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Performance Anxiety: Hysteria and the Actress in French Literature 1880-

1910

### Abstract

My dissertation uses close readings of four texts dealing with the actress, spanning the naturalist novel (Zola's *Nana*, 1880, and Edmond de Goncourt's *La Faustin*, 1882), autobiography (Sarah Bernhardt's *Ma double vie*, 1907) and autobiographical fiction (Colette's *La Vagabonde*, 1910), in order to examine late nineteenth-century representations (and self-representations) of the actress in relation to the discourse of hysteria. I argue that in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France, pathology and performance came together in the stereotype of the hysterical actress. In the wake of the French Revolution, and the subsequent political upheavals of the nineteenth century along with the emergence of a consumer capitalist society, *fin-de-siècle* society was living a moment of particular anxiety. This anxiety found a focal point in the hystericised figure of *la comédienne*, who came to embody a threatening blurring of gender and class distinctions. Actresses were pathologised in a discursive gesture which sought to identify and contain the threat which they were seen to pose, and which seemed to offer an objective narrative which re-established boundaries and identities. The discourse of hysteria, however, was by no means as secure or monolithic as it might seem. I argue that the discourse of hysteria is underpinned by a

fundamental performativity which has the potential to be profoundly subversive. By examining different modalities of response to the phenomenon of the hystericisation of the actress, I show how in both male and female-authored texts the discourse of pathology is undermined and reappropriated in a way which foreshadows twentieth-century feminist theories.

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## Introduction

The journalist Robert Kemp, reminiscing in *Le Figaro* about Sarah Bernhardt, recalled a particular gesture which the celebrated diva would execute when playing Phèdre. As she delivered the line, “C’est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée,”<sup>1</sup> according to Kemp: “A deux mains crispées comme des serres d’aigle sur la bête prise, Sarah se saisissait les flancs aux points précis sur lesquels pèsent les médecins pour calmer les malades saisis des fureurs d’Eros.”<sup>2</sup> The gesture, as Kemp records it, was a very specific reference, which mimicked the use of ovarian compression to quell hysterical fits. The original of this performance of pathology was to be found at the Salpêtrière hospital where Jean-Martin Charcot and his team of researchers put the suffering female body on display to an audience of fellow medical specialists and interested amateurs (including Bernhardt).

It is the overlap between the discourses of theatre and medicine, between performance and pathology, which forms the subject of this dissertation. The performance of female pathology which took place in the Salpêtrière during the late nineteenth century in France found its counterpart in a pathologisation of female performance. Two long-standing stereotypes of the unruly feminine, the hysteric and the actress, came together in *fin de siècle* culture in France, and I examine here some of the ways in which they

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, I, 3, l. 306.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kemp, *Le Figaro*, 21 octobre, 1944. Cited by Florence Vinas, “Comédienne! Analyse du mythe de l’actrice dans la littérature du tournant du dix-neuvième siècle.” Diss. Université de Montpellier, 1995. Print, 109.

overlapped and interacted in Emile Zola's *Nana*, Edmond de Goncourt's *La Faustin*, Sarah Bernhardt's *Ma double vie* and Colette's *La Vagabonde*.

In the decades before World War I there was a pathologisation of performance that was at once static and mobile, both conservative and potentially subversive. I read this pathologisation of the theatre woman as a manifestation of the uncertainties of a society which had lost its bearings in the wake of recent turmoil. The French Revolution and its aftershocks in the nineteenth century had deprived French society of the predictive plots which had hitherto structured social relations. In such a world, immutable and universal truths had become impossible: the supposedly natural divisions and boundaries of class and gender had become disturbingly fluid. Into this void stepped the discourse of science which seemed to offer an objective narrative whereby the world might be ordered and explained and boundaries reestablished. This narrative, I argue, played itself out on the bodies of actresses as a discourse of hysteria which sought to reestablish hierarchical gender boundaries by situating the actress as the avatar of feminine alterity.

The years which followed France's defeat by Prussia in 1870 were experienced by French society as years of profound instability. At the end of the previous century, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution had radically decentred the framework of political authority in France, undermining the predictive plots of monarchy and religion which had hitherto structured social relations. The effects of this collapse on the collective psyche could be felt in the political upheaval which punctuated political life in nineteenth-century



France. The June Days of 1848 claimed 3,000 Parisian lives and saw 15,000 arrests, whilst the Commune of 1871 took an even heavier toll: between 10,000 and 30,000 dead in the bloody week beginning on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 1871, and around 50,000 arrested or deported. At the same time, a profound economic shift had taken place, with the emergence of a consumer capitalist economy, a transition which contributed to the sense of ongoing uncertainty and confusion which came with democratisation, the blurring of social classes and the radical reconstruction of Paris which had been effected by Hausmannisation.

The sense of ambient confusion which inflects literary productions of the period crystallises around the trope of femininity. The question of *la femme*, her productive and reproductive capacities, her desires and dysfunctions, loomed large in the imaginary of the emergent Third Republic, as a lens through which deep-lying concerns about the foundations of socio-economic life could be examined. Be it in the form of the *pétroleuses* alleged to have set fire to Paris in the wake of the Commune, or the hysterics whose chaotic bodies were on display at the Salpêtrière, the unruly feminine became the favoured metaphor for a society which represented itself as being in crisis. The actress figured in the popular imaginary as precisely the kind of subversive figure of femininity which masculine society might cast in the role of threatening Other emblematic of this new world of uncertainty. Already a familiar archetype of the unruly feminine, the actress, through her visibility in a culture which believed along with Rousseau that “toute femme sans pudeur

est coupable et dépravée, parce qu'elle foule aux pieds un sentiment naturel de son sexe,"<sup>3</sup> and the frequently unconventional lives led by actresses, represented a profound challenge to nineteenth century gender and social norms. Her public status and perceived sexual availability situated the actress at just one remove from the prostitute as an emblem of the degeneration of capitalist society.

Paradoxically, such images of subversive femininity underpinned that society, for it is against these images of feminine chaos – in particular, as we see in my first chapter, the trope of hysteria – that the emergent society of the Third Republic defined and established itself. Images of confusion metaphorised as feminine, contained within significant form – be it a novel or a historical account – suggest, as Leo Bersani points out, that the chaotic elements are somehow reducible to order, that sense can be made of anarchy.<sup>4</sup> Underlying the discourse of hysteria is a Pygmalion mythology, a fantasy of woman as infinitely plastic and created entirely by the hand of man. The doctor transforms the unruly, “natural” body of the hysteric into one whose inexplicable symptoms, tics, convulsions and paralyses have order and meaning, a body which functions under the control of the male doctor. The *Leçons du mardi* were theatrical demonstrations of this Pygmalion fantasy, spectacular representations of medical mastery of the female body. Representations of the actress as hysterical were founded, then, on a

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, ed. M. Fuchs. Lille, Textes Littéraires Français, 1948, 65-6.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax*. Boston: Little Brown, 1971, 60.

scopophilic fantasy of the female body as legible even in its unruliness, orderly even in its disorder. The hysterical actress became a nineteenth-century Galatea, who fascinated as an infinitely malleable figure capable of embodying multiple meanings.

The privilege of articulating and interpreting the infinitely suggestive body of the actress-hysterical was, of course, a masculine one. Hysteria is characterised in masculine culture by the inability to speak coherently. Patients were reduced to the status of objects, to be interpreted by the masterful discourse of an omniscient – and so omnipotent – doctor. A revealing incident from one of Charcot's *Leçons du mardi* notes his response to being interrupted by a patient crying out: "Maman, j'ai peur". She is instantly reduced to silence, as Charcot denies her the very possibility of meaningful speech, remarking "Vous voyez comment crient les hystériques. On peut dire que c'est beaucoup de bruit pour rien."<sup>5</sup> Speech, and in particular meaning, are the privileges of the masculine, positivist subject: the hysteric is reduced to a choice which Luce Irigaray articulates as being between "le mutisme et le mimétisme. Elle se tait et, en même temps, elle mime."<sup>6</sup> Likewise it is in the nature of the actress's role that she speak not her own words but those assigned to her by a (male) playwright and that her gestures and intonations be dictated to her by a (male) director. The

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<sup>5</sup> Charcot, J.M., *L'Hystérie* (Paris: Privat, 1971). 119.

<sup>6</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977, 134.

hystericised actress would thus appear to be doubly ventriloquised, her verbal and bodily language at once dictated to and translated for her.<sup>7</sup>

To adopt such a view of the hystericised actress, however, would be massively to understate the complexity of the matter, for, as the work of Luce Irigaray has shown there lies in the apparently pathological symptoms of the hysteric a source of potential power<sup>8</sup>:

Il y a toujours dans l'hystérie à la fois une puissance en réserve et une puissance paralysée. Une puissance qui est toujours déjà réprimée, en fonction de la *subordination* du désir féminin au phallogotisme; une puissance contrainte au silence et au mimétisme, du fait de la soumission du 'sensible,' de la 'matière,' à l'intelligible et à son discours. Ce qui entraîne des effets 'pathologiques.' Et, simultanément, il y a, dans l'hystérie, la possibilité d'une autre mode de 'production,' notamment gestuel et de langage, mais qui est gardé, maintenu, en latence. Telle une réserve culturelle encore à venir?.... (Irigaray, 136)

Irigaray adopts a strategy of mimicry in order to destabilise a phallogocentric tradition which poses the feminine only and always as the negative of the masculine. Hysteria is re-read in Irigaray's theory as a form of resistance to

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<sup>7</sup> My use of the term "ventriloquised" is a reference to Janet Beizer's seminal work on hysteria, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> This vision of the hysteric is the subject of considerable debate in feminism which crystallises in the conversation between Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous in *La jeune née*. See Cixous, Hélène/Clément, Catherine- *La Jeune Née* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1975), 283 – 290. For Cixous, "L'hystérique [...] c'est la femme-type dans toute sa force: une force qui était retournée contre Dora, dans son cas mais qui, si la scène tourne et si la femme commence à parler autrement, serait une force capable de démolir ces structures-là" (284); Clément, however, disputes this view, arguing that such a view does little to disturb existing stereotypes of femininity: "C'est métaphorique... Ça métaphorise la destruction, mais la famille se reconstitue autour. Comme quand tu a jeté une pierre, l'eau se ride, mais redevient lisse" (285).

patriarchal ideology which operates through mimicry of stereotypes of femininity which have been naturalised, disguised as “female” behind a discourse of masculine rationalism. For Irigaray, the task is to use the role of mime which has traditionally been assigned to women to their advantage: “Il s’agit d’assumer, délibérément, ce rôle. Ce qui est déjà retourner en affirmation une subordination, et, de ce fait, commencer à la déjouer” (73-4). In doing so, she seeks to “enrayer la machinerie théorique elle-même, de suspendre sa prétension à la production d’une vérité et d’un sens par trop univoques” (75). The hysteric’s role as victim may, then, be precisely that, a role, a performance which provides an unexpected source of power and agency.

I suggest that in the interplay of pathology and performance in the literature of the late nineteenth century we find a foreshadowing of the twentieth-century feminist theories of hysteria and performativity. I show how actresses and writers such as Sarah Bernhardt and Colette were able to appropriate the discourse of hysteria in different ways. Through an examination of the actress-hysteric as a performed identity shaped by a masculine culture which seeks thereby to contain her subversive femininity, my dissertation reveals the potential of this performance. It shows how the pathology of performance was reappropriated and transformed into a form of female self-expression which situated itself in a position of constant dialectic, at once inside and outside of the prevailing gender ideology and modes of representation.

In my chapter on Sarah Bernhardt I trace a strategy of mimicry which foreshadows twentieth-century feminist thought by using the clichéd language of hysteria against itself. In *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt's hysteria becomes a performance which simultaneously enacts and deconstructs itself, and the notion of femininity along with it. Hysteria in Bernhardt's text functions as a form of parody, which over-complies with patriarchal requirements of femininity in order to frustrate them. The tactic of deliberate mimicry is not without risk, however. Irigaray, speaking more generally, points out the dangers of such a strategy, acknowledging that "parler *de* ou *sur* la femme peut toujours revenir ou être entendu comme une reprise du féminin à l'intérieur d'une logique qui le maintient dans le refoulement, la censure, la méconnaissance" (75).

The recourse to mimicry risks trapping women within masculine representations and confirming rather than subverting stereotypes. Colette's Renée Néré comes to this awareness in *La Vagabonde* as she finds herself enclosed in spaces which prove increasingly vulnerable to invasion by her lover, Maxime, who is unable to read her ironic mimicry for what it is. Ultimately Renée rejects the choice of silence or mimicry and sets out to deconstruct the binary codes of male/female, speaking/non-speaking. She does not seek to effect a simple reversal, to assume a masculine position within culture, but rather through a wandering rooted in the ethic of work she enacts a mobility, an ability to move across boundaries and to combine codes, to speak simultaneously from within and without masculine discourse.

In *La Vagabonde*, Colette moves her protagonist away from the strategy of mimicry which she employs at the beginning of the book towards a coming to writing. Renée Néré is unique amongst the actresses discussed in that she is not hysterical, nor does she describe herself as such. She does, however, flirt with the discourse of hysteria in order to undermine it, situating herself in the hysterically connoted territory of the *femme de lettres*, the vagabond, and especially the actress. Whereas Bernhardt mimics the stereotype of the hysterical actress subversively, Colette's Renée invokes the cliché in order to defy it, arrogating to herself that most masculine of privileges – and the one most frequently denied to the hysteric – that of language. Renée moves, over the course of *La Vagabonde*, from the silence of the mime to a resumption of writing in which she is no longer bound by a masculine textual tradition.

This masculine textual tradition, however, is by no means as monolithic and secure as it might first appear. The protagonists of *Nana* and *La Faustin* are far from being the passive victims of their malady, waiting to be cured by the diagnostic gaze of their male audience. In both Zola and Goncourt, the representation of the hystericised actress escapes the overt control of the author: the critique of a hystericised, performative society gives way to the revelation of the terrifying power of the actress-hysteric. The fascination with the actress as infinitely plastic has as its corollary, as we see in my first two chapters, two contrasting yet interrelated nightmares in masculine representations of the actress. In *Nana* the fantasy of the actress as a space

for creative masculine endeavour quickly disintegrates along with her corpse: the apparent exposure of the actress onstage can only ever be illusory, for along with her all-too-real body is revealed the inevitable corporeality and mortality of those who watch her. The fantasised encounter with the actress can only take place through a mediating screen, otherwise it risks becoming an encounter with death itself. The alternative to the horror of death and decomposition which we find in *Nana* can be seen in *La Faustin* as a disintegration of the coherent, masculine self into a series of copies. The imagined plasticity of the actress becomes a macabre compulsion to imitate which reduces her lover to a mere facsimile of himself. In both *Nana* and *La Faustin*, then, the actress is the stuff of dreams and nightmares, a locus of fantasy and of horror. Her pathologised body is the site on which is played out the modern loss of selfhood, a void at the heart of the symbolic order. She becomes the emblematic figure of both transcendence and its loss, of the degeneration of selfhood into either base materiality or radical lack. In short, even as the discourse of pathology articulates itself around the actress, the script appears to unravel. The hysterical actress appears to escape the role which has been assigned to her to become a figure of frightening power.

In order to examine the elaboration of a mythology of the actress as hysterical and the engagement of authors with this mythology, I have selected texts from period of roughly thirty years beginning in 1880 with the literary landmark of *Nana* which coincided with the consolidation of the Third Republic, following Mac-Mahon's failed coup and his eventual resignation in



January 1879, and ending with the publication of *La Vagabonde* in 1910, just four years before the apocalyptic watershed of World War I. My study proceeds through the close analysis of texts in which actresses are the main protagonists, in both the third and first person, and not simply the objects of a protagonist's desire.

In my first chapter, I offer an analysis of the mythology of the hysterical actress. I demonstrate the overlap between literary depictions of the actress and the hysteric and the upsurge of interest in both in fin-de-siècle France. I suggest that the insertion of the actress into a narrative of hysteria is indicative of a society in crisis, one which seeks to restore order by imposing a framework of hysteria whereby the actress is transformed into a semiotic object. In this society, the actress-hysteric performed – literally – the role of subversive feminine other. This function, I argue, is intertwined with a simultaneous commodification of the actress. The culture of late nineteenth-century France was marked by a nascent consumer capitalism which, in consuming the actress as other, performed an identity founded on and defined by her projected alterity. At the same time there exists a dynamic tension in representations of the hysterical actress created by her overt performativity. In order for her to continue to function as the founding other of capitalist society, the mastery implied by the discourse of hysteria must remain elusive: were she ever to be “cured,” the identity which is founded in opposition to her otherness would be undermined, if not destroyed. The actress-hysteric, then, must always remain *to be* incorporated, necessitating

the constant repetition of her performance of subversive femininity. Drawing upon the theories of Judith Butler, I suggest that this repetition is at once fundamental to consumer society and a point of vulnerability therein, and that in mythologising as hysterical the actress and her infinitely performative body, late nineteenth-century French society pathologises its own performativity and thereby denies it.

In the chapters which follow, I analyse four different modalities of response to the discourse of hystericisation which surrounds the actress. I begin my analysis with a chapter devoted to Zola's *Nana*, which I consider as at once elaborating the naturalist myth of the actress as hysterical and tracing its decomposition. In order to do so, I read the novel in the context of the phenomenal popularity of visits to the Paris morgue. The morgue offers a pattern according to which we may read the intertwined discourses of the theatre, economics and the naturalist novel. All three claim to reveal the female body but in fact rest upon the presence of a screen which creates and focuses an image of that body presented as "real." This screen simultaneously obscures and reappropriates the female body which is fantasised as a space of masculine creativity. *Nana* stages Woman as a fantasy of lack predicated on the occlusion of the female body behind its own image, which founds a dream of masculine (re)production independent of the feminine. At the same time, however, the actress represents the female body as that which exceeds this fantasy and cracks the realist screen of contemporary discourse. On and off stage, *Nana* is constantly exceeding the

role which is assigned to her, literally embodying a nightmare of reproductive femininity which undoes the fantasy of Woman as lack and which forces her male spectators to confront their own corporeality and the concomitant spectre of mortality.

In Edmond de Goncourt's *La Faustin*, we find a rather different nightmare of the actress. The disintegrating corpse of *Nana* finds its counterpart in the rigid body of the protagonist's lover William Rayne. My third chapter examines the passage from the actress as Galatea, as ideal Muse of the post-paternal age, to her demonisation as Medusa in *La Faustin*. I argue that the plasticity, both psychic and physical, of the actress makes her a figure of the ideal, able to embody any fantasy. At the same time, however, this plasticity is hystericised in the novel as a pathological compulsion to imitate which leads *la Faustin* to mimic her lover mercilessly during his *agonie sardonique*. This imitative impulse becomes a nightmare of the actress as a figure of castration who reduces her lover to a series of sterile reproductions, to endlessly repeated images of himself. If in *Nana* the actress is mythologised as a carrier of death, then in *La Faustin* she represents the equally appalling alternative of the individual as a succession of meaningless repetitions without origin or future. The multiplicity of the actress's performative identities makes her not the ideal mirror dreamed of in the myth of Pygmalion but the Medusa who transforms a man into a mere copy of himself.

My fourth chapter on Sarah Bernhardt shifts the emphasis of my dissertation from the elaboration of a mythology of the actress by male

authors to the engagement of actresses themselves with this mythology. Previous studies have, in my opinion, dwelt too heavily upon masculine representations of the actress and insufficiently on the way in which actresses have portrayed themselves in media and literature. I read Sarah Bernhardt's autobiography *Ma double vie* as operating in a mode of mimicry that exploits the inherent performativity of the actress's identity which forms the stuff of masculine nightmares. *Ma double vie*, I argue, is a reworking of the stereotypical images of Bernhardt which circulated both in the popular press and in satirical accounts of her life such as Marie Colombier's *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, which sought to reduce her to the status of cliché. In response to the propagation of her image as a stereotype of the actress, Bernhardt assumes and performs the cliché of the female performer as hysterical in *Ma double vie* and elsewhere. Through the assemblage of personae, Bernhardt produces herself as at once hyperlegible and illegible, disrupting the expectation of authentic revelation implied by journalistic realism or the autobiographical genre.

Colette, as I show in my final chapter, engages with contemporary discourse on the actress in a rather different manner in her autobiographical novel *La Vagabonde*. Specifically, she refuses altogether the mythology of the actress which Zola and Goncourt attempt to elaborate, and which is imitated subversively by Bernhardt. Reading Renée, the central character of *La Vagabonde*, alongside the Renée of Zola's *La Curée*, I show how Colette stages a coming to writing for the actress. In contrast to her Zolian namesake,

who must remain the passive object of the masculine gaze, confined at the end of the novel within sight of the Salpêtrière, Colette's Renée is able to return and analyse the gaze which constructs her. Over the course of the novel, she learns not only to read the discourse surrounding her profession but to write herself out of that discourse by appropriating the ideal of work articulated in the educational ideology of the Third Republic. Unlike Bernhardt, who appropriates the stereotype of the actress as hysterical, Renée rejects it altogether, along with the consumer economy which it founds, and instead performs through her writing an alternative identity for the actress in an economy founded on labour rather than on possession and consumption of the female body.

The hystericisation of the actress was therefore an ambiguous gesture: even as it seems that the body of the actress is manipulated and controlled through the discourse of science, we cannot assume a passive complicity on the part of the actress herself. In male as in female-authored texts, the discourse of hysteria can be and is appropriated in order to destabilize the very identity which it enacts. The fantasy of a cohesive and authoritative masculine identity founded by the hystericisation of the actress collapses in the face of a performance which is constantly exceeding the boundaries which have been set for it. It is in this double-edged quality that that the powerful – and seductive – fascination of the actress-hysteric for nineteenth-century French culture lies.

## Chapter 1:

### The Pathology of Performance: The Actress and the Narrative of

#### Hysteria in The Early Third Republic

The denigration of the theatre profession and its female practitioners was hardly a new phenomenon in the nineteenth century. In his influential *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles* of 1758, Jean-Jacques Rousseau delivers a scathing condemnation of the way of life of the theatre profession:

Je vois en général que l'état de Comédien est un état de licence et de mauvaises mœurs; que les hommes y sont livrés au désordre; que les femmes y mènent une vie scandaleuse; que les uns et les autres, avares et prodigues tout à la fois, toujours accablés de dettes et toujours versant l'argent à pleines mains, sont aussi peu retenus sur leurs dissipations que peu scrupuleux sur les moyens d'y pourvoir.<sup>9</sup>

Special opprobrium is, however, to be reserved for the actress: "Si on voit en tout ceci une profession peu honnête, on doit encore voir une source de mauvaises mœurs dans le désordre des Actrices, qui force et entraîne celui des acteurs" (108). Rousseau was by no means the first to offer such a view of the theatre profession or of the actress. Actors were banished from Plato's republic along with all other mimetic artists, and Cicero reported that the Roman people "considered the dramatic art and the theatre in general disgraceful," to the point that "they desired that all persons connected with such things be deprived of the privileges of other citizens but should even be

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre à M. d'Alembert sur les spectacles*, ed. M. Fuchs. Lille, Textes Littéraires Français, 1948. 101.

removed from their tribes by sentence of the censors.”<sup>10</sup> Christianity took a scarcely less dim view of the theatre, and excommunicated all actors, a ban which would remain in force in France until 1849. The view that the theatre in general, and actresses in particular were a corrupting element in society persisted well into the nineteenth century and beyond. Flaubert’s sarcastic definition in the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* describes the actress as “La perte des fils de famille. Sont d'une lubricité effrayante, se livrent à des orgies, avalent des millions, finissent à l'hôpital.”<sup>11</sup> Flaubert is, of course, lampooning a cliché here, but the inclusion of the actress in his taxonomy of *lieux communs* points to the persistence of negative stereotypes of *la comédienne* as greedy, immoral and sexually rapacious.

In the years leading up to and immediately following the catastrophic events of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune, the actress, as Lenard Berlanstein suggests, became a focal point for the anxieties of society.<sup>12</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s posthumous diatribe, published in 1875 and entitled *La Pornocratie, ou les femmes dans le temps moderne* in which he described the French people as having become “un peuple femme,” was

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981, 39-40.

<sup>11</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*. Paris: Nathan, 2006, 11

<sup>12</sup> Lenard Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: French Theater Women from the Ancien Régime to the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001 134-158. Unlike Berlanstein, however, I do not see the years following 1880 as representing years of progressive acceptance for the actress (159-181). Rather, I suggest that prejudice found a new form of expression in the form of the stereotype of the hysterical actress.

typical of a discourse of devirilisation, which blamed the decline of France on the blurring of the divisions between the two sexes.<sup>13</sup> Zola, in his journalistic work under the Second Empire, described French society as being in a state of crisis. In an 1868 article in *La Tribune* he remarked:

Je crois que le vice a existé de tous temps. Mais il est des âges où il s'affiche, et ces âges annoncent toujours quelque crise sociale. Quand les vers se mettent à une société, cette société tombe bientôt en poussière, comme une vieille charpente criblée de trous imperceptibles. La secousse de 89 a suivi les hontes de la Régence et de Louis XV. Je ne sais ce qui suivra notre époque. Je constate simplement que, de nos jours, les comtes envoient à des créatures des chevaux de vingt-cinq mille francs la paire, et vont réclamer au violon les femmes ivres[...] Une sorte d'éréthisme secoue notre jeunesse dorée. Nos gentilhommes, nos fils de famille vivent dans un rire idiot. Ils applaudissent les turlus de MM. Offenbach et Hervé, il font reines de misérables danseuses de corde qui gambadent sur les planches des théâtres comme des artistes de foire. Leurs maîtresses sont des filles de portière qui les rabaisent à leur langage et à leurs sentiments."<sup>14</sup>

We have here a portrait of a hystericised society, in which the "éréthisme" of young noblemen is characterised by sexual disorder and the blurring of social boundaries. A later article in *La Cloche*, entitled "La Fin de l'Orgie", completes this picture with the description of scenes of debauchery in which young noblemen dress up as women:

C'est du propre, et le régal est complet. Vraiment l'empire a fait de nous une grande nation. Voilà que nos hommes deviennent des femmes. Lorsque Rome pourrissait dans sa grandeur, elle n'a pas accompli d'autres miracles. Les belles nuits d'orgie antique sont

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<sup>13</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *La Pornocratie, ou les femmes dans le temps moderne*. Paris: Lacroix, 1875, 233.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Kanes, ed., *L'Atelier de Zola: textes de journaux 1865-1870*. Genève: Droz, 1963, 187.



revenues, les nuits ardentes où les créatures n'avaient plus de sexe.  
(224)

To the blurring of class boundaries, then, is added the collapse of the distinctions between the two sexes.

Actresses, as Zola's reference to "misérables danseuses de corde qui gambadent sur les planches des théâtres" suggests, were frequently held up as emblems of this socio-sexual disorder. The journalist Pierre Véron entitled his chapter on Sarah Bernhardt in *Les Coulisses artistiques* "Monsieur Bernhardt"<sup>15</sup>. The world of the theatre was described by Edmond Got as "un monde presque renversé" in which "[l]'amour-propre, le besoin de briller tout de suite[...] font que les hommes deviennent parfois femmes, jalouxant comme des filles quelque bouffettes de rubans, jusque sur un corsage, tandis que la la liberté complète rend souvent les femmes un peu hommes."<sup>16</sup> The actress is a figure of hysteria and gender disorder around whom the anxieties of a society which fears these very things in itself can coalesce.

Around this figure of social chaos, as I show, a narrative of hysteria was woven which provided a framework within which the threat which she seemed to pose could be identified and mastered. The subversive body of the actress was overdetermined by her hysteria which inserted her into an interpretive framework of gender. If late nineteenth-century society returned with such obsessive interest to the actress and to her hysteria, it is because

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<sup>15</sup> Pierre Véron, *Les Coulisses artistiques*. Paris: Dentu, 1876, 131.

<sup>16</sup> Got, Edmond, *Journal de Edmond Got, sociétaire de la Comédie-Française*. Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 2 vols., I, 81.

the performativity of her identity marked a faultline in the prevailing ideology, a point of uncertainty at which the structures of capitalist society stood exposed as being themselves performative.

The passionate and ambivalent interest inspired by the actress in late nineteenth-century France was mirrored by the fascination exercised by another figure of unruly femininity, that of the hysteric. Like that of the actress, the stereotype of the hysteric was not a new one, but it was one which provoked a surge in interest in fin-de-siècle culture, both within the medical domain and without. During the 1870s and 1880s, the number of theses written on the subject of hysteria at the Paris medical school quadrupled.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, there was a dramatic increase in the proportion of patients who were admitted to the Salpêtrière suffering from symptoms of hysteria: between 1841-2 and 1882-3, the number rose from around 1 per cent to 20.5 per cent.<sup>18</sup> The apparent epidemic of hysteria – described by a character in Jules and Edmond de Goncourt’s novel of 1860, *Charles Démailly*, as the “maladie du siècle”<sup>19</sup> – prompted Guy de Maupassant, in an article of August 1882, to remark that hysteria was “le grand mot du jour”.<sup>20</sup> Maupassant also

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<sup>17</sup> Martha Evans, *Fits and Starts*. Ithaca,: Cornell University Press, 1991, 24

<sup>18</sup> Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 322.

<sup>19</sup> Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Charles Démailly*. Paris: Charpentier-Fasquelle, 1893, 279.

<sup>20</sup> Guy de Maupassant, “Une Femme” in *Chroniques*. Paris: 10/18, 1980, 3 vols., II, 111.

highlighted the performative aspect of hysteria, dubbing the Salpêtrière's chair of pathology, Jean-Martin Charcot, "ce grand prêtre de l'hystérie, cet éleveur d'hystériques en chambre" (112). Charcot's dramatic demonstrations of hysteria at his infamous *Leçons du mardi*, where he would induce *grandes attaques* in his subjects were attended not merely by medical colleagues but by famous amateurs such as Maupassant, Émile Zola, Edmond de Goncourt and Sarah Bernhardt, to name but a few.

Medical practitioners were highly aware of the performative nature of the malady which they staged.<sup>21</sup> A nineteenth-century specialist of the disease and colleague of Charcot, Paul Richer, described the *grande attaque hystérique* in the following terms: "[la malade] assiste à des scènes où elle joue souvent le principal rôle; l'expression de sa physionomie et ses attitudes reproduisent les sentiments qui l'animent."<sup>22</sup> This phase of the hysterical attack is described as "une succession non interrompue d'attitudes variées, véritables poses plastiques qu'elle garde immobile plusieurs minutes, tantôt accompagnées de gestes violents et de paroles appropriées" (104). Later, Richer makes the theatrical comparison still more explicit, explaining that "Tous ces tableaux se succèdent comme dans une pantomime d'une rare expression" and describing the "poses théâtrales" of his patients (115). Richer here describes a very specific hysterical phenomenon, the *attitudes*

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<sup>21</sup> Florence Vinas has highlighted the discursive links made by medical texts between hysteria and the actress (Vinas, 101-14).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Richer, *Études cliniques sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie*. Paris: Delahaye et Lecronnier, 1881, 94.

*passionnelles*, the phase of the *grande attaque* in which, according to Charcot, the patient acted out a “drame”, in which the “mime expressive et animée à laquelle elle se livre” relieved her of psychic material.<sup>23</sup>

The *attitudes passionnelles* feature heavily in *La Flamme*, a novel of 1909 by Paul Margueritte, in which the narrator and protagonist, Henri Clerbault, a playwright, is married to a woman afflicted by hysteria. Early in the text, she undergoes a crisis in which she enacts various scenarios of persecution. As the doctor present explains, “son délire la fait le jouet d’une folie partielle dont elle est l’actrice involontaire et tragique.”<sup>24</sup> A few pages later, as she passes from one delusion to another, the narrator remarks: “La scène change, vivant cauchemar, au gré d’un metteur en scène invisible” (51). Once again, this time in the context of a novel, we find the hysteric inserted into a discourse of the theatre, of performance. What is interesting about the novel, however, is not simply the performativity of hysteria, but the inverse which we find therein, the pathologisation of performance. During his wife’s illness, the protagonist takes an actress as a lover, who shows symptoms of hysteria, being “instable, comme ses pareilles” (189), prompting Clerbault to remark that “certainement, chez les actrices de valeur, l’incarnation dramatique confine à l’hystérie: n’en reproduit-elle pas la puissance d’autosuggestion, la sincérité acquise, le dédoublement perspicace, et ce merveilleux don d’attitudes passionnelles” (190-1). Here,

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Martin Charcot, *Œuvres complètes*. 7 vols., Paris: Bureau du progrès médical, 1886 – 1893, I: 438.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Margueritte, *La Flamme*. Paris: Flammarion, 1919, 48.

juxtaposed with the image of the hysteric as an actress, we find the image of the actress as hysteric.

Depictions of the actress as hysterical were something of a commonplace in the late nineteenth-century novel. Linda Monti, the actress at the centre of Jean Lorrain's *Le Tréteau* is described as "une nerveuse,"<sup>25</sup> for example, whilst Arsène Houssaye refers the preface to *La Comédienne* to "la nervosité de toutes ces créatures."<sup>26</sup> Marie Colombier's novel *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* (a thinly-veiled fictional portrait of Sarah Bernhardt) gives the following description: "Avant elle on traitait la névrose à l'hôpital, mais elle vint, et jeta à la fois médecins et bromure de potassium par les fenêtres d'où, Don Juan femelle, elle raccrochait les naïfs."<sup>27</sup> The figures of the actress and the hysteric overlapped, then, to produce a new stereotype as the actress was inserted into a narrative of hysteria. A discourse of hysteria grew up around the figure of the actress, which provided a framework within which the threat which she seemed to pose could be identified and mastered. As spectators to the actress's performance of hysterical female sexuality, the members of her masculine audience were able to differentiate themselves from her, to situate themselves in opposition to her dangerous femininity and so secure their own masculine identity by "quarantining" the actress on the

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<sup>25</sup> Lorrain, Jean, *Le Tréteau, roman de mœurs théâtrales et littéraires*, Paris: Bosc, 1906, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Arsène Houssaye, *La Comédienne*. Paris: Dentu, 1884, ii.

<sup>27</sup> Marie Colombier, *Les Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*. Paris, 1883, 192.

stage just as the hysteric was contained in the Salpêtrière. Identifying the actress as hysterical, society situated her within a distinct narrative which explained and classified her.

Here I would like to turn to the work of Lynn Hunt on the French Revolution in order to begin to unpack the deeper significance of hysteria as a foundational narrative of the Third Republic. Hunt argues that all societies are structured around a cultural framework at the heart of which is a symbolic centre. If this centre is removed, was the case in the French Revolution, when the king was desacralised and executed, a vacuum results.<sup>28</sup> The king as the symbolic father was the centre of a narrative which had governed French social relations for centuries. Without this paternal figure, Hunt argues, the basis for all the distinctions of gender and social status which structure patriarchal society disappear and “there is no concept of legitimate lineage, of clearly defined kinship relations, of marriage as a social institution, or even of the differences between men and women,” provoking a crisis which manifested itself as the Terror.<sup>29</sup> We can extend Hunt’s argument and view the subsequent upheavals of the nineteenth century – notably the June Days of 1848 and the Commune of 1871 – as manifesting a crisis of narrative, a void at the heart of representations of political authority which call into question not only that authority but the very possibility of representation. The

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<sup>28</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, 87-8.

<sup>29</sup> Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 146.

early Third Republic was a period of particular uncertainty. Emerging from the chaos of the Franco-Prussian war, shaken to its core by the events of the Commune, and with the nascent republic yet to establish full legitimacy, French society was experiencing a critical moment in the years leading up to 1880 as it sought a framework within which to order itself and to establish a foundation for social and individual identity.

The pervasive rhetoric of hysteria in Third Republic culture in France was one of the means by which this sense of crisis worked itself out in the collective unconscious. The clinical language of nervous disorder became a privileged frame of reference for the discussion of the failure of the Second Empire and its bloody aftermath in the Commune. The latter would be described by Zola as “une crise de nervosité malade qui se déclarait, une fièvre épidémique,” terms echoed by Jules Clarétie who remarked that “L’état de Paris était encore plus pathologique que politique. La surexcitation cérébrale des derniers mois éclatait en un immense accès.”<sup>30</sup> So pervasive was the imagery of hysteria in discussions of Second Empire society and the Commune that Maupassant satirised it as a cliché, at once a catch-all diagnosis and an elastic paradigm of social upheaval: “La Commune n’est pas autre chose qu’une crise d’hystérie de Paris... Nous voilà bien renseignés,” he writes (Maupassant, 112). Hysteria, then, became a key

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<sup>30</sup> Both citations were brought to my attention by Janet Beizer’s analysis of hysteria as a fragmented allegory of the Commune in Maxime Du Camp’s *Les Convulsions de Paris*. My reading here is indebted to her. Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, 205-226.

means whereby the society of the early Third Republic represented to itself the crisis which it had recently undergone.

The narrative of hysteria is one in which order is imposed upon fluidity and chaos. The most disturbing aspect of the hysteric was her mobility, both psychic and physical. Henri Legrand Du Saulle remarked that:

Le fond même de son caractère [celui de l'hystérique] c'est la mobilité, l'impressionabilité excessive, la susceptibilité la plus accusée et la plus excessive; qu'il est dans la tendance de son esprit de s'inquiéter sans motif, de soupçonner ceux qui l'entourent, de rêver les plus chimériques éventualités; qu'elle récrime avec aigreur, se plaît au bruit, aux pleurs, aux extravagances, fait volontiers parade des passions qui la dominent, amour ou haine, jalousie ou orgueil.<sup>31</sup>

The fluidity of the hysterical psyche is paralleled on the physical level. When we read clinical accounts of Augustine, one of the most heavily-featured hysterics of Bourneville and Regnard's *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, we find in Bourneville's notes an almost obsessive interest in Augustine's bodily excretions. The timing and flow of her nosebleeds, her vomiting, her tears, and above all her periods (the French term for which, "les règles," carries weighty connotations of control) are all recorded studiously. Even her stomach is compared to "des flots qui s'agitent"<sup>32</sup>. As Janet Beizer has pointed out, it is the self-appointed role of medical discourse to regulate this psychic and physiological disorder, to staunch or at least to control this

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<sup>31</sup> Henri Legrand Du Saulle *Les hystériques*. Paris: Baillière, 1891, 495.

<sup>32</sup> Désiré Bourneville and Paul Regnard. *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*. Paris, Delahaye, 1878, 130.



constant flux.<sup>33</sup> Charcot's periodisation of hysterical attacks offered the possibility of systematisation and intellectual control over the phenomenon of hysteria, situating the doctor in a position of mastery, as a figure of authority whose knowledge allowed him to explain and to impose order upon what had previously been defined by its chaotic and inexplicable nature. As such, Charcot and his disciples could claim, like Charles Richet, that: "dans le délire effrayant des hystériques, dans leurs imprécations, leurs contorsions, leurs mouvements convulsifs, il y a un ordre secret, une série nécessaire et fatale, qu'on retrouve toujours pour peu qu'on veuille en faire une étude méthodique."<sup>34</sup> By figuring the French social body as hysterical, commentators of the Third Republic attempted to envisage the possibility of restoring order. In a society faced with a void at the heart of the symbolic, the role of the hysteric was to embody disorder, providing a vehicle for representation which gave form and shape to the experience of chaos.

As Georges Didi-Hubermann has shown in his study of Charcot's work on hysteria, the Salpêtrière was a kind of theatre in which the hystericised female body was exhibited in a display of mastery through masculine positivist science.<sup>35</sup> It was a site of visual display in which inner dramas were

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<sup>33</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, 48-50.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Richet. "Les Démoniaques d'aujourd'hui" in *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 37, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1880, 861.

<sup>35</sup> Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, Paris: Macula, 1982.

exteriorised, made visible and hence susceptible to representation. Charcot and his fellow researchers were visual artists as much as they were doctors, and their research produced a proliferation of images recording in minute detail patients, their symptoms and the various stages of their attacks.

According to Henri Meige, Charcot was offered by his father the choice between studying for a career in art or a career in medicine; he opted for the latter, but, in Meige's words, "[l]'artiste... chez Charcot allait de pair avec le médecin."<sup>36</sup> Both Meige and Charcot's student and biographer Georges

Guillain noted the importance which Charcot placed on visual examination:

Aussi proclamait-il [Charcot] très haut l'importance qu'il y a pour le médecin à connaître la forme corporelle et la nécessité d'étudier le *nu* vivant, aussi bien le *nu* normal que le *nu* pathologique... Le regard pénétrant de Charcot s'arrêtait sur les moindres anomalies corporelles; il en prenait note, réfléchissait, faisait venir un autre sujet, en appelait un troisième, recommençait le lendemain, au besoin les jours suivants, et, de cet observation minutieuse – visuelle surtout – résultait souvent une découverte précieuse. (203)

It was under Charcot's auspices that the relatively new visual form of photography made its entry into the medical apparatus of the Salpêtrière, and the visual cataloguing of patients for medical – and public – consumption culminated with the publication of the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* in 1876 by Charcot's students Bourneville and Régnaud. Medical constructions of hysteria were characterised by an "extrême visibilité," to use the terms of Didi-Hubermann, who remarks: "que cette expérience sur les corps soit faite pour rendre visible d'eux, quelque chose, leur essence, cela

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in Jean-Martin Charcot and Paul Richer, *Les Démoniaques dans l'art*, Paris: Macula, 1984, 203

n'est pas[...] douteux" (Didi-Hubermann, 13). As Charcot claimed boldly in the *Leçons du mardi*: "Cette douleur [l'hystérie], je vous la ferai pour ainsi dire toucher du doigt; je vous en ferai reconnaître tous les caractères" (Charcot, I, 321).

The hysterical body was transformed into a semiotic object, a representation of a disorderly, feminised other to be read, written and interpreted by the male gaze. Few if any of the images produced by the Salpêtrière went unlabelled, or unaccompanied by an explanatory title, if not a more lengthy commentary. The *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, for example, supplements the visual representations of hysterical attacks with detailed verbal descriptions of symptoms, such as this one, which accompanies a picture of Augustine: "Tout le corps devient rigide, les bras se roidissent, exécutant ou non un mouvement de circumduction plus ou moins parfait, puis se rapprochant l'un de l'autre sur la ligne médianale, les poignets se touchant par leur face dorsale."<sup>37</sup> The hysteric was exposed to view in order to be textualised. By being put on display, her unruly hysterical body was transformed from apparent incoherence into a legible text to be understood and interpreted by physicians. This process of semioticisation became literal in cases of dermographism. Dermographism is an autoimmune disease in which the skin is raised and inflamed by rubbing, stroking or scratching.<sup>38</sup> It

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<sup>37</sup> Désiré Bourneville and Paul Regnard, *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*. Paris: Progrès Médical, 1877-1880, 3 vols, II. 144.

<sup>38</sup> Janet Beizer gives a detailed account of the exploitation of dermographism in *Ventriloquized Bodies*, 20-29.

was considered to be particularly characteristic of hysteria, and was used by doctors who would inscribe words and other markings on the skin of certain hysterics, turning them into what a character from Jules Clarétie's novel, *Amours d'un interne*, set in the Salpêtrière, calls "papier à lettres vivant."<sup>39</sup>

The fascination of doctors with the possibilities of dermatographism in cases of hysteria is merely one expression of a masculine fantasy of the hysteric as infinitely plastic. The following definition of hysteria from the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales* locates the essence of the disease not in any identifiable physiological source but in its mobility and its capacity for mimicry: "L'hystérie est un véritable protéé[...] la fugacité des symptômes fait une place à part à l'hystérie parmi les autres névroses; on remarque la mobilité des manifestations[...] névrose qui peut simuler toutes les maladies du système nerveux,"<sup>40</sup> (241-2). This is of course merely an exaggerated version of contemporary stereotypes of femininity. Nineteenth-century culture figured women in general, and not merely the hysteric, as precisely the kind of "papier à lettres vivant" of which Clarétie spoke, as a blank page awaiting inscription. The writer Joséphin Péladan's view is representative: "la dominante psychologique de la femme consiste dans un

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<sup>39</sup> Jule Clarétie, *Amours d'un interne* (Paris: Dentu, 1890), 312.

<sup>40</sup> Dechambre, Amédée and Lereboullet, Léon (eds.), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales, tome quinzième*, Paris: Asselin and Houzeau/Masson, 1889, 241-2.

indéfini musical susceptible de devenir n'importe quoi."<sup>41</sup> A less romanticised view is given by Edmond de Goncourt in the *Journal* where he remarks that "[la Femme] n'est que le gracieux perroquet des imaginations, des paroles de l'homme, et le joli petit singe de ses goûts et de ses manies."<sup>42</sup> In a similar vein, Maupassant claims that "Tous les philosophes affirment que la faculté dominante de nos compagnes c'est l'assimilation. Presque toujours la femme d'un homme éminent semble supérieure. Dans tous les cas, elle s'emprègne de lui d'une étrange façon. Elle prend ses idées, ses théories, ses opinions[...] la femme devient ce que l'homme la fait" (Maupassant, 113-4). Woman, then, figures in the nineteenth-century imagination as a kind of clay to be shaped by men, a space of potentiality empty of original content.

The actress, like the hysteric, represents the extreme version of this stereotype. Like the hysteric, the actress featured in the cultural imaginary of the nineteenth century as a figure defined by her visibility, a woman whose *raison d'être* is to exhibit herself onstage in defiance of a prevailing ideology which held that the place of a woman was in the private sphere. The primary expectation of an actress was that she display herself, as illustrated by the boast of composer Jacques Offenbach that he wrote his music so that it would not require musical talent, enabling the selection of lead actresses for the sole criterion of physical attractiveness (Berlanstein, 111). As in the case

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<sup>41</sup> Quoted by Jean Decottignies, "Hystérie et décadence" in *Littérature et pathologie*, ed. Max Milner. Saint-Denis, Presses Universitaires de Versailles, 1989, 196-7.

<sup>42</sup> Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal*. 3 vols. Paris: Laffont, 1989, III: 377.

of the hysteric, the actress existed in the nineteenth century in order to be transformed into the object of visual study, her scandalously – yet seductively – visible body a space to be inscribed with meaning. The myth of Galatea was frequently invoked with regard to the actress. In Paul Ginisty's *Francine, actrice du drame*, the director imagines himself as Pygmalion to Francine's Galatea: "il ne lui déplaisait pas, il est vrai, de se comparer à un statuaire ayant tiré une image souriante d'un bloc de glaise informe."<sup>43</sup> In the sequel to Félicien Champsaur's *Dinah Samuel*, the male hero Patrice Montclar, now a playwright, is looking for a "cire malléable entre [s]es mains," having grown tired of "des poupées rebelles à l'idée juste,"<sup>44</sup> and invokes the figure of "l'auteur-guignol, agitant avec art non des personnages réels, mais de prestigieuses marionnettes" (25). The artificial women of *L'Ève future* and *Le Château des Carpathes* represent the apogee of this fantasy of the actress as a creation of masculine genius, a fantasy that, as Asti Hustvedt has demonstrated, mimics the techniques employed by Charcot in the *Salpêtrière*.<sup>45</sup>

The visualisation and aestheticisation of the actress and the hysteric are the founding gestures of a discourse of mastery which reinscribes the

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<sup>43</sup> Paul Ginisty, *Francine, actrice du drame, roman de la vie théâtrale*. Paris: Fasquelle, 1909, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Félicien Champsaur, *Régina Sandri*. Paris: Fasquelle, 1905, 27.

<sup>45</sup> Asti Hustvedt, "Science Fictions: The Future Eves of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Jean-Martin Charcot," in Asti Hustvedt, ed., *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy and Perversion from fin-de-siècle France*, New York: Zone, 1998, 498-518.

gender distinctions undermined by the collapse of the founding narrative of French society. The actress and the hysteric are the central figures in a narrative which, even as it depicts them as subversive forces, blurring the boundaries of gender, situates them within stereotypes of the feminine. We can detect a double movement in contemporary theories of hysteria which reintroduce sexual difference even as they vehemently denounce the anatomical theories which had dominated medical thinking about the disease throughout history. Despite his explicit distancing of hysteria from female anatomy, Charcot reintroduces difference even as he denies it: “dans la comparaison que nous ferons, chemin faisant, des symptômes de la grande hystérie chez la femme et chez l’homme, partout nous aurons à relever les analogies les plus frappantes, et ça et là seulement quelques différences qui, vous le verrez, sont d’ordre tout à fait secondaire” (Charcot, 1886-1893, III: 253). These “différences[...] d’ordre tout à fait secondaire” seem to be founded upon stereotypes of female character: “il ne faut pas s’attendre à rencontrer chez l’homme, ce *brio* morbide, fréquent en réalité chez la femme[...] Les hommes hystériques de la classe ouvrière, qui[...] encombrant aujourd’hui les services hospitaliers de Paris, sont à peu près toujours des gens sombres, déprimés, découragés.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, despite his extensive work on male hysteria and repeated denial of the widespread view that hysteria was a female disease, Charcot nonetheless implies elsewhere in his

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<sup>46</sup> Jean-Martin Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière*. 2 vols., Paris: Delahaye et Lecrosnier, 1887, II, 50.

work that hysteria is more “natural” to women: in the case of a young boy, he remarks that “chez les jeunes garçons, l’hystérie en général ne tient pas. On pourrait dire que la maladie est transportée sur un terrain qui ne lui convient pas” (I: 203). In denying difference based on anatomy, yet affirming it on the abstract level of nature, Charcot echoes his predecessor Charles Briquet who, whilst countering the notion that hysteria is located in the womb, nevertheless implies that it is inherent in woman’s nature: “la femme est faite pour sentir, et sentir, c’est presque de l’hystérie.”<sup>47</sup> We find, then, in the discourse of hysteria, a reintroduction of biological determinism which is founded on what Janet Beizer sees as a metaphorization of the uterus, a displacement of difference (Beizer, 6).

The hysteric appears in the descriptions of specialists simply as a woman more feminine than other women, whose symptoms were frequently nothing more than stereotypes of female behaviour. The physician Charles Richet suggested that mild hysteria

n’est pas une maladie véritable. C’est une des variétés du caractère de la femme. On peut même dire que les hystériques sont plus femmes que les autres femmes: elles ont les sentiments passagers et vifs, des imaginations mobiles et brillantes, et parmi tout cela l’impuissance de dominer par la raison et le jugement ces sentiments et ces imaginations.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Briquet, *Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie*. Paris: Balliere, 1859, 51.

<sup>48</sup> Charles Richet, “Les Démoniaques d’aujourd’hui.” *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 37 (January 15<sup>th</sup> 1880), 346.



Whilst contemporary medical theory on hysteria was moving away from the traditional association of the disease with the wandering womb, representations of the hysterical woman were, in spite of the self-proclaimed objectivity of the scientific observers, highly sexualised.<sup>49</sup> In one account of an attack suffered by Augustine, and recorded in the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, the patient is described as fantasising an encounter with a lover. The “scientific” gaze of the doctor noting down every detail melds with that of the voyeur: “(Nouveaux baisers... Elle sourit, exécute des mouvements du ventre, des jambes). ‘Tu recommences... Ça n’y est pas (*bis*)...’ (Elle se plaint, puis rit). ‘Tu t’en vas!’ La physionomie exprime le regret; X... pleure. – T.V. 38°. Sécrétion vaginale abondante” (Bourneville/Régnard, 1878, 140). The description of the attack constructs a narrative of desire, moving seamlessly from observation to interpretation. Later on in the attack, the construction of a narrative becomes still more explicit, as Bourneville speculates: “On dirait que son amant est placé au-dessus d’elle, descend à côté d’elle, remonte, etc” (164). In spite of the apparent separation of hysteria from its traditional association with the female reproductive organs, then, the presupposition of a link between the two continued to exercise a considerable influence on medical thought, which constructed the hysteric as the embodiment of a masculine image of pathological female sexuality.

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<sup>49</sup> In one of the *Leçons du mardi*, for example, Charcot remarks that “en soi, le mot hystérie ne signifie rien, et peu à peu vous vous habituerez à parler d’hystérie chez l’homme sans le moins du monde penser à l’utérus.” Jean-Martin Charcot *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière*. Paris: Lecrosnier et Babé, 1888-1889: 2 vols) II, 37.

Similarly, Arsène Houssaye, in his novelised version of the life of Rachel, quotes Alexandre Dumas *fil's* comment that “La *comédienne*, c’est la *femme*. Où il n’y a pas une *femme*, il n’y aura jamais une *comédienne*.” (Houssaye, vi). As Lenard Berlanstein remarks, the fascination of the actress in late nineteenth-century French culture lay in her role as the other of masculine bourgeois culture, the corporeal representation of a subversive, untamed female sexuality:

The cultural expectations surrounding the stage included a set of identities that situated theater women as the “Other” in relation to bourgeois womanhood. The identities gave actresses a collective history[...]which marked them as sexually arousing and perverse. Even as the critics evaluated the artistic performances of the actresses, they drew attention to them as sexualised beings. (Berlanstein, 113)

Zola’s *Nana* is perhaps the classic example of this stereotype but she is by no means the only one. Indeed, the voracious sexual appetites of the actress are directly linked in many novels to her dramatic ability. Linda Monti, the central character of Lorrain’s *Le Tréteau* is “une brute dont le désir sexuel faisait le génie,” who, “quand [elle] n’a pas le béguin, [...] ne rend rien dans ses rôles” (Lorrain, 11-12). Similarly, in the early part of Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustine*, the protagonist is troubled by the notion that she cannot play the role of Phèdre unless she is passionately in love: “s’il ne lui était pas accordé par le hasard d’avoir son être remué par une passion, un caprice fougueux, une passade tempestueuse, par une brusque révolution dans le train-train de son existence amoureuse, elle ne trouverait pas la tendresse, la flamme, enfin les

moyens dramatiques qu'exigeait le rôle de feu de Racine."<sup>50</sup> The actress, then, was a necessarily sexualised figure, whose subversive desires, like those of the hysteric, were her defining characteristic: like the hysteric she embodied a sexual pathology connoted as a side-effect of her femininity.

Hystericised representations of the actress tended then to reinsert her into the very gender stereotypes which she supposedly undermined. They served not to isolate her from society but to reintegrate her into its structures. A shift had clearly taken place since the days when actresses such as Adrienne Lecouvreur had to be buried at night and without Christian ritual. Far from being social pariahs, actresses were a visible and integral part of popular culture, avidly consumed by all levels of society as the epitome of the feminine. I use the term "consumed" advisedly, for, in my view, this shift is intimately linked to the rise of a consumer economy in late nineteenth-century French society. The development of new technologies of mass consumption and transportation, such as the train and the lithograph, and an explosion of the popular press in the late nineteenth-century, facilitated the diffusion of images across regional and national boundaries, making the actress a familiar figure even to those who had never been to Paris or set foot in a theatre. So widespread and voracious was the consumption of reports and images of the actress that it prompted one commentator to complain in 1882 that:

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<sup>50</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Faustin*. Arles: Actes du Sud, 2005, 101.

Depuis quelques années, on se préoccupe beaucoup trop, à mon sens, de la vie privée des artistes. Les échos de coulisses que l'on publie dans les journaux content dans le menu les faits et les gestes des comédiennes et des cantatrices en renom. On y cite les noms de leurs amants; on y énumère leurs grossesses; on y décrit leur mobilier; on y donne le nom de leur toutou préféré. Il y a là une tendance fâcheuse et une curiosité malsaine.<sup>51</sup>

Actresses were featured in journal articles, interviews, advertisements, posters and on a whole range of products from cigars to cosmetics. They were equally a popular focus of fiction: 42 novels and plays featuring actresses appeared between 1880 and 1914, according to Lenard Berlanstein's estimate (Berlanstein, 175). In real life, spectators – including royalty and other dignitaries – clamoured at dressing room doors for an audience, as we see in Émile Zola's *Nana*, where the title character receives a visit from the Prince d'Écosse. As Sarah Bernhardt proudly noted: "Toutes les royautés, les célébrités qui furent les hôtes de la France en 1878 pendant l'Exposition me rendirent visite. Ce défilé m'amusa beaucoup. La Comédie était la première étape théâtrale de tous ces illustres visiteurs."<sup>52</sup> The late nineteenth century and the rise of the capitalist economy, then, saw the birth of a cult of celebrity, in which actresses became the focus of public fascination and the object of a culture of consumption.

The actress had a clear and rising market value as the central figure of a booming theatre industry. The late nineteenth century in France saw a massive increase in the number of theatres and in attendance. Theatre

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<sup>51</sup> *Les Actrices de Paris*. Paris: H. Launette et G. Decaux, 1882, 48.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma double vie*. 2 vols.. Paris, Fasquelle, 1923, II: 83.

revenues doubled between 1850 and 1864, rising from 8 to 16 million francs (Berlanstein, 18). In 1864, all previous restrictions on commercial theatres were lifted, allowing any citizen to found a theatre and to mount any kind of production there. As the dancer Cléo de Mérode put it: “C’était une frénésie de théâtre, une folie de music-hall et de chansons, les scènes du boulevard: Gymnase, Porte-Saint Martin, attiraient un public passionné, et les générales était très courues et fort élégantes.”<sup>53</sup> Pierre Giffard, writing in 1888, remarked that “la population de Paris vit au théâtre, du théâtre et par le théâtre,” estimating – somewhat extravagantly – that 500, 000 Parisians attended the theatre every week, and between 1 million and 1.2 million attended every month.<sup>54</sup> At the forefront of this thriving industry was the actress whose star appeal could turn a play into an overnight success. The rise in the economic prestige of the actress can be seen from the huge increases in salary over the course of the century. The most important breakthrough was made by Rachel, whose success enabled her to demand and receive a rise in payment from 4, 000 francs a year in 1838 to 60, 000 francs a year in 1841. Whereas the most popular players such as Virginie Déjazet or Marie Dorval had received salaries of 20, 000 to 25, 000 francs a year in the 1830s, by the 1870s, Sarah Bernhardt, as a rising but not yet established star at the Comédie Française, could expect to receive around 30, 000 francs. In 1890,

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<sup>53</sup> Cléo de Mérode, *Le Ballet de ma vie*. Paris: Pierre Horay, 1955, 169.

<sup>54</sup> Pierre Giffard, *Nos Mœurs: la vie au théâtre*. Paris: Librairie Illustrée, 1888, 2.

Bernhardt could command 3, 000 francs per performance as well as a third of the box-office revenues on her American tour of the 1890s (Berlanstein, 30-31). Clearly, the actress had become a valuable commodity.

In the new consumer age, then, the hystericisation of the actress does not set her outside of society. Rather, it makes her doubly consumable. Here, I understand consumption in Maggie Kilgour's terms as a process of incorporation which at once depends upon and maintains a binary pair.<sup>55</sup> For Kilgour the drive towards scientific knowledge represents just such an act of consumption: "For *homo sapiens*, to think is to taste, as in the act of knowledge we imagine that we draw the outer world into our minds and possess it. All of our senses make contact with the world outside of our own bodies and so may be imagined as introducing it into ourselves" (9). Through the discourse of hysteria, nineteenth-century French society consumed the actress, framing her as other in order to draw her into the prevailing gender ideology. Hystericisation and commodification went hand in hand to make the actress digestible, easy to recognise and to identify. She is not so much the other as the consumable sign of that other.

Here we may recall Jean Baudrillard's description of a consumer society as one in which "on ne consomme jamais l'objet en soi (dans sa valeur d'usage), on manipule toujours les objets (au sens le plus large) comme signes qui vous distinguent, soit en vous affiliant à votre propre

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<sup>55</sup> Kilgour, Maggie, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5

groupe pris comme référence idéale, soit en vous démarquant de votre groupe par référence à un groupe de statut supérieur”<sup>56</sup>. Consumption is a process whereby individuals differentiate and define themselves and construct an identity based upon the circulation and exchange of signs which reflect economic and social status. Viewed in this way, I suggest, consumption becomes a performative act and consumer society a performative one. The consumer society of late nineteenth-century France was one in which social identity rested upon repeatedly reenacted gestures of consumption – on consumption as performance. The actress-hysteric, as the object of consumption, was the foundation of this performance. The hospital and the theatre represented controlled environments, in which a pathologised female nature was played out; within these closed and regulated spaces, the actress and the hysteric served as signs of a femininity which was always *to be recuperated* by an authoritative masculine discourse. They are archetypal sites of a society based upon consumption, offering up the female body as a consumable spectacle. In the clinic and on stage – and, as I have shown, the distinction between the two spaces was not always clear – the female body was hidden in plain sight, elided behind a representation of itself. It was disoriginated, its conventional performative representation presented as unmediated truth in a gesture of simultaneous construction and denial of the female body which is characteristic of consumer society.

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<sup>56</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *La Société de consommation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 79.

The performativity inherent in consumption, however, is precisely what precludes the possibility of full closure: in the performances of the actress and the hysteric, there remains always the latent threat of subversion. The performative nature of consumer capitalist society implies a contradiction between a desire to consume and to master the unruly feminine embodied by the actress and the need for her performance to be constantly reiterated. There is a dynamic tension in the narration of hysteria and the actress: the powerful and subversive female sexuality of the actress-hysteric remains always *to be controlled*, yet cannot be fully integrated. For all the curative rhetoric of medical discourse, actual recovery remained elusive in cases of hysteria. Both Martha Evans and Charles Bernheimer note the extent to which patients at the Salpêtrière, once interned there, tended to remain there, whilst Georges Guillain's biography of Charcot indicates that during his internship at the Salpêtrière, many of Charcot's former patients remained hospitalised even after the latter's death.<sup>57</sup> Even those who were "cured" might remain in the hospital hierarchy, like Augustine, who, confined to the "Incurables" ward aged 15 (Didi-Hubermann, 97), went on to work as a nurse at the Salpêtrière; it is not known whether she was ever released (Evans, 46).

In a similar vein, in his history of the French theatre industry, F.W.J. Hemmings notes the disappointment which the marriage of a famous actress

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<sup>57</sup> Evans, 41; Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill-Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, 255; Georges Guillain, *J.-M. Charcot, sa vie, son œuvre*. Paris, Masson, 1955, 174n.



provoked: far from rejoicing at the recuperation of a sign of feminine licentiousness, commentators viewed this as a betrayal.<sup>58</sup> Charles Constant remarked disapprovingly in his *Codes des théâtres* that: “[l]’on se marie, ce nous semble, beaucoup trop au théâtre, et les actrices les plus en renom contractent trop facilement de nos jours des mariages qui les éloignent peu à peu de la scène. C’est presque un crime que d’agir de la sorte, c’est dans tous les cas un crimes envers l’art dramatique.”<sup>59</sup> Constant cites the opinion of a “soubrette du bon vieux temps,” Mlle Belcourt, that “le mariage[...] va mal à toute femme qui doit plaire au public; je crois le public un sultan jaloux qui n’entend pas que celle qu’il admire soit à quelqu’un en particulier; et si le public ne pense pas ainsi, je sens, moi, qu’il doit le penser, et qu’une actrice doit rester toujours fille, comme les vestales” (93). For an actress to remain a true actress, she must remain in circulation, a public woman even in her most private affairs, as indicates Belcourt’s use of the word *fille*, meaning not only an unmarried woman but also a prostitute. An actress who married failed to fulfil her role as the repository for male fantasies, as a sexual and economic status symbol whose appeal lay in her potential openness, in the lack of resolution which characterises her narrative.

This dependence on the constant reiteration of a performance allows us to envisage the possibility of subversion. If at times the actress and hysteric

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<sup>58</sup> F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 206.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Constant, *Code des théâtres à l’usage des directeurs, des artistes, des auteurs et des gens du monde*. Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel, 1876, 92.

appear complicit in the performance of female sexuality demanded by masculine discourse, this complicity should not always be seen as simple fulfilment of the role demanded of them. Here we may recall Judith Butler's remarks on the performativity of gender. Butler argues that, far from being expressions of a prior subjectivity, categories of gender and sexuality are compulsory performances which depend for their effect on constant reiteration.<sup>60</sup> The very repetition on which gender norms depend, however, is the source of their potential subversion:

If repetition is the way in which power works to construct the illusion of a seamless heterosexual identity, if heterosexuality is compelled to *repeat itself* in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity, then this is an identity permanently at risk, for what if it fails to repeat, or if the very exercise of repetition is redeployed for a very different performative purpose. If there is, as it were, always a compulsion to repeat, repetition never fully accomplishes identity. That there is a need for repetition at all is a sign that identity is not self-identical. It requires to be instituted again and again, which is to say that it runs the risk of becoming *de*-instituted at every interval.  
(24)

The performativity of the gender roles enacted by the actress and the hysteric suggests the potential for the disruption of these same gender roles through a performance which through its excess highlights its own artificiality. The actress as the object of consumption has the particularity that she literalises and foregrounds the performativity which is at the heart of capitalist society. Her performance at once founds that of her audience and at the same time throws it into relief as being a performance. Her hysteria then acts as a mediating screen: it is a pathologised version of the actress's performance

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<sup>60</sup> Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991, 24.

which overwrites and re-performs it as “real.” The pathologisation of the actress’s performativity, the projection of a sickness which is in itself a performance, paradoxically re-naturalises it as the sign of alterity, of a sickness which is situated as feminine, other.

Within the performative context of consumer society, the actress and the hysteric fascinate by virtue of the fact that, whether in the theatre or the medical amphitheatre they are at once always performing and always threatening to exceed that performance. The roots of their ambivalent appeal lie in the vulnerability implied by the performativity which founds sexual difference in capitalist culture. The very performances which are so necessary are also a potential source of subversion, as Judith Butler points out: “If every performance repeats itself to institute the effect of identity, then every repetition requires an interval between the acts, as it were, in which risk and excess threaten to disrupt the identity being created” (Butler, 28). The actress and the hysteric are far from being passive objects of a masculine gaze: rather, as Didi-Hubermann notes of the performers of the Salpêtrière, they are “toutes consentantes, surenchérissant même en théâtralités des corps” (Didi-Hubermann, 2).

It is in “surenchérissant” in this way that the hysteric creates the potential for subversive performances, for the kind of risk and excess described by Butler. Let us consider an anecdote from Alphonse Daudet concerning the refusal of one hysteric to appear at a *leçon du mardi*:

Balman n'a pas voulu venir [au cours de Charcot], furieuse, de ce qu'on a appelé Daret avant elle... Entre ces deux cataleptiques, premiers sujets à la Salpêtrière, subsiste une jalousie d'étoiles, de vedettes; et parfois des disputes, des engueulades de lavoir, relevées de mots techniques, mettent tout le dortoir en folie. A défaut de Balman, on amène Fifine[...] Elle entre en rechignant: elle est du parti de Balman et se refuse de travailler. En vain, l'interne essaie de l'endormir, elle pleure et résiste. "Ne la contrariez pas", dit Charcot, qui retourne à Daret, reposée, très fière de reprendre la séance.<sup>61</sup>

Balman's refusal to appear – whose similarity to a diva's refusal to go onstage when slighted is underscored by Daudet's reference to "une jalousie d'étoiles, de vedettes" – marks at once a hysterical performance and a refusal to perform. On the one hand, she acts out a stereotypical version of the hysterical character, self-dramatising and capricious, but, on the other, she does so whilst refusing to be inserted into the medical discourse surrounding the disease. Similarly, in *Nana*, following her disastrous performance in the role of an "honnête femme" onstage, Nana goes on to perform the role with considerable success *offstage*: "Et le prodigue fut que cette grosse fille, si gauche à la scène, si drôle dès qu'elle voulait faire la femme honnête, jouait à la ville des rôles de charmeuse sans un effort[...] mettant le pied sur Paris, en maîtresse toute-puissante. Elle donnait le ton, de grandes dames l'imitaient" (Zola, *RM*, II:1346). What changes is less the performance than the context. Like Balman, Nana offers a performance of femininity which refuses the confines of a controlled environment. In the theatre, her performance is controlled and dictated by men, and doomed to failure should she step

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *La Leçon de Charcot: voyage dans une toile*, catalogue of an exhibition organised to mark the centenary of Brouillet's painting *La Leçon de Charcot* by the Musée de l'Assistance Publique de Paris, 17<sup>th</sup> September – 31<sup>st</sup> December 1986. Paris: Le Musée, 1986, 82

outside of the role demanded of her. However, Nana's performance of femininity exceeds the bounds of its original context: no longer bound by the expectations of theatrical convention, she successfully performs the role of a *grande dame*, and in doing so highlights the fundamental performativity of social identity.

The apparently clear lines of power relations assumed by the discourse of hysteria are, then, blurred by the performativity upon which it depends. The situation of the actress within the precincts of science and positivism does not guarantee her compliant repetition of the tropes of pathology but rather opens up the possibility that these tropes may be turned back against themselves. The very repetition upon which the ideology of hysteria depends becomes a site of subversion.

In the next chapter, I examine that most archetypal text of the hysterical actress, Zola's *Nana*, in relation to another space of pathological consumption, the Paris morgue. Reading the discourses of pathology, economics and naturalism alongside one another, I explore the spaces of the morgue and of the theatre as sites in which a fantasy of the female body as a site of masculine creativity and mastery is played out. The fantasy embodied by the actress, however, is haunted in *Nana* by the return of a repressed female sexuality which drives the novel and which can be neither eliminated nor controlled, exceeding the boundaries of the theatre and of naturalist representation.

## Chapter 2:

### Through A Glass Darkly: Creativity, Naturalism and the Actress in *Nana*

In 1864 the Paris morgue was moved to new accommodation on the quai de l'Archevêché, behind Notre-Dame Cathedral, where it received up to 40, 000 visitors a day.<sup>62</sup> Amongst other additions, the new building featured at its centre a *salle du public* where members of the public could file through and gaze at the twelve corpses laid out on display in the exhibit room. Ostensibly, this allowed unidentified corpses to be recognised and claimed by members of the public. At the same time, however, it transformed the morgue to what Alan Mitchell has called a "shrine of positivism,"<sup>63</sup> a spectacle of the human body anatomised, mastered and put on display by modern science in much the same manner as were the hysterics of the Salpêtrière. The theatrical aspect of this presentation led Clovis Pierre, morgue registrar from 1878 to 1892, to compare it to an *entresort*, a fairground attraction in which one paid to walk through and look at a display.<sup>64</sup> Analogies between the morgue and the theatre were commonplace. In an article published in the *Revue des deux*

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<sup>62</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, 48. Schwartz's insightful and informative study elaborates the idea of the morgue as popular theatre, and as a space of the spectacular real where life, and death, were staged as a kind of show, which serves as a starting point for this chapter.

<sup>63</sup> Alan Mitchell, "The Paris Morgue as a Social Institution in the Nineteenth Century." *Francia* (1976), 596.

<sup>64</sup> Clovis Pierre, *Les Galetés de la Morgue*. Paris, Flammarion, 1895. Quoted in Schwartz, 57.

*mondes* of January 1891, Ernest Cherbuliez described the spectacle of the morgue in the following terms:

La Morgue est l'un des établissements [sic] de Paris qui ont le privilège d'exciter le plus vivement la curiosité du public. A l'attraction qu'exerce le spectacle de la mort se mêle l'intérêt du drame. Qu'il s'agisse d'un suicidé, d'un individu mort subitement dans la rue ou d'un assassiné, tous ces cadavres exposés ont une histoire presque toujours dramatique, souvent bruyante et dont le dernier mot a bien des chances de rester mystérieux. La foule, qui s'écrase certains jours devant les vitrines de la salle d'exposition, n'y vient chercher que des émotions violentes; ce n'est pour elle qu'un spectacle à sensation, permanent et gratuit, dont l'affiche change tous les jours.<sup>65</sup>

This show, in addition to being free, had another particular attraction: like Charcot's patients at the Salpêtrière, the bodies on display at the Paris morgue offered a show which was all the more titillating because it was *real*. As an article in *Le Paris* proclaimed in 1892: "Ce ne sont pas des imitations: ce n'est pas du trompe l'œil."<sup>66</sup> Yet this thrilling, titillating encounter with death was by no means as direct as it might superficially appear. As in the old morgue, the public was separated from the bodies by a glass screen which protected them from the smell of the corpses. Moreover, in the 1864 building, any mingling of the dead and the living was avoided by the addition of a back door reserved for the reception of corpses. The authentic slice of real life (and death) which the morgue offered was in fact, the human body, presented not unmediated, but in the form of a spectacle which Parisians "venaient voir,

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<sup>65</sup> Ernest Cherbuliez, "La Morgue de Paris," in *Revue des deux mondes*, 103 (1891), 344.

<sup>66</sup> *Le Paris*, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1892. This citation was brought to my attention by Schwartz, 82.

seulement pour voir, tout comme ils lisaient un feuilleton ou allaient à l'Ambigu.”<sup>67</sup>

This quote, linking the morgue to both the theatre and the novel, brings us to the crux of the matter. If I have lingered over the phenomenon of public visits to the morgue, it is because it seems to me to offer a useful model of naturalist representation, and its relationship to reality on the one hand, and to spectacle on the other. In many of his theoretical writings on naturalism, Emile Zola clearly aligns the novelist with the discourse of science, claiming that: “la méthode expérimentale, aussi bien dans les lettres que dans les sciences, est en train de déterminer les phénomènes naturels, individuels et sociaux, dont la métaphysique n’avait donné jusqu’ici que des explications irrationnelles et surnaturelles.”<sup>68</sup> In particular, he associates the novelist with the objective, analytical gaze of the pathologist, claiming that the author’s task was to “passer le tablier blanc de l’anatomiste et disséque[r] fibre à fibre la bête humaine étendue toute nue sur la dalle de l’amphithéâtre.”<sup>69</sup>

Elsewhere, however, Zola offers a more cautious assessment of the naturalist writer’s vision. In a letter to Antony Valabrègue, he elaborates the notion of a realist screen: “L’Ecran réaliste est un simple verre à vitre très

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<sup>67</sup> Georges Montorgueil, “La Morgue Fermée.” *L’éclair*, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1892. This citation was brought to my attention by Schwartz, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971, 63-4.

<sup>69</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Figaro*, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1866, quoted by Aimé Guedj in his introduction to *Le Roman expérimental*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971, 31.



mince, très clair et qui a la prétention d'être si parfaitement transparent que les images le traversent et se reproduisent ensuite dans toute leur réalité. Ainsi, point de changement dans les lignes ni dans les couleurs : une reproduction exacte, franche et naïve".<sup>70</sup> This *verre à vitre* serves a parallel function to that of the glass pane through which viewers gazed at bodies in the morgue. It is at once a window granting visual access to the subject matter and a barrier to it. In the light of such a description, the *écran réaliste* comes to resemble the glass screen of the morgue: like the spectator of the the morgue, the reader is invited to view the human body – in particular the female body - put on display in a spectacle of reality, mediated through a screen.<sup>71</sup>

Zola's remarks to Valabrègue are reflected in his fiction, in which the vantage point of the observer looking through a glass window is frequently a privileged perspective: the scenes in which Hélène and Jeanne gaze out over Paris in *Une Page d'amour* spring to mind, as does the description in *Nana* of Nana and Georges gazing out of her window over the countryside, or Muffat's gazing through Fauchéry's window in order to see Sabine.<sup>72</sup> Yet even as Zola valorises the naturalist mode of representation, claiming that "les images qu'il

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<sup>70</sup> Émile Zola, *Correspondance*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Le Blond, Maurice. Paris: François Bernouard, 1928, 50 vols., XLVIII: 255.

<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Schwartz notes that the bodies of women tended to attract more press and public attention than those of men (Schwartz, 69). At the same time, Mitchell estimates that four to five times as many male corpses as female arrived at the morgue (Mitchell, 586).

<sup>72</sup> See Philip Walker, "The Mirror, The Window and The Eye in Zola's Fiction." *Yale French Studies*, 42 (1969), 52-67 for an in-depth study of such images.

donne sont les plus réelles; il arrive à un haut degré de reproduction exacte”

(255), he denies the pretension of the *écran réaliste* to complete

transparency:

L'Écran réaliste nie sa propre existence. Vraiment, c'est là un trop grand orgueil. Quoi qu'il dise, il existe, et, dès lors, il ne peut se vanter de nous rendre la création dans la splendide beauté de la vérité. Si clair, si mince, si verre à vitre qu'il soit, il n'en a pas moins une couleur propre, une épaisseur quelconque ; il teint les objets, il les réfracte tout comme un autre[...] Il est certes difficile de caractériser un Ecran qui a pour qualité principale celle de n'être presque pas; je crois, cependant, le bien juger, en disant qu'une fine poussière grise trouble sa limpidité. (255)

Zola here attributes two qualities in particular to the realist screen: in the first place, the “fine poussière grise” to which he refers acts as a kind of screen, a veil, so that “[t]out objet, en passant par ce milieu, y perd de son éclat, ou, plutôt, s'y noircit légèrement” (255). Moreover, as his allusion to refraction suggests, the *écran réaliste*, like any pane of glass, however translucent, naturally bends and focuses the light emitted by any object viewed through it: that is to say, it functions as a transformative lens, and cannot therefore offer unmediated visual access to that object:

les lignes y deviennent plus plantureuses, s'exagèrent, pour ainsi dire, dans le sens de leur largeur. La vie s'y étale grassement, une vie matérielle et un peu pesante. Somme toute, l'Écran réaliste, le dernier qui se soit produit dans l'art contemporain, est une vitre unie, très transparente sans être très limpide, donnant des images aussi fidèles qu'un Écran peut en donner. (255)

The vision of the naturalist writer, then, like that of all human beings, functions through the projection of an image. For Zola, the realist screen, whilst offering the most truthful rendering possible of its object, inevitably transforms that which it represents: “il doit avoir en lui des propriétés particulières qui

déforment les images, et qui, par conséquent, font de ces images des œuvres d'art" (255). The object viewed through the *écran réaliste* then, can never appear in its unmediated form, but only as an artistic representation, an image. Indeed, Zola's argument can be pushed even further: a pane of glass may act not merely as a lens but as a mirror in which the viewer may see his or her reflection. In such a case, in addition to the "real" image of the object produced by the lens, a virtual image is formed, positioned behind the mirror. Although the light rays appear to be being emitted from the image behind the mirror, they exist in fact only in front of it. We can, then, go beyond Zola's notion of the "verre à vitre" as a mediating lens and find that not only is the apparently unobstructed view of the object an image, but that two images, two signs, mediated and altered by this *écran réaliste* are produced: the image not only of the object of the gaze, but also of its subject.

The actress represents a particularly interesting starting point for an investigation of the role of the *écran réaliste* and its ambivalent relationship to the sexed female body, given the comparisons frequently drawn between the morgue and the theatre by contemporaries. Like the morgue, or the naturalist novel, the theatre puts a female body, that of the actress, on public display. The famous scene of Nana's first appearance on stage finds a curious analogue in another of Zola's novels. *Thérèse Raquin* contains a detailed description of the reaction of its protagonist Laurent as he visits the morgue in the hope of finding Camille, the rival whom he murdered, and is reminded of being in a theatre:

La morgue est un spectacle à la portée de toutes les bourses, que se payent gratuitement les passants pauvres ou riches. La porte est ouverte, entre qui veut. Il y a des amateurs qui font un détour pour ne pas manquer une de ces représentations de la mort. Lorsque les dalles sont nues, les gens sortent désappointés, volés, murmurant entre leurs dents. Lorsque les dalles sont bien garnies, lorsqu'il y a un bel étalage de chair humaine, les visiteurs se pressent, se donnent des émotions à bon marché, s'épouvantent, plaisantent, applaudissent ou sifflent, comme au théâtre, et se retirent satisfaits, en déclarent que la morgue est réussie, ce jour-la.<sup>73</sup>

Laurent's reaction to this "spectacle" as he enters the morgue is initially one of disgust: "il restait frissonnant en face de ces haillons verdâtres qui semblaient se moquer avec des grimaces épouvantables" (130). Yet once he has established that Camille's body is not among those on show, he begins to take an almost sexual pleasure in the spectacle on offer: "Ce spectacle l'amusait, surtout lorsqu'il y avait des femmes étalant leur gorges nues." (131) One corpse in particular inspires "une sorte de désir peureux" (131) in him which recalls the "détraquement nerveux" (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1118) provoked by Nana's first performance. Indeed, the body in question could almost be Nana. It is the body of "une fille du peuple, large et forte, qui semblait dormir sur la pierre; son corp frais et gras blanchissait avec des douceurs de teinte d'une grande délicatesse; elle souriait à demi, la tête un peu penchée, et tendait la poitrine d'une façon provocante; on aurait dit une courtisane vautrée" (Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 131).

Not only does the "spectacle" of the morgue appear to mirror that offered by the theatre, the two are further linked by the presence of a barrier, albeit theoretical, interposed between the body of the actress and her

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<sup>73</sup> Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), 131-132.

audience in the theatre. Just as a glass screen protects the public from unmediated contact with the cadaver in the morgue, the actress is always separated by tacit theatrical convention from the viewing public by the fourth wall or *quatrième mur*. The notion of the fourth wall was elaborated by Diderot in his *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* (1758). In chapter XI, “De l’intérêt”, he writes: “Imaginez sur le bord du théâtre un grand mur qui vous sépare du parterre; jouez comme si la toile ne se levait pas.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Stendhal evokes the notion of a transparent wall between spectators and actors in *Racine et Shakespeare*, remarking that: “L’action se passe dans une salle dont un des murs a été enlevé par la baguette magique de Melpomène, et remplacé par le parterre. Les personnages ne savent pas qu’il y a un public.”<sup>75</sup> It was, however, the late nineteenth-century theatre director André Antoine who is credited with putting into practice the theory of the “quatrième mur” on the Parisian stage.<sup>76</sup> Antoine replaced the sparse décor of the classical stage with a more realistic setting in which the actors might move more naturally, in line with a more general trend towards greater realism in French theatre whose major proponents included Zola.<sup>77</sup> Like the morgue and the realist novel, then, the theatre offers spectators a spectacle of reality

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<sup>74</sup> Denis Diderot, *Le père de famille : comédie en 5 actes et en prose ; avec un Discours sur la poésie dramatique*. Amsterdam, 1758, 86.

<sup>75</sup> Stendhal, *Racine et Shakespeare*. Paris: Champion, 2006, 526.

<sup>76</sup> See Raymond F. Costello, “Pour un centenaire: André Antoine, 1858-1943”, *The French Review*, 33(ii) (1959), 147-152

<sup>77</sup> See Émile Zola, *Le naturalisme au théâtre*. Bruxelles: Editions Complexes, 2003.

which is viewed through the translucent screen of the fourth wall, a thespian *écran réaliste*.

In this chapter, I use the notion of the *écran réaliste* in order to explore the ambiguous place of the actress in the discourses of political economy, naturalism and pathology. All three, I argue, are founded upon the female body viewed through a screen which at once reveals, hides and remakes it. Nineteenth-century economic theories of production and reproduction tended to elide the maternal body and the physical labour of motherhood in favour of a conception of maternity which emphasised the symbolic role of the mother in the capitalist economy. I draw a parallel between the elision of the maternal body in nineteenth-century theories of economic (re)production and its suppression in the discourses of hysteria and naturalism. In a similar way, the “verre à vitre” of naturalism serves not merely to hide or to reveal, but functions, like the glass screen of the morgue, to create and to focus a textual image which serves to obscure the material reality of the female, maternal body, whilst appropriating it in the service of a fantasy of masculine creation. The image of Woman created by the naturalist screen allows her body to be fantasised as both fertile and horrifying, a maternal space in which male creation can be both accomplished and destroyed. As such, it conceals not the horrifying lack featured in Freudian theory, but rather the material presence of the female body and its physical maternity. The real source of terror is not Woman’s castration but her creative capacity, a female generative power which is masked behind a fantasy of lack. This fantasy is at

once fulfilled and threatened by the actress who embodies Woman on the stage and exists as a woman off it, creating a contrast between the female body and its image, and so rending the textual veil of naturalism, cracking its glass screen.

In my first chapter, I argued that in the theatre, as in the morgue or the Salpêtrière, the female body served as a springboard for the elaboration of a narrative of sexual difference which depended upon the translation of the material reality of the female body into symbol, upon a process of metaphorisation. Here I argue that a similar movement underlies the naturalist theory of representation. The “verre à vitre” of the naturalist writer is the emblem of a creative process which relies upon the transformation of the female body into text, a gesture whereby the maternal function of that body can be at once suppressed, sublimated and appropriated for the purposes of a purely masculine creation. The female body as a physical entity is effaced, obscured by a textual screen onto which its image is projected. This occlusion by the phantasm of femininity of its material reality, by the signifier of its referent enables the former to serve as a textual space in which a purely masculine creation can take place.

*Nana* is characterised by a thematic split, a dialectic of veiling and unveiling, in which the naturalist impulse to see and to render visible is balanced by a terror of authentic revelation. The primary expectation of *Nana* revolves not around her voice or her talent as an actress, but around her visibility. As Naomi Schor points out, *Nana* is constituted from the very

beginning of the text as an enigma, who must be seen, in order that she may be resolved and mastered.<sup>78</sup> The men crowding around the poster which announces her debut are preoccupied with the mystery which she represents: “Les hommes qui se plantaient devant les affiches l’épelaient à voix haute; d’autres le jetaient en passant sur un ton d’interrogation[...] Personne ne connaissait Nana. D’où Nana tombait-elle?[...] On voulait *voir* Nana” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II, 1100. My emphasis). This fierce desire to see Nana, to render her visible, is part of a power game: to see in order to textualise and so to master. Before she has even appeared onstage, her erotic power has been transformed into a textual phenomenon, just as her body will become over the course of the novel. By the last scene of Nana’s final performance, she no longer needs to speak: “Elle ne disait pas un mot, même les auteurs lui avaient coupé une réplique, parce que ça gênait; non, rien du tout, c’était plus grand, et elle vous retournait son public, rien qu’à se montrer” (II: 1463). Her body has by now been transformed into text, through what Janet Beizer calls “a semiotic sleight of hand that would have us believe that we are reading body language rather than literary language. The text, replaced or repressed by that body it describes (and indeed creates), returns in the form of body language, the body as text or signifying corpus.” (Beizer, 178). Even after her disappearance, her body generates infinite textual possibilities by its very absence: “les plus étranges histoires circulaient, chacun donnait des renseignements opposés et prodigieux[...] Une légende

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<sup>78</sup> Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987, 33.



se formait” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II, 1471). Like that of Augustine and her fellow inmates at the Salpêtrière, Nana’s fascination lies in the mystery which she represents as the embodiment of “l’inconnu du désir” (II: 1120), a kind of dark continent to be conquered by the male gaze and colonised by the text of masculine discourse.

This “dark continent” is the same as that later evoked by Charcot’s most famous student, Sigmund Freud: Woman. From her first appearance on stage, Nana *is* Woman, the embodiment of masculine fantasies of sexualised femininity. We see her for the first time as Venus, supreme symbol of female sexuality: “A ce moment, les nuées, au fond, s’écartèrent et Vénus parut” (II: 1118). Throughout her first appearance, Nana is referred to more often as “Venus” than by her name, and no distinction is made between the actress and her role: “C’était Vénus, naissant des flots” (II: 1118). Even outside of her onstage role as “Vénus, souriante et grandie dans sa souveraine nudité” (II: 1120), Nana, with her “torse de Vénus grasse” (II: 1270) which so fascinates Muffat and her other lovers, remains the very image of Woman. In death, her identity continues to be inextricably bound up with the role which she defines and which in turn defines her: “Vénus se décomposait” (II: 1485). This role is above all that of Woman, and the disturbing power of her onstage nudity lies in its revelation of femininity: “Tout d’un coup dans la bonne enfant, la femme se dressait, apportant le coup de folie de son sexe” (II: 1118).

Yet the titillating promise of Venus, revealed in all her nude glory, is rarely, if ever, more than illusory. Even as the text promises to strip away its

protagonist's veil and to lay her bare before us, it defers the moment of revelation. At the climactic moment of the opening scene, a mere sentence after being told that she is naked onstage, the reader learns that her nudity is veiled: "Une simple gaze l'enveloppait; ses épaules rondes, sa gorge d'amazone dont les points roses se tenaient levées et rigides comme des lances, ses larges hanches qui roulaient dans un balancement voluptueux, ses cuisses de blonde grasse, tout son corps se devinait, se voyait sous le tissu léger, d'une blancheur d'écume" (II: 1118). Even when she is actually naked, in front of her mirror, we are given only an obscured, sidelong view of her body, over which yet another veil is thrown: "Nana était toute velue, un duvet de rousse faisait de son corps un velours; tandis que, dans sa croupe et ses cuisses de cavale, dans les renflements charnus creusés de plis profonds, qui donnaient au sexe le voile troublant de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête" (II: 1271). The textual screen which Zola interposes here between the reader and Nana's body has been read by Janet Beizer in psychoanalytic terms as covering an absence which is both sexual – the mother's missing phallus – and textual (Beizer, 183-184). Beizer reads the novel as staging a radical loss of meaning, in which the signifier and the signified, role and reality can no longer be distinguished (180). Rather than view the realist screen as a transparent barrier separating reality and the reader, she suggests that Zola's "verre à vitre" foreshadows the Barthesian notion of textuality as a generative idea, "l'idée générative que le texte se fait, se travaille[...]; perdu dans ce

tissu – cette texture – le sujet s’y défait.”<sup>79</sup> If the textual veil can never be drawn back, it is because it would reveal only another veil. Or, to return to the idea of the image projected through the “verre à vitre”, there are only images with no original. In effect, the signifier and signified are elided, the textual body which seems to act as a screen between Nana’s actual body and the reader IS in fact her body. The screen and the image are one, hiding not an objective reality, but an absence whose revelation is constantly deferred (Beizer, 185).

In reading Nana’s textualised body as veiling an absence, however, we must keep in mind that this absence is a nineteenth-century patriarchal fantasy. If we do not explicitly and continually do so, we risk reproducing the trope which aligns the female body with lack, with emptiness waiting to be filled by the forces of masculine creation. It is not, I propose, the absence of the female body which must be concealed in *Nana*. Rather, this fantasised absence is the screen whereby the far more terrifying *presence* of the female body is occluded in a discursive gesture which links pathology and literature to economics.

*Nana*’s publication in 1880 occurred at a historical moment when women were more physically present in the French economy than they had ever been, as the Industrial Revolution saw them enter the workforce in ever-greater numbers. Yet in spite of – or perhaps in response to – this phenomenon, it was this very presence which economic theorists anxiously

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<sup>79</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris: Seuil, 1973, 101.

sought to downplay in their writings on production and reproduction. The work of nineteenth-century French political economists such as Jean-Baptiste Say defined reproduction as an economic rather than a biological concept.<sup>80</sup> What counted for Say was not the creation of the raw material – a child – but rather its transformation into an economic entity with the capacity for work. The birth of a child in itself contributed nothing to the economy: it was the child's subsistence and the development of his or her capacity for work which produced economic value. "Cette capacité [pour le travail...] peut être considérée comme un capital qui n'est formé que par l'accumulation annuelle et successive [par ses parents] des sommes consacrées à l'élever," according to Say.<sup>81</sup> Say defined production as the activity which transformed raw materials into exchangeable objects of recognised value. "On appelle quelquefois la production du nom de reproduction, parce qu'elle n'est en effet qu'une reproduction de matières sous une autre forme qui leur donne quelque valeur[...]le mot production est plus exact parce que la richesse dont il est ici question ne consiste pas dans la matière mais dans la valeur de la matière" (599).

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<sup>80</sup> Joan Wallach Scott's chapter "L'Ouvrière! Mot impie, sordide...: Women workers in the Discourse of French Political Economy 1840-1880" in *Gender and The Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 139-163, describes the anxious debate around the question of women's work and the attempt to marginalise female labour.

<sup>81</sup> Jean-Baptiste Say, *Traité de l'économie politique*. Paris: Guillaumin, 1841, 372. This citation was brought to my attention by Scott, 144.

It was on the basis of this definition of production that Say justified the payment of higher wages to men, on the assumption that it was they who were responsible for the support and subsistence of the family, and therefore for the reproduction of the workforce as defined in his terms. Other economic commentators shared this basic assumption that it was the father of the family who served as the main producer and provider. According to Eugène Buret, “la femme est, industriellement parlant, un travailleur imparfait. Si l’homme n’ajoute pas son gain au salaire insuffisant de sa compagne, le sexe seul constituera pour elle une cause de misère.”<sup>82</sup> Leroy-Beaulieu too sees woman as “l’être le plus incapable de fournir à ses propres besoins” for whom “[l]a famille stable, permanente indissoluble – et non pas l’union libre, le contrat passager – est une nécessité économique.”<sup>83</sup> Economic production and provision for the family was, then, placed firmly in the masculine realm by contemporary theorists: indeed, Jules Simon denied that work and femininity were compatible: “la femme, devenue ouvrière, n’est plus une femme.”<sup>84</sup>

The subordination of reproduction to production, and the placement of the latter firmly in the paternal sphere, was important in psychic as well as economic terms insofar as it transformed maternity from a biological to a symbolic function. Not only were women excluded from the economy, but

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<sup>82</sup> Eugène Buret, *De la misère des classes laborieuses en France et en Angleterre*. Paris: Paulin, 1840, 2 vols., I, 287. This citation was brought to my attention by Scott, 144.

<sup>83</sup> Leroy-Beaulieu, Paul. *Le Travail des Femmes au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris, Charpentier, 1873, 3.

<sup>84</sup> Simon, Jules, *L’Ouvrière* (Paris: Hachette, 1861), v.

their role in the physical act of reproduction was suppressed by the discounting of the labour of women in childbirth and childrearing. In effect, what we have is an economic metaphorisation of the uterus to parallel the scientific one which was taking place in the Salpêtrière, with the elaboration of a mythology of the acorporeal mother as the symbolic heart of the family. As production, the subsistence and development of human capital was assigned to the father, whilst the mother was relegated to a symbolic, spiritual role in nurturing in the discourse surrounding the social and economic role of women. Women, were not built to work or to contribute to economic production: rather, it was popularly supposed that, as Jules Simon suggests in

*L'Ouvrière:*

Les femmes sont faites pour vivre dans leur ménage, et un état social qui les arrache à leur mari, à leurs enfants, à leur intérieur, pour les faire vivre toute la journée mêlées avec d'autres femmes, ou, ce qui est bien pire, mêlées avec des hommes, est un état social mal organisé, qui, pour ainsi dire, ne permet pas aux femmes d'être des femmes, et ne peut exister longtemps sans entraîner à sa suite les plus grands désordres. (183)

Such a definition of maternity not only excluded women from labour in the productive, economic sense, but occluded labour in the reproductive sense. A mother's role was to act as the symbolic heart of the family, a nurturing figure in the abstract, metaphorical sense only: that is to say, she provided spiritual, not material sustenance. In Simon's words, she was to be "la providence and personnification de la famille." (71) This has two major implications: first, it implies the separation of the public and the domestic spheres along gender lines. Moreover, it separates the material aspects of reproduction and family

life from the spiritual and the symbolic, effectively eliminating the physical, material aspects of the maternal role.

If the psychic structures underlying late nineteenth-century concepts of economic (re)production were predicated upon the occlusion of the female, and in particular, the sexual and maternal body, so too were conceptions of literary production. In the literary sphere, the appropriation of maternity, of a woman's regenerative role represents a fantasy of creation which excludes the feminine and in particular the female body. Literature is conceived of as a child born by parthenogenesis, in which the female body is little more than a vessel. Literary production is envisaged as a relationship between men, in which the male writer arrogates the functions of maternity in order to nourish a creative process from which the feminine role is entirely excluded. The association between literature and a maternity fantasised as masculine is particularly interesting when considered in relation to realist and naturalist fiction which operates on a principle of mimesis, claiming to *reproduce* the reality which it represents. This process of mimesis effected through the translucent screen of the *écran réaliste* echoes Say's definition of reproduction, entailing a transformation of raw material. In the literary economy, as in the capitalist, the raw material of human life is viewed as irrelevant: what counts is the creation of value – or meaning, in literary terms – which is coded as masculine. The “verre à vitre” referred to by Zola, as we have seen, does not simply reproduce the raw material viewed through it: it produces an image thereof, to which it adds value by endowing it with

meaning. Literary creation, like economic production, lies in the process of the transformation of raw material into something more than its original form, through its endowment with meaning, a process situated firmly in the masculine realm.

Jan Goldstein has demonstrated the central place of hysteria in this process of reappropriation, arguing that the androgyny implied by the concept of male hysteria offered a way to challenge existing gender norms. Writing in relation to Flaubert, she remarks that a male author “[b]y defining himself as suffering from hysteria[...] expanded the scope and aesthetic possibilities of his own personality, adding female modalities to his repertory without sacrificing male prerogatives.”<sup>85</sup> Baudelaire’s famous commentary on Emma Bovary is instructive here: “Comme la Pallas armée sortie du cerveau de Zeus, ce bizarre androgyne a gardé toutes les séductions d’une âme virile dans un charmant corps féminin.”<sup>86</sup> Flaubert’s claim of hysteria allows him to maintain his privileged relationship to the symbolic as a man, whilst at the same time appropriating the female body and its reproductive capacity. In doing so, as Baudelaire’s comparison of Emma to Athena suggests, he fulfils the parthenogenic dream of masculine literary creation. In fantasising themselves as hysterical, incorporating the fantasy of the female body as a textual space, male writers imagined themselves able to appropriate the

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<sup>85</sup> Jan Goldstein, “The Uses of Male Hysteria: Medical and Literary Discourse in Nineteenth-Century France.” *Representations* 34 (1991), 134-165.

<sup>86</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “*Madame Bovary par Gustave Flaubert*” in *Œuvres complètes* ed. Pichois, Claude. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, 2 vols., 81.



reproductive, creative capacity signified by the female body, and to subsume it into a masculine process of literary production analagous to Say's definition of the term in the economic sphere. The discourse of hysteria, as we have seen, represents the mastery of the female body through textualisation, its transposition from the realm of material anatomy to the realm of the sign. Likewise, the transformation of the female body from physical reality to fertile textual space lies at the heart of literary mimesis, and in particular of depictions of the actress and the hysteric. Literary creation does not simply reproduce that which it depicts: rather it generates meaning, transforming the subject matter of the female body into creative work by endowing it with meaning, which is to say, value, situating itself thereby firmly in the masculine realm of production.

In such a process, the womb becomes no more than an empty space in which the forces of masculine creativity are played out: the female body is imagined as a textual screen onto which masculine phantasms can be projected, and which serves as a protective barrier which hides the reality of the physical body. The naturalist novel, then, is underpinned by a view of the creative process which, like that of the capitalist economy, relies on the denial by the sign of its material referent, on the transformation of the female body into a textual image projected onto a screen which serves as both mirror and lens. The opening scene of *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which Denise gazes at the window of Octave Mouret's store, offers a perfect image of both literary and economic production in Zola's fictional universe:

La gorge ronde des mannequins gonflait l'étoffe, les hanches fortes exagéraient la finesse de la taille, la tête absente étaient remplacée par une grande étiquette, piquée avec une épingle dans le molleton rouge du col; tandis que les glaces, aux deux côtés de la vitrine, par un jeu calculé, les reflétaient et les multipliaient sans fin, peuplaient les rues de ces belles femmes à vendre, et portant des prix en gros chiffres, à la place des têtes. (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, III: 392)

The store is a paradigm of capitalist and literary reproduction. Viewed through a translucent screen, the sexualised female body, with its “gorge ronde” and its “hanches fortes” is reproduced and transformed into merchandise, into “belles femmes à vendre”. The store window serves as an *écran réaliste* which transfigures Woman into a figure of economic value, a symbol susceptible to infinite multiplication. At the same time, it brings us back to contemporary descriptions of the morgue, which compared it to a shop window. The morgue was “semblable à la devanture d’un magasin,” according to Adolphe Guillot, a view echoed by Gourdon de Genouillac in *Paris à travers les siècles*, who advised his readers to “imagine[r] la vitrine d’un grand magasin” when describing the morgue.<sup>87</sup> Pathology, literature, economy and theatre all seem to be linked by the concept of an apparently transparent screen, through which the female body may be viewed and its reality at once represented and obscured.

The actress stands in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the psychic structures underpinning these scientific, economic and literary

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<sup>87</sup> Adolphe Guillot, *Paris qui souffre: les basse-géole du Grand-Châtelet et les morgues modernes* (Paris: Rouquette, 1888); H. Gourdon de Genouillac, *Paris à travers les siècles : histoire nationale de Paris et des Parisiens depuis la fondation de Lutèce jusqu'à nos jours* Paris: F. Roy 1882-1889, 6 vols.), IV:28.

processes. Both onstage and off, she embodies a tension between the physical and the symbolic, between the female body and its representation, between a woman and Woman. The actress in the theatre is at once an image of Woman, inhabiting the textual body of a role, and a physical presence onstage. Whereas in the morgue a viewer might gaze upon a female body from which he is separated by a material barrier, in the theatre, the “fourth wall” is merely a concept: once the curtain has been raised, no physical barrier separates the audience from the actress. The contrast between the Woman admired on stage and the actress met offstage could be a rude shock. The Goncourt brothers’ *Journal* includes various anecdotes involving actresses which highlight their vulgarity and foreground the horror of encountering the actress as a flesh-and-blood woman. Réjane, for example, had famously bad breath: so notorious was her halitosis, that the brothers recount that the singer Félicia Mallet, when bothered by a fly at dinner, had been known to pursue it around the room with a napkin shouting Réjane’s name, “appellant ainsi à son aide la puanteur connue de son haleine pour tuer la mouche.” (Goncourt, *Journal*, III: 1130). Similarly, they tell of Mario Uchard’s disappointing encounter with an actress whom he hoped to seduce, only to be rejected with the excuse: “Ce sont mes hémorroïdes” (I:388-389). Suzanne Lagier shocks not only with her crudity but with her robust physique: “elle a l’air de passer en fraude trois potirons à la barrière: ses deux tétons et son ventre” (I:889), remark the Goncourts, who also depict her as vulgar and hysterical, calling her “une cabotine cynique, une vache hystérique” (I:790).

The jolting encounter between the actress viewed from afar and the reality of her bodily existence forms the crux of Félicien Champsaur's thinly-veiled fictional portrayal of Sarah Bernhardt in *Dinah Samuel*. The novel centres around the young protagonist, Montclar, and his relationship with the title character, an actress whom he adores from a distance and takes as his muse. Even before he has met her, she is the inspiration for a poem, as he seeks to turn her into an ideal of Woman, the embodiment of feminine beauty and charm. Neither a closer acquaintance and a brief affair with her, nor revelations about her affairs with other men in return for money can shake Montclar's idealised perception of his idol. The narrator of the novel at this point comments on the visibility of actresses in late nineteenth-century popular culture:

Chaque lecteur, par les yeux des journalistes, voit dans la maison des comédiennes comme dans une maison de verre, il assiste à leur lever et à leur coucher, car, après les avoir applaudies au théâtre, il a toujours la curiosité de les admirer encore ou de les critiquer, quand elles sont vêtues transparentement, d'une chemise de nuit. Encore parfois, elle habille trop, et on la jette dans la ruelle.<sup>88</sup>

The metaphor of the transparent barrier, of the "maison de verre" and the actress "transparentement vêtue" brings us back to the realist screen and the notion of the female body seen always through a veil which both obscures and reveals. This veil is, ultimately a textual one: the public sees the actress "par les yeux des journalistes," and, of course through the writing of those same journalists. Dinah Samuel herself, even when Montclar does meet her, is never seen without makeup and or out of some form of costume until the

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<sup>88</sup> Champsaur, Félicien, Paris: Pierre Douville, 1905, 135.

end of the novel: “elle se traitait comme une aquarelle” (360). The dénouement comes when, after being dismissed abruptly and returning to his home town for a while, Montclar returns to Paris and spends a night with Dinah. Upon awakening, he is confronted with the ageing actress shorn of her veil and is appalled by the skeletal hag with whom he is confronted: “C’était horrible.” (360) The source of his horror is clearly located in the revelation of the contrast between the dream of an idealised Woman and the woman whom he sees before him: “Dinah Samuel avait gardé jusqu’alors, dans la pensée de Montclar, toutes les attirances et tous les prestiges de la femme. Et c’était cela du génie, de la beauté! C’était cela qui avait ému des milliers et des milliers d’hommes, c’était cela, le rêve, l’idéal” (361-362). For the first time, Montclar is faced with the woman and not the actress: the textual screen onto which the young poet projected his fantasies of beauty and genius is torn down and he is forced to face the nightmare of the female body, transformed from fantasy of creative inspiration into an equally illusory and exaggerated image as the embodiment of death and decay.<sup>89</sup>

Montclar’s reaction to this revelation is telling. The actress is instantly transformed into a prostitute, “un spermatorium public (on paie en sortant),” and Montclar treats her appropriately (361). Leaving “dix billets de mille francs” by her bed, he leaves in order to undertake a career as a banker (362). Montclar’s demotion of Dinah Samuel from actress to prostitute reveals

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<sup>89</sup> Indeed, throughout this scene, metaphors of death and decay are prevalent. See Champsaur, 361-4.

a key distinction between these two figures of femininity. The prostitute offers a direct exchange of her physical body for money; one which, like all monetary transactions is by its very nature transient. In the case of the actress, on the other hand, the exchange of money is displaced, obscured by the fiction of a symbolic one, in which the role played by the actress mediates her physical presence onstage. The aura provided by the theatre served as a kind of veil over the physical aspects of *galanterie*, allowing women to, in the words of Henry Bauër's novel *Une comédienne*, "relever, par une rubrique artistique, leur commerce de galanterie."<sup>90</sup> As Edmond de Goncourt makes clear in the *Journal* in 1875, the role of the actress or the *fille galante* was to embody "le caprice nu, libre et vainqueur, à travers un monde de notaires et des joies d'avocat." Should she fail to do so, she was a mere prostitute, representing a "vice tout froid, tout arithmétique, que ne monte pas même le vin, enfin une prostituée sans le tempérament d'une vraie putain" (Goncourt, *Journal*, I: 786). Similarly, Octave Mirbeau, writing in *L'Illustration*, decries the rise of the "new" *femme galante*, who turns vice into a business and "pense moins à lever la jambe, à courir les fêtes et les plaisirs, à boire du champagne et à chanter d'obscènes refrains, qu'à emplir son bas de soie avec de bonnes pièces d'or et avec de bons billets de banque, à placer ses économies dans des affaires qui rapportent de bons intérêts, et à se faire donner en argent les

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<sup>90</sup> Henri Bauër, *Une comédienne Scènes de la vie de théâtre*. Paris: Charpentier, 1889.

sommes autrefois dépensées en orgies.”<sup>91</sup> At issue here is the intrusion of the material into an economy which is supposed to operate on the level of the symbolic. The reality of an exchange of money for the female body can no longer be disguised as an exchange of pleasures, in which the *femme galante* enacts a particular fantasy of subversive femininity. This demotion of the actress is also a degradation of her lover: it is no coincidence that at the end of Champsaur’s novel, Montclar’s break with Dinah Samuel precipitates his abandonment of poetry for the world of finance.

With this in mind, I would like to turn to the celebrated scene in which Muffat looks on as Nana contemplates herself in the mirror, before he suddenly tears her away in a fit of rage. The catalyst for this outburst comes when Nana leans forward to kiss herself in the mirror: “Elle allongea les lèvres, elle se baisa longuement près de l’aisselle, en riant à l’autre Nana, qui, elle aussi, se baisait dans la glace” (II: 1271). Prior to this moment, Muffat has been contemplating not Nana so much as her image in the mirror. The image reflected back at him is not that of a woman but that of Woman, on the one hand, a “Vénus grasse,” and, on the other, the “monstre de l’écriture, lubrique” (Zola, *RM*, II: 1271). This image is, moreover a textual one: as he gazes at her reflected body, he is reading Fauchéry’s “mouche d’or” article. Nana’s gesture brings together her reflected image and her physical self and it is at this point that Muffat intervenes to tear the two apart. As in *Dinah Samuel*, it is a jarring juxtaposition of image and body which provokes

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<sup>91</sup> Octave Mirbeau, “La nouvelle galanterie.” *L’Illustration* January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1881.

Muffat's violent response, and which is the source of the simultaneous repulsion and arousal, the "sentiment de vertige" (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1207) which he feels both in this scene and when he accompanies the visiting Prince backstage to Nana's dressing-room. As the real and imaginary royalties greet each other, a surreal effect is produced:

Ce monde du théâtre prolongeait le monde réel, dans une farce grave, sous la buée ardente du gaz. Nana, oubliant qu'elle était en pantalon, avec son bout de chemise, jouait la grande dame, la reine Vénus, ouvrant ses petits appartements aux personnages de l'Etat. A chaque phrase, elle lâchait les mots d'Altesse Royale, elle faisait des révérences convaincues, traitait ces chienlits de Bosc et de Prullière en souverain que son ministre accompagne. Et personne ne souriait de cet étrange mélange, de ce vrai prince, héritier d'un trône, qui buvait le champagne d'un cabotin, très à l'aise dans ce carnaval des dieux, dans cette mascarade de la royauté, au milieu d'un peuple d'habilleuses et de filles, de rouleurs de planches et de montreurs de femmes (II: 1210).

This encounter of the reality of royalty and its theatrical copy, which is at least in part a commentary on the politics of the Second Empire, is staged around the half-naked body of the actress. During this encounter, Nana cheerfully receives her guests in a state of near-undress:

Elle ne s'était pas couverte du tout, elle venait simplement de boutonner un petit corsage de percale qui lui cachait à demi la gorge[...] Par derrière, son pantalon laissait passer encore un bout de chemise. Et les bras nus, les épaules nues, la pointe des seins dans l'air, elle tenait toujours le rideau d'une main comme pour le tirer de nouveau, au moindre effarouchement (II: 1208).

She remains in this state of semi-nudity throughout the scene that follows, her body hinted at but always veiled by her scanty clothing and the hazy atmosphere of the room, "la vapeur de la cuvette et des éponges, le violent parfum des essences, mêlé à la pointe d'ivresse aigrette du vin de



champagne” (II: 1211). At the same time, this vaporous screen cannot fully conceal her powerful physical presence: “Le prince et le comte Muffat, entre lesquels Nana se trouvait prise, devaient lever les mains pour ne pas lui frôler les hanches ou la gorge, au moindre geste” (II: 1211). Nana does not simply represent Venus: she embodies her, incarnates her in the most literal sense of the term, and it is this that lies at the heart of her disturbing power.

The actress terrifies less by the absence of her body than by its presence. The fear which she inspires results less from any fantasised absence or castration than from its opposite: a powerful and active female sexuality and generative force. During her first performance as Venus, the initial reaction of the male spectators to her (apparent) nudity is one of arousal as her secondary sexual characteristics and womanly attributes are detailed in a kind of naturalist *blason* of her “gorge d’amazon,” her “cuisses de blonde grasse” and her “larges hanches” (II: 1118). Her primary sexual characteristics, on the other hand, her reproductive organs, provoke a far more ambivalent response. They represent a powerful and destructive force: “la bête d’or, inconsciente comme une force.” (II: 1271). Towards the end of the novel, as she surveys the damage which she has left behind, Nana’s sexual organs are compared to a sun setting over a battlefield: “dans une gloire, son sexe montait et rayonnait sur ses victimes étendues, pareil à un soleil levant qui éclaire un champ de carnage” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1470). “[C]e rien honteux et si puissant, dont la force soulevait le monde” (II: 1467) is so menacing precisely not because it is an empty space, an

absence, but because it is a presence, endowed with a generative power that penetrates the textual screen which veils it and gives the lie to the fantasy of the female body as a mere vessel, a space for masculine creation.

In the masculine fantasy of her first appearance, Nana, with her “chair de marbre” (II: 1120), is a kind of nineteenth-century Galatea, transformed from a statue into a woman. Imagined as marble, waiting to be sculpted by the Pygmalion of the masculine imagination, she represents an erotic fantasy of reproduction in which man gives birth to woman, unaided by either a biological mother or by the God of the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eve. This fantasy is destroyed by the revelation that, far from being marble, raw material to be shaped and brought to life, her body is, in fact, made of flesh and blood and capable of bearing children. If the maternal ideal of the late nineteenth century exalted a spiritual nurturing role and obscured bodily maternity, Nana is the very opposite of that ideal. She is a biological mother whose nurturing role in her son’s life is inconsistent, oscillating between neglect and near-hysterical “rages” of affection (II: 1359). Despite her physical motherhood, she shows little in the way of maternal instincts, even when she is briefly pregnant during the course of the novel. She regards the pregnancy as an “accident ridicule,” a “mauvaise blague” which exasperates her (II: 1411-1412. In line with nineteenth-century theories of hysteria, this pregnancy is associated with her hysteria as we are told that “[s]es peurs nerveuses, ses humeurs noires venaient un peu de cette aventure” (II: 1411).

The association between Nana's hysteria and her bodily maternity may allow us to shed light on Fauchéry's curious remark that she corrupts Paris, "le faisant tourner comme des femmes, chaque mois, font tourner le lait" (II: 1269-1270). This remark, implying, as Charles Bernheimer suggests, that Nana is perpetually menstruating (Bernheimer, 201), hints at the threat posed by Nana's fertility. If we see milk as emblematic of the nurturing mother, a symbol of idealised maternity dissociated from the womb, and Nana's menstrual blood as the sign of her biological maternal capacity, then Fauchery's slightly bizarre simile begins to make sense. Through this image, Fauchery expresses the fear inspired by Nana's maternal body, and its capacity to subvert masculine fantasies of creation and production.

The *écran réaliste* which transforms the maternal body is not meant to veil the absence of the female generative organs, then, but rather to hide their presence in order to preserve the fantasy of acorporeal male creation independent of the female body, just as the glass pane of the morgue shields spectators from the reality of death. This screen, however, proves permeable in the case of the theatre: unlike the morgue visitor, the theatregoer is not shielded by a glass screen. *Nana* is notable for the porousness of the barrier between the public and "l'autre côté du théâtre" (II: 1215). Not only can the audience penetrate backstage – most obviously in the Prince's visit and Muffat's presence at rehearsals of *La Petite Duchesse* – but backstage occasionally penetrates through to the public: at one moment during *La Blonde Vénus* the sound of a fight between Fauchery and Mignon which has

erupted backstage can be heard by Rose as she sings (II: 1217). Such interpenetration between the “real” world and that of the theatre generates the kind of jarring encounters between the illusion of the actress and the reality of the woman which cause cracks to appear in the realist screen and destabilise the fantasy of masculine literary reproduction

The prince’s backstage visit, in which he is accompanied by Muffat, stages just such an encounter. Muffat watches Nana obliquely, via her image in the mirror, mesmerised not by an intimate revelation of her body, but by her transformation from Nana, a woman, into Woman:

Elle avait trempé le pinceau dans un pot de noir. Le nez sur la glace, elle le passa délicatement entre les cils. Muffat, derrière elle, regardait. Il la voyait dans la glace, avec ses épaules rondes et sa gorge noyée d’une ombre rose. Et il ne pouvait, malgré son effort, se détourner de ce visage que l’œil fermé rendait si provocant, troué de fossettes, comme pâmé de désirs. Lorsqu’elle ferma l’œil droit et qu’elle passa le pinceau, il comprit qu’il lui appartenait. (II: 1214)

Muffat is “séduit par la perversion des poudres et des fards, pris du désir déréglé de cette jeunesse peinte” (1214), captivated by a carefully-constructed image of femininity viewed through a glass as Nana dresses before him in a kind of reverse striptease: “Nana passa un instant derrière le rideau pour enfiler le maillot de Vénus, après avoir ôté son pantalon. Puis tranquille d’impudeur, elle vint déboutonner son corsage de percale, en tendant les bras à madame Jules, qui lui passa les courtes manches de la tunique.” (1215). At no point does he gaze upon her nakedness: he is enthralled not by Nana’s body but by its image projected onto the screen of the curtain. As this image of Woman comes out from behind the curtain,

Muffat, the prince and the reader are confronted, not with a nude body but with a yet another veil, one which transforms Nana not only from a woman into Woman, but from Woman into Venus, supreme symbol of sexualised femininity: “Vénus était prête, elle portait simplement cette gaze aux épaules” (II: 1215). Even as “Venus” displays herself onstage, Muffat can only watch her from the wings, through a hole: “Quand elle eut poussé la dernière note au milieu d’une tempête de bravos, elle salua, les gazes volantes, sa chevelure touchant ses reins, dans le raccourci de son échine. Et en la voyant ainsi, pliée et les hanches élargies, venir à reculons vers le trou par lequel il la regardait, le comte se releva, très pâle” (II: 1221). The spectacle of Nana’s nudity is founded not on its revelation but on its veiled outline, viewed through a series of mediating screens, which transform her female body into an icon.

Like the sun and death, in La Rochefoucauld’s famous maxim, it would seem that the actress must not be gazed upon directly. As he moves away from his vantage point, however, Muffat is confronted with a rather different image of the theatre and the actress, as Fauchery guides him around the dressing rooms. Here he encounters the grimy material reality of theatre life which is obscured by the fourth wall and the backdrop from the view of the audience. Behind the Olympian grandeur of the stage, the theatre resembles a seedy hotel, grimy and smelly:

Au premier, deux corridors s’enfonçaient, tournaient brusquement, avec des portes d’hôtel meublé suspect, peintes en jaune, portant de gros numéros blancs; par terre, les carreaux descellés faisaient des bosses, dans le tassement de la vieille maison. Le comte se hasarda,

jeta un coup d'œil par une porte entrouverte, vit une pièce très sale, une échoppe de perruquier de faubourg, meublé de deux chaises, d'une glace et d'une planchette à tiroir, noircie par la crasse des peignes. (II: 1222)

This backstage area is a predominantly female domain, in which Muffat is confronted with the untrammelled materiality of the female body. Having watched, fascinated, as Nana dressed, Muffat is now overwhelmed by the abandon with which the actresses undress themselves and remove their makeup. His senses are flooded, quite literally, by the dirty water left over from their toilette, the material residue of their costumes. Passing by one dressing room, he hears a curse as “Mathilde, un petit torchon d'ingénue, venait de casser sa cuvette, dont l'eau savonneuse coulait jusqu'au palier” (II: 1222). Similarly the extras' dressing room is characterised by a “débandade de savon et de bouteilles d'eau de lavande, la salle commune d'une maison de barrière”, (II: 1223) whilst in another dressing room, “il entendit un lavage féroce, une tempête dans une cuvette” (II: 1223). This dirty water represents a kind of feminine secretion, an intimate, unmediated contact with the female body – a sort of theatrical menstrual blood – which is at once overwhelming and intensely erotic to Muffat. The final image which he has of this green room is of “un pot de chambre oublié, au milieu d'un désordre de jupes traînant par terre” (II: 1223): of the abandoned trappings of femininity juxtaposed with the excretions of the sordid, material, female body.

The impact upon Muffat of this “tranquille impudeur de la femme” (II: 1224) is contrasted directly with that of Nana's veiled “impudeur” in the earlier scene. Muffat “n'avait pas éprouvé dans la loge de Nana, au milieu de ce luxe

de tentures et de glaces, l'âcre excitation de la misère honteuse de ce galetas" (II: 1224). Upon reencountering Nana "au milieu de cette débandade de filles lâchées à travers les quatre étages" (II: 1224), he is overwhelmed by a violent sexual impulse and, "cédant à une poussée de colère et de désir, Muffat courut derrière elle [Nana]; et, au moment où elle rentrait dans sa loge, il lui planta une rude baiser sur la nuque, sur les petits poils ronds qui frisaient très bas entre ses épaules" (II: 1225). This "poussée de colère et de désir" foreshadows the "élan de brutalité" (II: 1271) with which he tears Nana away from her self-contemplation in the mirror and throws her to the floor. In Nana's bedroom, as in the theatre, the catalyst is the resurgence of Nana's physical presence, of the material and maternal physical body of the woman which disturbs his contemplation of Woman, which provokes Muffat's rage and desire. As he contemplates her image, Nana delights in the sensual reality of her body, kissing herself with "l'air étonné d'une jeune fille qui découvre sa puberté" (II: 1270), and Muffat is confronted with the troubling reality of her sex, whose presence makes itself felt through the textual veil drawn over her body.

The world of the theatre in general, and the actress in particular, represent, then, a particular point of vulnerability in the textual economy of naturalist mimesis, a point at which the *écran réaliste* becomes dangerously permeable. This vulnerability manifests itself in the obsessive evocation of the smell of the theatre and of actresses in *Nana*. One of the key ways in which the morgue's glass protected spectators from the physical reality of death

was through its role in containing the stench of decomposing bodies. As the commentary to a book of Parisian tableaux explained, “[d]e vastes chassiss vitrés et bien clos permettent de les examiner sans qu’ils soient exposés aux exhalaisons des corps, qui souvent sont dans un état de putréfaction.”<sup>92</sup> No such protection was afforded to theatregoers, especially those who ventured backstage. Recounting a backstage visit to greet Suzanne Lagier with Flaubert, the Goncourts emphasise the smell of the theatre: “ces corridors, tout empuantis, noircis, fumeux d’huile qui brûle. Ça sent le lumignon, la poussière, le chaud et le gras, la colle de pâte, un tas d’odeurs qui enivrent Flaubert” (Goncourt, *Journal*, I: 1239). Flaubert himself recounts with enthusiasm a visit to the Théâtre du Cirque during which “Je humais toutes sortes d’odeurs de femmes et de décor, le tout mêlé au rots du perruquier. Enorme, énorme! Et mon inconvenient de culotte ajoutait à mon excitation.”<sup>93</sup> Muffat is similarly at once overwhelmed and intoxicated by the smell of the backstage area of the Théâtre des Variétés in *Nana*: “à chaque marche qu’il montait, le musc des poudres, les aigreurs de vinaigre de toilette, le chauffaient, l’étourdissaient davantage” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1222). As in Flaubert’s letter, this smell is identified as being distinctively female, as “cette odeur de femme descendue des loges” (II: 1222). Finally, at the end of the corridor, Muffat stops and breathes, “dans une aspiration, tout

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<sup>92</sup> Jean-Henri Marlet, “La Morgue” in *Nouveaux tableaux de Paris*. Paris: E. Pochard, c.1823, not paginated.

<sup>93</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau. Paris: Pléiade, 1973, 1980, 2 vols., letter of 28<sup>th</sup> July 1856, II: 621.



le sexe de la femme qu'il ignorait encore et qui lui battait le visage" (II: 1223). Nana too is characterised by a powerful, intoxicatingly feminine smell: hers is "une odeur de femme" (II: 1139) which overpowers Muffat from their first encounter. Later, as he watches her, she is described as "sentant le fauve," exuding an odour which he associates with her sexual organs, "dont l'odeur seule gâtait le monde" (II: 1271).

This insistence on Nana's scent is a powerful reminder of a physical presence which cannot be erased by the text. As Guy Rosolato remarks of the voice, smell is "une de ces *émissions* qui se *séparent du corps*, qui proviennent d'un terrain souterrain de fabrication, d'un métabolisme, et qui, une fois chues, deviennent objets distincts du corps."<sup>94</sup> Like the voice, smell is a bodily emission which, once it has been produced, lives not only independently of the body but moreover *without* body. It is a trace of the physical body that has no body to be anatomised or textualised. Moreover, it functions as a kind of invader: just as one can not at the same time speak and ingest, so one cannot at the same time breathe in a smell and exhale, which is to say, that one cannot expel unwanted waste products from one's system. In the quote above, Muffat is constantly forced to "ingest" Nana's scent – "il but dans une aspiration" – a scent which "l'étouffait" (II: 1139), we are told, leaving him unable to resist her. It is the smell in the theatre which causes the "griserie" (II: 1222) which he feels backstage, dispossessing him of his

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<sup>94</sup> Rosolato, Guy, "La voix: entre corps et langage", *Revue française de psychanalyse*, 37 (1974), 78.

faculties to the point that he feels “possédé” (II: 1271) as he watches her in front of the mirror.

An intangible physical trace which invades Muffat’s senses, smell is also the forerunner of decomposition, one of the first signs of a body in decay. Indeed, the women standing around Nana’s deathbed are first reminded of the threat of infection by the smell of her corpse. By this point in the novel, her body is “une pelletée de chair corrompue” (II: 1485), disintegrating almost before the eyes of those around her: “Un œil, celui de gauche, avait complètement sombré dans le bouillonnement de la purulence; l’autre, à demi ouvert, s’enfonçait, comme un trou noir et gâté. Le nez suppurait encore” (II: 1485). This description of her face recalls once again the morgue scene of *Thérèse Raquin*, where the female corpse that arouse Laurent’s interest finds its counterpart in a body which causes him “une épouvante véritable” (Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 131), and which is similarly characterised by liquification, and a gaping hole in the middle of it: “Les chairs de ce noyé étaient tellement molles et dissoutes, que l’eau courante qui les lavait les emportait brin à brin. Le jet qui tombait sur la face creusait un trou à gauche du nez” (Zola, *TR*, 131). The lingering trace of the material body around which the text of *Venus* has been woven is also the reminder of the inevitable decomposition of that body: the body of the actress viewed on stage is also the corpse viewed in the morgue. The reassertion of Nana’s female, maternal body as a flesh and blood entity, inevitably brings with it the threat of decomposition not only of

that body but of the textual shroud in which it has been wrapped: the stench of decomposition eventually penetrates the glass screen of the *écran réaliste*.

At once necessary to and subversive of the textual economy of naturalism, the raw material of Nana's body cannot be entirely filtered out. If we conceive of the female body in the naturalist novel as the raw material for a process of literary creation, we can see its traces in the text as the necessary by-product of creation, in economic terms, or, in biological terms, as a kind of literary afterbirth. Indeed, the closing description of her corpse in a state of decomposition as "un tas d'humeur et de sang" (1485) evokes images of afterbirth as well as of decay. The association between the body of the actress and afterbirth brings us back once more to the question of hysteria, via an etymological detail pointed out by Martha Evans (Evans, 45). The word *hystera* or "uterus", in its neuter plural form of *hysteria*, has the added meaning of afterbirth. The actress then embodies hysteria not merely as a social disease but also as the necessary by-product of (re)production and creativity.<sup>95</sup> As we saw above, the female body fantasised as space serves as a springboard for male creation, a vessel for the masculine literary imagination to fill, "le foyer de tous les rêves et de toutes les divagations délirantes"<sup>96</sup>. At the same time, however, hysteria represented the inevitable traces of the material female body which resisted abstraction, whose physical

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<sup>95</sup> Janet Beizer also discusses this connection between hysteria, afterbirth and ultimately the abject, as the by-product of creativity which evokes disgust and fear (Beizer, 45).

<sup>96</sup> Monique Schneider, *De l'exorcisme à la psychanalyse: le féminin expurgé*. Paris: Retz, 1979, 125.

reality penetrated the *écran réaliste*. Hysteria is not merely a textual sign of the feminine: it is also the afterbirth of the process of the masculine imagination which creates that sign, the female body as resistant to abstraction. Hysteria is, after all, the female body which defies textualisation and control.

The regenerative power of this residual maternal body, which remains as the hysterical afterbirth of masculine creation, carries with it the menace of death. The counter to the fantasy of the womb as textual space, of the maternal body as a fertile absence, is the threat of death contained in its material presence. The physical reproduction associated with the female body has its corollary the inevitable death and decay of the body: that which is born of woman must die.<sup>97</sup> The maternal body then is at once the springboard for creation and the catalyst for disintegration. Spaces of great fertility in Zola are always also spaces of decay: we can think here of the garden in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* or the hothouse in *La Curée*, where extravagant fertility goes

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<sup>97</sup> The association between the maternal body and death in the masculine imaginary has been noted by several feminist critics including Simone de Beauvoir in *Le deuxième sexe*. Beauvoir remarks that "Du jour où il naît, l'homme commence à mourir: c'est la vérité qu'incarne la Mère." Dorothy Dinnerstein writes at length on the subject in *The Mermaid and The Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*, whilst in *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*, Susan Griffin analyses the misogyny of pornography in terms of the desire of what she calls the "chauvinist mind" to deny and to dominate nature and with it the evidence of mortality. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*. Paris, Gallimard, 1949 ; Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and The Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*. New York, Harper and Row, 1976; Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature*. New York, Harper and Row, 1982.

hand in hand with death and decomposition. Nana is the representative of just such an environment, as Fauchéry points out in his article: “Elle avait poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien; et grande, belle, de chair superbe ainsi qu’une plante de plein fumier, elle vengeait les gueux et les abandonnés dont elle était le produit.” (Zola, *RM*, II: 1269) The *fumier* is then at once a place of fertility and a place of death and decay, a decay which Nana will spread further. Created and nourished from death and decay, she produces death and decay: as Zola remarks at the end of the novel, in terms which hint at literary production, “son œuvre de ruine et de mort était faite” (II: 1470, my emphasis).

The imagery of dirt and decomposition which recurs throughout *Nana* is, then, closely related to her maternal capacity. In her work on the abject, Julia Kristeva argues that the disgust and nausea provoked by a corpse are the result of a direct contact with death, unmediated by signifiers:

Une plaie de sang ou de pus, ou l’odeur douceureuse et âcre d’une sueur, d’une putréfaction, ne *signifient* pas la mort. Devant la mort signifiée – par exemple un encéphalogramme plat – je comprendrais et je accepterais. Non, tel un théâtre vrai, sans fard et sans masque, les déchets comme le cadavre m’*indiquent* ce que j’écarte en permanence pour vivre.<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, Kristeva suggests that the abject is closely related to the desire to separate oneself from the mother, to “nos tentatives les plus anciennes de nous démarquer de l’*entité* maternelle” (20). In recoiling from the mother, the subject not only establishes an identity for him/herself, as

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<sup>98</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur: Essai sur l’abjection*. Paris: Seuil, 1980, 11.

Kristeva suggests, but institutes a separation from the materiality of the body which gave birth to him/her, and hence from his/her own corporeality. The elision of material reproduction is also the elision of death, and the means of its conquest. Here we may see the deeper significance of the *écran réaliste*. To place a mediating signifier between oneself and the maternal body is to place a screen between oneself and the corpse which that body (and one's own body) will one day become. The familial ideology of capitalist political economy, by discounting the labour of childbirth, excludes the female body from its definition of reproduction, replacing it with a model of symbolic maternity which obscures the physical maternal body and with it the threat of death and decay. Similarly, literary composition produces a textual body which resists literal decomposition by creating a mediated reality, through the *écran réaliste*.

In conclusion, then, when Nana rails against "cette littérature immonde, dont la prétension était de rendre la nature; comme si l'on pouvait tout montrer" (Zola, *RM*, II: 1369), she is articulating the challenge to Zola's own stated naturalist project which she embodies. One *cannot* "tout montrer", because to do so would bring the economies of capitalist and literary reproduction crashing down. Nana's nudity must always be mediated, viewed through a screen or a lens which recreates her as Venus, as a textual image of femininity separate from her material, maternal body. As the traces of her physical presence penetrate through the mediating screen of the *écran*

*réaliste*, however, her textual body is decomposed along with her literal one: “Vénus décomposait” (II: 1485).

In the following chapter, I will examine the place of the actress in the textual economy in Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Faustin*. If *Nana* represents the cracking of the *écran réaliste*, *La Faustin* depicts its complete fracturing and the disintegration which ensues in the psyche of the male protagonist. The hysteria of the actress no longer reflects the sanity of her male lover back to him but, rather, a vacuum at the heart of his identity, an image which, quite literally, petrifies him.

### Chapter 3:

#### Medusa's Head and Galatea's Body: Metamorphoses of the Actress in

##### Edmond de Goncourt's *La Faustin*

Amongst the objects cluttering up the apartment of Juliette Faustin's sister, Bonne-Ame, is an eighteenth-century pendulum depicting the myth of Galatea: "une petite merveille du siècle dernier, figurant la statuette qu'anime l'adoration amoureuse d'un Pygmalion, agenouillé à ses pieds sur le marbre blanc" (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 16). This description is the first in a series of allusions to a myth which is woven into the novel as a whole. In *Nana*, as we saw in the previous chapter, the fantasy of Galatea degenerates into the horror of death and decomposition which accompanies the female reproductive body in the masculine imaginary. In *La Faustin*, published in 1882, the image of the actress's putrefied body which closes *Nana* gives way to another kind of reproductive nightmare, to William Rayne's frozen grimace, as he undergoes his *agonie sardonique*, during which he is compelled to watch his dying moments endlessly reproduced on his lover's face.<sup>99</sup> For Goncourt, the figure of the actress as Galatea, sculpted and brought to life by the male gaze, does not disintegrate like *Nana*'s "chair de marbre" (Zola, RM, II:1120), but rather evolves into that of Medusa, a figure of petrification whose gaze turns a man to stone. The transition from Galatea to Medusa narrated by *La Faustin* is also a journey from the ideal to the pathological, in which the

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<sup>99</sup> At the end of the novel, Rayne suffers a kind of stroke which leaves him paralysed, with his face frozen in a sinister rictus.



actress as ideal muse is revealed as Nana's horrifying twin, the lack to her overwhelming presence.

At stake in the legend of Galatea is the fantasy of an ordered symbolic universe under human – and specifically male - domination and the stability of identity in relation to that universe. The myth of a statue brought to life by her creator's passion is a myth of man's mastery of the world and of the feminine in particular. Faced with the death of the Father in modern culture and a consequent radical destabilisation of meaning, as Ross Chambers has argued, nineteenth-century French authors fantasised through the figure of Galatea a world in which the artist takes the place of God as creator and arbiter of meaning in the symbolic order.<sup>100</sup> The actress, with her ever-fluid identity, provides a seemingly perfect foil for such a fantasy, the malleability of her persona enabling her to function as a creative space, a vehicle through which the (male) artist creates and interprets an autonomous symbolic world of his own invention. As Chambers puts it: “[l’actrice] sera Galatée lorsque... les signes seront ressentis comme étant d’invention humaine et l’univers de l’art comme un monde autonome créé par le travail actif du poète, l’actrice-automate étant cette poupée à laquelle il s’agit d’ ‘insuffler la vie,’ sous peine d’en ressentir de façon intolérable le vide absolu” (19). In *La Faustin*, however, the apparently ideal image of the actress as Galatea disintegrates into a nightmarish revelation of the void which she was supposed to fill. The

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<sup>100</sup> Ross Chambers, “L’Ange et l’automate: variations sur le mythe de l’actrice de Nerval à Proust,” *Archives des lettres modernes*, 128, 1971, 8 – 19.

protagonist struggles and fails to sustain the Pygmalion myth projected onto her by her lover. and in doing so, reveals not only the misogyny which underpins that fantasy but the fragility of the identity which it founds.

The Pygmalion myth is one which is driven by a disdain for female sexuality: Pygmalion creates his statue in response to the horror inspired in him by the Propoetides, the daughters of Propoetus, who are punished for their denial of Venus's divinity by being driven to prostitute themselves and ultimately by being turned to stone, in a myth which forms the prelude to Ovid's account of Pygmalion's story:

But the obscene daughters of Propoetus dared  
To deny Venus's divinity. The goddess's wrath  
Is said to have caused these women to be the first  
To prostitute their bodies and tarnish their names,  
And as their shame left they could no longer blush,  
For the blood in their faces grew stiff and hard,  
And it was a small change to turn them to flint.<sup>101</sup>

The sight of these women – who might be read as hysterics *avant l'heure* – leads Pygmalion to reject woman in her flawed “natural” state in favour of an artificial creation, “offended by the faults that nature had lavished/On the female psyche” (ll. 268-9). The legend of Pygmalion and Galatea is then one which is founded on a rejection of woman in favour of an artificial copy, who, even after her apparent embodiment occupies an ambiguous space between life and death, original and reproduction.

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<sup>101</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010, X. ll. 259-65.

The figure of Galatea draws upon two opposing yet interrelated trends in the way in which the Western cultural tradition views the female body. On the one hand, the female body stands as a metaphor for the production of meaning, through its capacity to reproduce. At the same time, however, Woman is fantasised as castrated, as representing a lack of symbolic capacity through her lack of a phallus, the apparently empty space between her legs. In the Pygmalion legend, as it is recounted by Ovid, these two visions of the female body come together in an erotic fantasy of autonomous male reproduction in which the female body is shaped and given life by the creative force of masculine desire. This myth of male potency is also a myth of female disempowerment in which the female generative capacity is reappropriated in a parthenogenic fantasy of masculine creation. Galatea's reproductive body is merely the object of Pygmalion's gaze and his desire: she has no subjectivity independent of her creator, animated only by his touch: "The ivory/Was growing soft, and as it lost/Its stiff hardness it yielded to *his fingers*... The veins were throbbing *under his thumb*" (ll. 312-4. My emphasis). Her consciousness is entirely bound up with that of Pygmalion: "lifting her shy eyes up to the light/[She] took in the sky and her lover together" (ll.326-7). Although Galatea, in Ovid's version of the myth, bears Pygmalion a daughter, she cannot be a mother, since maternity, as Gail Marshall points out, "necessitates speech, relationship, a recognition of the temporal, finite implications of the female body."<sup>102</sup> The maternal body, in the

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<sup>102</sup> Gail Marshall, *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance*

Pygmalion myth, is simply a mechanism, an automaton. Galatea is entirely the object of her creator's gaze, which she is unable to return, the product of his discourse in which she is denied the capacity of independent speech.

In recounting the fulfilment of Pygmalion's desire for his own creation, the legend also recounts the founding of a dynasty: the descendants of Pygmalion and Galatea would go on to found and rule the Cypriot city of Paphos. Robert Graves suggests that the legend is a mythological representation of the overthrow of a matrilineal cult of Aphrodite, speculating that it tells of the seizure by the priestess's consort of the goddess's statue, in order to retain power after the end of his term.<sup>103</sup> In other words, the appropriation of the female body represented by Pygmalion's retention of the statue enabled the supplanting of matrilineage by patriarchal power. Central, then, to the reproductive myth of the Galatea legend is the notion of *possession* of the female body as the foundation of a fantasy of patriarchy. It is possession of the female body – or rather, of a representation thereof – which guarantees Pygmalion's status as father and cements his position within a set of power structures based on genealogy; and, as we shall see, it is the difficulty, if not impossibility, of replicating that possession in modern culture which problematises the transformation of the actress into Galatea in late nineteenth-century France.

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*and the Galatea Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>103</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*. New York, George Braziller, 1955, 211-212.

The body of the actress, characterised as it is by its plasticity, lends itself well to such a mythological reading in *La Faustin*. La Faustin literally remakes her body in order to fulfil her role as an avatar of femininity:

Puis c'était le dentiste pour éclairer l'émail des dents, la manucure pour raviver le nacre des ongles, etc: toute la série des pratiques minutieuses et secrètes, avec lesquelles, pour une première, se fabriquent le rajeunissement, le refaçonnement d'un visage et d'un corps, que l'actrice et l'acteur veulent, pour ainsi dire, tout neufs ce jour-là. (116-7)

In this process of reshaping herself in her own image, she is complicit with her male audience, whose gaze helps to refashion her. As a public woman, La Faustin is also public property, a sign to be exchanged amongst men, in particular via newspapers. At the beginning of the novel, we see her being questioned by a journalist as to when she will open in *Phèdre*, since "le journal tient à l'annoncer dès maintenant" (15). It is through the press that her image is not only diffused and circulated, but made. Before the première is even over, Ragache is eager to inform her of the views of the critics who will sculpt her image as surely as any Pygmalion: "le critique de la *France libérale*, lui! il se rendait parfaitement compte qu'il s'était produit un léger amollissement dans ses alinéas... et qu'on ne le lisait plus... il en était à l'heure où l'on avait besoin d'inventer quelqu'un... et c'était elle qui allait être inventée par lui" (123). Immediately prior to this, she is approached by "le grand sculpteur moderne, celui qui, le premier, a fait rendre à la pierre, au marbre et au bronze, la vie nerveuse de la chair," who literally desires to transform her into his Galatea by sculpting her as Tragedy: "il venait demander à l'actrice de faire d'après elle une statue de la tragédie. Et, sans

s'inquiéter des autres qui étaient là, il la forçait à retrouver une pose qu'elle avait eue un moment, il la soulevait familièrement de son fauteuil, arrangeant presque de force sur elle sa tunique" (122).

La Faustin's desirability, then, lies in her potential to be the Galatea of all the would-be Pygmalions who form her public. From her working-class origins, we are told, she has kept "des mouvements de l'âme moins disciplinés, des impressions plus rapprochées de la nature, des sensations plus extérieures, et un entrain, et un montant, et une gaieté de pauvre diable conservée dans l'existence heureuse, et une vie au pouls précipité, une vie agissante, remuante, tourbillonnante" (195). Even physically la Faustin is characterised by her fluidity and her capacity for metamorphosis: descriptions of her note the "ondulation flottante" of her body and her ever-changing eyes, which are "gris, ou plutôt d'une nuance indéfinissable, des yeux de la couleur d'une vague, avec dedans, la nuit ou la transparence que met le passage d'une vague ou d'un coup de lumière en de l'eau de mer: des yeux à la fois obscurs et clairs" (125; 193). In her infinite plasticity, the actress is the focus for a scopophilic ideal of the masculine symbolic, in which, sculpted by the male gaze, she embodies an ordered universe of signs with man as the creative force at its centre.

A delicate balancing act is required of the theatre woman who must represent, but under no circumstances reveal, the female body. La Faustin is instinctively aware of this distinction between representation and revelation. Her requirement that her costume have "un caractère antique" (105) is, she

emphasises to the elderly painter who designs it, not to be confused with a need for historical accuracy. When the designer objects that the costume reproduces an engraving of the Villa Borghese, she responds: “villa Borghese... est-ce qu’il y avait des jupons dans ce temps-là... et voilà le *hic*, c’est que nous en portons maintenant... Je ne puis cependant, pour te faire plaisir, ma vieille bête, jouer *en peau*, là-dessous” (104-5). Authenticity must not interfere with the projection of the desired image of Woman: a veil must be maintained between the actress and her audience to ensure conformity with the expectations of the latter. When he continues to insist on the historical truth of the garment, she dismisses him with the explanation “je m’en fiche pas mal d’être bien historiquement... il s’agit avant tout d’être jolie” (104-5). The role of the actress is to profer an image, not to reproduce a referential reality.

For William Rayne, *la Faustin*, as an actress, fulfils the function of Galatea, as the symbiosis of the female body and its image, the conduit for a masculine genealogical fantasy of reproduction. *La Faustin* represents to Lord Annandale a coming together of the symbolic and the sexual: “la galanterie presque divinisée, une liaison sensuelle dans le bleu, de l’amour physique en de l’idéalité” (203). She takes care to present herself in just such a fashion upon their reunion, in which she transforms her naked body into a sign in order to receive him: “quand lord Annandale entra, le corps de la femme nue n’était plus qu’une apparence rose, presque invisible, dans une blancheur laiteuse, opaline, qui voilait et habillait sa nudité, d’un nuage” (167). Like

Nana in her transparent costume, then, she appears as Venus, as an image of the female body which promises yet constantly defers revelation, acting as a kind of screen for any and all fantasies. William therefore seems to speak more truly than he knows when he reassures her of his continued devotion during their separation with the words “c’était votre portrait que j’aimais” (179). La Faustin’s attraction lies in her mutability, her ability to transform herself into the object of any desire: “c’étaient des transformations, des métamorphoses, de subites transfigurations, où la femme, se renouvelant, pour ainsi dire, se faisait aimer toujours et toujours sous une forme nouvelle” (196) .

La Faustin has, however, a hysterical counterpart in her literal and figurative sister Bonne-Ame, in whom the infinite variation of the actress in accordance with the gaze of her male admirers is transformed from an ideal into a pathology. The hysterical attack which Bonne-Ame suffers during a dinner party early in the novel is broken down into stages, which parallel not only the courses of the meal, but also Charcot’s periodisations of the *grande attaque* and the acts of a play: “au premier service, Bonne-Ame a été d’une gaieté de tous les diables... au second, elle a fait de l’œil hystérique à tous les hommes... à l’entremets, elle s’est disputée avec Carsonac... et au desserts les pleurs et les sanglots” (71). In the wake of this “crise de nerfs” (76), she gives a pathological performance of the same mutability which characterises her sister:

Ondulante et serpentante et attouchante, la folle, en son travail d’allumeuse d’hommes, dans un enlacement souple, aussitôt délié,



faisait compter les battements de son cœur à un invité, un moment écrasée sur la poitrine d'un invité qu'elle frôlait; ou bien renversée et perdue dans l'ombre d'un grand fauteuil, livrait au baisers l'ivresse de son pied, traversant les jours de soie blanche de son bas. (77)

Her hysteria and her nymphomania are clearly linked in this description, which ties them to the actress by giving them the air of a performance as “Bonne-Ame partit d'un éclat de rire tout spécial, et par lequel s'annonçait l'exécution à *grand orchestre* d'un amant, exécution à laquelle elle aimait à associer *le public*” (77; my emphasis). In her hysterical performance, this “[c]réature de caprice chez laquelle semblait se battre le pouls de la folie, nature mouvante, détraquée, indevinable,” (77) with her “enlacement souple, aussitôt délié,” represents a pathologised version of the ideal offered by the actress of the female body as infinitely malleable.

La Faustin herself shows tendencies towards hysteria linked to her status as a female performer. The creation of a role is felt as a kind of possession, in the other sense of the word, as a doubling of the actress's personality: “le rôle prenait possession d'elle, s'emparait de sa pensée” (51), and the narrator quotes “une de nos plus vaillantes actrices” who claims that

A partir du jour ou le rôle m'est confié, nous vivons ensemble. Je pourrais même ajouter qu'il me possède et m'habite. Il me prend certainement plus que je ne lui donne. Aussi m'arrive-t-il de prendre, chez moi come ailleurs, le ton, le physionomie, l'allure générale que je veux lui donner, et cela inconsciemment[...] En pareil cas, je *suis deux*. C'est tout le secret de mon travail. Je pense et vis le rôle. Il est *vécu* quand je le livre au public. (51-2)

Whilst preparing her performance as the “grande hystérique légendaire,” (99) Phèdre, la Faustin shows traces of the same nymphomania as her sister, a “furieux besoin d'aimer” as “l'actrice se sentait mordue de la soudaine et

irrésistible envie de l'adultère avec l'inconnu fourni par l'occasion" (100). In her encounter with the fencing master, she is possessed entirely by her sexual desires: "il n'y avait plus, dans son être ardent et moite, que le désir sensuel, l'appétit déréglé d'une jeune bête en folie" (110). Like the scene which Bonne-Ame makes at the dinner, la Faustin's performance on the opening night of *Phèdre* resembles a hysterical attack, at the end of which she falls into a state of catatonic aphasia not dissimilar to that so frequently described in patients of the Salpêtrière:

La Faustin tombait sur son petit fauteuil à maquillage, les jambes allongées et raidies devant elle, dans un espèce d'état cataleptique. Complètement muette, elle ne répondait à l'effroi et aux paroles de [Guénégaud] qui voulait aller chercher le médecin du théâtre, que par les remuements de la tête, et par l'approche d'une main touchant sa bouche, touchant son cou, avec un geste indiquant que les nerfs qui servent à l'émission de la voix, étaient tellement contractés chez elle dans le moment, qu'il lui était impossible de parler. (124)

The following day, we find her "en proie à une de ces tristesses noires, à un de ces navrements sans cause et sans raison, qui suivent les grandes dépenses de fluides nerveux dans l'émotion, de la joie, du plaisir fiévreux" (145). Her performance of femininity is, then, as much pathologised as it is idealised in the novel.

The roots of this pathologisation lie in the very plasticity which makes her so attractive. The public status of la Faustin, as an actress, makes her a very different Galatea from the Ovidian model, for she is, as we have seen characterised by her potentiality, by her openness. Whereas in Ovid Galatea can exist only in a binary relationship with her creator, in which she "remains only and always the image of Pygmalion's desire," as Marshall puts it, the

public is la Faustin's Pygmalion: every man who meets her has the hope of possession, and it is this that represents her unique appeal (Marshall, 18).

The actress is the Galatea of the post-paternal world: that is to say, she is the Galatea of a world in which the Pygmalion myth has fundamentally changed because possession – and hence paternity – can no longer be assured. The figure of the actress was central, in Berlanstein's view, to the construction of a new, postrevolutionary elite in which the most important criterion was not aristocratic birth but fashion:

the terminology that the press employed to describe Monsieur underwent subtle changes, from one of rank to a language of fashionableness. The keepers of mistresses were now "men-about-town" (*viveurs*), "clubmen" (that is, men who belonged to exclusive groups, like the Jockey Club), fashionable men (*hommes à la mode*), stylish men (*hommes chics*). (Berlanstein, 121)

Berlanstein's conclusions reflect a shift in the basis of social identity: no longer is social identity a reflection of genealogy, that is to say a reflection of the codification of biological birth; rather it is based on mastery of the codes of fashion, on the consumption of objects possessed of a certain symbolic value. To become the lover of an actress was then, a socio-economic gesture, an affirmation of status through the consumption of an object designated as desirable.

Blancheron, la Faustin's lover-protector at the start of the novel, appears as an emblematic figure of these new social structures. He is "un des plus fiers estomacs de la Bourse" living an "existence donnée à l'*alea* de l'argent" (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 56; 57). In other words he represents an economy in which the certainty of possession and the transmission of wealth

between generations have been supplanted by the circulation of monetary signs. Blancheron's relationship with la Faustin is a primarily economic one, based on the exchange of pleasure and status for financial support, implying no proprietary rights on his part. In the opening scene of the novel, as la Faustin reminisces about her love affair with William Rayne, Blancheron attempts to evoke a right of possession, chiding her: "si vous ménagiez un peu la jalousie du patron". She replies by telling him that: "Nous sommes un ménage, n'est-ce pas, nous ne sommes pas des amants, nous" (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 13). Whereas, previously, "[la Faustin] m'appartenait, elle était mienne" (59), nothing guarantees the continuation of either this possession or of Blancheron's status as *le patron*. Once la Faustin leaves him for William Rayne, he is abruptly dispossessed and obliterated from the text, leaving no trace following his suicide beyond the dog whom he leaves to his former lover's care. As Barbey d'Aurevilley remarks in his critical review of *La*

*Faustin*:

[L']art [de l'actrice] est de ne plus être une âme humaine comme la nôtre, mais un protéisme d'apparences qui passent et qu'elle rappelle à son gré avec la puissance évocatrice d'une magicienne, qui charme et qu'on ne charme pas! De ce monstre qu'on divinise il peut tout à coup ne rester pas plus que de la nuée d'Ixion quand on la presse sur son cœur.<sup>104</sup>

The complete oblivion to which his rival is consigned leaves a profound impression upon Lord Annandale, who feels "une espèce d'effroi du peu de racine que laisse dans le cœur nouvellement amoureux d'une femme, un vieil

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<sup>104</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aurevilley, "Le Roman contemporain," *Les Hommes et les œuvres*. 20 vols.. Paris, Lemerre, 1902, XVIII, 65.

amour” (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 182), and it is the fear of this same oblivion which causes his profound jealousy.

In contrast to Blancheron, Lord Annandale is an emblematic figure of the genealogically-based structures of primogeniture and patrilineage, a representative of the social system which collapsed in France with the Revolution. His character, indeed, bears echoes of the early nineteenth-century *mal-du-siècle* heroes such as the protagonists of Chateaubriand’s *René* or Constant’s *Adolphe*: wandering, melancholy aristocrats who have in some way fallen from paternal grace.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps the most striking echo is between Rayne and the male hero of Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne*, Oswald. Both are Scottish aristocrats, who fall in love with women who distinguish themselves by public performance. In both cases, it is the disapproval of their fathers which causes them to end the relationship, and both protagonists eventually return home to assume the position of the deceased father. My purpose here is not to undertake an extended comparative reading of *Corinne* and *La Faustin*, but rather to argue that the character of William Rayne invokes a certain nostalgia for the return of patriarchal structures in which genealogy, founded upon the possession and exchange rather than the circulation of the female body, determined social identity. His card inscribes him firmly under the sign of the Father, announcing him by the title Lord

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<sup>105</sup> For a fuller examination of the literature of the *mal-du-siècle*, see Call, Michael, *Back to the Garden: Chateaubriand, Senancour and Constant* (Saratoga, CA., Anma Libri, 1988). Also, Waller, Margaret, *The Male Malady: fictions of impotence in the French romantic novel* (New Brunswick, NJ :Rutgers University Press, 1993)

Annandale which he has recently inherited: indeed, Juliette only connects the card to William through her recollection that “Annandale était le nom de son père” (107). His return under his inherited title, as “le jeune lord en grand deuil” (107) marks his assumption of his place in structures whereby wealth and rank are transmitted seamlessly through the structures of family and genealogy. Along with this heritage, I suggest, comes a nostalgia for the patriarchal myth of Pygmalion, for a culture based on the unproblematic possession of the female body by one man.

William’s return to reclaim la Faustin coincides with her performance in the role of Phèdre through which she is to be integrated into the classical French tradition embodied by the Comédie-Française. Her success will establish her as part of the artistic lineage represented by the “curieux et intime musée” of the green room of the Comédie-Française, whose walls are adorned with portraits of her predecessors in “la majesté, la pompe, la grandiose des reines de théâtre d’autrefois” (150) and key members of the French theatrical aristocracy, “figurés dans un de leurs rôles” (151). This artistic tradition is one which is intimately bound up with the genealogically-based social structures of the *ancien régime* and the absolutist monarchy, as is made clear by a picture representing Louis XIV receiving Molière at his table, which adorns one of the walls.

The men in charge of the production are determined to insert la Faustin into this classical tradition, and to ensure that the masculine artistic heritage represented by the theatre of the *grand siècle* is reproduced exactly through

the medium of her body. At one point, the character known as *le directeur* reminds her to follow in the footsteps of her theatrical “ancestors,” and to reproduce “l’effet introduit par Mlle Clairon, le léger frémissement de tout son corps, au moment où le son de la voix d’Hippolyte frappe son oreille” (90-91). No innovation or deviation from the tropes of classicism can be allowed, as *le directeur* reminds her: “[q]u’on aperçoive toujours à travers votre diction, la structure de nos grands vers symétriques, balancés sur deux rimes jumelles et deux hémistiches égaux” (94). Racine’s textual body, it would seem, must be reproduced exactly in accordance with tradition with no creative input from the actress.

La Faustin’s visit to Athanassiadis early in the novel, however, has implanted in her a vision of Phèdre which defies the conventions of the classical French version:

Et Athanassiadis, arrivé à l’accusation posthume de Phèdre contre son beau-fils, se mettait à expliquer aux deux femmes, avec un intelligence qui surprit la Faustin, cette figure de fatalité bien autrement grande, bien autrement humaine, bien autrement *nature* dans son ressentiment amoureux, que la femme conventionnelle et théâtralement *sympathique*, peinte par le poète de la cour de Louis XIV; et le commentateur donnait à la tragédienne moderne, la tentation d’accents nouveaux à introduire dans le rôle rajeuni, renouvelé, compris historiquement. (47)

The “figure de fatalité bien autrement grande, bien autrement humaine, bien autrement *nature*,” which Athanassiadis offers la Faustin, challenges the conventions of the Théâtre-Français, and along with it those of “la cour de Louis XIV” of which the Comédie-Française was a creation. La Faustin is drawn to this “autre Phèdre que celle de Racine,” one free from the

restrictions of conventional theatrical representation – and by implication from thespian genealogy: “Je voudrais revenir de chez vous, comme une Barbare d’autrefois... qui aurait passé deux heures dans la Grèce de Péricles” (41). Following her visit to Athanassiadis, we see the burgeoning of the hysteria which is latent in her, but which becomes more pronounced as the performance approaches.

It is precisely this hysteria, however, that the classical tradition demands be excised from the actress’s performance. In the words of *le directeur*: “qu’on ne sente pas dans cette scène la folie physique... point d’hystérie... ne soyons pas l’actrice trop dirigée par le public... vous avez un talent au-dessus de cela... jouons en victime de la fatalité, en femme succombant sous la vengeance des Dieux... C’est la tradition, la grande tradition du Théâtre-Français” (96). *Le directeur* here makes a revealing association, between modernity, hysteria and the relationship between the actress and her audience. In doing so, he offers an insight into the crucial difference between the role of the actress in the “grande tradition du Théâtre-Français” and the actress of the emerging theatre industry of the late nineteenth century. In the “grande tradition” of French theatre, the actress remained a vessel for the reproduction of male textual creation, through which canonical works were transmitted in something approximating their original form. By the late nineteenth-century, however, a shift had occurred as the culture of celebrity created an ever-greater familiarity between the actress and her public, fostering an illusion of intimacy, of possession, which



disrupted the smooth transmission of meaning from author to audience via the actress's body. The première of *Phèdre* is characterised by those very qualities against which *le directeur* warned his lead actress. As soon as she steps on stage, she establishes a complicity with her audience:

à chaque vers qu'elle dit, elle sent, peu à peu, se dissiper cette atmosphère de séparation qui, dans les premières, au lever du rideau, existe entre le public et l'acteur, ce manque de contact presque intraduisible, et comparable à la superposition de gazes transparentes, jetées entre eux, et que la réussite dissipe, balaye une à une, à mesure que la pièce marche. (119)

As the "gazes transparentes" separating the actress and the audience disappear, the actress becomes not the transcendent embodiment of theatrical tradition, offering a single, uncomplicated meaning, but rather she is open to interpretation and possession by all.

The return of William Rayne at this moment in the narrative coincides with la Faustin's recuperation into the patriarchal tradition of the Comédie Française. She once again belongs to one man:

Ainsi qu'elle l'avait promis à Lord Annandale, la Faustin jouait pour lui, pour lui seul, accordant à son amant la plus grande satisfaction d'orgueil que puisse donner à un homme l'amour d'une comédienne: l'offrande amoureuse de son talent, en présence et en dédain des deux mille personnes pour lesquelles elle joue, et qui sont comme si elles n'étaient pas. (173)

Whilst the performance remains a public one as "des têtes se retournaient de l'orchestre, des têtes se penchaient sur le balcon" (172), the focus of the spectacle is now William's repossession of Juliette, the actress not as the potential fantasy of every man but as her lover's sole possession: "les paroles de Racine ne racontaient plus au public l'amour de la femme de Thésée,

mais racontaient à William l'amour de Juliette, et, avec l'ombre des forêts de la Grèce, elle lui parlait de l'ombre des bois de l'Ecosse" (171).<sup>106</sup> The Shakespearian echo – one of the few times in which the novel uses la Faustin's first name – here places the lovers into the context not of the classic tale of star-crossed lovers which one might expect involving an actress named Juliette, but of a creator-created relationship which brings us back to the myth of Pygmalion and the reproductive fantasy which underlies it. At the same time, la Faustin is reinserted into the classical tragic tradition: "[c]e n'était plus la Phèdre un peu sauvagement sensuelle de l'avant-veille, la Phèdre d'Euripide, c'était la Phèdre de Racine, la Phèdre langoureuse, et au roucoulement de colombe blessée de la cour polie des vieilles civilisations" (173). Lord Annandale's return seems to draw la Faustin back into the artistic lineage of French classicism, and, at the same time, into the patrilineal structures of absolutist monarchy with which the classical tradition was so inextricably bound up. Through her performance as Phèdre he reclaims her as his possession, a gesture which he repeats on the economic level later in the novel, when he buys her out of her contract with the theatre (238).

Through his reclaiming of la Faustin as his possession, Rayne enacts a kind of Pygmalion fantasy. As long as she remains an actress, la Faustin's beauty is described in highly artistic terms, with references to "la chaude blancheur exsangue peinte par Titien" (192) or "l'harmonie de gestes

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<sup>106</sup> This is, to an extent, merely a fantasy of William's perception: the presence of the public cannot be entirely elided, but William is able to imagine himself as exclusive possessor.

sculpturaux” (193). Removed from Paris and the theatre, “[c]e n’était plus la Faustin de la Comédie-Française, l’actrice parisienne[...] C’était une autre femme” (240). The actress metamorphoses into a woman:

la sécheresse de l’élégant corps de la tragédienne s’enveloppait maintenant partout d’une petite rondeur ferme, tendant le fil de couture de ses robes, et qui mettait du gras et du juvénile à ses attitudes, à ses remuements, à ses gestes... il remontait sur le visage de trente ans de la Faustin la jeunesse d’une fillette, et l’incarnate fraîche de ses joues, et la blancheur lactée de ses carnations, et le rayonnement humide de ses yeux, et le rose rougissant du bout de ses oreilles. (240)

Here, Galatea has been transformed from a work of art into a sentient being: the fantasy of the actress has been brought to life in flesh and blood.

The fantasy of unproblematic possession which underpins La Faustin’s relationship with Lord Annandale, however, quickly proves incompatible with her status as an actress and therefore as a “faiseuse d’amoureux” (206). Initially, there is a hybrid quality to the affair, in which the “publicité de leur amour” (190) in society, contrasts with the “tête-à-tête” of their home life (190). Whilst Lord Annandale is able to accept his lover’s profile in a public context, he nevertheless prefers their domestic relationship to remain a private one, retaining “une certaine résistance à introduire ses amis, ses relations, dans un intérieur qui n’est pas l’intérieur conjugal” (191). The “tête-à-tête” (192) of their relationship becomes progressively more pronounced over the course of the novel as Rayne’s inability to reconcile himself to La Faustin’s life as an actress becomes ever clearer. He finds it increasingly difficult to accept the familiarity with which she is accosted by those who barely know her, the potential openness to all which is the characteristic and

supreme attraction of the actress and which reemerges in the context of the theatre, in particular in the liminal space of the dressing room, at once the actress's intimate refuge and the place in which she receives her guests:

Dans cette loge, la femme n'était plus la femme du faubourg Saint-Honoré et de partout ailleurs, la femme dont le regard, le sourire, l'expression amoureuse du visage, appartenaient à son amant seul. Là, dans ce tiède recoin, dans ces entrailles, pour ainsi dire, du théâtre, il revenait en elle un peu de l'ancienne Faustin et de cette coquetterie que l'actrice a pour tout le monde. (206)

His breaking of a cup belonging to the eighteenth-century actress Mlle Clairon, prompted by an acquaintance's over-familiar use of *tu*, is symbolic of his jealousy and brings about a quarrel in which he admits to his unease:

“Juliette.. je ne sais pas... mais ici, votre visage, votre voix pour les autres...”

(209). William is here jealous not only of individuals, but even, he admits, of his lover's audience (210). The “tête-à-tête” of their Parisian life becomes even more exclusive following her resignation and their move away from Paris, as they live far from society, “au milieu des montagnes bleues” (230), leading “une vie à deux”, since “[l]’amour un peu jaloux de William continuait à avoir peur du monde, et dans la grande villa, parmi cette installation princière, les deux amants vivaient seuls” (246), interrupted only briefly by the fatal visit of George Selwyn, before returning to “la vie tête-à-tête” (268). Their relationship, it seems, is sustainable only when its binary nature is jealously guarded, when William has sole possession of his Juliette.

Underpinning this possession, however, is a certain violence. Before she can be brought to life as Galatea, the actress in *la Faustin* must be destroyed. In order to adapt to her new life, *la Faustin* seeks to eliminate all

traces of the actress in herself, resigning from the theatre and leaving Paris. Before she does so, she attends the sale of the belongings of a famous tragedienne. This visit is, in a sense, a pilgrimage to her own shrine: the costumes on display, “les robes de Phèdre, les robes d’Hermione, les robes de Roxane,” (228) all correspond to roles which la Faustin is mentioned as playing in the novel. When asked by William why she has chosen to come and view “les reliques dramatiques de ce corps” (228), she explains that “c’est pour aider à la mort de la tragédienne... chez moi” (230), and later she writes to her sister, to inform her that this attempt has been successful, and that “l’actrice est bien morte et enterrée chez moi” (235). Galatea, it seems, must be killed into life.

At the beginning of the novel, la Faustin is a powerful, creative force. As the narrator puts it: “Créer un rôle, c’est-à-dire donner la vie extérieure de l’âme, donner la vie de la physionomie et des gestes, donner la vie de la voix, à un personnage imprimé, à un cadavre du papier” (50). La Faustin may be “frappée de la stérilité des courtisanes” (223) but she is nevertheless a powerfully generative figure whose creative abilities are compared favourably to those of a writer:

Alors l’opération qui se fait dans une imagination d’écrivain, lentement échauffée: ce jaillissement du néant d’un embryon du personnage, sa formation successive, son relief final de créature vivante, son existence enfin, l’actrice sentait se faire cette opération mieux que dans son esprit, elle la sentait se faire dans sa personne. Elle cessait d’être elle, au milieu de l’intime et secrète jouissance que l’acteur éprouve à être un autre que lui-même. Une nouvelle femme, créée par le labeur de son cerveau, entrait dans sa peau, l’en chassait, lui prenait sa vie. (51)

This power is neutralised by her elimination of the actress within herself: in her apparent idyll with Lord Annandale, la Faustin finds herself living as a kind of automaton, in a state of uncertainty somewhere between life and death which seems analagous to the ambiguous status of Galatea, at once statue and woman. Disturbed by the “immobilité pétrifiée” (259) of those who surround her, she begins to question the reality of her “vie figée” (261), wondering whether she may not be living as an automaton amongst automatons:

Et encore dans cette villa, les individus avec lesquels elle vivait[...] lui apparaissait comme des êtres troublants, alarmants, comme une humanité drôlatique ou macabre, un peu effrayante. Même l’automatisme de ces grands laquais de six pieds, se levant tout d’un ressort dans son passage dans l’antichambre, lui faisait naître parfois l’impression qu’elle vivait non en un milieu réel, mais dans un monde vilainement fantastique. (265)

By her transformation into Galatea, the actress has in a sense been disempowered, reduced to the status of an machine.

The violence which underpins Rayne’s Pygmalion fantasy is hinted at early in the relationship, during their first sexual reunion: “Parfois en le bégaiement jouisseur d’un spasme, son enfance remontait en elle, et lui mettait entre ses dents qui s’entrechoquaient, le mot: ‘Maman,’ ce nom qui revient aussi dans la bouche des femmes qu’on assassine” (180). This sense of latent violence becomes more pronounced with the intrusion of George Selwyn into the couple’s mountain retreat. Selwyn is, we are told, a “sadique” (261), with “des théories de l’amour où il y avait de l’assassin” (263). This violence seems to infect William:

Et maintenant, depuis que ce George Selwyn était là, son amant ne lui arrivait-il pas dans les bras, à la suite des interminables causeries d'après-dîner, comme si le verbe enflammé de son ami lui eût versé dans les veines un aphrodisiaque! Et n'avait-elle pas, à l'heure présente, un peu peur de cet amour, de sa frénésie, de sa rage inassouvie et même du visage aimé, que la volupté faisait autrefois si doux et où, aujourd'hui, il lui semblait se glisser une expression étrange, presque cruelle. (264)

The Sadian intertext is made explicit by a reference to the property in Brittany owned by Selwyn, the *chaumière de Dolmancé* (267). The allusion is to the main character of Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, a twisted Pygmalion tale in which Dolmancé goes about the task of instructing the young Eugénie in the ways of sadistic libertinism. The reference to Sade carries with it a series of implications which illuminate our understanding of the Pygmalion myth as it is played out in *La Faustin*. The character of Dolmancé is unapologetically homosexual: "les délices de Sodome lui sont aussi chers comme agent que comme patient; il n'aime que les hommes dans ses plaisirs."<sup>107</sup> At the same time, he unashamedly espouses incest: "L'inceste est-il plus dangereux? Non, sans doute, car il étend les liens des familles et rend par conséquent plus actif l'amour des citoyens pour la patrie. Il nous est dicté par les premières lois de la nature, nous l'éprouvons, et la jouissance des objets qui nous appartiennent nous semble toujours plus délicieuse" (229). Sade's perverted Pygmalion is, however, merely an explicit variation on the themes of the original myth: the tale of Pygmalion's desire for his own creation is one of narcissistic love, to which, as J. Hillis Miller points out,

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<sup>107</sup> Marquis de Sade, *La philosophie dans le boudoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976, 41.

incest and homosexuality are fundamental, since in desiring Galatea, his creation, Pygmalion is, in effect, desiring himself.<sup>108</sup> The relationship between Pygmalion and Galatea is one which eliminates alterity, in which the same mates with the same; it is, moreover, an incestuous one, for Galatea is Pygmalion's daughter as well as his wife.

Above all, the Sadian intertext underlines the hatred of the procreative female body which we have already noted in the Pygmalion myth. Dolmancé and his accomplice, Madame de Saint-Ange, deny the woman's role in reproduction: a woman's egg, according to Madame de Saint-Ange "ne crée point, il aide à la création, sans en être la cause" (Sade, 64). Woman has no generative power in the Sadian universe, and so as Dolmancé explains to Eugénie, "[u]niquement formés du sang de nos pères, nous ne devons absolument rien à nos mères (64). Towards the end of the novel, this hatred of engendering maternity is vented on Eugénie's mother, who is infected with syphilis by Dolmancé's valet before having her vagina sewn up by her daughter, with the explanation that this will prevent her from giving birth again: "Ecartez vos cuisses, que je vous couse, afin que vous ne me donniez plus ni frères ni sœurs" (283). The presence of Selywn, with his "appétits des sens dérégés, maladifs" (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 261) in the text represents then a brief surfacing of its unconscious themes: the dark underside of the Pygmalion tale is brought to the fore in *La Faustin* by his introduction into the

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<sup>108</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Versions of Pygmalion*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, 10-11.



novel, revealing its Pygmalion fantasy to be a sadistic one of the elimination of the female generative capacity.

Selwyn is diagnosed by the text, and indeed by himself, as a pathological case, “un cas pathologique” (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 253) with “un front d’hydrocéphale” (252), whose nervous disorder is described in precise medical terms which recall Charcot’s case histories<sup>109</sup>:

l’action réflexe du cerveau transmettant sa volonté aux muscles adducteurs et préhenseurs, se transforme en une négation du mouvement qui leur est commandé[...] C’est, disent les médecins, la prépondérance du cerveau annihilée par l’influx nerveux de la moelle[...] il y a paralysie musculaire momentanée[...] j’intéresse au plus haut degré mon ami le docteur Burnett, et il doit me faire l’honneur d’un paragraphe, dans son prochain livre sur les *Troubles nerveux*. (Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 253)

Medical language becomes blurred with the mythical, however, as Selwyn is described in terms which underline his satanic qualities: he has a “terrible sourire énigmatique” (267) and “une figure de vieille femme, dans laquelle allait et venait un ricanement perpétuel, pareil à un tic nerveux” (252).

This sinister laughter foreshadows the *agonie sardonique* of William Rayne with which the novel culminates, and which is similarly described in terms which mingle the medical and the mythical. On the one hand, the language of the doctor who attends Lord Annandale is rigorously scientific:

Voyez-vous, madame, les jeux bizarres du muscle *risorius* et du grand zygomatique?... un cas qui n’a jamais été observé scientifiquement... Les livres de médecine allemands, anglais, français la nomment, cette agonie... et vraiment la nomment-ils?... mais aucun livre d’aucun pays ne la décrit... et nous n’avons la

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<sup>109</sup> Barbara Giraud analyses this use of medical language in *La Faustin* in detail in *L’héroïne goncourtienne: entre hystérie et dissidence*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009, 102-113.

certitude de son existence que par la mention qu'en fait, d'après le récit de Tronchin, Mme d'Epinau, une de vos compatriotes qui a laissé des Mémoires dans le siècle dernier. (276)

On the other hand, the *agonie sardonique* is described in lurid terms by the narrator:

Car ce n'était plus le sourire informulé et constestable du commencement. C'était, cette fois, bien le rire, oui un rire montant et descendant en même temps que le râle dans la gorge, un rire retroussant d'une manière atrocement ironique des lèvres violacées, un rire courant dans le sinistre *ricтус* des dernières convulsions de la vie sur une face humaine, un rire – le rire, cette si douce enseigne, sur un visage, du bonheur et de la joie –, devenu une sorte d'épouvantable caricature satanique. (277-8)

La Faustin was supposed to protect and redeem Lord Annandale from those sadistic, hysterical aspects of himself represented by George Selwyn. In a flashback to their earlier affair, we are presented with a scene which echoes that depicted by the statue of Pygmalion kneeling at Galatea's feet described at the start of this chapter:

Dans une candide nuit de lumière, à propos de rien, et sans qu'elle sût pourquoi, tout à coup son amant s'était jeté à ses pieds, avait embrassé ses genoux, la remerciant en une humble adoration, du précieux don de son amour, et cela avec des tendresses mouillées de larmes, de la joie folle, des paroles délirantes, qui disaient, dans un tumulte désordonné de l'âme, que cet amour avait retiré sa jeunesse d'un milieu de salissantes débauches, de l'étreinte de redoutables passions inspirées par des lectures et des amitiés funestes, impies (263).

La Faustin proves incapable, however, of fulfilling the role of Galatea to Rayne's Pygmalion, unable as she is to suppress the actress within her. The sight of some young girls singing by a lakeside awakens memories of the past: "[l]'émotion de la rencontre persistait et semblait avoir ramené chez la femme un monde de souvenirs, et fait remonter en elle tout son passé" (242).

That night, Lord Annandale awakes to find her “jouant comme sur les planches de théâtre” (243), acting out the role of Hermione in her sleep. On awakening, she laments: “ce n’est pas ma faute... j’ai cependant tout fait pour ne l’être plus... tragédienne” (244). La Faustin is, from this point on, torn apart to the point of schizophrenia as she seeks to repress her thespian tendencies:

Devant cette obstination entêtée de tout son être, à lui rappeler par tous les sens, et à tout instant, son ancien métier, l’actrice, à la suite d’impatiences muettes, se mettait tout à coup à crier avec des piétinements colère, comme si elle s’adressait à une autre créature qu’elle-même: Non! non! puisque je vous ai dit que c’est fini, fini, à tout jamais fini! (245)

Indeed, the inactivity and calm of her new life only exacerbate her theatrical tendencies:

Chez cette femme faite par la nature pour le théâtre, dont chaque inflexion de voix, dont chaque attitude, dont chaque rien qui s’échappait d’elle, était théâtral et spontanément[...] c’était comme une exaspération de tous ces dons, de toutes ces facultés originelles, par ce long repos, ce sommeil de plusieurs mois. Il y avait comme de son talent à la géhenne, qui voulait, de force et violemment, sortir d’elle. (256)

The actress in her reemerges inexorably not as Galatea but as Medusa. As she prepares the role of Phèdre, La Faustin is transformed into a defeminised and emasculating figure:

Il y a encore une particularité à noter chez les actrices, dans cette période de l’incubation d’un rôle, et surtout dans le labeur agaçant et contrariant des répétitions, elles sont comme enveloppées d’austérité, de froideur, d’*insexualité*. Elles semblent avoir déposé les grâces aimables de leur nature qu’elles apportent à toutes choses de la vie; elles n’ont positivement plus le sourire, et elles se montrent avec le sérieux d’hommes traitant d’une affaire. (64).

Later, as she is taken over by her theatrical tendencies, the actress is terrifying above all for her gaze: “dans les yeux de l’amoureuse était rentrée l’impérieuse, la froide, l’insensible vue de l’actrice” (256-7). It is from this gaze that she seeks to shield her dying lover: “elle se voila les yeux de ses deux mains”; “la Faustin enfoncée dans sa peur et clouée à la même place, restait les mains sur les yeux, n’osant pas voir” (276, 277). This gesture serves not only to protect la Faustin from the sight of Lord Annandale’s agony, but also to save him from her imitative impulse. As soon as she allows herself to look, the actress in her takes over:

à force de regarder, peu à peu, ainsi que dans une salle d’hôpital il s’établit un courant contagieux de crise nerveuses entre les malades, la bouche, les lèvres de la comédienne, sans qu’elle pût le vouloir, se mirent à faire des mouvements de la bouche et des lèvres du mourant, à répéter le poignant et l’horrible de ce rire sur les traits de l’agonisant. (277)

The pathology of the actress remanifests itself in a compulsion to mimicry which transforms her lover into a mechanical reproduction of himself, in a hysterical reversal of the Pygmalion myth. Far from acting as Galatea, the embodiment of a desired feminine ideal, la Faustin robs Lord Annandale of his identity in much the same way as Medusa does her victims, leaving him frozen and helpless before her.

Rayne’s condition, which, “met chez le vivant en pleine santé, une soudaine et inattendue interruption de la vie” (270), places him in a kind of suspended animation, frozen between life and death. His fate is to be “étendu, dans une immobilité de cadavre, avec, dans ses yeux, son effrayant regard fixe” (271). Rayne is, to use the French term, *médusé*. The Pygmalion

myth is one in which death is overcome, as inanimate matter is brought to life: here, we find its appalling corollary. I noted earlier the terror inspired in Rayne by the sudden and absolute absence of his rival Blancheron in death: his jealous attempt to secure possession of la Faustin and to transform her into his Galatea can be read as reflecting a desire to avoid that same oblivion. Instead, however, he undergoes a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis which reveals itself as the terrifying alternative to death. He who does not die is condemned to eternal sameness, endless fixity and repetition, undercutting the fantasy of transcendence articulated by the Pygmalion myth.

This terrible fate arouses not compassion but interest in the actress, who recognises it as “la plus étonnante chose qu’il fût donné à un artiste dramatique de voir” (278). Her grief as a lover gives way to the morbid curiosity of the actress:

[E]t insensiblement, de l’imitation nerveuse, et contre son gré de tout à l’heure, la Faustin était despotiquement amenée à une imitation étudiée, comme pour un rôle, pour une agonie de théâtre à effet; et le rire qu’elle surprenait sur les lèvres de son amant, bientôt elle arriva à chercher si c’était bien celui-là qu’elle avait aux lèvres, en se retournant et le demandant à l’ogive de la glace verdâtre de la vieille toilette, placée derrière elle. (278)

Like Medusa, she reduces the man who gazes upon her to a mere copy of himself, a facsimile. Like Medusa, too, the actress can only be looked at obliquely: Rayne only recovers sufficient movement to summon servants and turn her out when he sees her image via the mirror in which she imitates him. The double of the man who turns stone to flesh, then, is the petrifying woman who turns flesh into stone in *La Faustin*. The ideal image of the actress as

Galatea reveals itself in fact to be the face of Medusa, as the actress's merciless mimicry of her lover's final moments destroys the fantasy of coherent individuality, reducing a man to a series of endlessly repeated images of himself.

The horrifying image of decomposition which closes *Nana*, then, has as its counterpart in *La Faustin* a different kind of breakdown, the complete disintegration of an individual identity at the hands of the actress. The plasticity of the actress which makes her an ideal figure for the projection of selfhood is also a pathological compulsion to mimicry which points to a void at the heart of identity. We have in my first and second chapters seen two aspects of the myth of the actress. In *Nana*, the actress represented an overwhelming plenitude, a *hyper-woman*; in *La Faustin* we find the actress as an insufficient Galatea who reveals a fundamental emptiness.

In my fourth chapter, I would like to shift my focus away from masculine myths of the actress in order to examine the engagement of actresses with this mythology in their self-representations. Specifically, I will be examining Sarah Bernhardt's use of mimicry as a method of destabilising stereotypes of the actress: Bernhardt, I will argue, appropriates and assumes the myth of the hysterical actress as both excessively and insufficiently feminine in order to expose its fundamental performativity.

## Chapter 4:

### Performing Cliché: Sarah Bernhardt and Stereotypes of Celebrity

In her 1881 narrative of Sarah Bernhardt's North American tour, Marie Colombier relates the content of a satirical article in the American magazine *Puck*. "[L'écrivain] suppose une série de lettres adressées au *Puck* par différents personnages connus, qui déclarent que la tragédienne, en représentation, sous le nom de Sarah Bernhardt, n'est pas l'artiste de la Comédie Française, mais une fausse Sarah, une simili-Sarah, une Sarah postiche."<sup>110</sup> A group of medical students, claimed the author, had stolen a skeleton from the catacombs and programmed it to imitate Bernhardt. The fake Sarah had enjoyed great popularity in cafés and bars, to the bewilderment of the real Sarah, who was mystified by her own sudden, inexplicable success. It was this "simili-Sarah" which was allegedly now touring America, whilst the "real" Sarah Bernhardt was playing the part of a witch's broom in a Comédie-Française version of *Macbeth*. The documentation for the article, as Colombier translates it, is attributed in the conclusion to M. Barnum, "l'inventeur de la réclame moderne" (Colombier, 124).<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Marie Colombier. *Les Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*. Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1881, 121.

<sup>111</sup> Here Colombier mistranslates and distorts the article in such a way as to suggest that the reference is to P.T. Barnum, the celebrated showman. The original article ended by crediting Mr. W.H. Barnum of the National Democratic Committee with the information in the article, and makes no

This curious article engages many of the clichés of Sarah Bernhardt which would have been familiar to contemporary readers: her famously slender figure, a hunger for fame and fortune, and allegations of her artificiality. At the same time, the invocation of Barnum transforms her into an avatar of a nineteenth-century phenomenon: the celebrity. The original meaning of the word *célébrité* indicated either pomp and solemnity or a great reputation. The latter meaning was extended in the nineteenth century to include a person who enjoyed celebrity, a neologism which was sufficiently established to appear in the *Dictionnaire Littré* of 1877:

CÉLÉBRITÉ (sé-lé-bri-té) s. f.

1° Solennité, pompe. Cette cérémonie se fit avec une grande célébrité, [LA BRUY](#), Théophr. 15.

2° Renom qui s'étend au loin. La célébrité d'un nom, d'une personne, d'un ouvrage, d'un événement. Viser, parvenir à la célébrité. Une vaine, une honteuse célébrité. Ils lui disent par compliment que sa haute réputation et la célébrité qu'il a donnée au lieu où il est, les ont obligés de le venir voir, [BALZ](#). Entretien 8, dans RICHELET.

3° Néologisme, personne célèbre. Les célébrités de notre temps.<sup>112</sup>

The evolution in the meaning of the word *célébrité* leads us to make two suppositions. First, the notion of a celebrity – as opposed to the more ancient notion of a famous person – is a modern type, a phenomenon which emerged during the nineteenth century. Second, he or she is the creation of a reputation, rather than vice versa. A celebrity is the word made flesh, the embodiment of a discourse. The *Puck* article situates Sarah Bernhardt firmly

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mention of him as “the inventor of modern fame”. See *Puck*, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1880, 212.

<sup>112</sup> Emile Littré. *Dictionnaire de la langue française*. Paris: Hachette, 1878.



within the culture of celebrity, as being the creation of a reputation based on an artificial version of herself. In her own autobiography, Bernhardt offers a similar view, remarking upon her creation as a celebrity in the popular press even before she had become famous: “mon premier titre à la réclame a été mon extraordinaire maigreur et ma fragile santé. J’avais à peine débuté que les épigrammes, les calembours, les jeux de mots, les caricatures, s’en donnèrent à pleine joie[...] Mon nom devint célèbre avant que je le fusse réellement” (Bernhardt, *Ma double vie*, II: 128-9). In this chapter I examine representations and self-representations of Bernhardt as France’s first modern celebrity. Reading Bernhardt’s autobiography *Ma double vie* alongside Marie Colombier’s *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* and *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, I focus in particular on the notion of cliché in order to examine the ways in which the discourse of celebrity sought to contain and categorise Bernhardt and at the same time offered the possibility of subversion through pose and imitation.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of a mass print media in France, as circulation of Parisian dailies rose by 250 percent between 1880 and 1914.<sup>113</sup> Through inventions such as the steam-powered rotary press, the automatic paper folder, linograph machines, the train, the telegraph and other such technologies, news could be gathered, reproduced and redistributed more quickly, more cheaply and more widely than ever

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<sup>113</sup> Anne-Marie Thiesse. *Le Roman du quotidien*. Paris: Le Chemin Vert, 1984, 17.

before. With these technologies came the advent of cheap, mass-produced papers such as *Le Petit journal*, which had attained a daily circulation of more than half a million readers by the early 1870s.<sup>114</sup> Newspapers such as *Le Petit journal* based their success on the commodification of reality for consumption by a mass audience: they “framed, represented and sensationalised ‘the real thing’ as the essence of modern Parisian spectacle,” to quote Vanessa Schwartz (Schwartz, 27). New journalistic genres such as the *fait divers* transformed the everyday into a spectacle of the real to be packaged and sold as entertainment and information to an ever-wider mass audience.

Amongst the “realities” produced and offered up for show in this way by the popular press was the celebrity. Interviews and a steady stream of reportages offered details of every aspect of the life of well-known persons such as actresses. A contemporary computation expert estimated facetiously that, laid end to end, the articles written about Bernhardt would equal the circumference of the globe, and piled up, the photographs taken of her would be equal in height to the Eiffel Tower.<sup>115</sup> Tongue-in-cheek though it may be, the comparison is a telling one which illustrates the importance of the dissemination of image in the culture of celebrity. The detailed reporting of Bernhardt’s life created her as a celebrity, as a textual persona who existed in

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<sup>114</sup> Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi (eds.). *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Berghahn, 2010.

<sup>115</sup> Mary Louise Roberts. *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 171.

people's imagination independently of her person, but it was the diffusion of her image in illustrated newspapers, and on postcards, writing paper, teacups, and a host of other items which made her not only known but recognisable, familiar, to millions who had never met her. In short, it was the reproduction of Sarah Bernhardt's image which transformed her into a celebrity.

The phenomenon of celebrity was then as much a visible as it was a textual or mediatic discourse: that is to say that it partook of the ocularcentrism which Martin Jay reads as dominating Western and in particular French culture until the twentieth century.<sup>116</sup> As the theorist and filmmaker Jean-Louis Comolli put it, "the second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible. It is, of course, the effect of the social multiplication of images."<sup>117</sup> From the diorama craze to the invention of early photographic apparatus to the huge success of the Musée Grévin, nineteenth-century French society lived in a culture saturated with images of famous people. To be a celebrity was not merely to be written about or discussed, it was to be *seen*.

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<sup>116</sup> Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Jay eventually argues for a crisis of the visual which has its roots in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>117</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible" in Teresa de Laurentis and Stephen Heath (eds.), *The Cinematic Apparatus*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985, 122. See too Maurice Samuel's book on the visual culture of history in nineteenth-century France; Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

The rise of the celebrity was intertwined with that of new visual techniques, most notably that of photography, which promised ever more faithful reproductions of reality. Although technological limitations meant that photographs could not be directly reproduced until 1891, photography remained the ideal of visual authenticity, and was an indispensable part of representative techniques, as photographs were either reproduced by artists or engraved directly onto wood. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 1891, Ernest Clair-Guyot of *L'Illustration* succeeded for the first time in imprinting a photograph onto wood for reproduction.<sup>118</sup> This technique progressively became the primary means of visual reproduction, with the imprints produced being slightly retouched in order to enhance their photographic aspect so that, in Clair-Guyot's words, the image was "tellement fini que l'on n'y percevait plus le travail du crayon ni du pinceau. C'était absolument photographique. La révolution était accomplie: la photographie avait, dans ce cas, réduit le dessinateur à un rôle anonyme."<sup>119</sup> Journalistic representations were, then, intended to transcend the mediation of artistic representation and offer direct access to reality. The ideal of photographic representation was one which sought to go beyond representing "the real thing" in order to reproduce it, and even to produce a more perfect – a more *real* – version.

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<sup>118</sup> For a detailed history of the visual techniques used in journalism, see Ambroise-Rendu.

<sup>119</sup> Ernest Clair-Guyot, "Un demi siècle à *L'Illustration*," *L'Illustration*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1933. Quoted in Ambroise-Rendu, 7.

Yet the much-vaunted realism of photography was only ever an illusion. As Jay notes, whilst the dominant reception of photography was as a perfection of realism, there also swiftly emerged a “subcurrent of skepticism” (Jay, 128). Not only could photographs be tampered with, they also only ever offered a copy of reality. Nor is this image an entirely neutral one, as Craig Owens points out:

The argument that the properties of the photographic image are derived not from the characteristics of the medium itself but from the structure of the real, registered mechanically on a light-sensitive surface, may describe the technical procedures of photography. But it does not account for the photograph’s capacity to internally generate and organise meaning.<sup>120</sup>

The photograph does not offer unmediated access to its subject matter but is always an image thereof charged with ideological meaning: it replaces reality with a cliché (quite literally in French, where the word *cliché* is used to signify a photograph or snapshot). The mediatic discourse of celebrity then, with its emphasis on the power and authenticity of the photographic image, reveals itself to be a visual discourse of cliché.

Here I would like to linger briefly over the multiple and at times paradoxical meanings of the word *cliché* in French. The eighth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* gives the following definition:

CLICHÉ. n. m.  
Planche en relief obtenu au moyen du clichage. *Le cliché d'une page. Le cliché d'un fleuron. Faire des corrections sur les clichés.*  
En termes de Photographie, il signifie Épreuve négative. *Un bon cliché.*

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<sup>120</sup> Craig Owens, “Photographie *en abyme*.” *October*, 5, 81.

Il signifie figurément Lieu commun, expression rebattue. *C'est un cliché.*<sup>121</sup>

A *cliché*, then, in its initial meaning, represents a technology of mass reproduction; in its figurative sense as a *lieu commun*, it takes on connotations of an image which is validated by shared knowledge and understanding.<sup>122</sup> I would like to suggest here that the culture of celebrity which we have been discussing is one which functions by cliché: the creation of a celebrity is a process of mass reproduction in the popular press, through the creation and diffusion of images, visual and textual, designed to be seen by as many consumers as possible and to promote a shared understanding of the “reality” which is replicated. At the same time, to propagate a cliché is an ideological gesture. According to the *Dictionnaire Littré*, the verb *clicher* from which the noun *cliché* is taken has the additional meaning of *fixer, assujettir*. The cliché, like its close cousin the stereotype, is a means whereby a person or object can be reified, fixed into a particular identity. The notion of cliché, as opposed to a stereotype, however, carries within it the additional paradox created by its connection to photography: it seems to bear within it the promise of the absolute realism of a photograph, and yet at the same time, it is the product of a discourse, which reduces its object to the status of a mere type. The cliché is a type of hyperrealism which exaggerates and distorts

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<sup>121</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Paris: Hachette, 1932.

<sup>122</sup> This sense of the word *cliché* does not appear in the 1878 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, but does feature in an 1883 dictionary of typographer's slang, suggesting that it had come into use by this period. Eugène Boutmy, *Dictionnaire de l'argot des typographes*. Paris: Les Insolites, 1979, 67.

even as it claims to represent faithfully: it is caricature introduced into the discourse of realism.

In my reading of Marie Colombier's *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique* and *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, I will argue that Colombier – or perhaps more accurately, her ghostwriter Paul Bonnetain – proceeds by this same process, introducing a reifying discourse of cliché into her supposedly historical travel memoir. In her 1881 account of her travels around America with Bernhardt on her first tour of the continent, as Sylvie Jouanny puts it, “[d]u réalisme, Marie Colombier est passée insensiblement à la caricature”.<sup>123</sup> The allegedly “realistic” portrait of the actress reveals itself to be a series of clichés, drawing upon images which are already embedded in the popular mythology of the actress. Early on in the text we find an image which summarises its overall thematics. Upon her birthday, “la Divine Sarah” is presented with a bouquet by the crew of the ship on which she is travelling to America:

Un vrai bouquet, et qui en valait bien d'autres! Les fleurs étaient remplacées par des légumes. Il y avait des fleurs, des betteraves, des radis roses, des pommes de terres! Mais tout cela taillé, découpé, travaillé, groupé avec un art et une patience de matelot ou de prisonnier. Les camélias surtout, sculptés dans des navets blancs de neiges, étaient plus vrais que nature. Des poireaux et le céleri faisaient verdure encadrant les *fleurs*. (Colombier, *Voyages*, 15)

It seems no accident here that it is the camélias – associated with one of Bernhardt's most famous roles, that of Marguerite Gautier in *La Dame aux Camélias* – that should be singled out as “plus vrais que nature”. The gift is

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<sup>123</sup> Jouanny, Sylvie. *L'actrice et ses doubles: figures et représentations de la femme de spectacle à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2002), 112.

at once a perfect imitation and a subtle exaggeration which makes a mockery of its recipient.

A similar incident occurs upon Sarah's arrival in the United States, when the actress finds her baggage impounded in order that taxes may be levied, amounting to a massive total of 8000 francs. The incident is directly preceded by a long reproduction from the American magazine *Chic*, which imagines the actress lamenting that "Il ne me reste plus que 623 costumes du prix de 862, 254, 936 francs." (Colombier, *Voyages*, 35). Between the stereotype of the vanity and extravagance of the actress and the reality, there seems to be little difference, as is implied by the sardonic transition from article to anecdote, "Ici finit l'article américain" (36). The actress is ridiculed and reduced to the status of a cliché. Throughout her account of the tour, Colombier has frequent recourse to this technique of citing parodic accounts taken from newspapers which mock Sarah Bernhardt variously for her avarice, her extreme thinness, her artificiality and her vanity. In this way she overlays her own allegedly documentary account with a parodic discourse which inscribes the actress within a familiar set of clichés. As Jouanny puts it, "l'actrice se voit réduite à un phénomène de discours et de société" (Jouanny, 112). Indeed, Marie Colombier acknowledges as much in her remarks on the American newspapers:

On y commente les toilettes, les menus; on revient sur les détails biographiques consacrés par la légende[...] Toutes les vieilles plaisanteries qui ont traîné dans la petite presse parisienne sont rajeunies et adaptées à 'l'esprit américain' [...] Le mot 'Sarah Bernhardt' est cliché pour six mois. (Colombier, *Voyages*, 46)



Colombier's account of the tour does not inscribe Sarah Bernhardt in the tradition of the great diva, but rather as a celebrity, the product of a mediatic discourse who can be understood quite simply as the sum of a shared set of knowledge, a cliché. Bernhardt's own prediction that "on viendra me voir comme une bête curieuse" proves to be well-founded. It swiftly becomes clear that the purpose of the tour is not to consecrate her as an artist but to establish her as a celebrity. The reporters who track her every movement are interested less in her roles than in her eating and sleeping habits (40). Likewise, her audiences remain blissfully uncomprehending of her performances, unaware when they are following the translation of the wrong play, or when in a fit of frustration, Bernhardt changes her lines completely (223). Rather like the audience which clamours to see Nana, the public is indifferent to Sarah Bernhardt as an actress, interested only in the celebrity. It is she herself, not her art, which is the spectacle, as Colombier points out: "On vient voir Sarah simplement parce qu'elle est l'attraction à la mode" (229).

Sarah Bernhardt, in this account of her travels, is not a person or an artist, but a commodity to be bought and sold. Colombier recounts in detail the commodification of Bernhardt's celebrity:

Un homme, une femme, occupent-ils l'opinion publique d'une manière ou d'une autre? Aussitôt il se trouve quelque industriel pour donner son nom à un produit, à une invention, et ce procédé réussit souvent auprès du public[...] On comprend que bien des commerçants aient songé à utiliser le retentissement fait autour du nom de Sarah pour le bien de leurs petites affaires. (251)

Bernhardt's very name is a valuable consumer object, but it is above all her image which is traded:

On vend partout des cigares Sarah B. Un parfumer a lancé le savon S.B. et le poudre de riz de la même patronne. Les gantiers ont des gants, des épingles-cravate Sarah, toujours Sarah. Un homme d'affaires de Paris a apporté avec lui une collection de palettes-portrait, reproduisant la diva dans les principaux rôles de son répertoire Un homme d'affaires de Paris a apporté avec lui une collection de palettes-portraits, reproduisant la diva dans les principaux rôles de son répertoire. (51-2)

The mention of these portraits leads Colombier into a discussion of the wrangles over the rights to sell photographs of Bernhardt during the tours: a profitable trade for all concerned except Bernhardt herself, and the photographer (52-54). Bernhardt, then, is the object of a literal trade in clichés in the actual and the figurative meanings of the term. The Sarah who is promoted and consumed on the tour is no less an artificial image of herself, a simulacrum of "the real thing" than the "contrefaçon de Sarah... mécanique" which is produced by Thomas Edison's phonograph during the actress's visit to Menlo Park (95).

The theme of the actress as an artificial woman is also central to the satirical *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* which were published under Colombier's name in 1884, with a preface by the actual author Paul Bonnetain. The novel, which details the rise and alcoholic decline of the eponymous heroine, an actress and courtesan, who is described as a "pseudo-femme,"<sup>124</sup> a mere fascimile of herself. As the narrator explains: "L'artificiel était son lot. Elle fut

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<sup>124</sup> Colombier, Marie. *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* (Paris: Chez tous les libraires, 1883), 192.

adorablement artificielle[...] En sortant de son salon, on trouvait naturelles les femmes de Grévin, on croyait vraie la vie peinte par des Parnassiens contemplant leur nombril, on jurait avoir coudoyé les poupées déshabillées par les romanciers façon Gyp” (194-195). She is a cliché of herself – an apparently faithful reproduction which at the same time exaggerates and reifies, blurring the line between realistic representation and caricature.

Like *Les Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*, *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum* inscribes itself under the sign of the documentary. In the preface which Bonnetain wrote to *Mémoires*, the supposed life story of an actress who is a thinly-veiled version of Sarah Bernhardt, he describes the novel as “documentaire,” (xiv) elaborating upon his statement as follows:

J’entends simplement dire que vous avez travaillé d’après nature et sans rien abandonner à la fantaisie. Vous avez simplement saupoudré de votre esprit et allégé par votre rire des procès-verbaux de choses vues, lues, ou entendues. Que vous ayez écouté vos souvenirs, fouillés vos tiroirs pleins de lettres, ou interrogé des témoins oculaires: vous avez fait vrai. (xiii)

Unlike the *Voyages*, however, the text does not claim to be a coherent portrait of a specific individual, but rather its subject is explicitly the celebrity as type: “vous avez... synthétisé et pourtraicturé, non mademoiselle X... ou madame Z... mais l’*Étoile*, généralité sociale, psychique et physiologique, telle que la font nos mœurs, nos goûts, notre réclame” (xiv).

At the same time, the novel incorporates incidents which would be familiar to readers as specific to the life of Sarah Bernhardt, such as the fire which devastated her apartment, and the subsequent benefit performance, or her American tour and dispute with Marie Colombier (who appears in the

novel as Marthe Pigeonnier). Similarly, descriptions of the heroine's physique are clearly designed to call Bernhardt to mind, most notably the references to her exceptionally slender build: she is "maigre à en être ridicule" (11), recalling one of Bernhardt's most characteristic and commented upon attributes. Like the use of newspaper articles in *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt en Amérique*, the use of widely-reported events, as well as the evocation of traits popularly associated with Bernhardt, enables Colombier/Bonnetain to play a double game. On the one hand they reinforce the "realism" of the text, and at the same time they create the actress as a cliché, as the product of a shared body of knowledge.

The approach of the narration to its subject matter is deliberately fragmented, anecdotal, reflecting the description of the novel as an assemblage of documents: "arrêtés à chaque pas par des anecdotes souvent typiques dont foisonne l'histoire de notre héroïne, nous nous interrompons pour bavarder en chemin" (155). Even though the stated aim is to "photographier" (188) "Sarah Barnum," the novel claims to be a mosaic rather than a portrait: "Ce n'est pas un tableau que nous avons l'ambition de faire, d'autant qu'à force d'accumuler des croquis, nous pouvons arriver à composer une mosaïque" (155-6). The analogy of the mosaic is a revealing one: as an assemblage of anecdotes, each of which provides a snapshot – or, to use the French term, a *cliché* – of the actress which, synthesised, lead to a picture of the actress as type, the novel echoes the realist aesthetic of the newspaper as a summary, rather than a narrative representation of

reality, whose parts, arranged without coherence or logic, nevertheless combined to give an overview of contemporary reality.

Like the newspaper reports and images of Sarah Bernhardt as a celebrity, Marie Colombier's memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt at once draw upon and perpetuate a shared set of knowledge and assumptions about the actress, creating her as a type in the public imagination. Paradoxically, details of Bernhardt's individual life are used to transform her into "l'originalité typique résumant une époque, un théâtre, une école" (192). The apparently oxymoronic notion of the "originalité typique" suggests to us the notion of cliché in its original technological meaning as a metal plate made from a mould of mobile type, whose purpose is to imprint its subject matter so that it may be reproduced and disseminated en masse. In other words, by transforming Sarah into an "originalité typique," Colombier and Bonnetain's volumes serve, in the words of Craig Owens, to "imprint (stereo-*type*) the image directly on the viewer's imagination, to eliminate the need for decoding"<sup>125</sup>. The stereotype – or, to maintain the terms of this chapter, the cliché – is "a form of symbolic violence exercised upon the body in order both to assign it a place and to keep it in a place" (18). By creating Bernhardt as a stereotype, Sarah Bernhardt's detractors seek to imprint her with ideological meaning, to fix her within certain representational and representative categories.

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<sup>125</sup> Craig Owens. "The Medusa Effect or The Specular Ruse," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

One of the key clichés which is engaged in the accounts of Sarah Bernhardt under discussion is that of the hysteric. Allusions are made in *Voyages de Sarah Bernhardt* to the actress's hysterical fits. At one point, the interruption of a dinner provokes a crisis: "elle se lamente, elle crie, tamponne ses yeux de son mouchoir, se frappe le front du poing fermé, et tombe enfin dans une violente crise de nerfs (Colombier, *Voyages*, 204). Later, a disastrous performance in Mobile, OH, produces similar results: "Sarah a repris ses nerfs. Elle ne crie pas, elle vocifère. Quelqu'un vient dire qu'on l'entend de la rue" (224). In *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*, hysteria is foregrounded as the defining characteristic of the actress, who is "[d]étraquée tout simplement": the narrator remarks that "[Sarah] fut névrosée et en tira une merveilleuse partie. Seulement sa névrose, par cela même que la névrosée avait les sens abolis, n'eut jamais rien d'effrayant, rien de tragique (Colombier, *Sarah Barnum*, 192-3). The actress's hysteria is here linked to her defective sexuality. La Barnum is portrayed throughout the novel as incapable of feeling love or sexual pleasure in the manner of a "normal" woman: she is "incomplète" (36), "un être anesthésié à l'amour" (45), prompting the *bon mot* of one journalist that "ce n'est pas un (*ici un terme médical...*) qu'elle possède, c'est un durillon!" (63). The pathologisation of the actress's defective sexual body partakes of the discourse of what Michel Foucault calls the "hystérisation" of the female body:

triple processus par lequel la femme a été analysé – qualifié et disqualifié – comme corps intégralement saturé de sexualité; par lequel ce corps a été intégré, sous l'effet d'une pathologie qui lui serait intrinsèque, au champs des pratiques médicales; par lequel il a

été mis en communication organique avec le corps social[...] la Mère, avec son image en négatif qu'est la 'femme nerveuse,' constitue la forme la plus visible de cette hystérisation<sup>126</sup>.

Sarah Bernhardt-Barnum is the product of a discourse whereby the female body is reduced to its sexuality – or insufficiency thereof – pathologised and socialised. In this way she is inscribed within an ideology of the feminine as normal or pathological. Sarah Barnum's hysteria does not make her an extraordinary woman, merely an abnormal one:

[L]a Barnum[...] n'était ni un ange, ni un démon. Produit d'un milieu spécial, elle était organisée d'une façon aussi complexe que tout le monde, un peu plus mal que tout le monde, si l'on veut, mais comme toute, elle était ce qu'elle devait être, étant donnés les influences subies, l'originelle prédisposition, l'égoïsme instinctif et toutes les causes extérieures qui avaient influé sur son état physique et physiologique. (Colombier, *Sarah Barnum*, 188)

Sarah is not an exceptional individual, merely a female type, one who, correctly defined and treated, would pose no threat: "À la Salpêtrière, si l'actrice, autrement élevée et dirigée eût suivi la logique de son mal inné, à la Salpêtrière, la Barnum n'aurait jamais eu besoin de douches, et n'aurait jamais passé par la camisole de force. Elle aurait amusé les internes, distraité les infirmières, séduit tout son monde et la morphine seule l'aurait abêtie" (193). The actress is here inserted into the discourse of the familiar, the known, the discourse of cliché.

Here the discourse on *l'Etoile* as type merges with the discourse on hysteria, as the narrator of the *Mémoires* admits: "nous devons avouer qu'à nos yeux Sarah relève plutôt de l'observation médicale que de l'étude

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<sup>126</sup> Michel Foucault. *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

pûrement philosophique” (192). Like the *Etoile*, the hysteric is a product of a discourse in which the cliché in its material sense as a technique of visual realism and exact reproduction evolves into cliché in its figurative sense as a reifying type. From the mid-1870s onwards, with the installation of Paul Régnard as photographer of the Salpêtrière, photography took an increasingly central role in work on hysteria. Following Régnard’s initial album of photographs in 1875, Charcot authorised the production of Bourneville and Régnard’s *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* published in three volumes in 1876, 1877 and 1880, followed in 1888 by the first volume of the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* by Albert Londe, Georges Gilles de la Tourette and Paul Richer. Through these volumes the hysteric was transformed into a spectacle of the real to be consumed by the medical and general public alike. The language of pathology echoes that of journalism in vaunting the direct access to reality offered by photography:

Il s’agit, en effet, de garder les traces durables de toutes les manifestations pathologiques, quelles qu’elles soient, qui peuvent modifier la forme extérieure du malade et lui imprimer un caractère particulier, une attitude, un facies spécial. Ces documents impartiaux et rapidement recueillis donnent aux observations médicales une valeur considérable en ce sens qu’ils mettent sous les yeux de tous l’image fidèle du sujet étudié.<sup>127</sup>

At the same time, however, photography was used for the express purpose of the categorisation of hysterics, reducing individuals to the status of a type, a cliché:

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<sup>127</sup> Albert Londe. *La photographie médicale. Application aux sciences médicales et physiologiques*. Paris: Gauthier-Villars, 1893.



Déterminer le facies propre à chaque maladie, à chaque affection, le mettre sous les yeux de tous, voilà ce que peut faire la photographie. Dans certains cas douteux ou peu connus, la comparaison d'épreuves prises dans divers endroits ou à des époques éloignées permettra de s'assurer de l'identité de la maladie chez les différents sujets qu'on n'a pas eus sous la main en même temps[... ] Avec ces épreuves ainsi obtenues, il serait facile[...] d'obtenir par superposition une épreuve composite donnant un type dans lequel les variations individuelles disparaîtront pour laisser en lumière les modifications communes.<sup>128</sup>

Like the pseudo-documentary discourse of *Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt*, the discourse of hysteria relies on a superimposition of images which creates a type. In overlaying the type of the *Etoile* with that of the hysteric, Marie Colombier doubly reifies her protagonist, overdetermining her as a cliché whose identity is easily fixed and contained.

It is this self-same discourse of cliché, however, which Bernhardt appropriated in her self-representations, most notably in her autobiography *Ma double vie*. If we take as true of clichés that which Craig Owens remarks of stereotypes, that “they disavow agency, dismantle the body as a locus of action and reassemble it as a discontinuous series of gestures and poses,” then we can see in the performativity of the cliché the source of its destabilisation.<sup>129</sup> The cliché as a pose, a gesture, can be mimicked, its inessential quality highlighted through performance. As Owens puts it, “The mimic appropriates official discourse – the discourse of the Other – but in

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<sup>128</sup> Albert Londe. *Aide-Mémoire pratique de la photographie*. Paris: Baillière, 1893.

<sup>129</sup> Craig Owens. “The Medusa Effect, or the Specular Ruse” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992.

such a way that its authority, its power to function as a model, is cast into doubt.”<sup>130</sup>

Such a strategy of appropriation is one which has been central to feminist thought. In her classic 1929 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade,” Joan Riviere sees womanliness as a defensive gesture, a pose adopted by accomplished women to protect themselves from male hostility. This performance of femininity is, however, impossible to distinguish from any putative original: “The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade.’ My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.”<sup>131</sup> In her reading of Riviere, Judith Butler draws upon this denial of a femininity prior to its imitation in order to suggest that the categories of gender and biological sex are constituted through “discursively constrained performative acts” which must be continuously repeated.<sup>132</sup> Butler suggests that it is in this repetition – in the constant citation of cliché – that the possibility of subversion lies: “The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a deformity

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<sup>130</sup> Craig Owens. “Posing” in *Beyond Recognition.*, 201.

<sup>131</sup> Joan Riviere “Womanliness as Masquerade.” Athol Hughes (ed.) “The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920-1958.” London: Karnac Books, 1991, 94.

<sup>132</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York, Routledge, 1990, vii.

or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (141).

I propose that Sarah Bernhardt offers precisely such a parodic engagement with clichés of gender, one which enables her to disrupt through her performance the very stereotypes which she cites. Bernhardt claims in *Ma double vie* that performance is an inherently feminine mode: “Je pense que l’Art dramatique est un art essentiellement féminin. En effet, se farder la figure, dissimuler ses vrais sentiments, chercher à plaire, vouloir attirer les regards sont les travers qu’on reproche souvent aux femmes et pour lesquels on leur montre une grande indulgence.”<sup>133</sup> Bernhardt here seems to suggest performativity as a means of self-expression open to women in patriarchy, one which takes place through the appropriation and manipulation of appearances within masculine discourse.

In her publicity materials and self-representations, Bernhardt enacts the clichés propagated about her in such a way as to create a persona of alterity for herself which defied easy categorisation. As Janis Bergman-Carton puts it:

As the most famous woman in France, her celebrity allowed her to play continuously in a space of possibility, a space inhospitable to categorical binaries. In her role selection, publicity stunts, memoirs, posters, news releases, and costumes, Bernhardt regularly insinuated disruptive signs[...] into the narratives of her personal and professional life.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma double vie*. 2 vols.. Paris, Fasquelle, 1923, 2: 32.

<sup>134</sup> Janis Bergman-Carton. “Negotiating the Categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the Possibilities of Jewishness,” in *Art Journal*, 55(ii), Summer 1996, 58.

An interview published in the American magazine *The Decorator and Furnisher* shows Bernhardt moving effortlessly through clichés, all staged in her own studio: “Can it be the exotic den of a queen from a far off and savage country? Or, is it the picturesque, original studio of the artist without peer? Or, is it the boudoir, very modern, very *coquet* and very charming, of a fashionable *Parisienne*?”<sup>135</sup> Bernhardt is pictured in a number of poses, each illustrated by a corresponding cliché. In the first she is shown draped in furs, surveying a fantastic oriental den: in the second, she is shown “leaning her arm on an old missal, supported by a wooden desk, the white delicate flesh of the arm in vivid contrast with the hoary hue of the page,” whilst the left of the picture offers the possibility of a third pose, “seated in a curious Arab armchair, her blonde head shaded by the large spindle-shaped leaves of a gigantic palm tree whose radiations stripe the deep perspective of the apartment, while at her feet is her enormous dog Osman, with gray hair, cravatted in steel[...] She is there, Sarah, the charmer, she is there in all her undulating and artistic poses” (98). The studio becomes a photographic stage, a space of possibilities in which Bernhardt enacts herself in a series of bewilderingly dissonant clichés.

Just as she moved between the poses of exotic oriental queen and serious artist in this interview, Sarah Bernhardt appeared in the roles which she adopted to move with equal ease between poses of the masculine and the feminine. Her biographer Maurice Rostand commented of her that “il y

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<sup>135</sup> Maurice Guillemot. “Sarah Bernhardt at Home,” in *The Decorator and Furnisher*, 18(iii), June 1891, 98.

avait deux êtres en Sarah, l'un extraordinairement viril, l'autre extrêmement féminin, et elle était en somme le couple réuni."<sup>136</sup> Bernhardt played male characters on nine occasions in her career, most famously as the title character in *Hamlet* and as the Duc de Reichstadt in *L'Aiglon*, and publicity shots for these performances showed her in the masculine garb which she assumed for the roles. Similarly, she frequently had herself photographed in the trouser suit which she wore when sculpting. In other representations, however, for example, as Cleopatra, she embodied the image of the sexualised woman, an archetype of the *femme fatale*. As Mary Louise Roberts argues, then, Sarah Bernhardt's self-presentation mimics with uncanny effect the clichés of both masculinity and femininity (Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 179). Bernhardt's masculine Reichstadt and her hyperfeminine Cleopatra destabilised categories of gender, denaturalising the opposition between man and woman, by revealing the gendered self to be a question of performativity. A revealing anecdote recounts Bernhardt's answer to a question about her ability to withstand the gruelling rehearsal schedule of *L'Aiglon*: Bernhardt is quoted as claiming that she now had the strength of a man since cutting her hair short (Roberts, 177). Bernhardt may have been speaking in jest, but her remark nevertheless offers an insight into her self-representations. Gender, for Bernhardt, is not a question of essential nature, merely a matter of a haircut. Roberts sees Bernhardt's deliberate androgyny

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<sup>136</sup> Maurice Rostand. *Sarah Bernhardt*. Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1950, 94.

as part of a performance of eccentricity which allowed her to exceed gender boundaries, by presenting herself as an illegible spectacle of the self.<sup>137</sup> I argue that she achieved this above all through the appropriation and multiplication of clichés. A brief scan of these few amongst many roles of Sarah Bernhardt shows her drawing upon the performativity of cliché in order to present an illegible, uncategorisable version of the self. Each of the performances discussed above is a hyperlegible cliché taken on its own, but taken in conjunction with others forms an unintelligible persona which defies categorisation. Bernhardt creates illegibility through the very piling up of clichés, through the contradictory juxtaposition of incompatible images of herself which demonstrate the contingent nature of the poses which she adopts.

A similar technique underlies her performance of the self in her volume of memoirs, *Ma double vie*. Sylvie Jouanny has identified what she calls a “courbe-type du parcours de l’actrice” (Jouanny, 36) which characterises actresses’ memoirs of the late nineteenth century in general, in which the theatrical career is but a substitute for a religious vocation, a vocation which is rediscovered towards the end of the actress’s career, as she finds redemption and social acceptability through a return to religion (Jouanny, 65-69).

Bernhardt’s autobiography plays with the expectations of the genre raised by this “courbe-type”. She highlights her own desire to enter religious orders, and

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<sup>137</sup> Mary Louise Roberts. "Rethinking Female Celebrity : The Eccentric Star of Nineteenth-Century France" in Edward Berenson and Eva Giloi (eds.), *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. New York: Berghahn, 2010.

eventually to emulate the beloved Mother Superior of her convent: “Je préférais au trône que m’offrait le roi, le trône de la Mère Supérieure, que j’ambitionnais vaguement pour le tard du plus tard.” (Bernhardt, I:161) Denied her vocation by the practical needs of her family, Bernhardt never, however, makes the expected return to religion and respectability. Even though she returns from her North American tour calmed and matured, apparently in the right frame of mind for just such a conversion – “J’avais, dans ces quelques mois, mûri mon cerveau, assagi la rudesse de mes vœux” (II: 283) – she ends her autobiography with her return from the United States, as a controversial but highly public figure, and far from seeking acceptance, insists upon her own oppositional alterity: “dès ce retour, je me vouai à ma vie” (II: 283).

Not only does she defy expectations of the specific sub-genre of actresses’ memoirs, she also flouts the expectations raised by her title. The naming of *Ma double vie* seems to offer the tantalising prospect of revelation, of the recounting of hitherto unknown details of the subject’s life. *Ma double vie*, however, disrupts our expectations. Despite the promise of its title, the text does not offer unprecedented access to a hitherto unseen side of the actress’s life, as Bernhardt explicitly acknowledges in chapter 31: “Je veux mettre de côté dans ces Mémoires tout ce qui touche à l’intimité directe de ma vie. Il y a un ‘moi’ familial qui vit une autre vie, et dont les sensations, les joies et les chagrins naissent et s’éteignent pour un tout petit groupe de cœurs” (Bernhardt, *Ma double vie*, II:164). The supposedly autobiographical

nature of her project notwithstanding, she does not seek in *Ma double vie* to tell “the truth” about “Sarah Bernhardt.” Rather than seeking to contradict or to disprove the clichés which circulated about her in the name of a more “truthful” historical account, Bernhardt, I would like to argue, assumes them in order to subvert them. The “double” life referred to in the title is not, then, a simple dichotomy between the public and the private, but a recognition that, as a public figure, Bernhardt is always her own double, always a version of herself.

The narrative voice which Bernhardt adopts in her memoirs is one which does not offer direct access to intimate thoughts but is always mediated by her awareness of herself as the object of a discourse of celebrity. For example, like Colombier, Bernhardt recounts the impounding of her luggage by American customs, but to a very different effect. As in Colombier’s account, the actress is forced to look on helplessly, “spectatrice du plus étrange des spectacles” (II: 189) as her belongings – and by extension Sarah herself – are reduced to a mere sign, a monetary value. Bernhardt, however, prefaces her account of this incident with a commentary on celebrity culture and the misinformation propagated by both her detractors and her admirers. This digression serves as an introduction to the confrontation with customs, in which she is forced to recognise her essential powerlessness against the discourse of cliché which would seek to control and categorise her. Bernhardt recognises the futility of attempting to contradict “toutes ces inventions”:

Aussi, j’y ai renoncé. Peu me chaut qu’on croie ceci ou cela! La vie est courte, même pour ceux qui vivent longtemps. Il faut vivre pour



quelques-un qui vous connaissent, vous apprécient, vous jugent et vous absolvent, et pour qui on a même tendresse et indulgence. Le reste est la 'foultitude,' joyeuse ou triste, loyale ou perverse. (II: 187)

It is in the light of this that we may interpret the following comment from *Ma double vie*:

J'ai voulu quelquefois[...] forcer le public à revenir vers la vérité et détruire le côté légendaire de certains personnages que l'histoire documentée d'aujourd'hui nous représente tels qu'ils furent en réalité, mais le public ne m'a pas suivie... Nous ne voulons pas que Jeanne d'Arc soit la fruste et gaillarde paysanne repoussant violemment le soudard qui veut badiner, enfourchant comme un homme le large percheron, riant volontiers des gaudrioles des soldats, et soumises aux promiscuités impudiques de son époque encore barbare, n'en ayant que plus de mérite à rester vierge héroïque. Mais nous ne voulons pas de ces vérités inutiles. Elle reste, dans la légende, un être frêle, conduit par une âme divine... C'est ainsi que nous la voulons. (I: 113-4)

Bernhardt here, in discussing a legend which formed the basis of one of her own most famous (and controversial) roles, obliquely elucidates both her own representation in the popular press and her own project.<sup>138</sup> Just as the apparent "real-life" anecdotes of the press mask a discourse of cliché, so, despite the theoretically documentary nature of the autobiographical project, Bernhardt does not intend to offer her reader the gritty, mundane details of historical reality. It is the legend of Sarah Bernhardt, the "être frêle, conduit par une âme divine" which the public consumes so avidly in *Le Petit journal* and *L'illustration*, that is the subject of her memoirs.

In staging her own legend in this way, Victoria Tietze Larson has shown, Bernhardt adopts a narrative strategy of self doubling, staging herself

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<sup>138</sup> For a discussion of the controversy surrounding Bernhardt's role as Jeanne d'Arc, see Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 210 -212.

as both subject and object of her own narrative, in a series of graphic vignettes of which she is the centre.<sup>139</sup> These vignettes place her in carefully posed scenes which situate her as the isolated focus of an observing crowd. Examples of these tableaux in her autobiography are numerous, beginning with the incident recounted in the opening chapter, in which as a small child she falls into a fire and attracts to her quasi-deathbed the attentions of a large crowd of adults (I: 7). In another episode, following an ill-advised leap across a crevice at Niagara Falls, she finds herself stranded: “Tout le monde me regardait, atterré, et augmentait ma peur. Ma sœur était prise d’une crise de nerfs; et ma pauvre chère Guérard poussait des : ‘Ah! mon Dieu! ma petite Sarah! Ah! mon Dieu! etc’ qui fendaient l’âme. Le peintre faisaient des croquis” (II: 271). Larson describes these scenes as “tableaux vivants” (Larson, 185); however, given the overwhelming use of photography which Bernhardt made, and the link between cliché and photography which is our subject here, I prefer to see them as photographic, as clichés, or snapshots in both the visual and discursive sense of the word.

Even as she portrays herself as the centre of attention, isolated under the gaze of others, Bernhardt underscores the contingency of her position. The pose which she adopts is that of one always leaping or poised to leap: “Je m’accroche une seconde à ce qui est; puis je me lance tête perdue dans ce qui sera. Tel un gymnasiarque se cramponne à son trapèze pour se lancer

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<sup>139</sup> Larson, Victoria Tietze. “Staging a Life: Narrative Strategies in Sarah Bernhardt’s *Ma double vie*”, *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies*, 2001 Winter; 16 (2): 185.

à toute volée dans le vide. En une seconde, ce qui est devient pour moi ce qui fut... (II: 12).” It is just such a leap that is explicitly posed as the source of Bernhardt’s motto, “quand même,” whose origins she recounts in *Ma double vie*. Having suffered a fall in attempting to leap over a ditch, in an incident which prefigures the scene at Niagara, the young Sarah cries “je recommencerais, quand même, si l’on me défie encore” (I: 130-1).

These snapshots also share a characteristic of photography highlighted by Georges Didi-Hubermann. Didi-Hubermann remarks of the attempt to master and categorise hysteria through photography that it is always too late: photography can only ever capture a present which is always already past. Even when images are arranged to give the appearance of a visual narrative, the *Iconographie de la Salpêtrière* “ne restitue pas, ne remémore pas quelque récit que ce soit” (Didi-Hubermann, 103). Its images reach us only as reconstructions of a moment which has been irretrievably lost: “un présent d’image ne nous atteint que comme indéfectible retard; l’image même serait-elle douée du mouvement, ce retard ne se laisse pas rattraper” (107). In a similar way, those who would restrain Bernhardt are always slightly too late, be it Perrin, the director of the Comédie-Française, who, alerted by the comte de Montesequiou that “[v]oilà votre étoile qui file,” (Bernhardt, II: 77) looks up at the Parisian skyline to see Bernhardt ascending in a balloon, or her American tour manager Abbey, who alerted to her intention to leap over the crevice at Niagara Falls “arriva juste à temps pour me voir en l’air” (II: 270). Bernhardt then adopts a series of poses which flaunt the contingency and

performativity of the persona which she enacts of herself as the stereotype of the wayward and unpredictable star.

Considerable emphasis is placed upon Bernhardt's unconventional looks, generally considered by those around her to be an obstacle to her success. In speaking of her appearance, she places the greatest emphasis on those two aspects which were the most frequently deprecated in the popular press: her mane of curly hair and her thinness. Bernhardt's slighthness of build was her most striking and commonly caricatured physical trait: in cartoons, she was depicted variously as a corkscrew, a needle, an umbrella and a snake. Bernhardt places this criticism of her physical appearance centre stage in *Ma double vie*. She is frequently the subject of comments from her mother's male acquaintances, of whom Bernhardt remarks: "[ils] me trouvaient maigre à faire pleurer les oies," (Bernhardt, I: 61). Her godfather takes an equally deprecatory view of her build: "[Mon parrain] ne m'aimait pas parce que j'étais trop maigre" (I: 81). Upon her début at the théâtre de l'Odéon, a colleague describes her as "Une flûte pour les gens du monde, il n'y a même pas de mie" (I: 166). The cliché of her slenderness is so frequently repeated in the text that it becomes exactly that: a cliché, the language of deadened, empty banality, which Bernhardt mimics mockingly when she refuses an umbrella with the quip: "je suis si mince que je ne puis me mouiller, je passe entre les gouttes" (II: 81).

Similarly, her rebellious hair, which is a prominent feature in contemporary cartoons, is constantly remarked upon by Bernhardt and

others. Early on in the text, Bernhardt's mother declares that "ce ne sont pas des cheveux, c'est une tignasse" (I: 11), echoing caricatures of Bernhardt as a brush or mop. Prior to Bernhardt's first *concours* at the Conservatoire, her mother attempts to have her "crinière rebelle" styled in conventional fashion, and her hairdresser remarks that "les filles de Tanger et toutes les négresses ont des cheveux semblables" (I: 105). Sarah's "cheveux de négresse blonde" (I: 105) do not simply, as Larson suggests, represent an identity which is Other and unclassifiable (Larson, 184). Rather, the numerous references by Bernhardt to her hair are an allusion to one of the most prominent of the clichés which circulated about her, her Jewishness. Curly or frizzy hair is a cliché of Jewishness, one which, along with the exaggeratedly hooked nose prominent in many caricatures, featured heavily in the anti-semitic discourse which surrounded Bernhardt.<sup>140</sup> In emphasising this physical trait, Bernhardt assumes stereotypes of Jewish identity, and turns them into a mark of pride. Her hair is transformed from a sign of derision and alterity into a badge of distinction. The attempt to tame it into a conventional hairstyle is a disaster which is felt by Bernhardt as nothing less than a disfigurement, an effacement of identity: "J'étais défigurée, je ne me reconnaissais plus" (Bernhardt, I: 105).

Rather than a handicap, Bernhardt's unconventional looks become a symbol of her distinction: "Mes goûts un peu fantastiques, ma maigreur, ma pâleur, ma façon toute personnelle de m'habiller, mon mépris de la Mode[...]"

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<sup>140</sup> For more in-depth studies of this anti-semitic discourse and of Bernhardt's engagement with it, see Bergman-Carton, "Negotiating the Categories" and Sander L. Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the 'Modern Jewess,'" *German Studies Quarterly*, 66(ii), Spring 1993, 195-211.

faisaient de moi un être à part” (II: 83). On three separate occasions in the book, Bernhardt juxtaposes herself with more conventionally beautiful actresses, such as Marie Lloyd, to whom she loses the first prize for comedy at the Conversatoire: “grande, très grande,” with “un charme plus femme que nous toutes,” Marie is the very incarnation of conventionality: “malgré la monotonie de son débit, la mollesse de sa diction, l’impersonnalité de son jeu, elle avait remporté les suffrages: parce qu’elle était la personnification de Célimène, cette coquette de vingt ans si inconsciemment cruelle... Elle avait réalisé, pour chacun, l’idéal rêvé par Molière” (I: 112). Similarly, auditioning for a role as a shepherdess she finds herself passed over for an actress who bears a striking resemblance to the description of Lloyd:

Me voyant près d’elle, dans la glace, je fus frappée par notre dissemblance: elle était rondelette, la figure large, de magnifiques yeux noirs, le nez un peu canaille, la bouche épaisse, et une patine – d’ordinaire – sur tout son être; j’étais blonde, mince et frêle, tel un roseau, le visage long et pâle, les yeux bleus, la bouche un peu triste, et tout mon être était empreint de distinction. Cette légère vision de nos deux personnes me consola de mon échec. (I: 161)

Here the comparison is made more explicit: against a mere cliché of beauty with her “patine d’ordinaire,” Bernhardt sees herself as exceptional, an “être[...] empreint de distinction.” In the final scene of the triptych, Bernhardt laments the calumnies and mockeries to which she is subject following her second resignation from the Comédie-Française to her beautiful friend Madeleine Brohan, whom she envies for her beauty and stereotypical femininity: “Je la regardai avec envie. Elle était si belle avec ses yeux mouillés, sa figure aux lignes pures et reposées, son sourire las. Je me

demandai si le bonheur n'était pas dans ce calme, dans ce dédain de toutes choses" (II: 122). This moment of doubt is, however, merely a rhetorical pose designed to dramatise the conclusion which follows, as Sarah makes it clear that her friend is not to be envied. She is literally and figuratively immobilised by her conventional femininity, trapped in cliché: "Ce qui m'avait charmé tout à l'heure me glaçait maintenant, car sa haine du mouvement venait de l'impuissance de ses yeux, de ses jambes ; et son amour de l'ombre n'était que l'apaisement nécessaire aux blessures de sa vie déjà vécue" (II :122). In contrast, Brohan tells Bernhardt: "tu es originale sans le vouloir, tu as une effroyable crinière rebelle et frisée par la nature, ta sveltesse est exagérée, tu possède dans ton gosier une harpe naturelle: tout cela fait de toi un être à part, ce qui est un crime de lèse-banalité" (II: 121). The language of cliché is here turned on its head: the clichés surrounding Bernhardt and her appearance are made not to reify and categorise her but to signify her exceptional nature as an "être à part".

Bernhardt also foregrounds her fragile health and the tendency towards hysterical attacks which was so savagely satirised in *Mémoires de Sarah Barnum*. As a child, she has a tendency towards violent and spectacular rages, which are frequently linked to attempts to force her into conformity, for example when forced to leave Mme Fressard's school: "L'idée qu'on violentait de nouveau mes goûts, mes habitudes, sans me consulter, me mit dans une rage indicible. Je me roulai par terre, je poussai des cris déchirants" (I: 15). Later, an attempt to tame her wild hair, symbol of her exceptional nature,

results in “un de ces accès de colère qui terrifiaient ceux qui en étaient témoins.” (I: 30). Bernhardt characterises these bouts as “mon seul et réel défaut et qui tenaient autant à mon état de santé qu’à la violence de mon caractère” (I: 30). Much is made by Bernhardt of her hysteria, which frequently takes on a performative quality, blurring the line between performance and reality. Her crippling stage fright prior to the English première of *Phèdre* leads to a hysterical episode which becomes her performance:

Je souffrais, je pleurais, j’implorais, je criais; et tout cela était vrai; ma souffrance était horrible, mes larmes coulaient brûlantes et âcre. J’implorais Hippolyte pour l’amour qui me tuais et mes bras tendus vers Mounet-Sully étaient les bras de Phèdre tordus par le cruel désir de l’étreinte... Et, quand le rideau tomba, Mounet-Sully me releva inanimée et me transporta dans ma loge. (II: 106)

The incident takes on a somewhat different appearance, however, when we consider that, earlier in the text, Bernhardt recounts an epiphany in which she comes to realise the power of performance to shape reality when she acts her way to a fit of hysteria in protest at being forced to perform during the heat of the summer months:

Voulant tomber évanouie, voulant cracher le sang, voulant mourir pour faire enrager Perrin, je m’étais donnée tout entière: j’avais sangloté, j’avais aimé, j’avais souffert, et j’avais été frappé par le poignard d’Orosmane en poussant le cri de la vraie douleur; car j’avais senti le fer pénétrer dans mon sein, puis tombant, haletante, mourante, sur le divan, j’avais pensé mourir sérieusement; et, pendant tout le temps de la fin de l’acte, j’osais à peine remuer un bras, convaincue que j’étais de ma languissante agonie, et un peu effrayée, je l’avoue, de voir réaliser ma méchante farce à Perrin. Mais grande fut ma surprise quand, le rideau tombé sur la fin de la pièce, je me levai prestement pour le rappel, et saluai le public sans langueur, sans affaiblissement, prête à recommencer la pièce. (II: 38-9)



This episode is a turning point, marking Bernhardt's realisation that "mes forces vitales étaient au service de mes forces intellectuelles" (II: 38-9), and her understanding of her capacity for self-creation through mimicry.

In a revealing conversation with Perrin, Bernhardt comes to understand and to assume her hysterical persona:

Mais, répondit Perrin, mais ma chère enfant il y a des gens ni gras ni maigres, ni rasés ni chevelus, et qui répondent oui et non[...] Je restai pétrifiée de la justesse de cette réponse, et je compris le 'parce que' de tous les 'pourquoi' que je me posais depuis des années. Je n'étais pas de la moyenne; j'avais du 'trop' et du 'trop peu'. Et je sentis qu'il n'y avait rien à faire à cela. (II: 130-1)

Her assumption of an identity which is at once "trop" and "trop peu" links her to contemporary discourse of pathology, in which works such as Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* developed the theories of François Broussais on the continuum of the normal and the pathological, according to which the differences between health and sickness were a matter of degree, marked semantically by the prefixes *hyper* (excess) and *hypo* (insufficiency).<sup>141</sup> In refusing to be "de la moyenne," Sarah willingly aligns herself with the language of the pathological, the hysterical, in order to refuse imprisonment within the discourse of the norm.

She assumes above all the mobility and fluidity associated with hysteria, constantly eluding definition or fixity. Speaking of her love of sculpture, for example, she remarks to Perrin on her desire for constant movement: "J'ai une envie folle de voyager, de voir autre chose, de respirer

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<sup>141</sup> See Georges Canguilhem. *Le Normal et le Pathologique*. Paris: P.U.F., 1966.

un autre air, de voir des ciels moins bas que les nôtres, des arbres plus grands, autre chose enfin! Et je me crée des tâches pour me retenir à la chaîne; sans quoi je sens que mon désir de savoir et de voir l'emportera, et je ferai des bêtises! (II: 76). *Ma double vie* shows a fascination with the technology of "notre époque de vélocité" (I: 2), in particular with the hot-air balloon which represents for her "la réalisation du rêve: voler dans les airs, se rapprocher du ciel, aller sans route devant soi, sans route derrière soi, sans autre plafond que l'éther du ciel, avec sous les pieds l'ouate humide des nuages" (I: 238-9).

In this, Bernhardt identifies herself with her mother, who is characterised by a similar mobility, as the opening lines of the memoir indicate: "Ma mère adorait voyager. Elle allait d'Espagne en Angleterre; de Londres à Paris; de Paris à Berlin. De là à Christiania; puis revenait m'embrasser et repartait pour la Hollande, son pays natal" (I:1). Likewise the hysterical fits of rage to which Sarah is subject are an inheritance from her mother: "ma pauvre maman m'avait fait héritière de ces mêmes colères" (I:154). In addition, like Sarah herself, Youle Bernhardt is profoundly aware of the power of performativity, as we discover in the very first scene of *Ma double vie*. Following the infant Sarah's fall into a fire, Youle gives a performance as a grieving mother as touching as anything which her daughter would produce onstage:

On m'a contée depuis que rien n'était plus douloureux et charmant que le désespoir de ma mère[...] Maman, belle à ravir, semblable à une madone, avec ses cheveux d'or et ses yeux frangés de cils si longs, qu'ils faisaient ombre sur ses joues quand elles baissait ses

paupières, donnait de l'or à tout le monde. Elle aurait donné sa chevelure d'or, ses doigts blancs et fuselés, ses pieds d'enfant, sa vie, pour sauver cette enfant dont elle se souciait si peu huit jours avant[...] Et elle était aussi sincère dans son désespoir et son amour que dans son inconscient oublié. (I: 3)

Just as she plays the role of distraught mother, so Youle enacts her hysteria in much the same way as we have seen that Sarah does: "Le médecin nous avait dit que maman mourrait un jour dans une crise semblable; et on faisait tout pour éviter ces accidents. Ma mère le savait et en abusait un peu" (I: 154). The performative hysteria and mobility which, I have argued, Bernhardt deploys as a means of destabilising cliché are, then, a maternal heritage. Bernhardt's subversive mimicry is at once a foreshadowing of twentieth-century feminist theory and a reiteration of a strategy whereby women have always found a means to express themselves through a parodic over-compliance with the expectations of cliché.

In highlighting her slenderness, her unconventional looks and her hysteria, Bernhardt reproduces with uncanny effect the discourse which surrounds her, exposing its claims to referentiality by highlighting its performativity. The deadening language of cliché and repetition is, then, reappropriated by Bernhardt through mimicry: she elaborates herself as cliché in order to highlight the performativity of the stereotypes which shape her public image, reenacting the social code which constructs her in order to disrupt it.

A very different mode of engagement with the prevailing discourse on the actress is enacted by the protagonist of Colette's *La Vagabonde*, which

forms the subject of my final chapter. Over the course of *La Vagabonde*, Renée Néré stages a coming to writing which enables her not only to mimic the discourse which surrounds her as an actress but to appropriate and to rewrite that discourse.

## Chapter 5:

### From Myopia to *Métier*: The Actress Learns to Read and Write in

#### Colette's *La Vagabonde*

In December 1897, the trial and execution for murder of a 28-year-old vagabond by the name of Joseph Vacher focused French attention on the phenomenon of *vagabondage*.<sup>142</sup> The case received widespread press attention and seemed to confirm a society's worst nightmares about a crisis of vagrancy sweeping the nation. One of the chief medical experts in the case, Alexandre Lacassagne, wrote in 1908 that "le vagabondage est devenu une des manifestations de l'anarchie."<sup>143</sup> Lacassagne, a professor of legal medicine at the university of Lyon, claimed that there were some 150, 000 to 200, 000 vagabonds in France, a "véritable corps d'armée" (8). A year later, Jules Bertaut would use similarly alarmist language to write of the "poussée de tout un clan," "la clameur de toute une classe," and indeed a "bataillon," echoing Lacassagne's military metaphor.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> The word *vagabondage* is generally translated as "vagrancy" in English. However, I will continue to use the French term throughout this chapter, both because of the etymological connection to the title of *La Vagabonde* and because I wish to discuss the particular place of the concept of *vagabondage* both in French culture and in Colette's novel.

<sup>143</sup> Alexandre Lacassagne, preface to Emile Fourquet, *Les vagabonds, les vagabonds criminels, le problème du vagabondage*. Paris: Marchal et Billard, 1908, 9.

<sup>144</sup> Jules Bertaut. *La Littérature féminine d'aujourd'hui*. Paris: Librairie des Annales Politiques et Littéraires, 1909, 19, 11.

Bertaut was not, however, referring to vagabonds but to female writers.<sup>145</sup> Two apparently radically different phenomena, the vagabond and the literary woman, then, provoked the same language of crisis, of an established order under siege. French society perceived itself as under threat from vagabond hordes on the one side and from amazonian tribes of literary women on the other.

In both cases, the threat was seen to come from mobility, from the crossing of spatial and social boundaries, between regions, between country and town, between class and between gender. If the Vacher case showed anything, according to the *juge d'instruction* Emile Fourquet, it highlighted above all the dangerous mobility of the vagabond: “les chemineaux errent à toute heure du jour et de la nuit; ils ont, en raison des distances considérables qu'ils parcourent, cent fois plus d'occasions de tuer ou de voler” (Fourquet, 58). Fourquet attributes the spread of vagabondage to a number of causes, all of them linked to higher social and geographical mobility: he refers to “[l']instruction [qui], de plus en plus répandue, a eu fatalement pour conséquence de détourner beaucoup de jeunes gens de la vie agricole, même du commerce” (28), to mandatory military service which gave young men a glimpse of city life (27) and above all to the rise of an industrial economy which had provoked massive rural emigration (26).

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<sup>145</sup> Rachel Mesch gives an extended analysis of the use of military metaphors to evoke an invading army of literary women, which she views as a defensive gesture to avoid the threat of women's intellectual equality, in *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006, 19.

Fourquet's colleague and Lacassagne's fellow expert in the Vacher trial, Alexandre Bérard, adduced the increased mobility afforded by new means of transport such as the bicycle and the train.<sup>146</sup> In short, *vagabondage* was symptomatic of the endless flux characteristic of the modern. As Matt Matsuda puts it, it was "the sign of an unsettled modernity, of a money economy whose logic of competition and exchange put not only goods, but uprooted people into relentless circulation."<sup>147</sup>

*Vagabondage* was far more than merely a social problem to nineteenth-century French culture: it interested the medical as much as the legal profession. Much contemporary commentary on the problem of *vagabondage* frames the question in terms of degeneration and pathology, as a form of individual and social hysteria.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, claimed the psychologists Raymond Meunier and Armand Marie, "[a]vant de relever de la législation ou de l'économie politique, les vagabonds relèvent de la psychologie."<sup>149</sup>

Meunier and Marie situate *vagabondage* as a hysterical phenomenon:

Le plus grand nombre des névropathes, neurasthéniques, hystériques, épileptiques, dégénérés feront surtout de l'automatisme

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<sup>146</sup> Alexandre Bérard, "Le Vagabondage en France" in Alexandre Lacassagne, *Vacher l'éventreur et les crimes sadiques*. Paris, Masson 1899).

<sup>147</sup> Matt Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, 127.

<sup>148</sup> For a discussion of the social pathologisation of *vagabondage* in nineteenth-century France, see Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 56-9.

<sup>149</sup> Raymond Meunier and Armand Maries, *Les Vagabonds*. Paris: Giard et Brière, 1908, 6.

ambulatoire. Il ne faudrait pas, du reste, attribuer un sens trop restreint au terme automatisme. Très rarement, cet automatisme sera initialement inconscient; mais dans la plupart des cas le malade suivra mécaniquement l'impulsion déterminée par n'importe quel petit fait mental, souvent par un choc idéo-émotionnel. La plupart des excentriques et des originaux rentre dans cette catégorie des névropathes voyageurs. (29)

Whilst it would be overstating the case to claim that there was an equation between the vagabond and the hysteric, around a hundred medical texts produced between 1875 and 1910 on the subject of *vagabondage* as pathology confirmed *dromomanie* or *la folie des routes* as a subject for pathology as well as for social commentary.<sup>150</sup>

In naming *La Vagabonde* as she did then, Colette not only made an unexpected gesture which blurred gender lines (*vagabondage* was generally associated with men), she also inscribed her narrator-protagonist within a terrain which overlapped with that of pathology and hysteria – the more so because Renée Néré is that most fearsome of creatures, a female writer. In nineteenth and early twentieth-century rhetoric, the *femme de lettres* loomed no less large than the vagabond as a source of threat to society. Whilst the literate and literary woman might not be as obviously mobile as the vagabond, she was still guilty of that greatest of crimes in nineteenth-century eyes, the desire to move out of the place and category assigned to her by birth.<sup>151</sup> In

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<sup>150</sup> For an overview of the discourse of pathologists on *vagabondage*, see Jean-François Wagniar, *Le Vagabond à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: Belin, 1999, 38.

<sup>151</sup> The links between hysteria, mobility and women reading and writing are explored by Beizer in *Ventriloquized Bodies*, 55-73; also in Jann Matlock,



particular, she crossed boundaries of gender, as demonstrated by Barbey d'Aurevilly's angry diatribe against *bas-bleus*: "Les femmes qui écrivent ne sont plus des femmes. Ce sont des hommes, – du moins de prétention, – et manqués."<sup>152</sup> In a similarly misogynistic and pseudo-scientific vein, Edmond de Goncourt proclaimed to a group of feminists in 1893 that if autopsies were to be performed on women of talent such as George Sand, they would be found to have genitals resembling those of men (Berlanstein, 115). The *femme de lettres*, or to use the derogatory term adopted by Barbey d'Aurevilly, the *bas-bleu* was a masculinised, unnatural figure, who represented the degeneration of French civilisation: "Beaucoup de peuples sont morts par des courtisanes, mais les courtisanes sont dans la nature et les bas-bleus n'y sont pas. Ils sont dans une civilisation dépravée, dégradée, qui meurt de l'être, et telle que, dans l'histoire, on n'en avait pas vu encore" (Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Bas-bleus*, 342). An anxious debate surrounded the link between a woman's literary pretensions and hysteria in nineteenth-century France, with Pierre Briquet being far from alone in declaring that an excessive literary education was for a young girl "une prédisposition à l'hystérie" (Briquet, 19).

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*Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria and Reading Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 249-280.

<sup>152</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. *Les Bas-bleus*. Paris: V. Palmé: 1878, xi.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that the heroine of *La Vagabonde* should describe herself as “une femme de lettres qui a mal tourné,”<sup>153</sup> subject to bouts of depression: “une dure crise de noir, je l’attends avec calme et d’un cœur habitué” (67), for in turn-of-the-century culture, what other way might a *femme de lettres* and self-described *vagabonde* turn but ill? In this chapter, however, I read *La Vagabonde* alongside Zola’s *La Curée* as rewriting the relationship between the actress, the hysteric and the female writer in the wake of socio-economic changes which made possible new models of femininity.

In addition to being linked by their shared name and heightened, visible femininity, the protagonists of *La Curée* and *La Vagabonde* each take a younger lover named Maxime. Moreover, the metaphor of the hunt, specifically of women as hunted, runs through the two novels. The title of *La Curée* refers to the part of the kill which is left to the hounds following a hunt, an image which is woven through *La Vagabonde*, through Maxime’s love of hunting (222) and the “entêtement chasseur” of Renée’s first husband Adolphe Taillandy (140). Renée herself is at several points compared to a trapped fox: “Renard sans malice qu’une poule aurait su prendre! Renard sans convoitise, qui ne se souvient que du piège et de la cage” (66), and her admirers to “chasseurs qui traquent une femme jusqu’au bat-l’eau inclusivement” (77). Through this image and the naming of her central couple, then, Colette seems to make a deliberate callback to Zola’s novel. I will

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<sup>153</sup> Colette, *La Vagabonde*. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2010, 68.

examine the progression which takes place between the two novels as centering around the scenes of female self-reflection before a mirror which close one and begin the other, in order to argue for a progression between the two from exclusion and alienation in the textual economy of patriarchy to reading, to a coming to writing which undoes the notions of space and possession on which this economy is based.

Before I turn to *La Curée* and *La Vagabonde*, however, I would like to return to my second chapter on *Nana*. A strange choice, perhaps for a discussion of women of letters, were it not for a particular passage in which the actress-hysteric ventures, as Janet Beizer has suggested, into the field of literary criticism:<sup>154</sup> “Elle avait lu dans la journée un roman qui faisait grand bruit, l’histoire d’une fille; et elle se révoltait, elle disait que tout cela était faux, témoignant d’ailleurs une répugnance indignée contre cette littérature immonde, dont la prétension était de rendre la nature; comme si l’on pouvait tout montrer” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1369). I evoked this passage in passing in the conclusion of my second chapter, in order to recall that *Nana* here challenges the notion of complete revelation in the novel, the idea that one can “*tout montrer*.” However, what interests me here is the speed with which, having suggested the possibility of her subversive reading, Zola shuts down *Nana*’s nascent literary critical discourse, and devalues her as a reader, highlighting her “opinions très arrêtées” and the stereotypically feminine

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<sup>154</sup> I do not intend to linger long over *Nana*, since this passage has been extensively discussed by Janet Beizer in reference to *Nana* as literary critic in *Ventriloquized Bodies* and by Rachel Mesch in *The Hysteric’s Revenge*.

nature of her literary taste: “elle voulait des œuvres tendres et nobles, des choses pour la faire rêver et lui faire grandir l’âme” (II: 1369). In other words, Nana desires precisely the kind of texts which doctors warned would lead young girls astray by encouraging excessive mobility, “ce faible de l’esprit humain pour grandir et s’élever, pour sortir de sa sphère” (Brachet, 58). If reading, as we have seen, is a source of potential hysteria, then Nana is the perfect example of why women should not read. Zola tears her away from her literary contemplation much as Muffat tears her away from her mirror earlier in the novel, denying her the possibility of an independent subjectivity: Nana must retain her “inconscience de bête superbe, ignorante de sa besogne, bonne fille toujours,” must remain lacking in self-awareness (Zola *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1470). The actress must be looked at, she must not see herself independently, nor must she return the gaze of her male audience. She is a text to be read, a space of masculine creative activity, not a reader of texts, or worse, a writer of them.

The protagonist of Zola’s earlier novel, *La Curée*, Renée Saccard is not, strictly speaking, an actress like Nana, but she fills an analogous place in the specular economy of the *Rougon-Macquart*. In particular, like Nana, Renée is excluded from reading within an economy in which she is looked at and read but does not return the gaze of those who look upon her. To this end, her body is repeatedly put on display throughout the novel – most notably through a series of increasingly risqué *toilettes* which create the illusion of nudity – and inscribed with the signs of her husband’s wealth, in the

form of the diamonds that adorn her at the dinner party and the gold bracelets which she wears at the final ball. Renée functions in Second Empire society, as she will ultimately come to realise, as “une valeur dans le portefeuille de son mari,” a sign of wealth to be circulated in the capitalist economy to be read and interpreted as such (I: 574).

If Renée is eminently legible, however, she is, like Nana, barred from literacy. Crucially, the gaze which forms her is one which she is literally unable to return, due to her myopia which is mentioned frequently in the novel. This short-sightedness, which has been analysed by Susan Harrow,<sup>155</sup> gives her an “air indécis de myope” (I: 455), as well as adding to her charm in the masculine sexual economy: “Ses yeux[...] lui donnait cet air hésitant des myopes, qui était chez elle une grâce” (I: 336). When she does see, it is through the masculine optic which is dictated to her by society and which is symbolised by her “binocle d’homme” (I: 320). Renée lives in a state of visual dependency, unable to see or make sense of the world for herself. Above all, she does not read, as a general rule, abandoning her affairs to Saccard “en toute confiance” (I: 392), and failing to read the document which seals her downfall at the end of the novel.

Yet at the same time, she is a figure who transgresses by reading. Along with Maxime, she peruses the latter’s album of society women, “un véritable catalogue vivant, où toute les filles de Paris était numérotées, avec

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<sup>155</sup> Susan Harrow, “Myopia and the Model: The Making and Unmaking of Renée,” in Anna Gural-Migdal (ed.), *L’Écriture du féminin chez Zola et dans la fiction naturaliste*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003, 259-260.

une notice très complète sur chacune d'elles. Cette gazette scandaleuse faisait la joie de Renée" (I: 426-7). Harrow views this album as part of Renée's scopic indoctrination in masculine ways of seeing, as "Renée learns to view women in ways which objectify the female body, fracture and fragment it" (Harrow, 259-260). On the other hand, I would like to argue, the album also serves as a means for Renée of deconstructing the artificially perfect female body:

Elle s'arrêtait aux portraits de filles plus longuement, étudiait avec curiosité les détails exactes et microscopiques des photographies, les petites rides, les petits poils. Un jour même, elle se fit apporter une forte loupe[...] La loupe servit dès lors à éplucher les figures de femmes. Renée fit alors des découvertes étonnantes; elle trouva des rides inconnues, des peaux rudes, des trous mal bouchés par le poudre de riz. Et Maxime finit par cacher la loupe, en déclarant qu'il ne fallait pas se dégoûter comme cela de la figure humaine. La vérité était qu'elle soumettait à un examen trop rigoureux la bouche de Sylvia, pour qui il avait une tendresse particulière. (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, I: 428)

Renée mimics the naturalist method in a parodic manner, whilst at the same time exposing the reality of female physicality which lies beneath its depiction of femininity, along with the idealising falsity of advertising. It is striking that Maxime is quick to deprive her of the magnifying glass when she threatens his idealised notions of the female body, seizing back optical control as soon as she strays from his reading of the images presented to her. Another forbidden reading is staged in the scene at the café Riche, as Renée gazes into the mirror and tries to make out the words scratched into it:

Elle alla regarder la glace, vers laquelle ses yeux vagues tournaient depuis un instant. Elle se haussa sur la pointe des pieds, appuya ses mains au bord de la cheminée, pour lire ces signatures, ces mots risqués qui l'avait effarouchée, avant le souper. Elle épelait les

syllables avec quelque difficulté, riait, lisait toujours, comme un collégien qui tourne les pages dans un Piron dans son pupitre. (I: 455)

Once again it is Maxime who intervenes in order to prevent her from reading, telling her “ne lis pas cela” (I: 456). Once again, Renée attempts an independent reading and is faced with an interdiction, leading to the struggle which precipitates her first incestuous sexual encounter with Maxime.

Renée’s attempts to read and to write independently are linked not only to her transgressive relationship with Maxime, but also to her hysteria. Her “nerfs” are evoked on several occasions (I: 324, 349), and Zola refers later in the novel to “le détraquement de cette adorable et étonnante machine qui se cassait” (I: 514). Renée’s hysteria is depicted in terms of an insatiable desire for the new: “Puis, comme une espérance, se levait en elle, avec des frissons de désir, l’idée de cet ‘autre chose’ que son esprit tendu ne pouvait trouver. Là sa rêverie s’égarait. Elle faisait effort, mais *toujours le mot cherché se dérobait dans la nuit tombante*” (I: 328-9. My emphasis). Her search for the new, for the unknown is then couched in terms which recall a search for language, the desire to write. At the same time, as Harrow points out, the physical symptoms which Renée experiences, notably her migraines (I: 446, 461), are the signs of disillusionment, of an excess of desire followed by the disappointment of this desire, “bodily responses to the perceived discrepancy between image and reality, dream and life” (Harrow, 261). It is precisely this sense of “la réalité inférieure au rêve” (Richet, “Les Démoniaques d’aujourd’hui,” 356) which doctors were so careful to warn of in women who read excessively. Renée’s sickness can then be seen as stemming from her

desire to know and to apprehend the world, that is to say, to read it and to write it.

The dénouement of the novel is staged as a confrontation between competing stories. As the two lovers are discovered, Maxime attempts to offer his account of the affair: “c’est elle...” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, I: 571). Saccard, however, offers a more palatable version upon seeing the signed deed, suggesting that Renée and Maxime have retired to the greenhouse merely to “comploter une de [leurs] farces” (I: 571), a tale which Maxime accepts. Renée is shocked by the ending to the story which has escaped from her control and from which she has been unexpectedly written out: “Eh quoi! ils était partis tranquillement, amicalement[...] Son mari savait tout et ne la battait même pas. Et le silence autour d’elle, ce silence où traînait la valse sans fin, l’épouvantait plus que le bruit d’un meurtre” (I: 572). She is utterly defeated by Saccard’s ability to narrate events as he chooses, and to punish her by literally stealing her writing from her: “au lieu de la tuer [Saccard] l’avait volée; cet homme punissait les gens en vidant leurs poches; une signature tombait comme un rayon de soleil au milieu de la brutalité de sa colère, et pour vengeance il emportait la signature” (I: 575). Looking at herself in the mirror, able to see herself and to read the situation clearly for the first time, Renée is brought to realise the extent of the alienation and exposure to which she has been subjected in patriarchal society: “Elle savait maintenant. C’était ces gens qui l’avaient mise nue. Saccard avait dégrafé le corsage et Maxime lui avait fait tomber la jupe. A présent, elle se trouvait



sans un lambeau, avec des cercles d'or, comme une esclave" (I: 575). In revenge, she seeks to impose her own story: "elle força son mari à connaître l'inceste, elle lui raconta que, le jour où il l'avait surprise avec Maxime, c'était celui-ci qui la poursuivait depuis longtemps, qui cherchait à la violenter" (I: 589). Yet Saccard again proves able to rewrite the story, brushing off the rift which she imposes with Maxime as "des bêtises" (I: 596). Faced with her own inability to narrate, to write her own story and to make it take convincingly, Renée retreats both spatially and verbally to the silence of her father's house, where she lives in the literal as well as the figurative shadow of the Salpêtrière as "au-dessus des arbres, le toit ardoisé de la Salpêtrière lui apparut, bleui par l'adieu du soleil, lui apparut comme un vieil ami" (I: 599).

It is this *prise de conscience* of alienation, and the embracing of silence in a patriarchal culture which refuses them access to language which is the key link between the heroines of *La Curée* and *La Vagabonde*. We find in *La Vagabonde* a re-writing of *La Curée* which takes as its starting point the famous scene in which Zola's Renée contemplates herself and her nudity in the mirror. As Renée Saccard stares at her own image, she becomes starkly aware of her exposure and of her alienation:

Elle s'aperçut dans la haute glace de l'armoire. Elle s'approcha, étonnée de se voir, oubliant son mari, oubliant Maxime, toute préoccupée par l'étrange femme qu'elle avait devant elle. La folie montait[...] Elle regardait ses cuisses que le maillot arrondissait, ses hanches dont elle suivait les lignes souples souz la gaze, son buste largement ouvert. (I: 572)

Seeing herself for the first time, with the lens of masculine discourse removed, Renée is shocked by her apparent nudity, by the exaggeratedly

feminine body with its rounded hips, thighs and bust which has been created in order to be exhibited, and she comes to realise the extent of her alienation, barely able to recognise the strange woman in front of her: “elle ne voyait que ses cuisses roses, ses hanches roses, cette étrange femme de soie rose qu’elle avait devant elle, et dont la peau de fine étoffe aux mailles serrées, semblait faite pour des amours de pantins et de poupées. Elle en était arrivée à cela, à n’être qu’une grande poupée dont la poitrine déchirée ne laisse échapper qu’un filet de son” (I: 574).

*La Vagabonde* opens with a scene of specular introspection that parallels the one which we find at the end of *La Curée*:

Je vais me trouver seule avec moi-même, en face de cette conseillère maquillée qui me regarde, de l’autre côté de la glace, avec de grands yeux aux paupières frottées d’une pâte grasse et violâtre. Elle a des pommettes vives, de la même couleur que les phlox des jardins, des lèvres d’un rouge noir, brillantes et comme vernies (Colette, 59).

Reflected at Renée Néré from her mirror is her public image, an exaggerated, artificial construction of femininity whose sole purpose is to stimulate and to justify masculine desire. The theatrical setting of this framing of the alienated self serves to underscore the performativity of Renée’s identity, in particular through the use of make-up which renders her almost unrecognisable to herself: “C’est pourtant bien moi qui suis là, masquée de rouge mauve, les yeux cernés d’un halo de bleu gras qui commence à fondre... Vais-je attendre que le reste du visage aussi se délaie? S’il n’allait demeurer, de tout mon reflet, qu’une coulure teintée, collée à la glace comme une longue larme boueuse” (61). For Colette’s Renée, however, performance and the silent

exhibition of her body on stage as a mime is a conscious choice, “cette carrière que j’ai[...] choisie” (68. My emphasis). The mask of apparent nakedness which she presents to her public is one of her own construction which she substitutes for authentic revelation of herself. In performing, she shows herself in order to become the vagabond of the title: her presence onstage is the pretext for her absence. As she performs in the café-concert:

Dès les premières mesures de notre ouverture, je me sens soulagée, engrenée, devenue légère et irresponsable. Accoudée au balcon de toile, je considère d’un œil serein la couche poudreuse – crotte des chaussures, poils de chiens, résine écrasée – qui couvre le parquet où se traîneront tout à l’heure mes genoux nus, et je respire un rouge géranium artificiel. Dès cette minute, je ne m’appartiens plus, tout va bien. (62)

Her performance is a defence mechanism. It is a screen behind which she shelters: Renée knowingly inhabits a performative body, one whose very unveiling is a screen which protects her from the patriarchal gaze: “je me dévêts comme d’autres se parent, rompue – car je fus le modèle de Taillandy avant d’être danseuse – à déjouer les dangers de la nudité, à me mouvoir nue sous la lumière comme sous une draperie compliquée” (258).

Unlike her Zolian counterpart, moreover, Colette’s Renée is able to return the gaze of those who look upon her. As she dances before an audience of former society friends, clad in little but “le voile qui constitue presque tout mon costume,” she is at once the subject and the object of a gaze:

*Je ne distingue rien, d’abord, à travers le fin treillis de ma cage de gaze[...] Peu à peu, le voile se desserre, s’enfle, vole et retombe, me révélant aux yeux de ceux qui sont là, qui ont tu, pour me regarder, leur enragé bavardage... [...] Je les vois. Malgré moi, je les vois. En*

dansant, en rampant, en tournant, *je les vois et je les reconnais*. (100. My emphasis)

Renée is here able not only to see but also to recognise, that is to say, to read her audience, subjecting them to a critical, analytical gaze of her own: “Sur les côtés, au fond, il y a une ligne sombre d’hommes, debout. Ils se pressent et se penchent, avec cette curiosité, cette curiosité rossarde de l’homme du monde pour la femme dite ‘déclassée,’ pour celle à qui on baise le bout des doigts dans son salon et qui danse, maintenant, demi-nue, sur une estrade” (102). Just as she is subjected to their scrutiny, so Renée subjects them to hers and she asserts the autonomy of her gaze throughout the novel. Unlike Zola’s Renée, with her masculine eyeglasses, Renée Néré refuses the replacement of her own critical gaze with the perspective of masculine society in *La Vagabonde*.

Between the two Renées lie not only the different gender of the two authors, but also almost forty years of historical change, particularly in the field of women’s education, which opened up new vistas for women. Between the publication of *La Curée* in 1873 and that of *La Vagabonde* in 1910, a number of educational reforms were enacted by the Third Republic, most notably the Ferry laws of 1881-1882, which made all public schools free and secular and decreed attendance to be mandatory for both sexes between the ages of six and thirteen. Other reforms included the opening of *écoles normales* to train female teachers, the foundation of state secondary schools for girls and the creation of additional primary schools. The impact of these reforms was such that, according to Linda Clark’s estimate, illiteracy had

been virtually eliminated amongst women under forty in France by 1914.<sup>156</sup>

These changes, coupled with the Naquet laws which relegalised divorce and with the ever-increasing entry of women into the workforce and the professions, offered women a wider scope of activity and identity. Colette's Renée remains a radical figure, but one whose radicalism relative to Zola's Renée reflects not only the different perspectives and gender experience of the two authors but the progress of history.

The *Belle Époque* also saw the rise of the figure of the New Woman, alternately reviled and celebrated (mostly the former) as she appeared in the press and on stage. Unruly, demanding, masculine and above all mobile, the New Woman was characterised by her refusal to remain within the home. She was shown in cartoons and articles abandoning traditional feminine costume in favour of bloomers in order to cycle off to feminist meetings, leaving her family behind. The New Woman was a *déclassée* both sexually and socially, performing an identity dissonant with expectations of her class and gender, an identity which had become possible, but which was not yet admissible to the mainstream.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that *La Vagabonde* is written from the ambiguous perspective of the margins, for we must situate Colette, a new divorcée making a living on the stage, while taking lovers both male and female, within this context. Colette writes performance from a perspective

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<sup>156</sup> Linda L. Clark, *Schooling the Daughters of Marianne: Textbooks and the Socialization of Girls in Modern French Primary Schools* Albany: SUNY Press, 1984, 26.

fundamentally different to that of Zola (or indeed Goncourt, or even Bernhardt), and accordingly gives her Renée a voice which speaks self-consciously from the fringes, neither within nor without society.

The perspective which Renée Néré adopts is one that Ross Chambers defines as one of “loiterliness,” a “peripheral consciousness, readily able to shift both its loyalties and its *visée* or target[...] an essentially mobile consciousness, indeed it’s a consciousness of mobility.”<sup>157</sup> The loiterly consciousness situates itself on the margins, neither fully inside nor outside of mainstream discourse: “Unlike the silenced fringe dwellers they frequent, the loiterly subject is at home on the fringe but can also claim certain bourgeois privileges on occasion, including the ability to write and the claim to be read” (60). As Chambers explains, then, in relation to *La Vagabonde*, “*Déclassée* as she is by her employment, Renée shares the flâneur’s traditional sympathy for the life of the underclass, along with the loiterly subject’s ability, as an educated member of the middle class, to represent its color and pathos for a similarly middle-class audience” (71). Renée’s loiterly knowledge is linked by Chambers to her ability to read:

Reading is the mode through which community is constituted, where community refers to the forms of connectedness available, not to disciplinary subjects (isolated by their individuality, as subjects and objects of the practice of examination), but to peripheral subjects conscious of the constitution in and through alterity of their own subjectivity, subjects who are thus always on the cusp of another context and defined by constitutive relations of proximity and motility. (81)

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<sup>157</sup> Ross Chambers. *Loiterature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

This loiterly reading allows Renée to identify herself with her fellow music-hall artists, “mes compagnons, mes frères” (Colette, 129), whilst at the same time, enabling her to read critically the society of which she was once a part: “That which is established and disciplined, self-absorbed and exclusionary, is subject to implicit and sometimes explicit relativization from the perspective of its own fringe consciousness, where subjectivity knows itself as split, mobile and other-constituted” (Chambers, 81).

Renée Néré, unlike Renée Saccard, is an accomplished reader of the fictions of masculine society. Early in the novel, she reproduces two letters addressed to her by admirers which offer different but equally clichéd narratives of the feminine. The first, signed by a “Marquis de Fontanges,” reads: “*Madame, j’étais au premier rang de l’orchestre: votre talent de mime m’invite à croire que vous en possédez d’autres, plus spéciaux et plus captivants encore; faites-moi le plaisir de souper ce soir avec moi...*” (Colette, 63). The marquis’s misreading of Renée is juxtaposed with her own scathing analysis:

Je flaire chez ce marquis de Fontanges une parenté proche avec un comte de Lavallière, qui m’offrit, la semaine passée un “five o’clock” dans sa garçonnière. Fumisteries banales, mais où se devine le romanesque amour de la grande vie, le respect du blason qui couvent en ce quartier de gouapes, sous tant de casquettes avachies. (63)

This letter is followed shortly afterwards by that of a “pauvre petit” who offers “un amour bavard et humilié”: “Il se rêvait Prince Charmant, pauvre gosse, et riche, et puissant” (71). Her reading, in the words of Rachel Mesch, “showcases the way in which the woman writer’s critical voice is constructed

against a specular image of femininity that fuels and authorises patriarchal male desire. Renée's critical acumen[...] protects her autonomous identity as it instantly transforms her spectators into objects of her own critical gaze" (Mesch, 71). Whether it is the classic narrative of marriage and redemption, or the stereotype of the actress as woman of easy virtue, Renée is able to read and to interpret them for what they are, clichés designed to entrap her. In transcribing these hackneyed storylines, Renée, true to her profession, mimics the masculine discourse which produces them, reproducing and parodying the classic female plots of literature. The trajectories mapped out by the letters which Renée receives are classic plots of femininity, and she reads them as such before rejecting them in the form of Maxime, who offers her redemption from her *déclassée* status in the form of conventional and respectable marriage, a plot of which she offers a disdainful reading to Hamond:

Le mariage, c'est... c'est: 'Noue-moi ma cravate!... Fous la bonne à la porte!... Coupe-moi les ongles des pieds... Lève-toi pour me faire de la camomille... Prépare-moi un lavement...' C'est: 'Donne-moi mon complet neuf, et remplis ma valise, pour que je file *la* retrouver...' Intendante, garde-malade, bonne d'enfant, - assez, assez, assez! (Colette, 207)

Though her "loiterly" reading, Renée situates herself on the peripheries of culture, on the edges of society but possessed of an intimate knowledge of its workings: "je ne l'oublie pas" (207). It is no accident that she lives towards the edge of the city and that she and Fossette take such pleasure in the liminal space of the Bois de Boulogne, where they roam as "vagabondes citadines" (87-8). Renée reads from the margins, literally and figuratively



neither in nor out of the city. She is at once situated and mobile, and this expresses itself on the spatial level in the novel as she carves out a series of spaces – the stage, her dressing room, her home and the Bois de Boulogne – which symbolise her loiterly status. As Ann Cothran has demonstrated, Renée’s life prior to Maxime’s entrance into it revolves around this series of spaces which Cothran views as specifically female, makeshift refuges from patriarchy.<sup>158</sup> Onstage she is “isolée, défendue” from the harsh realities of society by “la barrière de feu me gardant contre tous,” (Colette, 87). Similarly, although somewhat cheerless, her flat nevertheless provides “un abri... un asile” (64) whilst for Renée and Fossette the Bois de Boulogne is “notre parc, notre forêt” (87). Within these spaces, Renée is free to divagate, to wander as she pleases: “il n’y a rien de réel que la danse, la lumière, la liberté, la musique” (102). In this they resemble what Janet Beizer calls the “simultaneous containedness and capaciousness of the novel” (Beizer, 70). The spaces which Renée establishes through her loiterly performance are spaces of apparent containment which are also loci of fantasised wandering, rather like reading, an activity which requires no physical movement, yet offers intellectual mobility. In this association between space, reading and wandering, we can see the link between Chambers’s loiterly consciousness and the errancy which is the root of the hysteria so often warned against in reading women. From the *vagabondage* of the loiterly, it is but a short step to the “exaltations singulières, bizarres, éloquentes et mêmes poétiques de

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<sup>158</sup> Ann Cochran, “The Dryad’s Escape: Female Space in *La Vagabonde*,” in *Modern Language Studies* 21(ii), Spring 1991, 27-35.

l'imagination" (Brachet, 285-6) which characterise the hysteric: the wandering subject easily becomes a wandering womb. Interestingly, Renée herself makes a similar association between reading and wandering, connecting the smell of a book to that of a train: "le parfum d'encre humide et de papier neuf évoque celui de la houille, des locomotives, des départs" (66-7).

These spaces of *vagabondage* are, nevertheless, spaces. That is to say, they carry within them the notion of boundaries. All spaces are, by their very notion, demarcated. The same spaces which Renée arrogates to protect herself and her independence also imprison her: her dressing room for example is a "cage aux murs blancs" (60) as well as a refuge. Likewise, she compares her habit of talking to herself to "une manie qui vient aux reclus, aux vieux prisonniers" (67). The same image of reading which expresses her wandering, moreover, also expresses the immobility which is concealed behind her apparent mobility:

Vagabonde, soit, mais qui se résigne à tourner en rond, sur place...  
Les départs m'attristent et m'enivrent, c'est vrai, et quelque chose de moi se suspend à tout ce que je traverse – pays nouveaux, ciels purs ou nuageux, mers sous la pluie couleur de perle grise – s'y accroche si passionément qu'il me semble laisser derrière moi mille petits fantômes que à ma ressemblance, roulés dans le flot, bercés sur la feuille, dispersés dans le nuage... Mais un dernier petit fantôme, le plus pareil de tous à moi-même, ne demeure-t-il pas assis au coin de ma cheminée, rêveur et sage, penché sur un livre qu'il oublie de lire.  
(129)

Renée's loiterly *vagabondage* is, then, centripetal motion, movement in ever-decreasing circles around a fixed point, "comme un oiseau tenu par un fil" (179), within boundaries which entrap as well as protect her. In the second part of this chapter, I shall be examining the way in which Renée writes

herself out of this entrapment, as she moves from loiterliness to writerliness, from reading the objectifying fictions of masculine society to self-authorisation through writing. I shall read her return to writing in the context of the Third Republic's reform of education, and the ideological tools with which this programme, knowingly or unknowingly, furnished the young women in particular whom it sought to form.

As well as literacy the public schools of the Third Republic sought to inculcate a *morale laïque*, a set of moral values which would underpin the social structures of the newly-formed Republic by supplying pupils with a mental framework which would equip them for adult life as France's future citizens. Scholars have tended to foreground the gender conservatism of the *morale laïque*, which emphasised above all the role of the *femme de foyer* as wife and mother and the domestic influence of women as the heart of the family: Linda Clark, for example, comments that "the school tended to reinforce women's commitment to domesticity, not to free them from it" (Clark, 59). Yet, at the same time, as Patricia Tilburg points out, the emphasis placed by the Republican curriculum on work, and its insistence upon the importance of wage-paying labour, particularly the practice of a *métier*, or skilled craft, offered the potential to upset traditional gender roles: "While many of the laic [sic] curriculum's feminine images indeed differed little from those in Catholic textbooks, traditional feminine ideals of domestic virtue and maternal care were now accompanied by a host of images that elevated the importance of

financial solvency, achievement, and work, for girls and boys.”<sup>159</sup> Tilburg’s work situates Colette as one of the first generation of young women educated entirely under the auspices of the the Third Republic’s educational programme, with all the contradictions and possibilities that this implied: “As a product of the new republican school, Colette spent her formative years immersed in a *morale laïque* that both presented moral craft and financial solvency as the path to moral perfection and shored up traditional feminine domesticity” (100). In her analysis of *La Vagabonde*, Tilburg traces the marks of the educational culture in which Colette was raised in her depiction of the music-hall and the actress as archetypes of the republican ideal of the honest, hard-working craftsmanship and professional pride, “a realm of dignified labor and chaste propriety” (103).

The performers with whom Renée works in *La Vagabonde* are a far cry from the still-dominant contemporary stereotype which we found in *Nana* of the performer – particularly the female performer – as lazy, slovenly and promiscuous. Rather, they are dedicated artisans with a fierce pride in their craft:

Les artistes de café-concert... Qu’ils sont mal connus, et décriés, et peu compris! Chimériques, orgueilleux, pleins d’une foi absurde et surannée dans l’Art, eux seuls, eux, les derniers, osent encore déclarer, avec une fièvre sacrée: - Un artiste ne doit pas... un artiste ne peut accepter... un artiste ne consent pas.... (Colette, 92)

Renée shares this professional pride and is angered by euphemistic references to her profession which portray her as a dilettante “[qui] fait du

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<sup>159</sup> Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette’s Republic: Work, Gender and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, New York: Berghahn, 2009, 25.

théâtre,” into which she reads a “nuance subtile, un refus polis de la part du public et de mes amis eux-mêmes de me donner une grade dans cette carrière que j’ai pourtant choisie” (67-8). Likewise she takes umbrage with her partner Brague when he advises her to rest before a show: “Je ne daigne pas répondre. Me prend-il pour une débutante?” (256). Underlying this professional pride is a sense of the practical and moral imperative of making a living. To be out of work is to risk physical and moral degeneration, “l’oisiveté qui démoralise, appauvrit et détraque les comédiens sans emploi” (158). Renée too is “joyeusement reprise de la fièvre active, du besoin de *travailler*... un besoin mystérieux et indéfini (148). Her music-hall career is a source of pride to her, in spite of cultural prejudices, because it enables her to support herself independently following her divorce: “A mes bonnes heures, je me dis et me redis, joyeusement que je gagne ma vie. Le music-hall, où je devins mime, danseuse, voire comédienne à l’occasion, fit aussi de moi, tout étonnée de compter, de débattre et de marchander, une petite commerçante honnête et dure” (83). Renée is amused by the squeamishness of the bourgeois men who find such awkwardness in the act of paying a woman for her work following a private performance, asking “Qu’y a-t-il là d’embarrassant?” (103). In *La Vagabonde*, then, as Tilburg remarks, “Colette grounds her heroine’s rebellion on a precise understanding of the value of manual work, a language of honor through *métier*” (Tilburg, 117). The *café-concert* is recoded as an alternative model of honourable conduct open to

women besides marriage, one which Colette roots in the concepts of the *morale laïque*.

The honest labour of the music-hall is contrasted in *La Vagabonde* with the idleness of the bourgeois society of which Maxime is a product. As Renée prepares to leave on tour, it becomes clear that Maxime does not have any understanding of or respect for the profession which Renée has adopted as her own, when he tells her “Mais chérie, vous n’avez plus besoin de music-hall, puisque je suis là” (Colette, 204). Maxime’s remark reveals his failure to understand the importance of labour as not merely an unpleasant necessity but also as a practical and moral obligation. This failure is attributed by Renée to his bourgeois background and idle lifestyle: “où aurait-il appris, l’enfant gâté, que l’argent, l’argent qu’on gagne, est une chose respectable, sérieuse, qu’on manie avec sollicitude et dont on parle gravement?” (229). Renée perceives that the two of them have a fundamentally different relationship to work:

Je contemple, déconcertée, cet homme qui n’a rien à faire, qui trouve de l’argent dans sa poche à toute heure... Il n’a pas de métier, aucune sinécure ne déguise sa liberté d’oisif[...] Il peut se donner, jour et nuit, tout entier à l’amour, comme... comme une grue[...] Cette idée baroque, que de nos deux, c’est lui la courtisane, me cause un brusque gaieté (201).

As Tilburg points out, this comparison inverts conventional hierarchies of class and gender, associating the female performer, the “petite caf’conc très raisonnable qui vit de son métier” (230) with respectability and the male landowner with the stereotype of the idle courtesan (Tilburg, 117). Renée’s partner Brague remarks that he would rather die than live, as Maxime does,

without a métier: “Moi je crèverais... Question d’habitude” (Colette, 225).

When Renée, foreshadowing her final decision to leave Maxime, refuses his offer to join her on tour, she does so in a way that underlines the gulf between their attitudes to labour: “Laissez-moi toute seule à mon métier, que vous n’aimez pas... Laissez-moi accomplir ma tournée, en y mettant une conscience vaguement militaire, une application d’honnête travailleuse” (253). In this way, she frames her refusal of Maxime in terms of a refusal of idleness and a valorisation of labour which at once subverts social hierarchies whilst at the same time employing the language of republican dogma.

Tilburg reads this conflict as a dialogue between culturally constructed notions of honour (Tilburg, 118), an analysis which I find compelling but which, in my opinion, neglects the intertwined economic and literary implications of Renée’s decision. In refusing the idle lifestyle offered to her by Maxime, Renée is refusing above all an economy which is founded on the gendering of space as female, passive, to be conquered. Maxime’s wealth is derived not from the free exchange of money or goods for labour in which Renée engages, but from possession of and encroachment upon space: his income comes from a fortune based upon the exploitation of woodland for timber. His desire for Renée operates in much the same way, through the gradual invasion of the spaces which she has constructed for herself, a strategy which Renée identifies in her final letter: “Cher intrus... Tu étais venu partager ma vie. Partager, oui: *prendre ta part*. Etre de moitié dans mes actes, t’introduire à chaque heure dans la pagode secrète de mes pensées,

n'est-ce pas?" (251). As Cothran notes, Maxime and his immobilising desire insinuate themselves gradually into each of Renée's supposed refuges (Cothran, 29-31). First to be invaded is her dressing-room where she refers to him as "cet envahisseur" (Colette, 75). Then, his voice penetrates her onstage refuge, his "Bravo" cutting through the reverie of her performance at a private party, in what Nancy Miller interprets as Renée's interpellation by masculine society.<sup>160</sup> Renée at first rebuffs him as an intruder, but is soon forced to accept "l'intrusion du Grand-Sérin, échauffé, dans ma loge..." (Colette, 122) . Although she initially forces him to leave the dressing room, it continues to be filled nonetheless with surrogate invaders, flowers and gifts sent by Maxime (108), and he eventually secures entry into her apartment via Hamond. As their relationship develops, he seeks to possess and to dominate Renée, who remarks that Maxime "ne paraît s'occuper, que de me rassurer d'abord, me conquérir après" (136). In exchange for these spaces which he has conquered, Maxime offers her the tempting but restrictive space of marriage, a "clos ensoleillé, borné de murs solides" (254).

Idleness is, for Renée, tantamount to slavery: when she sarcastically exclaims to Hamond: "Laissez-moi attendre, parée, oisive, seule dans ma chambre close la venue de celui qui m'a choisie pour harem," (208) she makes a revealing association between leisure and female captivity, which she contrasts with "[le souci] âpre, fortifiant, naturel de m'assurer moi-même ma subsistance" (144). The luxury and idleness which Maxime offers her are

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<sup>160</sup> Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 242.



also a means of possessing her: “quand je t’aurai tout à fait à moi, va! je t’en collerai des wagons de luxe, et des fleurs plein le filet et des robes, et des robes! et tout ce que je trouverai de beau, et tout ce que j’inventerai” (230). Maxime partakes in a masculine fantasy of woman as a space to be conquered, aiming to trap Renée in the imaginary space of her immanent, female body through the maternity he posits for her: “tu ne pourrais plus me quitter, ni courir toute seule les grands chemins, hein? Tu serais prise” (214). Renée’s emphasis on the importance of the music hall as labour, then, expresses more than an alternative code of honour, for it enables her to write her way out of potential entrapment within a gendered economy of space: it provides the foundation for an alternative economy in which her continued *vagabondage* is possible.<sup>161</sup>

Renée rejects not merely the economic ideology of patriarchal possession, but also a mode of textuality which is connected to it, which Martha Evans describes as “a male mode, the desire to possess masquerading as eroticism.”<sup>162</sup> Writing in the masculine tradition is above all an expression of this desire to possess, as Renée recognises in reading the letters of her admirers: “Leurs lettres pressées, brutales et gauches,

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<sup>161</sup> Diana Holmes reads the novel as expressing women’s desire for economic independence in patriarchal society. See Diana Holmes. *Colette*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991, 62. Similarly, Nancy Miller remarks that in *La Vagabonde*, “the actress is grounded in a historical moment in which it becomes possible to imagine tropes of identity that emerge from a daily scene of work. See Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 245.

<sup>162</sup> Martha Evans, *Masks of Tradition: Women and the Politics of Writing in Twentieth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987, 57.

traduisent leur envie, et non leurs pensées” (77). The link between artistic representation and masculine desire in heteronormative culture is embodied by Renée’s former husband, the artist Adolphe Taillandy, a “balzacien génie du mensonge,” (80) who is incapable of dissociating representation and sexual possession: “Je ne veux pour modèles que mes maîtresses, et pour maîtresses que mes modèles” (79). Likewise, Maxime’s readings and writings of Renée testify to his desire to possess her: his writing has “une autorité superbe, qui dispose de moi, de mon avenir, de ma courte vie entière (254), and the sound of the paper rustling is compared to “un bruit de billets de banque” (255). Later, in reply to a “lettre ambiguë” from Renée, Maxime replies with “une lettre tranquille et heureuse, un long remerciement sans rature, où l’amour se faisait amical, assuré, fier de donner tout et de recevoir davantage, une lettre, enfin, qui pouvait me donner l’illusion d’avoir écrit: ‘Tel jour, telle heure, je suis à vous, et nous partons ensemble’” (261).

This mode of textuality is also, in *La Vagabonde*, the mark of one who has no *métier*. Rather like Maxime’s passion for hunting, writing is the pastime of those who have no occupation. Renée, on the other hand, must earn her living, and views writing as a luxury which she can ill afford: “[je] me refuse le luxe, le plaisir d’écrire” (69), for writing is entwined with the economic paradigms of normative heterosexuality from which Renée has sought to liberate herself with the ideal of work. With the remark: “je ne suis pas Balzac, moi. Le conte fragile que j’édifie s’émiette, quand le fournisseur sonne, quand le bottier présente sa facture, quand l’avoué téléphone, et

l'avocat, quand l'agent théâtral me mande à son bureau" (69), Renée places herself in opposition to Balzac not merely as a figure of the masculine literary canon, but also as a figure of prodigious literary production. Such productivity in the masculine tradition is posed as the privilege of those who are not interrupted by the realities of day-to-day living: it is the luxury of the idle, "plaisir et souffrance d'oisifs" (68). Just as, in Brague's words "l'amour et le métier, ça ne va pas ensemble" (224-5) so writing and *métier* do not mix.

At the same time, Renée is able to envisage an alternative mode of writing, one in which she may write again without becoming entangled in the masculine economy of possession. She imagines a writing which resists the desire of symbolic language to fix and to master:

Écrire! pouvoir écrire! cela signifie la longue rêverie devant la feuille blanche, le griffonage inconscient, les jeux de la plume qui tourne en rond autour d'une tâche d'encre, qui mordille le mot imparfait, le griffe, le hérissé des fléchettes, l'orne d'antennes, de pattes, jusqu'à ce qu'il perde sa figure lisible de mot, mué en insecte fantastique, envolé en papillon-fée. (68)

This conception of writing is not legible in the conventional sense: it is not to be apprehended as a single meaning. Rather, the written word becomes a material space of creative play in which all of the senses are engaged. Renée intuits something of this language in the writing of her third novel, *La Forêt sans oiseaux*, which was misunderstood and rejected by society as being incomprehensible but in which she herself takes a solipsistic pleasure: "je l'aime et je *m'y* aime de tout mon cœur" (82). Renée confesses that the affection which she feels for this novel lies at least in part in its impenetrability

to the reading public<sup>163</sup>: “Incompréhensible? Pour vous peut-être. Mais pour moi, sa chaude obscurité s’éclaire; pour moi, tel mot suffit à recréer l’odeur, la couleur des heures vécues, il est sonore et plein de mystères comme une coquille où chante la mer, et je l’aimerais moins, je crois, si vous l’aimiez aussi” (82).

In the pleasure which Renée takes in the illegibility of her novel to patriarchal society, we can also see a rewriting of the mythomania and logorrhea which were cited by many physicians as symptomatic of the hysteric’s pathology.<sup>164</sup> Charles Richet describes hysterics as characterised by the impulse to narrate: “Rien ne leur plaît plus que[...] de raconter des histoires absolument fausses[...] d’énumérer tout ce qu’elles n’ont pas fait, tout ce qu’elles ont fait, avec un luxe incroyable de faux détails” (Richet, “Les démoniaques d’aujourd’hui,” 344). The language of hysteria is characterised, then, as being effusive, excessive and incoherent, and from here, it is not a huge leap to *La Forêt sans oiseaux*, judged by critics to be “long, et diffus, et incompréhensible” (Colette, 82).

As Renée returns to writing in the third section of the novel, her writing has the same disorder and tendency to excess which doctors attribute to the hysteric: “écrire, c’est si facile. Écrire, écrire, lancer à travers des pages blanches l’écriture rapide, inégale, qu’il compare à mon visage, mobile,

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<sup>163</sup> *La Forêt sans oiseaux*, Rachel Mesch notes, represents to its author a literary ideal which “precludes the scopic violence of the patriarchal gaze” (Mesch, 76).

<sup>164</sup> For a full discussion of logorrhea in the discourse of hysteria see Beizer, 43-8.

surmené par l'excès d'expression" (262-3). The textual body which she creates for herself is incoherent, messy, driven not by reflection but by inspiration: "Quatre grandes feuilles, sur la table, témoignent de ma hâte à écrire, non moins que le désordre du manuscrit, où l'écriture monte et descend, se dilate et se contracte, sensible..." (265). This hasty, overflowing writing could be read in terms of medical descriptions of hysterical language as a kind of logorrhea: viewed through the eyes of the masculine medical establishment, Renée's writing might appear hysterical. The alleged verbal incontinence of the hysteric is, of course, part of the wider stereotype of the leaky vessel, of the woman as a porous space to be colonised and stopped up, simultaneously mobile and contained. Were it to remain situated in the space of hysteria, then, Renée's return to writing would be little removed from the loiterly, but ultimately limiting *vagabondage* which we found in the first two sections of the novel. It would remain an activity situated in space, vulnerable to colonisation and marginalisation by the patriarchal gaze.

In the excess of her writing, however, Renée moves beyond the loiterly spaces which at once protected and imprisoned her in the first part of the novel. I do not here wish to argue for the presence in *La Vagabonde* of what Nancy Miller has called an "*écriture féminine' avant la lettre*," written from a pre-œdipal space outside of patriarchal discourse.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, early in the

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<sup>165</sup> Miller, 240. Martha Evans also reads the novel as opposing masculine textuality to "a female mode based on a true eroticism, a desire for a symbolic union located in words." See Evans, *Masks of Tradition*, 57.

novel, Renée considers and rejects the possibility of a return to such an ordinary space:

S'agit-il pour moi de reconstituer, bûchette à bûchette, le décor primitif, une maison paisible au milieu des bois? Non, non, quelqu'un a brouillé toutes les lignes du doux paysage: je ne retrouverais même pas les débris du toit bleu brodé de lichens jaunes, ni la vigne vierge, ni la profonde forêt sans oiseaux. (Colette, *La Vagabonde*, 77-8)

Rather, I would like to view the novel as deconstructing space in the patriarchal economy. When she does return to the scene of childhood, travelling through her mother-country, her native Burgundy, she does not return to this maternal space so much as pass through it: "je viens de traverser, sans m'y arrêter, un pays qui est le mien, celui de mon enfance" (210). In the Jardin de la Fontaine, in Nîmes, she comes to redefine her relationship to space. Rather than seeking her own space, Renée begins to deconstruct the notions of space and possession which underpin gender roles: "Tout ceci est encore mon royaume, un petit morceau des biens magnifiques que Dieu dispense aux passants, aux nomades, aux solitaires. La terre appartient à celui qui s'arrête un instant, contemple, et s'en va; tout le soleil est au lézard nu qui s'y chauffe" (266). Space is no longer thought of in terms of an inevitably gendered binary relationship of possessor/possessed but as the medium of an endless mobility which evades the threat of possession.

Renée does not so much move within space as through it as she travels southwards to the sea, a *topos* which signifies the end of spatial boundaries, appearing to have neither beginning, nor end: "Elle [la mer] était

là, tout le long du train, revenue quand je ne pensais plus à elle. Le soleil de sept heures, bas encore, ne la pénétrait point; elle refusait de se laisser posséder, gardant, mal éveillée, une teinte nocturne d'encre bleue, crêtée de blanc" (270). Renée experiences a moment of identification with the sea which is situated not in space but in movement: "A demi endormie, comme la mer, abandonné au bercement du train, je croyais raser, d'un vol tranchant d'hirondelle, les vagues proches..." (271). Her return to writing is precipitated by this movement which has neither situation nor destination: "Pendant combien de temps venais-je pour la première fois d'oublier Max? Oui, de l'oublier, comme si je n'avais jamais connu son regard, ni la caresse de sa bouche, de l'oublier comme s'il n'y avait pas de soin plus impérieux, dans ma vie, que de chercher des mots, des mots pour dire combien le soleil est jaune, et bleue la mer, et brillant le sel en frange de jais blanc" (271).

Whereas previously, writing signified for Renée a spiritual wandering around a physical stillness, "le regard accroché, hypnotisé par le reflet de la fenêtre dans l'encrier d'argent, la fièvre divine qui monte aux joues, au front, tandis qu'une bienheureuse mort glace sur le papier la main qui écrit" (68), her

writing is now characterised by an endless mobility:

J'écris, avec un abondance, une liberté inexplicable. J'écris sur des guéridons boiteux, assise de biais sur des chaises trop hautes, j'écris, un pied chaussé et l'autre nu, mon papier logé entre le plateau du petit déjeuner et mon sac à main ouvert, parmi les brosses, le flacon d'odeur et le tire-bouton; j'écris devant la fenêtre qui encadre un fond de cour, ou les plus délicieux jardins, ou des montagnes vapoureuses... Je me sens chez moi, parmi ce désordre de campement, ce n'importe où et ce n'importe comment, et plus légère qu'en mes meubles hantés. (273)

The loiterly “vagabonde.[...] qui se résigne à tourner en rond, sur place,” (129) has, then, become an authentically mobile subjectivity, “vagabonde et libre” (286).

The word *vagabond(e)*, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, was a loaded term in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century culture, one usually placed in opposition to the concept of *métier*. Indeed, article 270 of the Code Civil defined a *vagabond* in 1810 as being someone not only without a home, but also without a *métier*. In *La Vagabonde*, however, Renée’s *vagabondage* is grounded in a *métier*, in “[des] choses précises et commerciales” (227). Renée comes to combine the wanderings of *vagabondage* with a middle-class ideal of respectability:

Mon goût tardif – acquis, un peu artificiel – des déplacements et du voyage fait bon ménage avec un fatalisme foncier et paisible de petite bourgeoise. Bohème désormais, oui, et que les tournées ont menée de ville en ville, mais bohème ordonnée, attentive à recoudre elle-même ses nippes bien brossées; bohème qui porte presque toujours sur elle sa mince fortune; mais dans le petit sac en peau de daim, les sous sont d’un côté, l’argent blanc de l’autre, l’or caché précieusement dans une pochette à secret... (129)

Her coming to writing is effected by the rooting of a culturally hystericised way of life in one recoded and valorised through its transposition into the *métier* of the music-hall, which she rewrites as a space of respectable and valorising labour.

The music-hall, and in particular the provincial (and, later, potential international) tour provide a scene of work which allows a new, more mobile subjectivity to emerge in *La Vagabonde*. Between Zola and Colette, the actress undergoes a coming to writing which is at once historically based and



a reflection of radically different gender perspectives. The recoding of the theatre as honourable labour subverts a textual economy based on the possession of the female body and its enclosure in space, and points towards an alternative textuality. Whereas Zola allows Renée Saccard no option, in the light of her *prise de conscience*, but a retreat into silence and enclosure, her namesake proves able not only to read masculine society's fictions of the actress but to write her way out of them. The actress is no longer a space to be colonised through textuality, but a literate, mobile subject in her own right, whose writing undoes a certain concept of space and its possession as it underpins the sexual and textual economies of traditional patriarchy.

## **Conclusion:**

In *fin-de-siècle* France, then, a drama of performativity and pathologisation was being played out on the bodies of actresses. The stereotype of the hysterical actress brought together pathology and performance in a complex interplay that proved at once repressive and liberating. We find, therefore, a paradox: in the period from 1880 to 1910, performativity begins to bear the brunt of Western pathologists' scrutiny; at the same time, however, it was through performance that women found a voice which was denied to them by the prevailing ideology. The very pathologisation of performance which was supposed to solidify gender hierarchies perceived to be under threat was appropriated and used to imagine new identities for women through performance. Be it in Zola's naturalist nightmare, in Goncourt's nostalgic dystopia of the actress, in Bernhardt's ironic mimicry or Colette's defiance, the protagonists of all four texts, in their different ways, offer performances, both literal and literary, which highlight the contingency of gender norms and the ultimate performativity of sexual roles. The question then remains: where does this progression leave us today? What are the potential and the limits of this ironic intelligence which we have uncovered in the performances of actresses?

Before addressing this question, let us return to the anecdote concerning Sarah Bernhardt's performance in *Phèdre* with which I opened this dissertation. As read by Robert Kemp in *Le Figaro*, Bernhardt's gesture reinscribes the actress in the discourse of hysteria, reinforcing in the minds of

the audience a presupposed link between the two. Yet it can also be read as an ironic citation of the trope of the hysterical, nymphomaniac actress by a performer who, as I have shown in my fourth chapter, was well aware of her own image and in full command of that image. As I read it, Bernhardt's gesture foregrounds the facticity of the hysteria trope, and underlines the capacity of the hystericised actress for self-creation through performance.

Our ironising reading of Bernhardt's gesture does not give us the right to discard Robert Kemp's version of events out of hand. Couched in the layers of Bernhardt's performance lies an apparently irresolvable ambiguity: does *la divine Sarah's* citation of Charcot call attention to the pathologisation of Woman in patriarchal culture, exposing the codes which structure representations of the feminine, or does it merely repeat those codes? The line between ironic and non-ironic, between the undermining of conceptual categories and their uncritical replication, is a fine one.<sup>166</sup> While I tend towards the former ironic interpretation, this, like all irony is dependent upon the reader: it is equally possible, and perhaps equally valid, to read this gesture in Kemp's terms as an essentialist replication of masculine stereotypes of the female body. In short, what I have been reading as an ironic performance of pathologisation could also be viewed quite simply as pathologisation.

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<sup>166</sup> In my discussion of irony and ideology in this chapter, my thinking reflects the influence of Janet Beizer's chapter on "Venus in Drag or Redressing the Discourse of Hysteria: Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus*" in *Ventriloquized Bodies*. See Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies*, 227-260.

The persistence of this hystericised reading of the actress's body represented by Kemp, the lingering presence of a pathological fly (a *mouche d'or?*) in our ironic ointment forces us to revisit the notion of performance which is at the heart of our argument. A reading of the gesture as purely ironic rests upon a postmodern concept of identity as a citational practice, as an ongoing project of self-fashioning which appropriates the clichés of ideology. It assumes a model of subjectivity which is characterised by endless self-transformation: the self is an actor who can adopt multiple identities and slip in and out of character at will. By reading in this way, however, we risk neglecting the extent to which the play of identity is always already constrained by ideology. That is to say, we ignore that which both binds and enables the actress's performance. Neither Bernhardt's specific gesture nor any of the performances which I have analysed were produced in a cultural vacuum: all are informed and shaped by the ideology of hystericisation even as they subvert it. The actress, to paraphrase Judith Butler, is always already on the stage.<sup>167</sup> This is not to suggest that the body of the actress is a passive receptacle of ideology – as I have shown, the actress in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was far more than the object of a pathologising male gaze – but rather to suggest that ideology provides the constraints with which she engages and within which she improvises. The interest of the actress and her performance lies neither in the compliant reproduction of cultural norms

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<sup>167</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology," *Theatre Journal*, 40(iv), 1988, 526.

nor in some postmodern fantasy of an endlessly mobile identity but instead in the creative engagement of theatre women with the prevailing discourse.

I persist, then, in my reading of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century actress in France as finding new possibilities of agency in the discourse of hysteria: I merely temper it with the realisation that actresses do not so much liberate themselves from the script of pathology altogether as appropriate it, leaving a fundamental ambiguity that cannot – perhaps should not – be resolved. Nonetheless, I find a powerful irony in the representations and self-representations of actresses, which turn the masculine gaze back upon itself, de-essentialising the ideology of pathology through multi-faceted performances of the often contradictory images of woman in patriarchy. As Judith Williamson puts it: “To present all those surfaces at once is such a superb way of flashing the images of ‘Woman’ back where they belong, in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>168</sup>

Williamson is here referring not to any of the actresses in this study but to contemporary photographer Cindy Sherman, whose work embodies the same tension between irony and ideology, between performance and pathology that I have been discussing. Sherman is best known for her serial self-portraiture, for her persistent appearances in various guises in her own photographs. However, the photograph I wish to discuss here is one in which Sherman does not appear. In this photograph, known as *Untitled #250* and produced in

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<sup>168</sup> Judith Williamson, “Images of ‘Woman,’” *Screen*, November-December 1983, 102.

1992, the model reclines in a classic pose: recumbent, her hands clasped behind her head, her legs akimbo, she is familiar from a thousand nudes. Her curvaceous figure, rounded belly, swollen breasts and erect nipples are all conventionally seductive. The image is completed by a mane of blonde hair that flows out behind her. However, this picture begins to fall apart when we see the face of the model: our glamorous starlet is a wizened old hag with a face that could freeze desire in its tracks. Moreover, the perfect body of the nude reveals itself to be no more than a collage of different prosthetic body parts, with the legs amputated: far from being a coherent whole, it is made up of a series of fragments.

We have moved in this dissertation from male representations of women in performance through to the ironic performances of Bernhardt and Colette in which the actress claims more control and agency over her own image. Now, in Sherman, we have a performance of a different kind, but one which I would argue partakes of this legacy, manipulating the tropes of pathology to expose their fundamentally ideological, misogynistic character. She does so through a series of intertexts which I would like to trace back to the origin of the world, or at least back to 1866, to Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde*. In Courbet's painting we find another truncated nude, in an almost identical position to that portrayed by Sherman: the painting depicts the genitals and abdomen of a woman lying on a bed with her legs spread, as if waiting for a lover... or perhaps for the inspection of a doctor. For the nude



Figure 1: Cindy Sherman, Untitled, 1992. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

of *L'Origine du monde* bears a startling resemblance to anatomical models which came into widespread use in the nineteenth century and which from the mid-1870s onwards were collected in the *musée de moulages* inaugurated at the Salpêtrière by Charcot. These models, as Janet Beizer points out, served no particular medical function but rather served to “create museum pieces, to preserve pathology as an art form” (Beizer, 254). The interface between pathology and art was underlined in Félicien Rops’ painting of 1878, *La Naissance de Vénus*. The picture shows a woman reclining in a pose altogether typical of the genre of the nude, one which could easily have been adopted by Courbet’s model. The woman is not, however, being painted: a man is casing her genitalia in plaster of Paris. Surrounding them are a series of fragmented sculptures of the female body: it is unclear whether these are works of art or works of science. Likewise, in his novel of 1881 about life at the Salpêtrière, *Les Amours d’un interne*, Jules Clarétie described

un sorte d’atelier... sentant l’amphithéâtre et le musée de médecine, où les débris humains traînaient à côté de têtes de criminels, moulées sur nature après l’échafaud - rez-de-chaussée singulier où les copies de la Vénus de Milo et des Captifs de Michel-Ange faisaient comme des antithèses consolantes aux difformités atroces que le mouleur conservait ou modelait pour les vitrines de l’hôpital (Clarétie, 112)

Here again, works of art mingle with artefacts of science, such that it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two: indeed one wonders if the distinction is not, in fact, a false one. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, the boundaries between art and pathology become blurred. Art, in the form of Courbet’s painting, Sarah Bernhardt’s gesture or Zola’s naturalism, imitates pathology; pathology, in the form of photographs,



drawings and sculptures of patients, mimics art. Medicine and aesthetics seem inextricably intertwined.

Sherman's photograph references this visual tradition of pathology by using medical prosthetics to compose the body of her nude. In an interview published to accompany the 2012 retrospective of her work, she notes that a key influence for the series to which *Untitled #250* belongs was medical supply catalogues.<sup>169</sup> By telescoping the genres of the nude and the pathological model she reveals through her photographic performance the fundamental complicity between portraiture and pathology. Above all she literalises and exposes their fetishistic fragmentation of the female body. Whereas in *L'Origine du monde* or in medical prosthetics the fragments of the female body stand in a synecdochic relationship to the whole, representing a fantasised plenitude, in *Untitled #250* the patriarchal image of femininity starts to come apart at the seams, quite literally. The photograph, far from seeking to hide the composite nature of the body which it represents, foregrounds its status as a series of fetishes. The image of the female body in patriarchal culture is destabilised and decentered in *Untitled #250*. The work of the fetish is to essentialise, to centralise and to unify: in short it is the work of metaphor. Sherman undoes this work to reveal the female body in patriarchal culture as a series of citations of cultural fragments related only contingently, metonymically. The point is underlined by the obvious disjoint between the different body parts, by the amputation of the legs which actualises the

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<sup>169</sup> "Cindy Sherman and John Waters: A Conversation," in Eva Respini, "Cindy Sherman." New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012.

truncation effected by *L'Origine du monde*, and by the bed of hair – another conventional sign of seduction, another fetish – on which the model reclines. Sherman then parodies masculine fantasies of the feminine in Western culture to reveal their facticity.

At the same time, she reveals that which *L'Origine du monde* dares not. Whereas the nubile body of the young woman featured in Courbet's painting is framed in such a way as to exclude her head, eliminating the model's identity, we are confronted in *Untitled #250* with a wrinkled, repulsive face. The de-composition of the image of the female body which we have been tracing is here apposed to a literal decomposition – for what is ageing if not the inevitable and ultimately fatal decomposition of the human body? – which eliminates identity, and in particular sexual identity. We find here, in grotesquely parodic form, the nightmare of *Nana*, the sexualised female body which embodies not only a fantasy of the feminine as vessel of creation but also the death and decay which are the equally phantasmic corollary of that fantasy.

The de-composition of the female body in *Untitled #250* partakes of the monstrosity that comes from the crossing of conceptual boundaries. The figure in Sherman's photograph occupies an indeterminate space between masculine and feminine, life and death. Whilst the prosthetic head is juxtaposed with the trappings of femininity, placed atop an obviously female torso and adorned with a long blonde wig, it appears, on closer inspection, to be that of a man, giving the lie to the excessively differentiated body. At the

same time s/he is neither alive nor dead: as a doll s/he is clearly inanimate, yet the bold gaze of the eyes which look directly at the camera give the uncanny impression of animation. This gaze interpellates the viewer, jolting us into a sense of horrified recognition: “You too, you will go this way.” Galatea’s body, to take back up the terms of my third chapter on *La Faustine*, reveals itself to have Medusa’s head.

I have so far employed an ironic reading of Sherman’s photograph, which I read as a collage of clichés of the modern nude and of pathology whose parodic excess and juxtaposition of phantasms of the feminine destabilises categories of gender and identity. A review of Sherman’s 2012 retrospective describes her as “an increasingly vehement avenging angel waging a kind of war with the camera, using it to expose what might be called both the tyranny and the inner lives of images, especially the images of women that bombard and shape all of us at every turn.”<sup>170</sup> In such a reading, pathology is de-essentialised by a performance which imitates the patriarchal gaze in order to destabilise it.

Yet as we saw above, the distinction between literal and ironic readings can all too easily become blurred. Mira Schor, for example, criticises what she sees as the compliant performance of stereotypes of the feminine in Sherman’s work, remarking that: “These negative representations were

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<sup>170</sup> Roberta Smith, “Cindy Sherman’ at Museum of Modern Art,” *New York Times*, February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012. The image of the avenging angel recalls in uncanny fashion Zola’s description of Nana as an avenging angel of the *faubourgs*: “C’était bien, c’était juste, elle avait vengé son monde” (Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II: 1470)

disturbingly close to the way men have experienced or fantasised women.”<sup>171</sup> Sherman herself refuses to solve the dilemma for us, remaining resolutely tight-lipped about interpretations of her work as either feminist or anti-feminist, ironic or non-ironic. Once again, then, we find a tension between irony and ideology which cannot easily be resolved. Again, I lean towards the former but cannot discount the latter. Indeed, I would argue that readings of *Untitled #250* as performative and as pathological are inextricably bound up with one another, that Sherman’s fragmented, composite doll demands that we view it with a critical eye to both interpretations if we are not to fall into either of the twin traps of essentialism or a postmodernism that elides the cultural embeddedness of the subject.

To read the performative female body in the text of pathology then requires us to perform a double movement, to navigate between irony and ideology lest we become the dupe of either. In the context of this dissertation, it requires that we view French theatre women as social actors, in both the literal and the ontological sense of the term, as bodies always already embedded in a culture which constrains but does not determine their performance. A reading of the *fin-de-siècle* actress in the discourse of hysteria reveals something far more interesting and complex than an endless series of chameleon-like self-transformations and ironic citations: it shows how bodies are always already marked by cultural inscriptions and how the

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<sup>171</sup> Mira Schor, “Backlash and Appropriation” in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.) *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s: History and Impact*, 255.

interpretation and performance of these inscriptions might offer the possibility of agency within the constraints of ideology.

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