the vulgarity of a method that linked literature with consumerism so emphatically. The well-established periodicals identified the translation as belonging to a new breed of publication, already showing that the “middlebrow” is often associated with high commercial presence, and success, and a status based, like that of lowbrow, on units sold, rather than on critical acclaim from an intellectual minority.

Melville has argued that Sheldon’s version was ‘punished’ by critics, unlike Chartres’s frequently republished translation, because by reproducing the controversial, violent and erotic text, she ‘did not submit to her female role in Victorian society’. However, most critics were unaware that Sheldon, who simply signed her name M French Sheldon, was a woman: they usually referred to the translator as ‘Mr French Sheldon’. More convincingly, Melville argues that whereas Flaubert’s the author function, in keeping with Fouché’s conception of an innovative style, French Sheldon’s translation was not. What some reviewers saw as a failing, however, Sheldon appears to have seen as an opportunity, both commercial and artistic. Vizetelly’s customers were readers; Sheldon’s were consumers.

The Salammbo translations also entered consumer culture in another way. In May 1866, a short story in Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading depicted a female character who reads the novel before exclaining: ‘That, mother, is Flaubert’s description of Salammbo, the priestess, whose picture in last year’s Paris salon attracted him at next Monday’s Mansion House ball.’ The fictional soon became real: a fashion magazine noted that ‘The robe “Salammbô” ... makes an effective and easily-arranged indoor dress’. Heath and Home reported in 1894 that at Bramshill, Sir Anthony Cope’s family and friends had participated in ‘tableaux vivants’ from Salammbo, and, three years later, Mrs Algernon Bourke paraded as Salammbo at the Devonshire House Ball. Flaubert’s erudite, sensual novel had been adapted into daytime wear for the practical yet fashionable Englishwoman, and entertainment for the aristocratic hostess. The translations encouraged the book’s association with late-Victorian consumerism and leisure.

Although the translations of Salammbo were packaged in different ways and made different linguistic choices, they were essentially two variants of the same work. The fact that they attracted such divergent responses based on the extent to which they sought to evade or embrace pre-middlebrow signifiers underscores the fact that a novel became “middlebrow” not because of any intrinsic content, but because it was widely read by the middle-class and, one might add, explicitly marketed for it. Nigel Cross has suggested that the middlebrow developed in the 1880s when ‘changes in the price and distribution of books allowed readers to exercise a much more direct choice over their reading matter.’ It is possible, however, that the middlebrow emerged less because readers had more access to books than because publishers were forced to find new ways to market their wares in an increasingly crowded literary sphere, and in doing so made their intended readerships more explicit. As affordable translations, both works seemed directed at a middle-class public, and both publishers were eager to tap into the new commercial opportunities provided by its expansion. Yes, while Vizetelly’s attempt to reconcile his commercial needs with a mission to elevate and educate middle-class taste meant that the middlebrow signifiers of his translation went unremarked, Sheldon’s visible eagerness to exploit and contribute to transient middle-class fashions provoked the kind of charges that we have come to identify with early twentieth-century discussions of the middlebrow: that ‘the allegedly second-rate entertaining tastes usurped the power [of] the highbrow, that their misconjuration of high and lowbrow culture lacked substance or distinction, and that they succumbed to aesthetic ideals deemed necessary for sales.

Notes


21. Other novels compared by reviewers to Madame Bovary include *That Lily Lymway*: A Novel (1877), Mary E. Mann's *Mrs Peter Howard* (1886), and Mrs Compton Reade's *The Maid O'The Mill* (1887).


10

Cross-Channel Mediations

Henry-D Davray and British Popular Fiction in the Mercure de France

Birgit Van Puyimbroek

In July 1905, in his monthly review of British fiction for the Mercure de France, the French literary critic Henry-D Davray stated: 'At the moment, on the other side of the Channel, morality and public opinion are changing. Changes occur, hence the inconsistency in literary efforts, the lack of unity in a movement to renew the old forms and old formulas.' The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of genres that catered to a wide range of literary tastes. The popular novels of Marie Corelli and Mrs Humphry Ward achieved unprecedented sales, while Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness and Henry James's The Wings of the Dove appealed to a more select audience. This chapter discusses the emergence, diversification and reception of British mass-market literature in the early decades of the twentieth century by examining Henry-D Davray's lettres anglaises in the influential French literary monthly Mercure de France. An expert on British literature, Davray regularly contributed to the Mercure de France, translated the works of H G Wells, Frank Harris, Edmund Gosse and Oscar Wilde and edited the short-lived bilingual periodical Anglo-French Review. His reports on British fiction are a little-known set of evidence for the changes in early twentieth-century British literature through his remarks on new works, and his comments on the social changes that influenced mass-market literary production in Britain at this time.

If critics have traditionally focused on British mass-market literature from a contemporary British perspective (the comments by Q D Lewis and Virginia Woolf are well-known), this chapter elucidates a contemporary French opinion. It further contributes to critical studies of French opinion on British production that have privileged the reception and dissemination of modernist works. As the lettres anglaises demonstrate, contemporary French critics discussed British modernist