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**Speaking the Body,  
Representing the Self:  
Hysterical Rhetoric on Stage**

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**Submitted for the Degree of PhD**

**University of Warwick**

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## Declaration

A shorter version of Chapter Four of this thesis, entitled 'Elizabeth Robins: Hysteria, Politics and Performance', is to be published in *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Historiographies*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Work towards a number of the chapters within this thesis has also been disseminated as conference papers:

'Staging the Subject: Hysteria and *Hedda Gabler*', Leeds Metropolitan University School of Cultural Studies Network Conference, 'Text-Scene-Subjectivity', 4 May 1996.

'New Uses for Old Hysterias: Writing Gender for Performance in *Portrait of Dora* and *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*', Northern Seminar Group for Twentieth Century Literature 'Gendered Writing' Conference, Nottingham Trent University, 22 March 1997.



## Summary

This thesis centres on the twin discourses of hysteria and theatre, and contends that an examination of hysteria, which is above all a performative disease, can illuminate our understanding of performance on the public stage. My analysis of the history of hysteria shows that our modern understanding of the condition developed out of the interactions between the physician/analyst and the live body of the hysteric, with all its symptomatic acts: this thesis, which has as its central concern the live body of staged performance, uses the history of those interactions to re-centre attention on the symptomatic acts of the performing body on stage, and on the process of reading such acts.

Drawing its material from a number of stage performances from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries - from the texts of melodrama such as *The Dumb Man of Manchester* (1837) or *The Bells* (1871) through the work of the American actress Elizabeth Robins in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1891) and her own play *Alan's Wife* (1893) to modern texts such as Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Dora* (1976) - this thesis reads those performances, and the relationship of those performances to their audiences, through the lens of hysteria: using an understanding of hysteria to read those texts anew and, in reverse, using the texts to develop, and critique, a model of hysterical performance rhetoric.

Such a model, this thesis argues, with its very basis in a condition of rejection of or failure to fit into the dominant discourses of society, is not limited in application to performance texts which take hysteria as their subject. Instead it can be more widely employed as a key part of a radical theatrical politics by those who today find themselves silenced by the dominant discourses and values of our own era.



## Key to Abbreviations

After the initial reference, further references to the following texts are abbreviated as follows:

<i>Alan's Wife</i>	<i>AW</i>
<i>Ibsen and the Actress</i>	<i>IA</i>
<i>Portrait of Dora</i>	<i>PD</i>
<i>Votes for Women!</i>	<i>VW</i>
Elizabeth Robins's Prompt Book for <i>Hedda Gabler</i>	<i>PB</i>

References to volumes from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74) are given in the text as *SE*, volume number, page number.

Full bibliographical details for individual volumes cited appear in the Bibliography.

# Introduction

This thesis centres on the twin discourses of hysteria and theatre, and contends that an examination of hysteria, which is above all a performative disease, can illuminate our understanding of performance on the public stage. My analysis of the history of hysteria shows that our modern understanding of the condition developed out of the interactions between the physician/analyst and the live body of the hysteric, with all its symptomatic acts: this thesis, which has as its central concern the live body of staged performance, uses the history of those interactions to re-centre attention on the symptomatic acts of the performing body on stage, and on the process of reading such acts. Drawing its material from a number of stage performances from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this thesis thus reads those performances, and the relationship of those performances to their audiences, through the lens of hysteria: using an understanding of hysteria to read those texts anew and, in reverse, using the texts to develop, and critique, a model of hysterical performance rhetoric.

Its central figure is that of the Freudian hysteric, described and explained in Freud and Breuer's 1895 *Studien über Hysterie* and the 'Preliminary Communication' of that work which was published in 1893, whose hysteria is based in the experience of trauma and the subsequent inability to use spoken language to react to or communicate that experience. Explaining their findings in the cases which were published in 1895, Freud and Breuer refer to

those cases in which the patients have not reacted to a psychological trauma

because the nature of the trauma excluded a reaction, as in the case of the

apparently irreparable loss of a loved person or because social circumstances



made a reaction impossible or because it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed.<sup>1</sup>

Unable to react in words, the hysteric's symptoms 'speak' for her through the language of the body: she often loses her voice, in a dramatization of the situation in which she finds herself, or 'a neuralgia may follow upon mental pain or vomiting upon a feeling of moral disgust' (*SE* II, p. 5). In order to understand the experience of trauma, then, the 'reader' of hysteria must examine not only the words which the hysteric speaks but also the gestures and other symptomatic acts which the body of the hysteric enacts.

Drawing on this structure of hysterical discourse as involving the symptomatic body as well as the patient's words, together with an examination of the history of treating the hysteric patient in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I argue that the effective analyst must develop an understanding of both the patient's words and her communicative body. As we will see in Chapter One, the history of modern hysteria begins with a retreat into the 'private theatre' of the mind and its daydreams; but even without the use of such terminology the parallels with stage performance and the watching of that performance can be clearly seen. This thesis thus develops a model of performance rhetoric of hysteria as a tool for creating and reading performances which can themselves say what cannot be said within the dominant structures of both theatre and society: performances which do not privilege either body or word but instead work in the space of the relationship between these modes

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), II (1955), p. 10. References to works in the Standard Edition will hereafter be given as *SE*, volume number, page number.

of communication, and which require their audience to read both gesture and word in order to achieve understanding. While recognizing the dangers of celebrating actual hysteria as an alternative discourse, I argue that a model of hysteria as a performance rhetoric avoids those dangers, functioning as a useful tool both for reading past performance texts and for the creating of challenging new ones.

This thesis develops such a model through an examination of a number of performance texts which are related to the developing understanding of hysteria in the late nineteenth century. The central performance text considered is that of the 1891 London production of Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, in which the American actress Elizabeth Robins played the title role (Chapter Four). Around that performance I also re-read and re-view other works involving Robins as well as texts by Strindberg (Chapter Three) and modern performance texts of hysteria such as Hélène Cixous's *Portrait of Dora* (Chapter Five).

My examination of the structure and workings of this model of hysterical performance rhetoric in performance texts from the nineteenth century onwards works to focus attention on two important and related areas: the combination of spoken and gestural discourses on the stage, and the role of the spectator or analyst in reading and interpreting those twin discourses. Firstly, I argue that the rhetoric of this performative disease requires us to examine carefully the relationship between speech and gesture, and can thus help us to identify key moments of performance when gesture speaks for what cannot be said in language, undercutting rather than reinforcing the spoken word. Developing performances with an understanding of this complexity of competing and potentially subversive dialogue between the two discourses of speech and gesture can thus, I suggest, enable the performer to



articulate the complex desires of the subject on the stage: speaking bodily as well as verbally to the other characters on stage but also to the watching audience.

Secondly, I turn my attention to that audience, exploring their role as observers of the performance. A performance which draws on the dual discourses of hysterical rhetoric, I argue, positions the spectator not merely as passive receptor for what is displayed on stage. Instead, the spectator of hysterical performance must work actively in relation to the stage events: both seeing bodily gesture and listening to spoken utterance, and reading these discourses together, they are enabled to make choices about their relative weight in order to create meaning. Returning to the history of hysteria, my re-reading of the different approaches taken by the analysts of the disease such as Charcot, Breuer, and Freud helps to illuminate this approach, as I identify the problems inherent in their different ways of reading the body of the hysteric, and thus trace a position for my ideal spectator which avoids those pitfalls.

In both these endeavours - examining the workings of the twin discourses of body and word on the stage of the theatre, and repositioning the spectator as an active interpreter of that scene - my work highlights the role of theatrical performance as a mirror for the social, political and psychological issues of its age, whether it is that of the birth of psychoanalysis, or our own pre-millennial culture.

## **1 A History of Hysterical Writings**

It is now over a century since Freud and Breuer published their *Studien über Hysterie* in 1895, and one hundred and six years since the understanding of hysteria set out in the Preliminary Communication of that book was first encountered in England: in April 1893 'a fairly full account of it [the Preliminary Communication] was given by F. W. H. Myers at a general meeting of the Society for Psychical Research in London



and was printed in their *Proceedings* the following June'.<sup>2</sup> Yet the work of Freud and Breuer, drawing attention to the links between society, language and the body which are enacted in the hysteric, continues to fascinate.

In the Introduction to *Approaching Hysteria*, his detailed and comprehensive analysis of 'the new hysteria studies', Mark Micale records an 'efflorescence of historical interest in hysteria' in the final quarter of the twentieth century, 'a steady stream of books and articles with no sign of slackening'.<sup>3</sup> Since Micale's book, with its own bibliography of four hundred publications on the topic of hysteria, 'a large majority of which appeared during the past ten years', was published in 1995, the flow has continued: in 1997 Elaine Showalter's *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* was published to attention not only from the books pages but the social commentary sections too, while 1998 saw publication of Elisabeth Bronfen's comprehensive exploration of psychoanalytic and cultural texts, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents*.<sup>4</sup> It is with some trepidation, then, that I come to insert my own particular historical cultural narrative of hysteria into the 'efflorescence' of 'disparate, fragmented and uncoordinated' literature described by Micale (Micale, p. 11). This section therefore briefly addresses some of the current writing on hysteria, and marks out the position of this thesis in relation to it.

In *Hystories*, Showalter describes the current 'interaction between 1990s millennial panic, new psychotherapies, religious fundamentalism, and American paranoia' as 'the crucible of virulent hysterias in our own time' (Showalter, p. 5).

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's Introduction, *SE* II, p. xv.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture* (London: Picador, 1997); Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). For an example of newspaper interest in Showalter's book see Suzanne Glass, 'Truly, Madly, Hysterically', *Guardian* G2, 20 April 1997, pp. 6-7.



Here she consciously echoes the fashionable late nineteenth century characterization of the age as ‘hysterical’, making the claim even more strongly in the context of the ending of a millennium rather than a mere century. In 1892, Max Nordau had of course diagnosed the entire *fin-de-siècle* disposition as the confluence of two well defined conditions of disease, ‘degeneration and hysteria’, himself explaining the upsurge in cases of hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century as the effect of industrialized society (and breakthroughs in communication) on civilized humanity, which grew fatigued and exhausted with nervous excitement as a result.<sup>5</sup> In our own time, Showalter says that ‘the cultural narratives of hysteria [...] multiply rapidly and uncontrollably in the era of mass media, telecommunications, and e-mail’ (Showalter, p. 5).

Nordau and Showalter, while writing from apparently very different perspectives, are both concerned to diagnose actual hysterias in the cultural life of the societies in which they write: by doing so, they can themselves be seen as partaking in the logic that produces the hysterical symptom. In contrast, this thesis, as we have seen, focuses on the structures of hysteria to create a map for re-reading cultural performances from both the *fin-de-siècle* period of degeneration and developing knowledge of psychology and from our own times as this century ends. Its concern is thus not with locating ‘real’ cases of hysteria but rather with using hysteria as an analytic category of discourse which enables us to understand the workings of certain symptomatic acts on the nineteenth and twentieth century stage.

My project is therefore much closer to that of Elisabeth Bronfen in her recent work *The Knotted Subject*, in which she traces a history of hysteria from the

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<sup>5</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from 2nd edn of the German work (New York: Fertig, 1968) (first publ. 1892), p. 15, p. 40.

beginning of the nineteenth century onwards in order to re-read a variety of cultural narratives and productions ranging from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to Woody Allen's *Zelig*. Much of this thesis was, of course, complete before I encountered Bronfen's work yet, as will become clear later in this introduction, I have found her re-examination of the traumatic causes of hysteria, which shifts the focus of hysterical theory away from its often constricting basis in gender binaries, extremely useful. But where Bronfen's work ranges widely over a variety of cultural narratives constructed in film, poetry, novels and visual art, my characterisation of hysteria as a performative disease has kept my work focused very specifically on the arena of theatrical performance, enabling me to intervene not only in debates about the meaning and workings of hysteria but also in debates about the practice of performance and the creation of meaning in the theatre. The focus on a lived body viewed live by the spectator keeps concentration tight on the hysteric's mode of communication through body as well as word, and on the difficult task of reading those symptomatic acts: this thesis re-examines the semiotics of word and gesture on the stage through the lens of hysteria and in doing so, also interrogates the working of the process of viewing and understanding in the audience.

One last point remains to be made about the relationship with hysteria which I have developed over the period of writing this thesis and which shapes its interests and structure. While I take account of the expanding theoretical work on hysteria, not least the work of feminist theorists with this disease which, as I show in Chapter One, is seen as 'the clamouring site of disruption in feminist discourse',<sup>6</sup> my main focus is on hysteria as understood in history: in particular, with the different formulations of

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<sup>6</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry and the "True-Real"', *Modern Drama*, 32 (1989), 58-72 (p. 67).



hysteria which coalesced in the last years of the nineteenth century around the figures of Jean Martin Charcot, Joseph Breuer, and Sigmund Freud. Therefore my readings of performance texts from these times utilize understandings of hysteria which are contemporary with those texts; I have sought to avoid the anachronistic use of modern theory as much as possible.

It should however be clear that what I am not seeking to do in this thesis is to argue for some kind of causal sequence of development in which the physicians of hysteria learn from the theatre or, in reverse, that theatre performers or playwrights learn directly from medicine and incorporate that learning into the content or structure of their performance texts. Where such direct relationships can be established I mark them out, but the establishing of such links in a more general way would take me beyond the scope of this work. In *The Knotted Subject*, Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that hysteria can ‘be understood as the performance of a given historical moment’ (Bronfen, p. 104); given theatre’s well-established role of showing ‘the very age and body of the time his form and pressure’ we might expect, and indeed I am concerned to trace in this thesis, similarities in ways of seeing and structures of understanding that the doctor or analyst brings to the hysteric condition and which the playwright, performer and spectator carry with them into the theatre building.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 A Note on Gender

My work on Freudian hysteria and the Lacanian theory of the subject’s development in Chapter One makes it clear that both the original Freudian theorization of hysteria, and through that theorization, Lacan’s work on language and the development of the

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<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins (Methuen: London and New York, 1982), p. 288.



subject, were founded on the bodies of women, on their lived experience. While both Freud's predecessor Charcot and Freud himself acknowledged the existence of male hysteria, that condition does, it seems, keep getting lost.<sup>8</sup> The five case histories set out in *Studies on Hysteria* - those of Fraülein Ann O., Frau Emmy Von N., Miss Lucy R., Katharina, and Fraülein Elisabeth von R. - together with the case which has come to define Freud's relationship with hysteria, that of Dora, are all those of female patients, and my readings of the stories of Anna O. and Dora in Chapter One work to emphasise the particular problems to which their positioning as females in the closed and tightly structured Viennese society of the late nineteenth century gave rise.

These founding histories of modern hysteria may lead to the belief that, just as for the classical writers who believed hysteria to be the result of a wandering womb, hysteria is necessarily a female malady. Mark Micale argues that 'for millennia hysteria was conceptualized, quite by definition, as a female sickness'.<sup>9</sup> But other stories and histories encountered in this thesis - not least those discussed by Micale in his articles on Charcot and the male hysterics of the Salpêtrière - make it clear that hysteria can also have relevance for the male: my work in Chapter Three on August Strindberg's plays includes a reading of Strindberg as himself marked by hysteria.<sup>10</sup> So while hysteria is usually (erroneously) thought of as confined to women, the work of this thesis, particularly in Chapter 3, makes it clear that is not the case (although as we

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<sup>8</sup> On his return from his study with Charcot in Paris at the Salpêtrière hospital, Freud gave a lecture on male hysteria to the Viennese Society of Physicians on 15 October 1886.

<sup>9</sup> Micale, 'Charcot and the Idea of Hysteria in the Male: Gender, Mental Science and Medical Diagnosis in Late Nineteenth-Century France', *Medical History*, 34 (1990), 363-411 (p. 363).

<sup>10</sup> Micale, 'Charcot and the Idea of Hysteria in the Male: Gender, Mental Science and Medical Diagnosis in Late Nineteenth-Century France', and 'Hysteria Male/Hysteria Female: Reflections on Comparative Gender Construction in Nineteenth-Century France and Britain', in *Science and Sensibility: Gender and Scientific Enquiry 1780-1945*, ed. by Marina Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 200-39.



will see there, it does seem that the men identified as hysterical are often seen by the nineteenth century doctors as carrying female traits).

This widening out of the category of hysteria plays an important part in the work that this thesis sets out to do, for in interrogating the performing body and the position of the spectator I do not want to limit myself to the female body only. Indeed, taking the female body out of hysteria - or perhaps more accurately, adding in the male - can illuminate the readings of theory offered in Chapter One, where the binary opposites suggested by feminist interpretations of Lacan's work on language and development (itself based on Freud's work on hysteria) can be called into question. Doing so enables a reading of hysteria as not simply a response to the position in which women find themselves in patriarchal society (although such positioning is often, as demonstrated by the case histories of *Studies on Hysteria*, a precipitating cause) but rather as a response to the workings of the Symbolic Order on the lives of both women and men who find themselves at odds with it. Yet this 'being at odds' is necessarily a violent occurrence if it is to give rise to the real illness that is hysteria: I am aware of the pitfalls of a construction of hysteria which reads it simply as a condition of liberal individualism pitted against the dominant structures of society or the family. Hysteria is, we must remember, a real disease with real symptoms: a disease which despite what we will come to understand as its protean nature, has its boundaries in actual illness, in the body's symptomatic and painful response to trauma. It is here that I have found Elisabeth Bronfen's work in *The Knotted Subject* most helpful, for in returning - as I have done - to the roots of Freud's understanding of hysteria as having a traumatic rather than a sexual aetiology,

she suggests a route for thinking about hysteria that does not tie it to gender categories. She argues that hysteric symptoms:

Do not broadcast a message harking back to a discrete primal scene, which a narrative encoding would resolve and thus extinguish. Rather, the message at stake addresses the lack of plenitude and completion as a structural phenomenon, be this the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of paternal law and social bonds), of identity (the insecurity of gender, ethnic and class designations), or of the body (its mutability). Hysteric symptoms reproduce [...] traumatic impressions. (Bronfen, p. 34)

Bronfen's argument suggests two points which are extremely useful to this work. The first is that by returning to Freud's original understanding of hysteria - as set out in *Studies on Hysteria* - which is based on a history of trauma rather than on the process of developing gender identity, the problem at the heart of hysteria can be seen to be not with the individual hysteric, but with his or her position in society: it is society's structures, rather than individual weaknesses, that are at fault. The second point, in consequence of this, is that it would seem that the hysteric cannot ever be fully cured. As Bronfen points out, the working out of a personal narrative, the comforting closure of treatment which we will see Freud working towards in my discussion of his patient Dora's case in Chapter One, cannot 'resolve and thus extinguish' such structural faults. Hysteria, then, remains open, resisting closure and re-inscription within the system: this aspect, too, must be incorporated into our developing model of performance rhetoric.

The experience of trauma is of course not limited to the female: in this way, while the positioning of women in the rigid structures of late nineteenth century



society remains key to much of the analysis of this thesis, the reader should bear in mind that I do not seek to limit the workings of hysteria and of hysterical rhetoric to the female body. Elaine Showalter suggests that ‘hysteria could also be the *son’s* disease, or perhaps the disease of the powerless and silenced’: much of my interest in developing a model of hysteria as a performance rhetoric lies in what I will argue is that rhetoric’s ability to communicate from this powerless, otherwise silenced position, for both women and men.<sup>11</sup>

### **3 An Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters in which I explore the relationships between hysteria, performance and spectatorship in a range of performance texts from nineteenth century onwards. Chapter One, ‘The Speaking Body: Language and Representation’, sets up the framework of the inquiry, exploring and defining the key ideas of hysteria, language and performance and beginning to sketch out the relationships between them which form the focus for the subsequent chapters. Ranging across both centuries, this theoretical introduction combines readings of Freud and Breuer with Lacan and Cixous to show that the hysteric operates outside the rules of patriarchy and language, a shifting, plural, fragmented subject whose body becomes ‘a private theatre’ in which she dramatizes the tensions and desires that she feels. Setting an examination of the Lacanian narrative of social and linguistic development which results in integration within the patriarchal Symbolic Order alongside the case histories of two famous nineteenth century hysterics, Anna O. and Dora, I endorse previous feminist critics’ identification of hysteria as a lived rejection

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<sup>11</sup> Showalter, ‘Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender’, in *Hysteria beyond Freud*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman and others (London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 286-344 (p. 288). Original emphasis.

of the woman's place within society and its ruling Symbolic Order, in which they are only allowed space as an object of desire rather than a subject. The hysterical patient, as described by Freud and Breuer, provides through her speaking body a challenge to the role assigned to woman as object for exchange within the system. Her mode of doing so explicitly disturbs language - she refuses to speak the patriarchal code, her body confuses sign and referent, making words speak true through the body.

Transposing the performative body of hysteria onto the performing body of the actor, Chapter One then argues that the figure of the hysteric can provide the basis for a performance rhetoric which speaks across or against the phallogentric codes of language on the stage. Transposing this structure of the hysteric's illness into the arena of performance illuminates the very practice of performance and through that, of spectatorship: for a performance practice which places emphasis on both word *and* gesture, with the possibility of conflict between those two modes of discourse, positions the spectator as an active analyst of the scene, working with the performer to create meaning rather than simply being told what to see, what to believe.

Chapter Two, 'The Spectacular Body: Theatre and Hysteria', begins the chronological development of the thesis, focusing on nineteenth century theatre and hysteria. Where the stories of Breuer's encounter with Anna O and Freud's treatment of Dora in Chapter One emphasise the importance placed on language and listening, this examination of the popular nineteenth century theatre practice of melodrama and the clinical analysis of hysteria prior to Freud shows that the emphasis was firmly on observation and display: the body and its movements were central to both discourses.

Discussing the dumb man of melodrama alongside the hysterical women of Charcot's clinic at the Salpêtrière hospital, the chapter thus reveals the existence of



similar structures of seeing and interpretation at work on both theatrical and medical stages, which are explored in the context of a wider discussion of the use and understanding of gesture in nineteenth century theatre. Historians of melodrama are agreed that a common and collusive language of gestural meaning operated in the theatre, but my work in this chapter seeks to interrogate this notion and offer a more complex model of the generation of meaning. Noting that in practice gesture is reinforced by language and music, not least the gestures of the dumb figure which are always translated into words by an on-stage character for the benefit of the audience, I suggest that melodrama is not simply a theatre of display but rather a theatre of fixity, in which the body is offered up from the stage labelled with fixed meanings. In the second part of the chapter I demonstrate that, in the same way, Charcot's work with his hysterical patients, usually characterised as obsessively visual, is also concerned with the putting on of labels: like the producers of melodrama, Charcot firmly retains control over the making of meaning, telling his audience what it is that they see before them just as the dumb man's helper always tells the audience what it is that his gestures seek to communicate. The gestures of performer or hysteric, then, are never left for the audience to interpret: the stages of hysteria and theatre explored in this chapter are ones in which the power is firmly with the on-stage translator, rather than with the performing figure itself or with the spectator of these spectacular bodies.

Chapter Three, 'From Dumb Show to Talking Cure: Developments in Hysteria and Theatre in the Late Nineteenth Century', utilizes an examination of the theatre of August Strindberg to capture the shift from melodrama to psychological realism, and from the hysteria of Charcot's clinic to Freud's consulting room. Where

other chapters concentrate on play texts as performance texts, with consideration given as much to what the body does on stage as to the words of the play, my discussion of Strindberg's plays in Chapter Three uses that dramatic material to develop the histories of both theatre and hysteria begun in Chapter Two, and in doing so sets up the historical context for my extended discussion of performance practice in Chapter Four.

Chapter Three focuses on the drama of what Strindberg called an 'hysterical age', using Strindberg himself to contextualize the complex web of *fin-de-siècle* fascination with hysteria, and showing that Strindberg's own drama reflects the transformation of the Freudian moment which connected the visual symptom to the underlying psyche. Detailed readings of three plays: *Creditors* (1888), *Comrades* (1888) and *The Pelican* (1907) trace a shift in Strindberg's drama from that of spectacular bodies controlled by a master director to explorations of the inner mind, and set this alongside that from Charcot's seeing to Freud's listening. What is at stake here is a changing relationship between body and word and the relative importance given to each.

A final brief section which sets Strindberg's 1907 play *The Ghost Sonata* alongside a re-reading of Freud's handling of Dora's case argues that in both cases mind and language are privileged over the body, which begins to be ignored. In Chapter One we saw that in approaching Dora's case, Freud's insistence on the correctness of his own interpretation led him to ignore or misread both Dora's bodily acts and her words, remaining blind and deaf to the potential for other meanings in the case. Similarly *The Ghost Sonata*, in contrast to *The Pelican* which seemed to be offering the potential to develop more open structures of meaning, can be seen to be



closing meaning down once again, retreating from both body and word into a final spiritual image. Arguing that this final shift once again reduces the complexity of the dual discourses of body and word which I have identified as central to an understanding of hysteria and to the workings of a hysterical performance rhetoric, placing power back in the hands of the narrator/interpreter of language, I suggest that we must seek to identify a performance practice which balances the relationship between word and gesture and thus places the power of creating, and reading meaning, with the performer and spectator rather than with some powerful interpretative eye or ear.

My discussion of the American actress, Ibsenite and suffragist Elizabeth Robins in Chapter Four, 'Staging the (Split) Subject: Elizabeth Robins', demonstrates the development of such a performance practice in her work both as actress and playwright, in three plays and performances: the 1891 production of *Hedda Gabler* in which Robins played Hedda, the 1893 short play *Alan's Wife* written anonymously by Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell in which Robins again took the title role, and the 1907 *Votes for Women!* which was written by Robins on behalf of the Women's Social and Political Union. In this chapter, too I begin to identify such a practice as having political implications for the performer and audience, as I show how Robins's involvement in the productions discussed traces her trajectory towards the ability to articulate her own desire, and the desires of the women in the society in which she lived, through her work as an actress, playwright and suffragist in London at the turn of the last century.

I first examine her portrayal of Hedda Gabler, adding to the work of Gay Gibson Cima and others and returning to Robins's own prompt book for the

production in order to reconstruct her performance. I argue that in this performance, for which she was both joint manager and lead actress, she staged the hysteric's reminiscences with a new style of acting, rejecting the surface conventions of melodrama and re-introducing complexity to the speaking body which spoke against the verbal text. By adopting and developing the multi-layered rhetoric of the hysteric's conversion symptom, by staging the discourse of the body as well as that of speech, Robins can be seen to have negotiated a more complex, and more powerful, position from which woman can speak. Working in the 'in-between' of speech and body, text and action, she revealed different possibilities and potentials to her audiences, requiring the spectator to become an active reader and interpreter of the scene.

A subsequent examination of *Alan's Wife* draws out the parallels between this text and that of *Hedda Gabler* as stagings of the fate of women who seek to step outside the bounds of patriarchy, and shows that in this text Robins took the techniques learned from Ibsen further, staging a scene in which the silent expressive body is used to communicate what her female protagonist cannot say in words. Finally, a consideration of Robins's increasing commitment to the feminist cause, evidenced by her later play, *Votes for Women!*, places these attempts to stage the feminine subject in a specifically political context. Offering us a version of early feminism with her demand that women should work together for change, Robins's use of a hysterical rhetoric of performance can be seen to have political effect.

Chapter Five, 'New Uses for Old Hysterias: *Portrait of Dora* and *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*', explores two plays by Hélène Cixous and Anna Furse which return to the famous hysterical patients of the *fin-de-siècle* in order to restage their hysteria as a feminist political strategy. Seeking to call into question both the notion of fixed



identity and the efficacy of the practices of two familiar figures from our history of hysteria, Charcot and Freud, these plays can also be seen to be utilizing elements of the model of hysterical performance rhetoric which the previous chapters of the thesis have worked to establish. A close examination of the performance practice of each text demonstrates the similarities and differences between them, and enables us to clarify the model further. The chapter ends by once more returning to the figure of the spectator, emphasising the need for him or her to remain distanced from the position of either the 'seer' (Charcot) or the 'listener' (Freud): only by balancing both elements, I argue, can both performer and spectator be fully open to the possibilities of performance.

# Chapter One:

## The Speaking Body: Language and Representation

### 1.1 Introduction:

Now, the differential feature of the hysteric is precisely this - it is in the very movement of speaking that the hysteric constitutes her desire. So it is hardly surprising that it should be through this door that Freud entered what was, in reality, the relations of desire to language and discovered the mechanisms of the unconscious.<sup>1</sup>

There is no place for the hysteric; she cannot be placed or take place. Hysteria is necessarily an element that disturbs arrangements; wherever it is, it shakes up all those who want to install themselves, who want to install something that is going to work, to repeat.<sup>2</sup>

These two quotations from Jacques Lacan and Hélène Cixous succinctly establish the links between hysteria and language and hysteria and disturbance. In doing so, they set up the framework both for this first chapter and for the thesis as a whole, in which the performance rhetoric of hysteria is explored as a potential tool for disrupting the ‘normal’ relations between desire and language which are structured by what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. In this first chapter I lay the foundations for the rest of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, ed. by Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Strasse, trans. by Betsy Wing, *Theory and History of Literature Series*, 24 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 156.



thesis, setting out the thematic and theoretical framework within which the subsequent exploration of hysterical rhetoric in theatrical practice will be placed. The key themes, and the theories which underlie them, are threefold: hysteria; language and performance. The chapter deals with each of these themes in turn, the final section also drawing out the connections between these themes as language and the hysterical body come together in performance. Here too I set the scene for the following chapters in which the particular relationship between theatre practice and the development of psychological understanding is explored and the outlines of an hysterical theatrical rhetoric sketched. The task of this chapter is thus to make explicit the connections between hysteria, language and performance: to show the ways in which, by converting unspoken language into the discourse of the body the hysterical patient foregrounds the idea of performance, making the site of the theatre an ideal one for exploring the cultural workings out of theoretical ideas of language and exclusion. In the course of this discussion it will become clear just why for some modern thinkers such as Hélène Cixous, quoted above, hysteria is seen as ‘necessarily an element that disturbs arrangements’, that ‘shakes up all those who want to install themselves’.

I will begin by telling stories: the stories of two women, Bertha Pappenheim and Ida Bauer, whose published case histories as the patients ‘Anna O.’ and ‘Dora’ are, as Lacan suggests, pivotal to Freud’s developing understanding of hysteria and the unconscious at the end of the nineteenth century. Through those stories I establish that both Freud’s definition and his attempted cure of the hysteric’s condition are constructed in terms of language - of what it is impossible to say in society and yet what must, with the therapist’s help, be said. With this in mind, I turn to examine

Lacan's development of Freud's work, which traces out a relationship between language, desire, and representation.

In this section I examine the way in which language plays an instrumental part in what Teresa Brennan calls 'the subject's assumption of the position of "I"'.<sup>3</sup> My discussion of this topic draws together Freud's nineteenth century work (grounded in his analysis of his hysterical patients) and Jacques Lacan's subsequent re-reading of Freud's theories in the second half of the twentieth century: work which has in turn been drawn upon and argued with by modern feminist theorists of language and sexuality. As Freud's work is based on the bodies of his hysterical patients (usually female) and, inevitably, coloured by nineteenth century views and anxieties over 'normal' sexuality, this account of the acquisition of language and its problems is inevitably gendered; however it is important to note here that this thesis seeks to question the exclusiveness of the binary positions which such a stance implies. The editors of *The (M)other Tongue*, writing from an understanding of Lacanian theory, ask, 'Can women be retrieved from the dominance of the phallic term?', seeing women and language as existing in two quite different and opposing spheres.<sup>4</sup> But in this thesis I want not simply to work to 'retrieve' women from this dominance but rather to expose and interrogate the oppositions inherent in that question, working with the different categories of subject and object, and the shifts that take place between those positions.

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa Brennan, *History after Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 53.

<sup>4</sup> 'Introduction', in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. by Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 15-29 (p. 22).



Having established the theoretical relationship between language and representation - and identified the problems inherent in such a linkage - I then return to Dora and Anna O., re-reading their stories, and the analysis of Freud and Breuer, in the light of that theory. Here I seek to set up the idea of hysteria as having a double role, pointing (like the hysterical 'split' personality itself) in differing, if still inextricably linked, directions. In its first, well-established role, hysteria can be seen as being paradigmatic of the problems caused by the relationship between language and representation discussed in the first section: hysterical bodily symptoms are grounded in the patients' inability to represent themselves and their desires in spoken language. But in its second, 'metaphorical' role, I want to suggest that hysteria can guide us towards a different way of thinking through and about the relationship between language and representation, can allow us a different way of speaking the 'truth'.

The third and final theme which I want to introduce in this chapter, and which links the theoretical ideas on language and hysteria to the work on nineteenth and twentieth century theatre practice which forms the substantive basis of the thesis, is that of performance. Hysteria, before or resisting its cure, might be viewed as a kind of personal theatrical performance: a performance in which the repressed knowledge or desires of the hysteric are acted out. Such an analogy suggests both the potential and the problems of performance as a tool for a different kind of representation. In this third section, building on my discussion of hysteria as a performative disease, I explore the role of performance in enabling the expression of desire. As with hysteria itself, the performance space has a dual role: I acknowledge its role as a site of repression, where bodies are objectified, forced into parts written by others for the pleasure of the audience, but I also want to argue for its potential as a site of change,

of breaking boundaries, where actors' bodies, like those of the hysterical patients, may be seen to be communicating a different, deeper truth to their audience than that which may be expressed by word alone.

## 1.2 Telling Stories

### 1.2.1 *Living Hysteria: The Stories*

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.<sup>5</sup>

In the third essay of *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger uses text and pictures to construct a gendered division of roles based around the role of sight: a division founded on 'usage and conventions which are at last being questioned but have by no means been overcome' (Berger, p. 46). Men watch, women are watched, and so the part of the split self of woman which watches herself is male.

Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (Berger, p. 45)

Berger writes in the 1970s, but at the end of the nineteenth century the 'usage and conventions' were even more firmly established; the 'watching' was also a kind of

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<sup>5</sup> John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin, 1972), p. 46.



guarding, both of the self and by others, which allowed only a very restricted role for women. In her introduction to *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism and European Theater at the Turn of the Century*, Gail Finney argues that in Victorian England's middle- and upper-class society, there was nothing that women at odds with that system could do but 'suffer and be still'.<sup>6</sup> The reaction to this amongst such women was two-fold: either to turn to the new feminism which aimed for sexual and political reforms, and to be castigated as a 'New Woman', or to retreat into hysteria. The stories of Anna O. and Dora, though set in the different milieu of Viennese Jewish society, illustrate that they faced the same conundrum: to suffer or be still.

Their case histories were originally published some ten years apart, a ten year period which witnessed the still controversial change in Freud's understanding of the founding causes of hysteria. The stories themselves take place in quite different periods: Anna O's illness and treatment occupied the years from 1880-1882, while Freud's encounter with Dora took place in 1900.<sup>7</sup> However, the background stories of these two patients reveal similarities, and it is those to which I wish to draw attention here: similarities that position both women as trapped within a system that does not allow them space, condemning them to the choice of being either 'mute' or 'mimic'. Anna O. is in fact the patient of Freud's colleague Joseph Breuer, whose case history forms the first of the five studies published in 1895 to support the theories set out in the earlier collaborative 'Preliminary Communication'. Dora's history was published by Freud in 1905, under the title of *Fragment of an Analysis of*

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<sup>6</sup> Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism and European Theater at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 4. The phrase is taken from Sarah S. Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (1845).

<sup>7</sup> Freud, however, consistently misremembers the treatment as taking place a year earlier, in 1899.

*a Case of Hysteria*, the title indicating Freud's acknowledgement of the incompleteness of his treatment and perhaps of his narrative of Dora's case.<sup>8</sup>

The following outline of Anna O.'s and Dora's stories consciously highlights their awkward positioning within codes of intellectual and social behaviour which, I suggest, leads to their hysteria. In their 'Preliminary Communication', Freud and Breuer write that dispositional hypnoid states (such abnormal states of consciousness being '*the basic phenomenon of this neurosis*') 'grow out of the day-dreams which are so common even in healthy women and to which needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone' (*SE* II, pp. 12-13. Original emphasis). The culprit here, I would argue, is not the needlework itself but the society which offers only needlework as an occupation for women. As Dianne Hunter suggests, 'people left to embroidery are bound to embroider fantasies'.<sup>9</sup>

Both patients seem to bear out an earlier characterisation of hysterical women as unusually intelligent and active: a characteristic which makes them less willing to 'be still', or to commit themselves to 'needlework and similar occupations'. In the lectures which were published in 1867 under the title *Hysteria*, the surgeon Frederic C. Skey warns his audience:

Do not imagine Hysteria to be a disease peculiar to persons of weak minds. It will often select for its victim a female member of a family exhibiting more

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<sup>8</sup> Anna O.'s case history is published in *Studies on Hysteria*, *SE* II (1955). Dora's case history is published in *SE* VII (1953). Further references to these editions are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Dianne Hunter, 'Hysteria. Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.', in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, pp. 89-115 (p. 94) (first publ. in *Feminist Studies*, 9 (1983)).



than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger, bold riders, having plenty of what is termed *nerve*.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, in the opening paragraph of Anna O.'s case history Breuer stresses her intelligence and vivacity at some length:

She was markedly intelligent, with an astonishingly quick grasp of things and penetrating intuition. She possessed a powerful intellect which would have been capable of digesting solid mental pabulum and which stood in need of it - though without receiving it after she had left school. She had great poetic and imaginative gifts, which were under the control of a sharp and critical common sense. [...] Her will-power was energetic, tenacious and persistent. (*SE* II, p. 21)

Dora is described by Freud in similar terms, as possessing 'natural gifts and [...] intellectual precocity' (*SE* VII, p. 20). The child Dora 'developed into a mature young woman of very independent judgement' who rejected the conventional woman's role by trying to avoid being drawn into 'taking a share in the work of the house', instead 'attending lectures for women and [...] carrying on with more or less serious studies' (*SE* VII, pp. 22-23).

Unsurprisingly for this time, both women lived within families centred around the figure of the father. Breuer describes Anna O. as 'passionately fond' of her father, Freud says that Dora's father was 'the dominating figure' in the family circle (*SE* II, p. 22, *SE* VII, p. 18). Both fathers suffered serious illnesses in which their daughters

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<sup>10</sup> Skey, *Hysteria: Remote Causes of Disease in General: Treatment of Disease by Tonic Agency: Local or Surgical Forms of Hysteria, etc.* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), p. 55. However Skey goes on, rather confusingly, to state that: 'We do not associate hysteric affections with persons of either sex who are characterised by vigour of mind, of strong will, of strength and firmness of character.' (p. 61). Here Skey seems to want to push hysteria back into its conventional wrappings, giving it qualities which tie it to the feminine.

were involved as nurses, and in different ways this involvement can be seen to lay the ground for the development of hysteria.

Anna O. ‘devoted her whole energy to nursing her father’ when he fell ill with the peripleuritic abscess that would eventually cause his death, so that ‘no one was much surprised when by degrees her own health greatly deteriorated’ (*SE II*, p. 23). Trapped in what Breuer himself describes as ‘an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically minded family’ and further by the restricted atmosphere of her father’s sickroom, Anna O. ‘embellished her life [...] by indulging in systematic day dreaming, which she described as her “private theatre”’ (*SE II*, p. 22). The theatrical metaphor is no coincidence: hysteria is, as I repeatedly stress in this thesis, a performative disease.

From this daydreaming, Anna O. passed over into illness without a break: eventually the ‘private theatre’ of the mind was translated into a public performance through the body. Unable to ‘live’ within the monotonous family world which failed to provide her with ‘solid mental pabulum’, Anna O. began to ‘split’: to suffer from the ‘splitting of consciousness’ which Freud and Breuer say ‘*is so striking in the well known classical cases under the form of “double conscience” [and] is present to a rudimentary degree in every hysteria*’ (*SE II*, p. 12. Original emphasis). In her illness she developed two ‘entirely distinct’ states of consciousness: one in which she was melancholy and anxious, and one in which she hallucinated and was, in Breuer’s word, ‘naughty’, becoming abusive, throwing cushions at people, and attempting to tear buttons off her bedclothes and linen (*SE II*, p. 24). Paralysis and contractures affected her, spreading from the neck to her right arm and leg and then for a while to her left leg and arm, but most interesting of all for the purposes of my argument was the



development of ‘a deep-going functional disorganization of her speech’. During the course of her illness Anna O. gradually lost control over language, losing her ‘command’ of grammar and syntax and then becoming ‘almost completely deprived of words’: for ‘two weeks she became completely dumb and in spite of making great and continuous efforts to speak she was unable to say a syllable’. When she began to recover speech, the language employed by Anna O. was that of English, although ‘at times when she was at her very best and most free, she talked French or Italian’ (*SE* II, p. 25). Eventually she was not even able to understand the German that was spoken around her. Breuer calls this German her ‘mother-tongue’ in his closing discussion of the case, but it can perhaps be better described as the language of the father, for as Dianne Hunter argues in what we will shortly be able to identify as Lacanian terms, ‘in patriarchal socialization, the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father’ (Hunter, pp. 99-100).

Dora’s symptoms are less dramatic than those of her fellow-patient - Freud dismisses her case as one of “*petite hystérie*” with the commonest of all somatic and mental symptoms’:

dyspnoea, *tussis nervosa*, aphonia, and possibly migraines, together with depression, hysterical unsociability, and a *taedium vitae* which was probably not entirely genuine. (*SE* VII, pp. 23-24)

Just as Anna O. suffers disruption in her control of language, so Dora loses her ability to speak; but that which she cannot speak about, the story leading up to the onset of this condition, is more dramatic than the story told of Breuer’s patient. Dora’s story places her, as with Anna O., within a system into which she does not want to fit, so

that both women, in Cixous's terms, can be characterised as being an 'element that disturbs arrangements'. But this time the proffered female role which Dora seeks to escape is not simply that of the sickroom nurse; instead it is the role of a female sexual object. Like Berger's female subject, Dora sees herself becoming an object in the eyes of those around her, and she does not like what she sees.

Dora was taken to see Freud in October 1900, when she was eighteen years old. Dora's father, whom Freud calls Herr B. in the case history, was prompted to take her to Freud by the discovery of a letter in which Dora said she could no longer endure her life, an event which was followed by a first attack of loss of consciousness on Dora's part. Perhaps because Freud's concern in writing up Dora's story, five years after the actual treatment, was not so much to give the facts of that case but rather to share the story of his own development of psychoanalysis through her case, his narrative is almost as convoluted as that first offered to him by Dora, 'an unnavigable river whose stream is at one moment choked by masses of rock and at another divided and lost among shallows and sandbanks' (*SE VII*, p. 29). But what emerges is a complicated web of sexual relations and exchange: a web which properly defies the attempt at summary which is all I can offer here.

What is central to my version of this narrative, and to the reading of both cases which I explore in this section, is the sense that the story which Dora tells is one in which she is expected to partake in a 'merry-go-round' of sexual exchange, endorsed by the society in which she lives. Again, the father is the dominant figure: Dora's mother, Frau B., is largely absent from Freud's reading of Dora's story, being described dismissively as 'an uncultivated woman and above all a foolish one, who had concentrated all her interests upon domestic affairs' (*SE VII*, p. 20). Freud makes



it clear that he attributes Dora's 'intellectual precocity' to her father's family rather than her mother's. The estrangement of the mother from the family concerns had increased subsequent to her husband falling ill, particularly as the illness was diagnosed as syphilis, a result of infection before his marriage. It was thus Herr B., the father, who had had the most influence upon Dora, and she had played a major part in his nursing care until supplanted by Frau K., a friend of the family who thus, in Herr B.'s words, had 'earned a title to his undying gratitude' (*SE VII*, p. 25). Herr B., who told Freud, 'I get nothing out of my own wife,' formed an intimate relationship with Frau K., visiting her daily whilst her husband was out on business (*SE VII*, p. 26). Whilst she was very close to Frau K., Dora knew of the relationship with her father; in fact she often looked after the K.'s children whilst her father and Frau K. were together.

Whilst Herr B. and Frau K. were together, Dora, a young girl, was encouraged to spend time with Herr K. 'He had gone walks with her when he was there, and had made her small presents', but no one, writes Freud, 'had thought any harm of that' (*SE VII*, p. 25). Dora, however, realised the parallel between Herr K.'s gifts to her and those with which Herr B. showered Frau K., and resented the attempt to place her within this system of sexual exchange. Freud writes in his case history:

When she was feeling embittered she used to be overcome by the idea that she had been handed over to Herr K. as the price of his tolerating the relations between her father and his wife; and her rage at her father's making such a use of her was visible behind her affection for him. [...] The two men had of course never made a formal agreement in which she was treated as an object

for barter; her father in particular would have been horrified at such a suggestion. (*SE* VII, p. 34)

Just as Herr B is accused by Freud of avoiding the dilemma of this situation ‘by falsifying [... his] judgement upon one of the conflicting alternatives’, so Freud himself seems to avoid this dilemma himself by accusing Dora of exaggeration. It is true that there may not have been a ‘formal agreement’, to use Freud’s rather legalistic and evasive term; but an unspoken acquiescence can have consequences just as dangerous. In any event, Herr K eventually made an audacious proposal to Dora, when she was 16, telling her (in words echoed by Herr B.) ‘You know I get nothing out of my wife’ (*SE* VII, p. 98). Dora told her mother of this, who then told her father, but nothing was done, Herr B. resisting Dora’s pleas to break off his relationship with the K. family. In fact, in analysis, it became clear that this was not the first attempt by Herr K. to press his attentions upon Dora. For Dora told Freud of an even earlier incident when, at the age of 14, while visiting Herr K. in his office, he had suddenly clasped her to him and pressed a kiss upon her lips. Thus, even more explicitly than in the case of Anna O., we see that Dora is placed within a system in which she does not wish to play her part. For the system of masculine exchange which her father and Herr B. represent is surely the system of patriarchal society in which women function as objects of exchange - as wives, daughters, lovers - but never as subjects in their own right. Both Anna O. and Dora thus reject the roles offered to them, and become ill as a result. How Breuer and Freud began to understand, and to attempt to cure, that illness, is the focus of the next section.



### 1.2.2 *Understanding Hysteria: The Analysis*

In my discussion of the cases of Anna O. and Dora, I drew attention to the fact that both women's hysteria included the loss or disruption of language among its symptoms. It is this inability to speak which is at the heart of the understanding of hysteria developed by Freud at the end of the nineteenth century. Breuer, feeling his way towards the workings of hysteria and of Anna O.'s case, writes that with the disruption of her language:

Now for the first time the psychological mechanism of the disorder became clear.

As I knew, she had felt very much offended over something and had

determined not to speak about it. (*SE II*, p. 25)

Through the disruption of language the process through which hysteria enacts itself becomes clear. Allowed no space from which to speak as a subject within the system, constrained within a 'monotonous existence' or a bourgeois merry-go-round of sexual exchange, the hysteric's desires and fears are converted from the language of speech to that of symptom: their bodies perform what they cannot say.

In the 'Preliminary Communication' to *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer thus characterise their hysterical patients as having been unable to react to a psychological trauma because the nature of the trauma excluded a reaction:

because social circumstances made a reaction impossible or because it was a

question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore

intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and

suppressed. (*SE II*, p. 10)

Unable to find a place from which to speak in patriarchal language, the hysteric's symptoms 'speak' for her. Through the loss of voice, she most clearly dramatizes the

situation in which she finds herself, but her other symptoms speak equally eloquently and symbolically: 'a neuralgia may follow upon mental pain or vomiting upon a feeling of moral disgust' (*SE II*, p. 5). Freud terms this process by which psychological excitement is transformed into chronic somatic symptoms 'conversion' (*SE II*, p. 86). Desires or fears are thus translated from the language of patriarchy into another, insistent, language of the body.

Freud's cure for hysteria, then, a cure which was developed on the bodies of Anna O. and Dora, is a process by which patient and analyst work to enable the patient to bring to consciousness that which has been repressed, to enable the hysteric to describe the trauma in speech and thus remove the need for the conversion into bodily symptoms. Set against the terms of the discussion so far, the 'cure' that psychoanalysis imposes upon the hysteric is thus that of talking, of re-integration into patriarchal discourse, of translating the body language and what Elaine Showalter calls 'the female antilanguage of hysteria' into the psychoanalytic theory of the unconscious.<sup>11</sup>

It was in fact Anna O. who first described this process of analysis as the 'talking cure', as she talked out the causes of each symptom with Breuer over a period of nearly a year. Through this process the non-verbal language of the hysterical symptom is thus converted into a verbal narrative constructed, in Anna O.'s case, by the patient and physician working together. We might want to see the process of analysis, then, as the process of constructing a story for the patient to tell. The hysteric has deflected, blocked, or fragmented a logical train of thought, that is, a

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<sup>11</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 157.



linear narrative, that the analyst can help to reconstruct. Erik Erikson describes this treatment as a process by which the patient eventually adjusts to what he calls “outer reality”, meaning to what cannot be helped’.<sup>12</sup>

Before exploring this process of analysis - and its problems - in more detail, I will briefly consider the theoretical explanation of the acquisition of language and identity constructed by Lacan which draws, via Freud, on the experiences of Anna O. and Dora. Just as Freud’s attempt to cure Dora involves, according to Erikson, an accommodation with outer reality, with ‘what cannot be helped’, so Lacanian theory shows that the child’s acquisition of language, and thus identity, is a process of accommodating the patriarchal order, which is, truly, ‘what cannot be helped’.

### 1.3 Language and Gender

In the quotation which opens this chapter, taken from Lacan’s discussion of Freud’s discovery of the unconscious and its mechanisms in the seminars collected together in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, it is clear that Lacan places hysteria centre stage as the ‘door’ through which Freud is enabled to make that discovery. For James Strachey, general editor of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Freud’s work in *Studies on Hysteria*, the collection of five case histories of hysterical patients published in 1895 together with the earlier theoretical essay on hysteria first published in 1893 as the ‘Preliminary Communication’, ‘enables us to trace the early steps of the development

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<sup>12</sup> Erik H. Erikson, ‘Reality and Actuality: An Address’, in *In Dora’s Case: Freud - Hysteria - Feminism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 44-55 (p. 49), repr. from *The Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 10 (1962), 451-74.

of that instrument', psychoanalysis. What the *Studies* and their hysterical case histories show us is:

not simply the story of the overcoming of a succession of obstacles; it is the story of the *discovery* of a succession of obstacles that have to be overcome.

(*SE* II, p. xvi)

These obstacles, and their discovery, are central to the development of psychoanalysis, as Freud discovered the realm of the unconscious, the role of free association and dream analysis, and the problem of transference. Thus, despite their differing approaches to the process of psychoanalysis, both Freud's work and the more recent seminars of Lacan are founded in the treatment of these hysterical women in the 1880s and 1890s.

Jacques Lacan's re-reading of Freud focuses on the manner in which the human subject is constructed out of what Juliet Mitchell calls 'the small human animal'.<sup>13</sup> Language plays a major role in this coming into subjectivity: Mitchell says that 'the human animal is born into language and it is within the terms of language that the human subject is constructed'. In order to understand this assertion, it is necessary to return to Freud's theories of sexuality, originally based in his work with his hysterical patients at the end of the nineteenth century, and, in particular, to examine the role of the Oedipus complex in the development of 'normal' sexuality in both boys and girls, which, for Lacan, also constitutes the development of the speaking subject. I do not pretend to offer here anything more than a summary of these complex and much-argued over ideas; instead this brief recapitulation highlights

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<sup>13</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Women: The Longest Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 253.



the key relationship between language and subjectivity which is central to my arguments both here and in the remainder of this thesis.

In its original dyadic relationship with the mother, the child has no sense of itself as a separate being, believing itself to be part of the mother, whose actions it imagines it controls. Lacan terms this stage the Imaginary or ‘mirror’ stage, using the mirror as a metaphor to signify the image of itself that the child perceives around it. This ‘mirror’ image, to the external observer, necessarily involves a split between the watching subject and the watched object, and indeed Lacan sees this stage as laying the foundation for what David Macey calls ‘later identifications through the assimilation of properties of the other’, exemplifying the ‘subject’s fatal tendency to identify with the ego’.<sup>14</sup> But the child, observing that it can control the reflected image (as it apparently controls the mother, who meets its desires), sees no such split. Instead it imagines a comforting wholeness, a unity between the self and the image. In this Imaginary stage, then, the child has no need for language, as there is no ‘Other’ to whom he must communicate his desires.

The developing child must however move from this pre-Oedipal period, negotiating its way through the Oedipal and castration complexes described by Freud if he or she is to attain ‘normal’ adult sexuality. The male child, Freud’s paradigm, learns that his love for the mother is forbidden, and abandons her at the intervention of the father. In Juliet Mitchell’s words,

In the ‘ideal’ case, the boy learns to accept his inferior phallic powers (thus resolving the castration complex) but on the understanding that he will later

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Introduction’ to Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), p. xvii.

have the same patriarchal rights and a woman of his own. (Mitchell, *Women*, p. 230)

But this route, and the successful outcome in the inheritance of patriarchal power, is of course only available to the male child. According to Freud, a more problematic path is trodden by the female child, who in recognizing her condition of lack (castration) repudiates her mother as inferior and by her desire for a penis, takes up the feminine position. Faced with the impossible desire for a penis, the 'normal' female child will substitute her desire for a child, only to be obtained by love for a substitute father.

In each case, the realization of separation from the mother comes through the father's intervention (or the intervention of the externally ordered world which the father represents - in Freud's terms, through 'the victory of the race over the individual').<sup>15</sup> Here the terms of Lacan's developmental narrative differ from Freud's: what for Freud is an actual father, an actual penis, instead becomes for Lacan a symbolic father, signified as the Phallus, the 'transcendental signifier', the 'name of the father', which represents the Symbolic Order of which language is a part:

It is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law.<sup>16</sup>

In *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* Mitchell describes the all encompassing authority of the symbolic father well:

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id' and Other Works*, SE XIX (1961), p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 67.



[It] is the law that institutes and constitutes human society, culture in the fullest sense of the term, the law of order which is to be confounded with language and which structures all human societies, which makes them, in fact, human.<sup>17</sup>

Truly, in its all encompassing power, this system can be characterised as ‘what cannot be helped’.

Both the male and the female child, then, experience loss as they negotiate the Oedipal and castration complexes. Lacan suggests that they cope with this sense of loss through language, by which they try to recapture the complete satisfaction of the Imaginary stage, claiming a specious unity between themselves and that which they imagine that they can control through language. But as Mitchell explains, ‘the object that is longed for only comes into existence *as an object* when it is lost’, and thus ‘any satisfaction that might subsequently be attained will always contain this loss within it’.<sup>18</sup> Language is thus an expression of lack which is never to be satisfied, a code within which the speaking subject is constituted.

But as we have seen, this code is part of the Symbolic Order, itself signified by the phallus. And if language is phallogentric, structured around the male term, what room does this leave for the expression of desires that are not themselves fixated on the phallus? I have already cited the question posed by the editors of *The (M)other Tongue*:

If woman is nothing but a category within language, constructed by male desire, where and what are women? [...] Can women be retrieved from the

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<sup>17</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 391.

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, *Women*, p. 255.

dominance of the phallic term? [...] Lacking a language that can articulate their experience, women are left mutes or mimics.<sup>19</sup>

I have argued through my exploration of the cases of Anna O. and Dora that, at the end of the nineteenth century, woman's positioning within the Symbolic Order leaves them at best forced to talk another's language, at worst sick and 'divided' within.

What is at issue here, then, is a way of representing, of articulating, experiences and desires which are at odds with the Symbolic Order, which do not fit the rigid pattern of development set out so clearly by Freud. Must women remain the 'Other', the object, within language, or can a means be found of representing the self, that which cannot otherwise be represented? In the next section, I propose that hysteria, which I have characterised as a lived example of this problem for those who do not fit within the patriarchal system, can be seen as a potential guide towards such a new means of representation.

## 1.4 Re-reading

### 1.4.1 *Re-reading the stories of hysteria*

Ann Wilson, drawing on the terms set out above, makes the link between hysteria and the problematic process of language acquisition clear:

The hysteric's gaps in memory, loss of speech, fits of coughing, amount to an unconscious refusal to employ the language of the Father. The hysteric is not, however, silent; she commands the attention of her audience with the spectacle of her body. She threatens to disrupt the authority of phallogocentric

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<sup>19</sup> 'Introduction', in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, pp. 22-23.



discourse by her insistence that the language of the mother [the language of the body] has a place within the symbolic order.<sup>20</sup>

In this way we can construct the figure of the hysteric, uncured, as existing outside of the rules of patriarchy, un-integrated within the Symbolic Order. She is a plural, shifting, fragmented subject whose body, as with Anna O., becomes a private/public theatre in which she performs before the gaze of the family and physician. The 'cure' is a process of reintegration through and in language:

To be 'cured' the hysteric must acquiesce to a language which denies her subjectivity, her presence, must learn to speak a discourse which refuses to hear her, [...] to become a comprehensible construct, robbed of any plurality of definition, reduced into a unitary, visible (phallic) economy within which she disappears.<sup>21</sup>

Language itself, patriarchal discourse, is the medicine, as we can see by briefly examining the approaches taken by Breuer and Freud in their study of hysteria and the treatment of their most famous hysterical patients. Both Breuer and Freud, as we have seen, turned to language and conversation, 'dialogues rather than exhibitions',<sup>22</sup> to cure their hysterical patients, but they used that language in very different ways. Breuer listened carefully to Anna O., caught up in her narrative, and enabled her to remain an actress in her own drama (save on the one occasion where, objectifying her once more, he exhibited her to another colleague, 'demonstrating all her peculiarities to him', and she 'fell unconscious to the ground' between them, transformed from

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<sup>20</sup> Ann Wilson, 'History and Hysteria: Writing the Body in *Portrait of Dora and Signs of Life*', *Modern Drama*, 32 (1989), pp. 73-88 (p. 78).

<sup>21</sup> Gabrielle Dane, 'Hysteria as Feminist Protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker', *Women's Studies*, 23 (1994), 231-56 (pp. 238-39).

<sup>22</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 155.

speaking subject to senseless body (*SE* II, p. 27)). Allowed to tell her own story, to become a speaking subject, Anna O. is thus integrated into language on her own terms, and in her true identity as Bertha Pappenheim she eventually became a feminist writer and activist, utilizing her control of language to translate Mary Wollstonecraft's text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, just as she translated her feminine antilanguage of gibberish and somatic symptoms into a discourse which Breuer could understand. What is key to Bertha Pappenheim's story, for this analysis, is that she was allowed the space in which to construct her *own* story, and had the power to speak it in her own words.

In contrast, I argue that if we return to Freud's interpretation of Dora's case, Freud can be seen to have abandoned the careful consideration of symptoms which characterized the approach of *Studies on Hysteria*. He writes:

Since the date of the *Studies* psycho-analytic technique has been completely revolutionized. At that time the work of analysis started out from the symptoms, and aimed at clearing them up one after the other. Since then I have abandoned this technique, because I found it totally inadequate for dealing with the finer structure of a neurosis. (*SE* VII, p. 12)

In the process of abandoning this focus on symptom, I would argue that Freud has lost the ability to see or truly listen to Dora, refusing her the space to speak and instead seeking to impose his own reading upon her, to use language for his own ends rather than as a means for Dora to tell her story. So while he claims that 'he that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret', Freud does not allow Dora's symptoms communicative power outside his own interpretations, which we now know to be misinterpretations, misreadings



(*SE* VII, p. 77). He encloses Dora's story with his own comments, footnotes, theories and desires. Steven Marcus writes that

In the course of psychoanalytic treatment, nothing less than 'reality' itself is made, constructed, or reconstructed. [...] At the end - the successful end - one has come into possession of one's own story. It is a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by one's self of one's own story.<sup>23</sup>

But Freud's Dora is unable to appropriate her own story, and eventually she rejects the story offered to her by Freud as another attempt to place her back within the system from where her hysteria seeks to escape. For example, when Dora tells Freud of Herr K.'s advances towards her as a fourteen year old, she describes a lingering sensation of disgust and pressure on her throat. Freud's discussion of this incident traces this sensation back and suggests that, at the time of the embrace, Dora must have also felt the pressure of Herr K.'s erect member against her lower body. That illicit pressure, which cannot be remembered by Dora, is then 'converted' by Dora into a memory of a sensation of pressure upon her thorax, and a subsequent disinclination for food (*SE* VII, pp. 28-30). That a 14 year old should feel disgust at such a moment is perhaps understandable, but here Freud is not content to accept Dora's word. For him, the fact that Dora had felt disgust rather than sexual excitement, that she rejected her role as a sexual object, marked her out as already hysterical, already abnormal. He therefore delved further back into Dora's history to try and find the cause of this, making use of dream analysis and free association to do so. Far from allowing Dora the space to tell her own story, to break the system,

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<sup>23</sup> Steven Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History', in *In Dora's Case*, pp. 56-91 (pp. 71-72), repr. from *Representations*, (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 247-309.

Freud's interest was not in Dora's symptoms but in the success or failure of his methods in gaining access to what he thought must be the reasons for those symptoms. In telling this story of his analysis, Dora herself is pushed to one side, as Freud tries again and again to construct theories which enable him to understand Dora's affections without recognizing that he himself is implicated as part of the system which so disgusts Dora.

First, Freud tells Dora that she loves her father, and suggests that her complaints about Herr K. are an attempt to break up the relationship between her father and Herr K.'s wife, by forcing a split between the two families. Then he tells Dora that she is in love with Herr K., and is in fact disappointed that his attentions to her did not continue after her rejection of his proposal. When Dora, also rejecting Freud's attempts to place her within the system, tells him that she is breaking off the treatment, giving him the same two weeks notice that the K.'s governess gave after she too had been seduced by Herr K., Freud insists to Dora that she is jealous of that governess. He suggests that Dora does desire to participate in the system of exchange and that her bitterness comes from the fact that, once rejected, Herr K. did not continue to pursue her. Freud thus wants to put Dora back within the system: it is this that she rejects in ending her treatment.

It is only later that Freud realises the 'key' to Dora's case: a key that takes her outside the sexual roles offered by nineteenth century society and also outside the pattern of normal development into adult sexuality, desire and language constructed by Freud and later by Lacan. Dora, realises Freud belatedly, is in fact in love with Frau K., whose 'adorable white body' she had praised to him repeatedly 'in accents more appropriate to a lover than to a defeated rival' (*SE VII*, p. 61). Dora thus has no



wish to participate in the masculine system of exchange: her affections remain with the female, breaking out of the bounds of patriarchy. In Dora's sudden breaking off of the treatment, 'just when my hopes of a successful termination were at their highest', says Freud, and thus 'bringing those hopes to nothing', he saw an 'unmistakable act of vengeance' on her part (*SE* VII, p. 109). Just as she rejected the role of sexual object within this system of exchange, so Dora rejects the imposition of Freud's narrative onto her bodily symptoms and walks out, refusing to be 'cured'.

In this section, then, through the frame of the stories of Anna O. and Dora, I have shown that both the disease of hysteria and its cure illustrate the relationship between language, subjectivity and desire constructed by Lacan's reworking of Freud. It is here that much of this thesis is grounded; here where the theoretical debates of modern feminists and others (debates which allow me a space, as a twentieth century academic, to speak within the academy) can be seen to be actually played out upon the bodies of nineteenth century women and men; here where the relationship between language and hysteria is 'performed'. Hysterical bodily symptoms play out the patients' inability to represent themselves and their desires in the language of patriarchy. And it is precisely because the hysteric's speaking body defies the grammar of the patriarchal symbolic, disrupting categories and systems of meaning, argues Elin Diamond, that hysteria has become the clamouring site of disruption in feminist discourse.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry and the "True-Real"', *Modern Drama*, 32 (1989), 58-72 (p. 67).

### 1.4.2 *Re-reading the analysis*

In this section I return to the hysterics themselves, turning the focus away from the doctors' interpretations of their condition, as I begin to construct a different reading of their symptomatic acts. Here I suggest that becoming hysterical need not always be seen as a retreat or a descent: that it can also disturb our notions about the primacy of the word, and offer a different representation of the truth. Hélène Cixous suggests that Dora's behaviour also shakes up, disrupts the system itself:

Dora seemed to me to be the one who resists the system, the one who cannot stand that the family and society are founded on the body of women, on bodies despised, rejected, bodies that are humiliating once they have been used. (Cixous and Clément, p. 154)

I go on to argue in the remainder of this thesis that in their varied responses to that situation, in their reactions to their exclusion from the codes of patriarchal society, these hysterics may point us towards a way of reconfiguring the relationship to language that apparently leaves those unable to negotiate their way safely through the Oedipal crisis as either 'mutes' or 'mimics'. This is, of course, not a new idea: I began this chapter with a quotation from Cixous, herself one of the most vocal advocates of the hysteric's ability to challenge the system. She writes of Dora:

Here is a kid who successfully jams all the adulterous little wheels that are turning around her and, one after the other, they break down. She manages to say what she doesn't say, so intensely that the men drop like flies. (Cixous and Clément, p. 150)



Cixous celebrates Dora, but in her hysterical figure lies exposed the problem of valorizing actual hysteria as an alternative discourse. As Catherine Clément argues in her 'Exchange' with Cixous,

[Hysteria] introduces dissension, but it doesn't explode anything at all; it doesn't disperse the bourgeois family, which also exists only through its dissension, which holds together only in the possibility or the reality of its own disturbance, always reclosable, always reclosed. [...] Raising hell, throwing fits, disturbing family relations can be shut up. (Cixous and Clément, p. 156)

Others, too, point out the danger of romanticizing madness as rebellion. Shoshona Felman characterizes mental illness as the 'impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation', as 'a *request for help*, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration', while for Toril Moi, hysteria is 'a cry for help when defeat becomes real, when the woman sees that she is efficiently gagged and chained to her feminine role'.<sup>25</sup> Such comments suggest that hysteria's refusal of spoken language is a retreat from the ability to articulate or represent their position, a step that only leads to weakness rather than to the possibility of challenge.

Yet Clément suggests that Anna O., who 'became the first welfare worker and who made something of her hysteria', does achieve a symbolic act, does 'arrive at symbolic inscription' (Cixous and Clément, p. 156). I want to take that idea and use it to argue that it is not in the actuality of hysteria but in the structures that it opens up

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<sup>25</sup> Shoshona Felman, 'Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy', in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 133-53, (p. 134) (first publ. in *Diacritics* 5 (1975), 2-10); Toril Moi, 'Representations of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora', in *In Dora's Case*, pp. 181-99, p. 192 (first publ. in *Feminist Review*, 9 (1981), 60-73).

and in the challenge that the hysteric's speaking body offers to the supremacy of the spoken or written word that hysteria can guide us towards a different way of speaking the 'truth'. I thus want to move away from a celebration of hysteria and the problems which that involves to begin to think about drawing on the performative aspects of the disease. And through that, to challenge the idea that patriarchal language allows those who challenge the system only the role of mute or mimic, developing a notion of competing languages of body and speech that can be best utilized on the space of the stage.

In arguing for this third 'alternative', I am drawing on the work of Gabrielle Dane who describes a space 'in-between' madness and not-madness, patriarchy and hysteria, a space which she locates in both Cixous's theory and in her theatrical practice:

to avoid speaking as both mad (clinical hysterical 'discourse') and not mad (the phallic tongue), [this] writer [is] consciously adopting hysterical rhetoric as a metaphor through which to [...] re-learn how to speak, to re-invent language. (Dane, p. 241)

Cixous herself urges the theft and appropriation of patriarchal discourse by a woman's body, a woman's tongue:

If woman has always functioned 'within' man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, [...] now it is time for her to displace this 'within,' explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her woman's mouth, bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it. (Cixous and Clément, pp. 95-96)



In searching for a way of putting theory into practice, Cixous has herself turned to the theatre, to the stage where, she argues, it is ‘possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body’.<sup>26</sup> I return to Cixous’s own theatre in Chapter Five of this thesis; in the final section of this chapter I want to turn to examine the role of performance, and of theatre, in enabling both the imposition of structure and a challenge to that structure.

### 1.5 Performance

In the previous section I suggested that hysteria, before or resisting its cure, might be viewed as a kind of personal theatrical performance: a performance in which the repressed knowledge or desires of the hysteric are acted out. Anna O.’s ‘private theatre’ of daydreams is translated, or converted, into the public spectacle of her symptomatic body: a body which the analyst, like the theatre audience, tries to interpret.

This analogy between theatre and hysteria suggests both the potential and the problems of performance as a tool for a different kind of representation. For while, as Cixous has argued, the lived space of the theatre can provide a liberating site for the ‘living, breathing, speaking body’, the actor in that theatre can also be seen as restricted in ways not dissimilar to those affecting the nineteenth century hysterics discussed above, tied not only by the textual frame of the playwright’s words but also by prevailing conventions of acting, staging, and viewing. In her article ‘Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism’, Elin Diamond describes these problems clearly:

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<sup>26</sup> Hélène Cixous, ‘Aller à la mer’, trans. by Barbara Kerslake, *Modern Drama*, 27 (1984), 546–48 (p. 547).

The body, particularly the female body, by virtue of entering the stage space, enters representation - it is not just *there*, a live, unmediated presence, but rather (1) a signifying element in a dramatic fiction; (2) a part of a theatrical sign system whose conventions of gesturing, voicing, and impersonating are referents for both performer and audience; and (3) a sign in a system governed by a particular apparatus, usually owned and operated by men for the pleasure of a viewing public whose major wage earners are male.<sup>27</sup>

I would argue that this third category in which Diamond places the female body on stage - as a sign created and interpreted by a male dominated system - suggests that the theatre is likely to contain just the kinds of roles for women which we have seen both Anna O. and Dora reject in their own real lives. The role of the compliant woman falling into line with her community's social and sexual codes is inevitably one which is as readily available, and as readily enforced, within the space of the theatre as in the society outside. As Jill Dolan argues,

The images reflected in it [the theatre] have been consciously constructed according to political necessity, with a particular, perceiving subject in mind who looks into the mirror for his identity.<sup>28</sup>

So, as with the nineteenth century society in which Anna O. and Dora found themselves, the theatre can be seen from this perspective to be providing only certain limited roles for women. Pamela Turner argues that women 'have always served as social actors, rehearsing (never really ready) the various roles as defined and

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<sup>27</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism', *The Drama Review*, 32 (1988), 82-94 (p. 89).

<sup>28</sup> Jill Dolan, 'Gender Impersonation on Stage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?', in *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. by Laurence Senelick (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 3-13 (pp. 4-5).



imprinted by man',<sup>29</sup> but I would argue that the theatre's particular role as a place for exploration of its contemporary society, as a mirror for contemporary issues and concerns, means that this definition of roles is likely to be even more emphatic in the theatrical space. If women in society are 'social actors', in Turner's terms, the female actor on a male-dominated stage is likely to have her role even more closely 'defined and imprinted'. In his introduction to *Gender in Performance*, Laurence Senelick puts forward a similar argument, suggesting that gender roles in the theatre 'never merely replicate those in everyday life' but 'are more sharply defined and more emphatically presented'.<sup>30</sup> The need for a discourse, a means of representation, which escapes those sharp definitions and emphatic presentations in the theatre is thus clear.

In the next chapter I explore the conventions which governed nineteenth century English theatre, tending to place the body of the actor, particularly that of the female actor, as a spectacular object rather than the subject of the drama. Here I want to make a more general point about the relationship between representation and performance and, in contrast to the preceding arguments, to stress the potential of theatre as a site for openness rather than for closure. For in a work that is so concerned with the apparently closed structures of language and society, the space of the stage can also be seen to offer a space where the aesthetic closure of the text can be avoided, where gender roles can be obscured or forgotten, where body and voice can work together.

What seems to be needed, then, is a way of turning representation, by which the actor or actress is made object, into performance, in which they become a subject

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<sup>29</sup> Pamela A. Turner, 'Hélène Cixous: A Space Between - Women and (Their) Language', *LIT*, 4 (1992), 69-77 (p. 70)

<sup>30</sup> Laurence Senelick, 'Introduction', in *Gender in Performance*, pp. ix-xxiv (p. xi).

rather than a sign. Pamela Turner, writing about Hélène Cixous's demand for woman to write her self, to write her body, 'which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure',<sup>31</sup> seeks to differentiate between performance and acting, characterising acting in terms close to those which I have set out above:

Acting is part of a social system that is male defined. Acting is the contextual presentation of human behavior and interaction through the artistic and psychological framework of a nonpresenced, yet dominant, other party. [...]

Performance must be both about and by the performer. It is the actual state of creativity, a concept which refers to some type of re-organizing and change. (Turner, p. 70)

Turner is writing here about the modern concept of performance work as a separate arena from that of theatre, arguing that the actor - as opposed to the performer - is only involved in interpretation and not in creation. However, as will become clear in my discussion of certain practitioners of acting in subsequent chapters, I argue in this thesis that acting too can be about creation of new meaning on stage, in a process close to that described by Turner as performance: 'a percolating blend of creation and re-creation' (Turner, p. 70). So I wish both to use and to question Turner's definitions; using them not to close off the area of theatre and acting from consideration, but rather to point us towards alternative practices available within theatre, a way of making dramatic texts new by enabling the actress to perform herself as well as her part.

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<sup>31</sup> Hélène Cixous. 'Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981), pp. 245-64, p. 250.



My argument throughout this thesis is that such an alternative practice can be found in the workings of a rhetoric of hysteria. Such a rhetoric draws on the understanding of hysteria which I have developed in the preceding section as a condition founded on the split between knowledge and refusal to know, and aims to communicate both of those irreconcilable positions to the audience at the same time. In order to do so, it utilizes both the body and speech of the actor, working both text and gesture alongside, across and against each other just as the symptoms of Anna O. and Dora sometimes spoke in support of their verbal stories and sometimes in contradiction, indicating the existence of a deeper, hidden truth.

But the analogy between hysteria and theatre with which I began this section can also be utilized in another way, looked at this time not from the perspective of the hysteric and his or her performance but from the point of view of the analyst who views that spectacular display of symptoms. For while hysteria is, as I have shown, often framed in theatrical terms, reversing the process to transpose the frame of hysteria on to the theatre can make new our understanding of the process by which the signs are constructed and read by the audience. What comes into play here are not only the desires and anxieties of the hysteric; the desires and anxieties of the audience shape their reading of the signs presented to them. Viewed from this side, the analogy focuses our attention on the potential and the problems of the role of the audience in the theatre, and emphasises the need to think about that role if we are to fully comprehend the possibilities of performance. As we have seen, the Freudian analyst seeks to reduce the symptom of the body back into words, into a written or spoken narrative; but this is the cure that the hysteric will resist, the cure that makes her once again the object of language rather than a speaking, performing subject. Thus the

audience of theatre, I argue in this thesis, must also resist the desire to reduce what they see into words, but instead accept and learn to interpret the dual language of body *and* speech, finding pleasure in openness rather than in closure. In theatrical terms, what is also sought is a position for the spectator which does not situate them as passive spectator of a scene, 'caught in imaginary and illusory identification' with a character on stage, nor as the dominant observer who objectifies the body that they see before them.

## 1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored and defined the key themes and concepts of this thesis: those of hysteria, language and performance.

An examination of Lacanian theories of the subject's development has shown that that development, and the language which is the code within which the speaking subject is constituted, is centred around the male term. Thus language, the very means of representation and communication, can be seen to limit the potential of that representation: there is much that can not be said. It is in hysteria, the door through which Freud, and following him Lacan, was enabled to enter the 'relations of desire to language' and thus 'the mechanisms of the unconscious' that we can locate a lived paradigm of this conflict between female desire and patriarchal language: the symptomatic illness of the hysteric speaks through those bodily symptoms the desires and fears that cannot be expressed in language. This chapter, in setting up a framework by which the structure of hysteria can be transposed from the confines of the sickroom to the stage of the theatre, has sought to re-examine and thus re-work the illness of hysteria as a rhetoric of performance. Doing so enables us to refocus on the act of performance as a combination of body and word, and thus to rethink the



role of the spectator as an active player in the theatrical scene, working to read both gesture and speech.

This framework will become increasingly important in the remainder of this thesis, enabling me to explore the workings of some complex ever-changing theatrical texts which work, in Elin Diamond's words, to ensure that

spectators are 'pulled out of [their] fixity'; [that] they become part of - indeed they produce - the dialectical comparisons and contributions that the text enacts.<sup>32</sup>

In the next chapter, though, I turn to examine some texts and performances which worked precisely to fix both actor and spectator in place, offering clearly delineated roles which reinforced rather than called into question notions of fixed identity.

Looking at early nineteenth century theatre alongside the early nineteenth century understanding of hysteria, I seek to set up a context in which the radical theatrical and psychoanalytical shifts explored in the rest of the thesis can be fully understood.

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<sup>32</sup> Diamond. 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory', p. 88.

## Chapter Two:

### The Spectacular Body: Theatre and Hysteria

#### 2.1 Introduction

To touch our emotions, we need not the imaginatively true, but the physically real. The visions which our ancestors saw with the mind's eye, must be embodied for us in palpable forms [...] all must be made palpable to sight, no less than to feeling [...].<sup>1</sup>

Hysteria? my poor dear wife is a dreadful sufferer from it - I've known her unable to sleep at all except with one foot curled around her neck!<sup>2</sup>

As I show in this chapter, histories of both nineteenth century theatre and of nineteenth century versions of hysteria place emphasis on the visual, on observation, on viewing the gestural body. In *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*, his work describing the emphasis which the nineteenth century theatre placed on the pictorial stage and the spectacles which could be enacted there, Michael Booth quotes Percy Fitzgerald's description of the contemporary theatrical audience's experience as typical of the age:

We go not so much to hear as to look. It is like a gigantic peep-show, and we pay the showman, and put our eyes to the glass and stare. (Booth, p. 4)

I want to draw attention to this quotation at the outset of this chapter, not just as a description of nineteenth century theatre before the changes instigated by moves

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<sup>1</sup> William Bodham Donne, *Essays on the Drama* (London: Parker, 1858), p. 206. Cited in Michael R. Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> F. Anstey, *The Man from Blankley's and Other Sketches* (London: Longman, Green, 1893), p. 22 (originally published in *Punch*).



towards realism and naturalism at the end of the century, but also as a pointer towards the attitude of nineteenth century physicians and psychiatrists towards hysteria before Freud. The quotation from Anstey's sketch offers, of course, only a caricatured version of nineteenth century hysteria, yet it is useful as a reflection of the popular understanding of hysteria as a performative, physical disease, played out in dramatic bodily symptoms: the speaker's wife suffers not from a mere nervous disease, but from a condition that forces her limbs into strange, wayward positions, unable to sleep without 'one foot curled around her neck'. We see in the next chapter that Stephen Heath describes the move which Freud makes at the end of the century as a move from looking to listening. He writes, 'Seeing is believing [...]; hearing is doubting: Freud's difficult and hesitant move'.<sup>3</sup> Here I want to set that change from looking to hearing in both theatre and the understanding of hysteria which I examine in Chapter Three in its historical context.

I therefore explore in this chapter the way in which, in the nineteenth century, both discourses are said to focus on the symptomatic body rather than on what is being said. I begin with a close examination of the ways in which the body is employed as a bearer of meaning on the nineteenth century melodramatic stage, and in doing so highlight the existence of a problem with such descriptions, which suggest the operation of a common and collusive language of gestural meaning understood by both performer and audience, in respect of which the words are not needed: 'we go not so much to hear as to look'. In fact, as my discussion shows, the theatre of display often relied on words in order to make the meaning of that display clear. Arguing for

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Heath, *The Sexual Fix* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 38. Heath does not acknowledge Breuer's role in this shift, although, as we have seen in Chapter One, the case of Anna O. is central to this development.

a more complex model of performance and readership than that suggested by the existence of a common language of gesture, I characterize the theatre of melodrama as not simply a theatre of display and observation but rather a theatre of fixity, in which the gestures of the on-stage body come to the audience clearly labelled with fixed meanings. To characterise melodrama as relying only on gesture for its making of meaning is thus misleading: the important point is that where words and music are used, they are used to confirm the truth that the gestures offer. If hearing is doubting for Freud, according to Stephen Heath, then I argue here that seeing is indeed believing on the Victorian stage: the spectator is allowed no doubt as to the meaning created by the gestural body.

Such an understanding also illuminates my re-reading of the history of hysteria in the late nineteenth century in the final part of this chapter, which centres on the work of Jean-Martin Charcot with hysterics at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris from 1870 onwards. Charcot is frequently, and rightly, characterized as a *visuel*, a man whose dealings with hysterics focused on observation: his ‘greatest error’, argues Heath in *The Sexual Fix*, is that he ‘becomes a spectator’ (Heath, p. 38). However, by transposing the frame of my theatrical analysis of melodrama onto Charcot’s work with hysteria, I argue that the comparison should be made not with the figure of the spectator, but rather with the figure who, in melodrama, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is always present to translate the language of gesture into fixed meanings for the audience. In *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*, Janet Beizer suggests that:

The hysteric becomes a useful device for authors who strive to hide words behind matter and to disguise telling as showing. [...] Woman’s speech is



repressed in order to be expressed as inarticulate body language, which must then be dubbed by a male narrator.<sup>4</sup>

Both the theatre of nineteenth century melodrama and the theatre of Charcot's lectures on hysteria are thus shown to be sites of fixity, producing performance texts which apparently privilege the language of the body but at the same time remove from the audience the power to interpret those performance texts for themselves. Just as Beizer questions the conventional understanding of Charcot's clinical theatre as one of showing rather than telling, so the exploration of nineteenth century stage practice in this chapter seeks to re-examine the usual critical focus on 'showing' as its dominant performance mode.

In the first section of this chapter, which focuses on the theatre, I take as my starting point the operations of melodrama, that theatrical form which despite disparagement as illegitimate, sensationalist, hack-work, and so on, persisted throughout the century as a truly popular form, from the success of Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* in 1802 to Henry Irving's final performance as Mathias in Leopold Lewis's *The Bells* two nights before his death in October 1905. Looking to the codes of display and gesture through which that theatre operated, I emphasise the role of the physical body as the bearer of meaning for the contemporary audience, and interrogate the potential within and the limits of that role.

Beginning with a detailed examination of a moment from Irving's performance in *The Bells*, I highlight both his use of the body to communicate the truth of his character's guilt to the audience, and the play's use of the discourse of mesmerism as the means through which guilt can be established. Irving's acting techniques - and his

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<sup>4</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 9.

part as Mathias, both murderer and honoured Mayor - do not fit the conventional, stereotyped notions of melodrama, with its easy division into good and bad, and its use of stock gestures to represent emotions, but starting with an exceptional performance can help us to look afresh at those gestures and their creation of meaning.

The next section of this chapter therefore turns to explore the gestural codes of melodrama. Here I make use of both acting handbooks from the early to mid-nineteenth century and the performance texts of melodrama themselves, putting these two elements side by side in order to examine just how gesture was used as a means of communication on the stage. This discussion centres on the figure, familiar to melodrama, of the dumb man, whose gestures quite literally have to speak what he cannot say, and examines the performance discourse of the dumb man in two plays - Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* (1802) and Barnabas Rayner's *The Dumb Man of Manchester* (1837). The figure of the dumb man is central to the process of audience frustration and eventual pleasure in these melodramatic texts, in that the truth of his innocence is unable to be heard by the other on-stage characters until the climax of these plays, but close examination of their mute discourse shows that it is in fact rarely mute: their gestures are translated into words for the audience by another character. The acting handbooks may describe a code of gestures by which emotions can be represented and understood, but the practice of melodrama shows us that this language of the body is not left open for the audience to decipher.

With this understanding of melodrama as operating according to fixed codes and seeking to impose fixed meanings on its audience, I then turn to consider the particular situation of the female body on the melodramatic stage. Thinking back to



my introduction in the preceding chapter of Elin Diamond's characterisation of the female body on the stage as not only 'a part of a theatrical sign system whose conventions of gesturing, voicing, and impersonating are referents for both performer and audience', but also as 'a sign in a system governed by a particular apparatus, usually owned and operated by men for the pleasure of a viewing public whose major wage earners are male', I argue that, in this theatre of codes, the codes applying to women's performance are even more restrictive, limiting the range of meanings that the female actor can seek to represent on stage.<sup>5</sup> Here a focus on *Lady Audley's Secret*, another 'exceptional' melodramatic text, helps to establish the codes governing women's representation on the stage, and also to interrogate the assumptions about appearance and readability which circulate around melodrama.

Henry Irving's performance in *The Bells* as a man who has not only got away with murder but thrived on the proceeds to become a much-loved and respected businessman also played on those assumptions, and it is with a return to this text that I end my discussion of the body and meaning on the melodramatic stage. The final act of that performance text plays out an embodiment of Mathias's guilty dream via the machinery of the spectacular melodramatic stage: the audience's belief in his guilt comes through seeing a physical re-enactment of the deed of murder. A discussion of *The Bells* thus concludes the first part of this chapter by re-emphasising the importance of the physical body to the creation of meaning on the nineteenth century stage, but also by marking the performance text's use of words to reinforce and fix that meaning.

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<sup>5</sup> Diamond, 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory', p. 89.

As the discussion of *The Bells* shows, melodrama was not slow to appropriate for sensational effect the scientific discourses of its time: a theatrical staging of mesmerism enables the truth of that play's murder to be 'played out' before its thrilled audience. In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud and Breuer characterize hysterics as suffering 'mainly from reminiscences' (*SE* II, p. 7), and this playing out of Mathias's reminiscences seems to fit this pattern, as he is haunted by past trauma which cannot be spoken and which instead writes itself upon the body. In the second part of this chapter my concern is, however, with the scientific discourses of the pre-Freudian time - particularly those focusing on hysteria and the developing understanding of that condition. My discussion of these discourses shows how, just as with the performance discourse of theatrical melodrama, their focus was on reading symptomatic signs rather than on hearing stories. If the patient interrupts the physician, wrote Robert Brudenell Carter in *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria*, 'she must be told to keep silence'.<sup>6</sup>

In his essay 'The Image of the Hysteric', Sander L. Gilman describes as 'one consistent image of the hysteric [...] that of the scientific reduction of the sufferer and the disease to schematic representations':

This fantasy of reducing the complexity of hysteria to statistics or charts rests on a notion of nineteenth-century science that everything is reducible to non-verbal form [...]. For once, it is said, you eliminate narrative, you remove the subjective aspect from the evaluation of the disease and you have a real representation of the patient.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria* (London: Churchill, 1853), p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Sander L. Gilman, 'The Image of the Hysteric', in *Hysteria beyond Freud*, ed. by Sander L. Gilman and others (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 345-452 (p. 402).



As with the nineteenth century actor, the nineteenth century hysteric is placed within codes of performance reliant on visual signs which are to be read and interpreted by the spectator: this quotation makes clear the desire to objectify the hysteric, remove any question of subjectivity from the examination. The work of Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière is paradigmatic of this method; this section thus focuses on his approach to hysteria as a *visuel*, looking at and recording visual signs. Charcot's role in this enterprise, I argue, can be seen to mirror not that of the spectator of theatre, as others have suggested, but rather that of the on-stage interpreter of the gestures of melodrama. Both stage-manager of and actor in the Salpêtrière's dramas, it is Charcot who fixes the codes of interpretation, fixing meaning on the gestural bodies of the hysterics for the Parisian audience who came to see him lecture. In this theatre of hysteria, then, the hysteric, like the dumb man of melodrama, is ultimately unable to communicate her story for herself; their spectacular bodies have meaning imposed upon them, and the spectator's view is fixed by the interpreters on stage. Both discourses of stage and lecture theatre can thus be seen to partake in a theatre of observation and fixity prior to the developments in new understandings of hysteria and in the stage practice of realist performance at the end of the century.

In drawing these comparisons, it is important to stress that I am not suggesting direct links between such developments, but rather noting similarities between the structures within which melodrama and hysteria operate and are understood in the Victorian period. Others too, have identified such links: in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks identifies melodrama with the Freudian structure of hysteria, as representing a victory over repression, revealing 'what could not be said on an earlier stage, nor still on a "nobler" stage, nor within the codes of

society'. Brooks is here concerned with the content of melodrama - its 'refusal', which mirrors that of the hysteric, 'of censorship and repression'; my argument in this chapter about the performance practice of melodrama and its use of bodily gesture identifies a parallel not with Freud but rather with the hysterical bodies which so fascinated his predecessor, Charcot.<sup>8</sup>

But it should be clear that what I am not seeking to do here is to argue for some kind of causal sequence of development in which the physicians of hysteria learn from theatre or, in reverse, that theatre performers learn from medicine in any more complex way than the pilfering of scientific discourses for the purpose of sensational effects. We have seen in the Introduction that Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that hysteria can 'be understood as the performance of a given historical moment';<sup>9</sup> we might see both the discourses discussed in this chapter, those of theatre and hysteria, as performing and partaking in the wider Victorian urge towards pictorialism described by Booth in the first chapter of *Victorian Spectacular Theatre*:

Looking at the world through the medium of pictures thus became a habit in the first half of the nineteenth century, and as the pictorial means of information and entertainment grew more sophisticated and better adapted to mass public consumption, the bombardment of visual and specifically pictorial stimuli became inescapable; the world was saturated with pictures.

(Booth, p. 8)

What this chapter is about, then, is the structures of seeing and interpretation which operate both in the theatre of melodrama and the theatre of hysteria: theatrical codes

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, p. 104.



which, in the early and mid nineteenth century, seem to place the focus of interpretation upon gestural movement rather than words, and medical examinations which look carefully at the patient's symptoms but do not listen to what they have to say. Such structures can be seen to culminate in Charcot's transformation of his Salpêtrière hospital into a 'museum of living pathology', in which the bodies of hysterics were displayed before a public audience, a medical version of the *tableaux vivants* which had entertained and titillated Victorian audiences throughout the century.

## 2.2 On stage: The spectacular public body

### 2.2.1 Henry Irving and 'The Bells'

*The Bells* by Leopold Lewis brought Henry Irving both fame and financial success from its first performance in 1871. Adapted from an 1869 play by Emile Erckmann and Pierre Alexander Chatrian called *Le Juif Polonaise*, the play provided Irving with a strong psychological role in the figure of the Burgomaster, Mathias, a man haunted by the memory of a murder which he had committed fifteen years earlier. Following his much-anticipated appearance in the first Act of the play ('It is I! - It is I! At last! At last!<sup>10</sup>) Irving's character explains that his arrival home has been delayed because he stayed to watch a performance in the town.

ANNETTE A performance! A Punchinelle at Ribeauville?

MATHIAS No, no, it was not Punchinelle - it was a - Parisian - who did the most extraordinary tricks - he sent people to sleep. [...] He simply looked at them, - and - made - made - some signs [...] and they went - fast asleep, - fast asleep.

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<sup>10</sup> Leopold Lewis, *The Bells*, in *Henry Irving and 'The Bells'*, ed. by David Mayer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), pp. 31-77 (p. 44). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[...] It certainly was a strange performance. Well, if I hadn't seen it myself, I should never have believed it.

[...]

HANS This Parisian sends people to sleep [...] and when they are asleep he makes them tell everything that weighs upon their conscience. (*The Bells*, pp. 44-45)

At the word 'conscience', wrote Eric Jones-Evans, remembering his childhood encounter with Irving's performance of Mathias in 1905, Irving's body responded to what he had heard:

He did freeze. But the hands crept up. He was buckling his right shoe and paused. And in that pause Irving used his face. You saw his face registering stark terror, anticipating his words of agreement, and with that thought his body slumped. Then a brief start, and he resumed his normal cheerfulness. But there was no rushing. He took time over it.<sup>11</sup>

In his biography of Irving, Edward Gordon Craig recalls a similar moment of reaction acting later in the same Act:

He glides up to a standing position: never has any one seen another rising figure which slid slowly up like that [...] suddenly he staggers, and shivers from his toes to his neck; his jaws begin to chatter; the hair on his forehead, falling over a little, writhes as though it were a nest of little snakes. Everyone is on his feet at once to help [...] and *one* of the moments of the immense and touching dance closes - only one - and the next one begins, and the next after - figure after figure of exquisite pattern and purpose is unfolded.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> In *Henry Irving and 'The Bells'*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *Henry Irving* (London: Dent, 1930), pp. 60-61.



I have quoted these descriptions of Irving's acting - and explained the context in which they are triggered by the word 'conscience' - at some length, because while, as we shall see later, *The Bells* is by no means an uncomplicated text of melodrama, Irving's reaction literally embodies the codes by which melodramatic acting operated. For the spectator in the newly dimmed auditorium of the Lyceum, Irving's actions communicated the truth of Mathias's guilt; already possessed of the story of the missing 'Polish Jew' recounted by one of the villagers before Irving's entrance, they could read the signs enacted by Irving and thus connect Mathias to that crime. In doing so they were partaking in a process, described by Michael R. Booth, of 'participation in a conventionalised bravura display' in which 'performers and spectators colluded in the arrangement of signs'.<sup>13</sup> I will return to examine Irving's actions as Mathias at further length later in this chapter, drawing out the connections between his performance and the discourse of mesmerism upon which the climax of *The Bells* relies for its effects. Before doing so, however, I want to consider the terms of this arrangement of signs, which Irving both partakes in and - via those little writhing snakes on his forehead, which are surely the product of Craig's imagination rather than of Irving's actual representation - seems somehow to exceed.

### ***2.2.2 Performers' Preceptors: Training the Spectacular Body***

In the nineteenth century, the conventions of the theatrical sign system were made explicit. The audience, argues Michael Booth, would:

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<sup>13</sup> Michael R. Booth. in John Stokes. Michael R. Booth and Susan Bassnett. *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse: The Actress in her Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 5.



recognise each passion because its outward signs were universally known and peculiar to that particular passion; the performer's face, attitude and gesture would be harmonised in the expression of any one passion.<sup>14</sup>

The stock acting system which predominated in the early part of the century meant that appearance was codified from the style of dress to the colour of the hero's hair. That this was so can be demonstrated by reference to the rehearsals for Tom Robertson's *Caste* in 1867. Squire Bancroft, joint actor-manager of the Prince of Wales's Theatre, who was to play the part of Captain Hawtree, suggested to the actor playing D'Alroy, the romantic lead, 'that he should be the fair man'.

He asked how on earth he could do such a thing, being the sentimental hero he of course was intended to be dark; while I was equally compelled to be fair, and wear long flaxen whiskers in what he called the dandy or fop.<sup>15</sup>

But the area which is of particular interest here is that of those gestures which Henry Siddons in his *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* (1822) argued 'serve as mediums to judge of [... the soul's] affections, its movements, and its desires'.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the century, from *The Thespian Preceptor* of 1811<sup>17</sup> to later works such as Lemn Rede's *The Road to the Stage* (1827) or the anonymous *The*

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<sup>14</sup> Michael R. Booth, 'Sarah Siddons', in Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett, *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in George Taylor, *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, 2nd edn (New York: Blom, 1968), p. 14. This text is taken 'from a work on the subject by M. Engel', according to the frontispiece, but it is difficult to discern how far Siddons's translation has taken him from the German original.

<sup>17</sup> The full title of this slim volume is given as an indication of the claims made for this type of acting handbook. Anon., *The Thespian Preceptor, or A Full Display of the Scenic Art: Including Ample and Easy Instructions for Treading the Stage, Using Proper Action, Modulating the Voice, and Expressing the Several Dramatic Passions: Illustrated by Examples from our Most Approved Ancient and Modern Dramatists; And Calculated not only for the Improvement of all Lovers of the Stage, Actors and Actresses, but likewise of Public Orators, Readers and Visitors of the Theatres Royal* (London: Roach, 1811)



*Art of Acting* (1863),<sup>18</sup> which draw directly on that text, actors are offered advice on learning, and practising, ‘action’:

It has been said that action should not be studied or practised, but that, if the actor be in earnest, the action will come. True, but it will most frequently be faulty. [...]

Practice the attitudes and actions by themselves, without words, in the same manner as a singer practices cadenzas, &c., apart from songs, and a dancer practices positions and steps apart from the dance of which they form part.<sup>19</sup>

The gestures and action to denote ‘the Principal Passions, Humorous Sentiments, and Intentions’ seem at first to be reassuringly simple. *The Thespian Preceptor*, for example, instructs its students that,

MELANCHOLY, OR FIXED GRIEF, is gloomy, sedentary, motionless. The lower jaw falls, the lips become pale, the eyes are cast down, half shut, and weeping, accompanied by a total inattention to everything that passes. The words are dragged out rather than spoke; the accent weak and uninterrupted, sighs breaking into the middle of sentences and words. (*Thespian Preceptor*, p. 33)

In contrast,

DESIRE expresses itself by bending the body forward, and stretching the arms towards the object as to grasp it: the countenance smiling, but eager and wishful; the eyes wide open, and the eye-brows raised; the mouth open; the tone of voice suppliant, but lively and cheerful (unless there be *distress* as well

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<sup>18</sup> Leman Thomas Rede, *The Road to the Stage: or, The Performer's Preceptor* (London: Joseph Smith, 1827); Anon., *The Art of Acting* (London: Lacy, 1863).

<sup>19</sup> Charles William Smith, *The Actor's Art: Its Requisites, and How to Obtain Them; Its Defects, and How to Remove Them* (London: Lacy, 1867)

as desire); the words are uttered with a kind of rapidity, accompanied (chiefly in distress) with sighs. (*Thespian Preceptor*, p. 34)

But while Siddons asserts that ‘gestures are the exterior and visible signs of our bodies, by which interior modifications of the soul are manifested and made known’, the illustrations which he appends to his text seem to complicate the issue of ‘knowing’. ‘Why would not a collection of expressive gestures and attitudes be as easy as a collection of drawings, plants, or shells?’ he asks rhetorically (Siddons, p. 27, p. 25). The figure of Terror (Figure 1) is indeed easy to ‘read’ or know, but those of Enthusiasm, or Painful Recollection, are more difficult to penetrate (Figures 2 and 3).

We might explain this apparent complexity in a number of ways. Firstly, that in writing this chapter one hundred and eighty years later, I am far removed from the collusive conventions governing the relationship of performer and audience in the nineteenth century theatre, unable to read with the knowledgeable eye of the nineteenth century spectator. Secondly, that in seeking to affix titles to these engravings, Siddons was himself caught up in the conflict between gesture and word, using what was - for melodramatic acting, at least - apparently secondary to gesture, to try and explain those gestures which have as part of their purpose their ability to exceed the scope of language. Siddons himself wrote that it was ‘singular’ that the engravings of attitudes from Italian pantomime in his book should be ‘at the same time so very easy to *comprehend*, and yet so extremely difficult to *explain*’ (p. 39. Original emphasis). And finally, we must remember that these gestures are of course gestures which in their true context of performance and plot would have been more easily readable. When the villain, Romaldi, and the good family friend, Montano,





*Terror*  
(as described by Engel.)

Figure 1 'Terror (as described by Engel)'

From Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, Plate 23.





*Enthusiasm*

Figure 2 'Enthusiasm'

From Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, Plate 48.





*Painful recollection*

Figure 3 'Painful Recollection'

From Siddons, *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, Plate 11.



confronted each other in Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, their gestures were reinforced by both words and music, thus leaving the spectator in no doubt as to their meaning:

*Enter* MONTANO, L.

*Music plays alarmingly, but piano when he enters and while he stays.*

MONTANO I beg pardon, good sir, but -

*Music loud and discordant at the moment the eye of MONTANO catches the figure of ROMALDI; at which MONTANO starts with terror and indignation. He then assumes the eye and attitude of menace; which ROMALDI returns. The music ceases.*

MONTANO Can it be possible!

ROMALDI *Returning his threatening looks* Sir!<sup>20</sup>

Montano's 'start', his 'eye and attitude of menace' do not stand in isolation; they work in performance alongside the loud and discordant music and the abrupt, emphatic verbal exchange to highlight the animosity between the 'good' and 'bad' characters, suggesting that the process of reading gesture on the melodramatic stage was in fact reinforced, and fixed, by other elements of the performance discourse.

The acting handbooks, too, seem to be aware of the complexity of gesture as part of an actual performance, as they warn the actor against a simplistic repetition of stylized action. The anonymous author of *The Thespian Preceptor* complains of the 'uniformity [of action] which at present prevails', arguing that:

The arms akimbo is often thought the attitude of grandeur, instead of, as it really is, the certain sign of vulgar and inflated imbecility. [...] The arm that is always in motion is always unmeaning. (*Thespian Preceptor*, pp. 21-23)

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Holcroft. *A Tale of Mystery* (London: Dolby, [n. d.]), p. 14. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.



A *Punch* satire on the conventional portrayal of emotions on the stage, entitled ‘The Stage Passions: An Ode for Melodramatic Music’, drives the criticism home:

Next jealousy approaches, beating flat,  
 With passionate thumps, the crown of its own hat, -  
 Now whining in a very love-sick tone;  
 Now showing hate in a long guttural groan.<sup>21</sup>

But while warning against the ‘redundancy of the ridiculous practice of suiting the action to *every* word’, even late nineteenth century texts suggest that ‘in representing the illusions of the mimic world gesture is of primary importance’.<sup>22</sup> The author of these sentiments, Henry Neville, categorizes temperaments and sentiments and provides for his readers a multitude of diagrams setting out the various zones of gesture and meaning. The whole body is divided into different radii and zones of movement: the mental zone; the moral zone (the heart), and the vital zone (below the waist), and Neville suggests that motions towards or from these different zones indicate various sentiments (Campbell and Neville, p, 132). An indication of this approach is shown in the attached diagram (Figure 4), which shows the zones of gesture utilizing the arms. While Neville’s work is ostensibly more scientific than the descriptions of ‘passions’ and ‘humours’ in the texts of Siddons or the anonymous *Thespian Preceptor*, it shares with them a discourse of seeing which assumes that what is on the inside can be translated into external action translatable by the audience.

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<sup>21</sup> Gilbert Abbott à Beckett, *The Quizziology of the British Drama* (London: Punch, 1846), p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Hugh Campbell M. D. and Henry Neville, *Voice, Speech and Gesture: A Practical Handbook to the Elocutionary Art* (London: Deacon, 1895), p. 157, p. 111. The section on ‘Gesture’ is credited to Neville.

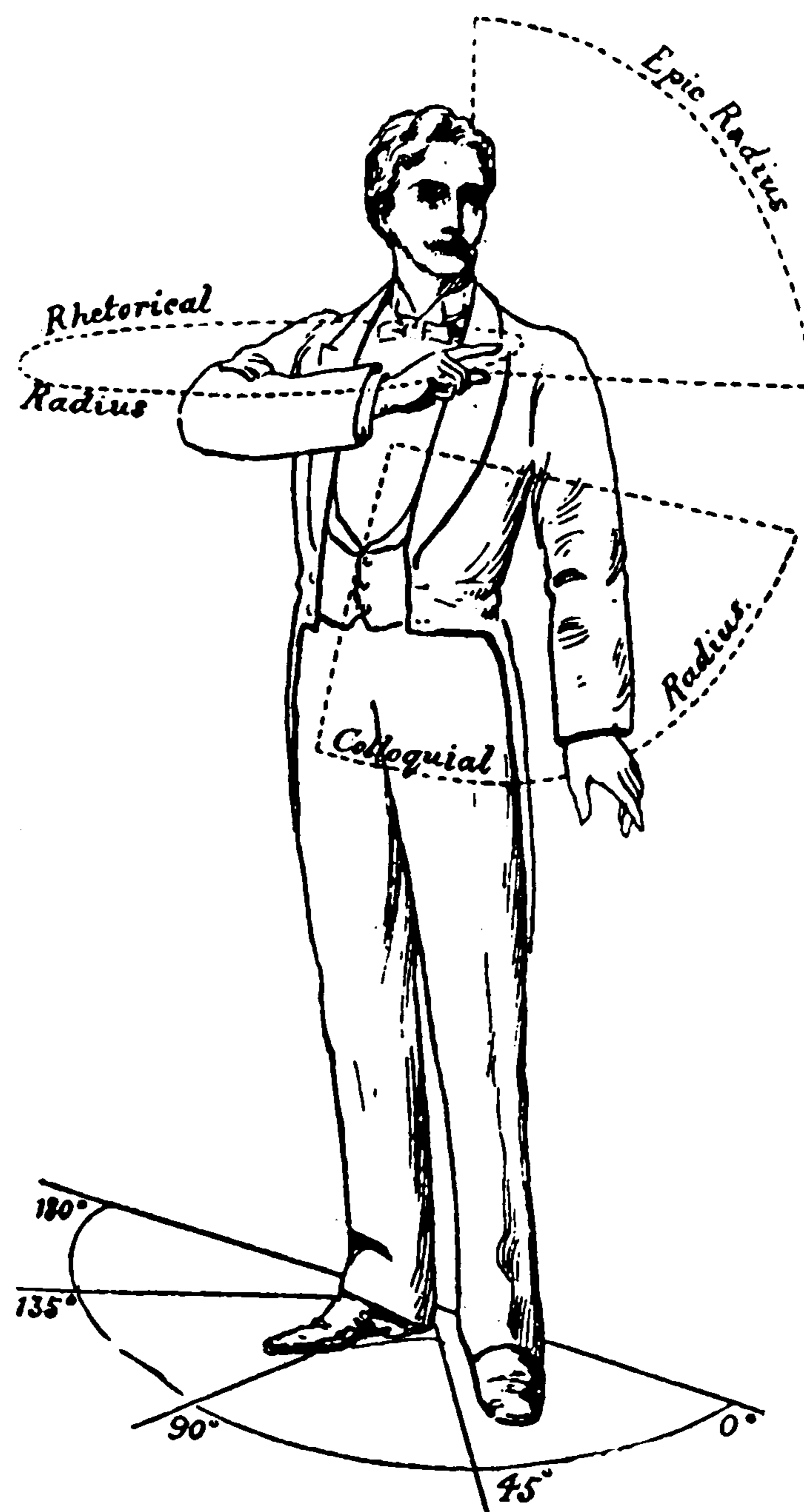


Figure 4 'Zones of Gesture'

From Campbell and Neville, *Voice, Speech and Gesture: A Practical Handbook to the Elocutionary Art*, 'Gesture'.



In making such assumptions, these acting handbooks can also be seen to be sharing a common discourse with another aspect of the nineteenth century's interest in reading appearances, represented by the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology which rose to popular attention in the early nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Both approaches sought to reveal character by examining the body's exterior. Practitioners of physiognomy, following the work of John Caspar Lavater, studied various aspects of external appearance to reveal the subject's moral life:

His moral powers and desires, his irritability, sympathy, and antipathy [...] are all summed up in, and painted upon, his countenance when at rest.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast students of phrenology, basing their work on that of Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, took a more materialist view of the human subject, arguing that it was 'only the form of the brain or that of the osseous box, as far as it is determined by the form of the brain, which can enable us to judge of the qualities or faculties'.<sup>25</sup> But phrenologists, too, with the claim that their system provided 'a natural index to mental qualities, that could be safely relied on', identified phrenological organs not only for 'propensities' such as 'Concentrativeness' or 'Secretiveness' but also for sentiments such as 'Benevolence' or 'Hope' (See Figure 5).<sup>26</sup>

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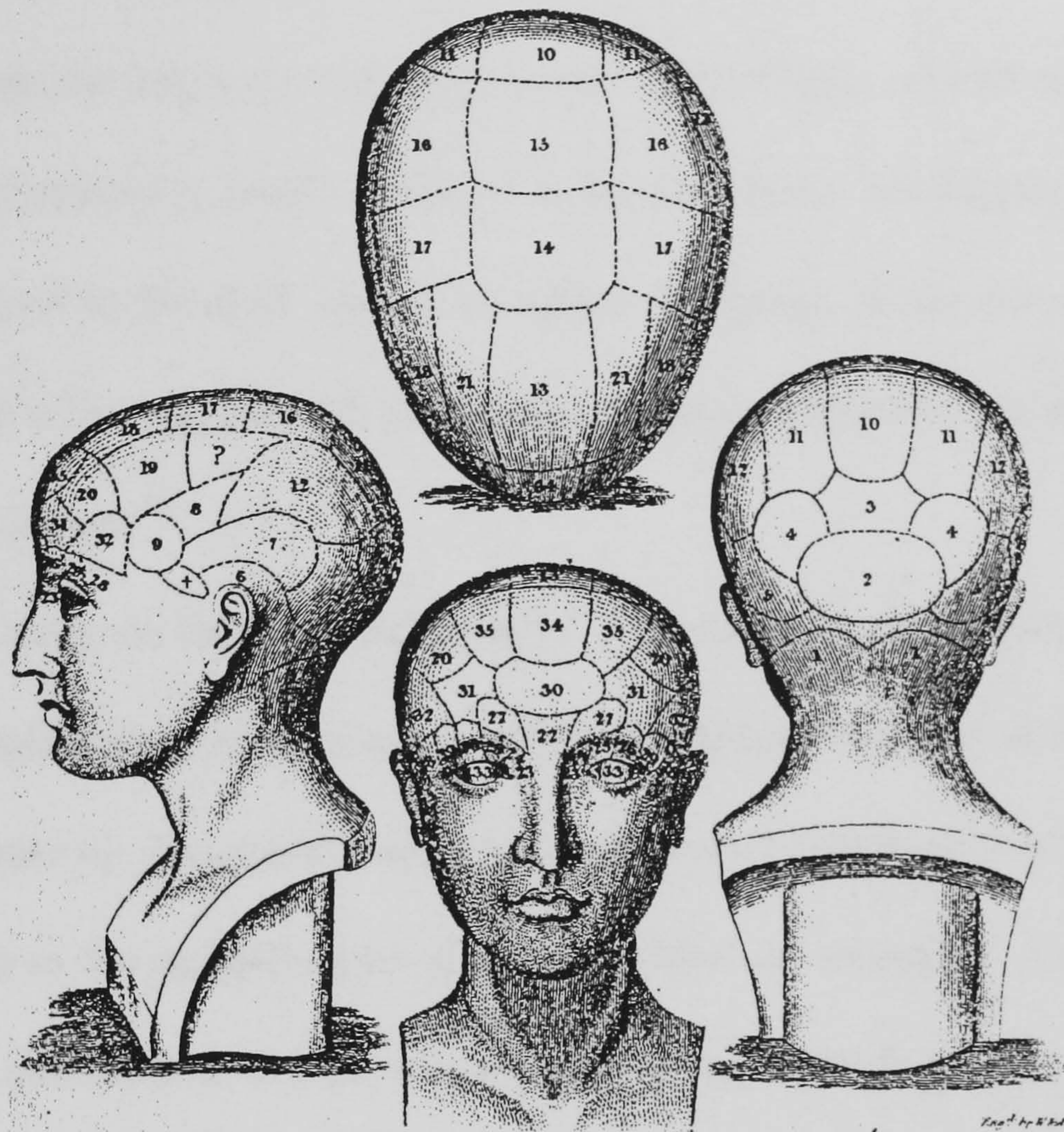
<sup>23</sup> Thomas Holcroft, playwright of *A Tale of Mystery*, translated Lavater's *Physiognomical Bible* into English in 1789. By 1810 there were more than twenty different versions of this work available in England. Phrenology was largely popularized by George Combe, who published *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects* in 1828.

<sup>24</sup> John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. by T. Holcroft, extracted in *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> Franz Joseph Gall, *On the Functions of the Brain*, trans. by Winslow Lewis, extracted in Taylor and Shuttleworth, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> George Combe, *The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects*, extracted in Taylor and Shuttleworth, p. 39.





### Names of the Phrenological Organs

REFERRING TO THE FIGURES INDICATING THEIR RELATIVE POSITIONS.

AFFECTIVE				INTELLECTUAL			
I. PROPENSITIES		II. SENTIMENTS		I. PERCEPTIVE		II. REFLECTIVE	
1	Ambitiveness Page 116	10	Self-esteem 231	22	Individuality 380	34	Comparison 466
2	Philoprogenitiveness 131	11	Love of approbation 253	23	Form 385	35	Causality 474
3	Concentrativeness 134	12	Cautiousness 252	24	Size 389		
4	Adhesiveness 157	13	Benevolence 261	25	Weight 393		
5	Combativeness 157	14	Veneration 274	26	Colouring 399		
6	Destructiveness 165	15	Firmness 285	27	Locality 414		
7	Alimentiveness 184	16	Conscientiousness 288	28	Number 420		
8	Secretiveness 190	17	Hope 304	29	Order 424		
9	Acquisitiveness 203	18	Wonder 309	30	Eventuality 425		
	Constructiveness 217	19	Ideality 322	31	Time 434		
		?	Uncertain 330	32	Tune 430		
		20	Wit or Mirthfulness 340	33	Language 446		
		21	Imitation 353				

Figure 5 'Names of the Phrenological Organs'

From Taylor and Shuttleworth, *Embodied Selves*, Figure 5.

*Quoted from: The Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine and Department for the use of the Royal Society of Medicine, (1888), p. 44.*



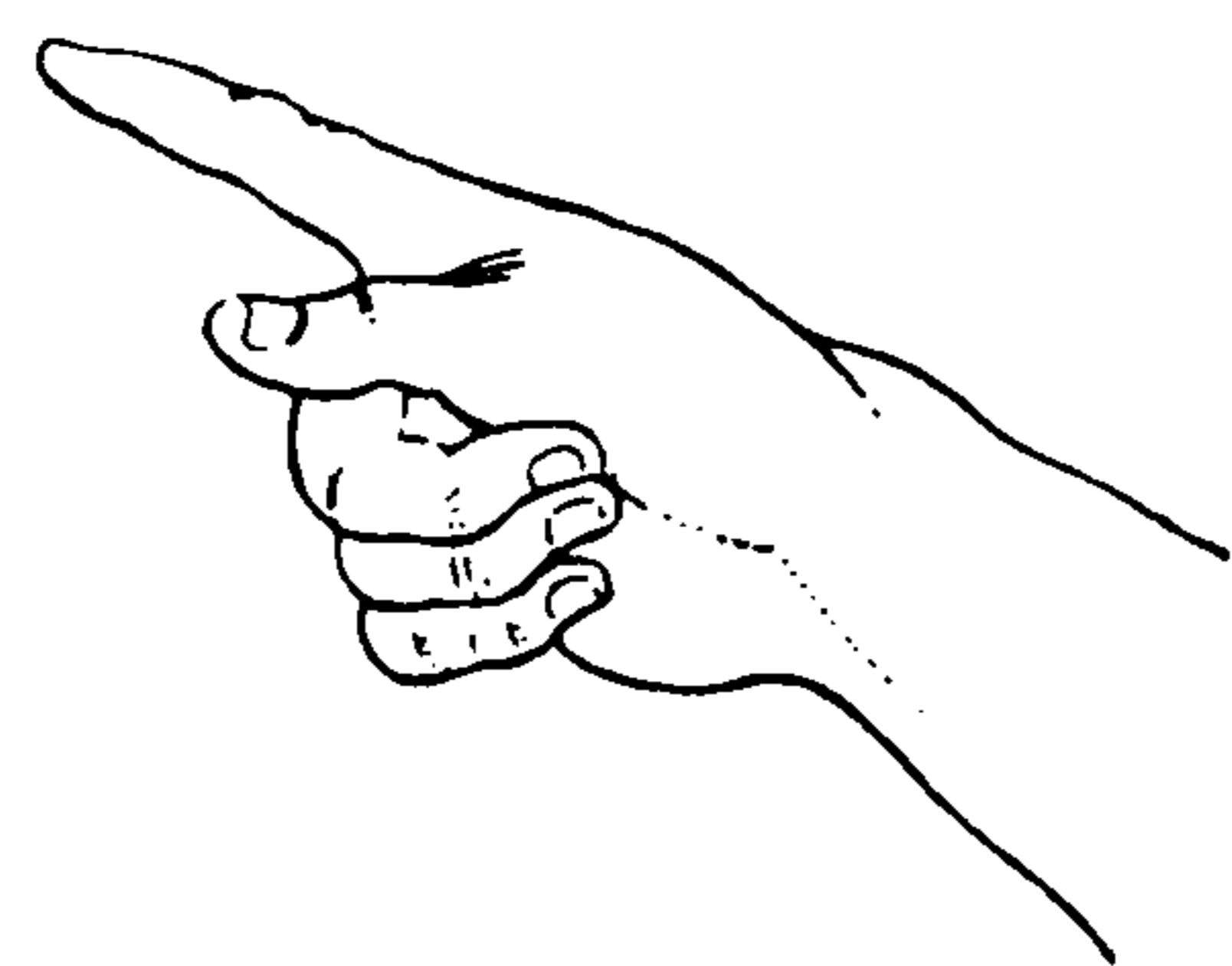
Perhaps influenced by such theories, at times the authors of acting texts and handbooks seem to confuse issues of representation with those of diagnosis. Gustave Garcia, Professor of Singing and Declamation at the Royal Academy of Music, writes in his 1888 *The Actor's Art* that:

The exquisite harmony existing between all the fingers, as well as their graceful attitudes, denote gentle or noble sentiments. The thumb gives force and vigour to the hand: with it we tighten our grasp. A thin nervous thumb, capable of curving back, is emblematic of great refinement, and also of determination.<sup>27</sup>

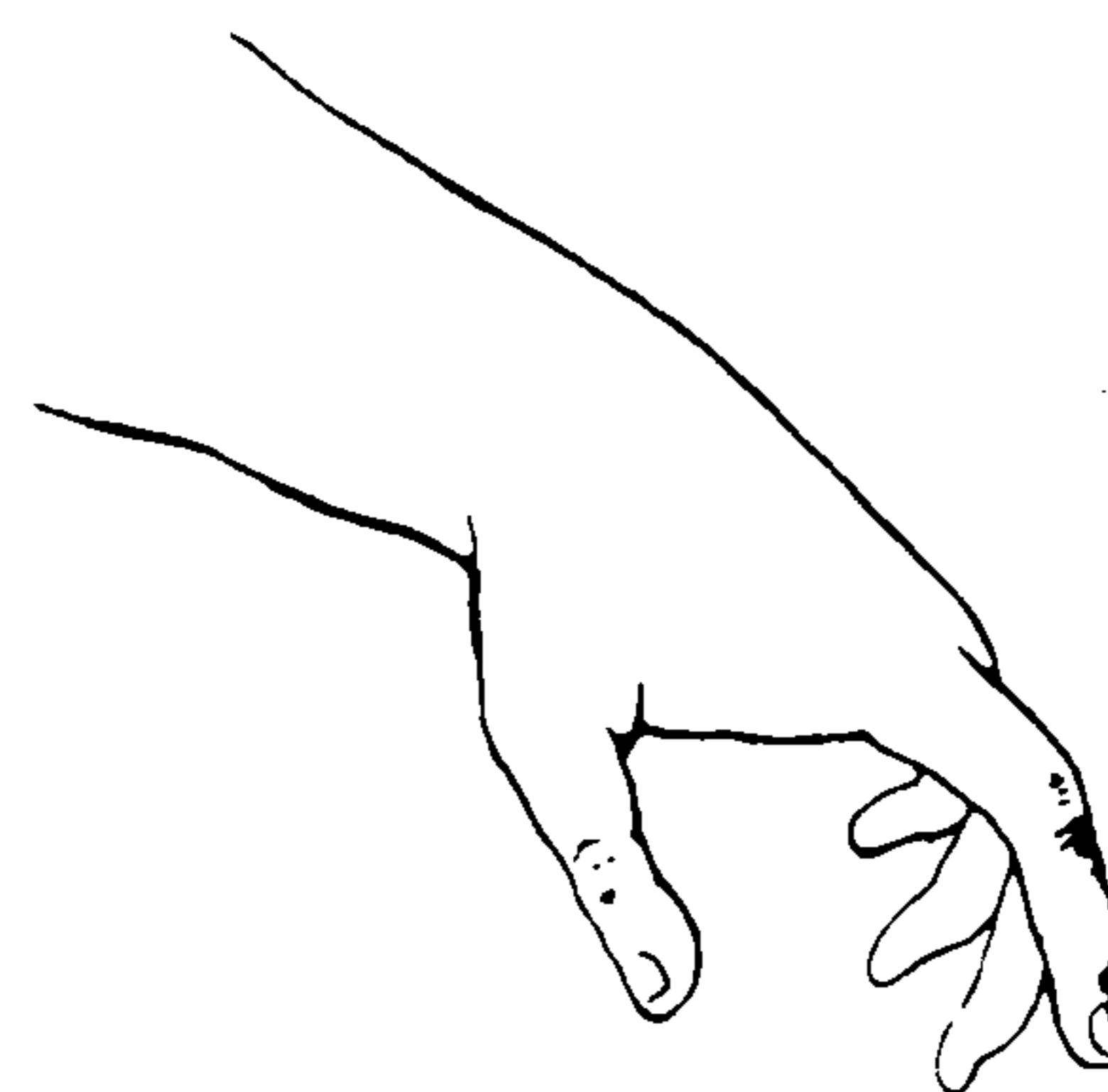
The transition from the fingers which 'denote' sentiments to a thumb which is in itself 'nervous' is replicated in the strange collection of hand positions set alongside this statement (Figure 6). A pointed finger clearly represents command, but it is unclear what gives rise to the categorization of the other hand as 'sensuality'. Elsewhere, in both Garcia's and Siddons's texts, pictures of expressions such as anger or fright are set alongside idiotism or wisdom, as Garcia states that 'a square forehead is indicative of wisdom and firmness' (Garcia, p. 100). Such sentiments seem to belong in the realm of phrenology rather than acting. The alleged simplicity of nineteenth century stage gesture thus hides complex assumptions of legibility: the nineteenth century actor and audience seem to share expectations about what can be read through gesture and appearance, but the actual utilization of these gestures on stage or via representations in books raises many questions about the process of such reading.

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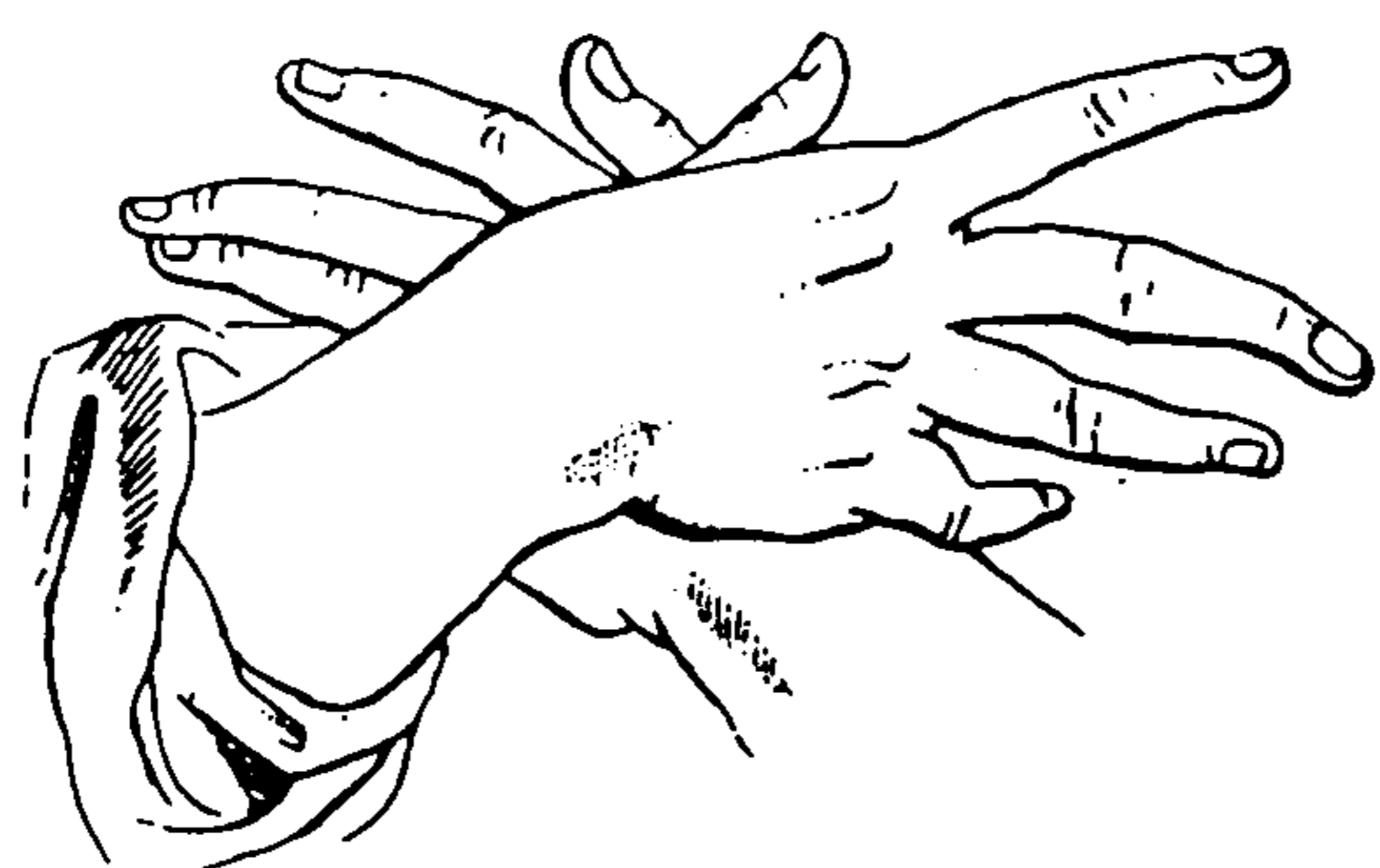
<sup>27</sup> Gustave Garcia, *The Actor's Art: A Practical Treatise on Stage Declamation, Public Speaking, and Deportment, for the use of Artists, Students, and Amateurs*. 2nd edn (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1888). p. 44.



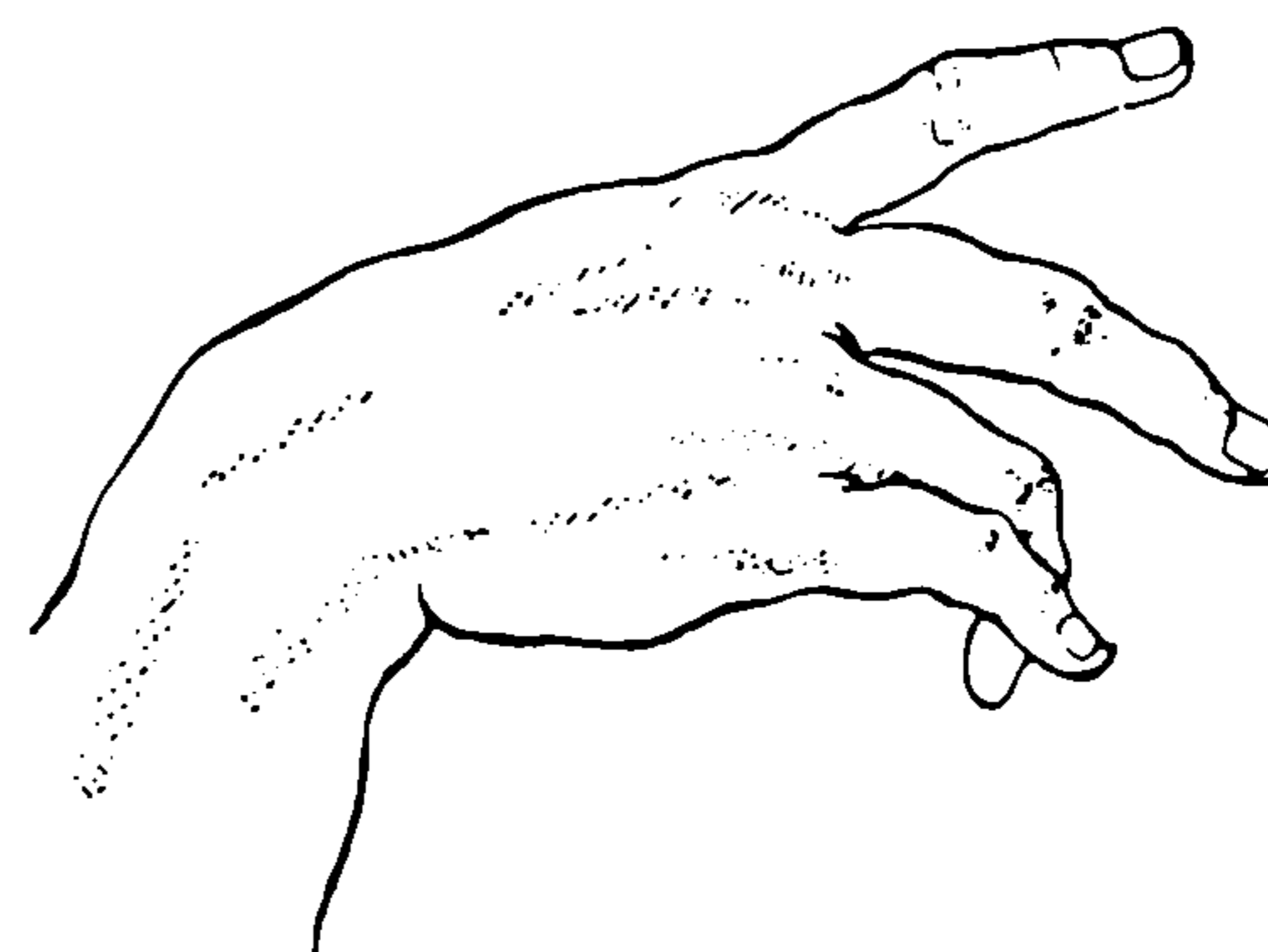
No. 4.  
Command, authority.



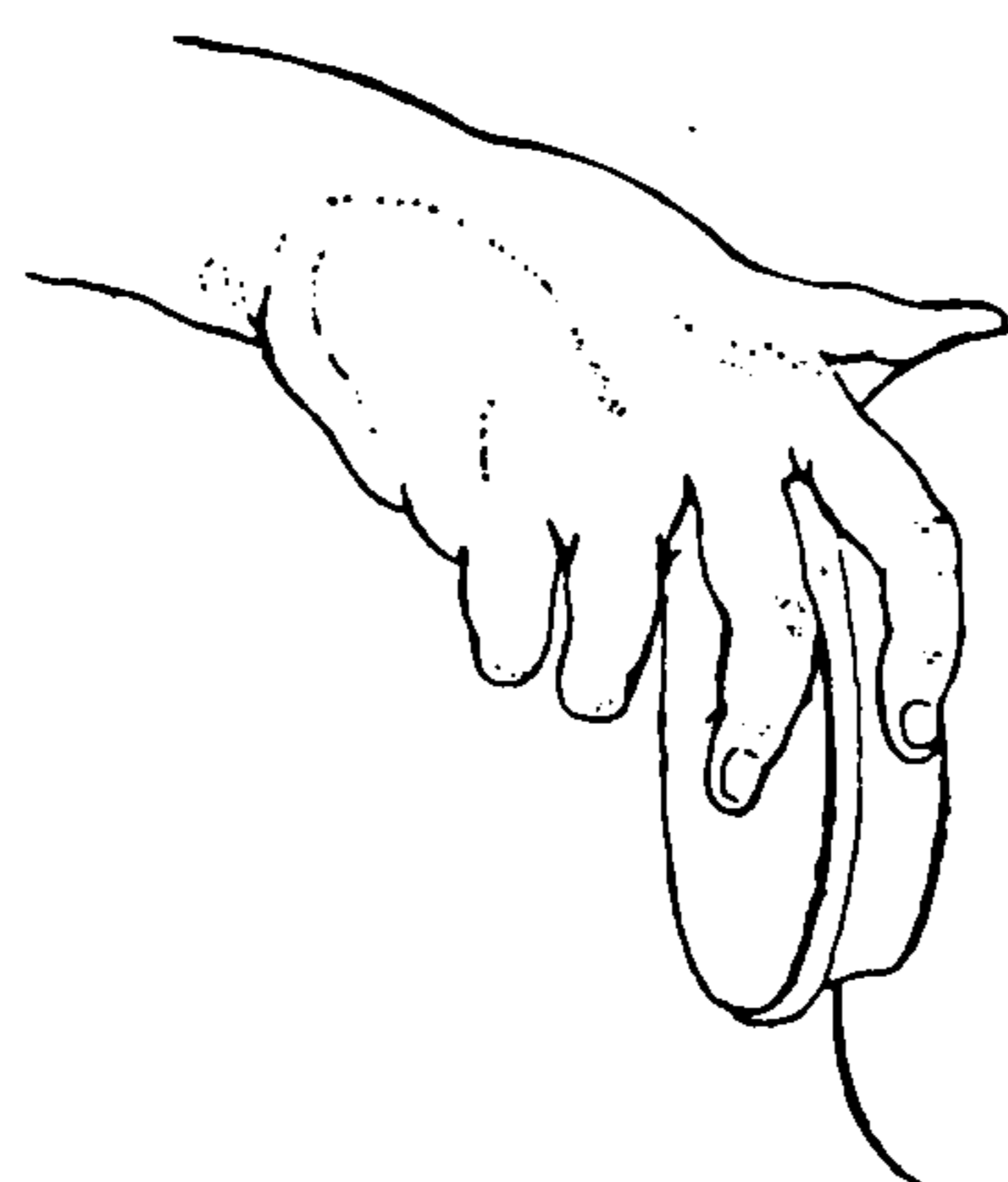
No. 7.  
Gentle disposition.



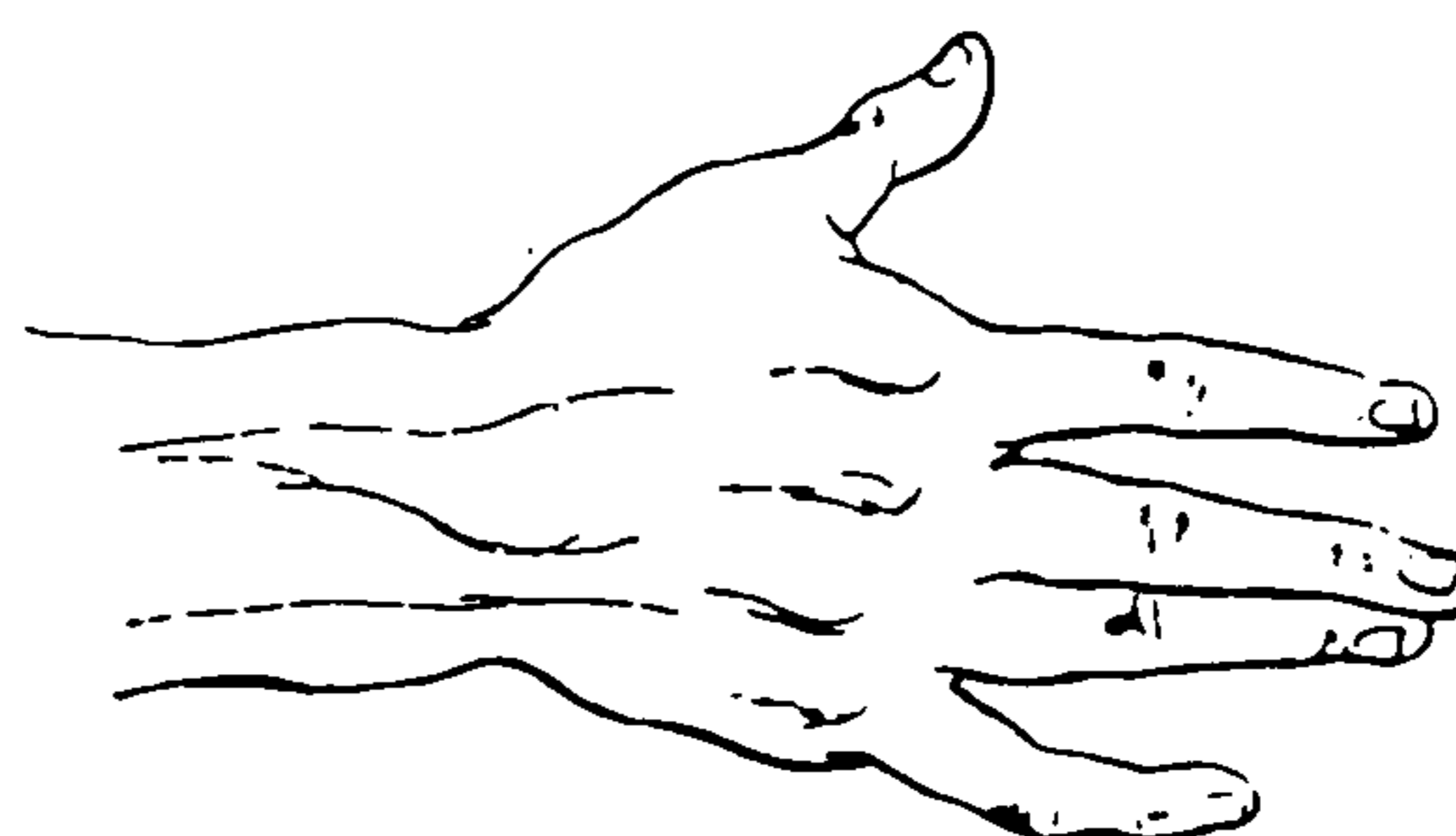
No. 5.  
Grace.



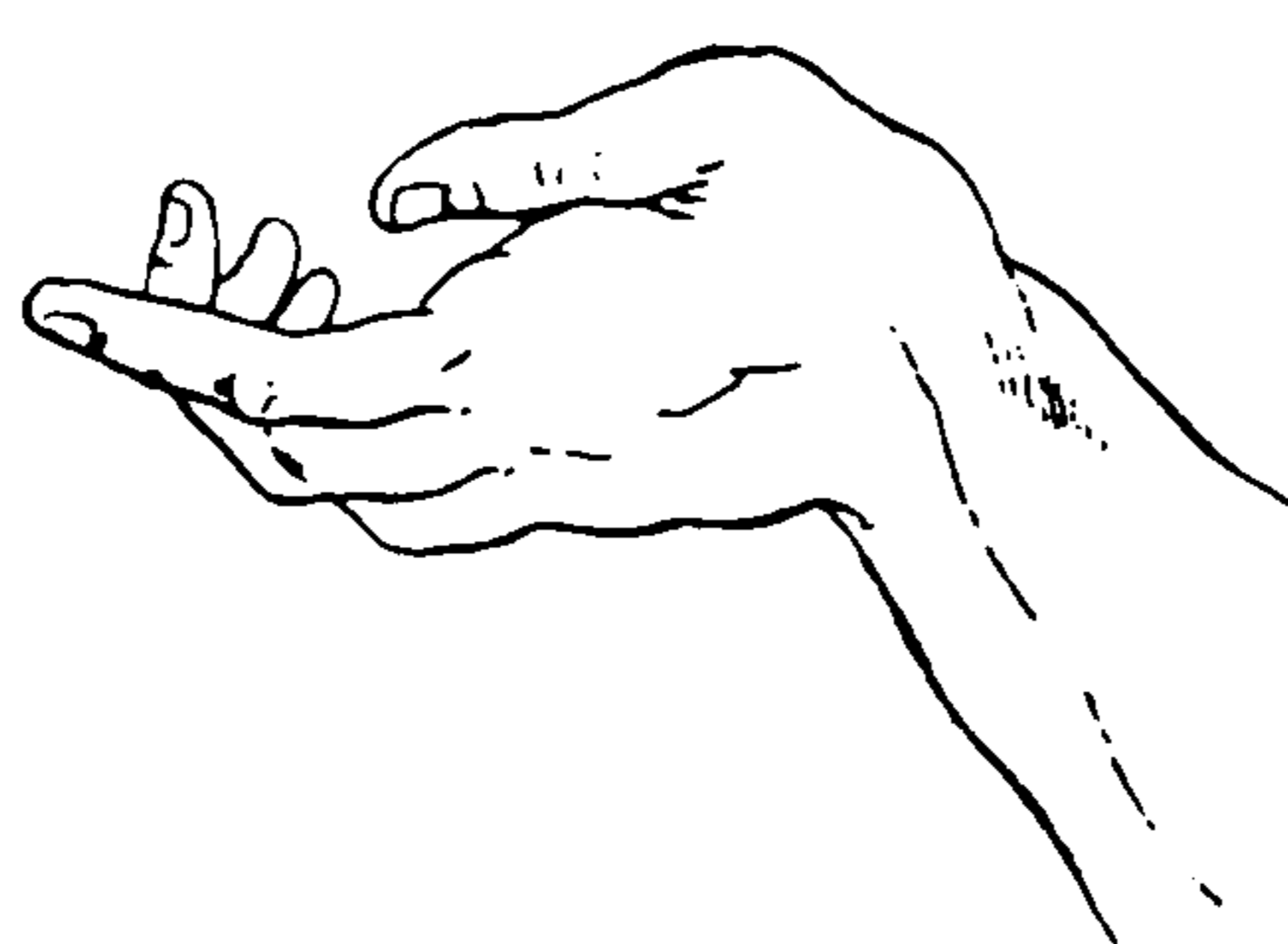
No. 8.  
Elevated mind, taste and dexterity.



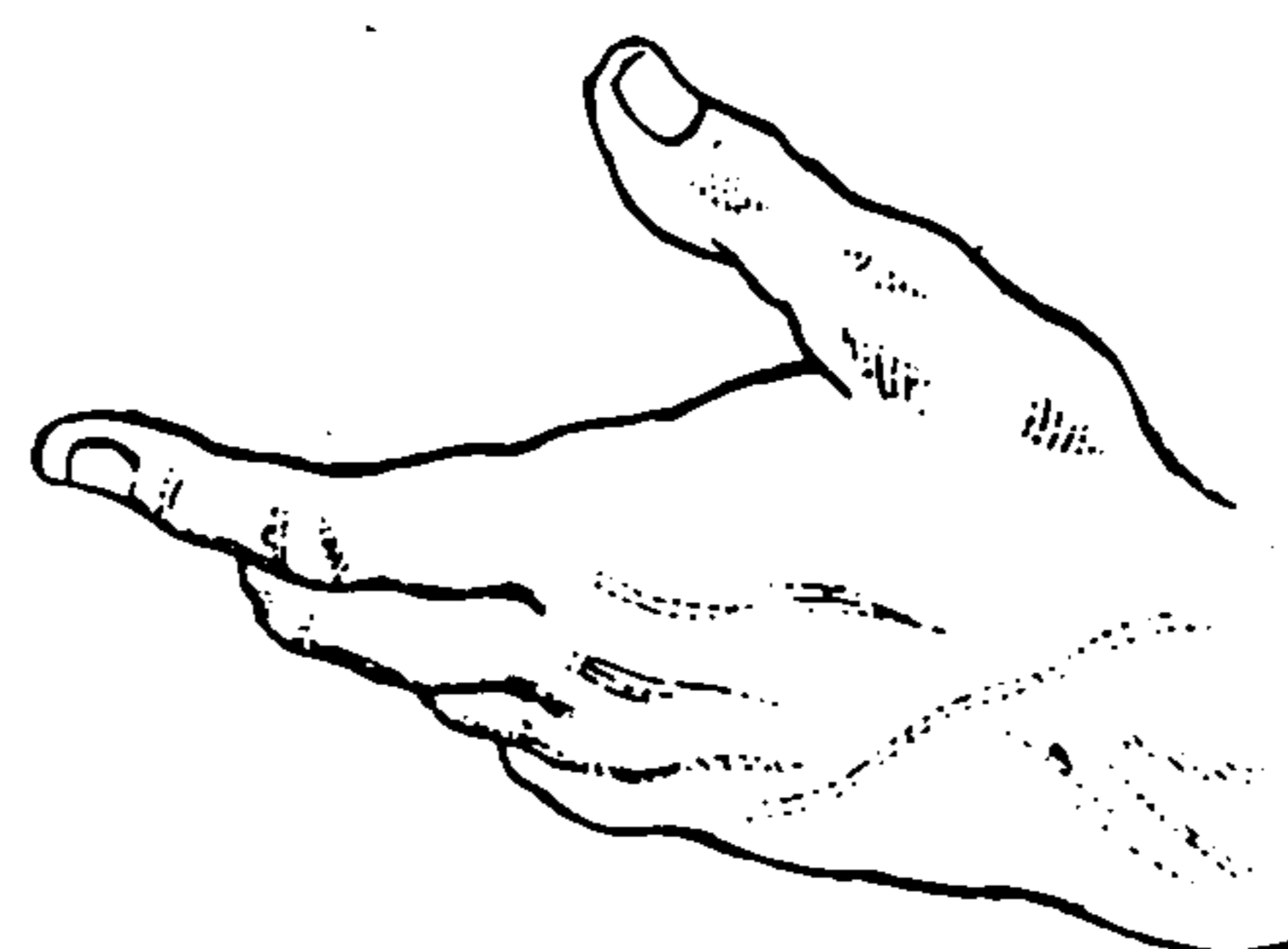
No. 6.  
Physical enjoyment.



No. 9.  
Sensuality.



No. 11.  
Imploring.



No. 13.  
Dignity, wisdom, experience.

Figure 6 'Expressions of the Hands'

From Garcia, *The Actor's Art*, pp. 44-46.



These issues are, perhaps, foregrounded most clearly in the figure of the dumb man: a brief examination of his role in melodrama, and the weight of meaning which his silent body is made to bear, will thus be very useful.

### 2.2.3 *The Dumb Man: Performing the Spectacular Body*

It is fitting that Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery*, the first melodrama to be named as such, should contain as a central figure the character of Francisco, a mute who the audience learns was made dumb in the course of a violent attack upon his person which left him 'dreadfully cut and mangled' (*Tale of Mystery*, p. 25). For the mute figure of melodrama is where the idea of embodiment, of externality, which I have explored in the preceding paragraphs, seems to reach its apotheosis. But in practice, I argue in this section, it is also where the legibility of gesture, its ability to be read without supporting dialogue, is most obviously called into question: the emphasis on pictorialization, of visuality, which seems to govern Victorian theatre cannot quite account for all that the mute figure has to communicate.

In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks discusses the mute role that is prevalent in melodrama and argues that mute gesture at times 'seems to be receiving a charge of meaning that we might suspect to be in excess of what it can literally support' (Brooks, p. 59). These comments relate to the mute character in Pixierécourt's *La Chien de Montargis* (1814), whom Brooks describes as having to express increasingly complex ideas through gesture, and failing to do so. But in both *A Tale of Mystery* and the 1837 performance text of Barnabas Rayner's *The Dumb Man of Manchester*, the gestural text of muteness is in fact translated for the audience both on and off the stage by another of the characters. In *A Tale of Mystery*, for example, Francisco is an educated gentleman, able to write down some of the

complicated answers sought by his host Bonamo during his interrogation as to the source of his dreadful injuries. But those answers which are simple and clear enough to be communicated by gesture alone are not left open to the audience to read and interpret, despite that simplicity:

BONAMO Who made you dumb? (*Music*)

FRANCISCO [*writing*] ‘The Algerines.’

BONAMO How came you in their power? (*Music*)

FRANCISCO ‘By treachery.’

BONAMO Do you know the traitors? (*Music*)

FRANCISCO (*Gesticulates*).

FIAMETTA (*Eagerly*) He does, he does! (*Tale of Mystery*, p. 11)

Here not even what was, presumably, simply an emphatic nod of affirmation is trusted to the audience’s ‘reading’. This situation is repeated as Fiametta translates Francisco’s gesticulated answers, ‘No, no, no!’ and ‘They are! They are!’ during the same exchange. We might explain this by the very earliness of Holcroft’s text: in 1802, perhaps, the ‘conventionalised bravura display’, ‘the arrangement of signs’ in which Booth suggests that the nineteenth century performer and audience partook, were not yet established. But in Rayner’s 1837 play the same situation persists: the gestures of the mute figure Tom, the dumb man of the title, are also translated to the audience. On being introduced to his sister Jane’s employer, Mrs Wilton, his gestures are immediately identified as illegible, in need of interpretation.

MRS WILTON I do not understand his mute language. What would he say?



JANE (*To Mrs Wilton*) That your workmen are coming in procession. (*To Tom*)

For what?<sup>28</sup>

Even where the audience knows what Tom must be trying to communicate this use of on-stage translation persists. Wrongly accused of Mrs Wilton's murder later in the play, Tom is brought before the Chief Justice and seeks to communicate his own understanding of what really happened. The audience of the melodrama have, of course, already seen this played out for themselves: the man that they know to be Edward Wilton, Mrs Wilton's nephew and Jane's long-lost husband, murdered his aunt for the sake of his inheritance. Yet after an elaborate mime sequence from Tom which acts out the events already staged before the audience, the Chief Justice translates the sense of Tom's gestures into words:

*(Music. TOM signs 'Yes, yes,' and continues - that at bed time he heard a noise; that he descended by a rope into the chamber; saw his sister asleep, and an ill-looking fellow come out of Mrs Wilton's room; that he hid himself behind the sofa; the man offered to strike his sister, but he (TOM) wrested the knife from his hand; that they wrestled together; TOM was thrown down, and the man escaped through the window; that he rang the alarm bell, opened the door, when Mr Palmerston entered; Mrs Wilton was led from her chamber bleeding, and accused him of the murder.)*

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<sup>28</sup> B[arnabas] F. Rayner, *The Dumb Man of Manchester: A Melo-drama in Two Acts* (London: Lacy, 1850), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

CHIEF JUSTICE You further say that, while in your bed-room, you heard a cry:  
 you descended by a rope, saw your sister sleeping, and the mendicant  
 came from Mrs Wilton's room with a knife in his hand [...]

(*Dumb Man*, p. 27)

It is worth noting here the identity of the actor playing Tom in Rayner's play: Andrew Ducrow, whose fame was established on the pre-Victorian stage as the 'Celebrated Equestrian of Astley's Amphitheatre' where, while balancing on the back of a galloping horse, he performed or embodied characters such as The Dying Gladiator, or The Flying Dutchman. Discussing his performances, George Taylor cites Leman Rede's high praise for Ducrow's mimetic ability:

No actor on the stage (not even Kean) could exceed his powerful expression.  
 [...] *His* pantomime, indeed, reminds us of that celebrated eulogy on the mimes of old. Their very nods speak - their hands talk, their fingers have voices.<sup>29</sup>

So if any performer was capable of communicating Tom's meaning successfully in *The Dumb Man of Manchester*, Andrew Ducrow was probably that man. But in *On The Stage: Studies of Theatrical History and the Actor's Art*, the nineteenth century critic Dutton Cook suggested that the need for interpretation of 'pantomimic skill and the language of gesture' was ever present.<sup>30</sup> His comments justify repeating at some length:

Pantomime, however significant to some, always remains inexplicable to others; the language of gesture addresses itself vainly to unperceiving eyes.

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<sup>29</sup> Taylor, p. 48.

<sup>30</sup> Dutton Cook, *On the Stage: Studies of Theatrical History and the Actor's Art*, 2 vols (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1883), I, p. 39.



[...] To certain close observers, however, dumb-show has seemed much more intelligible, a conventional system easily comprehended. [... Dickens writes humorously of a young girl who] will come out shortly [...] in the dumblines, and will relate her history in profoundly unintelligible motions, that will be translated into long and complicated descriptions by a grey-bearded father and a red-wigged countryman, his son.<sup>31</sup>

This consideration of the dumb man of melodrama thus shows that the role of gesture and spectatorship in the nineteenth century theatre may be somewhat more complicated than at first appears: the spectator of the dumb-show in melodrama has meaning explained to them, rather than simply being left to read the gestures for themselves. So despite the emphasis on visuality, we can conclude that this is a vision explained by language, where nothing is really left open for interpretation. Despite the complexity of gesture, meaning is always assured: gestures work with words to ultimately confirm, rather than confuse, the spectator's understanding of the playwright's meaning. There is room for frustration but never for uncertainty: seeing is indeed believing, but only because language ensures that it is so.

#### **2.2.4 Viewing the female body on stage**

In this theatre which I have characterized as one driven towards fixed meanings, and which is situated in the nineteenth century when gender roles were firmly set by society's codes, the woman's role in the melodramatic theatre was, I argue, even more circumscribed than those of the male actors I have so far discussed. The meaning of the dumb man's actions may have been fixed by others, but he at least had actions that required translation. In contrast, woman's place was restricted in the main

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<sup>31</sup> Dutton Cook, 1, pp. 45-46.

to that of reaction rather than action, and the range of gestures and meanings open to them were consequently limited by expectations of what was appropriate behaviour for a heroine. Robertson Davies characterizes Victorian stage heroines as women who ‘do not so much act as permit themselves to be acted upon; they rarely initiate anything vital to the plays in which they appear’.<sup>32</sup> Instead the events of the plays place them in impossible situations from which others must rescue them: the heroine of melodrama is often to be found pleading for mercy.

The *Thespian Preceptor* (1811), following a lengthy description of the qualities required by the male actor playing the hero of the drama, simply states that the actress playing the heroine should:

give feminine dignity of person, and all the qualities described under the title *heroes*, with that pervading force of sensibility which shall never vanquish, though it shall often endanger heroism, and [... she] will be nearly perfect.

(*Thespian Preceptor*, p. 29)

But while the hero cannot act or speak ‘as to denote confusion of mind: for ordinary minds only are confused’ (*Thespian Preceptor*, p. 27), the heroine is frequently placed in such a state, needing others to resolve the situation. In *The Dumb Man of Manchester* Jane greets her husband in the trial scene crying, ‘Oh, do not drive me mad! Save, O save my brother!’, and the curtain drops on Tom embracing her fainting form (*Dumb Man*, pp. 29-30). In the 1852 play *The Writing on the Wall*, the heroine similarly breaks down as she recounts her encounter with the villain to the hero:

MARGARET    Be patient. To this man I went and begged his mercy -

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<sup>32</sup> Robertson Davies. ‘Playwrights and Plays’, in Michael R. Booth and others. *The Revels History of Drama in English*, 8 vols, ed. by Clifford Leech and T. W. Craik (London: Methuen, 1975-81), VI: 1750-1850 (1975), pp. 147-269 (p. 242).



HARLOWE And he was inexorable -

MARGARET No - he was merciful - most merciful - ha-ha - (*laughing hysterically*) Harlowe - (*timidly*) Charles - I must be his wife, or see my mother die! (*wringing her hands*)<sup>33</sup>

In *Women and Victorian Theatre* Kerry Powell discusses the pirate adaptations of women's novels for the stage (of which Hazlewood's adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret*, discussed below, is one), and argues that in re-writing these novels for the stage male playwrights 'neutralized any tendency in women-authored novels to critique or reconfigure Victorian standards of gender'. Woman's place on the stage was limited in a way that the woman's role in novels of the same period was not.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of the gestural language used by female actors on the melodramatic stage such an analysis suggests that the range of emotions to be portrayed by such language would be limited in comparison with that available to men: anger or menace, for example, are less likely to occur in women's roles than in men's. But even where an emotion is accessible to both sexes, an examination of Siddons's *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action* suggests that the representation of such gestures might take different forms. A comparison of the male figure of 'Terror' in Figure 1 with the female figure of 'Terror' in Figure 7 shows that the violent movement away from the object of fear, arms outflung, which is the man's action is converted in the female figure to an introverted gesture, arms wrapped around the female body in a protective stance. Men take action, but the woman's role is far more often to be beautiful and sympathetic, acted upon rather than acting.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas and J[ohn] M[addison] Morton. *The Writing on the Wall: A Melo-drama, in Three Acts* (London: Lacy, [n.d.]), p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 102.





*Terror*

Figure 7 'Terror'

From Siddons, Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action, Plate 17.



Indeed, in the entire course of Henry Neville's long discussion of gesture and action in *Voice, Speech and Gesture* which, as we have seen, contains diagrams and discussion of the different parts of the body and their associated gestures, ladies are advised merely that they 'should cultivate expression of the ankle' (Campbell and Neville, p. 124). What the ankle could express is not made clear; but what is certain is that on a stage that is focused, as I have argued, on the act of looking, women are looked at not only for meaning but also for appearance itself.

Perhaps this is what made the adaptations of Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* so successful. For this novel, and the plays based on it, calls into question the assumptions which we have seen were made by the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology as well as by the acting handbooks, that interior states are reflected in external appearance. The stage adaptations also play with, and problematize, the normal codes of gender behaviour which we have seen applied on the melodramatic stage, although as Powell argues, their tendency was to seek ultimately to close down such problems rather than to fully exploit them.

In the 1863 adaptation of the novel by Colin Henry Hazlewood, *Lady Audley*, married to Sir Michael Audley, is 'fair as the day, [... with] a gentle innocent-looking face', yet her marriage is bigamous and before the end of the first Act the spectator has watched her attempt to murder her first husband by pushing him down a well:

LADY AUDLEY (*exulting*) Dead men tell no tales! I am free! I am free! I am free! - Ha, ha, ha!

*Raises her arms in triumph, laughing exultingly* -<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> C[olin] H[enry] Hazlewood, *Lady Audley's Secret*, in *Nineteenth Century Plays*, pp. 235-66 (p. 248). Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Lady Audley, then, is far removed from the stereotype villain of early melodrama, her evil nature concealed behind a fair and innocent face. The play is itself obviously concerned with this dilemma, setting up a dialogue between Lady Audley and her new husband Sir Michael in which this very question of appearance and what lies beneath can be addressed.

SIR MICHAEL My dear light-hearted wife, I don't believe you ever knew a moment's sorrow in your life.

LADY AUDLEY Ah, my dear, we may read *faces* but not hearts.

SIR MICHAEL And could I read yours, I'm sure I should see -

LADY AUDLEY That which would change your opinion of me perhaps.

SIR MICHAEL Not it, I warrant, for if ever the face was an index of the mind, I believe yours to be that countenance.

LADY AUDLEY (*Aside*) We may have two faces. (*Lady Audley*, p. 241)

Unlike that of the character of Mathias, Lady Audley's secret is revealed to the on-stage characters as well as to the watching audience: the female character is not allowed to get away with murder, even though, in fact, the workings out of the play's plot reveal that most of her evil schemes have failed, her first husband remaining alive. She ends the play in madness and death:

OMNES (*retreating from her*) Mad!

LADY AUDLEY Aye - aye! (*Laughs wildly.*) Mad, Mad, that is the word. I feel it here - here! (*Places her hands on her temples.*) Do not touch me - do not come near me - let me claim your silence - your pity - and let the grave, the cold grave, close over Lady Audley and her Secret.

*Falls - dies - Music - tableau of sympathy* (*Lady Audley*, p. 266)



Lady Audley's aberrant female behaviour is suitably punished, the punishment writing itself on her falling body, her hands to her temples to indicate the chaos within. She had temporarily broken with the codes of behaviour and gender enforced on the Victorian stage, but those codes reassert themselves at the moment of her death, when she recognises her own dangerous infection of evil and warns the other characters away - 'do not touch me'. Firmly labelled as mad, the audience's reading of her behaviour and its consequences is fixed by the final scene, just as the final tableau of sympathy fixes the bodies of the actors into position on stage.

Yet Lady Audley's story does, as I have argued, begin to raise questions about appearance and reality on the melodramatic stage. These questions surface again in Leopold Lewis's *The Bells*; it is with this performance text that I complete my discussion of the gestural body and its creation of meaning in melodrama.

### 2.2.5 *Re-viewing 'The Bells'*

*The Bells* breaks with the conventions of melodrama in that the guilt of Irving's character, Mathias, while made explicit to the audience in the first Act, is never communicated to the other characters within the play. George Taylor writes that the last line of the play, rarely delivered because of the rising applause following Irving's death scene, was 'Be comforted. He was a noble fellow, while he lived - and he has died without pain'.<sup>36</sup> What the audience knew and the villagers did not was that Mathias was guilty of murder: in the final Act of the play Mathias's guilt is played out in what we might describe as the hysterical embodiment of a dream triggered by guilt

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<sup>36</sup> Taylor, p. 154. However, Clement Scott, reviewing Irving's performance, wrote that 'we could have wished the concluding lines of the original drama could have been preserved, which show that, in spite of all, the Alsatian family are unshaken in their confidence in the beloved burgomaster', suggesting that this line was cut altogether in Lewis's version. *Observer*, 26 November 1871, reproduced in Mayer, pp. 100-03 (p. 101).

and the mention of the mesmerist with which I began this discussion of melodramatic acting.

Irving's portrayal of Mathias in this play is often contrasted with that of the French actor Coquelin, who made the murderer in the original Erckmann-Chatrian play 'a bullet-headed bully of the most matter-of fact criminal description'.<sup>37</sup> Where Coquelin's audience could read the body of the actor and identify signs of criminality, Irving's Mathias, said by the villagers to deserve [...] all the success he has achieved', is perceived throughout as the 'noble fellow' described in the closing line of Lewis's play (*The Bells*, p. 43). For the audience, aware of the guilty secret of murder and robbery on which his wealth and respectability is founded, Irving's performance worked the gap between appearance and truth.

But while this is a text which appears to concern itself with issues of psychology, with dreams and uneasy consciences, an analysis of its key moments demonstrates that it still relies on the melodramatic technique of 'acting out' for its effects, quite literally embodying memory on stage before its audience. In doing so, the play works to ensure that that audience's interpretation of the events on stage is fixed: appearances may initially be deceptive, but the villain is still clearly identified, and just as clearly punished.

In the final act of the play, his guilt over the long ago murder haunting him, Mathias insists on sleeping alone in his room because of his concern that 'walls have ears' (*The Bells*, p. 54). He reassures himself that:

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<sup>37</sup> H. Chance Newton, *Crime and the Drama* (London, 1927), p. 264, quoted in Taylor, p. 154.



No one will hear you if you dream - no one! No more folly, no more dreams,  
no more Bells! [...] Tonight, I triumph! for conscience is at rest!

*(The Bells, pp. 66-67)*

But as he sleeps the stage is transformed: the curtain behind the gauze that divides the front stage from the back rises and, with the back of the stage lit, the audience sees the 'COURT VISION':

PRESIDENT *in robes C. at back.* JUDGES *R. and L. of him.* CLERK OF COURT *in L. corner below him.* THREE COUNSEL OF BARRISTERS *in seats R. and L.*  
SPECTATORS (MALE AND FEMALE) *R. above them.* GENDARMES *R.U.E. and L. corner. Large table C. on which is the Jew's cloak and hat.* (*The Bells, p. 67*)

Within this court - faced with 'the cunning and audacity of the prisoner', and the 'deaths of witnesses who might have given evidence' - the trial proceeds with the help of a Mesmerist, who 'can read the inmost secrets' of Mathias's heart (*The Bells, p. 70*). Put to sleep, and asked what he did on the night of 24th December, 1818, Mathias re-stages for this dream court the events of that night, just as we earlier saw Tom give evidence to the real court in *The Dumb Man of Manchester*. Mathias, of course, has words to assist in the telling of his story, and it is with a combination of words and gesture that he re-enacts his struggle with conscience before the actual murder.

How your heart beats! How it beats! The moon shines out. The clock strikes!  
One! One! One! The Jew has passed! He's passed, thank God! Thank God!  
Thank God! (*Sinks by table on his knees, head in hands.*)

*Bells pp. L.*

*(A pause, he listens, starts up.)* The Bells! The Bells! He comes! He comes!  
*(He bends down as if listening, in a low voice)* You will be rich! You will be  
 rich! *(Backs up R., then suddenly as if following something, springs forward  
 and gives two terrific blows, accompanied by savage yell.)*

*Bells stop. (The Bells, p. 73)*

Sentenced by the court to be hanged from the neck until he is dead, the trial scene closes; but when discovered in the room by his anxious family, the death sentence passed in the dream is in the process of writing itself on Mathias's body:

*His eyes are fixed, and his appearance deathly and haggard. He  
 clutches the drapery convulsively, and staggers with a yell to C., is  
 caught in the arms of CHRISTIAN, who places him in a chair brought  
 forward to C. [...]*

MATHIAS Take the rope from my neck - take - the - rope - neck - *(Struggles and  
 dies.) (The Bells, p. 76)*

For the audience of this melodrama, then, just as for the dream court of what we would now identify as Mathias's unconscious mind, belief comes via re-enactment, making bodily. Irving's portrayal of Mathias did much to break with the stereotypical evil villains of early melodrama, but in his staging of the trial and punishment he remains firmly in the tradition of visual spectacle which we have seen dominated the theatre of melodrama in the nineteenth century. At the same time, his final words, 'take the rope from my neck', work as I have argued that the language of the text usually worked in such theatre, to explain and make clear the meaning of the spectacular speaking body. The audience must understand that <sup>Mathias</sup>Irving's guilt has been punished, and that the dream sequence is continuing to play itself out on his guilty



body. They are not left to interpret the convulsive movements of this great actor for themselves. Edward Gordon Craig, biographer of Irving, argues forcefully that the theatre must work in such a way, criticising the acting of realism for its failure to explain itself to its audience:

I have seen such actors recently in London. The villain of the play comes on to the stage smiling: he is quite alone; and though he remains alone for five minutes, he does not dare to tell us that he is 'the villain' - has not dared to let any tell-tale look escape him; he has failed to explain anything to us. It is called realism - it is no such thing: it is merely incompetence - an incapacity to understand that *everything* has to be clearly explained to the spectators.

(Craig, p. 61. Original emphasis)

*Everything* must be explained. In this theatre of melodrama, the gestural body is placed centre stage, but the meanings of that body are fixed in place by the other discourses of the performance text.

Irving's final moments as Mathias, struggling with the executioner's rope which he imagines to be fixed around his neck in punishment for his long distant crime, seem to offer intriguing parallels with the figure of the hysteric as we have already defined it, as responding via bodily symptoms to a trauma which cannot be expressed in words. Mathias is unable to speak his guilt in his society, in which he is seen as an entirely respectable and successful businessman and patriarch. That guilt, and the traumatic incident which gave rise to it, thus writes itself on Mathias's body, ending in death.

Analysing *The Bells* in this way is of course to read back onto a pre-Freudian text the insights of Freud and Breuer; and also, perhaps, to lose sight of the fact that

the focus of that performance text was not Mathias's story in itself, but rather the opportunities which it provided for the virtuoso display of Henry Irving's spectacular body. It is from this perspective that we can draw parallels with the late nineteenth century discourses of hysteria to which I now turn in the final section of this chapter. For these too, I argue, placed the symptomatic body at their centre. And just as with the operations of the theatre of melodrama described above, these discourses of hysteria can be seen to be concerned with fixing meaning onto that body in order to contain it, rather than with allowing it to create meaning for itself.

### 2.3 The Spectacular Private Body

We learned in Chapter One that Freud eventually came to understand hysteria and its physical symptoms as 'speaking' in some way for the desires or fears of his patient which could not be expressed in verbal language: in the 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*, he and Breuer wrote that hysteria was 'a question of things that the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed' (*SE* II, p. 10). So as we understand hysteria following Freud, it is very much a disease of the interior: its concerns are with desires, phantasies, the interaction of the conscious and the unconscious mind. In this context, the body of hysteria is a private body in contrast to the public body of the stage performer. But the 'long-standing European tradition of representing the insane' which Sander L. Gilman identifies in his essay 'The Image of the Hysteric' does of course involve the making public of a private body (Gilman, p. 359). In *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, Alison Winter argues that in Victorian society sciences of the mind

Were not merely sets of abstracted statements. Public performances and, especially, sight, were important to what they meant. Asylums were 'museums



of madness' where viewers gazed at inmates acting out uncanny parodies of insanity.<sup>38</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising then that in hysteria, a disease which is above all performative, this tradition of seeing insanity was to find its natural focus. And hysteria did offer itself up as a necessary candidate for objective representation and classification, for as William John Anderson wrote in 1853, the symptoms of hysteria 'are almost innumerable, aping almost every known disease and often with such exactitude, that men of the greatest skill have been misled by them'.<sup>39</sup> In Anderson's terms, hysteria and the hysterical symptom seem, unnervingly, to exceed medical codes (just as Henry Irving's writhing hair exceeds theatrical codes of representation in Craig's description of his reaction acting in *The Bells*). Perhaps this very quality of hysteria, its mutability, was what made nineteenth century doctors so keen to classify and identify, to take control of the disease through objective representation. It is useful to remind ourselves here of Gilman's discussion of the notion of nineteenth-century science 'that everything is reducible to non-verbal form'. This reduction, Gilman argues, was said to 'remove the subjective aspect from the evaluation of the disease', leaving behind 'a real representation' of the patient:

To describe was to understand, to describe in the most accurate manner meant to avoid the ambiguity of words, and to rely on the immediate, real image of the sufferer. (Gilman p. 402, p. 352)

In objectifying and viewing the condition, I would argue that the doctors attempted to control and limit the performance of this spectacular disease, wresting control from

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<sup>38</sup> Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> William John Anderson, *Hysterical and Nervous Affections of Women* (London: Churchill, 1853), pp. 4-5.

the patient who was often seen, with considerable anxiety, as a subjective actress, able to manipulate her illness for her own ends. Describing the behaviour of hysterics who after the ‘fuss and parade of illness, and the sympathy consequent upon it’, are prone to what he terms tertiary hysteria, fits designedly excited by the patient by voluntary recollection, Robert Brudenell Carter warns his readers that:

The hair will often be so fastened as to fall at the slightest touch, in the most ‘admired disorder’; and many analogous devices will be had recourse to, their number and variety depending upon the ingenuity of the performer, and the extent of her resources. (Carter, pp. 42-43, p. 46)

Ilza Veith argues that in his work with the hysterics of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris from 1870 onwards, Jean-Martin Charcot ‘made sick people of the apparently wilfully misbehaving, disagreeable women who had, in the nineteenth century, been suspected of malingering’.<sup>40</sup> He did this through defining hysteria as a specific neurosis; and his definitions, as we shall see, were primarily visual. But Janet Beizer suggests that this visuality is in fact a disguise: Charcot made of his patients ‘ventriloquized bodies’, repressing their speech in order for it ‘to be expressed as inarticulate body language, which must then be dubbed by a male narrator’ (Beizer, p. 9). This description is clearly key to my argument that parallels can be drawn between melodrama’s use of the gestural body and Charcot’s objectification of the hysterical body: Charcot’s role as translator of the hysterical language of the body gives him the same power as the on-stage translator of the mute body of melodrama. It is in the figure of Charcot, and of those doctors, photographers and artists who surrounded him at the Salpêtrière,

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<sup>40</sup> Ilza Veith. *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 238.



that we can identify the apotheosis of what we might call the spec[ta]cular approach to hysteria, and it is on Charcot's work that I focus in this section.

### 2.3.1 *Charcot: the 'visuel'*

'Female hysteria, as catalogued at the Salpêtrière by the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot during this [...] period, was a fundamentally visual phenomenon.<sup>41</sup>

Anthea Callen's description of Charcot's approach to hysteria is consistent with that of other historians of nineteenth century hysteria and science. Elisabeth Bronfen characterises the Salpêtrière as 'a scene of total visuality', while Gilman notes Charcot's 'reliance on the act of seeing as the privileged form of diagnosis' (Bronfen p. 176, Gilman p. 411). In *The Birth of Neurosis*, George Drinka seeks to explain this emphasis on external visuality by noting the absence of internal objective evidence:

Thwarted in his attempt to find a lesion, as he had in cases of multiple sclerosis, Charcot fell back on his visual talent. He undertook a careful study of the clinical phenomena of the disorder and scrupulously classified what he saw.<sup>42</sup>

What needs to be stressed here is that Charcot's main focus was not with cure but ~~with~~ rather with scientific analysis of the condition: objectifying and classifying a universal pattern of hysteria which could be identified by external signs and behaviours. These behaviours were twofold: the hysterical fit itself, which occurred periodically, and the permanent hysterical stigmata, the symptoms occurring between

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<sup>41</sup> Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> George Frederick Drinka, *The Birth of Neurosis: Myth, Malady and the Victorians* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 81.

the fits, such as localised anaesthesia, contractures, and the presence of hysterogenic points.

Charcot characterised the hysterical attack, which he claimed occurred in all hysterical patients, as consisting in four phases:

Four periods succeed each other in the complete attack with mechanical regularity - 1st, epileptoid; 2nd, great movements (struggling, purposeless); 3rd, passionate attitudes (purposive); 4th, terminal delirium.<sup>43</sup>

All of these mechanically regular phases rely on observable movements or behaviours for identification: in Figure 8 I reproduce Paul Richer's schematic diagrams of the phases of the *grande hystérie*. After the initial *debut*, the hysterical aura warning of attack, the four phases can be described more fully as follows.

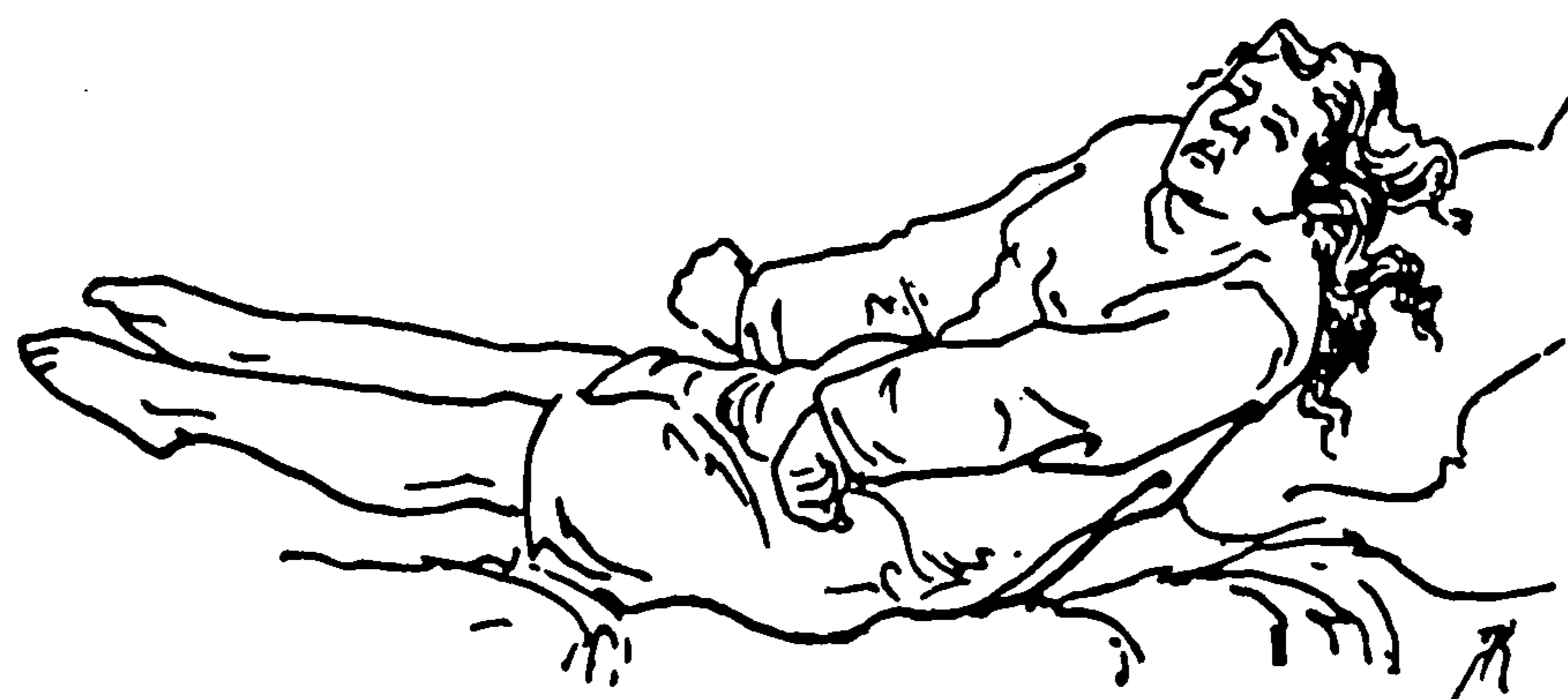
The first phase, that of *hystéro-épilepsie*, was so named because the patient's movements resembled an epileptic fit. The patient fell unconscious to the floor and began terrible jerking and flailing motions which involved distortion of the body and rigidity.

In the second phase, that of the *grands mouvements*, the patient's body would perform eccentric movements, contortions and dislocations in an almost acrobatic display. Charcot himself characterised this phase as the *période clonique*, the clownish period, because of the unusual flexibility and mobility displayed, and it is here that the *grand arc-en-cercle* of hysteria occurred, a position which Gilman has identified as echoing that of the opisthotonic position of tetanus, 'a sign of the visual

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<sup>43</sup> J[ean]. M[artin]. Charcot. *Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System Delivered at the Infirmary of La Salpêtrière*. trans. by Thomas Savill. 3 vols (London: The New Sydenham Society, 1877-89), III (1889), p. 13.

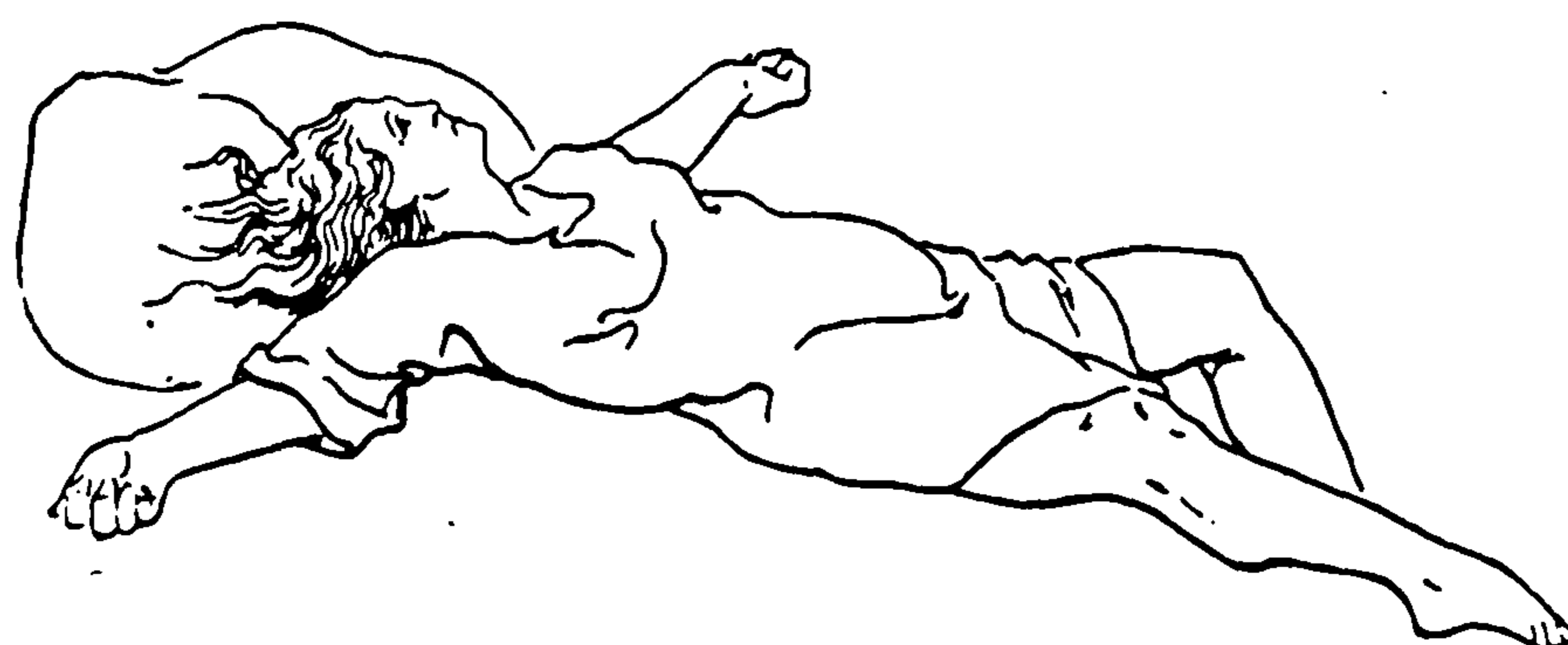




Phases of the grand hysteria: I. Epileptoid.



II. Grand movement: *arc-en-cercle*.



III. Passionate attitude: crucifixion.



IV. Delirium: weeping and lamentation.

Figure 8 'Phases of Charcot's *grande hystérie*'

interpretability of disease and, therefore, the power of the physician's insight over the disease' (Gilman, p. 364).

The third phase, and perhaps the most interesting in the context of this chapter, was that of the *attitudes passionnelles*, personalised gestures which, accompanied by confused babbling and shouting, conveyed the patient's psychic state. In this phase the patients 'performed' hallucinations which Charcot claimed were oblique representations of the passionate events and emotions from patient's psychic reality. Richer's diagrams, together with the photographs of the patient Augustine (Figure 9) demonstrate some typical 'passionate attitudes', and in looking at them, together with their descriptive titles, we are reminded of the gestures discussed in the first section of this chapter. Indeed, Callen notes that the posed photographic records of hysteria conform 'not only to the "gestures of the French classical acting style", but also to the formulaic *têtes d'expression* of fine art practice (Callen, p. 55). The act of reading undertaken by Charcot can thus be seen to be very similar to that carried out by the spectator of nineteenth century gestural acting: the codes of interpretation and understanding are shared between stage and clinic.

In the fourth and final phase of the hysterical attack, that of delirium, the patient slowly regained consciousness, usually accompanied by noisy weeping and lamentation. The patient might then recover, or descend into another cycle of the hysterical attack.

This classification of hysteria into separate, easily observable and identifiable stages clearly relies on the act of seeing and observation, and this visual emphasis is made still clearer if we consider the huge number of drawings and photographs contained within the three volumes of *L'iconographie photographique de la*





Planche XX.

ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES  
SUPPLICATION AMOUREUSE



Planche XXI.

ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES  
EROTISME



Planche XXII.

ATTITUDES PASSIONNELLES  
EXTASE (1876).

Figure 9 'Attitudes Passionnelles'



*Salpêtrière* published by Désiré-Magloire Bourneville and Paul Régnaud between 1877 and 1880 and the periodical *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* which was founded in 1888 under Charcot's direction. Charcot and his disciples are here seen to be concerned with photographing, drawing and recording each stage of the hysterical attack and the details of the hysterical stigmata; but what is also at stake in the publication of these volumes is quite literally the making public of the private body of the hysteric. Charcot's visual relationship with hysteria can therefore be seen not just to be about observing and classifying, but also about displaying hysteria, via the hysterical bodies of his patients, for the spectatorship of others, and about explaining that hysteria. To return to Craig, '*everything*' must be 'clearly explained to the spectators' of Charcot's hysterics.

This display, and labelling, of the hysterical symptom was not restricted to the publication of static images captured in photographs or drawings: Charcot's fame was largely established through his Tuesday lectures, in which the hysterical patients, induced by hypnosis or provoked by the application of pressure on their hysterogenic points, performed their attacks of *grande hystérie* before a watching audience including not only other doctors and medical students but also writers, journalists, artists and actors. Thinking back to Charcot's description of the hysterical attack, we can see that a display of its four phases would be seen as truly spectacular, involving the grand movements, sweeping gestures and representation of passions which we have previously identified with the theatre of melodrama. I am, of course, not the first to identify Charcot with the codes of the theatre: George Drinka writes that he is not just a neurologist but 'also an incipient psychologist and a bit of a showman [...]



certainly aware that his performances were theatrical' (Drinka, p. 89). Michel Foucault characterises the Salpêtrière itself in explicitly theatrical terms:

It was an enormous apparatus for observation, with its examinations, interrogations, and experiments, but it was also a machinery for incitement, with its public presentations, its theater of ritual crises, carefully staged with the help of ether or amyl nitrate, its interplay of dialogues, palpations, laying on of hands, postures which the doctors elicited or obliterated with a gesture or a word [...].<sup>44</sup>

In *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, Elaine Showalter describes Charcot's hospital as 'an environment in which female hysteria was perpetually presented, represented, and reproduced' by patients who became performers.<sup>45</sup> The famous Brouillet painting of Charcot displaying the body of a female hysteric to his audience depicts one such staging of hysteria; a version of hysteria as a kind of theatrical melodrama of the kind described in the first half of this chapter, with spectacular entrances, grand gestures, faints and fits for the enjoyment of the curious crowd which attended Charcot's Tuesday morning lectures.

The notion of performance can usefully be interrogated in this context, as I want to argue that not only does Charcot act as on-stage interpreter of what Beizer calls the ventriloquized bodies of hysteria, but that he can also be seen as a stage-manager of such performances, controlling them even more firmly than through the act of labelling. For while at a basic level we can see the reproduction of the hysterical attack as a performance in accordance with Richard Schechner's notion of

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<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), I: *An Introduction*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>45</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 150.

performance as restored behaviour, closer examination of the practices of Charcot and his assistants suggests that a more complex version of performance and rehearsal is in fact what was being staged in the lecture theatre of the Salpêtrière.<sup>46</sup> In *Freud's Women*, Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester extend the dramatic metaphor, suggesting that the 'theatre of the body was extremely well prepared behind the scenes'.<sup>47</sup>

Such preparation was in fact to cause damage to Charcot's reputation, for it later became clear that some of his assistants had been conditioning the patients to 'perform' according to his expectations (Veith, pp. 228-39). Describing the Brouillet painting of Charcot before his audience of physicians and writers, Henri F. Ellenberger notes that Brouillet has involuntarily shown Charcot's 'fatal error: his verbal explanations and the picture on the wall suggest to the patient the crisis which she is beginning to enact'.<sup>48</sup> So we might see that what Charcot identifies as the uniform cycle of the hysterical attack, including the dramatic *attitudes passionnelles*, in fact set up its own system of conventional and collusive signs just as strong as those which Michael Booth suggests operated in the nineteenth century theatre. Indeed, Charcot's critics were quick to note that such spectacular phenomena as he described - the *arc-en-cercle* and the *attitudes passionnelles*, were not seen in hysterics outside Paris. In answer, Charcot distinguished the pattern of *grande hystérie* from that of the *petite hystérie* which would involve only relatively minor symptoms, but it is clear that the spectacular displays of the Salpêtrière hysterics were

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<sup>46</sup> Schechner argues that 'the use of restored behaviour is the main characteristic of performance'. See 'Restoration of Behaviour', in *Performative Circumstances from the Avant Garde to Ramlila* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), pp. 164-237 (p. 164).

<sup>47</sup> Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry* ([New York]: Basic Books, 1970), note to illustration following p. 330.



part of a process of collusion with a system that placed its emphasis on visual signs and was rewarded accordingly. Bodily signs were what Charcot wanted from his hysterics, so bodily signs were what he was given; and by being given signs, instead of words, Charcot was able to retain power over these hysterical bodies, using his own articulacy to fix meaning onto these inarticulate, gestural figures.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In her history of mesmerism in Victorian Britain, Alison Winter suggests that:

Like the physiognomist, Victorians looked through physiognomic, phrenological, and, arguably, mesmeric eyes. They had habits of seeing and perceiving that required the knowledge one gleaned from these practices.

From Victorian social landscapes in paintings like *Derby Day* to caricatures in popular journals like *Punch*, the human attributes and social relations that Victorians could read so clearly were visually transcribed in a physiognomic cipher. (Winter, p. 30)

This chapter has demonstrated that both nineteenth century theatre, exemplified in the performance practices of melodrama, and nineteenth century hysteria as demonstrated in the lecture theatre and publications of Jean- Martin Charcot, centred on habits of seeing and viewing the gestural body which assumed that the body could indeed be read. Charcot's classification of the four stages of *la grande hystérie*, and his labelling of the hysteric's passionate attitudes, mirror the description and categorization of gestural codes in the acting handbooks which relied on the assumption that the movements of the body could create a language of gesture shared and understood by actor and audience alike.

But I have argued in this chapter that to focus exclusively on the idea of sight, to take for granted that Victorians could indeed read ‘human attributes and social relations [...] so clearly’, obscures just how that process of reading was in fact fixed by other elements. The theatre of melodrama, so often centred around the mute figure of the dumb man, does at first indeed seem to have relied on a theatre of display, utilizing the gestural body to make its meaning: the words of the play are often seen as relatively unimportant. Yet my examination in this chapter of the performance practices which surround the figure of the dumb man has made it clear that his gestural body is in fact never left open for interpretation: the words of other characters in the text, and the music by which the staged performance reinforces meaning, insist on translating the gestures into fixed meanings for the audience.

In the same way, we have seen that the spectators of Charcot’s displays of hysterical patients in the lecture theatre of the Salpêtrière were directed in their interpretation of the signs those speaking bodies offered up to them. Beizer’s characterization of the hysterical patients as ‘ventriloquized bodies’ makes clear the way in which their meaning is imposed upon them from the outside, by the physician who speaks and who has control over language, ‘dubbing’ their sense for the watching audience.

So in both theatres, of stage and clinic, the Victorian audience might look, but the meaning of what they saw was clearly determined for them by what they heard. Like the hysterical body in Charcot’s lecture, the actor on the melodramatic stage was the object rather than the subject of discourse: the ‘speaking’ bodies which we have considered in such detail in this chapter have been identified as the site of externally



imposed and fixed meanings rather than as a means by which the actor could create a bodily discourse of the self, to be read and understood by the spectator.

Against such a background, the shift in the understanding of hysteria represented by the work of Freud and Breuer in *Studies on Hysteria*, which brought into play the relationship between body and word, modelling the condition as created in the split between knowledge and what cannot be known, highlights both the need and potential for change. An understanding of hysteria as working with both speech and with what cannot be said points towards a dual discourse of word and gesture, assigning equal force to both, and thus represents a rejection of the theatrical and clinical discourses considered in this chapter which all too often made use of telling under the disguise of showing. It offers, of course, the potential for a new approach to the hysterical patient - one which enabled Anna O. to tell her own story - but if we transpose the shift into the frame of the theatre we can see that it also offers the potential for a new kind of performance. Such a performance practice would give subjectivity back to the figure of the actor, and thus place the spectator in a position which is not simply that of viewing an object, but rather of working with the subject actor in the creation of meaning. The next chapter, which takes as its frame the developing theatre of August Strindberg, traces this shift in the understanding of hysteria and identifies the theatrical potential which is opened up by its change in focus.

## Chapter Three:

### From Dumb Show to Talking Cure: Developments in Hysteria and Theatre in the Late Nineteenth Century

#### 3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I continue to explore the relationship between theatre and hysteria that was established in Chapter Two, tracing parallel developments in the understanding of hysteria and the development of theatre in the late nineteenth century that move us on from the fixity and spectacle of melodrama - both on the stage and in Charcot's lecture theatre - to the exploration of the unconscious in the drama of psychological realism and on Freud's couch. The body remains centrally important throughout, both in the theatre which requires bodies for performance, and in hysteria which is defined for Freud, at least in part, by the conversion process of mental anxieties into physical symptoms. But we can identify a move to explore the mind within that body as the nineteenth century ends, a move which necessitates a different relation to, and reading of, the corporeal. My exploration of these narratives of development in this chapter, placing one alongside the other, continues to emphasise that the process of reading bodily signs is central to both, and thus the focus must remain not only on the hysteric/actress, but also on the physician/spectator.

The frame through which I trace such developments in this chapter is provided by the work of August Strindberg, the Swedish writer who in his Preface to *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, described his 'modern characters' as 'living in an age of



transition more urgently hysterical at any rate than the age which preceded it'.<sup>1</sup>

Although not produced in England until the nineteenth century was over,<sup>2</sup>

Strindberg's plays can be seen to shadow the changes in the understanding of psychology, and particularly of hysteria, that were taking place in Europe as the century ended.

Michael Meyer points out that there is 'no mention of Freud in Strindberg's twenty thousand surviving letters, which are full of references to what he is reading, nor is there any work of Freud's in Strindberg's library', concluding that the dramatist had probably never heard Freud's name.<sup>3</sup> We can however be sure that Freud did know of Strindberg's name, because in the fifth German edition of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* of 1917 (first edition published in 1901) he added a passage to the chapter on 'Symptomatic and Chance Actions' in which he wrote of Strindberg:

Of all the writers who have from time to time passed comment on our minor symptomatic acts and parapraxes, or who have made use of them, none has understood their secret nature so clearly or exhibited them in so uncannily lifelike a manner as Strindberg - a man whose genius in recognizing such things was, it is true, assisted by grave mental abnormality.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> August Strindberg. 'Preface to *Miss Julie*', in *The Plays*, trans. by Michael Meyer, 2 vols (London: Secker & Warburg, 1964-75), 1 (1964), pp. 99-112 (p. 103).

<sup>2</sup> The New Stage Club presented a triple bill containing two of Strindberg's *quart d'heure* plays, *Simoon* and *The Stronger*, at the Bloomsbury Hall, London in November 1906 (Michael Meyer, *Strindberg: A Biography* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), p. 472).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Making of a Dramatist 1828-1864* (London: Hart-Davis, 1967), p. 199 (fn.).

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, SE VI (1960), p. 212.



Freud's evidence for this assessment comes in the form of an extensive quotation from Strindberg's 1904 novel, *The Gothic Rooms*. But it is difficult to be sure just when Freud first encountered Strindberg. Strindberg's plays were translated into German more quickly than into English (for example, a performance of *Creditors*, Strindberg's 1888 play which I discuss in detail in the next section of this chapter took place in Berlin on January 22, 1893), and in 1887 Strindberg published a series of articles in the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse* under the collective title of *Vivisektioner* which dealt with issues raised by the new psychology. These articles made reference to the work of Charcot, whose innovative work at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris had led Freud to visit him on a travel and study bursary for six months from October 1885, but as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, Strindberg went far beyond Charcot's work, exhibiting signs of that 'grave mental abnormality' of which Freud was to write thirty years later. It is tempting to imagine Freud, back in Vienna, reading these strange *Vivisektioner* essays with a degree of amusement or disbelief - but difficult to locate any actual proof that he did so. In any case, it is clear that both Freud and Strindberg can be seen as participating in the huge increase in the interest in hysteria and related subjects as the century drew to its close:<sup>5</sup> an interest which was to result for Freud in the publication, with his colleague Joseph Breuer, of the 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*.<sup>6</sup> To employ Strindberg as the frame through which this chapter is shaped

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<sup>5</sup> The *Index Medicus* shows that in 1880, 36 books taking hysteria as their subject were published in continental Europe, increasing to 67 books in 1885, and 89 in 1895. Excluding France (where, as we shall see, much of the initial work on hysteria and hypnosis took place) the rise is even more startling, from 6 books on hysteria in 1880 to 47 in 1895. This information is taken from Kenneth Levin, *Freud's Early Psychology of the Neuroses: A Historical Perspective* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 51. Levin provides evidence of a similar rise in publications of literature on hypnosis.

<sup>6</sup> In *Freud: A Man of His Century*, trans. by Iain White (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1979), Gunnar Brandell argues for a connection between Strindberg and Freud that places both in the category of 'psychological naturalists' (p.17).



thus makes the parallels between theatre and the developing understanding of hysteria even more explicit.

Writing the introduction to *A Madman's Defence*, the account of his marriage to Siri von Essen written in 1888, Strindberg expressed a desire for a kind of searching self-analysis which combined the use of modern developments in psychology with old fashioned melodrama:

I determined to examine my life, carefully, discreetly, scientifically. With the aid of all the resources of modern psychology, relying on hypnotic suggestion, mind-reading, mental torture, and not neglecting the good old methods of theft, interception of letters, lies, forged signatures, I would find out everything, everything.<sup>7</sup>

The dramas discussed in this chapter enact a similar analysis of the human soul. Strindberg's continual need to recollect, reconstruct and reorder his past, in autobiography, novels and plays, seem to enact a kind of 'writing cure' for a man who can, I argue, be viewed as hysterical himself. Playing the role of both patient and therapist, his writing revisits memories but also rewrites them, altering the perspective to distance himself from the pathologies demonstrated by his characters as he takes on the persona of the objective, clinical observer.

Such a focus on the figure of Strindberg also enables us to address the anxieties around gender, and hysteria, that so disturbed the *fin-de-siècle* society, as the figure of the 'New Woman' and the decadent, degenerate, effeminate man

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<sup>7</sup> August Strindberg. *A Madman's Defence*, trans. by Ellie Schleussner, revised by Evert Sprinchorn (London: Cape, 1968), p.40. Originally published as *Le plaidoyer d'un fou* (1895).

threatened to disrupt traditional gender identifications.<sup>8</sup> For while he is well known as a misogynist, a reading of Strindberg as hysterical reveals his concerns about gender identity, and his own anxiety about and suppression of his feminine qualities. As Adolf Paul, the Finnish writer who first met Strindberg in 1892 argued, the playwright's war against women was 'the battle against the feminine element in himself. His misogyny was less a hatred of women than a feminine man's expression of need to stress his own virility'.<sup>9</sup> Plotting this need against the gender stereotypes of the nineteenth century and their disturbance by figures such as the New Woman and the effeminate, decadent man - and against the ideas of gender revealed by both Charcot's work on hysteria in men and women and the reception of those ideas in Victorian England - implicates both theatre and medicine in the construction of gender identity and enables us to locate a potential for gender disturbance within those arenas.

This chapter is thus divided into four main sections, each of which centres on my reading of one of Strindberg's plays in the context of the changes in the understanding of hysteria in the late nineteenth century. By this means Strindberg is revealed as a true contemporary of Freud, not only caught up within the same structures of knowledge of, and fascination with, hysteria and hypnosis, but producing uncannily similar results as, in his dramas of psychological naturalism, he revealed a growing understanding of hysteria which had remarkable parallels with Freud's thought. The first section of this chapter, 'The Hysterical Body: Hysteria as

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<sup>8</sup> For this grouping together of masculine women and feminine men see R. Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Legal Study*, trans. by Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia: Davis, 1892), and Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Desire in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> Meyer, *Strindberg*, p. 278



Suggestion and Spectacle’, focuses on the 1888 text, *Creditors*; the second section, ‘Hysterical Genders’, focuses on Strindberg’s own anxieties about gender disturbance in the last years of the nineteenth century, using the play *Comrades*, written in the period 1886 to 1888, in which he explored those anxieties in a dramatic comedy, and the third section, ‘The Hysterical Mind: Hysteria as Reminiscence’, examines the much later play *The Pelican*, written in 1907 for Strindberg’s own Intimate Theatre founded with August Falck. In a short fourth section, which has its basis in a reading of another 1907 Chamber play, *The Ghost Sonata*, I return to Freud and consider the further shift in his thought, when dealing with his patient Dora, which I argue disturbed the balance of attention which he gave to mind and body, privileging the mind at the expense of the body. I argue that this both reduced the complexity of his reading of hysteria and shifted the power relationship in favour of the physician. Following through the analogy between the development of theatrical styles and the understanding of hysteria, my critique of this further shift on Freud’s part reveals the importance of a different path for the theatre, if power is to belong to the performer and his or her audience, rather than with the narrator-figures discussed here and in the preceding chapter.

## **3.2 The Hysterical Body: Hysteria as Suggestion and Spectacle**

### **3.2.1 *Suggestion***

This section takes as its focus the 1888 play *Creditors*, enthusiastically described by Strindberg to his publisher Karl Otto Bonnier as a drama ‘with three characters, a

table and two chairs, and no sunrise!’<sup>10</sup> The three characters are Adolf, an artist, Tekla, his wife, and Gustav, her former husband, and the play proceeds by way of three long dialogues: between Adolf and Gustav (in which Adolf is seen to be ignorant of Gustav’s true identity), Adolf and Tekla, and finally Tekla and Gustav. In these dialogues, Strindberg can be seen to be centrally concerned with the question of mesmeric influence with which he had ended his previous play, *Miss Julie*. It is this influence, and its effect on the bodies of Strindberg’s characters, which I explore in this section. In doing so, I argue that while Strindberg claims at this time to be writing naturalistic drama, his focus on the spectacular, suggestible body belies such claims, instead revealing similarities to the melodramatic discourses of both theatre and hysteria which were discussed in Chapter Two.

Like Mathias in the 1871 melodrama *The Bells* which was discussed in the preceding chapter, the characters in that ‘first Naturalistic Tragedy in Swedish Drama’,<sup>11</sup> *Miss Julie*, had clearly seen ‘a Parisian who did extraordinary tricks. He sent people to sleep’.<sup>12</sup>

Haven’t you ever been to the theatre and seen a hypnotist? He says to his subject: ‘Take the broom!’, and he takes it. He says: ‘Sweep!’, and he sweeps –<sup>13</sup>

In a key moment in the text of *Creditors*, written immediately after *Miss Julie* in 1888, Strindberg staged a scene of suggestion and bodily symptom by which one man, the cuckolded and now ex-husband Gustav, gains power over the other, Adolf, his ex-

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<sup>10</sup> Strindberg, letter 21 August 1888, in *Strindberg’s Letters*, ed. and trans. by Michael Robinson, 2 vols (London: Athlone Press, 1992), I, p. 281.

<sup>11</sup> Strindberg, letter 10 August 1888, in *Strindberg’s Letters*, I, p. 280.

<sup>12</sup> Leopold Lewis, *The Bells*, in *Henry Irving and ‘The Bells’*, pp. 31-77 (p. 45).

<sup>13</sup> Strindberg, *Miss Julie* (1888), *The Plays*, I, pp. 113-161 (p. 160).



wife's new husband. Borrowing techniques from the stage hypnotists described by Miss Julie, stage performers from whom he is surely descended, Gustav uses gesture and word to suggest bodily behaviour to Adolf, inducing the symptoms of epilepsy:

*GUSTAV demonstrates vividly. ADOLF listens attentively, unconsciously imitating him. [...]*

*GUSTAV (slowly)* We'd be sitting, talking, he and I - and after a while, his face would go as white as chalk. His arms and legs went stiff, and his thumbs twisted around inside his hands, like this. (*Makes a gesture, which ADOLF imitates.*) Then his eyes became bloodshot, and he began to chew, like this. (*Chews. ADOLF copies him.*) The saliva rattled in his throat, his chest contracted as though it was being crushed in a vice, the pupils of his eyes flickered like gas-jets, his tongue whipped the saliva into a froth, and he sank - slowly - back - and - down - in his chair, as though he was drowning. Then -

*ADOLF (whispers)* Stop.<sup>14</sup>

In this scene, which foreshadows Adolf's eventual death at the close of the play, 'eyes quite still and staring, [...] white froth around his mouth' (*Creditors*, p. 220), Strindberg not only drew on the tradition of stage hypnotism utilized by men such as the Parisian who did extraordinary tricks mentioned in Lewis's play, but also on his knowledge of the work being done on the subjects of hysteria and hypnosis in France in the 1880s which reclaimed hypnosis from the hands of the quack-doctors for the purposes of medicine. We know that Strindberg was familiar with the work of the key figures in this endeavour - not only Charcot of the Salpêtrière but also his rival and

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<sup>14</sup> *Creditors*, in Strindberg, *The Plays*, I, pp. 169-220 (pp. 178-79). Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.

critic, Hippolyte Bernheim, of the Nancy school - at the time of writing *Creditors* because he discussed them in his essay, 'The Battle of the Brains', first published as part of the Viennese *Vivisektioner* series in 1887:

Dr Charcot assumes the possibility of suggestion only in hypnotized hysterics; Dr Bernheim goes somewhat further and admits that all who may be hypnotized are susceptible to suggested ideas.<sup>15</sup>

In *Creditors* Strindberg, who elsewhere described himself as an 'author-hypnotist',<sup>16</sup> made use of these ideas of suggestion developed by Charcot and his rival Bernheim. Focusing on the sexual triangle of wife, former husband and present husband, Strindberg staged a battle between the two men which is truly a 'battle of the brains', in which he employs current psychological ideas in place of the swords and duelling pistols that might earlier have resolved the quarrel. Writing *Creditors*, Strindberg situated himself within the early discourse of hysteria and hypnosis, utilizing the structures of psychological influence throughout the play through the series of dialogues - between Gustav and Adolf, Adolf and Tekla, Tekla and Gustav - in which each character tries to influence the other through the language of suggestion. Such a relationship is first hinted at by Adolf early in the play when he tells Gustav:

Your magnetism has infected me, you've been like a watchmaker, mending the works inside my head and winding up the mainspring. (*Creditors*, p. 176)

The notion of magnetic or hypnotic influence is central to the work of both Charcot and Bernheim with hysterical patients and, in Bernheim's case, the non-hysterical. Charcot's use of hypnotism at the Salpêtrière gave new respectability to the 'animal

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<sup>15</sup> Translation in Borge Gedso Madsen, *Strindberg's Naturalistic Theatre: Its Relation to French Naturalism* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1973), p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> Preface to *Miss Julie*, p. 108.



magnetism' of Mesmer, rescuing the technique from the 'host of quacks who utilized [... it] for well-paying stage demonstrations' and thus allowing others to explore its use in therapy.<sup>17</sup> However, he mistakenly visualized hypnotism as a diagnostic agent rather than a therapeutic tool, becoming convinced that mere susceptibility to hypnotism indicated that the subject was potentially hysterical. For Bernheim, in contrast, hysteria consisted simply of attacks occurring in persons whose psychological reaction to emotional traumata was exaggerated or distorted, a diagnosis not so very far removed from Freud and Breuer's later formulations.<sup>18</sup> Bernheim used hypnosis not as a diagnostic agent, but as an aid to treatment, as Breuer and Freud would attempt to do in the treatment of the cases described in *Studies on Hysteria*. He hypnotized his patients himself, using words alone, rather than magnetic instruments or other unusual techniques, and argued that hypnosis was merely extreme suggestibility, which could be regulated completely by psychological factors:<sup>19</sup>

To obtain these suggestive phenomena (without sleep) I do not need to hollow my voice with an authoritative tone, nor flash my eyes to overwhelm my subjects: I talk to them very simply, smiling, and obtain the effects, not from people deprived of their will, but from well-balanced individuals, who reason well, who make full use of their own will, some of them even revealing a spirit of insubordination.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Veith, *Hysteria*, pp. 239-40.

<sup>19</sup> Hippolyte Bernheim, *De la suggestion et de ses applications à la thérapeutique*. (Paris, 1884).

<sup>20</sup> Bernheim, address to the Convention of the French Association for the Advancement of Sciences in 1883, quoted by John Ward in *The Social and Religious Plays of Strindberg* (London: Athlone Press, 1980), p. 33.

Bernheim's *suggestion à l'état de veille* (suggestion in a state of wakefulness) held more attraction for Strindberg than Charcot's theories, because, says Børge Gedsø Madsen, it fitted the dramatist's own belief that human relationships are based fundamentally on the desire for power (Madsen, p. 49). In the essay, 'The Battle of the Brains', in which he summarizes the differences between Charcot and Bernheim, Strindberg asserted that 'suggestion is only the stronger brain's struggle with and victory over the weak and that this procedure is applied unconsciously in everyday life' (Ward, p. 34). In *Creditors*, Strindberg employed such ideas to show how each character influences the other in their daily interactions, 'the weak' being represented in turn by Tekla, the woman, or by Adolf, whom Strindberg describes as crippled, needing crutches both physical and mental - 'I am like a legless child, and my brain lies open' (*Creditors*, p. 189) and feminized and hysterical: 'I've had fainting fits once or twice, but the doctor says it's due to anaemia' (*Creditors*, p. 180). Anaemia is a specifically feminine condition for Strindberg, demonstrated by Gustav's later description of 'woman' as a case of 'chronic anaemia' (*Creditors*, p. 187).

Max Nordau's work *Paradoxes Psychologiques* (1885), which Strindberg read and was fascinated by in 1886,<sup>21</sup> contends that there is an aristocracy of intellect exercised through suggestion, so that 'the individual of a more perfect development operates by way of *suggestion* on him that is of a less perfect type'.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Gustav represents Strindberg's 'perfect type' in this drama. Adolf, unaware of Gustav's true identity, remarks that 'it's extraordinary how much you resemble Tekla sometimes when you talk' (*Creditors*, p. 181), but it later becomes clear that this is

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<sup>21</sup> Meyer, *Strindberg*, p. 174.

<sup>22</sup> Max Nordau, *Paradoxes*, trans. by J. R. McIlraith (London: Heinemann, 1906), p. 195.



because of Gustav's lingering influence over his ex-wife. She wears the clothes he taught her to like, the earrings which he gave her, and uses his language, as Strindberg, carrying out the practice which he describes in the Preface to *Miss Julie*, made 'the weaker repeat words stolen from the stronger, and permit[ted ...] the characters to borrow "ideas", or, as the modern phrase is, accept suggestion from each other'.<sup>23</sup> In their final dialogue, Gustav tells Tekla:

Do you remember when I first met you? You were a lovely child; a little slate on which your parents and governess had scrawled crows'-feet which I had to scratch out. Then I wrote new texts on you, texts of my own choosing, till you thought there was no room for more. [... A] woman is a man's child.

(*Creditors*, p. 212).

Not content with relying on this idea of suggestion in everyday relationships, Strindberg also used the methods rejected by Bernheim, who did not want to 'hollow my voice with an authoritative tone, nor flash my eyes to overwhelm my subjects', as he made it clear that Gustav was utilizing the tricks of the stage to mesmerize Adolf:

GUSTAV [...]Adolf! Will you obey me?

ADOLF Do what you want with me. I'll obey.

GUSTAV (*gets up*) Look at me.

ADOLF (*looks at him*) Now you're looking at me with those other eyes - that seem to attract me. (*Creditors*, p. 189)

The language here is unmistakable. Strindberg, and Gustav, seems unable to resist the kind of showmanship of action and language which we might associate more closely

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<sup>23</sup> Strindberg, *The Plays*, I, p. 103.

with the trickery of the stage examined in the preceding chapter: ‘Now I shall pass electricity into you’ (*Creditors*, p. 190). This staging of hypnosis and hysteria as spectacle, as theatrical trickery, underlies the action of the play throughout, even at moments which seem at first sight to be far removed from such chicanery. For example, Gustav *seems* to adopt the rhetoric of modern psychoanalytical therapy when exploring Adolf’s unease over his previous parting from Tekla:

ADOLF I’m frightened of you. How can you know that?

GUSTAV It’s simple. I have three known factors, and from them I work out the unknown. What did you say to her?

ADOLF I said - I only said three words, but they were dreadful, and I regret them.

[...]

GUSTAV No. You said something else, but you’ve forgotten it, perhaps because you dare not remember it. You’ve hidden it away in a secret drawer. Now you must open it.

But he is ultimately revealed to be using the techniques of the charlatan performer rather than the insightful physician:

ADOLF I don’t remember. [...] But how do you know?

GUSTAV I heard her telling the story on the steamer while I was on my way here.  
(*Creditors*, pp. 189-90)

Like Strindberg himself, Gustav is not afraid to use the ‘good old methods of theft, interception of letters, lies, forged signatures’ to strengthen his fatal influence over Adolf: in the central scene of confrontation between Adolf and Tekla he will direct the action from off stage, banging twice on the floor with a chair when Adolf starts to



‘falter’ (*Creditors*, p. 192). In relying on such melodramatic methods, Strindberg remained close to the spirit of Charcot’s work with hysteria which, as we have seen in Chapter Two, can be characterized as theatrical, relying on the power of spectacle - and, sometimes, the ‘coaching’ of the hysterical patients to suit the demands of the performance - to drive home its scientific message.

However, Strindberg went beyond both Bernheim’s suggestion and Charcot’s spectacle when he asserted that the struggle between weaker and stronger brains may be to the death, a psychical battle which ends in a physical conquest. In another essay in the *Vivisektioner* series, ‘Psychic Murder’, Strindberg explored this idea at greater length, giving examples from contemporary literature which include Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*, in which, said Strindberg, Ibsen had unconsciously touched on this modern phenomenon:

In ancient times one killed one’s opponent without trying to prove him wrong; now one creates a majority against him, puts him in the wrong, exposes his ideas, attributes ideas to him other than his own, robs him of his means of existence, denies him social standing, makes him ridiculous - in a word tortures and lies him to death or makes him go crazy instead of killing him.<sup>24</sup>

In *Creditors* Gustav indeed tortures and lies Adolf to death, denying him any belief in himself or his wife: ‘It seems to me that you have been growing all the while you have been digging into me so that when you go you’ll take all my entrails with you and leave only a shell behind’ (*Creditors*, p. 188). But as we saw in the inducing of

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Psychic Murder (Apropos *Rosmersholm*)’, trans. by Walter Johnson, *Tulane Drama Review*, 13.2 (1968), 113-118 (p. 115) (first publ. as ‘Själmörd (Apropos *Rosmersholm*)’ in *Tryckt Och Otryckt* III, (1891)).

epileptic symptoms in Adolf, Gustav's words are explicitly shown to write themselves on his rival's body, and the words are reinforced with physical gestures.

In his 'Psychic Murder' article, Strindberg described an example of hypnotism and suggestibility taken from a novella by Erckmann-Chatrian (playwrights of the original play, *Le Juif Polonaise*, on which *The Bells* was based) from which he may have drawn inspiration for the mechanics of such scenes. This provides us with an example of suggestion and influence which relies entirely on gesture and the speaking body for its effect, evoking resonances of the mimicry of hysteria which writes itself on apparently healthy bodies, men as well as women:

In a small town, several people hang themselves from a certain inn's sign. A psychologist arranges to keep watch from the window of the inn and discovers in the house across the street an old woman who [... bewitches the travellers]. To achieve her purpose, she disguises herself as the unfortunate victim. After she has caught his attention, she gradually gets him - playing on his mimetic instincts - to repeat her movements until the bewitched man climbs out through the window and hangs himself on the sign.<sup>25</sup>

Within the novella, the psychologist solves the problem by in turn dressing up as a 'female marionette' and giving the old woman a taste of her own medicine in which she is 'inspired' to kill herself. Thus the psychologist is transformed into detective, playwright and director, judge and executioner, just as Gustav takes on these multiple roles in his work of 'dissecting a human soul and laying out the bits and pieces' (*Creditors*, p. 192).

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<sup>25</sup> Strindberg, *Psychic Murder*, pp. 116-17.



### 3.2.2 *Spectacle: The Body Displayed*

Suggestion is itself a mental process, relying on the workings of the brain to achieve its full effect. But Strindberg, like Charcot in his almost obsessive observation of hysteria and like the protagonists of the Erckmann-Chatrian novella, seems in *Creditors* and the other plays written around the same time to be centrally concerned with the way in which that suggestion writes itself on the body. For Charcot this results in the hysterical symptoms which he can observe and describe; for Strindberg in bodily gesture and often the destruction or death of the body. As I show later in this section, not only Adolf's death at the end of *Creditors*, but also Miss Julie's exit in a hypnotic trance towards suicide and the Captain's silent and stricken body at the conclusion of *The Father* - all three plays written around the same time - fit this pattern.

That the body is central to *Creditors* is made explicit from the opening stage directions before even a word is spoken:

*ADOLF and GUSTAV are at the table, right. ADOLF is modelling a wax figure on a miniature stand. His two crutches are beside him. GUSTAV is smoking a cigar. (Creditors, p. 173)*

The wax figure which Adolf models is, we will later discover, the figure of Tekla, his wife. But as she herself points out, 'it hasn't got any face' (*Creditors*, p. 195). For the moment then, there is a faceless, speechless, naked female body on the stage, which will remain there throughout the 'battle of the brains' between Gustav and Adolf - a battle which centres on possession of the original. Here the female body is seen as an object, as something to be modelled by men. The crutches, too, speak of an already

maimed male body, marking Adolf as the weaker of the two men in the battle over the female body around which the play centres.

This focus on the body - particularly the female body, displayed before its audience - was of course central to our consideration of Charcot and his work in the previous chapter. And just as Charcot and his assistants sought to shape the responses of their hysterical patients in their public demonstrations, so both Gustav and Adolf are shown in Strindberg's play to be trying to shape Tekla to fit their own desires and needs. In each case, it is important to note, it is a female body that is on display, a female body that is offered to the audience as a spectacle, despite the fact that Adolf is the most obvious hysteric in Strindberg's drama. For although Charcot did recognise male hysteria, as we will see in the next section of this chapter, it was the observation and display of the female body which was central to his reputation as, to use Freud's description, a *visuel*. Anthea Callen writes that, 'Male hysteria remained 'invisible': men were neither illustrated in the *iconographies* nor used in the lectures'.<sup>26</sup>

In *Creditors* the shaping of Tekla to the desires of the male characters takes place at two levels. Via the medium of the wax figurine being modelled by Adolf, there is an explicitly physical control over the female body and its display. Adolf has in the past exerted a more direct physical influence over Tekla, just as his own feminized and crippled body is now worked upon by Gustav: 'I was the man, not the athlete you had left, I was the strong-willed magnetiser who massaged your slack muscles with my own nervous energy' (*Creditors*, p. 204).

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<sup>26</sup> Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, p. 55. Mark Micale offers a contrasting viewpoint in his work on Charcot and male hysteria, discussed in the next section of this chapter.



Here there are obvious parallels with Charcot's demonstrations discussed in Chapter Two. But there is also an attempt to shape Tekla, and the female body, through verbal means, not only through the language of suggestion and influence employed to gain power over her and which Gustav has used (like Charcot with his 'ventriloquized bodies') to 'write new texts on you, texts of my own choosing', but through the manipulation of language itself as Gustav reshapes Adolf's mental image of Tekla and of the female sex:

Have you ever seen a naked woman? Yes, of course. A half-developed man, a child stunted in mid-growth, a youth with udders on his chest, a case of chronic anaemia who has regular haemorrhages thirteen times a year.

(*Creditors*, p. 187)

Gustav, the 'teacher of dead languages' (*Creditors*, p. 189), thus uses words in order to teach Adolf to see in a different way, to interpret signs in a way that makes Tekla into an object. Adolf tells Tekla that through the medium of his paintings of her he 'compelled the public to look at you through my infatuated eyes' (*Creditors*, p. 205), but in pressing Adolf to re-examine Tekla's photograph Gustav works towards a different way of reading the signs:

GUSTAV Look at [the photograph of Tekla]. Is it like the picture you painted of her? No. The features are the same, but the expression is quite different. But you can't see that, because you project your own image in front of it.

(*Creditors*, p. 191)

Adolf is thus stranded in a position where all signs become misleading. This difficulty in reading woman's body is a recurring theme of the play, allowing Gustav's victory as Adolf becomes increasingly uncertain that his reading of Tekla is the right one. For

a time Adolf thinks that he has learned to read the signs anew, as when he tells Tekla that Bret Harte describes an adulterous wife as a pale creature who cannot blush, but Tekla shows how misleading a partial reading of such signs can be:

But surely when she meets her lover she blushes, even though her husband and Mr. Bret may not be there to see her do it? (*Creditors*, p. 198)

Words do play a part in the process of domination and of the struggle for power enacted within this play - men against woman, man against man - but it is the body, and the way in which that body is seen, which remains absolutely central. We must remember that in performance, the silent body of the figurine is ever present, sometimes veiled, sometimes not, but always a body that speaks to the audience, so that when Gustav describes women in such ugly, destructive terms the hideousness of his words is strengthened by contrast with the beautiful figure now draped in cloth which stands as another representation of woman's body.<sup>27</sup>

As Adolf seeks to write his own version of Tekla's mind and body through his sculpture, so his own body is written on by the dramatist, who cripples his body as his brain will eventually be crippled by Gustav. In contrast to the almost Nietzschean superman Gustav, Adolf is shown as physically weak and crippled; his opening statement of the effect of Tekla's absence - 'It was as if she'd gone off with my crutches' (*Creditors*, p. 173) - marks him out as the weaker character in both body and brain and foreshadows his collapse at the end of the play, 'sink[ing] down to the floor' (*Creditors*, p. 220), defeated in this battle of the brains. Adolf is reduced to

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Russo notes that the proximity of female grotesques (in which category Gustav's description of woman is clearly situated) to their attractive counterparts has a long history in the typology of Western art and theatre. Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1995). p. 40.



bodily mimicry by Gustav's suggestions and it is his body, rather than his mind, which eventually betrays him to death in an apparent restaging of Charcot's *grande crise hystérique*, with its epileptoid period marked by muscular spasms. Utilizing Bernheim's power of suggestion *à l'état de veille* combined with the melodramatic bodily movements staged by Charcot's hysterics and his own extreme theories of the power that mind can exert over body, Strindberg here can be seen to have written a drama that is, for all its concerns with language and memory, a text of the body. Figurine and crutches mark the performance from its opening moments; despite Gustav's ostensible interest in Adolf's memories it is his body that he seeks to damage.

So we can see that like Charcot, in his observation of his hysterical patients, Strindberg in this play concentrated on the realm of the physical symptom or what, thinking back to the preceding chapter, I will call the melodramatic moment. However, both men's work did contain the seeds of the future developments in the understanding of hysteria, with its focus upon the mental element of hysteria based on past psychic trauma. In her article 'Foucault, Freud and French Feminism: Theorizing Hysteria as Theorizing the Feminine', Beret Strong characterizes Charcot's theory as marking 'the cusp between [... the] classical age texts which foreground the organically mimetic quality of hysteria and Freud who identifies hysteria as the compulsive repetition of past psychic trauma'<sup>28</sup>. Here, Tekla says that 'one can't escape one's memories' (*Creditors*, p. 212), showing that Strindberg, too, looked forward to future concerns with memory and repetition in this drama. For the

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<sup>28</sup> Beret E. Strong, 'Foucault, Freud and French Feminism: Theorizing Hysteria as Theorizing the Feminine', *Literature and Psychology*, 35.4 (1989), 10-26 (p. 17).

moment, though, the focus is on the physical rather than the mental, body rather than word: it is Adolf's silent, rigid body that dominates the ending of the play. 'What, then, is hysteria?', Charcot questioned in his last essay on the subject in 1893:

We know nothing of its nature, nor about any lesions producing it. We know it only through its manifestations and are therefore only able to characterize it by its symptoms, for the more hysteria is subjective, the more necessary is it to make it objective in order to recognize it.<sup>29</sup>

Psychic murders, or suicides in which suggestion results in destruction of the body, also conclude the two other psychological dramas of this period, *The Father* and *Miss Julie*. In the former play mimesis and memory work together, as the Nurse takes the Captain back into memory and inspires his body to mimic the actions of his childhood in order to trap him in the straitjacket:

And I took your little body-garment, which was only of green wool, and held it in front of you and said: 'Put your arms in', and then I said: 'Sit still, now, and be a good boy while I button up the back!' (*She has got the straitjacket on him.*)<sup>30</sup>

In this scene and the subsequent scene with Laura and the Nurse, 'the Father' regresses back to childhood and reminiscence, into the safety of the 'mother's' breast:

May I rest my head on your lap? So. That's warm! Bend over so that I can feel your breast. Oh, it is sweet to sleep at a woman's breast, whether a mother's or a mistress's, but sweetest at a mother's! (*The Father*, p. 86)

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<sup>29</sup> Jean Martin Charcot and Pierre Marie, 'Hysteria mainly hystero-epilepsy', in *A Dictionary of Psychological Medicine*, ed. by Daniel Hack Tuke, 2 vols (London: Churchill, 1892), I, p. 628.

<sup>30</sup> Strindberg, *The Father* (1887), in *The Plays*, I (1964), pp. 27-87 (pp. 82-83). Subsequent references to this play are given after quotations in the text.



The Captain's hysterical mind represses the knowledge of the mother's betrayal, but his body, like that of Adolf's in *Creditors*, is broken by his battle and he lies mute on the stage, in a scene in which Strindberg returns once again to the question of knowledge and language, as the doctor accepts the limitations of his knowledge of the mind:

That is all. My knowledge ends here. He who knows more, let him speak.

(*The Father*, p. 87)

But despite the linking of memory and mimesis, *The Father* still stages hysteria in Charcot's terms as susceptibility to suggestion, as does the play written immediately before *Creditors*, *Miss Julie*. The final scene in which Miss Julie takes the razor from Jean is explicitly framed in the language of mesmerism; I began this section with an extract from the play in which Miss Julie remembers her experience of the staged spectacle of hypnosis. In the conclusion of this play Strindberg relied on the bodily melodrama of the surface, sending Miss Julie off into a kind of sleep, a middle ground between the full hypnosis of Charcot and the Nancy school's *suggestion à l'état de veille*.

This group of plays written in the mid-1880s, at a time when Strindberg was immersed in the literature of insanity, rely on the mechanics of hypnosis and suggestion to achieve their climaxes. In all three plays, although words are of course important, the ultimate weight of meaning is written on the body, the physical act is the climax of the play. But in their concerns with language, memory and knowledge on the way to those climaxes they foreshadow Strindberg's restaging of hysteria in *The Pelican*: a staging in Freudian terms, as a structure of memory and knowledge, repression and consciousness. It is to this representation of hysteria as the return of

the repressed that we will return in the fourth section of this chapter; in the next section I first examine Strindberg's own relationship to hysteria and gender, topics which we will see are not only central to *Creditors* but to all the plays discussed here.

### 3.3 Hysterical Genders

#### 3.3.1 *Strindberg and Hysteria*

Since there was no longer physical work to do at home, John lived exclusively an inner life of the imagination. [...] He dissolved the ties which bound him to the realities of life. He lived a dream life in foreign lands and in his own thoughts, and grew, which became more and more uncongenial to him.<sup>31</sup>

This girl, who was bubbling over with intellectual vitality, led an extremely monotonous existence in her puritanically-minded family. She embellished her life in a manner which probably influenced her decisively in the direction of her illness, by indulging in systematic day-dreaming, which she described as her 'private theatre'. (*SE* II, p. 22)

The first of these quotations is taken from Strindberg's *The Son of a Servant*, the autobiographically based fiction which deals with his childhood and adolescent years through a third party narrative; the second is already familiar, being taken from Joseph Breuer's account of Anna O.'s descent into hysterical illness which was discussed in Chapter One and which forms the first of the case histories reported in *Studies on Hysteria*. It seems appropriate to begin this section by setting these extracts side by side, not only because Strindberg's retreat into 'a dream life in foreign lands and in his

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<sup>31</sup> August Strindberg. *The Son of a Servant: The Story of the Evolution of a Human Being 1849-67*, trans. by Evert Sprinchorn (London: Cape, 1967), p. 75.



own thoughts' uncannily mirrors Anna O.'s embellishment of her life in her 'private theatre', but also because I want to argue here that what Strindberg himself was doing, in his autobiography, novels and plays, was both to construct his own case history and to carry out a kind of self-directed 'writing cure'. Michael Robinson addresses this point in *Strindberg and Autobiography*, asking how far Strindberg's autobiographical writing can be regarded as consonant with the talking cure developed by Freud and Breuer, and:

what, if anything, is to be made of the striking synchronicity wherein (as Gunnar Brandell points out), 'Strindberg during his Inferno crisis to some extent carried out a self-analysis, albeit presented in religious and moral terms, at virtually the same moment as Freud was embarking upon the self-analysis which forms the basis of *The Interpretation of Dreams*'?<sup>32</sup>

This synchronicity is indeed striking, but the argument does not stop there; I would argue that we can extend it still further. For it seems to me that this self-analysis was not merely confined to the Inferno crisis; the writing, not only of *Inferno* and the *Occult Diary* but also of *The Son of a Servant*, *A Madman's Defence* and plays such as *Creditors*, *Comrades* and *The Ghost Sonata*, can be identified as part of the pathology and also as part of the attempt to find a 'cure'. If we want to locate even more striking parallels with Freud's own experiences we might find them earlier in these writings, for in *The Son of a Servant* Strindberg recalled seeing:

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<sup>32</sup> Michael Robinson, *Strindberg and Autobiography: Writing and Reading a Life* (Norwich: Norvik Press, 1986), p. 21.

the maid [...] playing with his younger brother Pelle in a suspicious manner as he lay in bed. The little boy got angry and spat in her face. [...] He couldn't put [what the maid had done] into words; it was a delicate matter.<sup>33</sup>

Strindberg wrote elsewhere in the same book that 'that is how the maids educated him, and thus are we all educated by the lower classes. They take their unconscious revenge by restoring to our children the superstitions which we have cast aside'.<sup>34</sup>

Such memories echo Freud's own dreams during his self-analysis which formed the basis of *The Interpretation of Dreams* about that old woman, his nurse-maid, who 'was my teacher in sexual matters'.<sup>35</sup>

I begin, then, with a consideration of Strindberg as a man whose symptoms conform to the diagnosis of hysteria, before going on to explore the means by which he carries out that self-analysis to which both Brandell and Robinson refer. Such an exploration, not only of the hysterical symptom but also of the self-directed writing cure, reveals anxieties centred around the issues of gender and identity, issues which are confronted most directly in the 1888 play *Comrades* but which are rarely absent from Strindberg's work. It is these issues upon which I will focus in the final part of this section, situating Strindberg's symptoms and his writing in the context of Charcot's often neglected work with male hysterical patients.

If the hysteric, in the words of *Studies on Hysteria*, 'suffer[s] mainly from reminiscences', then Strindberg's continual need to recollect, reconstruct and reorder his past seems symptomatic of that condition. Again and again he re-visited key

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<sup>33</sup> *Son of a Servant*, p. 118.

<sup>34</sup> *Son of a Servant*, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Freud, Letter to Wilhelm Fliess, October 3 and 4, 1897. *Pre-Psycho-Analytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts*, SE 1 (1966), p. 262.



scenes and relationships in autobiography, fiction and drama which increasingly caught up with his life as he wrote it. Freda Uhl, Strindberg's second wife, confirms this impression, writing in her memoir of their relationship, *Marriage with Genius*, about Strindberg's memory in terms uncannily reminiscent of that 'unnavigable river' which Freud describes in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (SE VII, p. 16):

The murderous past had burrowed itself deep into his mind, as the river burrows its bed, and every new emotion flowed down that way and was caught in the maelstrom of memories. The past devoured the present, the Shadow devoured the Reality.<sup>36</sup>

Freda was not the only one to recognise such symptoms, although she perhaps did so more quickly than most of Strindberg's acquaintances: she records that she reacted to her first viewing of *Creditors*, just after meeting Strindberg for the first time, by stammering to her companion, 'Strindberg is ill. I must help him ...'<sup>37</sup>

Other aspects of Strindberg's behaviour and physical symptoms seem to echo aspects of the diagnosis of hysteria formulated by Freud and Breuer - not least among them his suffering with silence and language:

He suffered from a kind of aphasia, and inability or unwillingness to speak, which followed him for a long time in life till the reaction set in in the form of garrulousness, of an inability to keep his mouth shut, of an impulse to speak whatever came into his mind.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Freda Strindberg, *Marriage with Genius* (London: Cape, 1937), pp. 267-68.

<sup>37</sup> Freda Strindberg, p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> *Son of a Servant*, p. 73.

Perhaps though, being a man of the theatre, the playing out of his condition retained a degree of theatricality which is more consonant with Charcot's emphasis on hysteria as a spectacular disease. Freda's sister Marie Uhl observed him during his Inferno crisis and wondered whether 'these dramatic and often theatrical scenes were not staged to make a theatrical effect or to study the effect on the public [...] to whom these scenes were played'.<sup>39</sup> Here Marie seems to be interrogating Strindberg's illness in terms that reflect those set out by Robert Brudenell Carter in his 1853 treatise *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria*, which was briefly discussed in the preceding chapter. In that work, as we saw, Carter argues that after the first, genuine, hysterical attack the patient will often indulge a 'tertiary' form of hysteria in fits designedly excited by voluntary recollection:

It is highly probable that the sensations commonly experienced during the paroxysm, are in themselves agreeable, - the emotions producing it are often decidedly so, - while the fuss and parade of illness, and the sympathy consequent upon it, are frequently found to possess irresistible attractiveness. Besides all this, there is the gratification of exercising a newly-acquired power.<sup>40</sup>

It is tempting to locate Strindberg - whose obsessive writing and rewriting of his life evidences both a strong egotism and concern with the presentation of the self - within such an analysis, as Marie Uhl seems to do. But in the crossing of a line between private and public spaces, private and public 'theatres', Strindberg can also be seen to be replicating the terms of Anna O.'s disease, in which her 'private theatre' spilled

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<sup>39</sup> Meyer, *Strindberg*, p. 354.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria*, pp. 42-43.



over into her public and family life. Strindberg himself observed his own behaviour at the time of the Inferno crisis and wrote to Leopold Litmansson that:

My nervous system is rotten, paralytic, hysterical, with fits of crying that have nothing to do with drink [...] I can see myself objectively, something the he- and she-asses call my subjectivity, as if that were something bad.<sup>41</sup>

This split self of the hysterical patient, whose subjectivity is ‘something bad’, reflects the divide between the restrictions of the public space - ‘the grey monotony of everyday life and of his surroundings’ - and the dream life of the private mind. This doubling, or splitting, was familiar to Strindberg, for in *The Son of a Servant*, the account of his childhood years, he wrote that:

Not until he was older and had come to know a great number of men and had studied the mechanics of thought did he find out that the brain is a strange object that goes its own way, and that all men are alike in leading a double life: the one that can be seen and the one that can't, the one revealed by the thoughts they speak and the other by the thoughts they think.<sup>42</sup>

Hysteria, in these terms, has its seeds in everyone. Other symptoms also enact this crossing of the boundary between private and public spaces, between the space of the mind and the space of the body. Strindberg's mental sufferings wrote themselves upon his body as physical symptoms, just as hysterical fears and fantasies wrote themselves on the bodies of those first patients of Freud and Breuer: for example, in Anna O.'s paralysed arm or Frau Emmy von N.'s clacking tongue. Strindberg, explaining the scarred appearance of his hands to Freda, hinted at what Freud and Breuer in their

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<sup>41</sup> Strindberg, letter 9 January 1895, in *Strindberg's Letters*, II, p. 524.

<sup>42</sup> *Son of a Servant*, p. 94.

*Preliminary Communication* call ‘a “symbolic” relation between the precipitating cause and the pathological phenomenon - a relation such as healthy people form in dreams’ (*SE* II, p. 5). ‘Playfully, yet with a hidden seriousness’, Strindberg described himself to his wife as an ‘accuser with blood on his hand’, making just the kind of symbolic connection that we have come to associate with Freudian analysis:

On the mound of the thumb and the second joint of the fingers there are scars [...] apt to break open again at any time. [...]

‘An inheritance of my maternal impoverished ancestors, most likely.

When anything bad happens to me the wound opens and bleeds’.<sup>43</sup>

Strindberg also suffered from a classic component of Charcot’s *grande hystérie*: the epileptoid attack which forms the first of Charcot’s four stages of the hysterical crisis and which, in the play *Creditors*, Gustav induces in the weaker figure of Adolf through the means of suggestion. Writing to Verner von Heidenstam in October 1888, Strindberg complained that:

I’m now heading for epilepsy as a result of celibacy and unsatisfied sexual desire. [...] My fainting fits while asleep and my tongue-chewing are merely the consequences of celibacy - not of masturbation, for that helps a little, and dispels my melancholy. Without it, I’d have gone mad by now.<sup>44</sup>

Such a letter makes clear the link between Strindberg’s hysterical symptoms and his anxiety about his own sexuality. This anxiety is linked in to a wider concern about the rise of degenerate and subversive genders as the nineteenth century closed which he forcefully expressed not only in his dramatic writing but also in his collection of short

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<sup>43</sup> Freda Strindberg, p. 54.

<sup>44</sup> Strindberg, letter 13 October 1888, in *Strindberg’s Letters*, I, pp. 288-89.



stories, *Getting Married*, and in his autobiographical works. In the Preface to *Miss Julie*, for example, Strindberg wrote of his lead character as a ‘half- woman, the man-hater’ who has ‘stepped forward into the limelight’ of the age and ‘begun to make a noise’, one of a type who, speaking to friends in 1893, Strindberg suggested that ‘effeminate men instinctively select’, so that ‘they multiply and put into the world beings of an indefinite sex for whom life is cruel’.<sup>45</sup> Here Strindberg took on the tone of the scientific observer, of a disciple of naturalism; this is a technique which recurred throughout the rewriting of his life in autobiography, fiction and drama as he sought to distance himself from the pathology he discusses. But a letter that Strindberg wrote to Freda in London in August 1893, in which he took on elements of his character Adolf from the play *Creditors*, shows that such fears were in fact situated right at the heart of Strindberg’s own relationship:

Have you found out that I had adapted myself to you, that, unconsciously, I played the part of the weakling and had resigned the male role to you? Why? Because otherwise you would not have loved me. [...] I am the man of the future, so male a man that I do my utmost to conceal it. That’s why I play the part of the misogynist. My sex urge is so vigorous that it always leads me on to the good path, where there is an excess of love awaiting me, matched with the cruelty of woman.<sup>46</sup>

Strindberg’s concern here, as it appears to have been in so much of the writing to which I now turn to discuss, was to reclaim for himself the position of the strong male character and to explain away his apparent abandonment of ‘the male role’: here to

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<sup>45</sup> Strindberg, *The Plays*, I, p. 103; Freda Strindberg, pp. 50-51.

<sup>46</sup> Freda Strindberg, pp. 222.

Freda, elsewhere to his first wife Siri. He is often described in terms of a feminine other self which he had to repress and fight against, a self which led him to abandon the male role and then have to work to reclaim it through writings that pushed him towards a harsh misogyny. As we have seen, Adolf Paul argued that Strindberg's war against women was 'the battle against the feminine element in himself. His misogyny was less a hatred of women than a feminine man's expression of need to stress his own virility'.<sup>47</sup>

As his character Frederick will do in the play *The Pelican* which I focus upon in the next section, so Strindberg also took on the role of the psychoanalyst: not only did he suffer from reminiscences, but he tried to carry out the talking cure. Thus it is possible to draw on his writing about his life not just as a kind of personal case history from which to draw evidence of Strindberg's hysterical symptoms, but also as an attempt to create a written version of Anna O.'s talking cure, in which he revisited key scenes from the past and dragged them back into his conscious memory. Just as Freud helped his patients to construct a narrative of their lives through the talking cure, so Strindberg placed himself within narrative in these multiple volumes of autobiography.

Strindberg's dual role as both hysteric and therapist, as analysand and analyst, creates a complicated picture here, and makes the reading of that narrative fraught with difficulty. In his role as hysteric, it is interesting to note that he wrote both of his most intimate volumes, *A Madman's Defence* and *Inferno* in French, as if he, like Anna O., could not communicate such matters in his 'mother' tongue; in his role as

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<sup>47</sup> Meyer, *Strindberg*, p. 278.



analyst this kind of writing, which I have already characterised as framed from the point of view of a supposedly objective observer, can be seen as part of a process by which Strindberg tried to remove himself from his own pathology. In writing out this material, Strindberg seems to have wanted to create a kind of distance between himself and the man about whom he was writing: to have tried to distance himself, as objective, scientific observer, from that which he saw. In this context the Intimate Theatre in which the 1907 Chamber Plays (of which *The Pelican* is one) were staged takes on a clinical overtone, becoming an operating theatre in which Strindberg could explore the human soul. 'I can see myself objectively, apart from my person; the he- and she-esses call that my subjectivity', wrote Strindberg in his letter to Leopold Littmansson; in his writing he attempted to use that split between subjective and objective selves to alter his position in relation to events. In writing, Strindberg wanted to re-write. Paradoxically, then, this writing cure would never cure, for it was full of distortions: distortions which once again centred on Strindberg's relationships with women and his troubled attitude to gender identity. A brief consideration of a play with which we are already familiar, *Creditors*, serves to illustrate this point.

According to Michael Meyer, the publisher Joseph Seligmann to whom Strindberg first offered the play rejected *Creditors* because it was too intimate, too obviously descriptive of Strindberg's own marriage and deeply libellous of Siri von Essen.<sup>48</sup> Seligmann's view is borne out by the striking similarities between the relationships of Gustav, Adolf and Tekla with the relationships described by Strindberg in *A Madman's Defence*, the account of his first marriage in which

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<sup>48</sup> Meyer, *Strindberg*, p. 200.

Strindberg claimed that he would ‘examine my life, carefully, discreetly, scientifically’. Taking the comparison at its face value would thus lead us to situate Strindberg in the role of the new husband, Adolf, with Gustav embodying the real life role of Siri’s first husband, Baron Carl Gustaf Wrangel. But it is clear that through the process of depicting the characters in the drama and in the autobiographical work, Strindberg actually wanted to associate himself with Gustav, that Nietzschean Superman who is practised in ‘dissecting a human soul and laying out the bits and pieces upon the table’. In examining his life ‘carefully, discreetly, scientifically’, Strindberg can be seen to be taking on the role of the powerful, objective observer that he associated with Gustav, the controller of the domestic drama who eventually stages Adolf’s death. In writing, Strindberg was thus able to revisit this scene and reclaim the male role that he told Freda he has abandoned, rejecting Adolf’s role as ‘the scapegoat who had to be slaughtered’ (*Creditors*, p. 205). Meyer says that ‘Adolf was his present self; Gustav a kind of idealised future self’.<sup>49</sup> But there is a further layer of ambiguity about Strindberg’s relationship to this role and his attempt to align himself with this powerful male figure, an ambiguity expressed nowhere better than in Strindberg’s reaction to reading Nietzsche for the first time, just before writing *Miss Julie* and *Creditors*. Writing to Edvard Brandes on 4 September 1888, he memorably recorded that:

The uterus of my mental world has received a tremendous ejaculation of sperm from Friedrich Nietzsche, so that I feel like a bitch with a full belly!

He’s the man for me!<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Strindberg, *The Plays*, 1, p. 165.

<sup>50</sup> Strindberg, letter 4 September 1888, in *Strindberg’s Letters*, 1, p. 283.



Taking the metaphor of impregnation, by which the stronger mind influences the former, to its biological limit, Strindberg here situated himself in the position of the fertilised female, a peculiar choice for this ‘man of the future, so male a man that I do my utmost to conceal it’. Confusion over gender identity, ‘the battle against the feminine element in himself’, lies at the heart of Strindberg’s symptoms and at the heart of his writing, in which through characters such as Jean in *Miss Julie* and Gustav in *Creditors* he tried to create models of strong virile men who are able to exert power over the female characters. ‘Woman’, he claimed to Leopold Littmansson in a letter quoted by Freda in *Marriage with Genius*, is ‘a stunted intermediary stage between the child and the man’; Strindberg needed to reassure himself that this fact ‘is now fully established and becomes a part of the biological handbooks’ so as to remove himself from the anxiety that Adolf Paul describes as underlying the ‘feminine man’s expression of need to stress his own virility’.<sup>51</sup>

### 3.3.2 *Comrades*

It is in *Comrades*, a play which Strindberg worked on between 1886 and 1888, that he confronted these issues and anxieties most directly in his writing for the theatre.<sup>52</sup>

The play focuses on a marriage between two artists living in Paris - Axel and Bertha (the daughter of the destructive relationship which Strindberg explores in *The Father*)

-in which traditional gender roles are reversed:

ABEL Do you call yourself a man? You who are toiling for a woman and goes about dressed like a woman -

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<sup>51</sup> Freda Strindberg, p. 316.

<sup>52</sup> *Comrades*, in *Seven Plays by August Strindberg*, trans. by Arvid Paulson (New York: Bantam, 1972). References to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

AXEL I - dressed like a woman?

ABEL You have a bang and go barenecked, while she wears a high collar and has her hair cut like a boy! Watch out, Axel! Soon she will take the pants from you! (*Comrades*, p. 139)

Strindberg turned this coupling between an effeminate man and an educated, manly woman into a degenerate triangle by introducing the character of Abel, a masculine lesbian who corrupts and disturbs the possibility of a conventional relationship, playing one partner against the other. He thus created characters who represent what have come to be seen as archetypal figures of the decadent nineties in England - the New Woman and the sexual inverts of the effeminate man and the woman of apparently masculine sexuality - and also explored the idea of marriage between such types. Here Strindberg's work foreshadowed the debate which took over the pages of the London *Daily Telegraph* in August and September 1888, prompted by an article by Mona Caird in the *Westminster Review* where she suggested that a true spiritual union was possible only if marriage constituted a free contract between men and women, only if men and women could enter into a spirit of comradeship before marriage.<sup>53</sup>

Strindberg's title, and the statement by Axel early in the play about the foundation of the marriage - 'We have made an arrangement between ourselves to be as two comrades; and friendship is both finer and more enduring than love' (*Comrades*, p. 122) - aligns Axel and Bertha with the new sentiments articulated in

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<sup>53</sup> Mona Caird. 'Marriage', *Westminster Review* August 1888, 130, summarised in Walkowitz. *City of Dreadful Delight*, p. 167.



England by Caird. For the relationship to succeed, traditional gender boundaries must be subverted:

BERTHA With fire! Isn't it possible for a man and woman to live together as comrades without striking fire!

ABEL No. You may be sure that as long as there are two sexes, just as surely will there be fire.

BERTHA Well - then that's something that has to be done away with!  
(*Comrades*, p. 146)

Strindberg thus set up a thoroughly modern marriage for his careful and scientific examination: but in fact this is no marriage of comrades and equals, rather being a marriage in which Axel, like Strindberg himself, unconsciously plays 'the part of the weakling' and resigns 'the male role' to his wife. Abel says that 'it's about time that an example be set' of 'a wife having superiority over her husband' (*Comrades*, p. 132). Strindberg thus undermined the idea of the new marriage by forcefully presenting evidence to support his notion that the reversal of power is entirely to the benefit of the woman rather than to the man: Bertha is not afraid to use her feminine charms to exert pressure on her husband to obtain what she wants. In this passage it is for Axel to pay a visit to a member of the jury which is to judge both Axel's and Bertha's entry into a painting competition at the Salon, in order to plead for success on Bertha's part:

BERTHA [...] Now I am going to ask you again - and as nicely as I can. Raise me up from my inferior position, raise me to your level and I shall be grateful to you, I shall never again annoy you by reminding you of my position, Axel - never! [...] (*embracing him*) Yes, I *shall* ask you - I shall ask you until you

grant me my wish! Oh, now, don't act so proud - be human! There, now! (*She kisses him.*)

AXEL (*to WILLMER*) What do you say, Gaga? Don't you think women are terrible tyrants?

WILLMER (*uncomfortable*) Yes, especially when they are submissive! (*Comrades*, pp. 127-28).

Not content with simply undermining Bertha's position in this way, Strindberg worked to remove himself from the anxiety that his characters' gender disruption causes by writing an ending that restores the husband to masculine strength and punishes the degenerate wife with both marital and artistic failure. In order to help his wife, Axel substituted his picture for hers, so that Bertha's gloating over Axel's rejection by the Salon eventually rebounds against herself. In a dramatic confrontation at the end of the third act, in which Axel begins 'to see much of what happened in the past in its true light', he forces Bertha to her knees:

Now - look up to me - from where you are - below me! There is where you belong - it's the position you have chosen yourself. (*Comrades*, pp. 150-51)

Strindberg placed the New Woman even more securely within the confinements of traditional gender roles in the closing scene of the play. Going off to meet his new mistress, Axel tells his old wife that 'this one is no comrade. She is my mistress'.

BERTHA And wife-to-be?

AXEL Perhaps! For I want to see my comrades at the café - but at home I want to have a wife! (*Comrades*, p. 169)

Strindberg, both in his autobiographical works and in his dramas, sought to re-establish these gender roles, to make it clear what it should mean to be a wife, and



what, even more importantly for him in the context of the ambiguous gender identification which I have discussed above, it means to be a husband. Faced with an onslaught of manly women and effeminate men, Strindberg wanted to categorise himself securely as a manly man.

### 3.3.3 *Hysteria and Gender*

In the remainder of this section on 'Hysterical Genders', I want briefly to set this work on Strindberg's gender anxieties alongside Charcot's work on male hysteria which is identified by Mark Micale as partaking in the wider debate over construction of ideas of gender in the late nineteenth century. Charcot's identification of hysteria in both female and male patients - 61 case histories of male patients were published by Charcot in addition to the 73 female case histories with which readers on hysteria are more familiar - contributed to the critique of what Micale calls 'the highly polarized sex/gender system of the mid-Victorian period',<sup>54</sup> but, like Strindberg, Charcot can still be seen to have sought to distinguish between the sexes, imposing different frameworks of precipitating causes and symptomatology which reflected traditional notions of gender identity. As part of the drive towards establishing hysteria as a respectable scientific diagnosis, Charcot had to try to retain a distance from the nineteenth century concerns over gender identity, avoiding the gender stereotypes traditionally associated with hysteria which we have already encountered in our discussion of Strindberg's work: the libidinous female and the effeminate, or gender ambivalent male.

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<sup>54</sup> Micale, 'Hysteria Male/Hysteria Female', p. 213.

But despite Charcot's rejection of traditional ideas of hysteria which tied the condition to the female body via the etymology of the wandering womb, Micale argues that in his desire to avoid these dangerous and subversive sexual stereotypes, Charcot manipulated the details of his patients' case histories with the result that conventional gender stereotypes of acceptable behaviour for men and women were in fact rigorously enforced. Charcot's notes include many observations of effeminacy in his male patients, but he insisted in his lectures that:

Those adult men who are a prey to the hysterical neurosis do not always present, far from it, feminine characteristics; they are, at least in a great number of cases, robust men presenting all the attributes of the male sex; [...] men in whom one would be very astonished, unless forewarned, to meet with an affection considered by most as an exclusively female disease.<sup>55</sup>

In his descriptions of the secondary causal factors of the condition, and of the symptoms exhibited by his patients, Charcot seemed to further reinforce conventional gender stereotypes. Micale points out that over half of Charcot's female patients developed their hysterical symptoms as the result of 'an overpowering emotional experience', while the men remained immune to emotional experiences, developing hysteria as a result of a direct bodily threat, often occurring in a public workplace:

Women in his writings fell ill due to their vulnerable emotional natures and inability to control their feelings, while men got sick from working, drinking, and fornicating too much. Hysterical women suffered from an excess of 'feminine' behaviours, hysterical men an excess of 'masculine' behaviours.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Charcot, *Clinical Lectures on Diseases of the Nervous System*, III (1889), p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> Micale, 'Charcot and the Idea of Hysteria in the Male', p. 406.



In their symptoms, too, women and men exhibited conventional gender behaviour: women re-enacted emotional scenes in the third stage of the hysterical attack, the phase of *attitudes passionelles*, while men often missed out this phase altogether, concentrating on the violent physical movements of the first, epileptoid period of the attack. Micale suggests that Charcot's construction of a de-sexualized and de-emotionalized model of hysteria in the male is precisely that which enabled him 'to apply the hysteria concept to members of his own sex with such ease',<sup>57</sup> a parallel can be seen with Strindberg's creation of strong gender stereotypes which enabled him to distance the drama from his own anxieties over the breakdown of traditional gender boundaries. However, Micale argues that Charcot's elision of gender differences remained central to his vital role in developing understanding of hysteria, just as I have argued here that Strindberg's exploration of subversive sexualities enabled him to progress the development of the new psychological drama. Many symptoms found in women were also mapped onto the male bodies without change, the *globus hystericus*, the anaesthesias and hyperaesthesias, and most notably, the hysterogenic points in the ovarian region were found to exist in a number of adult male patients. These latter were labelled 'les zones pseudo-ovariennes' by Gilles de la Tourette, one of Charcot's assistants. In such transfers of symptoms across gender boundaries gender identity seems to break down.

In the context of the understanding of hysteria in the nineteenth century prior to Charcot, with its strong emphasis on gender as implicated in the aetiology of the condition, it is interesting to note that while Charcot's work on female hysterics was

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<sup>57</sup> Micale, 'Charcot and the Idea of Hysteria in the Male', p. 408.

translated and discussed to a degree in Britain, his work on male hysteria was largely ignored. Micale suggests that this may be because of a difference in the social, cultural and psychological attitudes of doctors in Britain and France:

In an age of medical materialism, and within the highly moralized context of Victorian culture, chronic nervous disease ceased to connote a refined sensibility or Romantic eccentricity. Rather, it now implied a form of physical and mental degeneracy and a crude and uncontrolled emotionality.

For middle-class male diagnosticians then, these associations were especially unacceptable in regard to individuals of their own sex and class. [...] And perhaps most disturbing, it suggested the possibility of exploring the feminine component in the male character itself.<sup>58</sup>

Certainly William Anderson, writing about *The Hysterical and Nervous Affections of Women* in 1853, felt that the subjects of hysteria ‘in its true form, are females, [...] they are of a much more excitable temperament than the other sex’.<sup>59</sup> We thus return full circle to Strindberg, fighting ‘the battle against the feminine element in himself’. Underneath these apparently radically new representations lay the conventional stereotypes - requiring a still newer mode of representation to find full expression. It is in the plays which Strindberg wrote some twenty years later, for the Intimate Theatre which he founded with August Falck in 1907, that I want to suggest that such a shift can be identified, as Strindberg moved away from a concern with the materiality of bodily symptoms, away from the corporeal melodrama which marked the climax of the plays written in 1887 and 1888 such as *Creditors* or *Miss Julie*, and

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<sup>58</sup> Micale, ‘Hysteria Male/Hysteria Female’, p. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, *Hysterical and Nervous Affections of Women*, pp. 3-4.



instead towards an almost Freudian understanding that the bodily symptom is a sign or metaphor for what cannot be said in the language of speech. It is to an examination of one of these Chamber Plays, *The Pelican*, that I now turn.

### 3.4 The Hysterical Mind: Hysteria as Reminiscence

Sh! I know I'm walking in my sleep. I know I am. But I don't want anyone to wake me up, I couldn't live if they did. [...] Oh how many things there are I don't exactly know, but have an inkling of! Do you remember as a child —? They called you evil if you spoke the plain truth. [...] So then I learned to hold my tongue. Then they began to tell me what a pleasant disposition I had. So then I learned to say things I didn't mean at all.<sup>60</sup>

In his 1907 play *The Pelican*, Strindberg returned to the issue of maternal influence and feminine power which had concerned him in different ways in each of the plays discussed in the previous sections. The play takes as its central image the idea of the Pelican who feeds her young with its own blood, and then subverts that image as the mother figure of this drama is revealed by her children, Frederick and Gerda, to be a monster who has starved them and their father whilst herself growing fat:

She had her meals in the kitchen in the morning and let us have what was left over, thinned out and warmed up, she skimmed the cream off the milk, that's why we're poor, miserable children, always sick and hungry. (*Pelican*, p. 182)

Here, however, Strindberg's focus shifted from a theatre of display to what Gerda, the daughter of the family, calls 'the plain truth'. Just as Freud and Breuer came to

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<sup>60</sup> *The Pelican*, trans. by Evert Sprinchorn, in *The Chamber Plays: 'Storm Weather', 'The Burned House', 'The Ghost Sonata' and 'The Pelican'*, trans. by Evert Sprinchorn. Seabury Quinn, Jr., and Kenneth Petersen (New York: Dutton, 1962). pp. 153-201 (p. 177). Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.

understand, through the work that resulted in the 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*, that hysteria was ‘a question of things that the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed’ (*SE II*, p. 10), so Strindberg in *The Pelican* seems to have begun to understand that his characters’ broken psychologies are rooted in their childhood experience in which they have been taught to repress and suppress the truth. Gerda, whose distorted acquisition of language is described in the quotation which begins this section, ‘learned to hold my tongue’ (*Pelican*, p. 177); Frederick, the son, says that he told the truth as a child and was whipped for ‘tattling - or lying, to use your other word for it. As soon as you heard an honest word you called it a lie’ (*Pelican*, p. 192).

In contrast to the drama *Creditors*, where neither Adolf nor Tekla are concerned to find out the ‘truth’ of their situation until it is much too late, *The Pelican* takes the form of a journey of discovery by Frederick and Gerda as they re-examine their memories and bring them out into the open, thus learning to ‘read’ their mother anew. They discover a woman who taught them to say ‘ugly, insinuating things’ (*Pelican*, p. 198) to their father, the true pelican who ‘picked himself clean for us’ (*Pelican*, p. 201), a woman who nourished them not with her life’s blood but with stale rye bread, mustard and vinegar (*Pelican*, pp. 197-98), a woman who seduces her son-in-law, Gerda’s husband, so effectively that he tells her, ‘you plucked [... Gerda] out of my heart and mind, pushed her aside everywhere’ (*Pelican*, p. 171). We have previously seen Steven Marcus describe as the successful course of psychoanalytic treatment a process in which ‘at the end - the successful end - one has come into



possession of one's own story'.<sup>61</sup> In *The Pelican*, in a reversal of the process in *Creditors* whereby Adolf is betrayed into an erroneous reading of Tekla, Frederick and Gerda do learn to re-read the signs which they have been reading in error throughout their lives, and thus come into possession of their own story. The knowledge, however, results in an equally destructive end as that which overcomes Adolf in *Creditors*: Frederick, having come into possession of a story which involves betrayal by his mother and by the language of society itself, sexual knowledge and the infant's seduction, sets fire to the house: 'Everything had to burn up, otherwise we could never get out of here' (*Pelican*, p. 200).

In *The Sexual Fix*, Stephen Heath succinctly describes the shift of emphasis from body to word which I trace in this section. 'Charcot sees, Freud will hear. [...] Seeing is believing: Charcot's greatest error, he becomes a spectator, believes what he sees [...]; hearing is doubting: Freud's - difficult and hesitant - move'.<sup>62</sup> What is at stake here - and what I argue that Strindberg was also working towards in this chamber play for his Intimate Theatre - is a move away from the materiality of the bodily symptom to a focus on the psychic trauma that lies behind the symptom and which causes it: a trauma which is explored through speech and, even more importantly, through the act of listening. As we have seen in Chapter Two, Charcot 'looked carefully at hysterical women, [but] he paid very little attention to what they were saying'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History', pp. 71-72.

<sup>62</sup> Heath, *The Sexual Fix*, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Showalter, *The Female Malady*, p. 154. In *The Spectacular Body*, Anthea Callen relates this different access to 'language, or access to a listening ear', to the differing class status of Charcot's patients and those of Freud and Breuer (pp. 58-59).

In contrast, I argued in Chapter One that in the case histories discussed in *Studies on Hysteria* Freud and Breuer took on the role of a true 'audience' for the hysterical woman, *hearing* as well as seeing, working with both body and word. Freud recognised a double dialogue of speech and symptom which it was the analyst's task to read: he characterized the symptom as 'joining in the conversation', and in his early work with the patients discussed in *Studies on Hysteria* he wanted to listen as well as watch, in contrast to Charcot who founded his work on observation alone. During the work with their female hysterical patients which resulted in publication of their 'Preliminary Communication' in 1893 Freud and Breuer came to understand that by means of what Freud calls the process of conversion - 'the transformation of psychical excitation into chronic somatic symptoms' - the body speaks for the mind, as it stages the knowledge that the mind refuses to know (*SE* II, p. 86). This split between what is known and what is repressed in speech but speaks through the body, and the analogous split between the surface drama and what lies underneath, can be seen as central to both Freud's construction of hysteria and to Strindberg's authorial progress. Strindberg, making use of his new understanding of the importance of speech and silence, and of language as an agent of concealment in society - 'When people get together they talk, talk, talk, all the time, just to hide their thoughts' (*Pelican*, p. 178) - was enabled to write a new kind of theatre which staged a more modern interpretation of hysteria, founded in the split between knowledge and refusal to know, which wrote itself on the body in ways more subtle than the frothing blood at Adolf's mouth in *Creditors*.



Where the body was central to *Creditors*, the word - and its manipulation - was central to *The Pelican*. Strindberg focused attention on the relationship between body and duplicitous language through Gerda's words to her husband:

There are feelings which resemble fear, but are really something else. And gestures that say more than looks. And words that conceal what gestures and expressions couldn't reveal. (*Pelican*, p. 185)

Here language is given primacy over gesture. Gerda's acquisition of society's language, which for her is the process of learning how to lie, enforces the split between what she knows and what she is 'allowed' to know. Being forbidden true speech will lead to her suffering from reminiscences:

How can I ever forget all that lies in the past? Isn't there some drug that wipes out all one's memories without snuffing out one's life? If only I had the strength to escape. (*Pelican*, p. 198)

As we have seen in Chapter One, hysteria, and its talking cure, is constructed around the tension between the refusal of knowledge and the desire for knowledge, both on the part of the speaking patient and on the part of the physician who seeks to construct a total narrative from the patient's gaps, silences and conversion symptoms, in which both mind and body are implicated. The hysteric 'knows' what, within patriarchal society, she cannot be allowed to know - sexual abuse or the fantasy of sexual seduction - and, unable to express such knowledge within language, it is repressed, finding its way out via conversion to bodily symptoms. What cannot be said is still desired to be told; and what cannot be known is in fact desired to be known - not least by the psychoanalyst.

It is Frederick, the son of the 'Pelican', to whom Strindberg, mirroring his own life, gives the role of both Freudian psychoanalyst and hysterical patient in this play. The now dead father was apparently himself a victim of the kind of psychic murder discussed in Strindberg's *Vivisektioner* essays, unable to participate in the talking cure which the son and daughter will eventually share: he 'seemed to want to say something, many times, but the words never got past his lips' (*Pelican*, p. 179). Silent whilst alive, his influence lingers in his son, to whom he leaves a letter which is rescued from the fire which the miser mother has left unlit. Prompted by the revelations in the letter - 'The dear mother who gave us life was nothing but a thief!' (*Pelican*, p. 182) - Frederick begins to operate as a kind of Freudian therapist, dragging memory out of his sister and also from himself, in a restaging of the self-analysis which formed the basis of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The truth from the past gradually emerges, and it is structured in terms of the mother's failure to nourish her children, either physically or emotionally, which has left them stunted, and also in terms of the scene of infant seduction.

Frederick's task is a difficult one. Gerda acknowledges her repression of memory and asserts her reluctance to explore the hidden knowledge within her: 'I knew this all along - but I didn't want to. I closed my mind to it because it was too awful' (*Pelican*, p. 182). To return to Freud and Breuer, 'it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget'. Throughout the play Strindberg explicitly focuses on the role of language in aiding that repression and covering up the truth. Gerda's words quoted at the beginning of this section reveal a process of learning in which she 'learned to say things I didn't mean at all': "'You're so evil-minded", they always said to me when I told them that something ugly was ugly' (*Pelican*, p. 177). Frederick



attacks his mother with the accusation that ‘you didn’t learn to talk like other children; you learned to lie from the first word’ (*Pelican*, p. 192) and reminds her: ‘I remember when you first taught me how to lie. I was hardly old enough to talk. Remember?’ (*Pelican*, p. 190).

Language here, as Freud was also to discover in his work with his hysterical female patients, functions as both an agent of deception which conceals the truth and as an agent of the conventions of society which drive the hysteric into hysteria, and the refusal of language altogether. Lies cover up the truth; but the hysterical body pushes itself back into the narrative, its symptoms hinting at the truth that words conceal, just as here the father reaches back from the dead to begin the process by which Gerda and Frederick uncover the lies that they have told and been told. Michael Robinson points out that there are ‘some three hundred dashes and suspension points in the text as well as numerous specifically marked pauses’ which confirm that ‘*The Pelican* contains a rich flow of thoughts and feelings that cannot always be directly articulated by its *dramatis personae*’;<sup>64</sup> the gaps and silences of the text hint at the existence of the deeper truth that language seeks to conceal, and what is not said is as important as what is said. Lies are also enforced and demanded by a society and family that does not want to confront the ‘ugly’ truth: ‘they talk, talk, talk, all the time, just to hide their thoughts’ (*Pelican*, p. 178). Strindberg originally argued this point forcefully in his autobiographical account of his childhood, *The Son of a*

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Introduction’, in August Strindberg, *The Pelican and The Isle of the Dead*, ed. by Michael Robinson (Birmingham: Department of Drama and Theatre Arts, University of Birmingham, 1994), pp. 7-33 (p. 21).

*Servant*, where he condemned the family roundly for forcing his alter ego, John, to admit guilt for something which he had not in fact done:

Sacred family! Divinely appointed and unassailable establishment where future citizens are to be educated in truth and virtue! The supposed home of all the virtues, where innocent children are tortured into their first falsehood, where wills are broken by tyranny, and self-respect killed by jostling egos. The Family!<sup>65</sup>

John's lie is forced from him in order that he admits guilt for a sin which he has not committed; Frederick's lie in *The Pelican* is revealed to be more sinister, a lie through which he is forced to conceal a sin committed against his infant body. The secret at the heart of *The Pelican*, like that at the heart of the case history of Katharina set out as the fourth study of *Studies on Hysteria*, is the scene of infant initiation into sexual secrets, of the infant's seduction. Frederick, refused breastfeeding by his mother, was introduced to sexual secrets in the home of their nursemaid's sister, a prostitute:

There I got to see all the most secret, intimate scenes [...]. When I told you about it - I was only four years old - when I told you what I had seen in that house of sin, you said it was a lie and you struck me for lying, but I was telling the truth. This encouraged the nursemaid - she thought you approved - so she initiated me - at the age of five- into all the secrets. Five years old. (*He starts to cry*). (*Pelican*, p. 191)

Sexual knowledge, and the infant's seduction, is thus at the heart of those reminiscences from which Frederick suffers. Unable to find an audience for this

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<sup>65</sup> Strindberg, *Son of a Servant*, p. 35.



terrible truth he has been unable to react to the trauma of this experience. To return once again to Freud and Breuer, ‘social circumstances made a reaction impossible’ (*SE* II, p. 10).

Both children are marked emotionally and physically by the effects of their mother’s ill-treatment, made explicit in the case of Gerda who remains within a child’s body despite her marriage: ‘twenty years old and she hasn’t filled out yet’ (*Pelican*, p. 156). Frederick urges his mother to ‘look at Gerda, with her flat chest’ and Gerda herself tells her that she will never be able to have any children - ‘the doctor has told me’ (*Pelican*, p. 191, p. 199). The failure of the mother to nourish is thus written on the body of the daughter, while the failure of the mother to hear her children’s truth remains written in the memories of both son and daughter:

THE DAUGHTER [...] I’ll forget. I want so much to forget.

THE SON It’s all over for us, Gerda. Nothing to look forward to, no one to look up to. ... Impossible to forget. (*Pelican*, p. 183)

Despite their discoveries, the refusal of the mother and of Gerda’s husband to hear what the children have to say, and the inability of Gerda to apologise to her father for the lies she told at her mother’s urging, means that neither she or Frederick can<sup>be</sup> cured by talking: the attempt to do so must inevitably fail. There is no Freud or Breuer to help them restructure their past, and they remain trapped in memory, unable to act:

If I could only do the cruel things I want to do, you - you wouldn’t exist any more! Why should it be so difficult to be so cruel? When I lift my hand against you, I only hurt myself! (*Pelican*, p. 199)

The play has to end in death, the only escape, as the son sets fire to the home in a staging of catharsis which is the only possible resolution: ‘everything had to burn up,

otherwise we could never get out of here' (*Pelican*, p. 201). As the flames build brother and sister regress into their childhood memories, reliving the past in a dream that reunites them with an idealized mother:

Poor Mama! She's not with us, did we leave her on the shore? where is she?

I don't see her anywhere, it's no fun without Mama. There she comes! — now it's summer again! (*Pelican*, p. 201)

In this later play, then, Strindberg absorbed into his text the knowledge that was the basis for Freud's psychoanalysis, embodying in his drama the ideas articulated by Freud and Breuer in the 1895 *Studies on Hysteria* and which drew their foundations, like Strindberg's own work, from the obsessions of the age with hysteria and hypnosis. The shift in thought represented by both Freud and Strindberg, in *The Pelican*, demonstrates a similar relation to the material discussed in the previous section, a move beyond observation to exploration, from, in Stephen Heath's terms, seeing to hearing. This can be traced in the development of work on hysteria from Charcot to Freud, and in the theatre movement from the dumb show of melodrama through the convulsive body of Adolf in *Creditors* to the compulsive exploration of memory that drives Frederick and Gerda in *The Pelican* in a new kind of psychological naturalism. Writing for the Intimate Theatre (a name resonant with memories of medical spaces for examination and operation) Strindberg was able to put into practice his demands for a more naturalistic theatre which began with the preface to *Miss Julie*. Writing to Adolf Paul in 1907 in the hope that he might be interested in contributing to the work of the Intimate Theatre, Strindberg suggested that a chamber play should be:



intimate in form, [with] a restricted subject, treated in depth, few characters, large points of view, free imagination, but based on observation, experience, carefully studied; simple, but not too simple; no great apparatus, no superfluous minor roles, no regular five actors or 'old machines', no long-drawn-out whole evenings.<sup>66</sup>

Despite *Miss Julie*'s claims as the 'first Swedish naturalistic drama',<sup>67</sup> the use of ballet and pantomime and the ending against the backdrop of the sunrise betrayed Strindberg's intentions, as he himself seemed to realise when describing *Creditors* as being even better, 'with three characters, a table and two chairs, and no sunrise!'<sup>68</sup> Both those plays, however, relied on the drama of the silent body manipulated by the 'author-hypnotist'; even though *The Pelican* ends with the red glow of fire visible through a door at the back of the stage, the last words are given to Frederick and Gerda in their regression into memory. Reminiscences are spoken in words, not enacted on the body.

In *Studies on Hysteria* the body remained important to Freud and Breuer through the process of conversion, as it remained important to Strindberg, writing *The Pelican* for the realm of theatrical space, but the relationship to the body had changed: it was psychology, rather than anatomy, with which these writers were now concerned. Strindberg was still concerned with the dissection of the human soul, yet he had moved on from Gustav's wish in *Creditors* to lay 'out the bits and pieces here on the table'. The Intimate Theatre was now the site for a psychological dissection in which Strindberg moved closer and closer in to the minds of his characters in order to

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<sup>66</sup> Strindberg, letter 6 January 1907, in *Strindberg's Letters*, II, p. 734.

<sup>67</sup> Strindberg, letter to Joseph Seligmann 22 August 1888, in *Strindberg's Letters*, I, p. 281.

<sup>68</sup> Strindberg, letter 21 August 1888, in *Strindberg's Letters*, I, p. 281.

expose the corruption within them which had been wrought by society. As yet, though, the body was not abandoned completely: in *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer read the double symptom of body and word, allowing the body to ‘join in the conversation’. In the last section of this chapter, which examines *The Ghost Sonata* along side Freud’s case history of Dora, I argue that his eventual dismissal of the bodily symptom, turning full circle from Charcot, reduced his ability to let the hysteric speak true, forcing her back into language. Strindberg’s enthusiastic claim to the actors of the Intimate Theatre can be seen as double-edged in such a context: ‘I am inclined to consider the spoken word most important. You can present a scene in the dark and enjoy it, if only the actors speak effectively!’<sup>69</sup>

### 3.5 The Hysterical Body, The Hysterical Mind

Drawing together the discussion of Strindberg’s dramas in the preceding sections, we can now trace out a progression from an emphasis on the hysterical body, personified in Adolf’s convulsive death at the close of *Creditors*, to an exploration of the hysterical mind in Frederick’s self-analysis in *The Pelican* and through Strindberg’s own work of self-exploration in his autobiographical writings, fiction and plays. This process of reading reflects that undertaken by Freud and Breuer in their case histories in *Studies on Hysteria*, a reading of the double symptom of body and the word. We have seen, too, how Strindberg’s own anxieties about gender distorted the production of his case history and the process of the writing cure: the reading of the sign may, as we know, be affected by the desires of the one who reads.

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<sup>69</sup> August Strindberg, *Letters to the Intimate Theatre*, trans. and introduced by Walter Johnson (London: Owen, 1967) p. 24.



In this concluding section, I want to focus attention on another distortion in the development of understanding of hysteria, by which, by the time Freud came to analyse the case of Ida Bauer, his famous hysteric ‘Dora’ whose case history was set out in Chapter One, he seems to have himself lost sight of the body: ‘anyone who studies hysteria, therefore, soon finds his interest turned away from its symptoms to the phantasies from which they proceed’. Freud and Breuer, in *Studies on Hysteria*, did seem to be considering both the visual sign and the verbal sign, reading the true complexity of the language of hysteria and allowing the physical symptom to ‘join [...] in the conversation’ (*SE* II, p. 296). But by the time of Dora’s case Freud was completely caught up in the verbal system, abandoning the body except to the extent that its symptoms could immediately be pressed back into words.

Again we might draw a parallel with the development of Strindberg’s work, for his theatre can be seen to have become ever more intimate in the clinical sense, moving from a focus on bodies to a focus on ideas which are free of sexuality, disease or corruption (despite needing to retain the body as part of the mechanics of theatre, just as Freud cannot wholly abandon the body as the site of conversion). The set of his 1907 play *The Ghost Sonata*,<sup>70</sup> written like *The Pelican* for the Intimate Theatre, moves during the play’s three acts from the outside of ‘a fashionable house’ into the drawing room and finally into an inner room full of hyacinths of all colours as the young Student moves closer to the Daughter, the hyacinth girl, with whom he has fallen in love from outside the window: ‘When one stands face to face with the unattainable, what else can one do but despair?’ (*Ghost Sonata*, p. 438). Each move

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<sup>70</sup> *The Ghost Sonata*, in Strindberg, *The Plays*, 1, pp. 423-67. Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.

seems to take us away from the corruption of the world and towards the purity of the relationship between the young Student and the young girl, but the strong smelling hyacinths mask the smell of inner corruption: the Daughter is dying. The Student, and Strindberg, seem to retreat from humanity into the world of the mind, seeking refuge with the figure of Buddha. The play closes:

STUDENT Unhappy child, born into this world of delusion, guilt, suffering and death, this world that is for ever changing, for ever erring, for ever in pain! The Lord of Heaven be merciful to you on your journey.

*The room disappears. Böcklin's painting of the Island of the Dead appears in the background. Soft music, calm and gently melancholy, is heard from the island outside. (Ghost Sonata, p. 467)*

Strindberg can here be seen to be rejecting the corporeal, shown to be tainted with sickness, pain and suffering. In a similar shift, Freud also moved away from the body, wanting to bring everything back to a meaning that could be expressed in words. Even more importantly, as I have argued in Chapter One, he wanted to choose those meanings and words himself in the process of producing 'an intelligible, consistent, and unbroken case history', rather than allow the patient, Dora, to do so:

If a patient exhibits doubts in the course of his narrative, an empirical rule teaches us to disregard such expressions of his judgement entirely.

(*SE VII*, p. 17, fn. 2)

Despite a focus on the word, Freud can thus be seen to have aligned himself with Charcot who fails to hear what the patient is saying; abandoning the body too meant that Dora's case history was not her own, but rather another version of Freud's own case history in which he explored his problems in overcoming Dora's resistance to



treatment. Dora was 'obliged to admit' Freud's interpretation of her loss of voice (*SE VII*, p. 39); Freud insisted on clarity of language, the naming of everything with no room for subterfuge, although he of course fell back on just this kind of subterfuge to declare, '*J'appelle un chat un chat*' (*SE VII*, p. 48). The relentless bringing of everything into his own language is, finally, what provoked Dora's departure: she was not allowed a space in which to speak.

In the same way, Strindberg's texts can ultimately be seen to reject the body, and its potential for the creation of meaning; perhaps because his play texts, like Freud's case histories, are really about himself rather than about the characters and ideas they purport to discuss. This examination of Strindberg and Freud together teaches us, then, that what is needed is a mode of representation which combines the power of gesture and word and asks the audience to actively read that combination: to make the translation for themselves, working with the actor, rather than relying on 'the grey-bearded father and a red-wigged countryman' of Dickens's description of melodramatic dumb-show to do it for them.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter has used the writings of August Strindberg - plays, autobiography, fiction and letters - alongside a narrative of developing understanding and responses to hysteria in the late nineteenth century, in order to illuminate and interrogate changes in both theatre and hysteria. In the main parts of the chapter I have identified a shift in focus from the bodily display of melodrama which, despite Strindberg's desire for naturalism at the time that *Creditors* was written, colours the workings of that play, towards a psychological realism which is played out in *The Pelican*, with its

story of memory and repression. In tandem with this discussion of developing psychological knowledge, my examination of *Comrades* has enabled a consideration of the anxieties about identity and gender which were themselves a key concern of the new psychologies.

My concern with these plays has of course been mainly historical, in utilizing their changing concerns as a barometer of shifts in psychological understanding, but it is perhaps worth noting here that the Intimate Theatre, for which *The Pelican* was written, was founded precisely to bring the audience and the stage actors into close relations, enabling the audience to read more subtle acting techniques than would previously have been possible. The small independent theatres which were founded across Europe in the 1880s and 1890s can be seen as opening up the possibilities for reading performance, and thus for creating performance which needed to be read in new ways.

Strindberg does, as I have argued in my discussion of *The Pelican*, seem to have started along this route. But my brief discussion of *The Ghost Sonata* and Freud's writing of Dora's case history demonstrates that his desire to abandon the body (so far as it is possible to do so within the parameters of performance) leads once more to closure rather than openness, just as Freud's insistence on imposing his own meaning on Dora's case, ignoring or misreading the symptoms of her speaking body, led to her leaving his care, taking 'effective revenge' by 'demonstrating upon her own person the helplessness and incapacity of the physician' (*SE* VII, p. 120). Despite its concern with psychology, then, such theatre falls outside the model of hysterical performance rhetoric and audience reading which I established in Chapter One: we have yet to find evidence of a performance practice which truly combines



word and gesture in order to synthesise meaning. In the next chapter, which focuses on the work of Elizabeth Robins as an actress in Ibsen's dramas and as a playwright of her own dramas, I argue that she achieves just such a performance practice, and that she realizes the social and political implications of doing so.

## Chapter Four: Staging the (Split) Subject: Elizabeth Robins

### 4.1 Introduction

Now, I ask you to listen, as quietly as you can, to a lady who is not accustomed to speaking - a - in Trafalgar Square - or a ... as a matter of fact, at all. (Elizabeth Robins, *Votes for Women!*, p. 69)

With these words - greeted scornfully by a jeering Trafalgar Square crowd with cries of 'A dumb lady! [...] Three cheers for the dumb lady!' - the American actress and writer Elizabeth Robins introduced her character Vida Levering to a hostile audience in her 1907 pro-suffrage play, *Votes for Women!*<sup>1</sup> What is at stake here, made explicit in Robins's choice of language, is a move for Vida from silent suffering towards speech. By this point in the play the off-stage audience is aware that Vida has suffered at the hands of men in the past, suffering which includes an abortion carried out by a 'shady-looking doctor' in 'a lonely Welsh farmhouse' after being abandoned by the 'family friend' who had seduced her (*VW*, p. 120). But the circumlocutory and euphemistic dialogues through which Vida's history has emerged tell their own tale of repression, of social circumstances which, to paraphrase Freud and Breuer, make speaking the truth impossible. Indeed, in the first Act of the play one of the other female characters describes Vida in terms that relate specifically to the repression of language and knowledge:

MRS HERIOT For all her Shelter schemes she's a hard woman. [...]

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<sup>1</sup> *Votes for Women!*, in *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s: An International Anthology*, ed. by Katherine E. Kelly (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 108-46 (p. 69). Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text, with the abbreviation *VW*.



BEE She doesn't look -

LADY JOHN (*glancing at BEE and taking alarm*) I'm not sure but what she does.

Her mouth - always like this - as if she were holding back something by main force. (*VW*, p. 120)

Given her chance to speak at the pro-suffrage meeting in the second Act, then, Vida is enabled to make the transition from silence to speech, in the process making connections between her own suffering and the experiences of those around her. In this chapter, I will trace Robins's own journey along that trajectory towards the ability to articulate her own desire, and the desires of the women in the society in which she lived, through her work as an actress, playwright and suffragist in London at the turn of the last century.<sup>2</sup> Three plays and performances trace the route for this journey: the 1891 production of *Hedda Gabler* in which Robins played Hedda, the 1893 short play *Alan's Wife* in which Robins again took the title role, and the 1907 *Votes for Women!* which was written by Robins on behalf of the Women's Social and Political Union. In my examination of these plays I highlight two aspects of Robins's work that make it central to the development of the argument of this thesis: first, her own awareness of the ways in which her work relates to the negotiations between speech and silence, knowledge and the repression of knowledge, which I have traced in the preceding chapters; and second, her work as an actress and playwright in adopting and developing the multi-layered rhetoric that is the process of conversion and cure for

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<sup>2</sup> The 'society in which she lived' was of course a limited one: this phrase thus indicates both Robins's desire for women to work together, discussed in the fourth section of this chapter, and her apparent exclusion of other classes of women: Sue Thomas notes that 'In *The Convert* Robins represents the sex antagonism of the upper-middle-class and aristocratic circle in feminist, orientalist, Africanist and medievalist tropes, uncriticized in recent discussions of the novel' ('Sexual Matter and *Votes for Women*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 33 (1997-98), 47-70 (p. 54, fn. 6)).

the hysteric, privileging a contradictory language of the body alongside that of the text. Running through both these aspects of her work is, as we shall see, a common thread of political awareness as to both the difficulties of women's silent struggle, and women's potential to emerge from that silence.

In her essay, 'Woman's Secret', first published in 1907 by the Women's Social and Political Union, Robins emphasised both the potential strength and danger of an alternative to patriarchal codes of expression, and the repression of such alternatives in her own age and in the ones that preceded it:

Schliemann may uncover one Troy after another, six separate cities deep, and never come the nearer to what Helen thought. All that is not silence is the voice of man.

[...] If I were a man, and cared to know the world I live in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy - the thought of that long silence of one-half the world. [...] When I should hear women chattering, I almost think I might not feel it so acute in me to note that with all their words they so seldom 'say anything'. What if they know better? What if it is by that means they have kept their secret?<sup>3</sup>

Here, in an essay which was reprinted in 1913 by way of a Preface to *Way Stations*, a collection of her speeches, lectures and articles dealing with 'the more salient aspects of the Women's Movement', Robins thus anticipated the modern feminist critics discussed in Chapter One, seeming to identify the paradoxical position of woman as mute or mimic (*Way Stations*, p. vii). But in her acting and her writing of plays Robins can be seen to have negotiated a more complex, and more powerful, position from

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<sup>3</sup> Robins, 'Women's Secret', repr. in *Way Stations* (London, New York and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), p. 4.



which woman could speak: a position which drew on both the speech of the voice and the speech of the body. Indeed, I argue in this chapter that we can link Robins's work as performer and playwright with that particular kind of 'performance' described by Pamela Turner which I discussed in Chapter One, the 'activity of possibility', because Robins can be seen to have revealed different possibilities and potentials to her audiences by working in the in-between of speech and body, text and action. Moving on from the understanding of ideas of hysteria and hypnosis at the level of the dramatic text which was the focus of the preceding chapter, I now return to performance texts in order to examine how that understanding facilitated the development of a new acting style through which the conflict implicit within woman's positioning within the symbolic order could begin to be staged. Here - in so far as it is possible to discuss performances that were created over one hundred years ago - my primary focus is on the practical performance of hysterical rhetoric by Robins, bringing the body back centre stage.

It is appropriate to begin, then, with a brief discussion of a performance extract, taken from the short drama, *Alan's Wife*, the second play I examine in this chapter. This 'Study in Three Scenes' was presented as a new play by an anonymous playwright on 28 April 1893 by the Independent Theatre Society at Terry's Theatre, with Elizabeth Robins in the lead role of Jean Creyke. At the end of the second scene of this study, Jean, the eponymous wife, driven to despair by the death of her husband and the birth of a deformed child, decides to kill the child. In performance, according to the critic of *The Times*, '[The child] has not been baptized, and, lest its soul should

perish, she baptizes it herself and smothers it with a blanket'.<sup>4</sup> This scenario, largely dependent on mime, is reproduced in the published text of the play as follows:

He said, 'See to it that the child is saved.' Yes, darling, that's what I'm trying to do to save you! (*Lets quilt fall - stands staring into space - moves like a woman in a dream; brings two candles; returns, brings a bowl of water, and a big book with silver clasps; puts all on table by cradle - lights candles - lifts the great book, and goes to the cradle and looks at the child - turns away with a sob, and, standing by the candle-light tries to find the place - passes her hand across her eyes.*) Where is the place? I can't find it! I can't find it! (*Tries again - then falls on her knees between the table and the cradle - she closes the great book and whispers*) Have pity on us, Lord - show us the way! (*Still on her knees, she lets the book fall to the floor, dips her hand in the water and sprinkles the child*) I baptise thee, Alan! (*Prays a moment - then stands looking yearningly at him*) Alan, my little Alan! *Rises - looks anxiously over her shoulder to door and window, blows out the candles one by one, and goes stealthily towards the cradle with a long wailing cry, the eider quilt hugged to her breast as the*

#### CURTAIN FALLS.<sup>5</sup>

In his introduction to that text William Archer, the renowned Ibsenite and theatre critic, says 'As the play and the characters actually stand [...] the baptism scene is essential',<sup>6</sup> and the sheer detail of action and required props noted by the playwright in the extract above stresses the careful working out of the performative aspects of

<sup>4</sup> 'The Independent Theatre', *The Times*, 1 May 1893, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Alan's Wife: A Dramatic Study in Three Scenes: First Acted at the Independent Theatre in London*, introduced by William Archer (London: Henry, 1893), pp. 36-37.

<sup>6</sup> *Alan's Wife*, p. xvi.



the scene. But in the typescript sent to the Lord Chamberlain's Office for approval prior to the licensing of the play, the spectacle of the baptism scene is absent from the text, the second scene ending just after Jean has first taken up the quilt, telling her child gently,

Darling, it will be so easy - you'll never know - it will only be that you'll go on sleeping - sleeping, until you wake up in heaven!<sup>7</sup>

Thus, for the Examiner of Plays, the profane mock-baptism was not spoken, for as Tracy C. Davis notes in a different context, 'the Lord Chamberlain's criteria and experience of impropriety were rooted in the written text'.<sup>8</sup> Performance includes much that cannot be written down - most particularly, as we learned in Chapter Two, bodily gesture - yet all that was available for the censor were the written words of the play. The censor's inability to monitor the body as well as the word was thus key to the licensing of *Alan's Wife*, enabling the creation of a performance text which differed markedly from the written dramatic text.

This 'absent' scene is an appropriate place to begin our consideration of Robins and her work, because it seems to me neatly to set up the paradigm that this thesis seeks to explore. It illuminates the gap between text and performance, illustrating the importance of the focus on performance practice which this chapter adopts. It emphasises the differences between the written text of words and the silent but still expressive body, and demonstrates the importance of placing both together in order to read the full meaning of the performance - a concept which is central not only to drama but to the construction of hysteria which I have explored in the preceding

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<sup>7</sup> *Alan's Wife*, British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, Add 53524 D, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Tracy C. Davis, *Actresses as Working Women: Their Social Identity in Victorian Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 118.

chapter on Strindberg and Freud. And finally, the absence of this scene from the version of the play submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office highlights the question of what can and can not be said in culture: a question which also links closely to hysteria and its basis in what cannot be said in language but finds its way to expression through the hysteric's bodily conversion. Viewed in this way censorship can be seen as part of the dominant culture whose repression leads to hysteria: but as I demonstrate in this discussion of Elizabeth Robins's performance practice, the performing body on the stage can use hysterical rhetoric, the language of the body, to communicate what the censor has decided cannot be said.

Playing the part of Jean Creyke, Elizabeth Robins can herself be seen as illustrating another aspect of this divide between what could and could not be said or done in the culture of the 1890s. For the actress, on whose behalf one critic urged that 'a Rescue Society should be formed without delay for the purpose of reclaiming [her] from the slimy clutches of those who find pleasure in pictures of the charnel house, the dissecting room, or the hospital ward', was in fact, together with her friend and collaborator Florence Bell, the anonymous author of *Alan's Wife*.<sup>9</sup> Robins thus embodied the conflicts which I have identified in the preceding chapters as inherent in the positioning of the public woman of the 1890s: conflicts heightened by her particular profession as an actress, as a re-reading of the review cited above shows.

First, there is a confusion of identification between the actress and the part she plays, a confusion which seems to deny her agency, or indeed identity. Such problems are apparent if we consider the reaction of William Archer, the theatre critic and well-known Ibsenite, when first approached by Robins with the suggestion that she might

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<sup>9</sup> "'Hawk" in the Stalls: The Gruesome Grein', *Hawk*, 9 May 1893, pp. 15-16.



play the lead role in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Accustomed to 'actresses content with putting their own charming personas into the spaces left for them', Archer, who had already seen Robins play two of Ibsen's 'self-sacrificing women', asked her where 'was she to find the strain of perversity, of malignity, that is so marked in Hedda's composition?' He later admitted that, as she worked on the character, he was surprised to find in Robins 'a woman capable of literally creating a character equally remote from her ideal self and from the traditional traitress of melodrama'.<sup>10</sup>

Second, there seems to be a concern among the critics that Robins, by playing such parts as Jean Creyke and Hedda Gabler, both made these dangerous women more attractive and was herself in danger of moral degradation: in a review of *Hedda Gabler* the critic for *The Queen: The Lady's Newspaper* worried that Miss Robins contrived to make this 'objectionable type of womanhood' 'absolutely fascinating', while Clement Scott revealed his anxiety that Robins had, by her acting, 'stopped the shudder that so repulsive a creature should have inspired'.<sup>11</sup>

And finally, the critics reveal an inability to read Robins as anything other than a 'charming persona', to adopt William Archer's description, failing to see her as a woman who might actually want to act in such plays, or indeed to write and direct them. Such a failure exposes the limits of the expectations of woman's role in the 1890s: limits which we have described as the precipitating factor of the hysteria of Anna O. and Dora, and limits which Robins herself found restricting and potentially dangerous, not least because of her special position as an actress. Angela John sums up Robins's situation thus:

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<sup>10</sup> W[illiam] A[rcher], 'Hedda Gabler', *World*, 29 April 1891, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup> 'Between the Acts', *The Queen: The Lady's Newspaper*, 2 May 1891, p. 721; Clement Scott, *Illustrated London News*, 25 April 1891, p. 551-52, repr. in Michael Egan, *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 225-38 (p. 227).

The actress was always a liminal figure. She was set apart yet presumed to be available, a woman in a public position who became off stage another private individual, crossing from fantasy to reality.<sup>12</sup>

Robins's writings, both public and private, show her struggling with these different roles, trying to find a way to be a woman in the conventionalized society within which she found herself. In 1892 she wrote to Florence Bell with an outpouring of feelings over a man, probably William Archer, in terms that seem to bring her close both to Ibsen's character Hedda whom she had portrayed the previous year, and to the confined, repressive roles of Freud and Breuer's hysterics:

I've contracted the *habit* of the nun I am deathly *afraid* of the common heritage. I would like to escape from every consequence of youth and sex. [...]

Why am I afraid to be natural? Why am I such a slave to conventions? [...] Ah it's probably a mistake this bondage women are born under and grow so accustomed to they *refuse* freedom as I do.

[...] One moment I cry out against the savage that sleeps and wakens within me, again I glory in it and believe profoundly that I am richer for being untamed - that it means strength and courage and even artistic capacity that I am mad to hold in leash until fretting and [one word illegible] it lies down to weary acceptance of its bonds.<sup>13</sup>

It is thus through the figure of Robins, who seems so divided in these contradictory, contemporary accounts, that I examine in this chapter the developments that, linked to the new understanding of hysteria, enabled attempts to represent the female subject on

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<sup>12</sup> Angela V. John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life 1862-1952* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Elizabeth Robins to Florence Bell, 1892, held in Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, Series 5, Subseries A, Box 1.



the stage. In 1891, Robins played Hedda Gabler in the first London production of Ibsen's play, which she also co-managed; in the first section of this chapter, 'Acting Hysteria', I argue that Robins's experience in working with that text led her to develop a new style of acting based in the contradiction within the female split subject. In 1893, as we have seen, Robins played Jean Creyke in *Alan's Wife*, which she had written with Florence Bell; in the second section, 'Writing Hysteria', I argue that in this play, which echoes certain themes of *Hedda Gabler*, she sought to reproduce as a playwright the double discourse of speech and action which she had developed as a performer of Ibsen. In 1907, long after her retirement as an actress, Robins wrote her second work for the theatre: the Suffrage play *Votes for Women!* In the last section of this chapter, 'Politicizing Hysteria', which looks more briefly at this last, more conventional drama, I want to argue the case for a parallel between Robins's work in constructing a new way of representing the female subject on the stage, and her work towards constructing a new female political subject in her campaigning on behalf of the Suffrage movement. Thus I conclude this chapter by bringing performance and politics back together, before turning in the last chapter to an examination of the ways in which this project has been taken up and made explicit in the work of the modern playwrights, Hélène Cixous and Anna Furse, who explore performances of hysteria and history with the clear aim of re-voicing the hysteric for their contemporary audience.

## 4.2 Acting Hysteria: *Hedda Gabler* (1891)

### 4.2.1 *Text and Potential*

In my work on August Strindberg in Chapter Three, I showed that his texts reflected and at times anticipated the new understanding of hysteria and its talking cure which

Freud and Breuer were so famously to articulate in their *Studien über Hysterie* of 1895. *The Pelican*, I have argued, stages an almost modern interpretation of hysteria, founded in the split between knowledge and repression of knowledge, in which both mind and body are implicated. This linking of word and body is seen as a contrast to the focus on the visual, the merely corporeal, that I described in that chapter and in Chapter Two as characterizing both the work of Freud's predecessor Charcot and the theatre of melodrama which preceded the new naturalistic dramas of Strindberg and the realist theatre of Ibsen. But despite this new understanding of hysteria identified in Strindberg's work, I want to suggest in this section that it is in fact Henrik Ibsen, his fellow Scandinavian playwright, who can be seen to have best enabled the *fin-de-siècle* female actor to explore new ways of representing herself through hysteria on the stage (perhaps because that element of Strindberg which I have identified as hysterical also exhibited itself in his well-reported animosity towards women). It is thus Ibsen, rather than Strindberg, who started Elizabeth Robins off on the journey towards developing a new sense of the theatrical female subject and the political female subject.<sup>14</sup>

But why should Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* prove a suitable vehicle for Robins to attempt to stage the splits in the subject which mark both Anna O.'s and Dora's descents into illness and, to a lesser degree, Robins's own role as a female actor in a society whose attitude towards women, particularly women on the stage, is so marked by contradictions? *Hedda Gabler* is a realist text, and we might question the efficacy of using the practice of realism as a vehicle for change, given current criticism of its

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<sup>14</sup> Freda Strindberg certainly regretted that Robins had turned her attention to Ibsen rather than to Strindberg, writing in her memoir, *Marriage with Genius*, that Robins 'would be the thing for us. A pity that Ibsen fills up her horizon. Really, touching, to what dimensions she expands that artful old gentleman. [...] Why does she play Ibsen and not Strindberg'. Freda Strindberg, pp. 199-200.



movement ‘towards closure [which] ensures the reinstatement of order’.<sup>15</sup> Sue-Ellen Case describes realism as a ‘prisonhouse of art’ for women, ‘both in their representation on the stage and in the female actor’s preparation and production’ of her role.<sup>16</sup> In support of this argument, the classic realist text, with its focus on the moral development of a named, known individual over time, can be seen to be working precisely to suppress the contradiction in the subject, working to create the illusion that a stable, coherent, unfragmented individual can exist. In her article, ‘Mimesis, Mimicry and the “True-Real”’, Elin Diamond writes that ‘realism, more than any other form of theater representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification’:

Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it *produces* ‘reality’ by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths [...]. Human signification becomes no less teleological. In realism the actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents.<sup>17</sup>

Thus it may seem strange that I seek to locate a potential for new representations of female subjectivity within Ibsen’s work, and *Hedda Gabler* in particular, the very text seized on by Diamond in this article as a classic example of realism, with its patriarchal, historical frame of the drawing room. In fact, I argue in this section that what Robins did with this role actually revealed the contradictions in the subject rather than repressing them, thus taking hold of the realist text for her own ends just as Hélène Cixous urges the theft and appropriation of patriarchal discourse by a

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 124.

<sup>17</sup> Elin Diamond, ‘Mimesis, Mimicry and the “True-Real”’, p. 60.

woman's body, a woman's tongue.<sup>18</sup> And while these criticisms of realism may be forceful in relation to other plays, there are two key reasons why Ibsen's text escapes them.

The first point concerns the content of this particular play, and links to my construction of the hysterical body as the site of rejection of closure and repression. Quite simply, Hedda, whose hysteria is said by Ibsen to be 'the motivating force behind her way of behaving', can not escape from her body, a pregnant body which she does not want to acknowledge, which perpetually pushes itself into the dialogue.<sup>19</sup> A modern version of the play emphasises this interpretation: in the film in which Janet Suzman plays the title role, Hedda's bodily response to the exit of Tesman and Aunt Juliana in the first scene is to begin to vomit. This is a response which Hedda/Suzman checks, before going to the mirror of that patriarchal drawing room in order to examine herself, as if to keep watch over that betraying body.

The second point to be made here reminds us of the historical positioning of realism on the stage in the late nineteenth century, when it was itself a new and radical phenomenon which could be seen to be challenging the strict theatrical codes which we examined in Chapter Two. Gay Gibson Cima argues that at its advent, dramatic realism was itself perceived as revolutionary:

For late nineteenth-century audiences accustomed to the conventional codes of melodrama, realism made those codes seem strange, for in realism the

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<sup>18</sup> She writes, 'Take it into her woman's mouth, bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it'. Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>19</sup> From Henrik Ibsen's notes on the play, collected in *The Oxford Ibsen*, ed. by James Walter McFarlane, 8 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1960-77), VII: *The Lady from the Sea: Hedda Gabler: The Master Builder* (1966), p. 488.



female actor exceeded the womanly character or styles of performance  
behaviour the audience had grown to expect.<sup>20</sup>

Thus Cima argues that rather than propping up the illusion of reality for its audience, the realist text of the 1890s actually ‘made strange’ its subject matter: and if we compare the character of Hedda Gabler with those of the archetypal female parts in melodrama considered in Chapter Two - the angelic daughter or, more rarely, the evil villainess - we can begin to see why. Peter Brooks has argued that there is no ‘psychology’ in melodrama: ‘the characters have no interior depth, there is no psychological conflict’: while my exploration of melodrama in Chapter Two draws a slightly more complex picture, Brooks’s comment can be seen to be broadly true.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Hedda’s psychological complexity must have indeed ‘made strange’ the picture of womanhood which she represents. That she was *not* seen as a ‘real’ character within society can be demonstrated by the critical reaction to this first production, for the anonymous critic of *Reynold’s Newspaper* wrote of her thus:

Ibsen has been described as the only man who really understands women. If such is the case, the women he is credited with knowing must be the exception and not the rule, for it is extremely difficult to bring one’s mind to imagine that such female characters [...] live, move, and have their being in common with our wives, our daughters, our sisters, our sweethearts.<sup>22</sup>

Thus realism, in the theatre of the 1890s, can be seen to have made available new modes of representation; and *Hedda Gabler* itself, with its focus on bodies that are repressed by the spoken word yet keep pushing themselves insistently centre stage,

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<sup>20</sup> Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights, and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 12-13.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Vaudeville Theatre’, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 26 April 1891, p. 6.

employed competing vocabularies that, I would argue, opened up possibilities and revealed fragmentations in the subject rather than closing them down.

Gay Gibson Cima's characterization of Ibsen's innovation in the actor's understanding of character echoes the idea of the split experienced by the nineteenth century female subject, whether Anna O., Hedda, or Robins herself, and demonstrates the importance of Ibsen to the discovery of new ways of staging female subjectivity.

Cima suggests that:

In Ibsen's dramas, for perhaps the first time, performers faced characters who were pursuing a double line of action. The actor could no longer speak of the dual consciousness of self and character but rather had to discuss the treble strata of self, character, and *the role the character plays*, a phenomenon which produced a radical change in the actor's art.<sup>23</sup>

Thus in contrast to what Elin Diamond calls the 'complete adequation' that melodrama provides 'between the symptomatology of hysteria and the actor's language, body, and motive, allowing the spectator instantly to decipher the signs and messages',<sup>24</sup> Ibsen's realism created a second, hidden layer of thoughts and motives which the actor had to find a way of communicating to the audience. Michael Meyer suggests that Ibsen understood that:

When people talk about something concerning which they feel a sense of guilt, they cease to speak directly and instead talk evasively and with

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<sup>23</sup> Gay Gibson Cima, 'Discovering Signs: The Emergence of the Critical Actor in Ibsen', *Theatre Journal*, 35 (1983), 5-22 (pp. 18-19). See also her *Performing Women* in which a revised version of this article appears as Chapter One.

<sup>24</sup> Elin Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria: Towards a Feminist Mimesis', *Discourse*, 13 (1990-91), 59-92 (p. 69).



circumlocution; and actors, when they are playing these lines, have to speak the text but act the sub-text, the unspoken thoughts between the lines.<sup>25</sup>

I will return to this idea in my detailed discussion of Robins's approach to her role as Hedda; here it is sufficient to note this split in the subject, and to draw attention to the parallels with hysteria. Just as Anna O.'s day dreaming crossed over from her 'private theatre' to the public space of illness within the family, so Hedda Gabler, bored with her 'normal' life, indulges her day-dreams in 'reality', playing a role which will lead to her death.

In this section of the chapter, I want to argue that it is through representations of hysteria, utilising a performance rhetoric of hysteria, that the female actor was able most fully to stage this double split, and to engage the audience in the kind of active reading of word and body that I proposed in the first Chapter of this thesis. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, hysteria is constructed in the split between that which is known and acknowledged by the subject and that which is repressed from the mind, finding its way back through the symptoms of the body, through bodily 'conversion': 'we are accustomed to find in hysteria that a considerable part of this "sum of excitation" of the trauma is transformed into purely somatic symptoms' (*SE II*, p. 86). We have seen that the aim of Freudian psychoanalysis, the 'talking cure', was to bring these symptoms back within language, to reintegrate the split character of the hysteric; to repeat Stephen Marcus's words:

In the course of psychoanalytic treatment, nothing less than 'reality' itself is made, constructed, or reconstructed. [...] At the end - the successful end - one

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry 1864-1882* (London: Hart Davis, 1971), p. 301.

has come into possession of one's own story. It is a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by one's self of one's own story.<sup>26</sup>

But we have also seen that, in the course of psychoanalytic treatment, the language of the body, which insists on saying what cannot be said in patriarchal language, is 'shut down' once more, in an attempt (which mirrors the apparent project of realism) to create a unified individual in society. So in seeking to find ways in which to represent her understanding of Hedda Gabler, the character whose 'repression', whose 'hysteria' was said by Ibsen to be her 'motivating force', without resigning herself to the closure of psychoanalysis or of realism, Robins retained and utilized the language of the body, using gesture not to reinforce her language, not to demonstrate the truth of her speech, but to explore and hint at the existence of another, deeper, contradictory truth, which might explain Hedda's doubly-split self. In doing so, she was able to stage the 'return of the repressed', not only in relation to Hedda's hysteria, but also through a technique of acting which allows moments of what can only be termed 'melodramatic' gesture to force through the 'realist' veil. Peter Brooks writes that:

Melodrama consistently reminds us of the psychoanalytic concept of "acting out": the use of the body itself, its actions, gestures [...] to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression. Melodrama refuses repression or, rather, repeatedly strives towards moments where repression is broken through, to the physical and verbal staging of the essential.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Steven Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History', pp. 71-72.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Brooks, 'Melodrama, Body, Revolution', in *Melodrama: Stage Picture Screen*, ed. by Jacky Bratton, Jim Cook and Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1994), pp. 11-24 (p. 19).



As I will demonstrate when I turn to the evidence of Robins's performance practice in the 1891 *Hedda Gabler* - her prompt book, contemporary reviews, and correspondence - Robins supplemented the techniques of realism with the 'speaking body' inherited from melodrama (albeit without the equation of gesture and meaning which we identified in Chapter Two), to enable her to fully represent the contradictory, hysterical Hedda. In working to understand this new, psychological complexity of character, *and to stage the discourse of the body as well as that of speech* - drawing on techniques of realism *and* the mute discourse of melodrama - I further argue that Robins was herself able to experience, and begin to represent, her own subjectivity.

Elizabeth Robins expressed a sense, albeit retrospectively, of the impact of this new power in 1928 when, in a lecture to the Royal Society of Arts, she looked back at her first involvement with Ibsen:

I despair of giving an idea of what that little part meant, not only of vivid pleasure in working at and playing, but of - what I cannot find any other word for than - *self-respect*.<sup>28</sup>

Thus her experiences of acting in this new kind of drama can be seen to have contributed to Robins's increasing politicization, both in terms of her role within the acting profession and, later, through the activities of the Suffrage campaign, in terms of seeking rights for women to be represented on a wider stage. She and her fellow producer, Marion Lea, came

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<sup>28</sup> Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), pp. 14-15 (my emphasis). Further references to this edition are given in the text following the abbreviation *LA*.

to realize how essential to success some freedom of judgement and action are to the actor. The strangulation of this rôle and that through arbitrary stage management, was an experience we had shared with men. But we had further seen how freedom in the practice of our art, how the bare opportunity to practise it at all, depended, for the actress, on considerations humiliatingly different from those that confronted the actor. The stage career of an actress was inextricably involved in the fact that she was a woman and that those who were masters of the Theatre were men.<sup>29</sup>

For the moment, though, my concern is to show that Ibsen's plays, which even his bitterest critics admitted gave a 'scope [...] to the intelligent artist that cannot be denied',<sup>30</sup> made new styles of acting accessible to actors, such as Robins, who took advantage of having 'in our hands - free hands - such glorious actable stuff' (IA, p. 31). Ibsen's realist texts, even more than Strindberg's *The Pelican*, are structured around memory and the return of reminiscences by which Freud and Breuer characterize the hysteric's experience. Marked in this way, Ibsen's retrospective dramas can be seen as moving beyond those of Strindberg in enabling the physical staging of the hysteric's reminiscences, and through this, attempts to stage female subjectivity. Robins asserted that 'no dramatist has ever meant so much to the women of the stage as Henrik Ibsen' (IA, p. 55); for Robins in particular, Ibsen's text of *Hedda Gabler* prompted her to begin the journey towards truly representing the self.

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Robins. *Theatre and Friendship: Some Henry James Letters with a Commentary by Elizabeth Robins* (London: Cape, 1932), pp. 29-30.

<sup>30</sup> [Clement Scott], 'Vaudeville Theatre', *Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1891, p. 3.



#### 4.2.2 *'Hedda Gabler', Vaudeville Theatre, 20 April 1891*

I begin my consideration of the performance in which Robins staged this innovative portrayal by setting out some of the background to its production. The story of how the production came to take place might itself be seen to partake in the rhetorical form of hysteria, as it is marked by concealment and repression, by things which were known yet could not be said. Through this story Robins shows herself adept at repressing the truth where it is needed, playing the woman's part of 'a charming persona' to achieve her ends.

Because of a row that had broken out between William Archer and Edmund Gosse over who had the right to translate the text of *Hedda Gabler* for publication, and the fact that Heinemann, Ibsen's English publisher, had given the rights for a theatrical 'adaptation' of the play to Justin Huntly McCarthy, the true role taken by Robins and her fellow actor Marion Lea in the staging of this production, together with that of Archer himself, has been consistently distorted. Even now, the relative importance of Archer's contribution as against that of the Lea-Robins joint management forms a profitable battleground for theatre historians: Thomas Postlewait, biographer of William Archer (who himself seems to take on the role of therapist in Archer's story, arguing that 'Victorian culture is a buried text, to be read cunningly', and interpreting gaps in the historical record 'as challenges to understanding, signals from the latent discourse that punctuates the record like silences in a Pinter play', or, we might add, in Anna O.'s narrative), credits Archer as having ultimate artistic control, describing him as the hidden producer behind the

scenes and his role as ‘what is repressed’ in the story.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, Joanne Gates credits Robins with artistic control in her article which retells the story of the production using Robins’s own recollections in the unpublished memoir, *Whither and How?*<sup>32</sup> Archer himself, in a review of *Hedda Gabler* for *The World*, somewhat disingenuously denies positive involvement with the production:

I am able to speak without puffing my own wares, for the translation is not mine. Moreover, it was against my advice that Miss Elizabeth Robins and Miss Marion Lea went into the enterprise. Knowing my interest in Ibsen, they were good enough to consult me before making their arrangements; and if they had not had the self-reliance to disregard my croakings, the theatrical world would today have been the poorer by a vivid and memorable experience.<sup>33</sup>

What *is* clear is that Robins and Lea were able to persuade Gosse, who had translated the play for Heinemann, that he should agree to their mounting a production, for the purpose of which they would simply ‘adjust the dialogue in order to find a less awkward way to speak what Ibsen really meant’; in truth, Gosse’s translation was quite literally ‘unspeakable’.<sup>34</sup> An anonymous review alleged that there can be no question that he [Gosse] has misunderstood and mistranslated the Norwegian in scores of passages, some of them of serious importance, besides

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen Campaign*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, 20 (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. xix, p. 19, pp. 64-81.

<sup>32</sup> Joanne E. Gates, ‘Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of *Hedda Gabler*’, *Modern Drama*, 28 (1985), 611-19. *Whither and How?* is held in the Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library.

<sup>33</sup> W[illiam] A[rcher], ‘*Hedda Gabler*’, *World*, 29 April 1891, p. 24.

<sup>34</sup> Gates, ‘Elizabeth Robins’, p. 616. In his Preface to his published translation, Gosse discussed the production and wrote that ‘a few highly judicious alterations’ were made ‘with the entire approbation of the translator’ (*Hedda Gabler; A Drama in Four Acts*, trans. by Edmund Gosse (London: Heinemann, 1891), p. xii). Robins’s contribution to the translation of Ibsen’s work was never to be openly acknowledged: see *Whither and How?* (p. 76). See also Gay Gibson Cima, ‘Elizabeth Robins: The Genesis of an Independent Manageress’, *Theatre Survey*, 21 (1980), 145-63 (pp. 158-59).



rendering the dialogue in general with a jerkiness and falsity of idiom that make it the most irritating reading imaginable.<sup>35</sup>

The translation was to remain credited to Gosse, but Archer worked with Robins and Lea (both of whom were learning to read Norwegian) on the text. Robins and Lea, having failed to find a producer willing to take this 'woman's play' on, obtained a loan for the lease of the theatre on the security of their own small 'treasures' and decided to produce *Hedda Gabler* themselves.

They retired to a cottage on Richmond Hill to immerse themselves in the play, Robins describing the experience as 'coming closer and closer till I had Hedda in my bones'.<sup>36</sup> This is a thought provoking image: in contrast to Archer's fear that Robins would put her 'own charming persona' into the space left for her in Hedda, the character of Hedda seems to have possessed and penetrated Robins. There is a sense here of intimacy, of shared space, of a confusion of boundaries, a loss of sureness about subjectivity. In 'Who's Who? Introducing Multiple Personality', Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen writes of being introduced to two 'personalities' of a patient with MPD, without realising that this was the case: 'Being dragged unawares *into* the theatre of multiple personality, I had a difficult time re-establishing the difference between play and reality, between mask and face, personage and person'.<sup>37</sup> It seems to me that just as the critics seemed unable to distinguish between Robins and the characters which she played, so Robins herself can be seen to have been unsure of the boundaries between self and other.

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<sup>35</sup> 'The "Leader" Library: Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*', unidentified cutting, Theatre Museum.

<sup>36</sup> *Whither and How?* (Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library), Chapter 43, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'Who's Who? Introducing Multiple Personality', in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. by Joan Copjec (London and New York: Verso, 1994), pp. 45-63 (p. 46).

Again anticipating the critics who, as we shall see, were to write about the play in metaphorical terms of disease and infection, Robins seems to have viewed her immersion in Hedda's character as a process of infection, of illness, of specifically *nervous* affliction. Writing to Florence Bell about the character of Hedda, she said:

Do you know I think it's some kind of nervous *disease* that descends upon one with the grasp of such a part [...] I'm *possessed* - some mocking, half-pathetic demon gets into me and whirls me along without help or hindrance from me.<sup>38</sup>

Marion Lea's comments were more prosaic, but equally important in that they reveal the serious thought that went into the production, which is subsequently demonstrated in Robins's careful annotation of her prompt book and in the critics' response to the performance. In an interview whilst the production was still running, Lea said:

We knew every word of our parts before leaving Richmond, and had worked up the smallest nuances.<sup>39</sup>

Having chosen the rest of the cast, rehearsals began - Robins says that 'few London plays have ever been rehearsed longer or more carefully' (*IA*, pp. 17-18). Postlewait credits Archer with trying, subversively, to get the actors to drop the conventions of delivery and movement learned in melodrama and 'to take up a less rhetorical and demonstrative style of acting', while Cima credits Robins with the innovation of trying to induce her actors to view the dress rehearsal as a performance instead of a walk-through.<sup>40</sup> Robins, speaking of Archer's presence at rehearsals of *The Master Builder*, which were conducted upon similar lines to those of *Hedda Gabler*, says:

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<sup>38</sup> Letter to Florence Bell, 1892, quoted in John, *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life*, p. 60.

<sup>39</sup> M. A. B., 'Hedda Gabler: An Interview with Miss Elizabeth Robins and Miss Marion Lea', *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1891, p. 720.

<sup>40</sup> Postlewait, p. 72. Cima, 'Elizabeth Robins', p. 159.



Nothing escaped him, from the slightest inflection of voice, the significance of the smallest gesture or most fleeting expression, up to the crescendo of a climax or the capital crime of the smallest alteration of the text [...].(IA, p. 42)

As will become clear, while Archer may have tried to avoid the worst excesses of conventional melodramatic acting by such methods, it is Robins's utilization of melodrama's corporeal legacy which I argue enables her triumphant interpretation of Hedda's character in this play: she combined bodily gesture with Ibsen's words to startling effect. And in fact, for *Hedda Gabler*, if not for *The Master Builder*, Archer did himself commit that 'capital crime' of alteration of the text. In yet another act of repression associated with this production, he removed all references to Hedda's apparent pregnancy, becoming, as Postlewait argues, 'too fastidious in his attempt to build an audience for Ibsen'.<sup>41</sup> This was apparently not all that was repressed in the text, for Clement Scott, in an unsigned review for *The Daily Telegraph*, wrote that the 'certain indelicate minutiae' of the author's text which the audience were spared included all references to the pregnancy, the 'grossness' of Judge Brack and the 'suppression of [other] dangerous passages',<sup>42</sup> the identity of which we can now only guess at. Thus, in addition to the gaps and unfinished sentences that might be seen to mark Ibsen's text with the rhetoric of hysteria, the 1891 performance text can be seen to have suppressed and inhibited from conscious thought that which could not be 'remembered' on the stage of Victorian London, albeit that this repression was a conscious one.

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<sup>41</sup> Postlewait, p. 77. The chronology of this removal is still unclear: when I examined the script submitted to the Lord Chamberlain at the British Library all the references to the pregnancy were apparently still intact, and I have unfortunately been unable to trace the correspondence with the Lord Chamberlain's office. *Hedda Gabler*. British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays. Add 53471 F.  
<sup>42</sup> [Clement Scott], 'Vaudeville Theatre' *Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1891, p. 3.

The actress playing Hedda in this production had thus to find a way to communicate to her audience an awareness of her character that operated at many different levels: the past Hedda, daughter of General Gabler and ‘secret’ friend of Eilert Lovborg, who is hidden to Tesman but is revealed through her present actions which shape the outcome of the play; the present Hedda who participates not only in the ‘realistic’ world of her marriage and social relations but also in her own melodramatic narrative through which, as Cima argues (with a description that could apply equally well to Anna O.’s ‘private theatre’) she ‘creat[es ...] a role for herself different from the role she has been assigned’; and the Hedda who participates in two narratives at once, one open, one hidden, as in the photograph album scene with Lovborg or the final scene where, in Cima’s words,

Hedda must follow a tiered or imbricated line of action: she must not only try to follow and gradually understand Brack’s line of action, but also direct her effort toward overhearing Thea and Tesman, and determining her own future.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, despite Archer’s fastidious cutting of the text, Robins, with Hedda ‘in [her] bones’, had knowledge of the character’s situation which would also play a part in her representation. Again and again, then, the actor had to embody the split between what could be acknowledged and what must be hidden, without recourse to what we have seen described as the ‘complete set of attitudes, phrases, gestures, coherently conceived [in melodrama to dramatize] essential conflict’.<sup>44</sup> For with Ibsen’s texts, argues Cima, it was no longer possible to use this codified system of

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<sup>43</sup> Cima, ‘Discovering Signs’, p. 19, p. 21.

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 20.



gestural signs ‘without considering the complication of the verbal sign system and its ability to contradict and metatheatricalize the meaning of the gestures’.<sup>45</sup>

In seeking a way to represent Hedda, Robins made use of what she described in her lecture to the Royal Society of Arts in 1928 as ‘Ibsen’s supreme faculty for giving his actors the clue - the master-key - if they are not too lofty or too helplessly sophisticated to take it’ (*IA*, p. 26). Robins does not describe the operation of this faculty, but in the discussion that follows it becomes clear that she is referring to Ibsen’s use of psychology to give meaning to his character’s actions: an understanding of the ‘interior depth’ of the character provided the actor with a means of representing them on stage. Listening to Ibsen’s prompting (rather than to the ‘stage directions of all the Sydney Grundys of the last fifty years’ (*IA*, p. 52)), Robins describes the process as one of collaboration between playwright and actor:

Ibsen was by training so intensely *un homme du théâtre* that, to an extent I know in no other dramatist, he saw where he could leave some of his greatest effects to be made by the actor, and so left them. It was as if he knew that only so could he get his effects - that is, by standing aside and watching his spell work not only through the actor, but *by* the actor as fellow-creator. (*IA*, p. 53)

Robins’s account of her work on *Hedda Gabler* in *Ibsen and the Actress* shows that she, like Freud himself in his discussion of *Rosmersholm*’s Rebecca West in ‘Some Character-Types Met With in Psycho-Analytic Work’,<sup>46</sup> went back into Hedda’s history, seeking to fill in the gaps, feints and evasions which make up the hysterical

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<sup>45</sup> Cima, ‘Discovering Signs’, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup> Freud, ‘Some Character-Types met with in Psycho-Analytic Work’, in ‘*On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Association and Other Works*, SE XIV (1957), pp. 324-31.

text. Diamond, quoting from that source, characterizes Robins as ‘writing a psychoanalytical case study’,

filling in the gaps which the play leaves ambiguous: Lövborg’s sensuality ‘made her [Hedda’s] gorge rise ... the man who had wallowed in filth must not touch Hedda Gabler’ ([IA, p.] 22).<sup>47</sup>

But although this is indeed what Robins seems to be doing in 1928, in her lecture to the Royal Society and her subsequent essay *Ibsen and the Actress*, at the time of the production in 1891 she was extremely reluctant to discuss Hedda’s motivation, rejecting the position of the analyst in favour of identification with the female character she portrayed. In the *Illustrated London News* interview in which Lea discussed the process of preparing for *Hedda Gabler*, Robins was asked by the interviewer for her reading of Hedda’s character. She replied:

‘Well, frankly, I do not care to discuss that question. I am an actress by profession’ - smiling - ‘trying to make living the parts I play. My business is not to discuss characters by word of mouth, but to make my conceptions clear by my acting. If I have failed in making my audiences understand what I think of Hedda - well, I have failed’.<sup>48</sup>

In 1891, then, Robins seems to have wanted to let Hedda speak for herself through the language of the performance text: not only through ‘word of mouth’ but also through the speaking body. To impose an external framework of meaning would indeed situate her as no different from Charcot and the melodramatic actors discussed in Chapter Two: what distinguishes Robins is her desire to let the acting body ‘show’

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<sup>47</sup> Diamond, ‘Realism and Hysteria’, p. 78.

<sup>48</sup> M.A.B., ‘An Interview with Miss Elizabeth Robins and Miss Marion Lea’, *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1891, p. 720.



for itself. Robins's identification with Hedda, her 'possession' by the character, seems further to distinguish her activity from that of the psychoanalytic therapist alluded to by Diamond. Unlike Freud, who I have argued took power away from Dora by insisting on writing his hysterical patient's narrative for her, or Charcot, who dubbed the 'ventriloquized bodies' of his patients, Robins here tried to let Hedda's story speak for itself, enabling her, like Breuer's patient Anna O., to remain an actress in her own drama. And even in her 1928 lecture, Robins seems to have wanted at times to retain that sense of identification with the character of Hedda: situating herself both as psychoanalyst *and* as analysand, shifting from location to location as she first analysed Hedda's psychology and then recognised her own story and those of other women in that psychology. It is here, from this unstable and shifting position, that Robins seems to have been best able to draw out the political implications of her analysis, drawing herself and Hedda into identification not only with each other but with other women who share their restricted place in society: 'Hedda was not all of us, but she was a good many of us' (*IA*, p. 18).

Robins described Hedda in terms close to those used by Breuer of Anna O. and Freud of Dora, yet in language that exposed the limits of these women's lives: 'a bundle of unused possibilities, educated to fear life; too much opportunity to develop her weakness; no opportunity at all to use her best powers' (*IA*, pp. 18-19). It is thus that she is able to understand the central motivation of Hedda's relationship to the pistols:

It is perhaps curious that Ibsen should have known that a good many women have found it possible to get through life by help of the knowledge that they have power to end it rather than accept certain slaveries. (*IA*, p. 30)

The complexity of Robins's position in relation to the character of Hedda becomes clear if we compare her discourse of identification with that of the critics viewing the production. For while the critics certainly felt themselves able to partake in the discourse of disease and mental degeneration, taking on the role of diagnostic physician and psychoanalyst in relation to both audience and actors, their discourse is one of distance, clearly distinguishing their own position from the hysterical figures whom they discuss.

The 'Captious Critic' of the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* had described the Ibsen audience at a performance of *Ghosts* in March 1891, the month before *Hedda Gabler* was staged, in the following terms:

Never before, except at an entertainment for the mentally or physically afflicted [...] had I encountered so many deformed faces; so many men and women pale, sad-looking, white lipped. It was like an assemblage of out-patients waiting for the doctor. I seemed to feel in the midst of unhealth, chronic feebleness of the body, which could expect no help from the brain.<sup>49</sup>

Most critics sought to explain the central character of Ibsen's later play, *Hedda Gabler*, in similar psychological discourse: *The Stage* marked Hedda as 'what the French call a *névrosée*, a nervous subject who is not quite right, [...] like many epileptics', with an 'insane temperament' 'which would certainly arrest the attention of Dr. Forbes-Winslow', a reference through which the contemporary reader would connect Hedda's role with that of other 'unruly' women within their own society who

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<sup>49</sup> *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 7 March 1891, p. 893.



were restrained within Forbes-Winslow's private lunatic asylums.<sup>50</sup> *The Times* described the play as 'a study in *névrosité*', a 'demonstration of the pathology of the mind, such as may be found in the pages of the *Journal of Mental Science* or in the reports of the medical superintendents of lunatic asylums'. Hedda was 'clearly a lunatic of the epileptic class'.<sup>51</sup> For *The Observer* the performance was 'no doubt a study of insanity', whilst A. B. Walkley wrote that those

who recognize that the purpose of art is not to point morals, but to create impressions, will be content to accept the play as a picture of a peculiar type of *révoltée*, a dramatic study of mental pathology [...].<sup>52</sup>

Thus these male critics distanced themselves from the character of Hedda; they characterised her as 'mad' and so situated her as an object for inspection. In contrast, as we have seen, Elizabeth Robins was able to make the connection to the character of Hedda Gabler as a subject, recognising identity rather than separateness: 'she was a good many of us'. In her 1973 dissertation on Elizabeth Robins which has provided the groundwork for many subsequent researchers, Jane Marcus wrote that:

That in the course of this self-discovery she realized that her condition was not an isolated personal psychological problem but a social problem determined by the position of women in a repressive society was fortunate both for herself and for other women.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Unsigned review, *The Stage*, 23 April 1891, p. 12. Dr L. Forbes-Winslow was, of course, the 'mad-doctor' who was implicated in the attempted removal of another unruly wife, Georgina Weldon, to the private asylum which he owned and ran in Hammersmith. For an account of this affair, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), Chapter 6.

<sup>51</sup> Unsigned review, *The Times*, 21 April 1891, p. 10.

<sup>52</sup> Unsigned review, *Observer*, 26 April 1891, p. 6; A. B. Walkley, *Playhouse Impressions* (London: Unwin, 1892), pp. 62-63.

<sup>53</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Elizabeth Robins' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1973), p. 48.

### 4.2.3 *Staging Hysteria in 'Hedda Gabler': Speech and Symptom*

Having discovered the 'truth' of Hedda's character, Robins's next task was to set about trying to represent that truth on the stage. More recent productions have done so by staging a wordless prologue which reveals Hedda's hysteria directly to the audience, but Robins had to communicate these complexities within the frame of Ibsen's text.<sup>54</sup> Her prompt book, which I will examine in detail in this section, demonstrates the ways in which she combined word and action, setting the movements of her body alongside and against the spoken text in order to represent the conflicts within the character of Hedda, just as the hysterical symptoms of Dora and Anna O. seemed to Freud to 'join [...] in the conversation' (*SE* II, p. 296). Angela V. John describes this process, writing that Robins:

used facial expressions and her hands, and modulated her voice to help the audience interpret a complex character like Hedda who might say one thing and mean another. Hedda was herself a consummate actress and the audience had to be helped to appreciate this.<sup>55</sup>

John bases her argument here on Michael Meyer's earlier description of Ibsen's 'double-density' dialogue, an innovation in style which we have already seen Meyer attribute to Ibsen's knowledge that,

when people talk about something concerning which they feel a sense of guilt, they cease to speak directly and instead talk evasively and with

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<sup>54</sup> For example, the 1991 Abbey Theatre Deborah Warner/Fiona Shaw production. Elaine Showalter discusses this production, which was 'influenced by feminist interpretations of hysteria as the body language of powerlessness', in her *Hystories*, pp. 103-04.

<sup>55</sup> John, *Elizabeth Robins*, pp. 58-59.



circumlocution; and actors, when they are playing these lines, have to speak the text but act the sub-text, the unspoken thoughts between the lines.<sup>56</sup>

Both John and Meyer, then, while recognising a split within Ibsen's characters, agree with Gay Gibson Cima who, as we have seen, seems to situate this split, and the process of concealment and revelation to which it gives rise, at a conscious level of character: between 'character, and *the role the character plays*'.<sup>57</sup> The character concerned is aware of guilt or is herself a 'consummate actress': Cima says that 'the actor's creation of Hedda's awareness of the absurdity of the role she plays, is what constituted, for female actors and audience members, a new subversive level in the theatre'.<sup>58</sup> It is useful to briefly consider Cima's own notion of the 'autistic gesture', by which, she suggests, the actors of Ibsen were able to communicate the complexity of the characters whom they played to their nineteenth century audience, but I want to suggest in this section that the process is in fact a more complex one than Cima's argument would imply, and that the subversiveness offered by Robins's portrayal of Hedda's hysteria operated at the dangerous level of the unconscious as well as that of the unconscious mind. Hedda's hysteria, her 'repression' in Ibsen's words, means that she is *not* always conscious of her guilt, of what has been repressed, just as Archer's bowdlerized text was not conscious of the repression of Hedda's pregnancy, but still remained marked by its absence. The notion of the introspective, autistic gesture therefore needs to be extended and reinterpreted, as I re-view and develop this kind of gesture as the hysterical symptom, the 'symptomatic act'.

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<sup>56</sup> Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Farewell to Poetry*, p. 301.

<sup>57</sup> Cima, 'Discovering Signs', p. 19. Original emphasis.

<sup>58</sup> Cima, *Performing Women*, p. 48.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, acting texts of the mid-nineteenth century reflected a codified system of typical signs or gestures designed to ‘index’ various emotional states. Cima argues, as I do, that such gestures were no longer adequate to represent the complex psychologies of Ibsen’s individuals; ‘a revised category of gestures became necessary: the *autistic gesture*, or subtle visual sign of the character’s soliloquy with himself’:

It is this type of introspective gesture which allowed the Ibsen actress to show the dialogue taking place within the character and the various lines of action she had to convey.<sup>59</sup>

According to Cima, such gestures ‘opened a gap through which the audience could see the actor mediate the character’s performance of conflicting roles’.<sup>60</sup> But I want to argue here that Robins sought to display to her audience not only the *conscious* duality of the character whom she played, but also the hysterical symptom, that which could not be said in language as it had been repressed, or ‘forgotten’ by the conscious mind. Indeed, such an interpretation seems to have coloured the details of Robins’s staging from the first moment of Hedda’s presence on stage: the theatre critic of the *Leicester Daily Post* noted that Hedda

first appears in a sweeping tea-gown of serpent-green, with a draped front of orange-coloured silk. The train is lined throughout with the brighter colour, and there are puffings of the same all down the back of the arm, the vivid colour breaking through the subdued exterior *like a wild thing that could not be suppressed*.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Cima, ‘Discovering Signs’, p. 22. Original emphasis.

<sup>60</sup> Cima, *Performing Women*, p. 53.

<sup>61</sup> *Leicester Daily Post*, 26 April 1891. My emphasis.



So Robins's 'performances' of conflicting roles were not always those of the guiltily aware or consummate actress, but were sometimes stagings of the return of the repressed, working through the speaking body. In the remainder of this section I therefore rework the autistic gesture as a specifically hysterical gesture, a speaking symptom. In doing so we can locate a still deeper layer of meaning within Robins's gestures as Hedda.

Cima's main example of Robins's use of the 'autistic gesture' in *Hedda Gabler* is taken from the first meeting between Hedda and Mrs Elvsted, after Tesman has left them alone, when Hedda hears Thea admit that she left Sheriff Elvsted to follow Lovborg 'straight to town'. Robins's annotation of the prompt book shows that she planned to deliver her line, 'My dear good Thea, how did you find the courage?', while 'still sitting on arm of chair and looking off into space'.<sup>62</sup> For Cima, this gesture of looking into space allowed Robins, as Hedda, an introspective facial sign; indeed, this 'gesture' recurs repeatedly throughout the text at 'important' moments, such as when she gives Bertha the instruction to 'shew him [Eilert] in' at Lovborg's first entrance in Act II (PB, Act II, p. 24).

Cima's other example from the prompt book, which she offers not so much as an 'autistic gesture' but as an example of Robins working past action and memory into the present, relates to the scene in which Brack informs Hedda of the true nature of Lovborg's death. In a letter to his brother Charles, William Archer described Robins's playing of this scene thus:

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<sup>62</sup> Robins's 1891 prompt book, Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, Act I, p. 6. Further references to this document, in which the pages of each Act are separately numbered, are given after quotations in the text, following the abbreviation PB.

Instead of starting, where Brack says he must dispel her pleasant illusion, Miss R[obins] used to speak three speeches: ‘Illusion?’ ‘What do you mean?’ and ‘Not voluntarily?’ - quite absently, looking straight in front of her, and evidently not taking in what Brack was saying. She used to draw deep breaths of relief [...], quite intent on her vision of Eilert lying ‘i skonhed’, and only waken up at her fourth speech: ‘Have you concealed anything?’ [...].

I shall never forget her saying of ‘Not voluntarily?’ with a sort of dreamy surprise, not in the least realizing what Brack’s words implied, yet beginning to wake up, as when a persistent external sound forces itself into a dream, and you are just awake enough to wonder vaguely what it can be.<sup>63</sup>

In her prompt book, Robins has noted ‘grave and absent’ next to the line ‘Illusion?’, while next to ‘Not voluntarily?’ she writes, ‘sad far looking eyes and a smile that says softly how much better I know Eilert than you’ (PB, Act IV, p. 6). In the article, ‘Discovering Signs’, Cima describes this gesture as an indication that Robins revealed Hedda’s ‘melodramatic, self-dramatizing, past-oriented action as well as her actual present struggle to keep Brack at bay’.<sup>64</sup>

However, Elin Diamond reads the scene differently, rejecting the consciousness implied by Cima and replacing it with a specifically hysterical emphasis which is close to that which I also place on Robins’s performance:

Marking moments when her body translates the secrets of ‘emotion memory’, Robins consciously represents hysteria’s signifier, not for her interlocutor

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<sup>63</sup> Letter to Charles Archer, 8 July 1891, reproduced in C[harles] Archer, *William Archer: Life, Work and Friendship* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), pp. 186-88.

<sup>64</sup> Cima, ‘Discovering Signs’, pp. 20-21.



Brack, but for the Other, the spectator who will complete the circuit of signification and read her truth.<sup>65</sup>

Whether the spectators in the audience of the 1891 production were able to read Robins's truth is a question to which I will return in my discussion of the critical response to *Hedda Gabler*; for the moment, I want to pursue a reading of Robins's performance strategies which develops that of Diamond, identifying a hysterical rhetoric of performance at work in Robins's acting of Hedda. In doing so, examination of passages from the prompt book other than those described by Cima, and thus those which are discussed by her critics, strengthens the argument considerably, enabling us to more firmly identify such a performance practice within Robins's work. For rather than relying solely on facial expressions which are notoriously difficult to 'read', Robins also provides her Hedda with nervous tics and gestures which seem to speak for her at moments of agitation. To repeat my earlier quotation from Peter Brooks, Robins here seems to be using 'the body itself, its actions, gestures [...] to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation'. In setting out this analysis we need, however, to be aware that in relying on Robins's notes of the gestures she will make as Hedda, we are speaking of gestures which are 'being mediated by the context of articulated language, that the generalized indications of the gestural sequence exist to be translated'.<sup>66</sup> I identified some of the problems to which this gives rise in my discussion of Henry Siddons's work, *Practical Illustrations of Gesture and Action*, in Chapter Two; however, in the absence of performance itself, Robins's descriptions of gesture will have to suffice.

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<sup>65</sup> Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 79.

<sup>66</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 71.

In her first meeting with Mrs Elvsted, when Tesman has left to write his letter to Lovborg and Hedda is interrogating Thea about her relationships with her husband and with Eilert, Robins annotated the dialogue with descriptions of a gesture which, to return to Freud's terminology in discussing his hysterical patients, seems almost to 'join [...] in the conversation'. By using the prompt book together with the copy of the full performance script held in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays Collection at the British Library, it is possible to reconstruct this scene. Robins's annotations to the text are set out within square brackets:

HEDDA (*Casually*) And [examines an invisible spot on her dress] Eilert Lovborg has been in your neighbourhood about three years, hasn't he?

MRS ELVSTED (*Looking embarrassed at her*) Eilert Lovborg? Yes, he has.

HEDDA Had you known him before - here in town? [still brushing at the 'spot']

MRS ELVSTED Scarcely at all. I mean I knew him by name, of course.

HEDDA But you saw a good deal of him in the country? [quick sharp low]

(PB, Act I, p. 9)

The gesture is a lineal descendant of Lady Macbeth's guilt-ridden 'Out, damned spot!', but what Robins did with it is subtly different. In contrast to Lady Macbeth's known and acknowledged guilt, Hedda's feelings for Lovborg are multiply repressed, both (at this point in the play) from the knowledge of the audience and, in their true depth, from her own consciousness. Robins thus drew on what might otherwise be seen as a melodramatic gesture to stage what is repressed by the spoken text at this moment of performance.

This kind of hysterical gesture was repeated in the next scene when Eilert is mentioned. As Tesman returns and asks whether there has been any message from



Lovborg, Hedda's answer 'No' is accompanied by the hand-written direction, 'leans against curtain clicking nail on lower teeth' (PB, Act II, p. 23). Elsewhere Hedda's body as represented by Robins was in constant motion, moving from sofa to window to chair, leaning on the back of furniture at one moment and moving away again in the next, full of restless agitation which belied the words with which she maintained her relations with society. In these moments, I would argue that Robins created a double-layered dialogue of voice and body, adopting hysterical rhetoric to communicate a truth to the audience which could not be seen by the society within the play. In Peter Brooks's words,

Language as socially defined is inadequate to 'cover' an area of the signifiable. [... The gesture marks] a kind of fault or gap in the code, the space that marks its inadequacies to convey a full freight of emotional meaning.<sup>67</sup>

It is interesting to note that Robins's careful annotations in her prompt book are to a large degree absent in the scenes involving Hedda and Eilert alone; it is as though Hedda no longer needs to play act at these moments, but can speak her meaning to Eilert with her voice instead of her body. With Eilert she can live her dream life, rather than repressing it; but this is of course not without danger for her.

The split between what can be said and what Hedda wants, or needs, to say is evident at other moments in the script. Robins's notes make it clear that she was hopeful of communicating her hidden meaning to the audience through the mechanism of the speaking body: when Tesman discovers that she has burnt the manuscript and interprets it as an act of love, Robins's notes reveal her intention that Hedda should show palpitating disgust (PB, Act IV, p. 3). This disgust, in the unexpurgated version

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<sup>67</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 67.

of the play text, would have actually been in response to Tesman's realisation that Hedda is pregnant, so here we can locate a conjunction of multiple repressions: the repressed within Hedda and that which I have identified as the repressed within the production itself, the absent body of Hedda's unborn child.

In such ways then, Robins planned carefully the ways in which she would communicate to the audience the multiply layered nature of Hedda's character. While some of these doublings relate to her awareness of guilt, or her desire to 'act' to reveal her true thoughts, it seems to me that the specifically 'gestural' moments which I have identified can be interpreted as the speaking unconscious - the hysterical gesture 'joining in the conversation', so that the analyst in the audience can be sure that he is approaching, in Freud's own somewhat complex words, the 'region of the pathogenic organization which contains the symptom's aetiology': Hedda's fantasy life of freedom and power over Eilert Lovborg (*SE* II, p. 296). In the final part of this section therefore, I will examine the critics' response to Robins's performance, to see whether these men, whom we have seen setting themselves up almost as 'physician analysts' in their reviews of the play, were actually able to complete Diamond's 'circuit of signification and read her [Hedda's] truth'.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4.2.4 *Reading the Symptom: The Critics' Response*

The difficulties here are manifold. In addition to what Michael Booth has described as 'the fundamental problem of historical analysis when it seeks to discover what was seen in an age when conventions of seeing were quite different', when nineteenth-century acting and viewing involved collusion between 'performers and

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<sup>68</sup> Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 79.



spectators [...] in the arrangement of signs',<sup>69</sup> the fact that Robins was actively seeking to break down (and break out of) the terms of that collusion presents us with a further hurdle. If the critics were unable to 'read' the symptomatic act, we cannot now tell if that was because the act was not there, or because, outside the conventional 'arrangement of signs' it remained invisible, or because the critics, unlike Strindberg, Ibsen and Freud, were not yet able to think in modern psychological discourse.<sup>70</sup> Speaking of the modern condition of multiple personality disorder, which he offers as a kind of replaying of Freud's 1896 aetiology of hysteria, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen explores the constant interaction between the description of the condition by the physician and the clinical reality:

The description is also a prescription, a sort of stage direction which will be played out by the patients with occasional original improvisations (which then become incorporated into the clinical picture, and so on). Remember, then that the clinical picture is a 'living picture', a *tableau vivant*, an *imitation* of the psychiatrist's clinical picture.<sup>71</sup>

Borch-Jacobsen's description clearly applies to Charcot's hysterics, but Robins may have been showing too much originality in her improvisations, and thus have taken herself outside the bounds of the 'clinical picture' expected by these critics, who were as yet unable to read her 'symptomatic act'. Hysterical symptoms, as we have seen in Chapters Two and Three, existed before the development of the process of analysis by

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<sup>69</sup> Booth, 'Introduction', in Stokes, Bassnett and Booth, *Bernhardt, Terry, Duse*, p. 5 and p. 6.

<sup>70</sup> A further consideration might be the size of the theatre itself: the Vaudeville had been rebuilt and reopened on 13 January 1891, with a reduction in capacity from 1,000 to 740. See Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music Halls 1850-1950* (London: The Library Association, 1971).

<sup>71</sup> Borch-Jacobsen, 'Who's Who? Introducing Multiple Personality', p. 47.

Freud and Breuer which sought to display and explain them as part of the process of the talking cure.

However, the critical response to Robins's performance did stress the complexity of her portrayal of Hedda Gabler, although this response was at times subsumed within that other parallel discourse which has already been identified in the opening section of this chapter and which stressed the danger implicit within the play, and within Robins's performance in particular, in making Hedda, a worryingly unwomanly woman, appear sympathetic. I would want to see these discourses as interconnected, tying hysteria into the discourse of dangerous and subversive genders which I explored in Chapter Three through my work on the concern with pathological sexuality exhibited in the writings of Strindberg and Charcot. 'Carados', writing in the *Referee*, describes Hedda as 'a very abominable specimen of her sex' but says that Robins was 'so superb in her wickedness that she compelled admiration'.<sup>72</sup>

Robins's portrayal was a dangerous one, for it captivated the critics in spite of themselves: 'She has made vice attractive by her art. [...] She has glorified an unwomanly woman', worried Clement Scott.<sup>73</sup> The *Truth's* critic went even further in emphasising the dangers of Robins's skill:

Read the character of Hedda Gabler as she glares at us in the pages of the book. Study her, watch her. She is a fiend in human form. She is a revolting, abominable, heartless, relentless woman. See her acted by Miss Elizabeth

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<sup>72</sup> 'Carados', 'Dramatic and Musical Gossip', *Referee*, 26 April 1891. The critic goes on to say that 'here we have an illustration of the demoralizing effect of the Ibsen drama'.

<sup>73</sup> Clement Scott, *Illustrated London News*, 25 April 1891, 551-52, reproduced in Michael Egan, *Ibsen: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 225-28. The anonymous reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 April 1891, wrote that 'critics who feel that it is expected of them may pretend that they were shocked or bored. But they certainly followed the play for three good hours with every outward sign of lively interest' (p. 2).



Robins! Do we hate her, do we despise her, do we condemn her? No, we admire her for her very wickedness. She is no example to be avoided, she is a woman to be admired. She is a heroine.<sup>74</sup>

This dual nature of the response echoes the doubled nature of Robins's performance, for the reviews show that the division between speech and action, between outward appearance and underlying process, was conveyed to some at least amongst her audience. Clement Scott, owning that *Hedda Gabler* 'acts far better than it reads', says that Hedda 'talks with conviction and acts like a lunatic'. Her character grew under the influence of the actress:

Her face was a study. [...] It was the morbid attraction that we have felt at the Central Criminal Court at a great murder trial. What changes of expression and manner.<sup>75</sup>

For the critic of *The Era*, 'there was no resisting the spell she worked'. 'For every word and every look and every action [...] the actress commanded the closest attention', finding 'something that was dramatic in an Ibsen drama'.<sup>76</sup> For Archer, writing in *The World*, 'behind every speech we felt the swift intellectual process that gave it birth', although his involvement with that process may render his judgement less weighty than those of other critics. Agreement comes from the anonymous reviewer for the *St. James's Gazette*:

Every action denoted thought; every word received its full significance. The very woman stood revealed, her passionate nature disclosed, the restless

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<sup>74</sup> 'Hedda Gabler', *Truth*, 30 April 1891, p. 911.

<sup>75</sup> *Illustrated London News*, 25 April 1891.

<sup>76</sup> Unsigned review, 'Hedda Gabler', *Era*, 25 April 1891, p. 11.

craving for something undefined yet essential to her life betrayed by every movement.<sup>77</sup>

For Robins, who gave as one of her reasons for taking on the part of *Hedda Gabler* the fact that ‘it did seem hard never to act anything but from the pot-boiling point of view’, the critics agreed that her acting was natural, ‘not stagey’, but worked to bring her interpretation of the part clearly to her audience.<sup>78</sup> There was one exception to this point of view: Justin McCarthy, who had originally had an agreement with Heinemann for the presentation of a theatrical ‘adaptation’, and whose rumoured intention to cast Lilly Langtry in the lead role was one of the inspirations behind the decision of Robins and Lea to try and gain permission to stage their own production of the play.<sup>79</sup> In three separate reviews in *Gentleman’s Magazine*, *The Hawk*, and *Black and White*, McCarthy characterized Robins’s portrayal of Hedda as ‘merely melodramatic’, ‘ingeniously calculated to interest’, but misleading:

A Hedda so heavily emphasized, so highly coloured, was easier to score melodramatic points with, easier to impress an ordinary audience with than Ibsen’s Hedda. But it was not Ibsen’s Hedda. It was exceedingly clever, exceedingly interesting in its way, but it was not Ibsen’s Hedda.<sup>80</sup>

In the light of the otherwise near unanimity amongst the critics in favour of Robins’s subtle and calculated portrayal of Hedda, McCarthy’s criticism seems to come down to the fact that Robins’s interpretation does not square with his own. Like Freud with

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<sup>77</sup> Unsigned review, ‘*Hedda Gabler*’, *St. James’s Gazette*, 21 April 1891, p. 5.

<sup>78</sup> M. A. B. ‘An Interview with Miss Elizabeth Robins and Miss Marion Lea’: unsigned review, ‘Vaudeville Theatre’, *Morning Advertiser*, 21 April 1891, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> See Gates, ‘Elizabeth Robins and the 1891 Production of *Hedda Gabler*’. Remarkably, Archer seems to have initially supported this casting decision.

<sup>80</sup> Justin Huntly McCarthy, ‘*Hedda Gabler*’, *Hawk*, 28 April 1891, pp. 461-62; ‘Pages on Plays’, *Gentleman’s Magazine*, June 1891, p. 638; ‘Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* at the Vaudeville’, *Black and White*, 25 April 1891, p. 382.



his patient Dora, McCarthy seems to want to write his own narrative upon Hedda, and finds that Robins's performance prevents him from doing so.<sup>81</sup> McCarthy's 'misreading' emphasizes the colour, the melodrama: like the *visuel* Charcot, he seems to concentrate only on the melodramatic 'gesture', and not on the conjunction of symptom and speech working with and across one another. Throughout this chapter I have stressed the importance of reading both the text of words and the speaking body, placing both together in order to read the full meaning of the performance; it seems to me that this is what McCarthy fails to do. A very different approach, which resists the drive to complete analysis typified by Freud's restricted narrative of Dora's case, is exemplified by Grant Allan, writing in *Black and White*. His reference to the relatively new science of photography touches upon the combination of word and action by which I have tried to characterise Robins's work in this play; while his engagement as a spectator seems to come close to the model of active spectatorship which I argued towards in Chapter One:

This is wholly unlike anything I ever saw put upon the stage before; it's absolutely truthful, a photographic transcript from people one has met; as real as if it were actually taking place in earnest, and admirable above all things in its defiance of analysis. These people's motives are so true and so comprehensible that you can't explain them. [...] You grasp their truth at once, but you feel it would be hopeless to unravel them piecemeal as to unravel the whole set of balanced motives that lead to your own acts and your own daily adjustments.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> It is worth noting that Archer, too, originally had grave misgivings about Robins, who did not conform to his own 'very clear mental picture' of Hedda. 'Hedda Gabler', *World*, 29 April 1891.

<sup>82</sup> Grant Allan, *Black and White*. Cutting in Theatre Museum, undated.

I will give the last word, in defence of the apparent success of Robins's new acting strategy, to the critic of the *Daily Chronicle*, persuaded despite his obvious disdain for the play itself:

The actress had evidently attempted to seize every feature of the part, and it cannot be said that she is in the least bit wanting in the ability to render her reading plain to the onlookers, either by her bearing or by her delivery of the dialogue. Her intensity yesterday was in several instances successful in concealing the incongruities - if not positive absurdities - of some of the scenes.<sup>83</sup>

Robins's dual use of bearing and dialogue had been successfully conveyed to this critic; the symptom had been noted. In her own writing she was soon to make further use of this split, making bearing 'speak' in place of dialogue in an attempt to replicate, as playwright, the lessons that she had learned about representing female subjectivity from Ibsen. It is to this work, *Alan's Wife*, which Robins wrote in collaboration with Florence Bell, that I will now turn.

#### 4.3 Writing Hysteria: *Alan's Wife* (1893)

As the reader of this thesis is unlikely to be as familiar with this 'Study in Three Scenes', *Alan's Wife*, as with Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*, I will begin this section with a brief history of the genesis of the piece, which has its roots in a short story entitled *Befriad* ('The Release', or 'Set Free') written by yet another Scandinavian, this time the Swedish author Elin Ameen. I will then set out a summary of the plot of *Alan's Wife*, in which I draw out the strands of similarity between this text and that of

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<sup>83</sup> Unsigned review, *Daily Chronicle*, 21 April 1891, p. 5.



*Hedda Gabler*, and argue towards a reading of this play as in parts a ‘re-working’ of the concerns of Ibsen’s text. For Robins and Bell, with their understanding of women’s predicament in society reinforced by their involvement with the story of Ibsen’s heroine, here seem to have offered their audience an alternative picture of a woman who exceeds, or tries to escape from, the bounds of the Symbolic Order and of patriarchal society. Jean Creyke, the North Country girl married to a virile worker, and Hedda Gabler, the daughter of a General and wife of the weak Tesman, may seem to be very different individuals at first sight, but their situations and desires bear striking similarities: similarities which lead both women toward a final choice between death or submission. Having described the workings out of the play, and teased out the thematic similarities with Ibsen’s text, this discussion of *Alan’s Wife* concludes with a consideration of the use that Robins made, both in writing the text with Bell and in her own performance, of her previous performance practice in *Hedda Gabler*. Here I argue that by reproducing and radically re-writing the ‘double discourse’ of speech and action which Robins had developed as a performer of Ibsen, Robins and Bell attempted in the final scene of their play to stage the discourse of the mute but ‘speaking’ body of woman to shocking effect.

#### **4.3.1 *The genesis of ‘Alan’s Wife’***

As with the translation and production of *Hedda Gabler*, the story of the writing of *Alan’s Wife* was marked by concealment and evasion. The play was staged as the work of an anonymous author for the Independent Theatre Society’s ninth and tenth performances on Friday 28 April and Tuesday 2 May 1893, but J. T. Grein, the Independent’s founder, remained ignorant of the true identity of its creators until

some thirty years later.<sup>84</sup> Grein, who maintained to Robins that ‘women can’t write’, had called the play ‘one of the truest tragedies ever written by a modern Englishman’.<sup>85</sup> We can only imagine his surprise when, at a banquet given in his honour, Lady Bell finally told him ‘We wrote *Alan’s Wife*’.<sup>86</sup>

Some of the history of *Alan’s Wife* was set out by William Archer in his introduction to the published text of the play, which he began as follows:

The author of *Alan’s Wife* has deputed to me the task of relating its history, and, if need be, of pleading its cause. The former duty I undertake all the more readily as I am in great measure responsible for the existence of the play, and it is only right that I should put on record my complicity before the fact.<sup>87</sup>

Archer undertook his task with enthusiasm - his introduction numbers some 43 pages of single spaced text, only five pages less than the space occupied by the play itself. His role here deserves examination, for he seems, like Freud with his patient Dora, to have attempted to write his own narrative onto the text: he was concerned not so much with *Alan’s Wife* as written by Florence Bell and Elizabeth Robins, but with his own vision of what the play might have been and how it should be read.<sup>88</sup> Such a strategy mirrors the behaviour of the male figures within the text who, as we shall see, seek to write their own versions of the truth upon the body of its female protagonist.

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<sup>84</sup> Michael Orme, *J. T. Grein: The Story of a Pioneer* (London: Murray, 1936), p. 126.

<sup>85</sup> Grein’s comment was reported by Robins to Bell, and commented on by Bell in her letter to Robins, undated (Nov-Dec? 1892), Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, Series 5 Subseries B. Grein, ‘Editor’s Preface’, *Alan’s Wife*, pp. v-viii (p. viii). This Preface is taken from Grein’s review of the piece for *The Westminster Review*.

<sup>86</sup> Robins describes this incident in *Theatre and Friendship*, p. 119.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Introduction’, *Alan’s Wife*, pp. ix-lii (p. ix).

<sup>88</sup> Writing to Robins, Bell admitted that she rather dreaded Archer’s introduction: ‘I somehow feel sure beforehand that I shan’t like WA very much or Grein [who was to contribute a short preface] either’. Undated letter (?1893), Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, Series 5 Subseries B.



Archer situated his introduction firmly ‘around’ the play text, describing it as ‘a “reversible” commentary, a prologue and an epilogue in one’, and incorporating into the volume as Appendix I, which follows immediately upon the play text, a collection of correspondence between himself and A. B. Walkley originally published in *The Speaker* following Walkley’s review of the production (which is discussed below). Archer’s voice thus framed and attempted to shape the meaning of the text, but his history of the genesis of *Alan’s Wife* makes it clear just how much more control he had originally sought to exercise over the play’s creation.

Archer explained that in April 1891 - that is, shortly before the production of *Hedda Gabler* which was the focus of the preceding section, so that the common themes of the texts are perhaps unlikely to be mere coincidence - Robins lent him a copy of the short story *Befriad*, but was not at that time thinking of it as a subject for theatrical treatment.<sup>89</sup> It was Archer who was to have this revelation:

I suddenly saw it in the form of a play. It shaped itself naturally, inevitably, into three scenes of absolute and, as it seemed to me, beautiful simplicity and straightforwardness. [...] Accordingly I jotted down a rough scenario of the play as I saw it, and sent it to Miss Robins, mentioning the names of two young dramatists, to one or other of whom I advised her to suggest the theme.<sup>90</sup>

In due course Robins returned to Archer, the play already written, bearing the news that, ‘except as regards the division into three scenes, my scheme had been thrown

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<sup>89</sup> Angela John reports that Robins’s version of the genesis of this play involved her reading a summary of the story in Stead’s *Review of Reviews* and seeing the potential for a play in it (John, p. 89). What is clear, however, is that no permission was sought from the original author for its adaptation: see the correspondence from Ameen to Robins in the Fales Library, Series 2 Subseries B Box 6 Folder 4.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Introduction’, *Alan’s Wife*, p. xi.

entirely overboard'.<sup>91</sup> Reluctant to lose his original conception, Archer set out this scheme at some length in his introduction, and concluded that:

[My] play would clearly have been more academic, more of an experimental exercise, than the one now before us. As regards the first and third scenes, the author has, I gladly admit, improved upon my scheme, humanised and *dramatised* it.<sup>92</sup>

In the summary of the plot which follows, I will try to show the points of difference between Archer's conception and the actual text created by Bell and Robins, particularly in the second scene which Archer obviously feels did not improve upon his own; for the moment, I simply want to highlight the nature of the distinction which Archer makes here, between the academic, experimental text and the human *drama*. Once more we find ourselves exploring the gap between text and performance, the written text and the dramatic body, with which this chapter is so centrally concerned. The text written by Robins and Bell and performed by Robins places the human body centre stage, relying on the power of performance rather than academic argument to achieve its ends.

Subsequent to the writing of the play, Robins found an opportunity to read it to Grein, who was anxious to find a play by an English author which could be staged by his Independent Theatre Society (previously responsible for bringing Ibsen's *Ghosts* to the stage). The effect upon him was striking, rendering him mute and apparently imprinting the hysterical identification upon his own body, for he reports that:

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<sup>91</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xii.

<sup>92</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xiv.



When it was over, and Miss Robins had read the last speech, it seemed to me like one immense outburst of an agonising soul; I was speechless and overcome. I had not heard a play, - I had lived it, and suffered with the wretched heroine.<sup>93</sup>

*Alan's Wife* was granted a licence for performance by the Lord Chamberlain on 5 April 1893, and in accordance with the usual practice of the Independent Theatre Society, was performed twice, in the evening of 28 April and the afternoon of 5 May 1893, both performances taking place at Terry's Theatre. Critical reaction was vociferous, though mixed, and Robins's previous connection with Scandinavian playwrights was not forgotten. W. Moy Thomas echoes previous criticism of *Ghosts*:

In questions of morals the border-line is always a difficulty; but that there are limits we are all agreed, unless we except some Scandinavian writers, who [...] would persuade us that nothing can be too hideous for visible presentment on the stage provided it can be pleaded that the horrors are human. But the sensationalism which has been rightly alleged against this crude and repulsive little play is as deficient in truth as it is wanting in the light of imagination.<sup>94</sup>

The inhuman horrors that provoked such a reaction, and the connections with the Scandinavian stories of Ibsen (connections more subtle than allowed for by this critic), are made clear by a detailed consideration of the play's content and concerns.

#### 4.3.2 '*Alan's Wife*': the story of Jean Creyke

The title of *Alan's Wife*, like that of *Hedda Gabler*, situates the lead female character firmly within patriarchal society, allowing her identity only as she is owned or

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<sup>93</sup> 'Editor's Preface', *Alan's Wife*, p. vi.

<sup>94</sup> W. Moy Thomas, 'New Plays', *Graphic*, 6 May 1893, p. 409.

possessed by husband or father. General Gabler is dead, but his influence lives on in his repressed, hysterical daughter, now Hedda Tesman; Alan Creyke neither speaks nor is seen by the audience in the Robins-Bell play, but Jean's fate is shaped by her relationship to him. In the first scene she is happily married and pregnant, looking forward to a future which will in fact never happen, because by the end of this scene Alan has been killed in an accident. His dead body, on a covered stretcher, is brought onto the stage in the closing moments. In the second scene, Jean's child has been born crippled, almost as though the pregnant Jean has hysterically reproduced the mutilation of its father's body on the frame of her male child. Jean, driven to despair by the thought that her baby might outlive her ability to protect it, decides to end its life, first baptizing the boy in order to save its soul in the scene which I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. In the third scene, Jean is brought before the judicial authorities and is asked to try to explain her actions in order to avoid being hanged for the cold-blooded murder of her own child. But she remains silent until the final moments of the play as she is led away to her death, instead letting her mute body speak for her in a gestural dialogue carefully described by Robins and Bell.

Watching the performance, the critic of *The Referee* felt that the 'study' had 'none of the essential qualities of a play, for the three short scenes of which it is composed excite no more complex emotions than the contemplation of waxwork figures illustrating the history of a crime'.<sup>95</sup> But although the play could be described, in Walkley's words, as a series of "'slices of life" - mere *tableaux vivants*',<sup>96</sup> I want to argue that both the content *and* the form of the play raise issues concerning the place of the female in the Symbolic Order and the staging of the feminine subject which may

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<sup>95</sup> *Referee*, 30 April 1893, p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> A. B. Walkley, 'Alan's Wife', *Speaker*, 6 May 1893, p. 512.



have been 'misread' by the contemporary critics but still provide fruitful grounds for analysis over one hundred years later. Although content and form are of course inextricably linked, I want to begin my discussion of the play with a close textual reading which highlights Robins and Bell's understanding of the restrictions inherent in the woman's role, just as strongly felt by this Northern countrywoman as by Ibsen's Hedda Gabler or Freud's hysterical female patients. I will then move on to a consideration of the play's formal innovations, focusing on the performance practice described in the third and final scene which works by mining the disjunction between word and body.

In the first scene of the play, which 'takes place in a Village in the North of England at the present day',<sup>97</sup> we are introduced to Jean Creyke and her mother as they prepare the dinner for Alan, who is due to return shortly from 'the works'. The women are in the garden of the workman's cottage, shut off by a low fence from the street along which the villagers pass and stop to exchange news and greetings; the set instructions enable us to place this radical text within the stage conventions of realism. Before Jean enters, her mother, Mrs Holroyd, talks to a neighbour, introduced as Mrs Ridley, about Jean and her young husband Alan. We learn that Jean is the daughter of a schoolmaster, and that Mrs Holroyd had hoped in the past that Jean would 'marry a schoolmaster, as I did, or even a minister, - seeing all the book-learning she got from her poor father' (*AW*, p. 4). Instead, she has married Alan Creyke, whom both women describe as a 'fine fellow' (*AW* p. 3, p. 4). When Jean enters, this theme is repeated:

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<sup>97</sup> *Alan's Wife*, British Library, Lord Chamberlain's Plays, Add 53524 D, p. 1. Unless otherwise indicated in the text, references to the play will be taken from this manuscript and given after the abbreviation *AW*.

JEAN Isn't he the best husband a girl ever had? And the handsomest, and the strongest?

MRS HOLROYD Ah, yes, he's all that, I daresay.

JEAN (*laying the table*) Well, what more do you want?

MRS HOLROYD Ah, my dear, as I've often told you, I should have liked you to have looked higher.

JEAN Looked higher! How could I have looked higher than Alan?

MRS HOLROYD I wanted to see you marry a scholar.

JEAN We can't all marry scholars, mother dear - some of us prefer marrying men instead. (*AW*, p. 6)

Unlike Hedda Gabler in Ibsen's earlier play, Robins's character of Jean *does* marry a man, rather than a scholar like Tesman.<sup>98</sup> Where Hedda lacked the courage, or freedom, to marry a 'man', and was quite literally bored to death by her marriage to Tesman, Jean Creyke has been able to do so. But as the play progresses she too will be punished for her valuing of physicality over the Word - represented by the schoolmaster's book-learning - and the Symbolic Law of the Father: a punishment which results in her death sentence. Jean acts through her marriage to Alan, but her body is finally acted upon by the forces of law. Her resistance to these forces, knowing the outcome of such resistance, is at the heart of her refusal to speak in the third scene: a refusal and a choice that seems more positive than Hedda's hidden retreat to death in her closed, inner room.

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<sup>98</sup> The term used by Hedda and Brack to describe Tesman in the 1891 translation used for the production is actually 'savant', but there was obviously concern over how best to translate this term: 'savant' is written over 'specialist' each time.



Both Word and Law are explicitly 'embodied' in the play in the figure of Jamie Warren, the minister, whose first entry into the play is marked by his exhaustion from 'doing [his] work - giving the Word to those who can hear it' (*AW*, p. 9). It was Warren who was first chosen as a suitable husband for Jean by her father, as Mrs Holroyd reports that her husband used to say that:

When that lad grows up, he'll be the husband for Jean - he's a good lad, he never gets into mischief, he's never without a book in his hand. (*AW*, p. 7)

But Jean rejects Warren's life of the mind for a more physical, lived alternative, responding to her mother:

Ay, my poor father! but what would *I* have done with a good boy who never got into mischief! (*laughs*) that was not what I wanted. When Jamie and I used to come from school, and I'd rush on before and go flying up on the moors, to find the stagshorn moss, with the heathery wind in my face, and hear the whirring summer sounds around us, I used to want to shout aloud, just for the pleasure of being alive - and Jamie, poor little creature, used to come toiling up after me [...] And *I* used to have to help *him* up! [...] He was afraid - afraid! while I, a girl, didn't know what it was like to be afraid. I don't know now. (*AW*, p. 7).

The contrast could not be clearer: Jean, marked here as subversively masculine in her lack of fear, wants nothing to do with book learning. She reminds Warren that as children, when he 'had a book in your hand I'd snatch it from you and throw it over the hedge' (*AW*, p. 9): her distancing from the written text and all that comes with it is absolute. Instead she is closely connected to nature, to the virile, physical body, which she elsewhere associates with her husband, Alan:

I want a husband who is brave and strong, ready to defend me if there is danger in the path, a man who is my master as well as other folks'; who loves the hills and the heather, and loves to feel the strong wind blowing in his face and the blood rushing through his veins! Ah! to be joyous ... to be happy - to be alive! (*AW*, p. 7)

Jean's obsession with the strength and physicality of her husband is a motif repeated throughout this first scene, given extra emphasis by Warren's entry, tired and worn. In his introduction to the published text, Archer made it clear that Warren 'is practically an invention of the English author. A rejected suitor [...] is mentioned in the original, but does not appear in person'.<sup>99</sup> Archer's own projected plot of the play involved a doctor, rather than a minister, though he acknowledged the effectiveness of Warren as, 'as it were, an official mouthpiece for the consolatory commonplaces of piety'.<sup>100</sup> But Warren's role here is surely not simply that of a mouthpiece for pieties. He stands for Jean and audience as a contrast to the physical Alan (whom we do not see alive on stage) just as much as Tesman, in Ibsen's text, is contrasted in Hedda's mind with the beautiful, Dionysiac Lovborg, whom she imagines with 'vine leaves in his hair'. Both men, Alan Creyke and Eilert Lovborg, seem to represent for the female characters the possibility of an existence free of restrictions, unmediated by the Word/Law of society; yet both meet a Dionysiac fate in death and mutilation, one shot in the groin, the other mangled in the works machinery. The physical body is itself destroyed, and with these deaths, society's restrictions close in on both Jean and Hedda once again.

Following Warren's exit from this first scene, Jean and her mother occupy the time waiting for Alan's arrival by discussing the child that Jean is expecting - a topic

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<sup>99</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xii.

<sup>100</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xiv.



which shocked the sensibilities of the contemporary critics, one of whom described it as ‘the kind of conversation which the average playgoer feels it indiscreet to overhear’.<sup>101</sup> Jean imagines that she is to have a boy ‘just such another as his father’, with ‘sturdy little limbs’, but says ‘Oh, mother, it’s too good to be true!’ (*AW*, pp. 11-12). Almost immediately ‘gradual signs of commotion’ in the street forewarn of an accident at the works, involving the machines that Alan has stayed behind to mend. Warren returns to tell Jean, ‘God’s will be done, Jean; His hand is heavy on ye’. Eventually a covered litter is brought to the gate, bearing Alan’s body, which is described as ‘a sore sight’ which should not be seen: ‘You’re not the one to bear the sight’. The scene ends as Jean lifts the cover to view her husband’s mangled remains (*AW*, pp. 12-13).

Watching this play, the critic A. B. Walkley was convinced that he had seen this sore sight of the ‘mangled corpse’, ‘an unrecognisable mess of mangled flesh and crushed bones’.<sup>102</sup> But Robins made it clear subsequently that she and the producer, Hermann de Lange had not staged this spectacle. In a letter reproduced alongside the published text Hermann de Lange wrote to Archer:

I can unhesitatingly assure you that the ‘head and shoulders’ of the man who figured as the corpse on the stretcher were not ‘streaked with paint to indicate some hideous disfigurement.’ As it was not intended that he should be visible to the audience, I was under no temptation to commit any such crudity.<sup>103</sup>

Catherine Wiley argues that Walkley’s insistence on ‘having seen on stage what was never there parallels some of the hysterics’ problems’, that ‘the play’s realism raises

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<sup>101</sup> ‘Terry’s Theatre’, *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, 6 May 1893, p. 301.

<sup>102</sup> ‘Alan’s Wife’, *Speaker*, 6 May 1893, p. 512.

<sup>103</sup> Letter H[ermann] de Lange to William Archer, 23 May 1893. Reproduced in *Alan’s Wife*, Appendix I (p. 54).

the specter of castration in the critic's eyes and prompts his hysterical response'.<sup>104</sup>

There are indeed echoes of Lovborg's castration here, but what seems even more interesting about Walkley's response is the uncanny reversal, in his insistence on making visible what is not there, of what I have previously described as the hysterical repression of the baptism scene. Walkley's reaction seems marked by hysteria. Indeed, the terms in which he describes his response replicate the aetiology of the cases of male hysteria triggered by traumatic events seen by Charcot and discussed in relation to Strindberg's hysteria in Chapter Three. Walkley writes that,

One had the same shock, because one had the same feeling of everyday actuality, in the theatre, as though one had seen a man run over by an omnibus in the Strand outside.<sup>105</sup>

This critic's reaction helps to emphasise a focus on the 'spectacle' in relation to this text in performance. My reading of the play stresses the importance of sight and what should not be seen, and of the multiplying bodies in this play, bodies that speak through the silence of the written text in a physical spectacle which, as Walkley's experience demonstrates, can be dangerously misread.

The danger of the spectacle, of seeing what should not be seen, is made clear at the beginning of Act II. Jean's child is a cripple, indeed 'just such another as his father', but as his father was in death, his limbs disfigured. Jean's rejection of the written word, of the Symbolic Order in favour of the physical, virile body, has been punished, and this punishment is written on the bodies of the men whom she loves. Jean is withdrawn and almost silent as her mother and the neighbour Mrs Ridley

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<sup>104</sup> Catherine Wiley, 'Staging Infanticide: The Refusal of Representation in Elizabeth Robins's *Alan's Wife*', *Theatre Journal*, 42 (1990), 432-46 (pp. 442 and 444).

<sup>105</sup> A. B. Walkley, *Speaker*, 8 July 1893.



discuss the child and argue over the best way to care for it. She is as ‘white as a sheet’, and shudders as she looks into the fire (*AW*, p. 17, p. 16). Eventually Jean is left alone with the child, and makes it clear to the audience that her apparent indifference is not due to lack of love for the boy:

They say I don’t love you - I don’t care for you! Yes, yes, I do, my canny one  
- my little baby! (*AW*, p. 19).

Warren interrupts this scene, warning Jean that she must not fret, ‘mustn’t rebel so against the visitation of God!’. The child will ‘grow up to be a scholar and a God-fearing man yet’ (*AW*, p. 19). It is this idea that the child might ‘live longer than any of us’ that so worries Jean, but Warren also warns her that the child should be baptised: ‘It’s written in the Word “Unless ye be baptised -”’ (*AW*, p. 20).

During this dialogue Warren, looking to comfort Jean, urges her to think of those others who have suffered before her. But Jean rejects this advice, asking ‘And does it make it any better for me to think of those other wretched women?’ (*AW*, p. 21). Like Hedda, Jean perceives herself alone, not part of the community of women: this moment, which might potentially have been one of politicisation, of moving out from the individual to society, is rejected by Jean, who sees the sisterhood as one of wretchedness, not of comfort. It was not until *Votes for Women!*, the pro-suffrage play discussed in the final section of this chapter, that Robins was to be concerned with a stage narrative in which women joined together rather than experienced suffering alone.

Warren leaves, urging prayer as the way towards peace, and in the following moments Jean works through different phases of thought. First she makes an anguished prayer to God not to hurt the child any more as ‘*He* hasn’t been drunk with

life and strength and love - he hasn't walked through the world exulting and fearless and forgetting You' (*AW*, p. 21). Clearly Jean is aware of the ways in which she and Alan have broken the Laws of society and religion in their enjoyment of a physical, Dionysiac life, and fears that the punishment which should have been hers has instead been transposed onto the crippled limbs of her son. Looking in the cradle, she sees the smiling child, and comforts him, 'Never mind! Mother'll always be at your side - always - always' (*AW*, p. 22). But then she remembers Warren's words and worries that her child may outlive her:

*(With wide vacant eyes)* Oh, I seem to see you in some far-off time, your face distorted like your body, but with bitterness and loathing, saying 'Mother, how *could* you be so cruel as to let me live and suffer?'

Jean decides to kill the child, saying 'Darling, it will be so easy - you'll never know - it will only be that you'll go on sleeping - sleeping, until you wake up in heaven!'. The manuscript version of this scene submitted to the Lord Chamberlain ends there, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, but on the stage and in the published version Jean's words 'In heaven!' prompt her to remember Warren's words about baptism, and to then stage a 'baptism' of her own, 'moving like a woman in a dream'. The curtain falls as Jean 'goes stealthily towards cradle with a long wailing cry, the eider quilt hugged to her breast'.<sup>106</sup>

In Archer's version of the play - a version in which the minister played no part - the second scene was to have centred on a conversation between Jean and the district doctor,

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<sup>106</sup> *Alan's Wife*, p. 36.



a burly, benevolent, somewhat coarse-grained man, representing that medical optimism which is not founded upon piety, or indeed upon any metaphysical basis, but springs from a sort of instinctive feeling that the great machine of nature must go on.<sup>107</sup>

The conversation would have shown Jean resolving to end the crippled life, and following the doctor's departure she was to have done the deed in an inner room, 'seen but vaguely by the audience, and then rushed out, 'panic-stricken at the silence of death, called to her mother [... and] said "Yes, I did it," or words to that effect - whereupon, Curtain'.

In his Introduction to the published text Archer suggested that this interview with the doctor 'would have been a subtle piece of intellectual, as opposed to merely emotional, drama'.<sup>108</sup> But what would have been lost in Archer's version is surely more than emotion: without Warren as an authority figure connected with the power of the Word, a figure set up in contrast with Jean and Alan, the positioning of Jean as both trying to escape from and ultimately subject to the patriarchal Symbolic Order would fail. In addition, Jean's ability to communicate with her mother in Archer's text would have marked her as a very different woman from that created by Robins and Bell: their heroine stands silent and alone in the third act, unable, or rather unwilling, to use the language of patriarchy to say with Archer, 'I did it'.

This third scene opens with a dialogue between Colonel Stewart (Stuart in published text) and the Chief Warder of the prison, discussing the prisoner Jean Creyke. The Warder reports that she is 'Just the same, sir. Can get nothing out of her' (*AW*, p. 23). Just as Freud's patient Dora, and Freud himself, were to be confronted

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<sup>107</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xiii.

<sup>108</sup> 'Introduction', *Alan's Wife*, p. xv.

with a series of men who told them, 'I get nothing from my wife', so here the male figures of the justice system are unable to get what they want from Jean's female body: in this case, an explanation of her actions which might provide 'an extenuating circumstance if only we could get at it' (*AW*, p. 23). Mrs Holroyd, visiting Jean, is thus brought in to see the Colonel, in an attempt to fill out Jean's history, for 'there seems to be very little here to found an appeal for mercy on' (*AW*, p. 24).

Jean is brought on, but refuses to respond to either the Colonel's questioning or her mother's entreaties. She knows that explanations for the boy's death can not be made in language: Robins's performance practice in this scene is discussed in the next part of this section. Finally, Warren enters with news that the 'sentence must be carried out' (*AW*, p. 27), and urges her to confess her crime. Unable to drag a sentence out of Jean's body, the Word and the Law combine to impose their own sentence upon her; again there seem to be echoes here of Freud's treatment of Dora's story, discussed in Chapter One, for he too imposed his own sentence, or narrative, upon the story which was told by Dora's symptomatic body.

It is only now that Colonel Stewart's statement that Jean murdered her child 'because you hadn't the courage to bear the sight of its misfortunes' finally provokes her to spoken language:

I hadn't the courage? Ah, I've had courage just once in my life, just once in my life I've been strong and kind; and it was the night I killed my child!

(*AW*, p. 28).

In the published text, Jean's last words seem to anticipate a reunion with her husband and child in heaven - 'Maybe I shall find him up yonder made straight and fair and



happy - find him in Alan's arms'<sup>109</sup> - but in the version for performance the mood is much more sombre, much harder. Jean has no sense of personal redemption:

It was I who loved him, - loved him enough to do the only thing that could help him. If I have lost my soul, if I have no hope of salvation, it is for his sake - the child has been set free!

Like Hedda, Jean's only escape is that of death, for she, like her child, is unable to live free in society. But unlike Hedda, who is cornered by despair and by her inability to influence others, Jean seems to actively choose death as a means to set herself, like her child, free. This difference in their positions is reflected by their relationship to the speaking body: Hedda's body speaks for her at moments of tension, hysterically, involuntarily, while in the final scene of *Alan's Wife* Jean consciously uses her body and its gestures as a means of communication, resisting submission to the Word and the Law and communicating that resistance to the nineteenth century audience without the medium of the spoken word. By refusing the spoken word the character of Jean Creyke refuses to be reincorporated within the systems of justice and power represented by Colonel Stewart or Jamie Warren; by writing and performing such refusal Robins resists the closure of her text, instead staging Pamela Turner's 'activity of possibility', or what Elin Diamond calls 'hysteria's realism'.<sup>110</sup>

### 4.3.3 *The Speaking Body*

In this last section of my discussion of *Alan's Wife*, I focus more closely on the final scene of the play, in which Robins and Bell employed a performance discourse which built on that developed by Robins in her portrayal of Hedda Gabler's split self.

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<sup>109</sup> *Alan's Wife*, p. 48.

<sup>110</sup> Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 86.

Through this discourse, which sets the gestural language of the body against the authority of the word, Robins is, as I have argued, able to stage resistance to the systems of patriarchy and justice for her audience. Like Anna O., whose symptoms spoke eloquently of what she could not or would not say in a language which increasingly slipped out of her control, Jean Creyke employs the language of the body to communicate what otherwise cannot be said. But unlike Anna O., Robins's character is in control, making a conscious choice: here the rhetoric of hysteria, rather than the damaging illness which underlies it, is our focus.

We have seen that Jean is situated in the first scene as rejecting the Word and those who use it - schoolteachers and ministers - in favour of a life that is centred on the physical, on the lived body. In this final scene, despite the mutilated and crippled bodies that have multiplied around her, she attempts to assert control over her situation through the language of the body. Unable and unwilling to argue her case in words, knowing that by doing so she brings herself within the discourses of authority and punishment, Jean seeks instead a different kind of communication. Her resistance is recognised as such: discussing her with Mrs Holroyd at the beginning of the third scene, Colonel Stewart says that she 'seems strangely hardened', needing to be brought to 'a better frame of mind' (*AW*, p. 25). This language of 'hardness', which Robins returned to in her 1907 suffrage play as a descriptor of Vida Levering, identifies both women as non-conformers to society's expectations of compliant femininity. But where Vida succeeds in employing that hardness to strengthen her will to speak on behalf of herself and other women by the end of *Votes for Women!*, Jean is as yet unable to make the transition to voiced rather than gestural protest. She refuses the talking cure offered by Colonel Stewart and Warren, but is unable to stage



her own within the confines of their authority. Yet in resisting this ‘treatment’, even more effectively than Freud’s patient Dora, Jean refuses to enable the men that surround her to construct their own narrative out of the words she offers them. Diamond, too, suggests parallels between the actions of Jean and Dora, in ‘the confusion of figuration and representation and the unstable configurations that result’.<sup>111</sup>

When Jean is first brought before the Colonel and her mother, she acknowledges her mother with a cry, and then falls silent. Mrs Holroyd, working on the Colonel’s behalf, entreats her to, ‘Tell his worship how you came to do it. Tell him you hadn’t your wits right; that you didn’t know what you were doing to the little bairn!’ (*AW*, p. 25). Jean remains silent, refusing to offer up a narrative as exculpation. But on the stage this silence of the voice was set against the movements of Jean’s speaking body: the play text makes it clear that the actor’s body is to bear the meaning that cannot be expressed in words on the stage. The text records Jean’s response to her mother’s urging in the following way:

JEAN (*is silent*) I knew well enough.

MRS HOLROYD Oh, my dear, if you could tell him something that would make them let you off - now think, Jean, think, honey! it may be you could tell them something that would save you.

JEAN (*stares vacantly into space*) I can tell him nothing. (*AW*, p. 25)

Any ambiguity about the way in which this scene should be performed is removed by the published text, in which the stage directions state explicitly that, ‘Jean’s sentences are given as a stage direction of what she is silently to convey, but she does not speak

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<sup>111</sup> Diamond, ‘Realism and Hysteria’, p. 85.

until nearly the end of the Act'.<sup>112</sup> Thus Jean remains silent for the majority of this scene, but her body, making use of the lessons learned by Robins in her portrayal of the hysteric Hedda Gabler, speaks for her, reaching beyond the confines of the on-stage audience of authority to the theatre audience who, as knowing and active spectators, can work to interpret these symptomatic acts. It is interesting that the direction given to Jean at the end of this extract - '*stares vacantly into space*' - is the direction which we have seen Robins previously employ for Hedda Gabler at moments of tension, such as Eilert's first entrance. Here it is connected, explicitly, with the withholding of information, with the repression of knowledge. And the withholding is total, even between women: for when Jean is left alone with her mother, watched only by two Warders who 'stand at the back, apparently not listening', Jean refuses the medium, or cure, of words. Mrs Holroyd makes it clear that she 'hasn't opened her lips from the beginning' (*AW*, p. 25). Instead she continues, silently, to communicate by gesture alone.

We have already seen in Chapter Two that in his discussion of melodrama, Peter Brooks distinguishes between mute tableau and gesture - in which the actors provide fixed and visual representations of reactions in attitudes that correspond to the situation of their souls - and the mute role, such as that of Tom, the dumb man of Manchester, in which the character has to express increasingly complex ideas through gesture, and fails to do so. Brooks writes that in such cases:

Gesture seems to be receiving a charge of meaning that we might suspect to be in excess of what it can literally support.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *Alan's Wife*, p. 41.

<sup>113</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, pp. 59-61.



In Chapter Two, we noted the existence of an ever present interpreter figure or figures, Dickens's 'grey-bearded father and a red-wigged countryman, his son', who was able to translate these mute gestures 'into long and complicated descriptions'. Robins and Bell allowed their actor, and their audience, no such respite, no easy translation back into words: Mrs Holroyd, who admits that Jean 'always knew I hadn't the wits to be up to her, or find the words to say to her', is unable to translate (*AW*, p. 25). The gestures of Jean Creyke, like those of the mute role of melodrama, here seem to be being asked to bear a meaning in excess of what they can support, without the comforting safety net of translation back into words by an on-stage character: the power to translate is absent from the stage, and is thus situated with the audience.

While some of Jean's 'utterances' draw on the gestural codes of the mid-nineteenth century stage, such as when the actress expresses the sentiment of sympathy, 'Poor mother!', by 'put[ting] out her hand to her mother' (*AW*, p. 26), other sentences given in the play text are more difficult to represent in gesture, as the following examples demonstrate:

MRS HOLROYD How could you do it, my lass? Can't you remember? If you could have told them all about it and asked for mercy you could have got it.

JEAN (*smiles strangely*) I don't want mercy.

(*silent*)

[...]

WARREN Jean, your only hope is in Him who alone can pardon your sin; turn to Him before it is too late. Do not die unforgiven.

JEAN (*is silent*) I shall not die unforgiven. (*AW*, p. 26, p. 27)

Gesture cannot bear the weight of such language; or rather, the words given in the text are inadequate approximations of what is to be communicated by gesture. Language as socially defined is once again inadequate to cover an area of the signifiable. Diamond argues that here:

Robins and Bell have produced a hysterical body in the theater: they have given the actor's body a discourse that attempts to signify but that *cannot be read*.<sup>114</sup>

But it is in fact the very act of reading this bodily text which is so crucial to my discussion of *Alan's Wife* and its performance strategies, which I argue are based on the rhetoric of hysteria. Diamond, basing her argument on Walkley's hysterical reaction to the play discussed above, suggests that the text is unreadable, unrepresentable, generating other hysterias and disturbing 'the solid geometry of representation'.<sup>115</sup> But we must remember that it was Robins's own body, not just the 'actor's body' of Diamond's phrase, which was present in the performance text, and that Robins's was a body which brought with it the experience of setting gesture against word in Ibsen. With this in mind, I would argue that while the on-stage interpretation by which I have previously characterized melodrama is absent, Robins did indeed seek to convey meaning to her audience. This was, however, meaning that has to be worked for, watched for, created in tandem with the performing body.

For what does seem to be clear here is that Jean no longer wants to speak in the language of words, that she resists the talking cure urged so insistently by those around her: 'It may be you could tell them something that would save you', 'Jean, Jean, if only I could get you to speak', 'Speak, speak, before it is too late. Tell them

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<sup>114</sup> Diamond. 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 86. Original emphasis.

<sup>115</sup> Diamond. 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 87.



why you did it. Put away your rebellious heart!’ (*AW*, p. 25, p. 26, p. 28). Although she is explicitly stated within the play text *not* to be hysterical, or ‘mad’ in any way - ‘I knew well enough’ is one of the ‘silent’ phrases given to her (*AW*, p. 25) - Jean here adopts the language of hysteria, of the speaking body, as the only language which allows her to speak true, to resist re-inscription within the discourse of the Word.<sup>116</sup> Like Dora, Jean Creyke knows that it is only by resisting the talking cure that she can remain in possession of her own story. Steven Marcus wrote of Dora that she refused:

to be a character in the story that Freud was composing for her, and wanted to finish it herself. As we now know, the ending she wrote was a very bad one indeed.<sup>117</sup>

The character created by Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell, through remaining silent, is also able to ‘finish it herself’. And although her chosen ending - death - might seem to be a very bad one indeed, it enables her to retain her vision of bodily strength and vigour triumphing over the restrictions of the Word and the Law. In rewriting the ending of the play for publication, Robins and Bell drove this point home:

Maybe I shall find him up yonder made straight and fair and happy - find him in Alan’s arms. Good-bye - mother - goodbye! (*AW*, p. 28).

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<sup>116</sup> Archer makes it clear that Jean Creyke is not to be regarded as insane. She ‘is neither lunatic nor heroine. She is a terribly afflicted woman, that is all, who acts as, somewhere or other in the world, some similarly tortured creature is doubtless acting at the very moment I write these words’ (‘Introduction’, *Alan’s Wife*, pp. xlv-xlvi, repr. from *Westminster Gazette*, 6 May 1893).

<sup>117</sup> Marcus, ‘Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case-History’, p. 88. Marcus’s conclusion is contested by Appignanesi and Forrester in *Freud’s Women*, p. 167.

#### 4.4 Politicizing Hysteria: *Votes for Women!* (1907)

You've seen the accounts of the girl who's been tried in Manchester lately for the murder of her child. [...] A little working girl - an orphan of eighteen - who crawled with the dead body of her new-born child to her master's back door and left the baby there. [...] A few days later she found herself in court being tried for the murder of her child. Her master, a married man, had of course reported the 'find' at his back door to the police and he had been summoned to give evidence. The girl cried out to him in the open court: 'You are the father!' He couldn't deny it. The Coroner at the jury's request censured the man and regretted that the law didn't make him responsible. But he went scot free. And that girl is now serving her sentence in Strangeways Gaol.

(*VW*, p. 135)

Robin's character Vida Levering recounts this story of infanticide to her Trafalgar Square audience, and to the audience of the Court Theatre where Robins's play was first performed in 1907, in the second act of *Votes for Women!* Making the last of a series of speeches at a pro-suffrage rally, Levering, who has of course herself been forced into an abortion at the hands of a 'shady-looking doctor' some years previously, uses this story to highlight the different experiences of men and women within the English justice system:

A woman is arrested by a man, brought before a man judge, tried by a jury of men, condemned by men, taken to prison by a man, and by a man she's hanged! Where in all this were *her* 'peers'? (*VW*, p. 135)

Fourteen years earlier, in *Alan's Wife*, Robins had told the story of Jean Creyke, another woman who kills her child in desperate circumstances. In that play Robins and



her collaborator Florence Bell showed Jean to be caught up within this male system of justice, her only option the resort to silence as a means of resistant non-co-operation with the system which Vida Levering now reveals to be so biased against her. Jean, knowing that her voice would only be appropriated for others' purposes, remains silent. In contrast, in *Votes for Women!* Robins (like Vida herself) was able to take the step from silent or coded resistance towards vocal criticism and protest, using 'the methods proper to writers - the use of the pen', and translating this into the on-stage language of protesting bodies and voices.<sup>118</sup>

Unlike Jean Creyke, who explicitly refuses to identify with the suffering of other women when reminded that others suffer as she does, angrily asking, 'And does it make it any better for me to think of those other wretched women?' (*AW*, p. 21), Vida Levering is able to connect her own past experiences with those affecting all women in her society: her own 'peers' who are so seldom allowed to be heard. Making this connection gives her the strength to speak both in and against the dominant male discourse, doing so with the aim of co-operation by women with women and for women, rather than the old kind of co-operation with the patriarchal order which is urged upon Jean Creyke by her mother, Colonel Stewart, and the minister Jamie Warren:

We women must organise. We must learn to work together. We have all - rich and poor, happy and unhappy - worked so long and so exclusively for *men*, we hardly know how to work for one another. But we must learn. (*VW*, p. 135)

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<sup>118</sup> Robins, *Way Stations*, p. 106. In her Introduction to her recent edition of *Votes for Women!*, Jean Chothia draws attention to the fact that Robins ascribes her own 'conversion' to an occasion when she 'first heard women talking politics in public'. *The New Woman' and Other Emancipated Woman Plays*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xxi.

In stressing the value of ‘working together’, and doing so in a scene which relies for its staging on a kind of ensemble theatre far removed from the isolated figures of Hedda Gabler and Jean Creyke, Robins has, I argue, reached the end of the journey towards political awareness and articulation of desire which I have traced in this chapter. As theatre, *Votes for Women!* is not particularly radical in form: in *A Stage of Their Own*, Sheila Stowell describes it as ‘a grab-bag of conventions recycled for feminist ends [...] a drawing-room play of the 1890s yoked uneasily to Drury Lane city spectacle and Ibsenesque duologue’.<sup>119</sup> But Joanne Gates’s argument in her introduction to the recent republication of the play that its progress depends on visual ‘recognition moments’ does imply that Robins is still aware of the power of dramatic performance to undercut language with the action of the body.<sup>120</sup> Just as in Robins’s 1891 performance of *Hedda Gabler*, where Elin Diamond describes her as ‘marking moments when her body translates the secrets of emotion “memory”’, Robins as playwright here utilized moments of melodramatic, bodily revelation to carry her ‘tract’ forward.<sup>121</sup> Around Vida Levering’s central narrative of betrayal and recovery to voice protest at women’s position, Robins situates a romance involving a Conservative politician, Geoffrey Stonor (revealed to be the ‘friend of my family’ who betrayed Levering into abortion years before) and a young heiress, Beatrice Dunbarton, who is converted to the suffrage cause during the play by Levering’s Act II rally speech. Beatrice’s gradual realisation of Vida’s story, and its connection to her fiancé, comes via a series of melodramatic moments of revelation: Stonor’s identifying of a dropped handkerchief as Vida Levering’s from the embroidered initial

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<sup>119</sup> Sheila Stowell, *A Stage of Their Own: Feminist Playwrights of the Suffrage Era* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 2.

<sup>120</sup> Gates, in *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s*, p. 109.

<sup>121</sup> Diamond, ‘Realism and Hysteria’, p. 79.



‘V’ when he should not know her first name; Beatrice’s awareness of Stonor’s ‘set white face’ as Levering tells the crowd at the rally that:

Every woman who has borne a child is a Labour woman. No man among you can judge what she goes through in her hour of darkness - (*VW*, p. 135)

Beatrice’s moment of final realisation soon afterwards is staged in explicitly hysterical terms, the body speaking what words cannot yet say, against the continuing speech of Levering: ‘Her hands go up to her throat as though she suffered a choking sensation. It is in her face that she “knows”’ (*VW*, p. 135). But what is different here is that the play’s narrative does not end with this silent, hysterical realisation and the inability to communicate the knowledge gained which lead to death for both Hedda and Jean Creyke: instead the power of the body, and its numerous betrayals, is put to political use in the last Act, where Beatrice and Vida work together to force Stonor to repay the debt he owes to women, and enlist his support for the suffrage cause. ‘The man who served one woman - God knows how many more - very ill - shall serve hundreds of thousands well’ (*VW*, p. 141). Thus, while Robins has not forgotten the dramatic lessons learned from *Hedda Gabler* and *Alan’s Wife*, she now uses the combination of body and word to achieve political action on women’s behalf.

This distancing from Ibsen’s critical heritage as a result of her journey towards awareness of herself as a political subject is made clear by Robins’s subsequent comments on that playwright as a man of ideas. Looking back to her involvement with *Hedda Gabler* in the lecture which was to be published as *Ibsen and the Actress* in 1928, Robins admitted that although the playing of the part itself gave her a kind of ‘self-respect’, the ‘general bearing of Hedda’s story’ ‘so little concerned us when we were producing Ibsen that we never so much as spoke about it’. Had they done so,

Robins suggests, 'if we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves with the emancipation of women, we would not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of wholehearted devotion we did give' (*IA*, p. 31). But in 1908, the year after writing *Votes for Women!*, and the same year that she became president of the Women Writers' Suffrage League, founded by Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton, Robins showed that she was all too aware of the 'general bearing' of Ibsen's work. In a lecture given at the Philosophic Institute, Edinburgh, on 27 October 1908, entitled 'Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen', Robins interrogated Ibsen's role as a political thinker as well as a man of the theatre, setting him against what was for her a time of group action for the emancipation of women, when, as her character Vida Levering makes clear in her Trafalgar Square speech, women 'must learn to work together'.

Discussing *An Enemy of the People*, Ibsen's 1882 play (with which critics including Angela John and Joanne Gates have compared *Votes for Women!*, noting similarities between the rally scene of Robins's play and the open air meeting of Ibsen's play), Robins said that the playwright:

Seems not to have realized that whether the development of civilization in the past lay in the hands of the few, the outstanding fact of our time is that progressive ideas are barren and without effect except in so far as they are diffused and held in common.

But so far from making this deduction from his vividly seen facts Ibsen (to quote one of his most accredited and best informed critics) believed in the power of the single great personality and that 'he and he alone can accomplish everything'. (Brandes)



Yet the day is surely gone if it ever was truly here when effective progress can be made by fiat. [...] Ibsen's bias towards individualism leads him into that pitfall of the incurable hero-worshipper, belief in the Superman, which is nothing but a revamped Romanticism returned to us in a new guise. Strange to find this old trap with the new name ensnaring even the ironic Ibsen, who has his whips and scorpions for the will of the people, but in the will of Solness and of Brand an unthinking faith.<sup>122</sup>

So while the experience of acting in Ibsen aided Robins towards a new construction and representation of the female subject, the step towards political subjectivity was one that Robins eventually recognised needed to be taken together with other women. In Vida Levering's final long speech of *Votes for Women!* Robins widened the focus from the secret pain of the individual, experienced by Hedda Gabler and Jean Creyke, to draw a lesson of the need <sup>for</sup> communal political action, the need to speak out and to speak out together to avoid the possibility, which she discussed in 'Woman's Secret', that all could be 'made smooth and soothed again by some form of that phrase, "An exceptional woman", with the prompt rider, "sexless"'.<sup>123</sup> Levering tells Stonor, as Robins told her audience:

The time has come when a woman may look about her, and say: What significance has my secret pain? Does it 'join on' to anything? And I find it does. I'm no longer a woman who has stumbled on the way. [...] I'm one who has got up bruised and bleeding, [...] and said to herself not merely: Here's

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<sup>122</sup> Robins, 'Some Aspects of Henrik Ibsen'. Typescript, Elizabeth Robins Collection, Fales Library, pp. 6-7. For a fuller description and discussion of the contents of this lecture, see Penny Farfan, 'From *Hedda Gabler* to *Votes for Women*: Elizabeth Robins's Early Feminist Critique of Ibsen', *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996), 59-78.

<sup>123</sup> Robins, *Way Stations*, p. 13.

one luckless woman! but - here is a stone of stumbling to many. Let's see if it can't be moved out of other women's way. And she calls people to come and help. (*VW*, p. 145)

The dramatic journey of Elizabeth Robins which I have traced in this chapter thus brought her to a political understanding of the way in which she and other women had to work together to achieve both individual and collective aims. The stories of Hedda Gabler and Jean Creyke had no longer to be seen in isolation, but rather as joined to the stories of other suffering and silent women through history. This idea was, indeed, given dramatic impact in the Coronation Suffrage Pageant of 17 June, 1911, where the procession of the Actresses' Franchise League was led 'by Hedda Gabler, in the accomplished figure of the Princess Bariatinsky on horseback', following a succession of other women from history including Jeanne d'Arc.<sup>124</sup> It was this Jeanne after whom Robins had re-named her character Beatrice Dunbarton as Jean for the published version of 1909, making the allusion clear by giving Vida the new line, 'Who knows? She may be the new Joan of Arc', when discussing Jean with Stonor in the final scene of the play.<sup>125</sup> The name also, of course, links back to that other, less powerful Jean, Jean Creyke.

The move which Robins made from drama to politics and, in her own career, from the stage to the text, did not mean, however, that the body was left behind. I want to end this chapter where I began it, with the female body which is hemmed in by society's expectations and the strictures of authority. In a brief consideration of two developments which followed *Votes for Women!*, I want to show how the

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<sup>124</sup> Robins, *Way Stations*, p. 250.

<sup>125</sup> *Votes for Women!*, in *How the Vote was Won and Other Suffragette Plays*, ed. by Dale Spender and Carole Hayman (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), pp. 38-87 (p. 85).



treatment of that body, not only on stage but in society, remained inextricably linked both to Robins's own involvement with the women's movement and also to the suffrage campaign to obtain those votes for women.

As the suffrage campaign increased in militancy, and the imprisoned suffragettes began to participate in a campaign of hunger strikes as a protest against the British Government's refusal to treat them as political prisoners, a new policy was introduced into prisons in September 1909. By hunger striking, the suffragettes used the perceived weakness of the female body to their advantage: the policy of 'forcible feeding', by which the authorities sought to take back control over those bodies, was designed to end the 'short term martyrdom' of the hunger strike ending in release.<sup>126</sup> In her article 'Writing on the Body? Representation and Resistance in British Suffragette Accounts of Forcible Feeding', Caroline Howlett argues that the multiplying and similar accounts of forcible feeding published by the British suffragettes were 'crucial to the construction of a shared subjectivity, which enabled suffragettes to resist the annihilation of their movement that the pain of forcible feeding was intended to produce'.<sup>127</sup> Howlett's description of these accounts, and their effects, suggests a move from private pain to public and collective articulation of the body's secrets:

Personal experience was no longer distinguishable from the experiences of the community as a whole. The accounts became increasingly intersubjective: one account begins to sound much like another as the words of other women

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<sup>126</sup> This phrase was used by King Edward VII in a letter to Herbert Gladstone, 13 August 1909. Quoted in Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder: A Documentary* (London: Allen, 1975), p. 130.

<sup>127</sup> Caroline J. Howlett, 'Writing on the Body? Representation and Resistance in British Suffragette Accounts of Forcible Feeding', in *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*, ed. by Thomas Foster, Carol Siegel and Ellen E. Berry, *Genders* 23 (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 3-41 (p. 4).

become the means by which the suffragettes represent this (supposedly) private bodily ordeal.<sup>128</sup>

Just as with the private pain of Freud and Breuer's hysterics, what is involved here is the telling of stories of the body: but it seems to me that what the suffragettes were doing by writing their own accounts, and developing a shared vocabulary of experience, was retaining control over their own narratives of pain. The private body was thus translated into a public, politically actioned body.

Private bodies and their care could of course be seen as political in other ways: the whole picture of the treatment of the female body which I have developed in the preceding chapters makes it clear that the body of the female patient had been a site for the exercise of male power and authority in the nineteenth century. Robins's own description of the workings of the rest cure - 'your business is to eat, and sleep, and not to think' - and its desired outcome make this power politics clear:

She was very spoiled and difficult before [the rest cure]. No more trouble after that. She got fat and well. Married now, you know, and has a baby.<sup>129</sup>

Angela John quotes Robins as reporting on her own experience of a six-week Weir Mitchell cure that it was, 'Precisely the wrong thing for me, I being still invincibly determined to live'.<sup>130</sup> Plainly Robins did not approve of this treatment as it was planned and carried out by the male doctors she encountered. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in 1927 Robins's own home, Backsettown, was turned into a place of sanctuary for women who needed a 'Rest Pause': but these women were not offered the rest as a cure for unruly or inappropriate behaviour. Rather, Robins's

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<sup>128</sup> Howlett, 'Writing on the Body?', p. 8.

<sup>129</sup> Robins, *A Dark Lantern: A Story with a Prologue* (London: Heinemann, 1905), p. 158.

<sup>130</sup> John, *Elizabeth Robins*, p. 197.



close friend Octavia Wilberforce and her colleague Dr Marjorie Hubert recognised that the increasingly burdensome roles taken on by modern women could lead to over-fatigue. Backsettown, according to the original plans, was thus ‘primarily intended for the use of’:

1. Overworked Professional Women
2. Women with arduous social and public organisations
3. Mothers of families and others with heavy domestic responsibilities.<sup>131</sup>

The same document stated that ‘over-fatigue in greater or lesser degree comes to many women in every class of life in these days’; ‘normal vigour’ was to be returned by rest in congenial surroundings, with meals in bed or in the garden, and ultra violet radiation where needed. The actual rest did not differ greatly from that offered in the restrictive rest cures of the nineteenth century: what was different here was that Backsettown was being run by women for women, and with the expectation that rest would help these women to lead fulfilling, active lives in society. ‘Not to think’ was surely not the business of Backsettown.

This central chapter ends, then, with a scene in which the female body has been reclaimed for the female: an act of appropriation which, in the context of the history of medical and social intervention outlined in this thesis so far, can clearly be seen as political. Robins’s own involvement with the running of Backsettown was limited, but her provision of a space in which hard working women could reclaim their subjectivity seems to me to provide a fitting end to this discussion of her own efforts, through writing and performance, to find a space for the representation of the female self.

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<sup>131</sup> Details contained in an essay by Octavia Wilberforce, in *Backsettown and Elizabeth Robins*, published for private circulation, 1952.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the workings of three performance texts created by Elizabeth Robins: the 1891 *Hedda Gabler*, the 1893 *Alan's Wife*, and the 1907 suffrage play *Votes for Women!* In her acting and her writing of those performance texts, I have argued, Robins can be seen to have developed a hysterical performance rhetoric which drew on the speaking body of hysteria (and the corporeal legacy of melodrama) as well as the spoken word, working these systems of communication across and against each other in order to create meaning which was available to be read by the audience rather than, as in melodrama, by the other on-stage characters.

It is Ibsen's text of *Hedda Gabler*, itself marked by many kinds of doubling, which I have identified as having enabled this process of development to begin. Robins, playing the complex part of Hedda, had to find a way of communicating to her audience all that her character does not and cannot say in the restricted bourgeois society and marriage in which she is situated, where Robins described her as having 'no opportunity at all to use her best powers' (*IA*, p. 19). To do so Robins developed what I have termed a hysterical gesture, using the language of the body to speak against the verbal dialogue of the text. Described as able 'to render her reading plain to the onlookers, either by her bearing or her delivery of the dialogue', she clearly succeeded in working these twin modes of discourse together to communicate the hidden truths of Ibsen's character.<sup>132</sup>

In *Alan's Wife* it was Robins herself - along with her collaborator Florence Bell - who wrote as well as acted the performance text. By doing so she was able to explore the gestural speech of the body even more fully than in her portrayal of Hedda

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<sup>132</sup> Unsigned review, *Daily Chronicle*, 21 April 1891, p. 5.



Gabler, culminating in the final scene of the play in which her character, Jean Creyke, remains silent, using only her body to communicate her resistance to the systems of justice and power in which she is caught. My discussion of *Alan's Wife* has identified many similarities between this play and that of Ibsen, but this is, I have argued, the key difference in the use that is made of the gestures of the body: where Hedda's gestures at moments of tension are involuntary, hysterical in the sense of the illness which is, according to her creator, her motivating force, Jean Creyke consciously chooses to use the body as a means of communication which enables her a space outside the patriarchal structures of law to which she is eventually forced to submit. The actress who had developed a dual language of body and word in order to play a part in Ibsen's play can thus be seen to have taken that duality into the very structure of her own playwriting, using it as a strategy to communicate the powerlessness of woman's position within language and society.

Jean Creyke, however, remains alone in her ordeal; even the other women in the play, her mother and her mother's friend, cannot identify with her position or understand the reasons which led her to the murder of her child. I have argued in the last section of this chapter that in her 1907 play, *Votes for Women!*, Robins can be seen to be linking Jean's experiences to those of other women, discovering that they did indeed, in Vida Levering's words, 'join on' to something. Putting these experiences of women together, Robins was able to realise the lessons taught by her use of hysterical performance rhetoric in her earlier performances in *Hedda Gabler* and *Alan's Wife*, using the power of both body and word to achieve political action on behalf of the suffrage campaign. Without the betrayal of women's bodies, the suffrage speeches would have had limited effect.

Robins's work in *Votes for Women!*, and her aid in providing women-oriented treatment at her Backsettown home, can thus be seen as partaking in an early form of feminism, which placed the concerns and needs of women centre stage. In the next and final chapter of this thesis I turn to consider two much more recent performance texts, both written subsequent to the beginnings of the modern feminist movement, which also seek to explore the problems of finding a voice for woman, a place in which she can speak, and which can both be seen as drawing on a form of hysterical performance rhetoric for their creation of meaning.



## Chapter Five:

### New Uses for Old Hysterias: *Portrait of Dora and Augustine (Big Hysteria)*

#### 5.1 Introduction

We won't find the answer in her chattering, Herr Doctor. And certainly not in dreams! No, the answer lies IN THE BODY. We have to think anatomically and physiologically! [...] The answer lies in the BODY, Dr Freud, THE BODY! (*Augustine (Big Hysteria)*, p. 34)

Anna Furse, whose character of Jean Martin Charcot addresses these words to a young Sigmund Freud in her 1991 play about one of the famous hysterics of the Salpêtrière hospital, neatly sets out the opposition between the approaches of Charcot and Freud to hysteria, and highlights the problems with each. These have been explored in detail in the earlier chapters of this thesis: we have seen that Charcot's approach through physiological observation meant that he looked at the hysterics but did not listen to what they had to tell him ('We won't find the answer in her chattering'). In contrast Freud, by the time he came to Dora's case, was too caught up in dreams and word play, too concerned to tell a story and place his patient within it, to pay proper attention to what either the hysteric's symptomatic body, or indeed her words, were trying to communicate. Throughout this thesis I have argued that the stage is a place in which the extreme of either Charcot's or Freud's approach can and should be avoided: in performance both word and body have to be taken into account, so that neither Freud's dreams and wordplay or Charcot's body can be forgotten.

In the previous chapter we saw that by using this site of possibility, by employing the doubled language of word and gesture, of mind and body, which is at the core of the hysterical condition, the actress and playwright Elizabeth Robins was able to re-voice the silent figure of woman. In her 1907 play *Votes for Women!* she was concerned with giving a voice to women: a voice able to express both private pain and public ambition as Vida Levering's personal and political journeys intertwined. In this last chapter of the thesis I want to look at two plays, first written and performed some seventy or eighty years later, which seem to partake in the same political and theatrical project, that of overcoming the problem which is set out so clearly by Hélène Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman*:

Every woman has known the torture of beginning to speak aloud, heart beating as if to break, occasionally falling into loss of language, ground and language slipping out from under her, because for woman speaking - even just opening her mouth - in public is something rash, a transgression.<sup>1</sup>

These plays - *Portrait of Dora* by Hélène Cixous, first written as a radio play in French and then made into a theatrical text in collaboration with the director Simone Benmussa in 1976, and *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* written by Anna Furse and first performed in London in 1991 - thus provide a fitting frame through which to conclude the substantive analysis of this thesis. Both follow a similar trajectory to that which I have undertaken in this thesis, in looping back to the end of the nineteenth century, and they return to the early hysterics, patients of Freud and Charcot, in order not only to illuminate the power and gender relations of the birth of psychoanalysis and the times in which that birth took place, but also to speak to the position of woman in

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 92.



contemporary society and to try to explore new means of representation of the split subject. Written in the second half of the twentieth century, the plays can be situated as 'knowing' texts in contrast to what we might call Robins's 'learning' texts:

Robins's texts trace a journey through largely unmapped territory, whereas Cixous and Furse know exactly where they want to get to. These later dramatic texts are post-Freudian; they are written during and after the changes brought about by the feminist movement, and they draw on, and resist, Lacan's work on language and development which was discussed in Chapter One. More particularly, Cixous's theatrical text was produced by Simone Benmussa in 1976, the year after publication of Cixous's works on *écriture féminine* which have been adopted as part of the feminist writing canon, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' and *The Newly Born Woman*; Furse's text, as we will see, in turn draws on Cixous's theoretical writings. Thus informed and situated, these female playwrights are confident in their writing and in their voice, with no need to hide behind anonymity. And what they do from that position of strength and voice is to attempt to reclaim an earlier, silenced voice, to forge a place from which the hysterical patient can speak as subject rather than as object. Cixous writes of *Portrait of Dora*:

It was a step that badly needed to be taken, so that a woman's voice could be heard for the first time, so that she could cry out, 'I'm not the one who is dumb. I am silenced by your inability to hear'.<sup>2</sup>

Because of this explicit aim, the model of hysteria as a rhetoric of performance with which the previous chapters have worked is no longer appropriate in relation to these modern texts: it must be rethought. In writing about Robins's performances in *Hedda*

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<sup>2</sup> Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', p. 547.

*Gabler* and *Alan's Wife* I was concerned to identify a specifically hysterical subtext of bodily communication, in which Robins worked to say with the body what *could not be said* directly in the text or in the society in which she performed. But Cixous and Furse, writing for the modern stage, explicitly set out with the intention of giving the voice back to the silent hysterics, of saying in the late twentieth century theatre what could not be said in the restricted atmosphere of the nineteenth century clinic or consulting room or indeed, what would not be listened to by Charcot or Freud. Their hysterics, unlike Hedda in the restricted Tesman household, or Jean Creyke facing the forces of law and order, are created precisely in order to be able to 'tell you everything, as I remembered myself'.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter One, we saw that Steven Marcus has described the process of psychoanalysis as one in which by 'the end - the successful end - one has come into possession of one's own story. It is a final act of self-appropriation, the appropriation by one's self of one's own story'.<sup>4</sup> I have argued that the hysterical patients of Charcot and Freud too often had their stories appropriated or created by others for their own uses: Cixous and Furse use the double language of mind and body, word and gesture, to reclaim these hysterical women's stories on their behalf, and to communicate those stories to their audience, now knowledgeable in the ways of reading subtext as text. It is in this way we can locate these plays as descendants of Robins's *Votes for Women*, which moved towards an explicit political message when being performed for a sympathetic audience.

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Furse, *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*, Contemporary Theatre Studies, 20 (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 1997), p. 49. Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case-History', p. 72.



In *Augustine* and *Portrait of Dora* Furse and Cixous thus employ a hysterical rhetoric of performance in order to articulate the politics of hysteria and language which has been explored in this thesis, with both playwrights triumphantly partaking in the vision of feminine ‘mastery’ which is offered by Augustine at the end of Furse’s play:

I will be immortal. I will be salt. I will parch your mouths dry. Then I will tell everything, as I remembered myself. And you, you will put your tools down, you will listen, really listen, and you will believe every word I say...

(*Augustine*, p. 49)

By using innovative theatrical forms to communicate their stories, Cixous and Furse demonstrate a control over form which equals that of the male masters but which is here employed for the purposes of liberation rather than for repression. The next two sections of this chapter examine the content of the stories that are being told and, in more detail, the ways in which these playwrights manipulate form in order to tell those stories, making use of the varied semiotic languages of the stage. Doing so also enables a final examination of the other aspect of the hysterical metaphor, that of the analyst’s position, which I have suggested throughout the thesis can work as a warning sign to the spectator to read all those languages together, not privileging text above performance, or gesture above word. For it is only by both listening to the words of Cixous’s *Dora* and Furse’s *Augustine* and watching their bodily gestures that the truth of their stories - or, in the case of Cixous’s text, the denial of a single truth - will emerge. For the plays aim to enact the ‘wrench’ that is, in Cixous’s words, the acquisition of speech (itself ‘something rash, a transgression’):

She goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the ‘logic’ of her discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true. She exposes herself. Really she makes what she thinks materialize carnally, she conveys meaning with her body. She *inscribes* what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the part they play in speech.

Her discourse, even when ‘theoretical’ or political, is never simple or linear or ‘objectivized’, universalized; she involves her own story in history.

(Cixous and Clément, p. 92)

The final section of this chapter, which focuses on the relationship of the spectator to these performance texts, seeks to consider whether the staging practices of the plays, which I argue participate to varying degrees in the model of hysterical performance rhetoric developed in this thesis, indeed succeed in avoiding the binds of objectification and universalization. They have been praised for making the spectator an active part of the performance process rather than allowing them to remain a passive observer of the scene: Sharon Willis has suggested that we, the audience,

are ‘staged’ by *Portrait of Dora*, as much as it is staged for us. [...] This is a *mise en scène* that places us within the scene as well, forces us to find our position mapped there. Disjunction of body and voice, and body and its image, exposes the reciprocal construction of the body as a sign on stage and the spectator as subject for that sign, as gendered subject to whom it is addressed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Sharon Willis, ‘Hélène Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora*: The Unseen and the Un-scene’, in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Practice*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 77-91 (p. 91).



The final section of this chapter thus interrogates this analysis of the spectator's relationship to these radical theatrical texts, and in doing so highlights important distinctions between their handling of their material. Furse initially seems to align herself with Cixous, quoting *The Newly Born Woman* in one of her epigraphs to the play and in her introduction to the published text:

The hysteric, whose body is transformed into a theatre for forgotten scenes, relives the past, bearing witness to a lost childhood that survives in suffering ... For the hysteric does not write, does not produce, does nothing - nothing other than making things circulate without inscribing them. The result: the clandestine sorceress was burned by the thousands; the deceitful and triumphant hysteric has disappeared. But the master is there. He is the one who stays on permanently. He publishes writings. (*Augustine*, p. 15)

However, the line of influence is more complex than it would at first appear. Furse credits this extract to Hélène Cixous, but the quotation actually comes from the section of *The Newly Born Woman* written by Catherine Clément, whose debate with Cixous over the importance of the hysterical figure - and the limits of her ability to 'disturb arrangements' - runs through the book and is encapsulated in the dialogue which forms its conclusion (Cixous and Clément, p. 5 and p. 37). We have seen in Chapter One that Clément argues that the hysteric's 'raising hell, throwing fits, disturbing family relations can be shut back up'; Furse's use of this epigraph, and her crediting of *The Newly Born Woman* to Cixous as sole author, itself seems to partake in the process of inscribing meaning onto women's voices which is so criticised within her stage text. This 'slip', I will argue, reflects the differences in approach between the two plays: Cixous's *Portrait* ultimately works to resist inscription, while Furse's

play, despite its use of radical theatre techniques of fragmentation, finally communicates one particular story to its audience, pulling all those fragments back together into one, monovocal narrative of Augustine's oppression by Charcot and Freud.

## 5.2 Whose Histories?

Both *Portrait of Dora* and *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* return to the end of the nineteenth century, and to the hysterical patients of that time, for their stories. Furse focuses on the figure of Augustine, a female hysteric who was kept at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris under the care of Jean Martin Charcot for five years between 1875 and 1880, before she made her escape from the asylum dressed in men's clothes. Cixous's play, as indicated by the title, retells the story of Freud's most famous hysterical patient, Dora, whose case appeared as a *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.

As I have made clear in earlier chapters, the original stories of these women have come to us only via the frame of their doctors' words and the images which record them: the woman's voice is itself hardly ever heard, or, when it is recorded, is denied importance. Convinced by his own interpretation of Dora's case (an interpretation which his later footnotes and additions reveal to have been erroneous), Freud wrote in his *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*:

My expectations were by no means disappointed when this explanation of mine was met by Dora with a most emphatic negative. [...] If this 'No', instead of being regarded as the expression of an impartial judgement (of which, indeed, the patient is incapable), is ignored, and if work is continued, the first evidence soon begins to appear that in such a case 'No' signifies the desired



‘Yes’. [...] Nevertheless Dora persisted in denying my contention for some time longer, until, towards the end of the analysis, the conclusive proof of its correctness came to light. (*SE VII*, pp. 58-59)

Freud’s *Fragment* is in fact more the story of Freud’s exploration of dream work and his discovery of the problem of transference than that of Dora’s own history. And what little we know of Augustine comes from the case records of the Salpêtrière hospital and from the images that Charcot and his assistants made of their patients: drawings and photographs which, as we saw in Chapter Two, reflected Charcot’s obsession with the performative appearance of the condition and upon which he imposed his own descriptions. Both Cixous and Furse, then, attempt to re-stage the relationships between doctor and patient not from the point of view of the physicians, whom I have described respectively as a master-narrator (Freud) or director of scenes (Charcot), but instead by retelling the stories of these hysterics from the point of view of the hysteric herself. Or, perhaps more accurately, because the theatrical practices which they employ call into question the notion of a single ‘point of view’, seeking to refuse narrative or the realist theatrical frame, the plays highlight the restrictions of the cage of narrative and case history in which these female bodies have been placed by the doctors. Thus Augustine’s history of sexual abuse at the hands of her mother’s lover, dismissed by Furse’s Charcot as ‘Much ado about nothing!’ (*Augustine*, p. 30), is communicated to the audience through memories and images which they can interpret and understand notwithstanding the doctor’s rejection of them as unimportant.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, the hysteric can be liberated, as the playwrights stage for

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<sup>6</sup> For further details of Augustine’s case history, see Drinka, *The Birth of Neurosis*, pp. 97-100.

their audience the women's refusal to become part of the physician's master-narrative.

Cixous's Dora is triumphant in her refusal to continue Freud's treatment:

DORA Today is my last time here.

FREUD (*doesn't hide his panic*) You are avenging me the way you would have liked to avenge Mr. K. And you are abandoning me the way he abandoned you.

DORA You don't understand anything. That won't stop you from existing! Here's my revenge: I'll go 'alone', I'll cure 'myself'. And I've made up my mind to leave on a date I've set myself. The first of January 1900.<sup>7</sup>

Furse makes the point even more clearly, as Augustine removes herself both from Charcot's 'stage' of the lecture theatre and from the confines of his interpretation of her case:

AUGUSTINE My Doctors, sirs, messieurs! [...] No more exhibition! No more stories! I'm leaving your stage! The masterpiece has been stolen! [...] My crisis will shatter into millions of crystal splinters, like stars pricking the sky. I will disappear. Dis-membered. I will return. Re-membered. I will come together again in a form you won't recognise. (*Augustine*, p. 49)

The emphasis on dis-membering and re-membering here serves well as a description of the theatrical approaches taken by both playwrights, to which I turn in the next section of this chapter.

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<sup>7</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Dora*, trans. by Anita Barrows, in *Benmussa Directs: 'Portrait of Dora' by Helene Cixous: 'The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs' by Simone Benmussa* (London: Calder, 1979), p. 65. Further references to this play are given after quotations in the text following the abbreviation *PD*.



### 5.3 Staging Hysteria's Histories

Both plays considered here attempt to negate the idea of character or a single point of view, taking their protagonists out from the confining narratives of their case histories as recorded by Freud or Charcot and working to reveal to their audience the divisions which society first causes in the hysteric and then seeks to cover up. Freud recognises the true nature of the life on which he seeks to impose his linear narrative of interpretation; in a passage from *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* which is repeated by the Voice of the Play in Cixous's text, he writes:

This first account may be compared to an unnavigable river whose stream is at one moment choked by masses of rock and at another divided and lost among shallows and sandbanks. (*SE* VII, p. 16; *PD*, p. 31)

Cixous's Dora actually voices her knowledge of this splitting process explicitly although, given the disrupted narrative form adopted by the text, itself choked by masses of rock at one moment and divided among shallows the next, the audience has to work to connect two apparently isolated moments in order to understand the full effect of Dora's words. Cixous creates for Dora additional dreams to the ones so fully analysed within Freud's case history; in this extra, still private space which resists Freud's interpretation (although the dreams are described to Freud in the course of the play, they are not analysed) Dora remembers sitting with her grandmothers 'having a terrific feast on little cakes' when Mr and Mrs K. and 'my father and his bride' came in:

I go to ask my three grandmothers how to divide the cakes equally. they're choking with laughter, their mouths are stuffed, they've eaten everything.

[...]

And if one of them killed me, ah! If one of them killed me under my own eyes, what revenge that would be! My body cut into tiny slices on the table. To replace the cake. (*PD*, pp. 47-48)

Dora identifies herself here with the cake, cut into tiny slices, but it is only later that that divided cake is explicitly connected with her positioning in society and her divided role in the complex web of sexual exchange. She tells Freud, while looking at Mr K.:

I feel absolutely nothing for that man.

Papa takes advantage of the opportunities Mr K. allows him. Mr K. takes advantage of the opportunities Papa allows him. Everyone knows how to get his piece of cake. (*PD*, p. 52)

Cixous here situates Dora, as I have done in the opening chapter of this thesis, as positioned within a society and a framework of relationships which seeks to use her for differing, unsatisfactory ends: ends which make her into an object, albeit of conflicting and competing desires, without leaving space for her own subjectivity and desires. In the innovative form of their plays, however, both Furse and Cixous reclaim that fragmentation as a positive theatrical force, seeking to resist the objectification that is the dominant tone of the original case histories.

Augustine's threat to her master-narrators, Freud and Charcot, that 'You will see my body fly away into a thousand sparks. [...] My crisis will shatter into millions of crystal splinters, like stars pricking the sky' (*Augustine*, p. 49) epitomises both the content of Furse's play and its staging practices, which take Charcot's approach to Augustine's identity and turn it around as a forceful attack. The audience to the play and within the play have seen that he wants to split her into pieces scientifically: in



exhibiting her symptoms to his lecture audience early on he is seen to be ‘using her body as a specimen, touching various parts, under breast etc. as he speaks’

(*Augustine*, p. 29). In her introduction to the published text, Furse notes that Augustine features in the Salpêtrière records also as Louise, X, A, and L, suggesting that:

The observer-scribes and their seniors found no fixed point of identity in the young patient. Any stability she may have had was thus subverted by mere language. (*Augustine*, p. 3)

As playwright, Furse turns that scientific dissection and destabilising of Augustine back onto its protagonist, revelling in the splitting of her subject in ways that are continually changing and which Charcot is ultimately unable to control, making a virtue here out of what Clément criticises as the hysteric’s failure to do anything ‘other than make things circulate without inscribing them’.

The various theatrical devices employed by Furse in order to resist the representation of a unified character and of a single narrative make explicit the kind of doubleness and presence of past memory in present existence which Robins worked to achieve in her portrayal of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*. Clearly aware of the split self that characterises the hysterical patient, she describes Augustine in her initial outline of characters as ‘A child-woman. Part of her extremely advanced for her age and time, the other in suspended childhood’ (*Augustine*, p. 16). Later in the play Augustine acts out her divided self in the course of a hysterical attack, starting ‘*to play out the aggressor and herself with her hands. One hand moves towards her body, the other pulling it away*’ (*Augustine*, p. 40).

This split self is signified to the audience both visually and through sound by Furse's use of a violinist figure present on stage at key moments in the play, who is described as Augustine's 'double' (*Augustine*, p. 16). This musical double sometimes reinforces the portrayal of Augustine's emotional state, as when the scene of Augustine 'frantically running around her bed, crying, screaming and rattling the iron frame' is succeeded via a blackout by the figure of the violinist 'in a tight overhead light. She shifts the vibrato note into painful, high pitched playing' (*Augustine*, p. 35). Later, the violinist is seen 'stamping out a wild tarantella on Charcot's desktop', as 'Augustine is frantically knotting and tying her bedlinen into huge, futile attempts at escape' (*Augustine*, p. 42). More frequently, though, the violinist is used to emphasise the contradictions within the hysterical split self. As Augustine dances in slow motion before the audience, reflecting the slides of the *attitudes passionnelles* taken by Charcot's assistants which are projected behind her, the violinist is instructed to play 'a passionate and rasping counterpoint to Augustine's sweet, lethargic and compliant dance' (*Augustine*, p. 21), effectively communicating to the audience the problems for Augustine that such compliance causes.

The double figure is also used to highlight Augustine's role as a visual object: the projection of the series of *attitudes passionnelles* in the scene just discussed, and the actress's imitation of those poses, culminates in both Augustine and the violinist 'turning their backs to the audience and taking off their nightrobes. Their backs are tattooed with F stops (cf. Man Ray photograph)' (*Augustine*, p. 21). This display, which draws on the modern history of photography as well as Charcot's own repeated use of the medium, serves to remind the audience of the repeated visual objectification



of the female figure, and particularly of the hysteric.<sup>8</sup> While the young Freud, inserted anachronistically into the text as a student of Charcot,<sup>9</sup> suggests tentatively to him that the cure of hysterics might be ‘about listening to the meaning ... to what they say’, Charcot vehemently rejects this approach:

I listen with my eyes, Herr Doctor ... That’s the difference between us ... *veni, vidi, vici!!* [...] My wife is most keen to meet the Young Turk from Vienna! Next Friday it is, eh! she LOVES to talk, so if you’re a good listener ...

(*Augustine*, p. 44)

Augustine herself, repeatedly photographed as part of Charcot’s ‘conquering’ process in an age when photography took minutes rather than seconds, eventually began to see the world around her only in black and white. In her introduction, Furse argues that:

This is Augustine’s particularly significant message: *She takes on the qualities by which she is described by others.* She not only *is* a black and white photograph but she incorporates the very idea: her whole world becomes transformed into monochrome. (*Augustine*, p. 5)

But Augustine, though well-trained as a performer (‘if he thinks I’m good I’ll get more shows, and if I get more shows, well ... it’s better’ (*Augustine*, p. 37)) is not willingly complicit in this process of objectification. Later in the play when Augustine persuades Freud to show her the clinical photographs for the first time, she is initially concerned with the quality of her performance, asking ‘Are they better than the

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<sup>8</sup> Furse says that this ‘is meant to signify not only that A has become an “instrument of science”, callously played by others, but also refers to the Surrealists’ appropriation of hysteria in their peculiar use of female psychic disorder in their aesthetic’ (*Augustine*, p. 10).

<sup>9</sup> Freud did work under Charcot at the Salpêtrière as a young neuropathologist on a six month study grant, but this was not until 1885-1886; the patient who came to be known as Augustine escaped from the hospital in 1880.

sketches they've done of me?'. But on seeing the descriptions which Charcot has affixed to the pictures she exclaims angrily:

But what's this? [...] 'Amorous supplication'! 'Eroticism'! 'Extacy'! Who gives them titles? How does he know? He doesn't understand a thing! He never listens! (*Augustine*, p. 37)

That last phrase, with its implication that Freud's approach is the correct one, is of course problematic in the context of Augustine's ultimate rejection of both mind doctors, Charcot and Freud, in the final scene of the play, and I will return to this question in the final section of this chapter. But Furse does seem here to be concerned with emphasising the idea of the fragmentation of Augustine's character: the slide projections of the pictures of Augustine from documentary archives of the Salpêtrière which are projected behind the actress - sometimes complementing, sometimes contrasting with her own movement - again serve to remind the audience just how much she is objectified through this recording process:

FREUD They say the camera doesn't lie, Mademoiselle.

AUGUSTINE People do. Their eyes do. Is this how you see me? Is this one really like me?

FREUD Mademoiselle, this is how you are, were, for some minutes, holding still until it flashed and recorded your actions ... its a ... a ... portrait of you ... er ... having an attack, its ...

AUGUSTINE But I look so ... MESSY! (*Augustine*, p. 37)

Furse's use of actual documentary slides from the Salpêtrière archives means that these projections play a dual role, highlighting Augustine's personal objectification by Charcot and his assistants, but also working theatrically to set Augustine's



multiple-selves alongside one another. This technique reaches its climax at the close of the play, where Furse directs that ‘with increasing speed and frenzy, a montage of photographs [...] flash around the stage so that the effect is almost stroboscopic. The audience’s eye is giddied’ (*Augustine*, p. 49). Just as Augustine claims to the two doctors that she will disappear, ‘dis-membered’, her body flying ‘away into a thousand sparks’, the theatrical scene reflects that dismemberment.

This latter technique - making use not just of slide stills but also of moving film - is used much more extensively in Benmussa’s adaptation of Cixous’s text, not least because the multiple layers of screen memories and evasive stories in Dora’s case make for a more complex understanding not only of Dora’s own character but of those around her. Even Freud himself is split between Freud the character and Freud the Voice of the Play, caught up at times within those dangerous dreams of which, in this text, Dora seems to be in control: ‘I know how to [...] make dreams rise, inflate them, heat them, roll them, take them in my mouth’ (*PD*, p. 47).

This constant splitting, in which in a literalization, or acting out, of Freud’s theories the characters seem to become the things that they desire, is epitomised by Freud’s last words to Dora. In the French, ‘*Donnez-moi de mes nouvelles!*’, they are translated into English as ‘Let me know what I’m doing’, identifying Freud with Dora, his desires with those of his patient via what Cixous describes as ‘a slip of the tongue [...] that [...] goes unnoticed’ (*PD*, p. 66). Sharon Willis suggests that:

Freud’s Freudian slip here works to disclose the network of slips that are really slippages, displacements that dramatize not only Freud’s final ‘hysterical’ identification with Dora, but also a kind of hystericization of the

entire stage through rampant identificatory exchanges among its characters.

(Willis, p. 84)<sup>10</sup>

Speaking about her adaptation of the text to an audience at the New York University Maison Française, Benmussa stressed the multiple facets of her characters and the need to seek ways in which to stage the various inscriptions of meaning imposed upon each character in their relationships with others:

In *Portrait of Dora*, Frau K. is there, and simultaneously her image appears as projections onto various parts of the set. I wished to convey all of the woman's aspects, the way in which she lived in other people's minds. The same was true of Dora.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, just as in Freud's original case history, the various characters - Mr B., Mr K., Mrs K. and Freud himself - all offer different, competing versions of Dora to the audience, but here too Dora joins in the multiplication of identity. Her dreams repeat and multiply (procreate seems both the right and the wrong word), enabling her to explore different relationships with those around her. And like Freud, who places himself with that last Freudian slip into an hysterical identification with his most famous patient, Dora substitutes herself for the object of her desire as Cixous makes obvious in this play what Freud missed for so long:

DORA I'd had a curious dream. I was running, my right foot was very sore. I had to sit down. My ankle was swollen. I couldn't move anymore; I wanted to talk to Dr. K., and at the same time I knew he wasn't really a doctor. I wanted to

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<sup>10</sup> Willis provides a detailed analysis of the performance text from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory which may be of interest to readers of this thesis.

<sup>11</sup> Lecture delivered at New York University, quoted in Rosette C. Lamont, 'The Reverse Side of a Portrait: The Dora of Freud and Cixous', in *Feminine Focus: The New Woman Playwrights* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 79-93, (p. 89). Lamont dates this lecture as 1972, but as *Portrait de Dora* was not produced by Benmussa until 1976 this date may be incorrect.



ask his advice. I ask for him on the phone. Finally he comes; and it's not him, it's his wife. I feel her presence over the phone, obscure, white, insinuating ...

MRS K (*over the phone*) Who shall I say is calling?

DORA She asks. *Mrs K.*, I say. (*PD*, pp. 63-64).

Here Dora usurps the place of Mrs K, and also substitutes Mr K. for Freud in a playing out of the transference which Freud later came to see as critical to the abrupt ending of his treatment in the case:

The transference took me unawares, and, because of the unknown quantity in me which reminded Dora of Herr K., she took her revenge on me as she wanted to take her revenge on him, and deserted me as she believed herself to have been deceived and deserted by him. Thus she *acted out* an essential part of her recollections and phantasies instead of reproducing it in the treatment.

(*SE*, VII, p. 119)

'Pricked, pierced, sewn, unravelled. That's women's work', says Dora to Freud in Cixous's play (*PD*, p. 47); Cixous and Benmussa prick and pierce, unravel and restitch Dora's story in unexpected ways, unpicking Freud's narrative case history and reinstating the gaps and evasions that mark the hysteric's tale, allowing Dora to *act out* memories, phantasies and revenge. Thus, in addition to the kind of playing with identity which we have seen Furse too adopt in her writing of *Augustine*, Cixous's text denies or refuses narrativity, actively working to prevent the audience following or constructing 'a' story.

The multiplying dreams and memories which are threaded through the text mean that the audience is placed in a position where it becomes impossible to work out what is real and what is not. Dreams and memories are not just described but are

indeed acted out - in the words of the English translation, at one point 'DORA at age fourteen is *performed* by the door near the staircase' (*PD*, p. 32, my emphasis) while the present Dora reflects on the memory for Freud:

FREUD Yes. And then?

DORA He came back, and then, and so, instead of going out the open door, he drew me close to him, and he kissed me on the lips. And then I felt such an intense disgust, I hated him with all my soul, I was revolted, I tore myself away from him, violently, I can still feel it now, today, I felt it so intensely.

I still feel that kiss, and the pressure of that embrace; his lips were very wet. Here, on my chest, and all the way through to my back. I ran in front of him, I brushed past him, past that man.

I tore myself away from him. I raced, I looked back at him, I raced towards the stairs, brushing past that man (I thought, 'I'm brushing past this man'), towards the stairs, and from there, towards the door of the house.

FREUD And?

DORA And ... nothing. Just that. The door.

DORA I can't stand intimate conversations. (*PD*, p. 33)

In Benmussa's words, the characters in *Portrait of Dora* are 'permanently split between one reality and another, between the dream (as reality) and the real. They are



alternately in the grip of the dream and released from it'.<sup>12</sup> And Benmussa's way of communicating this to the audience appears to be close to the kind of hysterical rhetoric which we have earlier discussed and developed in the context of Elizabeth Robins's work some eighty years earlier, in which both word and gesture work to undercut each other, to make the other strange. Benmussa writes in her Introduction to *Benmussa Directs* that:

These are gestures which, taken separately, are natural, but into which something unfamiliar has crept. When a character says a perfectly simple, normal phrase, but makes a gesture that seems to remain suspended, or which is foreign to the situation he is in - a trifle, the least anomaly - the phrase which he is saying becomes slightly unbalanced, its direct meaning is understood, but something has deflected its deeper meaning.

(Benmussa, p. 17)

In this way, Benmussa suggests, the spectator is led to question 'something which he feels is located between the gesture and the phrase', but the ongoing movement of the performance text does not allow time to formulate that question:

It is his [the spectator's] feelings that are in line with the atmosphere, rather than his mind that is in tune with the narrative. (Benmussa, p. 17)

As Benmussa's comments suggest, *Portrait's* structure is one that avoids linearity and narrative; it is here that the staging techniques of Cixous and Furse begin to part company. Furse's Augustine is ultimately enabled to articulate her repressed trauma to her off-stage audience, even if it goes unheard by Charcot in his fascination with the body rather than the word:

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<sup>12</sup> Benmussa, 'Introduction' in *Benmussa Directs*, p. 16.

AUGUSTINE [...] I don't want you anywhere near me! ... I won't uncross my legs! ... Oh. you've hurt me too much ... No you won't ... Help! ... bastard! Nurd! Lousy jerk! Excuse me! Excuse me, Monsieur, leave me alone!

CHARCOT (*Gesturing Freud to take her away*) Doctor!

AUGUSTINE I'm telling you, get rid of that snake, the one in your trousers! It's bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, bad, (etc.)

*CHARCOT nods paternally at AUGUSTINE's yells, watching her being wheeled out.*

CHARCOT See how hysterics scream and shout? Much ado about nothing!

(*Augustine*, p. 30)

Ultimately, then, *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* plays by the rules of narrative and linearity, stressing the fractured nature of the hysterical patient but doing so only in the process of telling her complete story to a late twentieth century audience more able to hear - indeed, to 'see' - than the doctors of the Salpêtrière. In contrast, *Portrait of Dora* literally plays out the return of the repressed, as memories bubble up through the surface of the narrative, restoring Dora's story to its pre-Freudian form of an unnavigable river, divided by sandbanks and obstructed by rocks. I want now to consider the effects of these differences - and of the performance practices which they entail - on the spectator of these performance texts. In Chapter One I argued that what is sought is a position for the spectator which does not situate them as a passive spectator of a scene, caught up in illusory identification with the onstage character, nor as the dominant observer who objectifies the body that they see before them. Both these hysterical texts attempt to escape that bind; in the next section I evaluate the success of those attempts from the perspective of this particular 'spectator'.



## 5.4 A Critic's Response: Theatricality and Spectatorship

I have headed this section 'a critic' rather than 'the critics', for in this last substantive part of this thesis I am, more clearly than anywhere else in this work, negotiating and exploring a response to performance texts which is a very personal one. Sharon Willis has suggested that *Portrait of Dora* 'stages' us as much as it is staged for us; here I want to reflect on the ways in which these two texts, concerned with the ideas of hysteria which I have spent so much time exploring in this thesis, work to 'stage' this particular spectator, and to evaluate their success in doing so. This section does not, however, completely reject the objectivity and theoretical framework which a critical response requires; following my initial exploration of the theatricality of these texts I seek to place my responses in the context of the arguments about feminism and language which prompted my initial interest in the issue of hysteria and performance.

### 5.4.1 *Breaking the Rules of Theatricality*

While both *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* and *Portrait of Dora*, as performance texts, are clearly concerned with the staging of hysteria for an audience, Cixous and Furse build quite different relationships with that audience. Perhaps because of the different perspectives taken by the doctors upon whom the works focus - Charcot's concern with observation and the body, Freud's stress on language and memory - the plays seem to operate in different spheres of performance, the public and the private. With Charcot's lectures and performances, and even more widely with publication of Freud and Breuer's *Studies on Hysteria*, these nineteenth century hysterics were brought out of their private theatres of the body and into the public theatre of examination, observation and appropriation. Furse's text plays on this idea of public performance and, in consequence, gets caught up in the problems implicit in that performance;

Cixous's text attempts, via an act of public theatre, to reclaim a private space for Dora.

Furse's play, then, takes the very theatricality of hysteria not just as its subject but also as a means of constructing form, staging a series of performances before an audience which ultimately draws the twentieth century spectator into complicity with the 'internal' audience within the play. Charcot's lectures to that fashionable Parisian audience run through the play; within those lectures Augustine is situated, sometimes manipulated by Charcot and sometimes consciously - like Hedda Gabler - manipulating herself to fit in with the desires of those around her:

CHARCOT First phase, what we call epileptoid - arched back then vocalizations, then contractures ...

*AUGUSTINE is convulsing, arching, twisting.*

CHARCOT You know, the extraordinary thing about these attacks is that the patient curiously recovers without being in the least bit tired or spent ...

*AUGUSTINE suddenly pauses. Sits up. Ties a ribbon on her corsage, adjusts her hair. Resumes fit. CHARCOT doesn't seem surprised.*

*(Augustine, p. 39)*

Furse attempts to make the play's audience complicit in the voyeurism of Charcot's lecture audience, making Augustine stiffen in the middle of her agonising dance and appear 'to notice us, the audience, and now be performing for us instead of before us' (*Augustine*, p. 40). This strategy is made explicit in Furse's introduction to the published text:

The audience is deliberately placed in the role of voyeur. They are cast in the role of audience to Charcot's lectures, whilst he, as Master of Ceremonies,



treats them as intelligent and concerned. But it is the character of Augustine who jostles to be the central narrator and should gradually implicate the real-life audience in their gazing. She sheds clues which they must work out. She comes out and touches them, she counterpoints the mainstream narrative with her own story, she makes the audience work for her. (*Augustine*, pp. 11-12)

Critics of the first London production disagreed as to the success of this strategy.

Louise Kingsley in the *Independent* argued that Furse places the audience ‘in the compelling if uncomfortable position of voyeur’, while Simon Reade of *City Limits* criticised the ‘sterile story’, concluding that ‘the audience isn’t implicated in the inherent voyeurism’.<sup>13</sup> Yet just as it is clear that Charcot’s performances are intended to lead his audience to a fixed point - the understanding that the spectacle of hysteria ‘is a single event that unrolls sequentially. Beginning, middle and end. With a climax, and catharsis. Just like a classic play. Or symphony rather’ (*Augustine*, p. 38) - so Furse’s story removes ambiguity for its contemporary audience, for ‘it is abundantly clear to us that during Augustine’s frantic contortions and screaming (“Put that snake back in your trousers! I don’t want those rats in my bottom!”) she is reliving the trauma of rape’.<sup>14</sup> The audience is indeed implicated in Augustine’s vehement, anguished rejections (‘I don’t want doctors’ fingers! I don’t want measurements! I don’t want pictures! I don’t want performances!’ (*Augustine*, p. 36)), but despite the threat to shatter into a million pieces the narrative which Furse presents is after all itself eminently theatrical, following a developing narrative line and ending in climax and catharsis.

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<sup>13</sup> Louise Kingsley, *Independent*, 19 June 1991; Simon Reade, *City Limits*, 20 June 1991. Both reprinted in *Theatre Record*, 11 (1991), 702.

<sup>14</sup> Clare Bayley, *What’s On*, 19 June 1991. Reprinted in *Theatre Record*, 11 (1991), 702.

As we have seen in the preceding section, Furse does employ a hysterical rhetoric of performance in her text, for the audience must read body and word - Augustine's frantic gestures and her barely disguised stories of rape - and negotiate the interplay between them in order to understand her story as Charcot and Freud both fail to do. In doing so, Furse's play succeeds as a strong piece of feminist theatre which reclaims Augustine's story from out of the hands of the doctors (via the words recorded in the Salpêtrière archives, which found no contemporary understanding): in Furse's words, 'Augustine has repossessed herself' by the end of the play. Augustine is 'cured' in the retelling, and we come into possession of her own story: 'she quits their stage and leaves her hysteric career behind her', Furse writes, perhaps optimistically (*Augustine*, p. 12). But in this 'cure', and the narrative progression that enables us to reach it, Furse ultimately abandons the hysterical form, inscribing a fixed meaning onto Augustine in spite of the brilliant threats of dismemberment with which the play closes. The very mastery on show here, while triumphantly overturning the dominant narrative of patriarchy, can thus itself be seen to be working to fix the spectator-subject in a particular position in relation to the events on stage. Just as Charcot dubbed Augustine's ventriloquized body, Furse now offers her own audience 'telling' in the guise of 'showing'.

In contrast, Cixous's play remains an ambiguous, radical text to the last, returning Dora and her story to Dora herself, rather than to the audience. While 'politicising' Dora's story just as much as Furse politicises that of Augustine, *Portrait of Dora* is indeed 'never simple or linear or "objectivized", universalized': the text, as we have seen, 'performs' the 'past, the different levels of memory and desires, and the projection of desires into the future' by means of film projection, split staging, and



other techniques which serve to highlight the unnavigable nature of Dora's story. By these means, Cixous reclaims Dora's private space from Freud's prying words and creates a place for memory that is not subject to incorporation within the doctor's narrative. Yet Cixous and Benmussa also resist the possibility of Dora being incorporated as an object within the spectator's narrative: the repeated acts of displacement between word and gesture mean that even though 'the spectator questions something which he feels is located between the gesture and the phrase', he 'has no time to formulate this question to himself; he too remains in suspense, like the acting' (Benmussa, p. 17). The spectator's attempts to construct a single narrative for Dora are doomed to failure; despite the public staging of the play, Dora's hysteria remains private, resisting appropriation or cure by others. As Elin Diamond notes, Benmussa's introduction refers constantly to the 'complexity of reading and writing':

The 'levels of memory, of the real, of the dream, and of fantasy' in *Portrait of Dora* 'must always remain readable'; moments must be 'legible'. But this readable performance text is not, as Barthes would say, 'readerly'; it does not close on a signified.<sup>15</sup>

Writing those introductory comments on the play and its staging which she developed through working with actors at the Théâtre d'Orsay, Simone Benmussa stresses the breaking of the rules of theatrical language enabled by Cixous's text, 'constructed like a jigsaw puzzle, as it was originally written not for the theatre but for radio':

I thought it would be interesting to start with a text that was not theatrical, as it would enable us to avoid the habitual theatrical yoke, the yoke that

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<sup>15</sup> Elin Diamond. 'Benmussa's Adaptations: Unauthorized Texts from Elsewhere'. in *Feminine Focus: The New Woman Playwrights* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). pp. 64-78 (p. 69).

constricts the actors' freedom and forces them to keep on the rails of theatrical 'language'. The text came from 'elsewhere'. (Benmussa, pp. 10-11)

So while Furse's text draws on a history of theatre and performance to construct its own theatricality, *Portrait of Dora* seeks to escape the rules of theatricality and the resulting positioning of the spectator as voyeur or as passive identifier with the scene played out before them. *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* does, as we have seen, require body and word, gesture and phrase, to be read together, but although it is about hysteria it is not a hysterical text. This involves a working together of word and body which mirrors that which I have been arguing towards in this thesis, leaving a dangerous gap between phrase and gesture which the audience must seek to fill but never quite succeed in doing so. Benmussa's description of her aims in *Portrait of Dora* could also describe the writing and performance practice of Elizabeth Robins in the final scene of *Alan's Wife*:

To leave the actors in danger, as if balancing on the words, balancing on the gestures that filled the gaps between the words; to make the staging more like choreography than like the kind of acting usually considered appropriate to psychological situations.<sup>16</sup>

#### 5.4.2 *A Return to Theory*

In this last section I briefly consider *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* and *Portrait of Dora* in the context of the theoretical framework set out in the opening chapter of this thesis. The different perspectives of these texts, and their relationship to the spectator, can be seen, I would suggest, to relate to the different approaches of Anglo-American feminism and French feminism to questions of feminine identity and language.

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<sup>16</sup> Benmussa, p. 11.



In her introduction to *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, Elaine Showalter distinguishes between Anglo-American feminist criticism which ‘tries to recover women’s historical experiences as readers and writers’, and French feminist theory which looks at the ways in which “‘the feminine’” has been defined, represented, or repressed in the symbolic systems of language, metaphysics, psychoanalysis, and art’.<sup>17</sup> Thus Furse, whose work can be situated within the former category, reclaims and recovers Augustine’s story from the representations of the male doctors, but does not really call into question the way in which representation itself is constructed. In contrast Cixous’s text, and Benmussa’s adaptation, focus~~s~~ precisely on the problem of representation itself.

These different approaches can be illustrated by a last comparison between the plays, which examines the differing ways in which the playwrights enable their female hysterics to assert power and control over their own stories by stealing those very attributes from the doctors that surround them. In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous argues that:

If woman has always functioned ‘within’ man’s discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this ‘within’, explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her women’s mouth, bite its tongue with her women’s teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it. (Cixous and Clément, pp. 95-96)

In *Portrait*, Cixous’s Dora figure is seen to steal Freud’s language and thoughts, taking his psychoanalytical framework and turning it upon him just as Furse takes

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<sup>17</sup> *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), p. 9.

Charcot's strategy of scientific dissection and turns it into a means of disturbing and subverting his power within her play. Dora teases Freud, showing awareness of his thought patterns and clearly identifying herself as choosing, for the moment, to partake in his psychoanalytic game:

FREUD Naturally one can't be indifferent as to whether a girl is 'open' or 'closed'. It's obvious which key would be used to 'open' in such a case.

DORA I was 'sure' you would say that!

[...]

DORA I 'knew' that 'you' were going to say that. (*PD*, p. 46, p. 49)

And knowing the way that the game works enables Dora to turn the spotlight onto Freud, quite literally making his discourse, his mode of analysis, hers. In this way she can take control:

FREUD He whose tongue is silent.

DORA Yes. Yes, I know. And he who speaks with his fingertips? Why do you twist your pen seven times in your hands before talking to me? Why?

FREUD You must respect the rules!

DORA (*She mimics him*) You must respect the rules!

*She strides across the width and length of the room.*

Where are your cigarettes? (*PD*, p. 51)

Here Dora not only appropriates Freud's way of thinking and his interrogative stance, she also takes command of the stage space, making it all hers by marking out the width and length of the room. Most tellingly of all, perhaps, the request for cigarettes which is followed by the stage direction '*Sound of a cigarette lighter*', reveals Dora to be stealing the actions of those ranged around her: 'Herr K. and her father were



passionate smokers - as I am too, for the matter of that', writes Freud (*SE VII*, p. 73). Taking the smell of smoke which haunts the first dream of the case (and which Freud ultimately interpreted as Dora's desire 'to have a kiss from me' (*SE VII*, p. 74)), Dora puts herself into the places of those men and appropriates their behaviour, shocking Cixous's Freud into a dream of his own, in which Dora holds him 'by the hand with the firm and irritated grip of a governess', then 'eyes him up and down, gives him a look of disdain, and then turns her back to him with a movement that stuns him: haughty, implacable, unrestrained' (*PD*, p. 51).

Furse's Augustine, too, steals from her doctors in a move which acts out a shift of power from them to her and enables her to escape from the Salpêtrière.

Furse's last scene opens with a drumroll during which

*AUGUSTINE bursts on stage, bringing warm, rich coloured lighting with her, as though the stage had suddenly switched from black and white to technicolor. Dressed in a mixture of CHARCOT's and FREUD's clothes, including top hat and cane, she is a strange, battered, vaudeville drag artiste. FREUD and CHARCOT are sitting on chairs. They are both in shirtsleeves and long johns. Defrocked, they look vulnerable, like babies. They stare out like statues. (Augustine, p. 49)*

But even though Augustine's last speech, in which she threatens to 'tell everything, as I remembered myself', is delivered into the doctors' silence, what is being stolen here is appearance rather than language: Augustine takes the doctor's clothes in order to be able to escape as a man rather than remain imprisoned as a woman. Cixous's Dora steals language and desire, the means by which representation is constructed and can be undermined; Furse's Augustine simply takes on the doctor's means of

representation through appropriating their appearance. Tammy Ann Aiello has argued that in imagining Augustine's escape from the Salpêtrière in 'a mixture of Charcot's and Freud's clothes', Furse only enables her character to overthrow her oppressors in the act of becoming like them.<sup>18</sup> I would take the argument a stage further, and say that in adopting the performance practices favoured by Charcot to tell Augustine's story, Furse's text remains caught up in the bind of theatricality which offers the spectator no choice between passive and illusory identification or the position of voyeur.

This is, ultimately, the problem with Furse's text, which while ostensibly challenging the doctors, ends up playing the game according to their terms. As Jane Milling argues,

In offering us a false 'reading' of the hysteric's body by Charcot, Furse's play produces a self-evident reading for the audience, via the sympathetic figure of Freud and his listening cure. We solve the riddle of Augustine, interpret her theatre of 'forgotten scenes', and leave unchallenged by our own complicity in the power game of the 'seer' (Charcot) or the 'listener' (Freud).<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, Cixous's performance text as adapted by Benmussa resists the resolution of Dora's riddle, indeed insisting that the riddle must remain unsolved. And in order to do so, Benmussa makes it clear that the performance must not privilege either seer or listener, Charcot or Freud, gesture or word:

Some people can only see theatre in terms of what they call the 'theatre of the text', or 'the theatre of gesture', or 'of image', or 'of the voice', or ...

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<sup>18</sup> Tammy Ann Aiello, 'The Body in (Con)text: the Hysteric as Woman in *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*' (unpublished master's thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 1993; abstract in *Dissertation Abstracts*, AAC 1353702).

<sup>19</sup> Jane Milling, '*Augustine (Big Hysteria)*', *Studies in Theatre Production*, 17 (June 1998), 64.



[...] We have to set ourselves up against those who practise the vivisection of expression, those whose behaviour pertains to mutilation.

[...] I try to remain within the sphere of this 'disturbance', in which sensory impressions are interwoven, superimposed, confused, and escape from their original meaning to the point of becoming indistinguishable from each other.

(Benmussa, pp. 20-21)

Benmussa writes that this 'disturbance' requires 'vigilance, lucidity, and intense precision; and this intensity must even be allowed to reach a state of vertigo'.

Balanced in this in-between of word and gesture, mind and body, the spectator of Cixous's play about hysteria is truly caught up in the hysterical frame, and thus laid open to the possibilities of performance.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined two performance texts which are, through their focus on the famous hysterical patients Augustine and Dora, centrally concerned with the narrative of hysteria. Through close analysis of their performance practices I have argued that these plays can be also seen to be concerned with hysteria in other ways, not just through content but through the development of a form and structure that reflects the structure of hysteria. For we have seen that both playwrights, Cixous and Furse, make use of the dual discourses of mind and body, word and gesture, in order to communicate these hysteric's stories to their audience, removing the hysteric from the master narrative of the physicians in which she has been placed by history and encouraging the audiences to read their stories anew.

Both playwrights - aided by technology which was not available to Elizabeth Robins a century earlier - have been shown to have developed methods of placing

word and image across and against each other, 'dis-membering' the rules of stage narrative and bringing them together again, to use Furse's words, 'in a form you won't recognise'. Furse employs slides, doubling and music to dis-member Augustine's story, while Cixous and Benmussa use slide and film projections together with a twisting, punctured dialogue to prick, pierce, and unravel the case history so carefully constructed by Freud. Looking back to previous elements of this thesis, this use of slide and film can perhaps be seen - just as Robins's bodily gestures were seen - as drawing on the legacy of melodrama with its emphasis on display, on the corporeal, yet - just as with Robins's work - using those elements of the corporeal to undercut the very safety that melodrama, with its fixity of meaning, offered its audience. In these plays bodies multiply, excessively and dangerously.

But I have also identified an important difference between these performance texts in the use that is made of the structures of hysteria in the creating or disturbing of meaning. While refusing Charcot's interpretation of Augustine's story, Furse seems determined to offer the audience her own version of events: a version which closes rather than disrupts meaning. She plays with the rhetoric of hysteria but, as we have seen, ultimately inscribes fixed meaning onto the hysterical body, leaving the audience no room in which to draw their own conclusions as to Augustine's case. In contrast, Cixous's *Portrait of Dora* resolutely refuses a single narrative, a single meaning. In order to do so, I have argued, it makes use of a performance practice which fits very clearly into the model of hysterical rhetoric which this thesis has sought to develop, seeking to direct the audience away from privileging the 'theatre of the text' or the 'theatre of gesture', and instead placing the spectator within a 'sphere of disturbance' in which both word and gesture can 'escape from their original meaning'. The



adoption of this practice of hysterical performance rhetoric thus situates the spectator, working with the performer of the text, to actively create meaning, rather than simply passively receiving it.

## Conclusion

Hysteria resists all cures. It offers instead ever new versions of reworked memory traces, addressing - without ever touching - the initial traumatic event.

Indeed, rather than accepting the solution, the undoing of the knot, hysteria preserves the knot in all its ambivalence and inconsistency.

(Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, p. 42).

Elisabeth Bronfen's characterization of hysteria as holding on to ambivalence and inconsistency, as refusing the solution, seems an appropriate place for the ending of this thesis to begin. It was the idea of hysteria, standing in opposition to or even outside the dominant patriarchal system, which triggered my interest in this area of research at its outset. And it is this idea which, after all the substantive research set out in the preceding chapters has been completed, I still see as a powerful model, particularly when transposed from the arena of actual illness onto the stage of the theatre. For a mode of being which resists 'cure', which resists reduction, which seeks to represent 'the knot' itself rather than any explanation or solution of it, suggests a radical approach to the issue of theatrical representation of the self: an approach which, I have argued in this thesis, has been particularly rewarding for those seeking to find new ways of representing the female subject on stage. It is perhaps appropriate here to remind the reader of the title of this thesis, with its argument that in speaking the body, it is possible to begin to represent the self: a self which I too would see as full of ambivalence and inconsistency.



Such a description of hysteria thus captures what we can now see as key to the development of a model of hysterical performance rhetoric in this thesis: a model which, by transposing the performative body of hysteria onto the performing body of the actor, celebrates the power of that performing body working with but also resisting and refusing to be contained by the play's textual frame. In this conclusion I want briefly to summarise the workings of such a model as it has developed through the substantive analysis of texts and performance practices in preceding chapters; then to emphasise that model's potential for creating radical performances which enable the performing body to refuse being situated as an object on stage, and finally to highlight that model's role as a tool for re-reading and analysing a range of performance texts. For such a model, with its very basis in a condition of rejection of or failure to fit into the dominant discourses of society, is not limited in application to performance texts which take hysteria as their subject. Instead it can be more widely employed as a key part of a radical theatrical politics by those - usually but not exclusively women - who today find themselves silenced by the dominant discourses and values of our own era.

## **1 Hysterical Rhetoric on Stage**

Hysterical rhetoric, I have argued in this thesis, involves a transposition of the structure of hysteria from the performing body of the hysteric onto the performing body of the stage actor communicating to a public audience in the theatre; a transposition of the structure of disease into the arena of metaphor and theatrical form. That structure, based on the work of Freud and Breuer which is recorded in the 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*, involves the repression from speech of things that by their nature 'made a reaction impossible' or that 'the patient wished to forget, and

therefore intentionally repressed from his conscious thought and inhibited and repressed' (*SE* II, p.10). What cannot be spoken or consciously remembered finds its way into the open via the symptomatic body of the hysteric, whose coughs, loss of voice and paralytic contractures speak this hidden truth for her. What is at the heart of hysteria, then, is a relationship between repressed word and speaking body: between what cannot be said in culture and what finds expression in corporeal, symptomatic acts. Transposed onto the performing body on the theatrical stage, these structures suggest a model of hysterical performance rhetoric which utilizes the discourse of the body as well as that of the word in order to create meaning, making use of the gestures and tics of the performing body to undercut, to speak against, to refuse and subvert the meaning which the performer's words alone would create.

This model is developed throughout the thesis, but is most fully explored in my work in Chapter Four on Elizabeth Robins's performances in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and her own *Alan's Wife* (written jointly with Florence Bell). There I argued that Robins, in seeking to find a way to represent the knot which is at the core of Hedda's character, used gesture not - as in the earlier practice of melodrama - to reinforce her language or to confirm the truth of her speech, but rather to indicate the existence of a deeper, contradictory truth. She created a double-layered dialogue of voice and body, adopting hysterical rhetoric in order to communicate to the audience what could not be said within the closed society of the Tesman household.

While the character of Hedda was, as we have seen, described by her creator Ibsen as hysterical, the character created by Robins and Bell and performed by Robins on stage in *Alan's Wife* was explicitly marked as sane, as being fully in control of her



actions and aware of the implications of them.<sup>1</sup> Robins is thus shown to have taken the rhetoric of hysteria which she developed in playing Ibsen, a rhetoric based in the dual and opposing discourses of word and gesture, and applied it to a non-hysterical character who employs that rhetoric precisely in order to avoid speaking the language of those who would seek to contain and dominate her. Robins's performance practice in the third and final scene, as the character of Jean refuses engagement with the language of the law, and speaks instead to the spectator via the gestures of the performing body, is thus vital to our understanding of the model of hysterical performance rhetoric which I have sought to develop in this thesis.

For, while it has its roots in the hysterical condition, its power as a mode of performance is not restricted to plays which have a hysterical character at their centre. This thesis has indeed focused on performance texts which - from Mathias's mesmerized body in *The Bells* through Ibsen's nervous heroine in *Hedda Gabler* to Cixous's revisiting of Freud's famous patient in *Portrait of Dora* - have often (although perhaps sometimes unexpectedly) had connections to the actual condition of hysteria as understood in the playwrights' contemporary societies. But in relation to those plays, my discussion of the ways through which their hysterical content is played out in their performance practices has been even more important than that hysterical content itself. For it is those performance practices, I argue, that are the true marker of a hysterical text: a conclusion which has led me to deny Anna Furse's *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* the status of a hysterical text, despite that play's central concern with key figures in the history of hysteria. In the Introduction I quoted Elaine Showalter's suggestion that, rather than being seen as 'the daughter's disease',

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Four, p. 179 and p. 233.

hysteria could perhaps be seen as 'the disease of the powerless and silenced'; in the same way, I would argue, use of a hysterical performance rhetoric is not restricted to plays which take hysteria as their subject.<sup>2</sup> Instead it can be used to re-voice those whose stories are normally either excluded from the stage altogether or merely served up as objects of pleasure for the passive spectator.

The society in which Robins performed both Hedda Gabler and Jean Creyke - that of *fin-de-siècle* England - was of course one in which there was much that could not be said. Censorship, both public and private, was dominant, providing what was perhaps uniquely fertile ground for the development of a performance rhetoric centred on saying the unsayable through the discourse of the body. Yet my examination of Cixous's 1976 play *Portrait of Dora* in Chapter Five shows that such a rhetoric can still be used to create radical and powerful performance texts in more modern times. Writing after the changes wrought by the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and thus in what is a very different era from that in which Robins began to campaign on behalf of the women's suffrage movement, Cixous can be more open about what needs to be said, but still sees, like Jean Creyke and Vida Levering that 'speaking - even just opening her mouth - in public is something rash, a transgression'.<sup>3</sup> Cixous and Simone Benmussa thus still identify a need to utilize the competing discourses of gesture and word in order to avoid reinstatement and reinscription within the dominant system, in order to be able to represent their central character and those around her in all their ambivalence and inconsistency.

Chapter Five's discussion of two modern performance texts - that of *Portrait of Dora* and Anna Furse's *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* - is also useful in refining the

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<sup>2</sup> Showalter, 'Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender', p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, p. 92.



model of hysterical rhetoric established via consideration of the practice of Elizabeth Robins a century earlier. For while both plays centre on a hysterical figure as their main character, and attempt to use radical staging techniques which combine word and image, text and gesture, to disrupt narrative meaning, I concluded that chapter by identifying only one of them, Cixous's *Portrait of Dora*, as fitting the model of a text drawing on hysterical performance rhetoric. What differentiates them is that element of hysteria with which I began this conclusion: the resisting of cure, the rejection of solution and the undoing of the knot. Furse's play, we saw, rejected Charcot's solution to Augustine's case, his labelling and fixing of her as a performing hysterical body whose words were simply 'much ado about nothing' (*Augustine*, p. 30); but in place of Charcot's solution the play simply offers its own. The play thus plays with the rhetoric of hysteria but ultimately rejects it, inscribing meaning onto Augustine's hysterical body, and leaving the audience no choice as to how to interpret her case. *Augustine (Big Hysteria)* can in fact be seen as not so very different from the plays of melodrama and the clinical lectures of Charcot which I discussed in Chapter Two: Furse argues that she's writing a text which 'shows', with a central character who 'sheds clues which they [the audience] must work out', but her text is surely one that 'tells' (*Augustine*, p. 12). Her audience is not allowed to see the inconsistencies and work things out for themselves. In contrast, Cixous's *Portrait of Dora* offers a bewildering multitude of perspectives on Dora's story, using word and body, text and image, to undercut and contradict each other right to the end without the consolation of solution or cure.

The model of hysterical performance rhetoric developed through substantive analysis of play texts in this thesis can thus be seen to contain two key elements: the

combination of the discourse of the body and that of the word in ways that disturb and confuse the separate meanings of each, and the refusal of cure or closure, rejecting the fixed meanings of conventional theatrical narrative and denying the spectator the certainty of positioning which more usually confirms him as the dominant spectator of the body as object on stage.

## **2 The Politics of Hysteria: Power and Potential**

In my analysis of the hysterics Anna O. and Dora in Chapter One I suggested that we could view the figure of the hysteric, uncured, as existing outside the rules of patriarchy, refusing integration into the symbolic order: it is this which has made her such an attractive figure for modern feminist critics. Her symptoms play out her inability to represent herself and her desires in the language of patriarchy, which marks her as ill. But the symptomatic acts of hysteria also point us towards a different way of representing the self and desire which avoids the bind of that language with all that it does not allow to be said. For hysteria, which Showalter describes as the disease of the powerless and silenced, contains within itself the structures which, transposed into a theatrical frame, provide the potential for re-voicing the silenced. Using Cixous's words from another context, the model of hysterical rhetoric which I have developed in this thesis thus offers the opportunity for representation which does not simply work to the rule of patriarchal language and society but rather seeks to:

explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in [...] bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside it.<sup>4</sup>

Hysterical performance rhetoric, I argue, enables the creation of a radical politics of form, one which questions narrative teleologies and the notion of a single truth.

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<sup>4</sup> Cixous and Clément, p. 92.



Combining the power of the hysteric as a figure who ‘jams all the [...] little wheels’ of her society with the power of the transgressive body on stage, it opens up a different kind of representation, one which leaves both actor and audience ‘in danger, as if balancing on the words, balancing on the gestures’ that together make up this radical performance discourse.<sup>5</sup>

Those words are Benmussa’s, writing about *Portrait of Dora*, but they seem to me to fit equally well the performance practice employed by the nineteenth century actress Elizabeth Robins in *Hedda Gabler* and *Alan’s Wife*, in an era which long predates the theorization of relationships between stage and spectator by writers such as Brecht or indeed Cixous herself. While her writing of *Votes for Women* and her involvement with the suffrage movement in the early years of the twentieth century place Robins as an active political figure, it is Robins’s work as an actress and performer which places her at the analytical and political core of this thesis. For it is here that, refusing placement within the language of their societies, her characters use the bodily gestures and symptomatic acts that are at the heart of hysterical rhetoric to attempt to communicate to her audience what cannot or must not be said through the words of the text. And it is here that I have identified the potential of hysterical rhetoric as a means of representing the self, both personally and politically.

### **3 Re-reading Theatre through the Lens of Hysteria**

While a hysterical rhetoric of performance is thus, I have argued, a powerful tool for the creation and staging of radical performance texts, the core work of this thesis and its substantive contribution to theatre research has been the re-reading and re-viewing of nineteenth and twentieth century stage texts from melodrama onwards: texts which

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<sup>5</sup> Cixous and Clément, p. 150; Benmussa, *Benmussa Directs*, p. 11.

are ‘about’ hysteria and texts which, while dealing with different subject matter, have been illuminated by my reading through the lens of hysteria. With its roots in what is clearly denoted as a performative disease, an analysis based on hysterical rhetoric has worked in two key ways in this thesis: it has refocused attention on the relationship between the discourse of the word and that of the body in the making of meaning in performance and, via the complex relationships between hysteric and analyst which are such a vital part of the history of hysteria, it has emphasised the importance of examining the relationship between performer and spectator, asking questions as to where, and by whom, meaning is created and understood.

Firstly, it has ensured that my analysis of texts as varied as *The Dumb Man of Manchester* and *Hedda Gabler* has focused not on their literary aspects but rather on the actual practice of performance, avoiding the dominance of the textual frame and providing a new framework for rethinking the relationship between word and gesture and their dual role in the creation of meaning on the stage. The value of such an approach has become clear as juxtaposed readings of the narratives of hysteria and theatre in the nineteenth century have enabled me to re-examine the conventions surrounding the use of the body on the nineteenth century stage. In particular, my discussion in Chapter Two of the gestural body on the stage of the melodramatic theatre and in Charcot’s lecture theatre works to interrogate assumptions about the way in which the body was employed by the nineteenth century actor. Charcot’s labelling of the hysteric’s passionate attitudes, which mirrors the description and categorization of gestural codes in the acting handbooks which were so prevalent throughout the century, suggests that those gestural bodies in both public and private theatres were in fact never left open for interpretation. Where Charcot’s labelling



imposed meanings on the movements of his hysterics, in the theatre the words of other characters in the text, and the music by which the staged performance reinforced meaning, worked to translate the gestures into fixed meanings for the audience: the performing body was not allowed to speak for itself.

A re-reading of these texts through the lens of hysterical rhetoric, which constantly reminds us that the play's script or written text masks much that is left unsaid, which cannot be written down, thus focuses attention on the actual workings of the relationship between the actor's words and his or her gestural body in the creation of the performance's meaning. But it also reveals connections between what at first appear to be very disparate texts. Where early nineteenth century melodrama and the late nineteenth century realism of Ibsen and Strindberg are often set in opposition, this thesis has shown that their very different performance practices both rely on the corporeal gesture as central to their making of meaning. The analysis of Elizabeth Robins's performances discussed above highlights her use of a speaking body that is a close descendant of the gestural body employed by the dumb man figure in melodramas such as *A Tale of Mystery*.

But there are, of course, also key differences in the way in which that body is utilized by the actor within the play text and is interpreted by the drama's spectator: where the performance of the dumb man's discourse relies on the presence and language of an on-stage translator to fix meaning, Robins's gestures work precisely to unfix and unsettle meaning by undermining the truth of the words which she speaks. Such differences become even clearer when we turn to examine the second element emphasised by this analysis: the relationship between performance and spectator.

The history of hysteria as outlined in this thesis makes it clear that the changing relationship between the hysteric and the doctor/analyst is central to the developing understanding of that condition. Thus transposing the structure of hysteria to the theatre via the model of hysterical rhetoric must inevitably focus attention on the way in which the spectator is enabled to read and interpret the meaning of the on-stage performance. My discussion of the work of Charcot, Breuer and Freud in Chapters One and Two shows them each to have had enormous influence on the way in which the hysteric's symptomatic acts were displayed and interpreted to a wider public (accompanied by varying degrees of success in treating and curing their patients). Identifying the problems inherent in their different approaches to reading the body of the hysteric has helped me to trace similarities with the positioning of the theatre spectator in relation to the performance text, and has thus illuminated the different ways in which the plays considered work to situate the spectator and to restrict or open up the range of meanings available to him or her.

In Chapter Two I characterised Charcot - who is often seen as concerned only with display and observation - as both a stage manager and narrator figure, using the apparatus of showing only to drive home what he was in fact telling his audience, just as the playwrights and actors of nineteenth century melodrama appeared to rely on the gestural body to make meaning, but in fact left little to the audience's own judgement or imagination. And throughout the thesis I have argued that while Freud's initial approach to hysteria, influenced by Breuer's treatment of Anna O. with its emphasis on dialogue between analyst and patient, appeared to be one of listening, of letting the patient speak both via body and through those symptoms which seemed to join in the



conversation, by the time he came to Dora's case he too was concerned with telling rather than letting the patient 'show' for herself.

Awareness of the limitations of such approaches, with their claims to represent the truth of the patient while denying that patient his or her own voice, has helped me to analyse carefully the different stages in theatrical radicalism discussed in this thesis from Chapter Three onwards with a view to assessing just how far the playwright, director or actor has sought to impose, or avoid imposing, a single fixed meaning on their audience. Doing so has enabled me to understand, for example, why Anna Furse's *Augustine (Big Hysteria)*, despite its use of many radical techniques of form, still seemed narrow and unexciting compared with Robins's work in Ibsen's apparently much staid text. For where Robins, refusing to discuss the motivations behind Hedda's character at the time of her performances, said that her business was not to discuss characters by word of mouth, but to make her conceptions clear by her acting, Furse seems to leave nothing to the chance of that creative relationship between actor and spectator, merely unfixing the spectator from one position (complicity with Charcot) in order to fix him or her in another.<sup>6</sup>

A hysterical lens for re-reading, then, usefully focuses the theatrical scholar's attention on the actual practice and context of performance rather than on the written text with all its gaps and absences. The performer's creation of meaning via the linked yet potentially opposing discourses of word and body, and the spectator's ability to work out that meaning for him or herself, are kept centre-stage where they rightly belong.

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<sup>6</sup> M.A.B., 'An Interview with Miss Elizabeth Robins and Miss Marion Lea', *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1891, p. 720.

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This prompt book, bearing Elizabeth Robins's signature, consists of a typescript of Hedda's lines and cues, annotated by Robins, sometimes on both sides of the pages. Act I contains 13 pages (2-14), Act II contains 18 pages (15-32), Act III contains 16 pages (33-48) and Act IV contains 11 pages (1-11)

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