



P E R F O R M I N G
H Y S T E R I A
IMAGES AND IMAGINATIONS OF HYSTERIA

EDITED BY JOHANNA BRAUN

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PERFORMING HYSTERIA
Contemporary Images and Imaginations of Hysteria

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THE PHANTOM ERECTION

Freud's Dora and Hysteria's Unreadabilities

Dominik Zechner

I'd pop myself in your body
I'd come into your party, but I'm soft
— *Kings of Leon, "Soft" (2004)*

It's complicated. Sometimes you understand a phenomenon precisely in and through its withdrawal. As you lose your grip and become more and more unable to discern and identify what it is exactly that caught your attention in the first place, a "truth" about the object reveals itself by way of its very absence. Simply terming it "absence" would be too reductive, however—for there's always something that remains, a trace bearing the entire weight of a "presence" that may never fully have realized itself (I put all these words in scare quotes as they are hopelessly metaphysical, but it's not like we can do without them). The trace or signifier that stands in for the vanished object entertains a peculiar relationship with its referent: often, it's as though it impresses itself all the more lastingly the more we lose sight of the phenomenon for which it purportedly stands.

Let me give an example: about thirty-five years after hysteria vanished as an official diagnosis from the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders* (cf. Devereux 2014), and about a century since hysteria had been a "thing", the signifier remains remarkably persistent, showing up as the go-to buzzword motoring pundit headlines that span the entire

political spectrum. One need not search long to see the evidence pile up—it suffices to take into consideration a number of fairly recent events and public conversations to encounter a shrill polyphony deploring the “hysteria” about the #MeToo movement, “hysteria” around trans issues, “hysteria” about the European migrant crisis and about refugees in general, “hysteria” about the planet’s future and the menace of global warming, anti-vaccination “hysteria”, and the “hysteria” we call Black Friday shopping, etc., etc.¹

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it no doubt speaks to the relentless colloquialization of an utterly complicated term. There is certainly the problem of what psychologists call “concept creep” (Haslam 2016), meaning the dilution of a rigorous scientific or philosophical concept, detaching it from its core definition in order to expand its usage and apply it to related phenomena, or, in the case of psychological concepts, to situations less severe than intended by the original or prevalent definition (the term “trauma” is a telling example in this respect).² It is certainly true that a far-ranging case of concept creep has befallen the problem of hysteria, severing its relation to a reliably diagnosable medical or psychic phenomenon, expanding its conceptual horizon in such a radical fashion that the term has come to encompass any challenge to a collectively perceived “norm” by an upsetting circumstance that impacts a larger number of people. As an additional facet of its concept creep, the dilution of hysteria in ordinary speech has caused an odd effect of massification according to which hysteria is never applied to a singularly lived-through state or situation, instead always invoking a circumstance that affects a crowd or mass of people; “hysteria” nowadays means *mass hysteria*.

The easy way to surmount this observation would consist in simply dismissing the media’s usage of the term as a fallacy that owes its perseverance to the inconsistencies and inaccuracies of our shared vernacular. Thus, we could deny any serious connection between what is clinically termed “hysteria” and the average pundit’s misapplication. Even so, we would still have to come to terms with the astonishing circumstance that the signifier’s incessant proliferation takes place precisely as the clinical phenomenon has vanished—it takes place in want of scientific credibility, pragmatic applicability, yes, in want of the very object of its concern: the hysteric. Otherwise put, hysteria’s trope gains power and popularity precisely as its referential phenomenon disappears from the scene. As tempting as it is, then, to disconnect the signifier from its clinical situation and keep the discussions apart, they

remain undeniably linked—if only to the extent that one stands in as the photographic negative of the other; one’s generality bulldozes over the other’s idiomatic singularity; one’s timeliness trumps the other’s hopeless anachronism.

As I proceed, I would like to suggest that the essential connection between hysteria’s concept creep and its diagnostic value concerns the question of reading. This is to say that the indubitable link between the emergence of hysteria as clinical phenomenon and “hysteria” as an overused trope, exploited and exhausted, corresponds to a certain hermeneutic static effected by both. If we consider the manifold applications of hysteria in the popular discourses that surround us—be it in the traditional mainstream media or the combative channels hosting Twitter rage and Facebook shorthand—we notice that the term “hysteria” tends to be tagged or deployed whenever issues that question or openly challenge established modes of cognition are at stake. In other words, the signifier marks cultural processes that refuse to be read through traditionally accessible codes of hermeneutic appeasement. Take #MeToo, for instance: in tandem with an avalanche of revelations that concern sexual misconduct and the—mostly male—abuse of authority for sexual gain, the movement has taken up a fundamental challenge of the ways in which inter-subjective relationships in the workplace have thus far been coded and decoded. The movement raised public awareness that translated, in some cases, into juridical action and legal consequence; yet, what must not be overlooked are the hermeneutic problems posed by this moment of cultural tremor, for it threatened the very cognitive means by which mainstream culture used to understand and categorize constellations of sex and work. The fact, then, that #MeToo got pegged “hysterical”, beyond the vulgar misprision and misuse of the term, testifies to a fundamental crisis of understanding provoked by a profound defiance against reigning master codes.

I am fairly confident this “diagnosis” can be expanded, and it is possible to infer that “hysteria” emerges as an imposing trope precisely at times when intelligibility, cultural codification, and the practice of reading and deciphering are somehow troubled. Attentively listening in on our current cultural conversations—I avoid exploiting the term “culture wars” in this context as the overuse of bellicose rhetoric and exaggerated polemics proffer another set of worn out tropes whose hermeneutic repercussions are yet to be discerned—we are thus called upon to engage with the interpretive exigency lodged beneath any cultural phenomenon that forces the signifier “hysteria” into the headlines. The

wager of this essay would be that hysteria operates as the symptomatic stand-in for a major hermeneutic challenge, it marks a moment of drastic unreadability that may not be surmounted by dint of reverting back to established codes of decipherment and interpretive mastery.³ A lot will hinge on convincingly demonstrating that this claim holds true also for the clinical emergence of hysteria: at what point does the symptom not just issue an invitation prompting its decoding but pose a fundamental threat to the very principles and methodological apparatus of its decipherment? We shall see how Freud's hermeneutic founders precisely when attempting conceptually to immure an encountered situation by virtue of imposing a pre-established code, i.e., the Oedipal paradigm governing psychosexual experience.

The massification of hysteria obscures one of the core problems Freud wrestled when theorizing the issue: how is it possible to bridge the diagnosis in its general import with the singularity of a case? Initially, hysteria is not a mass phenomenon or a schema that links various experiences together. Rather, it presents an isolated phenomenon, individual distress entrapped in the radical idiomaticity of one's symptoms and their history. "A series of very important questions on the aetiology of hysteria now arise", Freud comments at one point in his notes on the patient tagged "Dora", asking whether a singular case can "be regarded as typical, is it the only type of cause for it and so on" (69/151).⁴ Freud does not have a clear-cut response to this dilemma; the relation between general aetiology and individual case has to remain problematic, at least for now, and for at least two reasons: first, there is the need to collect more cases whose similarity would support the establishment of a general rule; second, the term "aetiology" applied to psychoneurotic illness is dubious in itself and would require an extensive elucidation before it could allow for the constitution of a reliable typology analytically to determine the illness. In consequence, Freud finds himself thrown back at the singularity of the case, struggling to make the idiom of the individual symptom somehow intelligible with regard to a general *Krankheitsbild* or syndrome. This dilemma has to be kept in mind throughout any sort of engagement with hysteria: instead of starting from an abstraction whose general applicability can seemingly be taken for granted, the reader ought to pay attention to the singularity of each case—and each symptom arising within each case—in order, perhaps, to achieve, through a careful hermeneutic effort, some level of legibility, as precarious and preliminary as it may turn out

to be. The abstraction of symptoms will necessarily end up being vague and undependable; the massification of hysteria will reveal itself to be empty if the singular constitution of its symptoms is ignored.

For the remainder of this essay, I thus propose the return to singularity. As “hysteria” and so-called “hysteric” masses re-emerge, not so much as actual phenomena but as rhetorical figures—tropes, strategically placed at crucial relays of contemporary political discourse—it will serve the conversation well simply to step back and reconsider a major case, in tandem with its foundational text, blockbuster intervention in the theoretical history of hysteria: enter Dora, feminist heroine and epochal icon of analytic collapse. As her story’s history of reception has repeatedly emphasized, Dora was the one who got away; whose protest not only upset the orderly family portrait but also instigated a textual ruin, the fragment of an analysis in which Freud confronts the inevitability of failure. One of the most commented-on texts in psychoanalytic history, the case magnetizes precisely by virtue of its forced finitude: the premature termination of treatment, an unrealized cure, the deficient protocol that remained. Dora’s appeal transgresses the boundaries of her own case precisely because she pushes the psychoanalytic endeavor at large to its limits. And as we gauge Dora’s afterlife on the contemporary scene, we ought to remain mindful of the oscillation between the singularity of the case, historically embedded, entrenched in unrepeatably specific and marked by the idiomatic dates of its concrete situation—and her discursive role as a synecdoche for hysteria and the “hysteric”. Which is to say, the failure to read Dora could reveal a systemic failure provoked by encountering the trope of hysteria in general. In order to divulge the possibility of such failure, however, a careful textual analysis is not just called for but inevitable—for hysteria, as stated above, tends to scramble the codes of its own decipherment.

Let me start at the end. More precisely with an endnote—appended after the fact, long after, in fact, almost five years post-treatment, situated right at the open conclusion of Freud’s fragmentary report. Subject to extensive critical appraisal, this appendix takes a stab at identifying the incorrigible: still upset that Dora left of her own accord, unsubscribing, as it were, from the free trial, three months into the talking cure, Freud recognizes a mistake. “The further I move in time from the end of this analysis, the more likely it seems to me that my technical mistake was as follows: I failed to guess in good time that [Dora’s] homosexual (gynaecophile) love for Frau K. was the strongest unconscious current in the life of her mind” (103/184). He could have been onto it sooner,

Freud confesses, for Dora knew way too much about sex than was appropriate—but he never probed the source of this knowledge, the pedagogical scene whence Dora derived her surplus sex-ed creds. It must have been Frau K., her adulterous father’s para-spouse, who sexed her up rhetorically. What, for Dora, is a matter of knowledge, Freud, in his defense, could not have known: he scolds himself not for an epistemic lack but for a fortune flaw, a speculation missed out on: “Ich habe versäumt, rechtzeitig zu *erraten* ...,” *I neglected to guess in time*.⁵ Lodged in the precinct of surmising divination, the lucky blast of a good guess in the right moment, female homosexuality is barred from the confines of reason. And the good fortune of getting it right simply happened to occur too late in this case.

Other things Freud did not have to guess as they apparently were all too obvious: for example that Dora’s desire was trapped in the circuit of a phallic economy that included her father, Herr K., and, ultimately, Freud himself. I don’t want to rehash a story all-too-well-known, let me simply recall the main parameters: Dora’s father entertains an affair with family friend Frau K. whose husband, for appeasement’s sake, gets Dora—who, in turn, somatizes wildly. The woman, at this point, is 18 years old. From the get-go, Freud bases the hermeneutics of his analysis on the assumption of a series of substitutions securely enclosing Dora within a libidinal swirl flowing from guy to guy to guy: father—Herr K.—analyst. What Freud ultimately admits, however, in the paratext of a last footnote, *de facto* undermining his entire argument, is the shadow existence of a different encounter: an obscure flow of desire among women—a sisterhood stronger than the phallic community that supposedly holds Dora in thrall. There’s women talking about sex, there’s women in love⁶: there’s an aphaallic coalition unfolding beyond the imperatives of the Oedipal configuration, and stronger than the paradigm of male substitutability that principally guides Freud’s interpretation.

It has to be taken seriously that Freud’s moment of self-introspection and the confessional gesture of claiming responsibility—“I made a mistake”—happens in a paratext, marginalized and belatedly appended. This not only conjures up the entire issue of supplementarity and the role it plays for psychoanalysis which Derrida (1996) has thrown into sharp relief—it also repeats a major moment in the Dora narrative itself, namely regarding the appendix and its status as a site for the manifestation of hysterical symptoms. Jamieson Webster has

recently made the case for a renewed understanding of hysteria as “conversion disorder”—and right as she concludes her exploration by supplementing her own appendix (quite literally), she reminds us that Dora’s appendicitis, which is simultaneously performed as a faux pregnancy, marks the hysterical symptom par excellence, disclosing the issue of conversion in the most striking fashion: “The rediscovery of the appendicitis in the final sessions becomes the linchpin in Freud’s sense of the point in an analysis where a hysterical symptom reveals its contact with an organic base. This place is where the sexual, as such, asserts itself, literally more than phantasmatically” (2018: 277).

There is more to be said about the *literality* of the hysterical symptom, and how it clashes with what we may call its *literariness*—for the moment, however, let me just state the observation that the fact of recognizing the appendix as symptom-carrier in its extraordinary value for the decoding of Dora’s narrative did not keep Freud from textually repeating its complication: for what is the supplemented footnote cited above other than an appendix, the very sign of the text’s own hysteria, an analysis gone hysterical, supreme indicator of a confusion that causes enough static for Dora to take off, leaving things unresolved? “I failed to guess in good time that her homosexual (gynaecophile) love for Frau K. was the strongest unconscious current in the life of her mind”, Freud supplements. It’s the appendix in which the “truth” of the matter might be encapsulated—yet, not without being affected by the very misspeculations that led the entire reading astray in the first place: notice how even the supplement needs to be supplemented, namely by dint of a parenthesis that supposedly functions further to elucidate the admission of Dora’s homosexuality. The appended term, however, “gynaecophile”, serves only to obscure things: isn’t “homosexual” a self-explanatory concept in the context of Dora’s doting on Frau K., the emerging love between two women?

In his cross-reading of Dora and Henry James, Neil Hertz calls the term “gynaecophile”—or “gynaecophilic” according to the translation he worked with; the German original reads *gynäkophil*—“slightly unusual” and points out that Freud uses it “to describe Dora’s homoerotic tendencies”. For Hertz, the appeal presented to Freud by this strange term lies in its insistence on “philia”, i.e., love, as opposed to the clinical sterility of “logos” as reflected in the medical term *gyneco-logy*. This reading reflects the chasm running through Dora’s narrative separating issues of experience (*philia*) from knowledge (*logos*) whose discrepancy is one of the determining factors accounting for the analysis’s failure.

Putting it too reductively, Freud tends to overemphasize Dora's lived experience, especially with respect to Herr K., at the expense of investigating the circulation of sexualized knowledge between her, Frau K., and also her governess. According to this schema, however, Dora's relationship with Frau K. could not be one of *philia* and would therefore have to reside on the side of *logos*. In other words, Hertz' explanation for Freud's deploying the strange term of "gynaecophilia" to concretize Dora's homosexuality might not hold up. It might even be the case that, instead of explaining or concretizing the term, Freud's word choice openly contradicts the belated admission of Dora's homoerotic disposition.

Indubitably, the parenthetical appendix to the appendix—"homosexual (gynecophile)"—introduces a semantic tension, and one would be tempted simply to dismiss the terminological oddity in bafflement if it were not the case that this is, in fact, the *second*, not first, instance within the case study where use of the term is made. At the very end of the first section, which recounts Dora's history thus establishing her "Clinical Picture", and right before jumping into the analysis of her two dreams, Freud writes the following: "The feminine emotion of jealousy [*eifersüchtige Regung des Weibes*] went hand in hand, in Dora's unconscious mind, with the kind of jealousy that a man might have felt. These male, or let us say *gynaecophile*, currents of emotion [*diese männlichen oder, wie man besser sagt, gynäkophilen Gefühlsströmungen*], are to be regarded as typical of a hysterical girl's unconscious love-life" (53/135). At stake in this passage is Dora's perception of the father's relationship with Frau K., and the extent to which being jealous of the woman for having "Papa" might serve as a cover-up for the deeper emotion of Dora's jealousy of him for possessing Frau K. Astonishingly, however, this "current of emotion", running from girl to woman, de facto establishing an aphyallic economy, can only be thought of, by Freud, in phallic terms: he calls it "male"—and then substitutes this qualification by inserting, for the first time in the narrative, the word "gynaecophile", in fact using it as a "better word" ("wie man besser sagt") to refer to something masculine. A lot has been said about Freud's heteronormative reading strategies and how they reflect a deplorable heterosexual bias especially with regard to Dora, but keeping in mind that he appended the footnote which again uses the adjective "gynaecophile" *precisely in order to admit to the heterosexual fallacy*, stating that he failed to take into account Dora's love for Frau K. as the "*strongest* unconscious current in the life of her mind" (my emphasis)—it appears all the more bewildering that even

this ultimate admission had to be undercut by a phallic intrusion. The parenthetical insert—“(gynaecophile)” —to qualify the word homosexual causes a confounding paradox if we take into account the prior definition of “gynaecophile” as “male”. In other words, Dora has to become a *man* in order to feel jealousy toward the father for his relationship with the family friend; she has to become *male* so as to feel love for Frau K.; she has to become *male* for the lesbian fantasy to be established (and thus come undone). Hence, the ultimate admission of failure, disguised as an appreciation of female homosexuality, presents yet another instance of what I would like to term “phallic reading”: the hermeneutic effort to recover and maintain the Oedipal paradigm at all cost. It’s as though the parenthetical intrusion literalized a phallic interloping—something like a phantom erection whose marker would slip in precisely to prevent an entirely female libidinal economy from becoming analytically passable.

The definition of “gynaecophile” as “male”, mirrored in the later shift from “homosexual” to “gynaecophile”, describes a semantic operation that secures the Oedipal paradigm on the level of signification. Yet, the strong pull of Freud’s phallic reading—though not stronger than Dora’s affection for Frau K.—is visible even on the level of the signifier, as shown, for instance, in Jane Gallop’s seminal reading where she expounds on the prominent trope of the *key* in the report on Dora. According to this tropology, a woman is someone to be unlocked by virtue of the right opener’s phallic intrusion. After all, Freud holds, “it cannot be all the same whether a female is open or closed. We also know what ‘key’ will open her” (56/138). Gallop comments: “In Freud’s question the woman is, in either case, grammatically passive: she remains passively ‘shut’ or she is ‘open’ through an outside agent” (136). Unable to play the role of this agent, Freud fails to unlock her—which might be less an issue of not having found the “right key” but instead have to do with the basic presumption that the key-lock analogy could structure the logic of a case like this. In other words, there might be an openness that neither adheres to the binary between open and shut, nor does it respond to the key as a metonymy for the phallic analytical enterprise.

The feminist reception of Dora is replete with comprehensive commentaries on what may be termed Freud’s readerly *phallsifications*—his need “to encode all experience of vulnerability within phallic terms”, as Elisabeth Bronfen puts it (335). The grievance launched against the analyst aims at the need to coerce Dora’s experience into the

pre-figured templates of analytical conceptualization. The case of Dora must surrender to the analyst's demand—not the other way around. Yet, simply claiming that Freud misunderstood Dora by privileging conceptual faith over an engagement with the case's unreadable complications, means choosing the easy way out of this textual mess. Instead, I would like to suggest that Freud's reading strategy led him to an aporia that discloses the textual "truth" of Dora's dilemma precisely *through* the breakdown of a flawed psycho-hermeneutic method.

The supreme moment of this methodological debacle can be found in Freud's interpretation of Dora's first erotic encounter with Herr K. At the age of 14, the patient recalls, she happened to meet K. in his shop, right when he was about to end the business day early in order to attend a church ceremony with his wife. Before leaving the store, however, he suddenly seized the girl, embraced and kissed her. Having broken away, Dora fled the scene at once, driven by a lasting sensation of disgust. Later on, in analysis, she would report (and relive) a persistent feeling of pressure on her thorax, somatic echo of the blindsiding embrace. Unsatisfied with the memory recalled, however, Freud insinuates a spectral key to unlock the scene: kiss and embrace in themselves, as remembered, are not enough, he is convinced, to account for Dora's physical reaction to the assault. Says Freud: "I also think I detect the influence of another factor" (23/106). Key to deciphering the onslaught, this factor is K.'s sexual titillation. Convinced that the pressure on Dora's upper body signifies more than a mere embrace, the interpreter conjures a phantom erection: "I think in that stormy embrace she felt not only the kiss on her lips, but also Herr K.'s erect penis pressing against her body" (24/107). The aroused member's "surge forward" (*andrängen* is the word Freud uses) subsequently got displaced from the lower to the upper body, hence Dora's aching thorax. According to Freud, this would also explain the distance Dora keeps from men whom she sees "engaged in animated or amicable conversation with a lady"—there's always the danger of that erect member and its surge forward.

Not to discredit Anthea Bell's deserving new translation, but it seems important to point out that the verb Freud originally used to interpolate K.'s arousal is not "think" but "believe"—"ich *glaube* aber" (my emphasis): erection is a matter of belief. Once again, the hermeneutic elucidation of the hysterical circumstance, by dint of a strange doubling, seems affected by the very symptomatology it seeks to explain and solve. Wasn't Dora's pregnancy also a matter of *belief*? If the problem of hysteria, to channel, once again, Jamieson Webster, is essentially one of conversion,

it's not too far-fetched to consider a faithfully professed erection a hysterical symptom. The male erection describes perhaps the most basic movement of conversion—as desire materializes physically and the sexual arrives at the very intersection of the drive and its organic base. Now, add to this process the dubious parameter of belief and you have an instance of conversion disorder: erection as hysterical symptom. One that is not, however, lived through in experience but hermeneutically produced. This symptom disturbs a proper reading, cock-blocking certain interpretive passageways.

The question remains as to why Freud could not resist conjuring up a fictitious key for this lock. What were the analytical merits of insinuating the phantom erection? Why could Herr K.'s sheer embrace and kiss, as recalled by the patient, not have been enough to trigger her appalled escape? Freud takes an interpretive risk by insisting on the presence of an erect penis during the scene in the store, and one might wonder if the hermeneutic stakes were in fact high enough to merit his maneuver. It is all the more surprising that the analysis, as it proceeds, does not return to the phantom erection: the moment K.'s arousal is speculatively implemented, it's swiftly dropped again. Why could Freud not fight the temptation? What does this speculative moment tell us about the analysis at large? In other words: if it could not “unlock” Dora, what does the key-slash-penis disclose and indicate as a *textual* symptom?

I would like to suggest that the phantom erection marks a moment of speculation from which we learn less about Dora's distress and its various causes, than about Freud's convoluted strategy of interpretation and the opposing forces it displays. This is to say that his insertion of the phantom erection functions both as the symptom of and resolution to some of the misconceptions to which his phallic reading falls prey. In order to corroborate this claim, however, we need cut Freud more slack than is usually the case in appraisals of *Dora*. Instead of simply dismissing the phantom erection as a moment of analytic delusion, let me suggest taking its spectral presence seriously to the degree that it addresses the critical theme of male potency and impotence that permeates the entire case of Dora. It's as if Freud were irreversibly pre-occupied with an all-too-suggestive *Männerfantasie*, a vision of uncompromised virility that inhibits the view on Dora's feminine associations, the homosexual excess welling beneath the interpretive maelstrom. In its lack of significance and questionable analytical merit, the phantom erection stands out, literally, as so delicate, strange, and scientifically treacherous that it turns into a symptom of analytic misprision itself. Freud handed us the

key not to Dora, but to the question of how to distinguish between what he knew and *did not want to know* about his patient and her story. Hence, I suggest accompanying Freud precisely to this aporetic crossroads where the enterprise of phallic interpretation points in one direction, while the lawless pussy riot of unreadable female community lies the other way.

At large, there seem to be two constellations of desire at play in the report on Dora. The first one, privileged by Freud, revolves around the verticality of erection, comprising the male triangle of father, Herr K., and Freud—three men who all come to stand in for each other in the course of the analysis. The second constellation, underrepresented in Freud's account, horizontally connects Dora to her governess, her father, and his lover, Frau K.—offering an alternative to the logic of phallic substitution determining the first model. As becomes clear through the disquieting footnote/appendix cited above with which Freud concludes his report, the analyst himself undergoes an interpretive shift, if only a partial one, ultimately to privilege Dora's female communities over the Oedipal economy in which he interpretively compelled her to take part. The floating hinge between these two constellations of desire is represented by Dora's father, and it is precisely the trope of the erect penis and its phantom quality that enables the paternal figure to take on this relay function. For the father is posited as the carrier of an oscillating sign—the penis as erect and defunct—and he may therefore interpretively be placed in both constellations: the phallic triangle as well as the lesbian community. That Dora's father suffers from performance issues is revealed at a seminal moment in the analysis at which Dora famously claims that Frau K. only wants Daddy because he is “well-endowed [*ein vermögender Mann*]”. Instantly, Freud suggests that what Dora actually means to say with this formulation is that he is, in fact, *not* well-endowed, and he adds: “This could only be meant sexually; while her father might be a man of means in the sense of prosperity, he had no means of making an impression as a man, that is to say, he was impotent” (39/122). Contrary to her MO, Dora affirms this interpretation, adding that due to her father's condition the lovers could only engage in oral sex—whereupon Freud immediately connects Dora's coughing and throat tickling to this imagined scene of oral gratification.

It was none other than Jacques Lacan who suggested that Freud might have jumped the gun with this last interpretive move—for it still seems to hold on to the father's ability to get it up as the comments on the

symptoms connected to Dora's throat and mouth suggest a fellatory phantasy. Freud does reveal as much when, two pages later, he recasts the scenario simply by calling it "such a sexual practice as sucking the penis, ... expressed ... by the sensation of a tickle in the throat and by coughing" (43/125). To this strangely reductive account, Lacan cavalierly responds that there was no "need for him", Freud, "to invoke her awareness of the fellatio undergone by the father, when everyone knows that *cunnilingus* is the artifice most commonly adopted by 'men of means' whose powers begin to abandon them" (67, my emphasis).⁷ Freud fails to recognize the horizontal community involving the father and Frau K. just as much as Dora herself as he keeps rerouting the narrative through the signifier of proliferating erections and their forward surge. Even the impotent have boners if it serves to corroborate the myth of desire's phallic determination.

Hence, the phantom erection is, in fact, double. And as strange as the two scenes (the "scene in the store" and the father's imagined sex life) are if one considers them as stand-alone hermeneutic interventions, there might be a possibility for them to elucidate one another. For if we think back to the "scene in the store" and its victim's disgusted retreat, the question as to why Herr K.'s erect member and its forward surge would have been such a deal-breaker for Dora is more easily solvable if we consider it breaching the paradigm of male impotence on which Dora's libidinal economy is based. If we follow Lacan's argument that "Dora's Oedipal relation is grounded in an identification with her father, which is favoured by the latter's sexual impotence" (66), the (phantom) erection would have undermined this identification, whereas his erectile dysfunction would have broken the chain of substitutions linking Dora's father to the potent Herr K.

Contrary to Freud's interpretive thrust, it's precisely the trauma of *non*-impotence that Dora's sexual economy is unfit to integrate. The analyst gives interpretive privilege to virility, potency, and masculinity—ensuring the chain of substitutions between the three father figures, each marked and distinguished by his own phantom erection. Freud turns out to be unable to read male impotence for it poses an overwhelming threat to the Oedipal configuration. In other words, it's precisely when it comes to the issue of impotence that the powers of Freud's own reading, to use Lacan's phrase, "begin to abandon him". What's subsequently missed, is the horizontal communion activated by an aphallic libidinal economy in which Dora's father can partake precisely because his masculine powers fail him. The phallic economy depends on the erect

specter. The practice of phallic reading, as marked by the proliferation of phantom erections, rigorously gatekeeps the Oedipal interpretive frame. Yet, its inherent vicissitudes divulge the very homoerotic desire it strives to disclaim.⁸

Notes

- 1 Concrete references for these discourses are hardly necessary: a simple Google news search for any of the examples invoked will produce evidence galore.
- 2 For a critical response to Haslan, see Cascardi and Brown 2016.
- 3 Discussing Freud at a moment in his study *Body Work*, Peter Brooks produces a similar conclusion, holding that “[t]he hysterical body ... threatens a violation of basic antitheses and laws, including the law of castration and the conditions of meaning” (1993: 244). I wonder, however, if the term “violation” as Brooks uses it here might not carry too weak a force when we think about the relation between hysteria and the established codes (or “laws”, as Brooks phrases it) of reading. It seems to me that hysteria does not just violate the law, which would still make it subject to and corrigible by virtue of the law’s authority—but that the hysterical occurrence challenges the established order so profoundly that the law itself needs to change so as to be able to grasp its object of confrontation. One might even say that hysteria carries an “afformative” quality, to channel the late Werner Hamacher.
- 4 The page references here and going forward refer to the Oxford edition of Freud’s *Dora* paired with the German original according to the *Studienausgabe*.
- 5 Cf. the entangled semantics of guessing (*raten*), financial installments (*Raten*), and rats (*Ratten*) in the “Rat Man” case.
- 6 Freud talks about a strong *Liebesregung*, the stir of love (103/184).
- 7 Hertz comments on this passage in Lacan, saying: “It’s hard to guess what Freud would have made of this note of high Parisian *savoir vivre*; whatever everyone else knew, he seems to have taken for granted the more phallic—and phallogocentric—option” (129). I hope to be able to show why Freud *has to* take this option for granted as it serves as the bedrock of his entire hermeneutic operation.
- 8 I would like to express my sincerest thanks to Michael Levine for his feedback on this text.

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