

Woman and Truth?

*When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her though I know she lies...
William Shakespeare, Sonnet 138*

*“I don't know how to approach [...] the truth—no more than woman. I have
said that the one and the other are the same thing, at least to man. They
constitute the same conundrum.”¹
Jacques Lacan, Seminar Encore*

Lacan will add to the above that he likes them both, woman and truth. These two central themes for psychoanalysis began with Freud's search for the truth in the speech of women. In 1895 he discovered the hysteric's symptom, which was already a spoken symptom for him, even if it emerged at the level of the body. The symptom's status as a false deduction, which he called the *proton pseudos* in the case of Emma, was a mistaken designation of a jouissance that should not be.² Access to the truth of the symptom's cause was gained along a ladder or a web of signifiers, in which two entwined repetitions occurred. The first, a repetition of the incidence of jouissance (Emma returns to the scenario of the attack of an old grinning shopkeeper grabbing her genitals under her dress). The second, the retroactive trauma, the recent event creating the trauma of the original incidence. In a contingent moment (a young and attractive shop assistant laughs, maybe because of her dress), the two signifiers — the laughing and the dress — converge, linking both events. The false deduction is ultimately not false at all, as the young girl is experiencing a forbidden desire and makes a symptom out of “shops” that marks the (literal) location of her jouissance.

Lacan will later designate the *proton pseudos* as the “sovereign lie”.³ And still later in his teaching, he will define the symptom as that which is built upon what does not exist, namely the truth. The symptom marks the place of the truth, which does not exist there.⁴ *The* truth, like *The* woman, does not exist. Freud — from the butcher's wife, who misrecognises her desire in order to dream a counter example to a wish fulfilment — via Dora, who does not admit to her involvement in what she complains about - to the young homosexual woman, whose dreams were made in order to deceive Freud — highlighted the truth in the mistake and in the deception.

¹ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton, 1998, p. 120.

² Freud, S., “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1950 [1895]), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume I*, London: Hogarth Press, 1966, pp. 352-359.

³ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVI, From an Other to the other*, ed. J.-A., Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge: Polity, 2024, p. 184.

⁴ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX, ...or Worse*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. A. Price, Cambridge: Polity, 2018, p. 39.

It needed Lacan to show us that mistake and lie are results of the structure of language, as it is the signifier that lies. From the *Fehlleistung*, the bungled act, to the self-deception of the beautiful soul, “man’s language, the instrument of his lies, is thoroughly ridden with the problem of truth”⁵, he says. We say the truth unbeknownst to us, but it is also an eternal question in us, based on a lie.

With this, the question of whence the subject is speaking comes to the fore. In analysis, it is a matter of figuring out “through whom and for whom the subject asks *his question*. As long as this is not known, we risk misconstruing the desire that must be recognised there and the object to whom this desire is addressed. The hysteric captivates this object in a subtle intrigue, and her ego is in the third person by means of whom the subject enjoys the object who incarnates her question.”⁶ The hysteric’s intrigue is linked to identification and the object as the relay to her desire, such as Herr K. is for Dora. This object in question is thereafter the Other’s desire and Lacan will highlight the hysteric’s special relationship with it. Caught in a push and pull of the dialectic between the fantasy and the symptom, that Jacques-Alain Miller developed in his course of 1982-83.⁷ The famous dissatisfaction of the hysteric is a truth, by definition, in halves: “inasmuch as desire is sustained in fantasy only by the lack of satisfaction the hysteric brings desire by slipping away as its object”, Lacan says.⁸ Either desiring as an Other the desire of the Other, or evade. The French term *dérobade* captures the ambiguity between evading and disrobing, seducing. The phallus organises the logic of both.

Freud’s hysteric, with one hand covering herself and with the other pulling down her clothing, also encapsulates this.⁹ A British sketch of the ‘90s created an unforgettable character: a chamber maid, contorting her body to display both seduction and hiding for the camera, while repeating loudly, in case someone forgot to look, “don’t look at me, I’m shy”. However, Lacan did not favour the interpretation of a “hysteric behaviour” as theatrics. Instead, he firmly insisted on the analytic discourse, as “[i]t functions to give the hysteric back her truth and it suffices to dissipate the theatrics in hysteria.”¹⁰ For, a variation of the hysteric’s truth is the question of femininity. And the conundrum of the truth and the woman is precisely what continues to advance the psychoanalytic discourse.

⁵ Lacan, J., “Presentation on Psychical Causality,” *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton, 2006, p. 136.

⁶ Lacan, J., “Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton, 2006, p. 250.

⁷ Miller, J.-A., “*L’orientation lacanienne. Du symptôme au fantasme, et retour*,” teaching delivered under the auspices of the Department of Psychoanalysis, University of Paris 8, 1982-1983, unpublished.

⁸ Lacan, J., “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” *Écrits*, trans. B. Fink, New York/London: Norton, 2006, p. 698

⁹ Freud, S., “Hysterical Phantasies and their Relation to Bisexuality” (1908), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX*, London: Hogarth Press, 1959, pp. 166.

¹⁰ Lacan, J., *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVIII, On a Discourse that might not be a Semblance*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge: Polity, 2025, p. 136.