

Re-imagining the female hysteric: Hélène Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*

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Hélène Cixous' 1976 play Portrait of Dora offers a re-writing of the historical figure of 'Dora', a female hysteric and subject of Freud's case study (1905). This paper argues that Cixous' play effectively subverts Freud's patriarchal analytic frame and that by re-imagining Dora as an empowered subject, it offers a utopian feminist vision that is comparable to Cixous' theoretical notion of écriture féminine. However, I challenge Cixous' suggestion that the female hysteric offers subversive potential and suggest that it is time for a reassessment of this figure who, in the 1970s and '80s, was celebrated as a transgressive feminist icon. While Portrait of Dora offers an important re-reading of a historical female figure, I suggest that hysteria should not be championed as a feminist strategy of resistance to patriarchal power.

In her 1976 play *Portrait of Dora*, prominent French feminist theorist and playwright Hélène Cixous constructs an interpretive re-reading of Sigmund Freud's case study entitled *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.¹ Published in 1905, Freud's study documents his treatment of an eighteen-year-old girl named Ida Bauer (for whom Freud uses the pseudonym of Dora) who commenced analysis with Freud in 1900 and abruptly ended her treatment after only eleven weeks. In his case study, Freud details Dora's dreams and memories and his own analysis of them in an attempt to uncover the root of Dora's psychological condition, which Freud diagnoses as hysteria.

As numerous feminist critics have observed, Freud's understanding of Dora is limited by his patriarchal and hetero-normative frame of vision.² In *Portrait of Dora*, Cixous exposes Freud's phallogocentric biases and focuses upon the contradictions, exclusions and gaps in his case study. She creates an alternative version of events to that documented by Freud by reconstructing the narrative from Dora's perspective and showing the oppression of Viennese bourgeois life at the turn of the century.

Cixous' play re-imagines Dora as a figure who rejects the limitations imposed upon her by a patriarchal society. It supports the subversive possibilities of the figure of the female hysteric, viewing the hysteric's refusal (or inability) to conform to social expectations as a mode of resistance to the patriarchal system. By reconfiguring Dora as an empowered figure, Cixous actively re-writes history, imbuing Dora's character with the ability to transgress her social position, a scenario that would have been unimaginable to the real-life 'Dora' of Freud's case study. Thus, the Dora of Cixous' play, while based upon a historical subject, is a fictionalised and idealised, if ambiguous, representation of the feminine.

Cixous' resurrection of Dora contributed to the cult-like status that Dora received both in French feminist theory and in feminist writings that emerged in the United States in the 1980s. A proliferation of books and articles in the 1980s and '90s, including an entire collection of essays published in the anthology *In Dora's Case*,³ celebrated the figure of Dora and claimed her as a subversive feminist icon. This outspoken, disruptive teenage girl was retrospectively imbued with an astonishing degree of female empowerment and transgressive potential. However, over thirty years after her first appearance, it is time for a reconsideration of this feminist icon. This paper re-examines Dora from a

contemporary feminist perspective and challenges the notion that the female hysteric offers subversive potential. While Cixous' depiction of an empowered female hysteric offers a fictional and utopian feminist vision, I argue that this figure should not be championed as a feminist strategy of resistance to patriarchal power.

'FRAGMENT OF AN ANALYSIS OF A CASE OF HYSTERIA': FREUD'S CASE STUDY

The significance of *Portrait of Dora* as a feminist text lies largely in its detailed interrogation and subversion of the text from which it draws inspiration. Thus, before a discussion of the performance can take place, it is necessary to briefly outline the content and nature of Freud's case study.

Freud explains that Dora's father brought her to him for analysis in 1900 following the discovery of a suicide note. Although she had suffered from physical symptoms such as coughing fits, aphonia and a strange limp for many years, her depression and anxiety that culminated in a suicide threat was a recent development.⁴ Over the course of the analysis Freud discovers that Dora's anxiety is linked to an incident that took place two years earlier when Dora, then sixteen years old, accompanied her father to a lake in the country where they were to spend a few weeks with a couple with whom her father had become closely acquainted. In both Freud's case study and Cixous' play the couple are referred to as Herr K and Frau K. Dora tells Freud that Herr K made an immoral proposal to her in the form of a sexual advance while they were walking by the lake and later reveals that he had made a similar sexual advance two years earlier when Dora was only fourteen. It further emerges that Dora's father and Frau K were lovers. Unlike Dora's father, who claims her story is an adolescent fantasy, Freud believes her version of the events and acknowledges that a silent contract has been initiated in which Dora is unintentionally treated 'as an object for barter'.⁵ Freud writes that Dora 'was right in thinking that her father did not wish to look too closely into Herr K's behaviour to his daughter, for fear of being disturbed in his own love affair with Frau K'.⁶

Despite Freud's acknowledgement that Dora is telling the truth, his analysis of her case is disturbing in its misogynist tones. He does not view the sexual contract that is silently established by the

adults as abusive or damaging towards his patient. For Freud, the troubling aspect of the 'incident' is not related to Herr K's seduction of an adolescent girl, but to the question of why Dora rejected his advances. Freud views Dora's reaction to Herr K's attempted seduction as utterly abnormal. Writing of Herr K's earlier sexual advance Freud claims that 'this was surely just the situation to call up a distinct feeling of sexual excitement in a girl of fourteen who had never before been approached'⁷ and concludes that Dora's behaviour 'was already entirely and completely hysterical'.⁸ A contemporary assessment of Dora's situation would read Herr K's sexual advances as paedophilic and his treatment of Dora as child abuse. Freud, however, defends Herr K, citing his attractive appearance as evidence that a 'normal' girl would respond to his advances. Freud's inability to understand Dora's feelings stems in part from his insistence upon placing an Oedipal scenario over Dora's narrative. He views Herr K as a substitute for the father figure and argues that upon this basis a 'healthy girl in such circumstances' would have felt a sexual attraction towards Herr K.⁹ Freud's conclusions imply that Dora's hysteria can be attributed to her failure to adopt the correct female role within the Oedipus complex.

In his prefatory remarks to the case study, Freud writes at some length of the fragmented and incomplete nature of the study, acknowledging that it is the record of a failure. He attributes this failure to a number of factors including Dora's abrupt termination of the treatment after only eleven weeks, and his inability to master the effects of transference (Freud believes that Dora transferred her feelings for Herr K onto her analyst). However, for feminist critics of Freud's case study, the key reasons for the failure of the treatment reside not in the explanations Freud provides in his prefatory remarks but in his inability to see beyond his male prejudices. Freud's patriarchal biases lead him to view female sexuality and desire in passive terms,¹⁰ and his focus upon the male figures leads him to overlook the significance of the women in Dora's life, including her mother, who is referred to only briefly as an uncultivated and foolish woman suffering from 'housewife psychosis'.¹¹ Some time after the case study was completed Freud also conceded another omission on his part, which has since been regarded by many to be one of the dominant reasons for the 'failure' of the treatment. Relegated to a footnote within the postscript is Freud's statement: 'I failed to discover in time and to inform the patient that her homosexual (gynaecophilic) love for Frau K was the

strongest unconscious current in her mental life.'¹² It is this 'unconscious current' that Cixous takes up as an important aspect of Dora's sexual identity in her play.

CIXOUS' PORTRAIT: RE-IMAGINING THE FEMALE HYSTERIC

Portrait of Dora re-examines and reconfigures a series of Freud's interpretations of his patient and also subverts his narrative construction. Despite its status as a 'fragment of an analysis', Freud's case study continually betrays his desire for continuity and completeness, and his frustration at the disjointed manner of Dora's memories, which he attempts to convert into a coherent linear narrative. In contrast, Cixous not only accepts the fragmentary nature of Dora's memories, but exaggerates and plays upon their gaps and discontinuities. The staging of the play is constructed to emulate the hysteric's symptoms of amnesia and aphonia, through the use of silences, ellipses and repetitions of the scene of trauma ('the incident by the lake'). Throughout the performance various lines and entire scenes are repeated, with modifications according to whose memories are being represented. The alternate points of view attest to the instability and falsification of memory and also suggest that the characters' ulterior motives may account for the discrepancies in their recollections. In the opening sequence, for example, as Dora recalls 'the incident by the lake', Herr B and Herr K deny its very existence.

Cixous also depicts the body as the privileged site of memory, thus challenging Freud's prioritising of the voice. For Freud, memories reside in the individual unconscious in the form of repressed memory traces, which are brought to the surface in the psychoanalytic process through the speech act (the 'talking cure'). Given that one of the dominant symptoms of hysteria is the loss of the voice, one of Freud's central aims is to help the patient to recover her voice and thereby give verbal form to her memories. Cixous eschews the primacy of the speech act by drawing attention to that which is left unsaid. Throughout the play, Dora's silences are as informative as her spoken words. She frequently ignores Freud's questions, making choices when and when not to respond. When she does reply, she often turns Freud's questions back upon him. For example, when Freud asks 'who is replacing whom in this story?'¹³ Dora's reply is to pose the more pertinent question: 'who betrays whom in this story?'¹⁴

For Cixous, Dora's refusals to speak can be viewed as her resistance to conform to symbolic or phallogentric forms of language. Cixous displaces language from its conventional role as a verbal form of communication and instead focuses upon alternate means of expression. Firstly, Dora's memories are given visual form through still and filmic projections and textual form through the projection of written text; and secondly, the hysteric's gaps in memory and loss of speech are countered by the memory and language of the body. Through the visual and corporeal representation of Dora's fantasies, dreams and memories, the stage becomes a playing field for the performance of a feminine interiority.

'SCREEN MEMORIES'

Portrait of Dora was first performed in 1976 at the Théâtre d'Orsay in Paris under the direction of Simone Benmussa, who also directed the English version of the production in London in 1979.¹⁵ Benmussa's production effectively gave visibility to the repressed aspects of Dora's interiority. Throughout the performance, still images and filmed sequences of the actors are projected onto screens, portraying repressed memories and fantasies that are often inaccessible to Dora's consciousness and therefore cannot be articulated in verbal form. The memories of the other characters are also presented on the screens; that which they keep hidden and refuse to admit in spoken words is manifested in the images.

The play opens with a filmed projection of the 'incident by the lake' depicting Herr K's attempted seduction of Dora as it is described in Freud's case study. During the projection Freud, with his back to the audience, states:

These events project themselves like a shadow in dreams, they often become so clear that we feel we can grasp them, yet they escape our final interpretation, and if we proceed without skill and special caution, we cannot know if such a scene really took place.¹⁶

From the opening sequence the spectator is already presented with a series of contradictions through the disjunction between the aural and visual texts. The filmed images seem to attest to the past occurrence of

the incident, and yet the authenticity of the images is called into question by Freud's cautionary warning that despite their seeming clarity, we cannot be certain that they pertain to an actual event. Thus the combination of theatrical and filmic forms of representation and the contradictory messages they convey throws into question the reliability of either representational mode and leaves the viewer uncertain as to how to interpret the filmed scene: is it a past event that actually took place, a falsified memory, fantasy or pure theatre?

In her discussion of this scene, Sharon Willis explains in a footnote that, 'the founding reference of the play concerns screen memories,'¹⁷ a concept developed by Freud to account for the way in which the individual deals with traumatic experience. The subject unconsciously invents an innocuous 'screen memory' to conceal a real traumatic memory. Thus, the screen in the opening sequence can be read as a metaphorical screen that by presenting one memory conceals another. On this view, 'the incident by the lake' serves to mask and conceal deeper traumatic memories. For Freud, the suppressed memory might be Dora's Oedipal desire for her father that he claims has been displaced onto the figure of Herr K. Cixous and Benmussa, however, suggest that the screen conceals much darker traumatic memories of sexual abuse.

Later in the play the scene by the lake is repeated, this time from Freud's perspective. As the scene is projected onto the screen, Freud describes his 'dream', in the third person, in which he is walking with Dora by the lake when she 'raises her dress in a purposely seductive gesture which slightly reveals her ankle'.¹⁸ This scene can be read as the repressed scene of paternal seduction so integral to Freud's Oedipus complex. But here, the fantasy that Freud imagines to be unconsciously experienced by his patient is reconstructed as an aspect of his own unconscious fantasy. Thus, Cixous denies Freud authorial control and subjects his own unconscious to scrutiny.

The screen is also utilised to give expression to Dora's unconscious desires. In one sequence Cixous and Benmussa use projected images to recreate a scene from Freud's case study in which Dora relays her experience of visiting the Dresden Art Gallery and becoming completely absorbed in the painting of the Sistine Madonna. In his case study, Freud interprets Dora's adoration of the Madonna as analogous to her desire for maternity. Cixous challenges this hetero-normative reading of Dora's subjectivity by suggesting the possibility that Dora's

adoration of the Madonna is a reflection of her homosexual desires. A series of filmed stills are used to depict an unconscious fantasy in which Dora's adoration of the Madonna is aligned with her love for Frau K. The first still depicts the image of the Sistine Madonna. In the second still, the baby Jesus is replaced by an image of Dora and in the third, the Madonna is replaced by Frau K. Throughout the scene Freud is oblivious to the images and proceeds with his insistence of Dora's heterosexual love for Herr K.

This scene is highly suggestive of Julia Kristeva's semiotic *chora*, the space of unconscious feminine desire in which the subject relives the union with the pre-Oedipal mother.¹⁹ As in Kristeva's theory, the pre-Oedipal mother also plays a central role in Cixous' theorisation of the hysteric female subject. For Cixous, the hysteric is a privileged figure because she cannot be assimilated into symbolic discourse. Her 'failure' to complete the transition into the symbolic order via the Oedipus complex means that she remains within the pre-Oedipal and pre-symbolic phase of psychic development. Cixous views the pre-Oedipal phase as a repressed yet vital stage in which feminine language and desire are given free reign. In the case of the hysteric, Cixous suggests, the lost female language and feminine *jouissance* of the pre-Oedipal phase are reignited.

In the Sistine Madonna scene, Dora's connection to the maternal body is manifested through the substitution of the baby Jesus for Dora herself. The consequent substitution of the Madonna for Frau K indicates the central role that Cixous and Benmussa suggest Frau K plays in Dora's unconscious fantasies. Dora's desire for Frau K is double; she is both the object of Dora's homosexual (or bisexual) love and a figure symbolic of the pre-Oedipal mother. The pre-symbolic stage of psychic development is also a phase that precedes the formation of sexual and gendered identity, in which a multiplicity of sexualities come into play, allowing for a fluid bisexuality. Dora's expression of homosexual love in this scene is therefore coincident with her yearning for the maternal body. In this way, Cixous interrogates Freudian theories, depicting a process of identity formation that rejects the Oedipus complex and its emphasis upon the father figure, in favour of an imaginary return to the pre-Oedipal mother. Dora's link to the pre-Oedipal phase can be understood as the re-igniting of repressed memories of a corporeal union with the mother. The substitution of figures on the screen reveals that Dora fantasises herself safely held on the maternal lap.

Through its depiction of Dora's unconscious desire for the pre-Oedipal figure of Frau K *Portrait of Dora* gives focus to Dora's repressed bodily memories.

'WRITING THE BODY': MEMORY AND CORPOREALITY

The play's emphasis on expressing subjectivity through the body suggests that *Portrait of Dora* can be re-read as a theatrical realisation of Cixous' theory of *écriture féminine*, a specific form of feminine writing that is said to emerge from the libidinal impulses of the female body. This theory is best articulated in Cixous' 1976 article 'The laugh of the Medusa'.²⁰ Here Cixous proposes a utopian feminist vision, claiming that a new form of feminine textuality which emanates from the biology of the female body can subvert patriarchal language. Cixous' theory of 'writing the body', while conceived as a metaphor for the creation of feminist literary texts, also serves as an apt description of a feminist theatrical practice that gives ascendancy to female desire, sexuality and subjectivity through the body of the female performer.

Cixous' insistence upon the primacy of the female body in communication is carried into *Portrait of Dora* through the depiction of the body as the central conduit of repressed and silenced memories. The hysterical body becomes, in Rosi Braidotti's words 'a text, that is to say a collection of signs which demand interpretation'.²¹ Cixous and Benmussa present these signs for the audience to interpret through the representation of the hysterical body on the stage. In contrast to the immobile body lying on the psychoanalytic couch, in Cixous' and Benmussa's theatrical space, the body is entirely active.

The focus on bodily memory necessitates a performance style that contrasts with the psychoanalytic scenario and its emphasis on immobility and voice. Thus, while the analytic scene between Freud and Dora is the central point of reference for the play, it is continually interrupted by the representation of memories, dreams and fantasies in which the body is given a more active role. Benmussa explains that in order to convey 'the different levels of memory and desires' an anti-naturalistic theatrical form was employed, 'to make the staging more like choreography than like the kind of acting usually considered appropriate to psychological situations'.²² For example, in a number of scenes the actors perform their actions repetitively and robotically like a filmed sequence that is continually replayed. Such a theatrical

form rejects realism and the depiction of psychologically motivated characters. Thus the figures of Freud, Herr K, Frau K and Herr B are constructed, not as individual subjects, but as social archetypes that reflect wealthy Viennese society at the turn of the century.

In *Portrait of Dora* the body is represented as an alternative medium through which to portray memory when the voice fails. However, unlike vocalised memories, which expel the traumatic memory from the body through the speech act, bodily symptoms fail to convey the content of the memories or to adequately deal with the trauma. Willis argues that 'hysterical symptoms, then, are like screen memories inscribed on the body',²³ implying that the bodily symptoms function to conceal repressed traumatic memories. If the body lies, it is unclear as to how the hysteric's body is capable of giving representation to memory in any meaningful or coherent way. The traumatic memories remain silenced and repressed and all that is visible is the suffering they cause, represented in bodily symptoms. The hysteric's symptoms of amnesia and aphonia also prevent her from attaining a voice with which to protest against the injustices inflicted upon her. Such observations reveal the limitations of the figure of the female hysteric for a feminist politics of representation.

This critique is strengthened when we consider that hysteria is defined by the failure of subject-formation,²⁴ as a result of which the patient is unable to achieve a cogent sense of self. On this view, Dora never acquires a satisfactory subject position in Cixous' play. Rather, her body serves as a conduit for repressed memories; traumatic memories are 'written' on the body and performed as bodily symptoms (loss of the voice, muscle spasms, limping), but they are not resolved or successfully integrated into the subject's sense of self. Without proper resolution of the scene of trauma, Dora remains a fractured, unstable subject who is unable to achieve sufficient agency.

In response to Cixous' theory of 'writing the body', Ann Rosalind Jones poses the question, 'can the body be a source of self knowledge?' and argues that women cannot experience their bodies outside the realm of social experience.²⁵ In the case of hysteria this argument is particularly pertinent, for the hysteric's bodily symptoms are brought about by social oppressions. The figure of the hysteric also reveals that the female body is not necessarily always a powerful source of feminine *jouissance*. Rather, the hysteric's body is severely damaged by traumatic memories and transformed into a site of pain and suffering.

Importantly, the hysteric's body reveals that the body is not only a biological entity but is itself a social construct. Reading against Cixous' privileging of the female body as a biological essence from which women write themselves, I suggest that *Portrait of Dora* does allow for an alternate reading of the body as a site of social and cultural memories. Cixous and Benmussa make it clear that Dora's hysteria can be attributed to Herr K's sexual abuse of Dora at a young age, Herr B and Frau K's selfish actions, and Freud's perpetuation of a damaging situation. Thus the causes of Dora's psychological condition are portrayed as the result of social, cultural and historical factors. Through the characters' repetitive gestures in performance, Benmussa depicts Freud, Herr K, Herr B and Frau K as archetypal figures, reflective of a destructive social system. At times Dora, too, is portrayed as a social and historical figure, trapped within her traumatised body. However, problems arise when Dora's body becomes the site of internal desires and feminine *jouissance*, such as in the representation of Dora's dreams and fantasies. In such scenes she is extricated from her position in the social world and reconfigured as an imaginary and idealised figure.

DORA AND THE CELEBRATION OF HYSTERIA

For Cixous, Dora is a subversive figure because she resists and subverts the patriarchal order. Cixous writes, 'she is the name of a certain force, which makes the little circus not work anymore.'²⁶ Freud's misogynist treatment of Dora can only lead one to conclude that her final rejection of Freud's analysis was a necessary step. Dora's abandonment of her treatment is also her one active and independent gesture, and perhaps a surprising one given the enormity of the social and familial pressures placed upon her. It is therefore tempting to read her dismissal of Freud, as Cixous does, as a silent protest and a sign of female empowerment.

However, such a reading neglects the historical facts of Dora's case. Drawing upon an article written by Felix Deutsch in 1957, Toril Moi describes the tragic life of the 'real Dora', Ida Bauer, who 'continued to develop various hysterical symptoms, made life unbearable for her family, and grew to resemble her mother.' According to Moi, 'Dora suffers continuously from psychosomatic constipation, and dies from cancer of the colon.'²⁷ Moi concludes that 'it may be gratifying to see the young, proud Dora as a radiant example of feminine revolt

(as Cixous does); but we should not forget the image of the old, nagging, whining, and complaining Dora she later becomes, achieving nothing.²⁸ If we can accept Moi's assertions here, the celebration of the female hysteric in an utopian feminist reconstruction of the past ignores the very real suffering of the victim, and ironically resembles Freud's own blindness towards the social and historical factors that contribute to the hysteric's pain and suffering.

Cixous' promotion of the female hysteric, which began in her essays published in *The Newly Born Woman* in 1975, had a widespread and lasting impact upon French feminism. Indeed, Elaine Showalter reflects upon the period in 1970s' France as 'the hysterical phase of French feminism'.²⁹ On the one hand, this phase of French feminism provided a significant critique of the 'hystericization' of women within psychoanalytic discourse. Yet, at the same time, it reclaimed the figure of the female hysteric for the feminist project, thus ironically perpetuating the 'hysterical' discourse and resulting in what Showalter calls 'the hystericization of feminism'.³⁰

Describing the 'cult of Dora' Showalter writes:

Feminist critics were retroactively *healing* Dora, performing the acts of remembering they believed Freud had neglected. In retrospect, it seems to me that these feminists were redefining and even denying hysteria.³¹

Cixous' play can be located within this feminist retroactive project of healing and remembering, through its representation of aspects of Dora's subjectivity and sexuality that Freud neglected. *Portrait of Dora* is itself an act of memory that aims to rediscover the significance of a female subject who, prior to Cixous' play, was a marginalised historical figure constructed according to Freud's patriarchal frame of vision. However, *Portrait of Dora* goes much further than this for, as Showalter suggests, it also redefines history. In 'performing the acts of remembering' as Cixous does, feminist critics did not merely remember the victims who suffered from hysteria, but dramatically reconfigured them, imbuing them with resistant and transgressive potential. Cixous writes, 'Dora seemed to me to be the one who resists the system'.³² Hysteria, she argues, 'is the nuclear example of women's power to protest'.³³ I suggest that this is not only an overstatement of the political potential invested in the figure of the female hysteric, but

a glorification of hysteria, which is a highly debilitating condition.

Cixous' view that the female hysteric is representative of subversive possibilities is situated within the discourse constructed around mental illness in the 1960s and '70s, particularly within French feminism, that celebrated hysteria as a form of rebellion. Shifts in discourses on mental illness in recent times render such a reading untenable. Since the mid 1990s, debates surrounding the relationship between traumatic experience and mental illness have been particularly associated with instances of post-traumatic stress disorder affecting war veterans, the concept of recovered and false memories in cases of child sexual abuse,³⁴ and memories of the holocaust and its aftermath.³⁵ Such debates have radically altered conceptions of the impact of trauma upon the identities and lives of the victims. Scholarship within the field of trauma studies demonstrates that traumatic memory radically alters an individual's understanding of his or her sense of identity, denies human agency, and results in social alienation and ongoing pain and suffering. It is therefore highly unlikely that one would read mental illness as subversive within the contemporary cultural climate.

The celebration of hysteria is equally problematic from a contemporary feminist perspective. The problem with representing the female hysteric as a feminist figure is that she is essentially a damaged person who is too unstable to achieve a satisfactory subject position from which to speak and act. Even in Cixous' idealised interpretation of Dora, subjectivity is denied as a result of hysteria. The voice and the body are portrayed as disconnected and Dora remains a fragmented subject deprived of agency. Thus, while it is important to recognise her historical oppression, the female hysteric is not a viable model for contemporary feminism.

CONCLUSIONS

Portrait of Dora resists narrative closure and fixed meanings in favour of maintaining the possibility of multiple interpretations, as a subversive feminist artistic practice that destabilises the fixity of phallogocentric discourses. As a result of the play's ambiguities and contradictions it is difficult to construct a definitive feminist reading. The ambiguous nature of the text can be attributed to the feminist utopian discourse from which *Portrait of Dora* emerged that is itself riddled with contradictions. On the one hand, as Toril Moi points out, utopian

ideas can function as a social critique by ‘signalling the repressive effects of the social structures that gave rise to the utopia in the first place’.³⁶ From this perspective, Cixous’ reconstruction of Dora as an empowered figure is not merely an idealistic vision of an alternative reality, it is also a critique of an existent social system that denied Dora the empowerment and agency she was entitled to.

However, at the same time, a utopian ideology disengages with social reality when it shifts into the realm of the imaginary and constructs women as ideological archetypes rather than social beings. By constructing the female hysteric as an idealised figure, Cixous conceals the very real pain and suffering that many women endured within an oppressive patriarchal system. In her exchange with Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman*, Catherine Clément articulates the problem with Cixous’ theoretical concepts, which can be extended to a critique of *Portrait of Dora*. Clément argues:

Except in taking what you say poetically, I have to admit that these sentences have no reality for me... I do not recognize anything of what I think in political terms. Not that it is ‘false,’ certainly. But it is described in terms that seem to me to be of the order of myth, of poetry. It describes a sort of collective subject, fictitious, desiring—a huge entity by turns free and revolutionary or subjugated, by turns sleeping or awake... In reality these aren’t subjects.³⁷

Clément’s description of a ‘collective subject, fictitious, desiring’ is an accurate description of the Dora of Cixous’ play. Dora is a character full of contradictions; she is simultaneously oppressed by social forces *and* an empowered subject who possesses the freedom to experience her own internal desires and feminine *jouissance*. This position, as Clément suggests, is in reality entirely untenable. Historically, the abuse and oppression Dora (Ida Bauer) endured rendered her a damaged subject who was never able to recover from her traumatic past.

Cixous’ construction of alternative feminine memories and subjectivities in *Portrait of Dora* effectively evades and exceeds Freud’s analytic frame. Cixous subverts Freud’s construction of Dora and re-images her sexuality and subjectivity as fluid and multiple. However,

the representation of feminine fluidity and multiplicity corresponds to a feminist poetics that is arguably redundant on a political level. The ‘collective subject, fictitious [and] desiring’³⁸ gives ascendancy to a celebratory femininity that is pre-symbolic, and utopian, but politically ineffective and unsustainable. The sense of female empowerment and freedom given to Dora’s character exists only in the realm of fantasy, fiction and drama, and ultimately conceals the extent of Dora’s suffering.

In the final moments of *Portrait of Dora*, Dora is represented as an empowered figure who tells Freud that his results are ‘totally insignificant’³⁹ and defiantly walks out on the treatment. However, this idealistic ending is problematised by the realisation that Freud’s analysis has failed and Dora has not been cured of her hysteria. Her departure from the stage signifies the end of her treatment but not the end of her internal traumas. As a result of the play’s inability to resolve Dora’s traumatic memories, it is difficult to see how there can be much hope for her future. Indeed, the play provides no indication as to the direction in which Dora’s life may be headed. Thus, despite Cixous’ emphasis upon utopian possibilities, at the end of the play Dora’s actual future is left unexplored and uncertain. ❖

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sigmund Freud, ‘Fragment of an analysis of a case of hysteria’, in Angela Richards (ed.), James Strachey (trans.), *Case Histories 1: ‘Dora’ and ‘Little Hans’*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, 35–164.
- 2 See for example, Toril Moi, ‘Chapter 6: Representation of patriarchy: Sexuality and epistemology in Freud’s *Dora*’, in *What is a Woman? And Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 330.
- 3 Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (eds), *In Dora’s Case: Freud-Hysteria-Feminism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985.
- 4 Freud, 52–53.
- 5 Freud, 66.
- 6 Freud, 67.
- 7 Freud, 59.
- 8 Freud, 59.
- 9 Freud, 60.
- 10 See also Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and Other Works*, Angela Richards (ed.), Penguin, Middlesex & New York, 1977.
- 11 Freud, 49.
- 12 Freud, 162.

- 13 Hélène Cixous, 'Portrait of Dora', Sarah Burd (trans.), *Diacritics*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1983, 20.
- 14 Cixous, *Dora*, 21.
- 15 Simone Benmussa's production notes, entitled 'Portrait of Dora: "Stage work and dream work"' were published with an alternative translation of the play in *Benmussa Directs*, Anita Barrows (trans.), Riverrun Press, London, 1979, 9–19.
- 16 Cixous, *Dora*, 2.
- 17 Sharon Willis, 'Hélène Cixous' *Portrait de Dora*: The unseen and the unscene', in Sue-Ellen Case (ed.), *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1990, 77–91.
- 18 Cixous, *Dora*, 19.
- 19 See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Columbia University, New York, 1984.
- 20 Hélène Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1981, 245–264.
- 21 Rosi Braidotti, 'In the footsteps of Anna and Dora: Feminism and psychoanalysis', in Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik (eds), *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey, 1993, 166.
- 22 Benmussa, 11.
- 23 Willis, 60.
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