

traumatic theory of the origins of hysteria. His correspondence makes clear that he was increasingly troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis. Hysteria was so common among women that if his patients' stories were true, and if his theory were correct, he would be forced to conclude that what he called "perverted acts against children" were endemic, not only among the proletariat of Paris, where he had first studied hysteria, but also among the respectable bourgeois families of Vienna, where he had established his practice. This idea was simply unacceptable. It was beyond credibility.²⁰

Faced with this dilemma, Freud stopped listening to his female patients. The turning point is documented in the famous case of Dora. This, the last of Freud's case studies on hysteria, reads more like a battle of wits than a cooperative venture. The interaction between Freud and Dora has been described as "emotional combat."²¹ In this case Freud still acknowledged the reality of his patient's experience: the adolescent Dora was being used as a pawn in her father's elaborate sex intrigues. Her father had essentially offered her to his friends as a sexual toy. Freud refused, however, to validate Dora's feelings of outrage and humiliation. Instead, he insisted upon exploring her feelings of erotic excitement, as if the exploitative situation were a fulfillment of her desire. In an act that Freud viewed as revenge, Dora broke off the treatment.

The breach of their alliance marked the bitter end of an era of collaboration between ambitious investigators and hysterical patients. For close to a century, these patients would again be scorned and silenced. Freud's followers held a particular grudge against the rebellious Dora, who was later described by a disciple as "one of the most repulsive hysterics he had ever met."²²

Out of the ruins of the traumatic theory of hysteria, Freud created psychoanalysis. The dominant psychological theory of the next century was founded in the denial of women's reality.²³ Sexuality remained the central focus of inquiry. But the exploitative social context in which sexual relations actually occur became utterly invisible. Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience. By the first decade of the twentieth century, without ever offering any clinical documentation of false complaints, Freud had concluded that his hysterical patients' accounts of childhood sexual abuse were untrue: "I was at last obliged to recognize that these scenes of seduction had never taken place, and that they were only fantasies which my patients had made up."²⁴

Freud's recantation signified the end of the heroic age of hysteria. After

the turn of the century the entire line of inquiry initiated by Charcot and continued by his followers fell into neglect. Hypnosis and altered states of consciousness were once more relegated to the realm of the occult. The study of psychological trauma came to a halt. After a time, the disease of hysteria itself was said to have virtually disappeared.²⁵

This dramatic reversal was not simply the work of one man. In order to understand how the study of hysteria could collapse so completely and how great discoveries could be so quickly forgotten, it is necessary to understand something of the intellectual and political climate that gave rise to the investigation in the first place.

The central political conflict in nineteenth-century France was the struggle between the proponents of a monarchy with an established religion and the proponents of a republican, secular form of government. Seven times since the Revolution of 1789 this conflict had led to the overthrow of the government. With the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870, the founding fathers of a new and fragile democracy mobilized an aggressive campaign to consolidate their power base and to undermine the power of their main opposition, the Catholic Church.

The republican leaders of this era were self-made men of the rising bourgeoisie. They saw themselves as representatives of a tradition of enlightenment, engaged in mortal struggle with the forces of reaction: the aristocracy and the clergy. Their major political battles were fought for control of education. Their ideological battles were fought for the allegiance of men and the dominion of women. As Jules Ferry, a founding father of the Third Republic, put it: "Women must belong to science, or they will belong to the church."²⁶

Charcot, the son of a tradesman who had risen to wealth and fame, was a prominent member of this new bourgeois elite. His salon was a meeting place for government ministers and other notables of the Third Republic. He shared with his colleagues in government a zeal for the dissemination of secular, scientific ideas. His modernization of the Salpêtrière in the 1870s was carried out to demonstrate the superior virtues of secular teaching and hospital administration. And his investigations of hysteria were carried out to demonstrate the superiority of a secular over a religious conceptual framework. His Tuesday Lectures were political theater. His mission was to claim hysterical women for science.

Charcot's formulations of hysteria offered a scientific explanation for phenomena such as demonic possession states, witchcraft, exorcism, and religious ecstasy. One of his most cherished projects was the retrospective diagnosis of hysteria as portrayed throughout the ages in works of art.