

Mesmerism in Late Victorian Theatre

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Abstract. Originating as a medical practice and ultimately rejected as pseudoscience, mesmerism evolved into a literary symbol in the later Victorian era. This paper focuses on three plays that use mesmerism as a symbol of marital control and domination: the comedy *His Little Dodge* (1896), adapted from *Le Système Ribardier* (1892), by George LeFeydeau and Maurice Hennequin; *Trilby* (1895), adapted from the novel by George Du Maurier; and, finally, Johan Strindberg's *The Father* (1893). The mesmeric power one character imposes over another, overriding both consent and awareness in the trance state, serves both to reaffirm hierarchies of power and highlight anxieties about social change in the *fin-de-siècle*.

Keywords: Mesmerism, hypnotism, Victorian theatre, Johan Strindberg, George Du Maurier.

[es] Mesmerismo en el teatro victoriano tardío

Resumen. Desde sus fracasados orígenes como ciencia y su uso en el ocultismo, el mesmerismo acabó por encontrar un lugar significativo en los escenarios teatrales al final de la era victoriana. Este artículo discute en particular tres obras en las que el mesmerismo aparece como metáfora del control y la dominación matrimonial: la comedia *His Little Dodge* (1896), adaptada a partir de *Le Système Ribardier* (1892) de George LeFeydeau y Maurice Hennequin, *Trilby* (1895), adaptación de la novela de George Du Maurier, y *The Father* (1893) de Johan Strindberg. El poder que un personaje impone sobre otro, obviando su consentimiento y su conciencia durante el estado de trance, sirve tanto para reafirmar las jerarquías existentes cuanto para subrayar la ansiedad ante los cambios sociales que se estaban produciendo durante el *fin-de-siècle*.

Palabras clave: Mesmerismo, hipnotismo, teatro victoriano, Johan Strindberg, George Du Maurier.

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1. Mesmerism from the Laboratory to the Stage

Over the course of the nineteenth century, mesmerism underwent a singular transformation. In spite of its failure as a scientific theory, mesmerism penetrated occultist circles and ultimately played a significant role in Victorian *fin-de-siècle* theatre. Influenced by George Ernst Stahl's writing on animism-vitalism in the alchemical traditions, toward the end of the eighteenth century, Franz Anton Mesmer developed his theory of animal magnetism, claiming that the fluid movement of magnetic energies could flow from one person to another and be manipulated to produce varied states of trance. While it later came to be known by its inventor's name, animal magnetism initially entered Britain through its proposed application in medical science. J. Jeffrey Franklin's article in the *Ashgate Research Companion*, on "The Evolution of Occult Spirituality in Victorian England and the Representative Case of Edward Bulwer-Lytton" (2012) marks the 1830s as the beginning of the "mesmeric mania" in England, summarizing how mesmerism "rapidly became a subject of intense public and medical interest in the mid-1840s and had saturated popular culture by the 1850s" (129). Books such as British clergyman Chauncy Hare Townshend's *Facts in Mesmerism* (1841), and French doctor Joseph-Alphonse Teste's *Practical Manual of Animal Magnetism* (translated into English in 1843) introduced mesmerism into the dialogue of medicine and popular science. John Elliotson, author of *Numerous Cases of Surgical Operations Without Pain in The Mesmeric State* (1848), spoke of the "Inestimable Blessings of Mesmerism" as anaesthesia (1, 5-12) and opened the London Mesmeric Infirmary in 1849. Despite these and other similar efforts, mesmerism never succeeded in integrating itself into standard scientific or medical practice. Although in the

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second half of the century it came to be seen increasingly as pseudoscience, its popularity began to be reflected in other spheres.

Toward the 1880s and 90s, rejection of this theory produced a two-pronged reaction among committed mesmerists. On the one hand, doctors insistent on the curative powers of mesmerism aimed to distance themselves from occultism or mysticism. Concerned by the scientific disavowal of their practice as occult quackery, mesmerists initially attempted to distance themselves from spiritual matters. On the other hand, the Victorian Occult Revival, with its rituals, séances and magic shows offered a new venue for mesmerism to take hold. Alison Butler in *The Making of Modern Magic* (2011) addresses the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn's rejection of mesmerists from their society (83) (despite the Order's use of self-hypnosis for astral projection [51]), but also notes that other occult groups of a less Rosicrucian methodology, such as the *Fratres Lucis*, not only welcomed mesmerists, but included Franz Anton Mesmer, the very father of the practice, among their membership (85). Franklin in his article for the *Ashgate Research Companion*, echoing Alex Owen's argument in *The Place of Enchantment* (2007), explains that mesmerism was a mid-century fad which the late Victorian period cast aside in favour of what Owen terms a "'new' occultism" (Owen 2007: 5), a historiographic approach which made the occult highly attractive to new converts (Franklin 2012: 131). For instance, the medium Sophie De Morgan compared mesmerism to the spiritual influence of a séance in which the fluid energies of a deceased spirit could pass through and control, or mesmerise, the medium's body (Noakes 2012: 32-33).²

The association with later occultist practices, however, strengthened mesmerism's more performative aspects which, until then, had been seen through the lens of medical institutions. Indeed, mesmerism flourished at the end of the nineteenth century as showmanship and light entertainment. A poster advertising mesmerist Miss Annie De Montford's abilities, in the style of a playbill, illustrates how mesmerism in the late Victorian era took a turn toward other pursuits.³ The performance, announced as both "Grotesque" and comedic, innocent "Fun and Sport", while also "intellectual", plays into both the occult and scientific cultures of mesmerism. De Montford's spectacle places emphasis on performance, marketing her brand of mesmerism as a diversion. Her show took place in a music hall and moved on through Britain and America. The heritage of mesmerism presented in music halls extended to song itself, allowing performances in private homes following the dissemination of sheet music. Musical theatre German-born British composer Meyer Lutz in 1891 and music hall lyricist Harry Castling in 1893 each wrote numbers on "How to mesmerise 'em" and "How I mesmerise 'em" (respectively). Publications at this time focused less on mesmerism's medical approaches and case studies, turning instead to its practical use among laypeople, partly as a parlour trick and partly as a means of seduction, as per the Meyer Lutz song's variant title, "If you're courting a girl and on her you call" (1891).

The performative and theatrical aspects of the Victorian Occult Revival have already received sustained discussion in scholarship as witness Dennis Denisoff's "Performing the Spirit: Theatre, the Occult, and the Ceremony of Isis" (2015), Edmund Ligan's "Contemporary Forms of Occult Theatre" (2006) or his book on *The Theatre of the Occult Revival* (2014). These texts, however, contain little mention of mesmerism, reflecting Franklin and Owen's views that, by the *fin-de-siècle*, mesmerism had already been thoroughly debunked and was therefore no longer of significant relevance.⁴ Yet mesmerism's later distancing from the field of science and new associations with occultism facilitated its reintegration in the cultural atmosphere of the 1890s as both occult performance and music hall diversion.

2. Mesmeric Theatre

Through its integration in popular culture, mesmerism became a literary tool of symbolic value. While an individual entranced, under another's control, may be used for comedic effect, this plot structure also unveils the complexities of psychological manipulation and systemic domination. Perhaps surprisingly, the importance of mesmerism in late nineteenth century drama has not received sustained treatment despite the numerous plays that incorporate mesmeric language and practices. This paper will speak to the mesmeric plays of the 1890s in which its symbolic use, rather than a mere plot device, serves to highlight existing hierarchies of race and gender.

Leopold Davis Lewis' 1871 melodrama *The Bells*, for instance, underscores the dangers of mesmerism in wrong hands. In this play, one man mesmerises another for criminal aims, coercing his subject into committing murder (the character Mathias was interpreted onstage at the Lyceum Theatre in London by Henry Irving to great acclaim).⁵ In 1877, Wilkie Collins' adaptation of *The Moonstone* for the stage changed the explanation for the stone's theft. In the 1868 novel, the stone was stolen under mesmeric influence in conjunction with laudanum, while the play makes use

² See Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room* (2004), Amy Lehman's *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance* (2009) and Tatiana Kontou's *Women and the Victorian Occult* (2013) on mediums and the 'feminine link' to the spiritual.

³ British Library: *Poster advertising the mesmerist Miss Annie De Montford at the Music Hall, Barnstaple, Devon.*

⁴ Publications aiming to assert the scientific truth of mesmerism continued, surprisingly, well into the 1890s from John Newport Langley's *The Physiological Aspect of Mesmerism* (1884) and theosophist Alfred Percy Sinnett's *The Rationale of Mesmerism* (1892) to occultist James Coates' *Human Magnetism: or how to hypnotise* (1897), which focused on teaching mesmerism to lay 'students' of the 'art'.

⁵ *The Bells* was Lewis' translation of *Le Juif polonais* (1867) by Émile Erckmann and Alexandre Chatrian.

of the less threatening somnambulism brought about by nerves and a large evening meal which upsets the innocent thief's sleep cycle.⁶ Here the novel's combination of mesmerism and drug use could perhaps have been considered too sensational for the more lighthearted tone desired of its stage adaptation, thereby necessitating this plot alteration. Much later in 1894, Scottish playwright Robert Williams Buchanan's *The Charlatan* premiered at the Haymarket Theatre, starring Herbert Beerbohm Tree in the titular role as fake occultist Phillip Woodville, who aims to seduce and mesmerise the somnambulist (and therefore doubly vulnerable) Miss Arlington. Buchanan's play makes exotic use of his characters' Indian connections to heighten the occult aspects of the play. As a result, Woodville possesses legitimate mesmeric powers, but Buchanan simultaneously offers a satiric criticism of mediums and theosophists.⁷ In the midst of parody, the mesmerist remains awkwardly in both camps, barely legitimised for the purposes of Buchanan's plot and implicitly mocked in tandem with other occult practices. In the same year Victorien Sardou's *La Sorcière* once again features both mesmerism and somnambulism. Set in early sixteenth century Toledo, Zoraya entrances a somnambulist maiden under the pretence of curing her sleepwalking, to seduce the maiden's fiancé while she lies in a deep trance. Zoraya and her lover are discovered, and she is condemned to burn as a witch. Both take poison to commit suicide rather than be separated, dying in a tragic embrace.⁸ Sardou uses the trance to explain historic 'witchcraft' and distinguishes between the passive woman's sleepwalking and the powerful woman's mesmeric skill. Throughout these plays, mesmerism confers pseudoscientific validity on the narratives while connoting the danger, power and control inherent in overtaking another's will.

These performances repeatedly combine mesmerism with other forces, reflecting the earlier sensationalism of the midcentury mesmeric mania while collapsing the boundaries of distinct occultist forces from witchcraft to theosophy. Among the plays featuring induced trance-states in the late nineteenth century, three are especially interesting both for their greater cultural influence and reliance on mesmerism not merely as a lesser tool of new occultism, but as a symbol for gendered, marital Victorian power dynamics. The first of these 1890s productions, August Strindberg's naturalist play *The Father*, a three-act tragedy staged by the Independent Theatre Society in winter of 1893 and adapted by Justin Huntly McCarthy, uses the language of animal magnetism to describe a marital power struggle. Strindberg's play features Captain Adolf and his wife Laura fighting for control over their daughter's education.⁹ Its detail-oriented and scientific approach to mesmerism would seem at odds with new occultist approaches to animal magnetism, yet Strindberg's interest in addressing concepts such as mesmerism in tandem with contemporary neuropsychological research leads him to use mesmerism in its most literal sense.¹⁰ The struggle between the Captain and Laura over whether their daughter will leave home and study to become a teacher, as her father insists, or remain at home and become an artist, as per her mother's wishes, hinges on legal claims, but ultimately casts Laura in the role of a stage mesmerist, casting her power over her husband as a form of feminine manipulation derived from both intellectual and physiological power.

Two years later, *Trilby*, George Du Maurier's novel, published first in *Harper's Monthly* (1894), was proclaimed "book of the year" in America and stage rights were quickly bought up by Albert Masherman Palmer, with Du Maurier's permission, for the Park Theatre in Boston ("Theatrical Gossip" 1895a; "The Drama in America" 1895b). Paul M. Potter expanded the play with a final fourth act and it was finally staged in its complete form on April 1, 1895 ("The Drama in America" 1895b). Potter's *Trilby* featured a man mesmerising a woman onstage, not, as with Strindberg's play, to impose power of argument, but, instead, to render music from her body. *Trilby* heightens the performative aspect of the mesmeric trance through the metamorphosis of the charming, beautiful and talentless Trilby O'Ferrall from sentient personhood into an instrument. Svengali, the Jewish musician and mesmerist, uses his powers to kidnap Trilby from her fiancé, Little Billee, and sing "like an archangel". Svengali's marriage to Trilby combines mesmerism with sexual predation, highlighting the villainy of a mesmerist racial other. The threat of sexual violence is mitigated by the metaphor of music, but, even so, by enjoying Trilby's newfound musical abilities, the audience is implicated in the mesmeric assault. Moreover, the novel and play's intense fame led to multiple adaptations and burlesques that both mock and establish the play's conventions of power.

While *The Father* and *Trilby* both propose mesmerists with undue or usurped power, *His Little Dodge* (1896) offers a comedic turn to sexual violence, while reasserting patriarchal power dynamics through the authority granted in marriage. A French play originally titled *Le Système Ribardier* (1892) by George S. LeFeydeau and Maurice Hennequin, *His Little Dodge*, was adapted for the British stage by Justin Huntly McCarthy and debuted at the Royalty Theatre in London from 24 October 1896 through January of the following year.¹¹ Both versions centred on Sir Hercules

⁶ Steve Farmer's notes in his 1999 edition of *The Moonstone* describe Collins' interest in mesmerism (32, 72, 459).

⁷ Buchanan then co-wrote a novel version of *The Charlatan* with Henry Murray (1895).

⁸ The play was produced at the Parisian Theatre Sarah Bernhardt in 1903 and the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York in English as *The Sorceress* (translated by Louis N. Parker) (described in Hart 1913: 118-19, 364-67).

⁹ The *Glasgow Herald* ("Our London Correspondence") in August 1893 advertises J.H. McCarthy's adaptation at the Independent.

¹⁰ Allusions to mesmerism also feature briefly in Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1998: 59-60). See also Matthew Wilson Smith's "The Prison House of Nerves: Zola and Strindberg" (2017).

¹¹ First advertised in *The Sporting Times* ("Multiple Classified Ads") on 24 October 1896 and playing "for the last time" in *The County Gentleman* ("The Man About Town") on 16 January 1897. (*The County Gentleman* also notes this was the last play under George Alexander's management at the Royalty ["The Man About Town" 1897].) As per an article in *The Birmingham Pictorial and Dart*, we know the play shifted to the Theatre Royal in Birmingham with a different cast, starting during the week of 14 June 1897 ("Before the Footlights" 1897). *The Sun* also reports it was taken to New York and staged at the Manhattan Theatre starting 22 November 1897 ("This Week On Our Stage" 1897).

Little, who places his wife into a sleep trance in order to commit adultery with their neighbour Lady Petlow, also married. Rather than condemn mesmerism or discover criminality through lay hypnosis as in the plays of Lewis, Buchanan and Sardou, *His Little Dodge* focuses on mocking the farcical effects of mesmerism in Sir Little's marriage. Moreover, entrancement into an immobile sleep state proves more threatening than the sleepwalking of *The Moonstone's* stage adaptation. Wicked intentions come to the fore in *His Little Dodge*, but they are all the while framed as comic. The husband performs the trick before a rapt audience, yet the fictional aspect of the play distinguishes *His Little Dodge* from the displays of a 'real' stage mesmerist such as Annie De Montford. Ellis Jeffreys, the actress playing Lady Little, had only to perform being mesmerised, just as Fred Terry's acting as the mesmerist husband required no real mesmeric ability. The vulnerable body of the mesmerised woman on stage, however, underscores sexual danger. Lady Petlow, the other woman, is also mesmerised and therefore absolved of sinful involvement with a man to whom she is not wed. Thus both become interchangeably vulnerable sexualised targets.

In its late Victorian iteration, combining its links to other forms of occultism with the excitement of showmanship, mesmerism found in the stage an ideal venue to maximise its sensational effects. Its transformation into practical and increasingly accessible lay hypnotism (categories with distinct histories yet often conflated) allowed mesmerism to percolate into the intimate drama of Victorian everyday life, where it served as a symbol in the struggle for power. Mesmerism thus showcases the existing power structures of sexuality, gender and race as well as their potential to be overturned in the hands of the oppressed.

3. Widespread Conventions

A democratised, lay 'hypnotism' heightens the risk of domination in ways distinct from the medicalised treatment of mesmerism in the 1840s and 50s, which would only ever feature male doctors exerting power over women or men framed as psychically weaker. When we recall the theme of Meyer Lutz's comic song, "If you're courting a girl and on her you call" (1891), which offers hypnotism as a form of courting a woman, the difference in treatment when the subject is a man is evidently laced with sexism. Mesmerised women overpowered by men fit into the patriarchal discourse while a man stripped of power produces anxiety. *His Little Dodge* and *Trilby* both then stage more acceptable sexual dynamics of married life despite their respective themes of adultery and abduction. In both cases, scenes of mesmeric domination become a euphemism of sex itself as animal energies flow, like sexual fluids, from one body to another without requiring nudity or overt sexual vulgarity from the actors. While *Trilby* further redirects violence through music, *His Little Dodge* combines the sleep state with the mesmeric trance, rendering the women's bodies inert, languid and better suited for the both dually somnific and sexual bedroom.

The voyeuristic display of sexualised mesmerism would seem intensely risqué for a Victorian audience and, indeed, reviews of *His Little Dodge* focused largely on condemning or excusing its sexual politics. A review in *The Sporting Times* on the Saturday after its London debut focuses primarily on the play's translation and adaptation, using a euphemistic culinary metaphor for 'good taste'. The reviewer describes how "'Cook' McCarthy has taken the sting out of the sauce of 'Chefs' Feydeau and Henniquin (sic)". McCarthy's adaptation of *Le Système Ribardier* becomes a conversion of 'French cuisine' into a milder English alternative, allowing *His Little Dodge* to maintain the sexual "titillation of a somewhat sultry sort" which "the British public will swallow with avidity". Yet McCarthy's play is still sufficiently "hot and strong" to perturb the artistic palates of "playgoers who require nothing stronger than mustard with their dramatic dish" ("Things Theatrical" 1896). While *Le Système Ribardier* "is not exactly what we should consider refined in its Frenchness"—that is, the play is 'French' in the sense of sexually vulgar rather than sophisticated—*His Little Dodge* achieves "tact" in its "refined treatment" of a subject that is still, functionally, about adultery and rape ("Things Theatrical" 1896). The contrived food metaphor allows the reviewer to express, with the same tact and refinement, that the play, while containing the lewd sexuality of its French original, is staged in a way acceptable to a more conservative, albeit equally patriarchal, Victorian audience.

A much lengthier review in the *Pick-Me-Up* (1896), punctuated by cartoonist Sidney Herbert Sime's comic caricatures, completely denies the play's sexual overtones, arguing that Little's "passing acquaintance" with Lady Petlow is entirely innocent and that he mesmerises her "in the cause of science" alone. The medical history of mesmerism allows for the language of sexual suspicion while offering a possible justification backed by the respectability of science. The *Pick-Me-Up* review concludes that just "because a gentleman puts a lady under mesmeric influence in her husband's house during his absence from home" he does not necessarily have improper intentions. After all, "it is hard enough as it is to lead a good life, without having one's services in the cause of science blamed and belittled" ("Through the Opera Glass" 1896). Mesmerism as scientific discourse grants the man respectability as a scientist, yet there can be no question that Little exploits his semi-occult ability in order to strip two women of all agency. Mesmerism acts as a metaphor not only for lying but also for control and the ability of the mesmerist to overpower, both mentally and sexually, the subjects. Because *His Little Dodge* is a fictional display of mesmeric ability, it differs from shows of purported mesmerists claiming to actually control subjects. Little's ability and the truth of his actions remain constantly in question. The farce mocks the scientific reality of mesmerists' skills not only by showing the potential for its more lascivious and base application but by folding mesmerism into the art of lying—in this case, of lying to one's wife rather than lying to a captive, 'mesmerised' audience. McCarthy's adaptation allows a voyeuristic audience the pleasure of watching a man

overpower a woman on stage. The reviewer's explanation, in turn, for Lady Little's mesmerism is her own jealousy. Because her previous late husband had been a notorious philanderer, the reviewer writes, Lady Little "has decided that all husbands are rogues, and she harbours such heated suspicions in her chest" that poor Little, who deserves "our heartfelt sympathy right from the start", and who only wishes to "pay a visit" to Lady Petlow to "pass remarks on the weather and other necessaries of life", cannot possibly enjoy such innocent freedoms without the hysterics of his jealous wife ("Through the Opera Glass" 1896). In this interpretation, Sir Little uses mesmerism to gaslight his wife as a perfectly understandable remedy for her feminine hysteria and unfounded jealousy. The pathologizing language of a 'hysteria' diagnosis then requires mesmeric medical intervention. Put in other words, he is not only granted control over her body as her husband but is also morally absolved of wrongdoing in the public eye as his wife's entrancement is framed as a psychiatric treatment for her controlling paranoia. The reviewer's appeal to sympathy for Sir Little inverts the narrative, highlighting the husband's lack of control in his marriage and his need to mesmerise others as a means to regain his rightful power over both women.

In both cases, *His Little Dodge* presents an otherwise scandalous or serious subject as a farce. Little is found out and gravely admonished by both Lady Petlow's irate husband and, even worse, his own wife, who "assured of his wickedness [...] puts on her hat and cloak with the view of making the traditional trip back to mother". Nonetheless, he calmly regains control of the situation. An apology serves to appease Mr Petlow and, by the play's end, his repeated mesmeric powers over Lady Little render her unable to tell truth from fiction. While she begins to convince herself that she has dreamt the whole episode, Mr Petlow returns to "inquire how the deuce he can wake his wife up again," arousing Lady Little's suspicions once more to great comedic effect ("Through the Opera Glass" 1896). The tension between Lady Little's theatrical gaslighting and the implicitly cuckolded Mr Petlow's return suggests that Sir Little will need to continually mesmerise his wife to prevent a marital separation. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, it is even possible that Lady Little could cite adultery and abuse as grounds for divorce, yet the play's comedic framing seems to mock this very eventuality: the continual solution to Lady Little's well-founded suspicions of infidelity is to render her immobile, unable to think or speak. Moreover, Petlow's return is punctuated not by a threat to Little but the weak request for help of a cuckolded husband. Petlow lacks the mastery and knowledge of how to control his own wife and finally needs Little's help in reawakening her. Although the mesmerist uses his art to trick his wife and Lady Petlow, but never plies his trade on the men, the play establishes Little's superiority over Petlow as a man of marital control. Moreover, when Little's friend, the Honourable Mandeville Hobb, 'makes love' to Lady Little, Sir Little awakens her from her mesmeric trance, allowing her to reject the intruder in no uncertain terms. Her ability to consent and reject the advances of other men, thereby securing her respectability and, by extension, her husband's honour, is subject to Sir Little's influence.

Sir Little's mesmerism in *His Little Dodge* is repeatedly framed as a man exerting control of his wife (acceptable under patriarchal conventions), while his potentially adulterous relationship with Lady Petlow is undermined on the stage through the mesmeric metaphor. The implicitly desexualised context makes Sir Little's exploits, at worst, comically roguish. *Trilby's* Svengali, on the other hand, although ultimately married to the titular character, refuses to maintain the same lighthearted air of compliance to marital conventions. Indeed, the play frames Svengali as the villain not for the same abuses committed by Sir Little in *His Little Dodge* but because his power over Trilby is usurped. Trilby never forgets her true love, and babbles about Little Billee even while under Svengali's mesmeric trance (Du Maurier 1996: 252). Her fidelity to a gentile lover leaves Svengali as a racial other, a Semitic threat to a gentile couple. While *His Little Dodge* makes comedic light of the sexual exploitation of women through mesmerism, *Trilby* frames its mesmerist as an irredeemable villain whose exploitation is wrong because he steals her from a gentile suitor, thus destabilizing the norm. Svengali's wicked actions, his significant "will" and power, stir up anxieties about the threat of the 'other' against established hegemony (Du Maurier 1996: 243). In fact, Svengali gained such prominence in the play that reviews proclaimed it "over-Svengalised" ("Things Theatrical" 1895).

Weeks before Potter's adaptation was fully written, the rights to *Trilby* were purchased by William Aloysius Brady and James J. Corbett, who aimed to produce the play with six different companies in "the whole of the United States, except seven of the principle cities, where Mr Palmer will present the piece with his own company" ("The Drama in America" 1895a; "Theatrical Gossip" 1895b). Herbert Beerbohm Tree began advertising his British production of *Trilby* as early as May of the same year, starting a "provincial tour" on the 19th of August before reaching the Haymarket Theatre in London on the 30th of October.¹² Despite the advertising, Tree's production of the play did not actually open at the Theatre Royal in Manchester until the 7th of September as there was difficulty in settling upon the perfect actress to play *Trilby* ("Trilby" 1895). Dorothea Baird who was finally cast as Trilby had to feign artlessness in Act I while performing in Act III "like an enchanted princess in a fairy tale" as if she were "not mortal at all" (Du Maurier 1996: 250).

As portrayed by Tree on the British stage, Svengali was made to loom up tremendously, Satanically. And wonderfully does Mr Beerbohm Tree depict the overpowering Jew. His make-up is a study in itself. This Svengali towers above his companions with the pride of Lucifer and the malice of Mephistopheles. ("Trilby' at the Haymarket" 1895)

¹² Announced in "Haymarket Theatre" in May 1895 with dates of tour specified in "Haymarket Theatre" in July 1895 and its arrival in London printed in "'Trilby' at the Haymarket" in November 1895.

Svengali in the play is “as bad as they make them” (Du Maurier 1996: 213). The “black devil” declares with a sinister green lens upon his face and the room lit only by a red glow from the fire that he “can work magic”, but that magic is really only “a trick of magnetism” (Du Maurier 1996: 257, 219). In Svengali’s case, the reduction of mesmeric ability to a magic trick downplays his power. On the other hand, whatever power he does have constitutes a threatening and demonic excess.

In the first Act, Svengali showcases his mesmeric powers by curing Trilby of her headache, but when he has “taken all [her] pain away”, it has actually transferred to Svengali’s elbows (Du Maurier 1996: 212-17). Mesmerism in *Trilby* is particularly embodied and even a simple curative scene with medical connotations involves a transfer of sensation from one body to another: Svengali initially seduces Trilby by easing her pain, but he instantly feels the punishment of his actions in his own joints. Though Billee declares that “Any doctor could do that”, devaluing Svengali’s power, the villain nonetheless “impose[s]” on Trilby. Svengali functions both in the medical discourse of mesmerism and in new occultist practices when he reads Trilby’s palm, suggesting that his mesmerism is more than curative and suggesting, perhaps, that his powers are derived from wickedly nonchristian occult forces (Du Maurier 1996: 236). Svengali’s attempted seduction turns musical when he declares that he “will play to [Trilby] and take away [her] pain, and keep it himself because he loves [her]”; he has two overlapping methods of engaging with Trilby’s body on the stage: music and mesmerism. His motivations, however, are predatory. He develops a plot to make his fortune by mesmerising the young woman (Du Maurier 1996: 221). In the final act, Trilby’s friends attempt to remove “Svengali’s influence”, “get Svengali out of her head” and cure what they euphemistically term her “brain fever” (Du Maurier 1996: 265-268). Svengali’s psychic penetration of Trilby’s body renders the performance troubling, even traumatic. Unlike *His Little Dodge*, the text repeatedly positions Svengali’s control over Trilby as sexual violence and abduction, but without offering an overt inversion of the expected power dynamics; Svengali is merely the wrong man to dominate Trilby when the gentile Little Billee should be her rightful husband.

W. Moy Thomas in an article for *The Graphic* (1895) describes the various ways Potter’s adaptation differs from the novel, but perhaps the most important change involves Svengali’s death.¹³ Rather than have Svengali’s sidekick, Gecko, avenge Trilby’s abuse by killing the mesmerist, the Jewish musician and mesmerist dies of a heart attack. The physicality of his mesmeric connection to Trilby evidenced at first by the pain in his elbows translates to bodily moral punishment. While Du Maurier’s book only suggests mesmerism, Potter’s play frames it as the main cause of Svengali’s death, as a review in the *Glasgow Herald* (1895) describes it, “from the effect of his own hypnotic efforts. He has so exercised his will-force over Trilby that he dies from sheer exhaustion” (“Mr Beerbohm Tree in ‘Trilby’” 1895). Framing Svengali’s hypnotism of Trilby as “passion” and love and later on presenting the two married complicates the sexual politics of the play (Du Maurier 1996: 253). He seems to Trilby “a great big hungry spider. And makes me feel like a poor little fly”, like prey about to be physically devoured (Du Maurier 1996: 222). When Svengali kidnaps her on the eve of her wedding with Billee, she struggles and resists, though in vain, and we later discover Svengali beats his wife (Du Maurier 1996: 242, 253-61). Unlike in *His Little Dodge*, *Trilby* frames the combination of sexual assault, enslavement and domestic abuse as unacceptable, not for damage to the play’s heroine but because Svengali has a gentile competitor.

Considerable research exists on the anti-Semitic portrayal of Jewishness (and, in particular, Svengali’s) in relation to what Daniel Pick in *Svengali’s Web* (2000) terms a particularly Jewish capacity for “psychic manipulation” (128).¹⁴ Svengali’s Judaism heightens his role as a racial other even in bohemian Paris. The mesmeric metaphor for sexual assault and abuse becomes tragic when Jewish Svengali steals a gentile lady from a British man. Under trance, Billee’s Trilby is “fast asleep—our Trilby is dead!” (Du Maurier 1996: 262). This moment foreshadows her eventual death in Act IV when Svengali’s eyes mesmerise Trilby one last time from beyond the grave—through a portrait. In the moments before, Trilby’s friends plan to “pack [her] happily off as Billee’s wife” while she declares that she has not “been good enough to marry him” and hopes for forgiveness (Du Maurier 1996: 270-71). Despite Billee’s attempts to erase Trilby’s traumatic time with Svengali, he cannot win her. Even after his death, Svengali’s possession of Trilby leaves her sullied. Her sexual loss of innocence means she is no longer a fit wife for Billee, and thus she dies tragically.

Though *Trilby* would differ from *His Little Dodge* as a tragedy that presumably depicts sexual violence in a more negative light, ongoing attempts to parody *Trilby* as burlesques were allowed by Tree and applauded by Du Maurier. The Garrick Theatre in London featured a burlesque of *Trilby* authorised by Du Maurier (in exchange for royalties) and revised by the author’s American agents (“The Theatres” 1895). *A Model Trilby; or, A Day or Two After Du Maurier* at the Opéra Comique, meanwhile, was a burlesque written by William Yardley and Charles Brookfield and managed by Nellie Farren. The burlesque featured Kate Cutler not only singing as Trilby but whistling and dancing while Robert Harwood’s Svengali received praise for his precise imitation of Tree’s. Svengali’s sidekick, Gecko, is

¹³ Other changes include: the action is entirely set in France; Little Billee has not merely proposed to Trilby but their marriage is already arranged; Svengali’s meddling convinces Billee’s guardians, the Bagots, to oppose the marriage; Svengali forces Trilby to write a parting letter to Billee; Trilby becomes La Svengali through marriage to avoid the scandal of a single woman in Svengali’s care (Thomas 1895).

¹⁴ See also Carol Margaret Davison’s *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature* (2004), Ruth Bienstock Anolik and Douglas Howard’s *The Gothic Other* (2004) and Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s (ed.) *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (2005).

transformed into a monkey named Jacko for public amusement¹⁵ and Billee along with his two British friends all propose to Trilby who accepts them each in turn. The plot is inverted with Trilby possessing a beautiful voice at the beginning which is then ruined by Svengali when he attempts to teach her—with only a weak attempt at lay hypnosis (“Opéra Comique” 1895). Tree, as the theatre company’s actor-manager, directs the action of the play while Svengali directs Trilby. Tree’s Svengali, in combining both roles, has complete control while the burlesque Svengali of the Opéra Comique is left comparatively powerless. The American burlesque, *Thrilby*, at the Garrick Theatre in New York also shifted focus away from mesmerism and toward the song, dance and theatrics of the play. Similarly, Amy Lehman notes that running at the same time as *Thrilby* in the United States was a circus version “where a bareback rider dressed as Trilby rode under the whip of a ringmaster dressed as Svengali” (2009: 37). These burlesques of *Trilby* seem to lessen the threat of the Jewish mesmerist by further stripping him of power or by making him ridiculous, yet these farcical adaptations also make light of the play’s sexual violence and place greater emphasis on the theatricality of Trilby’s body. Beyond showing the play’s vast scope of influence and relevance, these burlesques highlight how *Trilby*’s use of mesmerism is indivisible from its protagonist’s role as performer. *Trilby*’s presence on the American and British stage heightens the performativity of the 1890s mesmerist theatre, but the burlesques also serve to deflect from the traumatic sexual violence euphemistically represented onstage. In shifting the focus away from Svengali, these productions only underline the threat he poses and mock what they see as inherently grotesque: a Jewish man laying claim to a gentile woman. Both *His Little Dodge* and *Trilby* in its multiple iterations reaffirm, be it comedically or tragically, the expected conventions of married life.

4. The Dangers of Control

While *His Little Dodge* and *Trilby* both represent mesmerism as a theatrical trope used to reaffirm hierarchies of gendered and racialised power, the tension between *Trilby* as either intense tragedy or lighthearted comedy speaks to anxiety over power in the wrong hands. The dangers of hypnotism constitute a full chapter of Scottish stage hypnotist and magician Walford Bodie’s 1905 text known simply as *The Bodie Book*. In it, he warns that “[t]here is no power so dangerous as that of hypnotism in the hands of the unscrupulous” (Bodie 1905: 84). Bodie’s first example of the abuses of mesmerism references Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s occult 1862 novel *A Strange Story* in which, as Bodie writes “the soulless Margrave exerts an influence over a stranger to stab Sir Philip Dervall, Margrave’s enemy”, a scenario which Bodie characterises as “easily possible in real life” (1905: 84). These dangers highlight growing late Victorian interest in influence and control and, despite Bodie’s assertion that true mesmerist violence is a legitimate threat, mesmerism evidently offers a symbol for addressing Victorian anxieties regarding threatened power structures. While the role of mesmerism in literature finds significant treatment in Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne’s critical text on *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (2006). Yet this text neglects the role of mesmerism in theatre during a period when, indeed, the stage had become an apt location to discuss the use of mesmerist trance or of lay hypnotism as symbols for domination and abuse.¹⁶

Where *His Little Dodge* and *Trilby*’s mesmerisms bring the practice to life in the titillating figures of mesmerised women controlled by their husbands, legitimate or otherwise, Strindberg’s *The Father* inverts the narratives of sexual violence and control by speaking all the more directly about power. Rather than let either Laura or her daughter, Bertha, choose, the Captain declares that “no one” shall “usurp my rights, neither women nor children” (Strindberg 2005: 71). From the outset, *The Father* centres two parents battling to “keep and control [their] child” (Strindberg 2005: 75). Yet, rather than allow the husband to exert his culturally and legally legitimised power over either wife or child, Strindberg writes a Captain with no crew, no command and no power.

Margaretha Fahlgren writing on “Strindberg and the Woman Question” (2009) argues that Laura “acts much as a man would have done” and “resembles a traditional male protagonist”, studying “how [her husband] exercises power in the household” and replicating it to “replace the Captain as head of the family” (27). Fahlgren notes, however, that Strindberg’s intention in writing Laura was not to present her as a strong, feminist figure, but rather as a dangerous and destabilizing force, what he termed “the woman from hell” (Fahlgren 2009: 26).

The Father can thus be seen as Strindberg’s worst nightmare at a time when he was obsessed by the question of women’s emancipation and wrote the many articles in which he sought to prove their inferiority. He was evidently fearful about what would happen if women’s demands were met, and *The Father* [...] dramatizes the treat that Strindberg dealt with in these articles. (Fahlgren 2009: 26)

Strindberg at first hoped his Captain could maintain a certain degree of dignity before the audience, but ultimately decided to change this dynamic. Fahlgren describes how, in *The Father*, at its original 1887 premiere in Copenhagen, “Strindberg did not want the Captain to appear weak but as a man who could not escape his fate in the fight with his

¹⁵ He was changed back to Gecko by December and played by a “Mr Horniman”—most likely the actor Roy Horniman (“Opéra Comique—‘The Model Trilby’” 1895).

¹⁶ See also Stefan Andriopoulos’ chapter on *Possessed* (2008) and Amy Lehman’s *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance* (2009) but both, though touching on mesmerism in theatre, focus primarily on somnambulism, hysteria and the theatricality of Dr Jean-Martin Charcot’s medical work.

evil, monstrous wife". Yet in 1908 when the play was performed at the Intimate Theatre in Palmers Green, London, he altered the script, feeling that it lost dramatic tension if the Captain remained sane, and thus "the Captain really became the loser in the play, a victim who evoked pity, something that Strindberg felt did not befit a man" (Fahlgren 2009: 27).

As per patriarchal norm, the father has the final word on his daughter's education and so Laura strengthens her power over Bertha by casting doubt on her daughter's parentage (Strindberg 2005: 53). If Bertha's father is not the Captain, he can have no say as to her education. His anxiety at losing not only his fatherhood but also his control over his wife and daughter drives him to the breaking point:

CAPTAIN. [Rises]. Laura, save me and my reason. You don't seem to understand what I say. If the child is not mine I have no control over her [...] But perhaps you want even more—to have power over the child, but still have me to support you.

LAURA. Power, yes! What has this whole life and death struggle been for but power? (Strindberg 2005: 98)

The Captain's loss of power is closely tied to a loss of reason as Laura continues to manipulate his sense of reality. By the time she promises her husband that Bertha is in fact his daughter, he no longer believes her and breaks down in tears, fully emasculated (Strindberg 2005: 101-2).

While Fahlgren notes the differences between *The Father's* 1887 premiere in Copenhagen and its altered 1908, its reception after its first British performance at the Independent Theatre in 1893 suggests that the Captain's perception as an emasculated and tragic victim took place much earlier, before any changes to the script. To the contrary, Strindberg's alterations may have been an attempt to lean into this interpretation. For instance, *The Era's* review of the play focused much of its description on Laura, claiming she was

The very worst woman in all fiction—a lady beside whom Lady Macbeth [&etc.] are dear good inoffensive beings—has married a scientific military man. [...] The poor gentleman's father and mother had always disliked him, because they had not wanted him to be born at all; and our heroine had been so kind to him in his boyhood that she felt quite like a mother, and was inexpressibly shocked when he made love to her. However, as we have said, she revenged herself by marriage and she made his life hell. [...] but the one gleam of cheeriness in the play is its end, which gives one hope that he may die before he is permanently locked up in a padded room. ("Theatrical Gossip" 1893)¹⁷

This writer goes one further than the *Pick-Me-Up* review of *His Little Dodge* in finding sympathy with the husband. In reviling Laura, the review exhibits a rote acceptance of the father's role as authoritarian while expressing shock at the mother's similar desire for power. Moreover, in characterizing Laura as the unquestionable villain rather than addressing *The Father* as a mutual marital struggle for power, the *Era* review aims to turn Laura into another Svengali, another individual at the margins whose quest for control through unconventional means must be wicked because it upsets established structures of power.

Strindberg's play evokes tragedy in the Captain's downfall at the hands of his unscrupulous Lady Macbeth wife, yet the language with which Laura overpowers her husband echoes the dynamics of animal magnetism. The Captain claims that Laura "always had the advantage" and "could hypnotise me when I was wide awake, so that I neither saw nor heard, but merely obeyed" (Strindberg 2005: 103). Strindberg expands on Laura's hypnotic powers:

CAPTAIN. [...] you could give me a raw potato and make me imagine it was a peach; you could force me to admire your foolish caprices as though they were strokes of genius. You could have influenced me to crime, yes, even to mean, paltry deeds. [...] But when at last I awoke, I realised that my honour had been corrupted and I wanted to blot out the memory by a great deed, an achievement, a discovery, or an honourable suicide. I wanted to go to war, but was not permitted. It was then that I threw myself into science. (Strindberg 2005: 103-4)

The Captain's unconventional scientific background melds occultism with pseudoscience, and thus it would not be surprising for him to perceive mesmerism as a form of feminine manipulation. After all, the "superior" mind (which Laura claims to possess) must overpower the "weaker" (Strindberg 2005: 76, 106). The power struggle thus depends on the strength of the Captain's will which, at first, "has not been completely undermined" even if his wife has "gnawed and nibbled at it so that it will soon slip the cogs." However, nearer the play's end, the Captain reveals that because his own "father's and mother's will was against [his] coming into the world," he was consequently "born without a will" and upon marrying Laura he "became obedient to [her], grew through [her], looked up to [her] as to a

¹⁷ The Captain's suicide is 'cheery' as per this reviewer not only because it would save him from a life in "a padded room" but also because, as The Captain himself explains in *The Father*: "If I die, my life insurance will fall to you [Laura]. But if I take my own life, you will get nothing. Consequently, it is to your interest that I should live out my life" (Strindberg 2005: 95). The reviewer may see the possibility of Laura's financial ruin as a cheery and just punishment.

more highly-gifted being” (Strindberg 2005: 95, 102). If Laura were a mesmerist, as the Captain suggests, she would be perfectly positioned to use the superior magnetism of her will to mesmerise her husband.

Nonetheless, Laura discusses the Captain’s pseudoscientific occultism with a doctor as evidence of his insanity. Strindberg’s naturalism cannot allow for Laura to be a true mesmerist, hence her reliance on a legitimate physician to pass final judgement. Still, Laura convinces the doctor that what he sees as the Captain’s “clear and powerful intellect” is truly a “weak brain” (Strindberg 2005: 57-59). It is the Doctor himself who states that, much as a weak individual is particularly receptive to mesmerism, “One can make the insane believe anything, just because they are receptive to everything” (Strindberg 2005: 60). The Doctor, however, is so easily convinced by Laura that, were this not a naturalist play, one might imagine she had mesmerised him as well. Instead, Laura appeals to logic, asking the Doctor if it is “reasonable” that her husband thinks he can “see what is happening on another planet by looking through a microscope” (Strindberg 2005: 58). These leading questions, however, reflect her use of institutional psychiatry to gaslight and manipulate her spouse. It is unclear, in the end, whether the Captain is engaged in pseudoscientific occultism or if Laura paints her husband’s scientific exploits as occult in order to question his sanity. Laura’s tight control of knowledge makes her *The Father*’s Svengali, its Sir Hercules Little, the director of action, but unlike these two mesmerists, appealing continually to reason. Her manipulation reduces the Captain to profound epistemic confusion:

CAPTAIN. [...] When things go so far that a man, a man who loved and worshipped a woman, takes a lighted lamp and throws it in her face, then one may know.

PASTOR. Know what?

CAPTAIN. Nothing. One never knows anything. One only believes. (Strindberg 2005: 119)

While Laura uses the mesmeric quality of her superior willpower to destroy her husband’s, she simultaneously uses epistemic power to question her husband’s sanity. His military authority and his scientific knowledge both fall apart. The manipulative wife is seen as all the more monstrous for inverting the structure of power—for simply being a woman who controls her husband rather than a man whose mesmeric ability overpowers a woman. Yet it is the Captain who possesses knowledge of occult practice. He is the scientist and patriarch who should have access to mesmeric control, and in destroying his claims to truth and to legitimate power, she overrides his power through his own methods.

5. Conclusion

Paired with tensions over the rise of the New Woman or of the racial other, mesmerism proved itself to be far more than a mid-century fad. It was invoked either comically to reinforce hegemonic structures of power, as in *His Little Dodge*, or to invert them as the tool of the outcast other, as in *Trilby*, allowing the educated Jewish mesmerist to gain the reins of power, if only briefly. Even in *The Father* with the Captain’s mere suspicion of having been manipulated through hypnotism, allusions to mesmeric control colourfully echo the patriarchally problematic loss of power. While pity felt toward Sir Little, limited in his freedom by a jealous wife in *His Little Dodge*, serves to comically legitimise the man’s actions, even his gaslighting and alleged philandering, in *The Father*, pity rises to panic as Laura, the New Woman, manipulates and destroys her husband’s sense of reality and mental wellbeing. While the adaptation of *Trilby* alters its novelistic ending to turn mesmerism against Svengali, whose access to power is culturally unauthorised, *The Father* does not allow a neatly cathartic moral ending. Instead, Strindberg’s appeal to mesmeric language paints Laura as domineering, abusive and terrifyingly clever. Her success in stripping the Captain of his manhood, both in terms of legal power and sheer sanity, transforms her into a chilling archetype of illegitimate power. Although Strindberg’s play inverts the expected gendered conventions of married life, Laura’s desire for matriarchal domination frames gender equality as a real and practical threat. All three of these 1890s productions, be they comedy, tragedy or naturalist drama, use the language of mesmerism to reassert the legitimacy of patriarchy and expose the power of marginalised people as illegitimate and unsettling. Yet the defensive undertones of these plays ultimately underscore the impending and by then unstoppable tide of social change that the new century would herald.

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