

Hester . Emma . Sonia

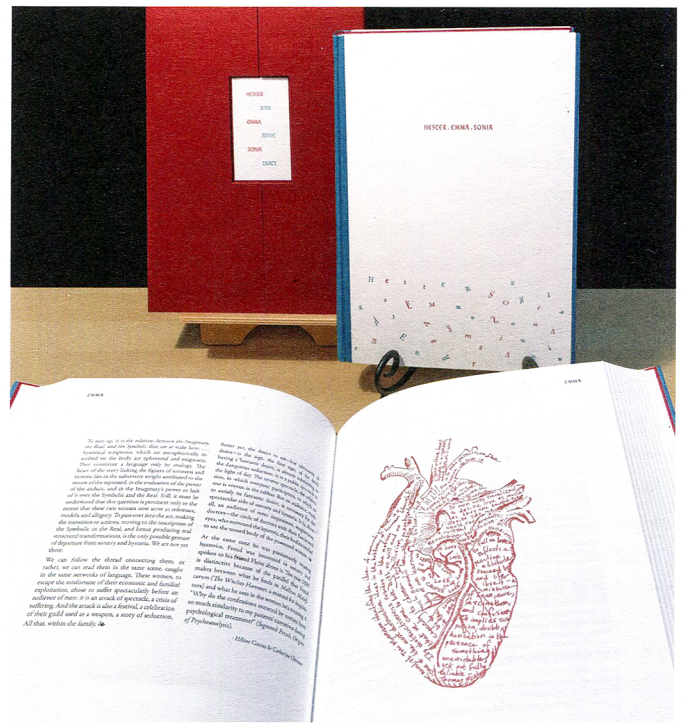
MINDY BELLOFF

REVIEWED BY LAUREN GRAVES

New York: Intima Press Editions, 2022. 300 pp. 266 × 196 × 44 mm. Featuring: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (abridged). Introduction, "No Text Stands Alone" by art critic Saul Ostrow, Afterword, "Through a Feminist Lens," and Appendix with over 100 bibliographic references. Over forty reproductions of fine artworks: paintings, drawings, photographs, and calligrams by the artist adorn the pages. A selection of text is in Latin, French, and Russian. Printed on a Uni III A/B + Epson Professional. 32 copies: 26 standard, 6 deluxe in two designs. Bindings designed by Mindy Belloff. Standard edition quarter bound aqua blue Sokoto leather, spine millimeter binding, sewn and bound by Celine Lombardi with letterpress printed thick paper covers, printed by Mindy Belloff. Deluxe edition two designs: full leather bound or leather and parchment with custom box, bound by Celine Lombardi. Price standard \$7,500, deluxe (POA). • Intima Press Editions. Mindy Belloff, 32 Union Square East, Studio 310, New York, NY 10003, USA. Tel: +1 917 412 4134. Website: <https://IntimaPress.com>.

Mindy Belloff's newest book, *Hester . Emma . Sonia: Joni . Annie . Tracy: A Postmodern Feminist Discourse*, presents a feminist rereading of three canonical nineteenth-century texts: *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The texts are condensed and reconstructed to emphasize the voices, stories, and perspectives of the main female characters, Hester Prynne, Emma Bovary, and Sonia Marmeladov. The book includes an introduction appropriately titled *No Text Stands Alone* (a phrase borrowed from Jacques Derrida) written by art critic Saul Ostrow, and an afterword by the artist. Between these bookends are 300 pages of text, written in three parts, and layered with additional texts referencing historic and contemporary songs, poems, and prose. Countless artworks by Belloff, including work originally presented as paintings, drawings, and photographs, as well as recent drawings and calligrams, enrich the pages. The book's subtitle, *Joni . Annie . Tracy*, references the singer-songwriters Joni Mitchell, Annie Lennox, and Tracy Chapman, three of many voices printed in conversation with Hester, Emma, and Sonia. The additive texts are read closely alongside the core narratives, including the ancient codices of Nag Hammadi, the historic work of *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Witches Hammer*), and the words of modern poets and philosophers, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Rainer Maria Rilke, and William Blake.

The core narratives are printed in black archival pigment ink, and the additions to the main texts and



calligrams are letterpress printed. Most of the added song lyrics by Joni, Annie, Tracy, and others are printed in aqua blue, while poetry and prose are printed in deep red. At times, added commentary is printed in a soft gray, echoing the main text. The text stands alone, layered and dynamic, with Belloff's typography, typesetting, and page composition further reinforcing its dynamism. Some pages are half-filled with text, with a quote or notation added to the marginalia, while other spreads are overflowing with words. Text is printed in columns with overlapping sections causing a collision at the page's center. It diminishes, enlarges, becomes bold, changes font, and shifts color to fulfill a narrative arc. Lyrics are added to the margins, and are at times overlaid on existent words, textually echoing a tune as melodies are transcribed within the page.

In the book's introduction, Ostrow describes the ensuing pages as "dialogic" and "polyvocal," a recycling of text reassembled to enable each story and voice to build on and off the other. Belloff, through her intervention and reworking of the canonical texts, re-presents the narratives to challenge the linearity of each, intervening in the text's singular, typically masculine reading. Through her countless addendums to the main stories, Belloff presents a cacophony of voices—at times harmonious and occasionally discordant—that encourage the reader to further mine and dissect the book's text and structure to make room for a subjective, feminist reading. Furthermore, the book's dialogic and active nature comes forward in the page design, as the letterpress printing is seen and felt on and through the Crane's Lettra archival cotton rag text weight papers, inviting constant referral.

Other voices are found when examining the written word in relation to the many artworks printed alongside

the multiple narratives. The personal is emphasized by the inclusion of countless self-portraits of Belloff, as the artist draws herself onto the page. The visual additions, selected from Belloff's forty-year career, include portraits, abstracted pieces, and reworked designs that offer greater insight into the text. In the second section, which explores the life of Emma Bovary, the artwork considers the classical beauty of Greek and Roman sculpture, as interpreted in Belloff's photographs of sculptural lamps from 1991-92. In the proceeding section, focusing on the narrative of Sonia Marmeladov, Belloff continues to examine themes of classical beauty by reinterpreting Ingres's famed *Grande Odalisque*. In a brilliant reference to the book's textual reworking, Belloff created a calligram drawing of the *Odalisque*, constructed with sentences and phrases from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. These additions reanimate the dialogic presentation of the texts, and make space for visual representations of the themes explored.

In her contemplative afterword, Belloff adds an explicitly personal layer to the polyvocal narrative, describing the book's production amid New York City's COVID-19 lockdown. Seeking refuge and safety, Belloff turned to the familiar texts of Hester, Sonia, and Emma, writing, "I surrounded myself with books, many from graduate school at New York University." Earlier in the afterword,

Belloff notes *Hester . Emma . Sonia's* structure was inspired by "polyglot bibles, illuminated manuscripts, and the Hebrew Pentateuch." In my reading, I interpreted the page design as being akin to graduate students' worn copies of classic tomes, locating the student's desire to underline passages, repeat and rewrite phrases, and link texts to contemporary lyrics from right within the book's pages. These additions, clearly a part of and separate from the texts of Hester, Emma, and Sonia, feel intensely personal and reflective, tucked into the safe space of a novel's margins, a space inviting questions and rumination. In the safety of those margins, Belloff was also able to create space and produce networks that go well beyond the page.

I first encountered this book in late 2022, during another round of COVID-19 vaccine boosters and society's uncertain "reopening." Despite this progress, I still feel the physical confinement of the pandemic, making Belloff's ability to span narratives, defy chronologies and timelines, and construct new worlds an even greater wonder. The artist's intense admiration for the texts of Hester, Emma, and Sonia comes through in the re-narrativizing, design, and production of the book, as well as Belloff's choice to add borrowed phrases, ideas, and poems. This deeply personal, reflective, and well-crafted book invites and rewards close reading.