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CALL ME MADAM

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This is perhaps a misleading title because someone could confuse it with its famous homologue of the music-hall by Irving Berlin. To a Frenchman, "Madame" has different connotations than it does in the English language.

This common name "Madame," in the beginning of the French language, signified the wife of a Knight; then it developed to refer to any married woman. However, different spheres of society had this epithet. For instance, a married woman of high lineage, occupying an important position, bore the title of Madame, and when someone would speak about her one would say, "She is a rich Madame, a great Madame." If someone affected attitudes which were unparalleled with her social condition, one would say that she was pretending to play "à la madame," and please notice that the word did not have a capital "M." In everyday language when one says, "She is a big madame," it means that she is a well-to-do woman.

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Historically "Madame" (with a capital "M") at the Bourbon Court was the title given to all the daughters of the King and of the dauphin, as well as the spouse of Monsieur, the King's brother. We have to point out that the French princesses added to their title of "Madame" their Christian name, as for instance: "Madame Elizabeth," "Mesdames de France." Only the wife of "Monsieur" and the oldest daughter of the King of France did not have their title followed by their name. It is interesting to notice that sometimes the oldest daughter of the King was called "Madame Royale." In fact, Napoleon the First was so eager to found a dynasty that he gave to his mother, Laetitia Ramolino, the title of "Madame Mère" (Madam Mother).

In religion the title of "Madame" was given to women saints, for example, Madame sainte Anne, Madame sainte Geneviève. Then the title was passed on to the abbesses and canons, mostly during the XVII and XVIII centuries, for instance "Mesdames de l'abbaye de Port-Royal," "Mesdames les chanoinesses de Remiremont." However, this title has been subjected to a kind of religious democratization, since in contemporary life "Madame" is used also of all religious women in certain orders.

But this title exported to America has a pejorative meaning which indicates the directress of certain establishments that the French humorously call "closed houses" although they are

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open to anyone. This title also designates the mind-readers or fortune tellers.

French literature is illustrated by several titles which begin by the word "Madame." In this short presentation we will deal only with the most famous; I will present them in chronological order by "genre."

In the novel Madame Bovary (1857), by Gustave Flaubert, the central character is Emma Rouault, daughter of a peasant, who has been raised in a convent. She marries the doctor Charles Bovary, an honest physician of a mediocre intelligence, poor and without too much interest in the pleasures of life. Emma, on the contrary, has a very romantic mind and an exaggerated ambition. She becomes tired of her provincial life, she is bored in this little village in Normandy, and when the couple move to Yonville, a bigger town, she becomes involved in a love affair with Homais the pharmacist, and then with Binet the tax collector. But always her lovers get tired of her. Even Dupuis, an assistant to the attorney, who is the last one in this list, forsakes this too complicated mistress. Then Emma meets Rodolphe Boulanger, a very rich gentleman farmer full of pretenses, who promises to take her away. But he does not keep his word and one day disappears without leaving any trace behind him. Emma becomes very ill. However, with time passing by,

Emma is well again and, while on a trip to Rouen, the capital of Normandy, she meets Léon and becomes his mistress with all her impetuous passion. Alas, it was a very great fire of love which did not last long, and once more, the lovers get tired and Emma finds herself alone. But not for long, for as soon as she meets a tenor of the Opéra-Comique she gets involved, and this affair turns out to be as unfortunate as the others.

Overwhelmed by debts, sued by a persistent debtor, sensing the impossibility to fill her life according to her desire, Emma departs from this world by swallowing arsenic. Her husband, Charles Bovary, dies completely ruined. The one who seems triumphant is the pharmacist Homais. At the time when the novel was published France lived in a literary puritanic epoch and the book was banned and labelled immoral, as well as the work of Charles Baudelaire, who published Les Fleurs du Mal (1857). In fact Flaubert had only exposed his literary doctrine: to demonstrate the most absolute realism of his school. The author had chosen a central figure, Emma Bovary, with several secondary characters, or at least less centered, in order to show the excesses and the conventions of the romantic aspirations and to oppose, to the taste of strange adventures, grandiose souls and ardent passion. His books were written for their uncomplicated truth under a light which seems ordinary or trivial. In one way Flaubert serves as an observer. He shows life and

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the personages of his novel as they are, in a society very often filled with prejudices and always ready to reject the normal reactions of the romantic protagonists and to judge them a priori without trying to study the behavior of their souls. The painting is brushed with profound observations, well alive with the defects of human beings. It is, however, undeniable that Flaubert feels a great attraction towards ardent natures, thus building in him a natural nausea against the bourgeois' life which is tasteless and without spice.

In 1863 the French novel directs itself towards a kind of "regionalism" as well as in the National genre. Erchmann - Chatrian in Madame Thérèse sets the action of his novel in the German Vosges Mountains, in the small village of Anstatt where Dr. Jacob Wagner lives. We are in 1792, the French Republican Army enters the village only after a fierce battle, but reinforcements come and the French retreat. The people of Anstatt try to find survivors among the soldiers lying on the ground and they discover the body of the French nurse, Thérèse, who still breathes. Dr. Wagner has her carried to his place and takes care of her wound. This nurse is a very honest young girl as well as a brave patriot. She is not long to notice that the good doctor has a certain feeling toward her, but she is a dedicated patriot who sets aside her nascent feeling, and the doctor knows it. He takes her back to the French Camp knowing

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that he diminishes his chances to conquer the young girl's heart, but respectful of the laws of honor and of duty he prefers to sacrifice himself. Madame Thérèse knows all the drama which tears the one she secretly loves and toward the end of the book she acquiesces to become his wife. In this work the author shows the devotion and the purity of sentiments of the main personages, as well as the opposition of the life of the village of Anstatt, which changes from its peacefulness to the horror of war.

Edmond and Jules de Goncourt pour out in their novels this "little human comedy" and at the same time a hero, a painting of a given milieu, a study of morals, a true slice of life, according to nature, of a sector of society.

In Madame Gervaisais, they describe the life of a well-educated woman raised by a father familiar with the XVIIIth century French philosophers. She shows a well balanced mind, although deprived of religion. She is staying in Rome when her young son becomes ill. There is little hope of saving him, according to the doctors who are taking care of the child. Suddenly at the highest peak of an immense despair the child recovers miraculously. Madam Gervaisais converts to Catholicism and falls into a kind of mystical devotion encouraged excessively by Father Zibilla, who tortures her, humiliates her, and unbinds her from any human affection. The drama is powerful, brutal at

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times, and the authors strive hard to do through their painting a revival of the drama in which Madame Gervaisais has fallen into a kind of religious madness. At that particular moment of the novel one senses that something is going to break forth with violence. Madam Gervaisais' brother enters the scene at that particular time and manages to show her the horror of her situation in which her exaggerated mysticism has unbound her from those whom she loved so dearly. She promises to go back to the place she used to hold in society after having been blessed by the Pope. At the very moment when the pontiff appears, she falls dead, killed by her physical privations and by her moral combat. Madam Gervaisais was the type of psychological novel which was found among the best sellers in 1865.

In the novel Madame Chrysanthème, the navy officer Loti met his future bride Mademoiselle Chrysanthème, a young Japanese girl of a good family, while his ship is anchored at Nagasaki. He marries her before the Japanese local authorities (just for the length of the stay). As time goes by, the attraction of the young officer for the Japanese girl diminishes. The young bride is more of a woman taking care of the master than a companion, and soon the French officer begins to be bored to such an extent that, when time comes to leave, he notices with surprise that, if his feelings towards her have vanished, in return the ones she has for him are not at all deep.

At the time of this separation she is more concerned by the piastres he is giving her as the base of their transaction than by the feelings brought by their breaking off. The novel is mostly centered around a painting of the morals of the people and of Japanese life rather than by the emotions shared by two lovers.

If we consider the French theater we meet several plays bearing the title of "Madame." One of them is Madame Butterfly, a light opera in three acts.

The only French in this play are the words by Paul Ferrier, composed from an Italian libretto by L. Illica and G. Giacosa, music by G. Puccini. The play was presented in Italy in 1904 and again in France in 1906 where it won greater success than at the La Scala de Milan.

The action sets on stage a young geisha who marries an officer of the American Navy, who is not long in forsaking her. From this ephemeral union a child is born, and when the father tries to take away the fruit of their association (three years later) Mme. Butterfly commits suicide. The plot seems banal, melodramatic. However, the play is written with ability: during the first act one witnesses the introduction of the whole family for the wedding, followed by a touching love scene. In the second act the monologue of Mme. Butterfly, although very moving, is too long. However, it was necessary to have it since it

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unfolds the feelings of the heroine; also it was necessary to have a scene in which the American consul Sharpless is introduced.

The third act is characterized by a tri-scene which has a power of exceptional expressive magnitude. It is evident that romanticism allied to exoticism composes the principal part of an unfortunate love affair. The modern critics searching for novelty make of this lyric drama a kind of warning concerning cultures that are ancestrally opposed and that cannot find harmony in a world in perpetual motion.

Madame l'Archiduc is an opéra bouffe (comic opera) in three acts by Albert Millaud, with music by Jacques Offenbach, that was presented at the famous theater Bouffes-Parisiens, November 2, 1874. The play was favorably welcomed although this public was generally difficult to satisfy.

The plot, hard to believe but very amusing, is based on a mistake which almost leads to a catastrophe. Marietta, a sprightly inn servant-girl, is full of happiness because she has just married. Is it her extraordinary felicity, her queen-like aspect filled with affection, that makes Eros once more mischievous and ready to play a prank? The reason does not really matter; the fact is that Marietta is mistaken for a countess who is in danger of arrest. An archduke falls in love with the pretty girl and tries to convince her to marry him. But Marietta is faithful to her husband, and the archduke has to

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admit that he has made a blunder. He tries to redeem himself and gives her a dowry; then he sends her back to her husband. This plot, very spicy at times, inspired Offenbach to write an alert and witty score which for more than half a century made merry the fans of the Opéra-Bouffe.

Madame Sans-Gêne, a four-act play by Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau, was presented at the famous theater "Le Vaudeville" in Paris in 1893. The play teaches us some historical facts as well as the life at the Imperial court, with everything which is lively and amusing.

The heroine is Mme. Lefebvre, the marshal's wife, a former laundress who has kept her mostly colored habits and common language, which have caused her to be nicknamed "Madame Sans-Gêne" (Madame "No Shame" or "Madame Offhanded"). In the beginning the new "aristocrats of the First French Empire" take offense at her slovenliness, but her good humours and her generous heart succeed in conquering even the most offended ones. Even the Emperor seems to enjoy himself in the company of this warm person without affectation.

One day an Austrian officer is caught near the apartment of the Empress Marie-Louise. Napoléon gives the order to have him shot by a firing squad. But Madame Sans-Gêne helps him to escape and everything comes back to normal life at the court with the petty intrigues which tie and untie themselves.

As one can see, there is practically no plot. However, the play is full of wit in each repartee and the framework of the play is strong enough to sustain the weight of the anecdotic episodes which follow one another in order to make a relaxing evening in another epoch which is so similar to our own.

And so, French literature and theater pay their honor, like the ancient homage of the knight or common people who devoted themselves entirely to their lady, by saying: "Madame."

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