Realism and Hysteria: Toward a Feminist Mimesis

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I. Doleful Referents

Morbid pessimism, subdued or paroxysmal, is the dominant note of the . . . psychological drama. . . . The ideal writer of the neurotic school is a sort of literary mosquito, probing greater depths of agonised human nature than anybody else. . . . And this same process of needless self-torture is at work in some women’s minds now. It is difficult to explain on any other hypothesis their craving for the literature of hysteria . . . the doleful squalor of Ibsen.
— H.E.M. Stutfield, Blackwood’s Magazine (1897)

Noticeable immediately in this statement is the ease with which the writer identifies not only a genre, “the literature of hysteria,” and its characteristic strategies and tone, but also its characteristic audience/reader: women whose minds are engaged in “needless self-torture,” who perversely indulge their “craving” for unhappiness — who exhibit, in other words, the very symptoms of hysteria they were seeing enacted on stage. To this late Victorian critic, the hysteric was alarmingly on stage and in the audience, responding mimetically with “sobs and tears” to the titillating and tearful revelations of Rita Allmers during the first London performances of Ibsen’s Little Eyolf. As he sat surrounded by women at a matinee in the Avenue Theatre, Novem-
ber 1896, H.E.M. Stutfeld was no doubt reacting to more than an unseemly adoration for Ibsen and other "semi-insane" writers. The "new woman's" demands for suffrage, better education, employment, and more sexual freedom, accompanied by major changes in late Victorian law and culture, were, Stutfeld believed, connected to the very disease he was witnessing at the Avenue Theatre: hysterical ego-mania. In his Blackwood's article, authoritatively entitled "The Psychology of Feminism," Stutfeld borrows the inflammatory medico-ethical terminology of Max Nordau's Degeneration (1895) to denounce those "self-centered, neurotic, and egotistical" women both on and off the stage who have fallen prey to "the Ibsenite theory of female individualism" (108). In fact the enormously popular Degeneration substantiated Stutfeld's claim for theatrical influence: Nordau's long chapter on hysteria contains the subheading "Ibsenism."

The year 1895 marked the appearance of another analysis of neuropathology in women, Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer's Studies on Hysteria (translated into English in 1909 but discussed in British medical journals as early as 1896), and from 1889 to the end of the century a rash of English translations and productions of Ibsen's "literature of hysteria" appeared (six Ibsen performances in 1893 alone), infecting indigenous imitators who broke out with their own versions of the "new drama." What I am pointing to is a discursive formation whose fields of enunciation are the new science of psychoanalysis and the new "sex-problem play," both at the end of the nineteenth century, both targeting the "woman with a past." My first thesis is that Ibsenite realism guarantees its legitimacy by endowing the fallen woman of popular melodrama with the symptoms and etiology of the hysteric. In deciphering the hysteric's enigma, realism celebrates positivist inquiry, thus buttressing its claims for "truth to life." In effect, hysteria provides stage realism with one of its richest and, ideologically, one of its most satisfying plots.

My second thesis, that realism is itself a form of hysteria, needs a wider preface, especially in relation to feminist theory. Realism's putative object, the truthful representation of social experience within a recognizable, usually contemporary, moment, remains a problematic issue for feminism, not least because theatrical realism, rooted in domestic melodrama, retains the oedipal family focus even as it tries to undermine the scenarios that Victorian culture had mythified — the angel in the house, the lost child, the poor but faithful husband, among others. In line with Diderot's tragedy for the common man, late nineteenth-century social realism establishes its authenticity
against, on the one hand, the “artificiality” of neoclassical rules, and, on the other, episodic, histrionical, visually excessive melodrama. Realism carves out a “natural” present; the walls of the family drawing room and later the family living room, particularly the fourth wall, create the only space for breathing what Zola calls “the free air of reality.” The notion that realism offers, as Shaw puts it, “ourselves in our situations,” follows the curve of Plato’s condemnation of mimesis but inverts the valuation. The life-like stage sign is not only validated by, it reinforces the epistemology of an “objective world,” for the referent does not simply exist (the historical drawing room on which Hedda Gabler’s is modeled), it is reaffirmed in the activity of reception. Realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces “reality” by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths: this escritoire, this spirit lamp, affirms the typicality, the universality of this and all late Victorian bourgeois drawing rooms. Human signification is no less teleological. The actor/signifier, laminated to her character/signified, strenuously seeks admission to the right class of referents.

With Brechtian hindsight we know that realism, more than any other form of theater representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relation between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with ideology. And because it depends on, insists on, a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the arrangements of that world. Given these ideological pressures, given realism’s fetishistic attachment to the true referent, one can only agree with Alice Jardine’s claim that all moves toward capturing the real of, say female experience, redound to a recapitulation of the Same.\(^6\)

Hysteria, on the other hand, has become the trope par excellence for the rupture of the referent. Whether one situates the hysteric empirically, as a historical-medical object whose unreadable symptoms derive in part from the material and gender constraints of bourgeois life (particularly, as Breuer noted, the Victorian tendency to channel young women into jobs as governesses or nurses to the dying),\(^7\) or discursively, as a “speaking body” that defies the grammar of the patriarchal symbolic, hysteria in feminist discourse has become meaningful precisely as a disruption of categories and systems of meaning. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément’s The Newly Born Woman (La Jeune Née 1975) remains one of the best feminist readings of hysteria because it interweaves empirical and discursive explora-
tions, Clément drawing on anthropology and psychoanalytic history, Cixous mythmaking and deconstructing though a spiraling series of phantasmatic (hysterical) identifications. In both authors’ sections, Freud’s theory of bisexuality, a prominent feature of his formulations on hysteria, is rewritten as a refusal of correct gender positions; for Clément, however, such a refusal is efficacious only in the short term (“Every hysteric ends up inuring others to her symptoms, and the family closes around her again” [5]), while for Cixous, hysterical discourse explodes the logic of logocentrism (“It is you, Dora, you who cannot be tamed . . . your words will . . . write themselves against the other and against men’s grammar” [95]). If the female subject is the “repressed that ensures the system’s functioning” (67), hysteria throws a wrench into the system, upsetting its sociolinguistic and gender arrangements.

Another important reading of hysteria is Sarah Kofman’s The Enigma of Woman, which also marks bisexuality as the undecidability of female sexuality. But Kofman insists on the relation of the narcissistic female, she who has a secret and won’t tell, and the hysterical female, she who is ignorant of her own secret and needs the doctor to reveal it to her. In Kofman’s view, Freud criminalizes both: the multiple identifications that characterize hysters are condemned along with the reflexive identifications of the narcissist.

We find such criminality exemplified in the first English audiences of Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler. In her memoir of her Ibsen years, Elizabeth Robins, an American who first acted Hedda and other major Ibsen roles in London in the 1890s, confirms Stutfield’s impressions of the imaginary identifications and the gender divisions that Ibsenism produces: “How should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn’t understand her in the person of their wives, their daughters, their women friends. One lady of our acquaintance, married and not noticeably unhappy, said laughing, ‘Hedda is all of us.’” Hedda Gabler seems to produce a bourgeois spectator-subject who sees, and reproduces, a real relation between signifier-specified-referent. Hedda is all of us, says the spectator, and the pleasure of participating in that (group) reference is the self-gratifying sense that one’s knowledge of the world and the text has been confirmed. Robins’s spectator is merely the flipside of Stutfield, using Ibsen as empirical evidence to validate her own “truth.” If the early texts of realism seem to gender their spectators, dividing men who snigger (according to Stutfield) and fail to understand Ibsen from women who weep and do understand, realism
is just doing its job, mirroring and reproducing society’s most conservative ideological positions. On the other hand, there is something volatile in this woman’s statement: a narcissism that deconstructs the mimetic referent upon which it is insisting. If Ibsenism empowers women to recognize themselves as the referent for Hedda, the truth of referentiality passes through the signifier of hysteria.

Let me draw out the implications of this statement. In such plays as Ibsen’s Rosmersholm, The Lady from the Sea, Hedda Gabler, A.W. Pinero’s The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, and H.A. Jones’s Mrs. Dane’s Defence, hysteria is signified and narrativized; my question is, has it been cured? Or is it possible that even as realism contains and puts closure to the hysterical’s symptoms, it catches her disease? Can feminist theory make use of the observation that realism, at its inception, might be construed as a form of, and incitement to, hysteria?

In the long chapter from which this essay is drawn, I answer these questions by mapping a genealogy, recovering an early connection between the thematics and semiotics of medical and popular theaters, between Freud’s well-padded couch and the ottoman upon which so many early heroines of realism collapse. By the early to mid-nineteenth century, hysterical women (who were often considered degenerate, duplicitous actresses) became semiotically indistinguishable from actresses playing hysterical fallen women in melodrama. In both we find eye rolling, facial grimaces, gnashing teeth, heavy sighs, fainting, shrieking, choking; “hysterical laughter” was a frequent stage direction as well as a common occurrence in medical asylums. Charcot’s medical demonstrations were immortalized in paintings bearing the iconography of melodramatic “tableaux of sympathy” in which fallen women/hysterics occupy the paradoxical position of passive victim and star of their own spectacular theater of suffering.10 Foucault cites a description from the Salpêtrière annals:

The subject exhibits hysterical spasms; Charcot suspends an attack by placing first his hand, then the end of a baton, on the woman’s ovaries. He withdraws the baton, and there is fresh attack, which he accelerates by administering inhalations of amyl nitrate. The afflicted woman then cries out for the sex baton in words devoid of any metaphor.11

Here are effects worthy of the best sensational melodramas: the woman’s jolting spasms quelled by the wand of a Svengali-like mesmerist who with the help of potions brings the demonstra-
tion to a screaming climax. In this highly charged theater, the bipolar semiotics of pain and pleasure, sick and healthy, indigent female patient and prosperous male doctor interact in a medical orgy fired by laughing gas and erotic language. The audience of male doctors and students, “their bodies tensed to see the tensed body of the possessed woman,” occupy the position of learner and voyeur, a scopophilic position permitting them to identify both with “the great Charcot” and with a hero who can maintain the arousal of a screaming, heaving woman with a few well-chosen props.

Foucault finds other meanings in such demonstrations: “The essential point is that sex was not only a matter of sensation and pleasure, of law and taboo, but also of truth and falsehood. . . . What needs to be situated [is the] ‘interplay of truth and sex’ ” and this interplay, Foucault suggests, occurs most clearly in confession, a ritual of discourse in which, with great emotional distress, past sins are articulated to an authority figure who grants absolution and forgiveness (56-60). Foucault’s linking of sexual confession and truth helps us account for a significant change in late nineteenth-century theatrical and therapeutic constructions of the hysteric. On the basis of the hysteric’s articulated confession, Freud discovers what he believes to be the originary traumatic event responsible for somatic conversion into hysteria. On the basis of the confession, the fallen woman blossoms out of melodramatic unifacity into a figure who, by allowing figures of cultural authority to strip her of falsehood, makes possible the production of truth. In readings of three significant early realist texts, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Alan’s Wife*, we will find that in the semiotics of realist acting, in the theatrical “translation” of the body into discourse, in the materiality of performance texts, and in spectatorial pleasure, hysteria was a powerful and contradictory measure of the real.
II. Translation and the Hypnoid State

I cannot think that these are all the reasons for your feelings. . . . I believe that you are really in love with your employer.
— Freud, *Studies on Hysteria* (1893-95 [117])

Woman, you're lying! . . . I say you're lying! You are Felicia Hindemarsh!
— Henry Arthur Jones, *Mrs. Dane's Defence* (1900)14

[I]n the private practice of a physician working in a large town, the quantity of such patients [with organic diseases] was nothing compared to the crowds of neurotics, whose number seemed further multiplied by the way in which they hurried, with their troubles unsolved, from one physician to another.
— Freud, *An Autobiographical Study* (1925)15

Oh! oh! oh! I believe, to be a woman is to be mad.
— A.W. Pinero, *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895)16

The discourses of psychoanalysis and the late nineteenth-century problem play share a similar emphasis on newness and on the theatrical production of truth. Freud and Breuer label their innovative treatment of hysterics "the cathartic method," in which hysterical patients verbalize the scene of originary trauma, thus purging their debilitating symptoms. William Archer, Ibsen's major English translator, promotes the "new drama" because it "casts out the foreign elements of rhetoric and lyricism" — the overblown language of melodrama — in favor of "natural" dialogue and a "purification or *katharsis*" of dramatic form. For Freud, Breuer, and Archer *katharsis* is the effect that vindicates an epistemology and a practice. All are eager to associate their projects with a venerable cultural monument, Attic tragedy, and to impress their readers with a concomitant feeling of pity and wonder. And there is a more specific similarity; the new therapy and the new theater depend on exploring and exposing the woman with a past. Realism and psychoanalysis celebrate precisely what melodrama and farce,
and uterine-theory physicians had ignored: motivation arising from the complications of an “individual,” shaped by inherited traits, social contexts, and forgotten traumas. Gone is Charcot’s medical magnet drawing analgesias from one side of the body to another. Gone are hair-tearing fits and chases before moving painted panoramas. But perhaps “gone” is too strong a word. If in their object-laden rooms Ibsen and his imitators give prominence to etiology (causal and probable action), the explosive melodrama of hysteria remains only barely repressed. And Freud, in the privacy of his consulting room, follows his mentor Charcot in charming away some unwanted pains. In both sites, the woman with a past is the theater of discovery.

The “Preliminary Communication” to the Studies on Hysteria is an ambitious, optimistic document. Freud and Breuer announce with certainty that “[h]ysteries suffer mainly from reminiscences” and report that hysterical symptoms will disappear “immediately and permanently” when the event that produced the originary trauma is remembered and articulated and the accompanying affect released or “abreacted” (6-10). It is important to recall the sheer diversity of symptoms about which these claims were being made — from depression, withdrawal, bouts of uncontrollable laughter and crying to muscular tics, shortness of breath, nervous cough, attacks of blindness, mutism, vomiting, cutaneous analgesias, neuralgias, abasia, tremors, deafness, contracture of limbs, hair-tearing fits, seizures — some or all of which arose and vanished erratically or lasted for years. In their early therapies with mostly middle-class patients, Freud and Breuer used hypnosis (at which Freud was untalented), massage, and firm urgings to coax out the traumatic memory, discovering in the process resistance or repression, the first step toward mapping the unconscious. The process of verbally remembering and re-reacting was christened the “talking cure” or “chimney sweeping” (30) by Breuer’s famous patient “Anna O.” (Bertha Pappenheim), the result of which was catharsis, abreaction, and the disappearance “immediately and permanently” of the hysterical symptom. This seems as far a cry from the juiced-up demonstrations of Charcot’s leçons du mardi as the exciting but human-scale dialogues of realism were from the constant teeth-gnashing, swooning, gesturing, and shrieking of melodrama.

Which is not to say that Freud saw his work as any less theatrically effective or powerful. In his case studies of Frau Emmy von N., Miss Lucy R., Fräulein Elisabeth von R., and Katharina, which he admits read like good stories, Freud’s tone is confident, even exultant, as he begins to understand the
unconscious as a realm of potential discovery and to develop the tools for — to use his own metaphor — excavating layer upon layer of memory so as to arrive at originary traumatic scenes. The conclusive proof of the patient’s putting “the affect into words” is that the stimuli connected with the affect, be they spasms, neuralgias, or hallucinations, “re-appear once again with the fullest intensity and then vanish forever” (7). During this performance, while the patient speaks, recreating the memory, reexperiencing the hysterical symptom with doubled intensity, Freud observes, monitors, and legislates: it must be a truthful performance, otherwise there can be no catharsis:

As a rule the patient was free from pain when we started work. If, then, by a question or by pressure upon her head I called up a memory, a sensation of pain would make its first appearance, and this was usually so sharp that the patient would give a start and put her hand to the painful spot. The pain that was thus aroused would persist so long as she was under the influence of the memory; it would reach its climax when she was in the act of telling me the essential and decisive part of what she had to communicate, and with the last word of this it would disappear. I came in time to use such pains as a compass to guide me; if she stopped talking but admitted that she still had a pain, I knew that she had not told me everything, and insisted on her continuing her story till the pain had been talked away. (148)

In his treatment of Fräulein Elisabeth, Freud plays both director and audience, judge and witness, which casts the patient in the role of performer and criminal. The truth of her performance lies in the relationship between translation and interpretation. Through his verbal question or hand pressure, Freud introduces a memory that is immediately translated into another medium: bodily pain, signaled by a “start” and a hand gesture. The verbal revelation is obviously vital, but the word must be verified by the body’s visible mimesis. Without this physical expression Freud cannot be sure that he has heard the secret — “the essential and decisive part” of the story. Elisabeth’s body language is Freud’s “compass to guide me” as he travels into the unconscious (148). It tells Freud the truth even when Elisabeth herself resists, when she stops talking but still admits to pain. (Later Freud will explicitly call the hysteric’s attacks “phantasies projected and translated into motor activity and represented as pantomime.”) The result of her performance is cathartic climax and denouement, no more words, no more pains. But this performance
requires another: Freud’s written interpretations in which the
detective analyst retroactively affirms the truth of his methods
and theories by producing a satisfying etiology. Freud is after, in
his words, no less than “a completely adequate set of deter-
minants,” a “causal chain” to justify the conversion of traumatic
affect into hysterical symptom (139). Only such causality could
produce the desired anagnorisis which, once again, is translated
theatrically: “The sulky unhappy face had grown lively, [Katharina’s]
eyes were bright, she was lightened and exalted” (131). The avuncular tone of this and other passages occasions
an apology from Freud who notes that his case histories “read
like short stories . . . and lack the serious stamp of science” (160).

But Freud liked stories, and it is not surprising that when he
needed to illustrate a problematic etiology he raided other
fictions, including what he called the “new psychological
drama,” which molded itself on a dynamic of excavation, repres-
sion, and revelation. For Ibsen and his English imitators, A.W.
Pinero and H.A. Jones, the conventionalized fallen woman was
more than automatic sinner. Her social position, her desires, her
confusion, most of all her secret sexual past were a problem, the
problem or enigma, that had to be solved. Like Freud’s case
histories, the new realism progressed by going backward, reveal-
ing the psychobiography of nervous women. Through confes-
sions and self-exploration, woven into dialogue and action, an
etiology emerged. One might say the search for an etiology is
basic to realism’s departure from the episodic melodrama. The
events of the past, filtered through memory and desire, form part of
the “motive-complex” of Mrs. Alving, Rebecca West, Nora
Helmer, Ellida Wangel; in their (self) discovery lies the play’s
claim to truth.

Of course Freud would have found another fascination in the
theater: the fact that the symptomatology of hysteria is always
“translated,” theatricalized, putting the spectator into the posi-
tion of analyst/discoverer. Of the three Ibsen plays written in
succession that deal with female hysteria, Rosmersholm (1886), The
Lady from the Sea (1888), and Hedda Gabler (1890), Freud, in
“Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work”
(1916), focuses on the first, with its “new woman,” Rebecca West,
as an ideal exemplum not only of the oedipal taboo but also of
the analytic dialogue (Rector Kroll’s “inquest”/dialogue
of/with Rebecca West) and of the way in which repression
functions to conceal motives that the patient (character) finds
unacceptable. Rebecca can confess to what Strindberg called
the “psychic murder” of Rosmer’s wife Beata, but not to what she
must repress: that she has been her father's mistress. This is the secret that the play withholds.18 Because he could "rely on the fact that the dramatist's conscious creative [material] arose logically from unconscious premisses" (329), Freud will find "complete agreement" between literary and "clinical experience" (331). In effect, Freud translates Ibsen's Rosmersholm into a case history filled with dazzling synoptic insights and the unmistakable tone of the stern detective/analyst:

Let us listen to [Rebecca], and then consider whether we can believe her entirely. (325)

Laws of poetic economy necessitate this way of presenting the situation, for this deeper motive [the knowledge that Rebecca has committed incest] could not be explicitly enunciated. . . . We have, however, a right to demand that the explicit motive shall not be without an internal connection with the concealed one. . . . (329; my italics)

Rector Kroll, Freud acknowledges, shows "analytic perspicacity" (329) but "Kroll is mistaken" (327). Dr. Freud will pick up where Kroll leaves off.

The hermeneutic pleasure of the new realism, the fact that it invites competitive readings on the road to a "truthful" solution, testifies to its semiotic complexity. Melodrama offered complete adequation between the symptomatology of hysteria and the actor's language, body, and motive, allowing the spectator instantly to decipher the signs and messages.19 Realism retains some of melodrama's thrilling signs — Ellida Wangel, like Lady Audley, beats her temples with fists; Nora rips into a wild tarantella (a dance which Clément, and conceivably Ibsen, linked to hysterical abandon) — but the gestural range has diminished to the suggestive signifiers of a complex, changing interior state. Instead of adequation there are gaps, feints, evasions, and ambiguous physical translations, such as Hedda's thin hair, Mrs. Dane's hand-wringing, Paula Tanqueray's pallor. The next section will take up this point more fully. For now let me note that what Freud manifests in his reading of Rebecca West — the analyst's magisterial role in translating the hysterics signs — is transferred to the audience. The spectator takes on, is assured of, the position of completing the narrative, of discovering the secret, of judging its truth.

Before Studies on Hysteria was published in full, the "Preliminary Communication" appeared in a German periodical in
January 1893; and in April of 1893 an account of it was delivered to a meeting of the Society for Psychical Research in London, then printed in their *Proceedings* the following June. Another account, by a physician called Michell Clarke, was published in *Brain* in 1894. What impressed Clarke here was the concept of “double conscience” (Janet’s term) or what Breuer called the “hypnoid state.” Freud and Breuer first theorized that pathogenetic or incompatible ideas were in a sense stored in the unconscious and could only be addressed and abreacted if the patient were hypnotized. Hysterics, they thought, had a kind of secret, sick self, although Freud soon abandoned this idea for a more complex theory of the defense mechanism. Clarke made only brief mention of abreaction (which he calls “reaction”), but he stressed the “double consciousness” that produced separate and different psychical states in the same person. Much later, in *The Psychopathology of Hysteria* by a Boston physician (1915), long after Freud had published his findings on infantile sexuality, the chief symptom of hysteria was identified as the “splitting of consciousness.” Why did this receive such currency?

Perhaps the idea of “double personality” allowed doctors to ignore the sexual etiology that Freud so disturbingly proposed in infants. Equally likely, the idea of dramatic duality reinforced the popular epistemology of the doubleness of women — “both higher and lower, both innocent and animal, pure yet quintessentially sexual.” With the theory of the hypnoid state, as Freud and Breuer note in their “Preliminary Communication,” the two conditions could exist side by side until “the products of hypnoid states intrude into waking life in the form of hysterical symptoms” (13). The hypnoid state in effect frees the hysteric from the opprobrium of fakery. It accounts for the observable fact that “hysterics may be . . . people of the clearest intellect, strongest will, greatest character and highest critical power . . . but in their hypnoid states they are insane, as we all are in dreams” (13). The notion that a good woman contained within her a bad woman represented to the profession enlightened opinion. It permitted physicians to see women as simultaneously innocent and guilty, pitiable but meriting severe correction.

After the first Ibsen production in 1891, virtually every play that claimed the status of innovative new drama with regard to sexuality in social life translated hysteria into a hypnoid state. A.W. Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* (1893), *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbstsmith* (1895), *Mid-Channel* (1909), Henry Arthur Jones’s *Michael and His Lost Angel* (1896), *Mrs. Dane’s Defence* (1900), to name only a few, feature female characters with double natures,
one sick or sexually tainted, the other well, responsive to what Jones called society's "laws of health." Usually the attractive woman in view is meant to be judged as inferior to, a sick simulacrum of, a purer past self constructed in language. Conversely the past might be invoked as the moment of originary splitting. Marguerite Gautier, the consumptive courtesan in La Dame aux camélias (first performed in 1852), a prototype of the realism so admired in post-Ibsen England, offers this version of the trope:

There are moments when I forget the past and when the Marguerite of old and the Marguerite of today seem to be two separate women, the second scarcely remembering the first.  

Marguerite can no more resolve her intractable twoness than the hysterical. She can read her own hypnoid state. So l'on oublie l'autre (one forgets the other), a radical forgetting of an incompatible idea that takes its revenge by returning as a symptom — Freud's first conceptualization of repression.

The most popular fallen woman problem play of the early 1890s, The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, shrewdly exploits the structure of doubleness and repression; Pinero's Paula was two Paulas, seducer and violator, her hysteria both her own and society's disease. Of course Shaw's criticism stands, that Pinero succumbs to an archaic ideology when he makes his heroine commit suicide. But a more relevant observation would be that Pinero's "tragedy" has the limitations, if not the interest of, Studies on Hysteria, in which certain symbolic positions are filled (doctor/patient, knowledge/ignorance, truth/deception) and the symptomatology of hysterical women is translated into a coherent, culturally acceptable text. As with the Studies, the plot is the text's most dubious feature. A fallen woman, Paula attempts to rehabilitate herself with the help of her long-suffering husband, Aubrey, but faces up to her sickness (her sinful past) when one of her former lovers shows up to woo Elleean, Aubrey's virginal daughter by his first marriage. Realizing the pointlessness of hiding from her past, Paula throws herself out her bedroom window.

On the way to this point, however, Pinero demonstrates the new drama's respect for the complexity of moral issues. Paula's rehabilitation produces a hypnoid state; that is, Pinero provides a parallel possibility that Paula's pain and eventual suicide are the result of society's split consciousness — its double standard — as
well as her own secret past. Figures of doubleness abound before Paula arrives, beginning with Aubrey’s splitting not only his life’s narrative into the present and the “next chapter” but also his future wife into the unnameable “lady” and “Mrs. Aubrey Tanqueray.” The allegory of scandalous Mabel Hervey, “the new Lady Orreyed,” is another double representation: “Paint [Mabel’s] portrait, it would symbolize a creature perfectly patrician; lance a vein of her superbly-modelled arm, you would get the poorest *vin ordinaire*!” (87).

As Paula attempts entry into this environment of doubles, she develops hysterical symptoms — insomnia, anxiety, hand-wringing — and most of all a hypnoid personality, not just sharp swings in mood, but evidence of another repressed being. Like the Victorian doctors, Aubrey enjoins her to forget the past, to exert will power, but in the claustrophobic drawing room an unseen Paula emerges. She tells bawdy jokes fit for the smoking room, not Ellean’s virginal ears. She blurts out facts about former lovers; she has, says Aubrey, strange “out-of-the-way thoughts” (109) — that is, antisocial, disruptive, incompatible ideas bearing the taint of sexual knowledge. Aubrey calls her “incurable” (101). When Paula claims she has “two sides” to her nature, and that “I’ve let the one almost smother the other” (107), she implies that Ellean’s acceptance of her as a “second mother” would mend the rift. But Aubrey forces a definite split, reminding Paula that she is second, not to the first wife and mother, but to herself — the virginal “she” who is irretrievably lost but whom Aubrey worships in Ellean. Instead of encouraging a relationship between the two women, which Paula wants, Aubrey continually separates them, enjoying conjugal rights with Paula while lavishing intimate attentions on Ellean.

The play is redolent with sexual displacement; in fact Paula’s desire for Ellean’s desire (“why don’t you look on me as your second mother?” [107]) far outweighs any gesture of passion toward Aubrey: “Ellean, you seem to fear me. Don’t! Kiss me!” (107) — and earlier “Love me” (106). Pinero diverts attention from this passion by positioning Ellean in the phallic role of analyst/judge. When Paula enters, she is “innocent-looking,” but like Clément’s construction of the hysteri c, her body “is a theater of forgotten or repressed scenes,” and the stepdaughter as spectator reads and translates her symptoms accurately: “I have always known what you were. . . . It’s in your face” (147). Judged as a criminal by the one whose desire she most craves, Paula kills herself.
Just before, though, she delivers what for realism is the equivalent of a grand mal seizure: the confession. Not of a single event, but of something late Victorians found equally fascinating: the spectacle of the hypnoid state. In its final-act manifestation, the incompatible idea entering consciousness is Paula’s future ugliness, with the effect that Paula is “seen” as divided: the still attractive woman in view, the imagined wreck in the future. Pinero takes pains with this speech, dwelling on her future methods of deception (“paint and dye”) and on the anticipated vulgarity of a “body too thin or too stout... cheeks raddled and ruddled — a ghost, a wreck, a caricature, a candle that gutters, call such an end what you like!” (150). The Picture of Dorian Gray had appeared in Lippincott’s Magazine by 1890, and may have partially inspired this verbal picture of internal degeneration projected away from a visibly healthy body. Another possibility is that Pinero needed to solve the problem of the hysterical body in the only way that realism would permit. If hysteria broadens, makes “serious” and “real” the fallen woman stereotype, it also dangerously disrupts the subtle discussion on which realism thrives; the signs of guilt are the signs of the body, and it is precisely this anarchic body that must be silenced, dematerialized, translated into a morally acceptable etiology. The last act of that etiology in Paula’s fantasy is the physical corruption of the sick self, the hypnoid other. Yet language has already effected a translation. Paula, Pinero directs, “deliver[s] this speech staring forward, as if she were looking at what she describes” (150). Her body in full view, Paula speaks of a body not present: a referent which, in the play’s “double conscience,” is more real than the one we see. Nowadays the most hackneyed of method-actor ploys, Paula’s “staring forward” nevertheless underlines the fact that at realism’s inception, at the cathartic moment of one of its most popular texts, the body’s “reality” with its potential for “physical repulsion” is confirmed as illusion.
III. Realism’s Hysteria

It may be . . . [that certain] psychopathic characters are as unserviceable on the stage as they are in real life.
— Freud, “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” (1905 or 1906)

The female underground revolution in thought. The slave’s fear of the outside world.
— Henrik Ibsen, notes on Hedda Gabler (1890)

In Ibsen’s preparatory notes for Hedda Gabler (1890), more copious than for any other play, three ideas recur: one, Løvborg’s “double nature”; two, the “burlesque note” of Løvborg’s revolutionary ideas being pieced together by bourgeois “philistines” who have no idea of their meaning; three, Hedda’s hysteria. The three ideas are related, although in the play itself their connection is repressed. Løvborg, not Hedda, dramatizes the hysteric’s hypnoid state: he has a double nature (the masterful thinker, says Ibsen, who cannot master himself), “two ideals” (woman as object of desire; woman as companion), two books (conventional and subversive), and two suicides (romantic: bullet to the temple, and sordid: misfired bullet to the groin). About Løvborg’s inspirational manuscript, Ibsen’s notes give Tesman a line which he deleted from the play: “The new idea in E.L.’s book is that of progress resulting from the comradeship between man and woman” (167; my italics). This is quite different from the abstract description the play gives: “[My book] is divided into two sections. The first is about the forces shaping the civilization of the future. And the second part . . . suggests what lines of development it’s likely to take.” At one time Ibsen imagines the value of Løvborg’s text to lie with its revisionary speculations on sexuality and gender, but in the published play that writing is reduced to an object in an envelope and then signified as a “child,” which Hedda burns. The text is then revived in a ludicrously aborted state, as bits of notes that Mrs. Elvsted has kept in her body — her pockets — and that, through the agency of Tesman, will now be (re)delivered. The dark “burlesque” of the manuscript/child, the fact that Tesman’s cobbled-together mediocrity will not translate Løvborg’s inspirational thought, is a metonym for Ibsen’s own text, which cannot hope to translate Hedda. Hedda too is unreadable. In his preparatory notes Ibsen announces,
"The play shall deal with the ‘impossible’" (159), and further on, "Brack understands well enough that it is Hedda’s repression, her hysteria that motivates everything she does," followed by "On her part, Hedda suspects that Brack sees through her without believing that she understands," and a few lines later, "She really wants to live a man’s [sic] life wholly. But then she has misgivings" (166).

If hysteria motivates all Hedda’s actions, then her attachment to her military father’s pistols, her betrayal of the sensual ("abundant hair") and loyal Thea, her destruction of Lövborg’s manuscript/child, her disgust with the bourgeois smugness of her husband and his aunts, and, most of all, her horror at her own pregnancy are all features of hysterical discourse. They are also the radii of the play Hedda Gabler, for only Aunt Rina’s death is untouched by Hedda’s agency. As Bert States observes, Hedda’s first lines in the play (and, he might have said, the first lines of most drama conceived for realism’s eternal room) posit a “Ptolemaic universe — that is, a world whose center is here, will remain here, and the elsewhere will revolve obediently around it.” Never leaving the room until the last moments of the play, Hedda is the centripetal center and her hysteria — her hysteron or womb — wanders into every corner of the play’s perimeter, mimicking the discourse of her interlocutors — the language of womanly confidentiality with Thea; of wisely devotion with Tesman; of romantic dualism with Lövborg — infecting and destroying: “Why is it, this — this curse — that everything I touch turns ridiculous and vile?” (773). Even Aunt Rina’s death can be seen as a mimesis of Hedda’s death-grip on the action; Hedda’s mourning black in the last act joins the aunt’s death to Lövborg’s and to Hedda’s own demise.

Ibsen deliberately diminishes the socio-legalistic checks on this rampant disease. Judge Brack is the Ibsen surrogate who “understands” that hysteria “motivates everything Hedda does,” but his insight produces no etiology. In line with other patriarchal fictions, Brack is empowered to “read” the hysterical, but his “inquest” has the undesirable effect of the hysterical escaping his control. Ibsen debunks Brack, who does not know that Hedda knows that he knows. The little moral tale that the play and its commentators provide, that cowardice and lack of an “object” or mission in life accounts for Hedda’s boredom and destructiveness, is a Brackian idea ("Brack represents the personal bourgeois point of view" [157]) and represses the horror of the “here” in realism: the room/womb which is in Hedda Gabler the source of the body’s hysteria and of the play’s action.
Those pistols. Perhaps they are Hedda’s “object” in life — not just the tired “phallic symbol,” but what Lacan would call the little objet a, the substitute for the Other to which/whom the subject’s desire is really addressed. The convenient explanation is that Hedda’s Other is the Father; and certainly in the realm of culture, the Lacanian symbolic, all subjects are subjected by, positioned in relation to, the Names-of-the-Father. But the question of hysteria, the question in hysteria is, as Sarah Kofman notes, the question of femininity. Refusing the oedipal formation of which the referent is always the Father, the hysterical asks, unforgivably, “Am I a man or a woman?”

Realism, the mimesis of a true self, has no ability to represent or translate this undecidable state, which is perhaps why Hedda Gabler has a double ending, a hysterical ending that calls into crisis the seeable field of realism’s stage. After Judge Brack taunts her with his new power to blackmail, Hedda circles the stage, stopping by the new “parents,” Tesman and Thea, as they assemble their fragmented “child.” She grazes Thea’s feminine hair and “imitates Tesman’s intonation” (776) a quick reprise-pantomime of hysterical mimicry, and then retreats to the inner room, pulling the curtain. She has left the visible space for the first time since arriving on stage. She has not exited, however, but has drawn the spectators’ eyes to the vanishing point, the stage within a stage, a space present but out of sight, like Freud’s topography of the preconscious/conscious mind’s separation from the unconscious. From this latter unseen “space,” Hedda projects not words but sound, “a wild dance melody” (777) on her childhood piano, which earns a rebuke from the “parents.” Then, using the oldest proscenium-stage object — the curtain — as a prop, she pops her head out like a grand guignol puppet to make one last insolent remark. With Hedda in fragments, Ibsen comes close to translating the “impossible.” The old puppet trick shivers the wholeness and completeness of the mimetic body, in which actor is subsumed in character, and for one moment the hysterical body is explicitly equated with the unseen — that which realism represses. After the gunshot, Brack closes the play with the famous line, “But good God! People don’t do such things!” People may not, but actors do. Hedda’s gesture of obvious miming — recalling Diderot’s image of Garrick’s face thrust between two doors — ruins the seamless world of “real” people and offers instead a world already disfigured, made “ridiculous and vile,” by the infections of hysteria.

Or is “the female . . . revolution in thought . . . the slave’s fear of the outside world” a better way of expressing hysteria’s
infection? These lines from Ibsen’s notes to *Hedda Gabler* are Zarathustrian in their veiled power and sexual ambiguity: subjects without predicates, ideas without referents, head without bodies. Who or what is the Other, the addressee, of these phrases? It seems that the world-famous master of prose realism was unable to write the “female . . . revolution” into the grammar of a sentence, though “in [his?] thought” we detect traces of disturbance, the signifier’s tarantella.

When first produced in London, *Hedda Gabler* joined other Ibsen plays in inciting wonderfully florid accusations of immorality, criminality, and disease. *A Doll’s House* was charged with having a “hideous atmosphere . . . an abuse of wholesome mind”; *Ghosts* was “an open drain, a loathsome sore unbandaged, a dirty act done publicly, a lazare house with all its doors and windows open”; *Hedda Gabler* promoted “heartlessness and overweening vanity [typical of] the daily police reports.” The London production of *Hedda Gabler* in April 1891, following hard upon *Rosmersholm* in February and *Ghosts* in March of that year, was a triumph of Elizabeth Robins’s and Marion Lea’s entrepreneurial skills and was by late Victorian standards, a commercial triumph as well: a five-day run was extended to five weeks. To the H.E.M. Stutfields, however, success merely confirmed that Ibsenism was no mere fad but an ideology attracting neuropaths who thrived on images of sexual aberration and rebellion. Typically, William Archer countered these charges with realism’s deadly credo: Ibsen’s “individuals” represented “no systematic body of doctrine”; Ibsen’s sole task was to “make the stage a sincere, undistorting, unexaggerating mirror of real life.” That Ibsen’s most famous apologist should defend his bard by depoliticizing him seems appropriate to realism’s mystifications as we understand them today. The hackneyed “mirror of life” conceit erases agency and ideology — the point of view in the angle of the mirror, in the holder of it, and in the life it reflects. Archer’s nervous efforts at appeasement also cover over Ibsen’s mysteriously coded but politically suggestive “female . . . revolution in thought.”

However, some responses to *Hedda Gabler* raise fascinating questions about specularity, spectatorship, and mimetic representation. A.B. Walkley provides one part of the picture:

The “hard-shell” Ibsenites, who insist upon regarding Ibsen as a moralist rather than a dramatist, will be sore put to it to find the moral of “Hedda Gabler.” More wary persons, who
recognize that the purpose of art is not to point morals, but to create impressions, will be content to accept the play as a picture of a peculiar type of revolt, a dramatic study of a mental pathology, a nineteenth-century tragedy. . . . "Hedda Gabler" is a masterpiece of piquant subtlety, delicate observation, and tragic intensity. . . . Its heroine may be, as our judicial critic[s] [assert] "a monstrous specimen of unfettered womanhood," but I can only ask, "What then — so long as she is interesting?" She is a very complex, very modern, very morbid type; and if you ask me whether she is to be praised or blamed, I put aside your questions as a pure irrelevance — she is to be watched with interest.34

Adroitly reshuffling his adversary’s buzzwords ("modern," "complex," and "morbid") with pseudo-Kantian sophistication, Walkley announces that moral questions should not interfere with aesthetic (and scientific) appreciation; the "masterpiece," the "tragedy," the "type," communicate to the spectator through "impressions," "intensity." Like the medical observers in Charcot’s theater, Walkley can indulge in the harmless perversion of voyeurism, taking his pleasure in the separation from and mastery over the object: Hedda "is to be watched with interest." (The phrase is striking considering his response to the performance by Elizabeth Robins two years later in Alan’s Wife.)

Robins’s Hedda was undoubtedly responsible for some of Walkley’s pleasure. Known for her detailed, precise, and, according to Shaw, “intensely self-conscious” acting,35 Robins translated Hedda, enabling the critic/spectator to take on the role of spectator/analyst, gathering clues (the pistols, the portrait, the thinning hair), and to trace the outline of a “mental pathology.” Testimony of the density of her performance comes from Robins’s memoir, Ibsen and the Actress, in which she retroactively fleshes out Walkley’s “dramatic study” with her own etiology, exactly as though she were writing a psychoanalytical case study and filling in the gaps which the play leaves ambiguous: Lövborg’s sensuality "made her [Hedda’s] gorge rise . . . the man who had wallowed in filth must not touch Hedda Gabler” (22).

What Robins creates here is an ontological alter ego that “no critic [had] ever noticed” (30) — which was precisely Konstantin Stanislavsky’s goal in the “psychotechnique” that he formalized after years of acting in the plays of Ibsen and Chekhov. In Stanislavsky’s words, an actor “after a long and penetrating process of observation and investigation” creates “an inner life,” a “subconscious” for his/her character. To do this, the actor
must pay particular attention to the character’s “traumas of the past” and synchronize these, through “emotion memory” with her “own motivating desires” (my italics). Interpreting and relaying her character’s desires, the actor solicits the spectator’s desires to read and interpret her, to “watch with interest.” One need only read Elizabeth Robins’s prompt books to understand how systematically she laid the groundwork for her discovery. When Brack recounts the shabby scene of Løvborg’s actual death, Robins, according to Archer, gazed out to the audience “evidently not taking in what Brack was saying.” In her promptbook, next to the line “Illusion?,” Robins wrote “grave and absent” and next to the line “Not voluntarily?,” she indicated “sad, far-looking eyes and a smile that says softly how much better I know Eilert than you.” Marking moments when her body translates the secrets of “emotion memory,” Robins consciously represents hysteria’s signifier, not for her interlocutor Brack, but for the Other, the spectator who will complete the circuit of signification and read her truth. As Stuart Schneiderman puts it, “In the hysterical symptom a part of the body is sacrificed to fill in a gap in the Other, to make him understand or respond. The symptom is signifying. It speaks a reply that the hysterical cannot pronounce — this is because she must await it from an Other body.” Is this not the relation of the mimetic actor to his/her audience — the actor produces symptoms addressed to spectators, who gradually understand their meanings? In this sense, realism creates the theater equivalent of the transference, the actor joined to character through “emotion memory,” reexperiencing past relations, past emotions in the presence of, as Lacanians say, a “subject presumed to know.”

However, the pleasure of realism, as with psychoanalysis, as with any process of interpretation, is the deferral of knowledge. What if the subject presumed to know is, like Henry James when he watches Robins’s Hedda, not sure? James:

And then one isn’t so sure she is wicked, and by no means sure . . . that she is disagreeable. She is various and sinuous and graceful, complicated and natural; she suffers, she struggles, she is human, and by that fact exposed to a dozen interpretations, to the importunity of suspense.

If realism sets up a fictional transference, the reexperiencing of past relations, past emotions in the presence of an analyst/ spectator, it immediately induces a counter-transference, an identification of spectator with actor/character whose infinite variety
exceeds the judgment of any single spectatorial moment, and who permits, as Freud notes in “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage,” that delicious masochism of feeling at one with a hero whom Fate or Society destroys. One of the sexual perversions, masochism in Freud’s typology falls under the rubric of the feminine. To experience pleasure only through pain and humiliation is to be, according to Freud, in the feminine, or passive position.\textsuperscript{41}

“What Hedda is all of us.” The married woman’s response to Elizabeth Robins’s portrayal of Hedda differs from Walkley’s interested scrutiny in the power of its identification, opening access not only to masochistic pleasure in Hedda’s suffering and defeat, but also to the more dangerous disturbance of counter-transference: Hedda is the imago of plenitude, extending beyond me and other individuals; we meet in Hedda, discover ourselves in Hedda. This inflated narcissism (“I” becomes “we” becomes “Hedda”) bears little relation to the mastery of voyeurism and interpretation, or even the desiring engine ignited by ambiguity. In the context of Robins’s narrative, the object “us” in the spectator’s formulation refers to “women.” What happens when females readily occupy the masochistic position? Is the quest for a true interpretation deflected? If the hysteric’s truth is her undecidability, are the women who take pleasure in this gender disturbance reifying it, reducing it, or extending it?\textsuperscript{42}

In The Newly Born Woman, Cixous writes, “The hysterics are my sisters” (99). Again, in contradistinction to the voyeuristic position, the position of mastery over the object, Cixous plays in the narcissistic mirror: “As Dora I have been all the characters she played” (99), but near the end of the book she asks, “What is identification? When I say ‘identification,’ I do not say ‘loss of self.’ I become, I inhabit, I enter” (148). To what extent can the spectator enter, pleasurably, knowingly into the hysteric’s undecidability — or are “knowingly” and “undecidability” an oxymoronic pair? What happened to Lady Burne-Jones?

We had been told that exceedingly critical person, Lady Burne-Jones, had been saying remarkable things about [The Master Builder]. No one, least of all she herself, had expected it to take such hold of her. When some time later I met her this is what she said: “After the final curtain I remember being disturbed by the applause. When I got up to go, I was bewildered to find the theatre empty; and I never knew how long I’d been sitting there alone.” (Ibsen and the Actress 50)
“I remember . . . I was bewildered . . . I never knew how long I’d been sitting . . .” This testimony echoes the “absences” of the hysteric’s hypnoid state. Cixous’s protean dance of entering, inhabiting, and becoming represents a phantasmatic hysteria, a theorist’s hysteria, which deliberately navigates around the mirror and beyond the self-scripted secrets of the mimetic actor. Cixous’s theater celebrates the undecidable and admits no spectators. Robins’s theater, on the other hand, representing Ibsen, welcomes her female spectators to the pleasures of the mirror. Her married friend happily sees her imago, not Hedda, just as Robins gratifyingly sees her imago, “grave and absent,” as she fills out the portrait of “Hedda Gabler.” The enormous pleasure of such illusory flights is that we “know” that they are true: Hedda is all of us.

However, a sweet irony of history plays havoc with these truths. Robins’s Hedda was really no one’s imago but William Archer’s. Translating (in both senses) Hedda Gabler for the London stage in 1891, Archer deleted all references to Hedda’s being “filled out.” Thirty years later, Robins again suppresses any mention of pregnancy. Without the dialectic between her body’s terrifying “room” and the dead room she shares with Tesman, could there be any possibility of representing Hedda’s “bisexuality”? Perhaps Archer understood that doubleness, of a certain kind, at a certain historical moment, ruins the intensity of identification and transference, and the pleasure of masochism. That a Victorian gentleman felt justified in censoring a cluster of signs alluding to hysterical disturbance is hardly surprising. What is noteworthy is that the first great success of Ibsenism on the English stage was achieved by partially repressing the hysteria that Ibsen had imagined. Yet perhaps the married friend was responding to this repression as, precisely, Hedda Gabler’s actual referent when she said, “Hedda is all of us.” For all of us, at what Lacan calls the “primordial level,” the mother was once bisexual, once had a phallus, had it “all.”

Ibsen, Robins writes, gives “his actors the clue — the master key” (26) to his plays. This favorite Victorian metaphor serves Freud to make an emphatic point about hysteria in Dora: “Sexuality is the key to the problem of the psychoneuroses and of the neuroses in general. No one who disdains the key will ever be able to unlock the door” (136). If Archer and Robins had the keys, they found it too dangerous to unlock Ibsen’s Hedda.
IV. Hysteric’s Realism

Which body? We have several.
— Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (1975)44

Of course the juxtaposition of dates is intriguing; like the hysteric’s hypnoid state, The Second Mrs. Tanqueray and Alan’s Wife occupy a near-identical temporality, both appearing in London theaters in May 1893; but one is well, the other sick. Pinero’s The Second Mrs. Tanqueray, produced in the mainstream St. James Theater, receives critical raves: “it satisfies the intelligence more completely than any other modern English play,” writes William Archer, “an astonishing advance in philosophical insight”; “[a] vivid and truthful individual character study.”45 Elizabeth Robins’s Alan’s Wife, also “a study,” is produced in J.T. Grain’s financially shaky Independent Theater, and is denounced by Shaw’s friend A.B. Walkley as false, sensationalistic, not art. Elizabeth Robins, considered after her success in Hedda Gabler the most important “new drama” actress in London, was offered the part of Paula Tanqueray and turned it down, rehearsing and performing instead in Alan’s Wife. Both plays deal in a representation of hysterical behavior, but the first successfully narrativizes the hysteric’s deviance as a truth while the second writes from within hysteria’s truth. Given this distinction it is perhaps not surprising that The Second Mrs. Tanqueray had a long, successful run from which Pinero made £30,000, and Alan’s Wife played for two afternoons and earned Robins nothing — except notoriety due to the highly unusual format of the play’s publication. In fact the play’s contribution to contemporary theory has to do with the peculiar polyvocality of the text in an era when textual relations to performance took on singular importance.

Yet another of the epistemological dividing lines between realism and melodrama is the site and status of the drama text. In stage practice before Ibsen, the written text was little more than a plan with speeches. Like Nahum Tate and countless lesser hacks, actor-managers rewrote, recast, and reconceived plays to conform with public taste and the exigencies of a given theater company. The public hunger for the latest well-made Parisian success, especially rampant in London between 1850 and 1880, meant that the text was always a patchwork; actors usually worked from “sides,” texts containing only their lines. As Gay Gibson Cima observes, the detailed study of the whole text became a feature of Ibsenism, actors worrying the knots of references,
evasions, and allusions to reconstruct the full case history of their characters. Said Minnie Fiske, an early Ibsen performer, "in the study of Ibsen, I had to devise what was for me a new method. To learn what Hedda was, I had to imagine all that she had ever been . . . [for example] the scenes of Hedda's girlhood with her father," the early relationship with Lövborg, "and all other meetings that packed his mind and hers with imperishable memories all the rest of their days." Fiske's transference onto the text is an actor's prologue to the status of the text in literary modernism — a unique and irreducible source of unlimited meaning, the site of knowledge to be studied, analyzed, unlocked, understood. The text initiates the desire to interpret; as Elizabeth Robins put it: "By the power of his truth and the magic of his poetry [Ibsen] does something to the imagination that not only gives the actors an impetus, but the impetus in the right direction . . . Ibsen knew better [than his critics about the suffering of women]; he saw further than the special instance" (31).

Not surprisingly, these impressions are rooted in the new material relations of theatrical production: the passage of copyright laws, coupled with Ibsen's notoriety, created a resurgence of play-reading in the 1890s, which encouraged Shaw, Pinero, Jones, and others to publish the true texts — in Archer's case the "true translations" of Ibsen's plays — as distinct from the unreliable promptbooks through which their plays reached the stage. In the published plays, stage directions, merely functional in promptbooks, became novelistically precise, a means of visualizing the details of rooms, importing metonymically a social and psychological atmosphere into objects and geography. Pinero was typical in supplying Aubrey Tanqueray's address even before describing his room.

The manipulation of stage directions will be an issue in our reading of Alan's Wife, a play written collaboratively by Robins and Florence Bell, which opened May 2, 1893, with Robins playing the lead role. Robins had already published fiction under the pseudonym C. Raimond; in attempting to win a hearing for Alan's Wife she went further, removing all signs of authorship. As William Archer tells the story in his long introduction to the published text, he supplied Robins with the story, Befriad, by the Norwegian writer Elin Ameen, along with his advice about adaptation. No doubt in collusion with the authors, he also recommended "one or two young dramatists" but the title page lists no author, and Archer coyly offered no explanation. On her side, Robins did not miscalculate the benefits of anonymity.
Exploiting the rage for medico-criminal naturalism, Robins and Bell subtitled *Alan's Wife* "a dramatic study in three scenes." In scene 1, Jean Creyke is pregnant and sexually radiant, setting out dinner for her young husband while extolling his strengths to her mother, who nevertheless wishes her daughter had married the weaker but wealthier village curate. The scene ends with Alan Creyke brought home on a stretcher, hacked to pieces by a new mill saw. In scene 2, Jean sits to the side while her mother and neighbor attend to her crippled baby boy: she has reproduced the trauma of her husband's mutilated corpse. The women leave. After agonizing doubt during which she takes on the hysterics demoniacal pallor (the "suppressed wildness," the "wide vacant eyes" [36] of Lady Audley and Robins's Hedda), Jean smothers the child (with "a long wailing cry" [37]) so he won't suffer into adulthood as a cripple. In scene 3, Jean is in jail. She refuses to speak to the magistrate until the end of the play when she affirms the logic of the murder and walks off unrepentant to her death. Remarkably, in this scene Jean doesn't speak but the text "translates" her emotions into what appear to be lines of dialogue (see p. xx). Ignoring this crucial point, Archer took pains to point out other authorial changes to the story; one was to situate the action in the north of England, the other, far more significant, was to keep the protagonist on stage alone in the second scene to intensify the horror of her hysterical hallucinations and the gothic infanticide (Jean gives the infant a mock christening by candlelight, then snuffs the candles, and advances stealthily toward the crib clutching the quilt with which she will smother him, as the lights dim). Archer, of course, would have preferred an Ibsen-style discussion between Jean and the curate, who still loves her, in which the audience could learn about their relationship while they debate the future of the infant.

Considering that in February-March of 1893 Robins had played Hilda Wangel to enormous acclaim in the first London production of *The Master Builder*, and that at the end of May, the very month of the opening and closing of *Alan's Wife*, she was to star in repertory performances of *Hedda Gabler, The Master Builder, Rosmersholm*, and *Brand*, her co-written *Alan's Wife* is surprisingly, even vehemently, un-Ibsenite. It rejects entirely the formal arrangement of retrospective action, the process whereby the past remembered produces or explains a hysteria, its necessary confession, and its cure. Unlike Hedda, Ellida, Mrs. Alving, Nora, and even Hilda, Jean Creyke has no nervous symptoms or fearful secrets but rather an irrepressible eroticism based on a dialectic of strong, blond health (Alan and Jean) versus sickly,
Christian conservatism (the curate and Jean’s mother). Alan’s Wife reads in fact like a Nietzschean morality play: Alan is Jean’s proud, swaggering “master,” a natural leader who “loves the hills and the heather, and loves to feel the strong wind blowing in his face” (9) while Warren, the curate, peddles his joy-killing vale-of-tears conformism. In this dialectic Jean is not merely Alan’s support but his twin, equally strong, reckless, handsome, a female, as Kofman would say, who does not accept her castration, who in fact fetishizes the likeness between herself and the male (“What would I have done with a good boy who never got into mischief?” [8]).

Significantly, her pregnancy is mentioned only near the end of the scene as that which will, if such a thing were possible, make her even happier. Suitably, the godlike Alan does not appear (except as a corpse on a stretcher), but when he dies the play’s discourse is dominated by doctrinal injunctions from her mother and Warren: “you must put off that hard, rebellious spirit, and put on a meek and submissive one, else you will be punished” (27). When their voices are joined by those of the secular authority that hangs Jean, and when Jean’s semiotically dense mutism is broken by her Brontëan fantasy of a transfigured heaven where Alan and a straight-limbed son wait to welcome her, it is clear that Robins and Bell are attempting to reimagine socioethical conventions. What is the referent for Alan’s Wife? Not Ibsen’s ironical but coherent drawing rooms in bourgeois society, but rather one woman’s hallucination of transcendent power — hysteria itself. Put another way, in Alan’s Wife, hysteria is no longer a means of affirming the methods and ethics of a benign but authoritarian patriarchy; rather it energizes the heroine’s moral iconoclasm, evacuating the Father’s power by denying his structures, semiotically and textually. Alan’s Wife, more than the other plays discussed here, dramatizes, and allegorizes hysteria’s progress.

The final phase of the hysterical progress displaces the method (mimesis) and the textual autonomy of realism. In scene 3, Jean stands silent like Clément’s hysterical woman with her words cut off, or like Kofman’s narcissist, a woman who won’t tell what she knows. She rejects the succor of the lawgivers, minister, and magistrate, and of her religious (castrated) mother. It is tempting to compare Jean’s silent rejection to the orchestrated moves of Freud’s Dora as she terminates her therapy before the doctor can complete his diagnosis. But far more Dora-like is the confusion of figuration and representation and the unstable identifications that result. In the stage performance of Alan’s
Wife, Jean is silent under questioning, but in the text these silences are “written” as prose sentences the accuracy of which would be impossible to represent. Here is a typical exchange:

MRS HOLROYD [Jean’s Mother]: Oh, my dear, if you could tell him something that would make them let you off — now think, Jean, think, honey! it may be you could tell them something that would save you.

JEAN: (Silent — stares vacantly into space): I can tell him nothing. (42)

By collapsing the semiotic distinction between authorial stage direction and character’s speech (here neither is spoken), Robins and Bell not only subvert the conventions of realist texts, they insist on the untranslatability of a woman’s (body) language — particularly when the woman in question has violated the gender code for “natural” maternal behavior. Any competent performer can mime a “vacant” stare, but how does one represent somatically a declarative sentence (“I can tell him nothing”)? In effect Robins and Bell have produced a hysterical body in the theater: they have given the actor’s body a discourse that attempts to signify but that cannot be read. Moreover, the visible body and the invisible text are mutually destabilizing. Just as the signifying body forces itself into the written text, the text invades the space of representation. There can be no translation of Jean’s symptoms; figuration writes over mimesis producing a realism without truth: hysteria’s realism.

What happens to the spectator of hysteria’s realism? Walkley, the critic/analyst who watched Hedda Gabler “with interest” (who was encouraged by Hedda Gabler to assume that comfortable position), in letters appended to the text, claims that he had seen a bloody body on stage, that he had seen the baby’s corpse after it was strangled. Archer writes back, using testimony by Robins and the stage manager, that there was no bloodying of (streaks of red paint applied to) the actor impersonating Alan’s hacked-up corpse, and that the doll-baby never emerged from the solid oak crib. In other words, Walkley hallucinated these appearances. Like Anna O., he created a private theater in the public theater, transferring his own fantasies and wishes into the space of representation. How different is this from the women who weep over, identify with, Ibsen’s female protagonists? Walkley’s imagoes are castrated males, the mutilated husband and the dead baby, and so his identification produces something much more powerful than the enthrallment of mirroring; he has
entered into the real according to the hysteric, that which cannot be symbolized or represented. In *Alan’s Wife*, Robins and Bell have produced a limit-text of Ibsenite realism — mimesis gone wild. A body imitating hysteria generates other hysterias and the solid geometry of representation is radically disturbed. Jean’s signifying but unreadable body is “impossible” as a fetish object of Walkley’s journalistic analysis; she/it becomes a space that collapses the subject-object relation.

It is this unwriting of realism in the name of realism that Robins and Bell offer feminist and theater theory. By wedging a space between the body and the text of the body, they displace the imaginary wholeness of the actor in realism, making her truth provisional, contingent. *Alan’s Wife* does not abandon the referent, it merely refuses to allow the hysteric to become recuperated as the necessary stake in realism. It does not abandon narrative, it merely refuses the closure of an ethical etiology. It does not dismantle the text as a unique source of meaning, but destabilizes the relation between text and performance, each contaminating the other. As I have noted elsewhere, the contaminated text is itself problematic, but the implications of a realism-without-truth are no less compelling. We might imagine, for example, a different mimesis — one in which the actor’s body becomes a material signifier that speaks not for, but before the referent.

**Notes**


2 On the education front, the foundation of Queen’s and Bedford Colleges in London (1848, 1849) produced the first generation of well-qualified women teachers while the North London Collegiate (1850) and the Cheltenham Ladies’ College (1854) promoted secondary education. The opening of Girton (1869) gave women a foothold at Oxford and Cambridge. Legal changes were slower. The Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) allowed for divorce although husbands were far more protected than wives. The Married Woman’s Property Act of 1882 gave women the right to their own property after marriage, but suffrage for all women was not law until 1928. Books on sociology and sexuality — George Drysdale’s *The Elements of Social Science or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* (1854), J.S. Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Bradlaugh and Besant’s *The Fruits of Philosophy* (1877) — paved the way for debate on female emancipation, employment, and birth control: Meredith, Hardy, and Gissing brought the “new
woman” into fiction as did the novelists Stutfield chastises, Mrs. Roy Devereux and George Egerton Grant Allen, both afflicted with what
Punch called “Ibscenity.” On these and related issues see Gail Cunningham, The New Woman and the Victorian Novel (New York: Macmillan,
1978).

3 By 1891 William Archer had published a five-volume translation of Ibsen’s drama, the last volume including Rosmersholm, The Lady from the
Sea, and Hedda Gabler, but there were also translations by Gosse (Hedda Gabler 1890); Eleanor Marx-Aveling (An Enemy of Society [sic] 1888), (The Lady from the Sea, The Wild Duck 1890), and others. See Thomas Postlewait’s Prophet of the New Drama: William Archer and the Ibsen
Campaign (Westport: Greenwood, 1986) 139.


5 G.B. Shaw, The Quintessence of Ibsenism (London: Constable, 1952) 144.

6 In contemporary theory, particularly feminist theory, the “Same” — i.e., the same as the patriarchal “I” — opposes and subsumes the difference of the female sexuality, desire, experience. Jardine cautions, however, that feminism becomes similarly monolithic, “engages in ultimately conservative and dated polemics,” if it blindly accepts its own valuations for the true. Jane Gallop’s comment, cited by Jardine, is particularly relevant: “Belief in simple referentiality is not only unpoetic but also ultimately politically conservative, because it cannot recognize that the reality to which it appeals is a traditional ideological construction.” See Alice A. Jardine, Gynesis: Configurations of Women and Modernity (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 155. For the most wide-ranging analysis of the phallocentric “Same,” see Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) esp. 13-129, 303-10. See also Hélène Cixous, “The Empire of the Selfsame,” in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 78-83.

7 See Josef Breuer’s section in Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, Studies on Hysteria (1893-95), The Standard Edition of the Complete

8 Sarah Kofman, The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud’s Writings (1980), trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 122-25. See also Elizabeth Berg’s reading of Kofman, “The Third Woman,” Diacritics 12 (1982): 11-20. After the hysteric (the first woman) and the narcissist (the second woman), Berg finds a third woman, a Nietzschean “affirmative woman” who “produ[ces] an irresolvable oscillation between masculine and feminine” (19), thus dissolving the have/have not binary of penis envy and gender opposition, those truths of phallic structuration. Berg’s intertext for this reading is
Nietzsche’s equation of the veiled deceptive woman as truth in Derrida’s *Spurs*.


10 The stage direction for the last scene of *Lady Audley’s Secret* (a popular domestic melodrama and forerunner to the problem play or “new drama”), calls for a tableau of sympathy — symptomatic of the cultural ambivalence toward a demonic murderess and bigamist who is also a victim of class and gender inequality. This ambivalence is the real secret of *Lady Audley*. Melodrama cannot tell it, but in Ibsenite drama such secrets will be dramatized and debated, although the taint of female degeneracy (the legacy of medical and popular suspicion about hysteria) will never be expunged.


12 Svengali was the famous mesmerist in George Du Maurier’s *Trilby*, adapted for the stage by Paul Potter in 1894. The iconographic link between melodramatic and medical tableaux has been much discussed. Consider the famous lithograph of Charcot lecturing at the Salpêtrière — Charcot, surrounded by students and physicians, stands expressionless near a swooning, partially disrobed female figure who is supported by his assistant Babinski. A mid-century spectator’s account of Charlotte Cushman’s Bianca (in Henry Hart Milman’s *Fazio*, 1847) is an exaggerated but uncannily accurate description of the lithograph’s iconography: “[her] hair, like a mantle of flame streamed over her fair shoulders, while from the simple tunic of white muslin, which fell from head to heel, gleamed forth a pair of statuesque arms and a superbly molded bust which rose and sank tumultuously as though about to burst with the agonies of a tortured, despairing heart.” Cited in Michael Booth, *Prefaces to English Nineteenth-Century Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1979) 19. For other examples see Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon, 1985).

13 Cixous and Clément 10.


Freud ignores references to overwhelming erotic passion, Beata's and Rebecca's, which the puritan Rosmer views as sick and which conform to the popular view of hysteria as degeneracy. Nor does Freud discuss Rebecca's control and manipulation, signs of her intellectual (and demonic) power. Rather he concentrates on Rebecca's resistance (repression), on Ibsen's knowing dissimulation of her secret, and on his own penetration of the secret.

Written two years after "On Narcissism," Freud's reading of Rebecca West may have been influenced by the earlier piece. Rebecca West is an excellent example of criminal self-sufficiency and the illusory confusions of narcissism, but Freud would rather see her as ignorant of something only he can disclose. According to Kofman, the coincidence of "On Narcissism" and Freud's friendship with the intellectual, independent, self-sufficient Andreas-Salomé is no coincidence. Rebecca West, intellectual partner to Dr. West and Rosmer, may have reminded Freud of Andreas-Salomé.


21 The playwright Henry Arthur Jones, anxious to establish his credentials in the movement for the "new drama," published a lecture he delivered before J.S. Mill's ethology society expressing fascination for the rich material of the hysterical personality. The puzzle of human character — which Jones thinks the new drama should reflect — is exemplified by "the strange and bewildering fact of multiple personality. We find that certain men and women (more women than men) manifest wholly different personalities and characters during certain divided portions of their lives. Instances of double personality are, I daresay, familiar to you all; where a certain person leads two wholly separate lives, manifesting in each of them wholly different dispositions; being wholly oblivious to the one state of everything that happens in the alternate state." Though he does not mention hypnosis, this sounds, in layman's language, very much like a summary of the hypnoid state. Cited in Henry Arthur Jones, The Renascence of English Drama (London: Macmillan, 1895) xx.

22 Alexandre Dumas, fils, La Dame aux camélias (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1972) 144; my translation. Here is the passage in the original: "par moments, j'oublie ce que j'ai été, et le moi d'autrefois se sépare tellement du moi d'aujourd'hui, qu'il en resulbe deux femmes distinctes, et que la seconde se souvient à peine de la première."

24 Austin Quigley’s analysis of The Second Mrs. Tanqueray convincingly elaborates the shock, ultimately the impossibility, of Paula’s entry into a society in which there are “pluralistic divisions, and pluralistic lived values, but...only one set of publicly acknowledged values” (89). While Quigley allocs every character his or her world (“The truth of the matter is that Ellean, Aubrey, Paula...all come from separate worlds” [89]), I am trying to suggest that the exploitation of hysteria as type, trope, and plot device in this and other plays of late nineteenth-century realism undermines the spectator’s perception of individual worlds. See Quigley’s The Modern Stage and Other Worlds (New York: Methuen, 1985).

25 See Jones’s Mrs. Dane’s Defence for a classic example of this kind of plot.

26 Sigmund Freud, “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage” (1942 [1905 or 1906]), SE 7: 310.

27 All references to Ibsen’s notes are from Toby Cole, ed., Playwrights on Playwriting (New York: Hill, 1964) 156-70.


30 See, for example, Sir Daniel Carteret in Mrs. Dane’s Defence, Dr. Wangel in Lady from the Sea; Dr. Kroll in Rosmersholm.

31 Indeed after Dora, Freud finds an instability of gender identification in all his hysteria cases: “an hysterical symptom is the expression of both a masculine and a feminine unconscious sexual phantasy.” See “Hysterical Fantasies and Their Relation to Bisexuality” (1908), Freud, Dora 151.

32 See Miriam Alice Franc, Ibsen in England (Boston: Four Seas, 1919) 24-56.

33 Archer, The Old Drama and the New (Boston: Small, 1923) 286.

34 Cited in Franc 40.

35 Shaw, in fact, said that Robins was “intensely self-conscious” in temperament and was only convincing “in parts that...enable her to let herself loose in this, her natural way.” G. Bernard Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties, vol. 2 (London: Constable, 1954) 262.


Henry James, cited in Cima 16.

Freud’s short essay on theater was written not long after he published his analysis of Dora in 1905, an analysis which was terminated in December 1900. The history of Freud’s revisions and detours has been well documented; what concerns me is the crucial revision, planted in the periphery, in a footnote. Freud had initially assumed that Dora, but for her hysteria, would have been attracted to her father’s surrogate, Herr K. In his footnotes, however, Freud reveals that Dora’s attraction had become identification. In her sexual desire, Dora acts the “man” adoring the woman. The hysterical’s bisexual symptoms, then, are linked to the desire to move (like the “wandering womb”) into another position, to fully identify with another’s subjectivity.

When Robins saw her first Ibsen performance, with Janet Achurch as Nora (*A Doll’s House*), she was dazzled by the naturalness of Achurch’s impersonation, but she objected to the tarantella: there was too much “theatricalism” (*Ibsen and the Actress* 13). This moment of hysterical expression, of an actor’s body imitating an out-of-control body, seemed to Robins “a mistake” (12).


Cited in Alan’s Wife: A Dramatic Study in Three Scenes (London: Henry, 1893), with introduction by William Archer, xii. All play references are to this edition.

Perhaps after playing Hilda to Ibsen’s Master Builder, she was trying to displace the burden of his enormous influence.