Post May '68 French theatre by women: the play of language and emotion

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POST MAY ’68 FRENCH THEATRE BY WOMEN:
THE PLAY OF LANGUAGE AND EMOTION

by

Heidi Collins

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in French and Francophone World Studies in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Rosemarie Scullion
To Paul,
Molly and Luca
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ABSTRACT

In the period following the May 1968 protests, French women began to create theatre that highlighted women’s struggles. This study explores the dual influence of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht on plays by Hélène Cixous, Simone Benmussa, and the Théâtre du Soleil led by Ariane Mnouchkine. Artaud argued that theatre should become a transformative experience through an explosion of sensory stimuli. He called for the audience to be surrounded by the action and for them to be emotionally overwhelmed through the use of bright lights, loud noises, and movement. Conversely, Brecht sought to use theatre as a tool to revolutionize society. He theorized that through *verfremdungseffekt*, spectators would be obliged to step outside the action of the play causing them to think critically about the its significance and to be compelled to action.

The female playwrights and directors studied created powerful theatre by combining the theories of Artaud and Brecht in a manner mimicking Julia Kristeva’s notion of subject formation. Kristeva proposes that the human subject is never stable. Instead, it oscillates between the non-discursive, emotion-filled register she labels the semiotic which existed prior to the acquisition of language and the symbolic one, characterized by language and logic. These two realms are in constant tension as the semiotic disrupts the logic of the symbolic which in turn strives to regulate the semiotic impulses.

In this study, I argue that the ideas of Artaud are aligned with the semiotic while those of Brecht resemble the symbolic. In the plays examined, the non-linguistic elements of the design and mise-en-scène engage with the didactic aims of the playwrights and directors, causing the spectator to connect emotionally with the story while simultaneously reflecting on its real-world signification.
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The female playwrights and directors studied created powerful theatre by combining these ideas in a manner mimicking Julia Kristeva’s notion of subject formation. Kristeva proposes that the human subject is never stable. Instead, it oscillates between the non-discursive, emotion-filled state she labels the semiotic and the more language- and logic-propelled symbolic register. These two realms are in constant tension as the semiotic disrupts the logic of the symbolic and in turn, the symbolic strives to regulate the semiotic impulses.

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INTRODUCTION

As audiences left the Théâtre de l’Odéon on May 15, 1968, protestors charged into the building bringing the chaos from the streets of Paris with them. In a move that would eventually lead to his dismissal, the Odéon’s director Jean-Louis Barrault welcomed them, and they occupied the space for nearly a month. Ariane Mnouchkine, a student at the time and future director of the Théâtre du Soleil, recalls the scene vividly: “Then there began a long siege during which, twenty-four hours a day, there was talk, talk, talk – revolutionary planning, beautiful poetic visions and nonsense, all mixed up. Anyone could get up and speak” (Pellerin E3). The Odéon, where everyone could freely speak their mind, became a reflection of the fledgling revolution happening outside its doors. The student protests had begun as an anti-imperialist rally,¹ but quickly escalated as police arrested the leaders. Students rushed to the Latin Quarter demanding the release of their classmates. When authorities responded with violence, the movement transformed into a revolutionary call to completely transform society, remove economic inequities, and overturn the government run by elites. The students moved to collaborate with workers, leading nine to ten million hourly and salaried employees to shut down factories throughout France (Singer 160). The general strike that followed had an immense negative impact on the nation’s economy. While the turbulent events of May ’68 did not create lasting political changes, they remain fixed in French minds as the frame of reference for the on-

¹ Daniel Singer pinpoints a proposed anti-imperialist student rally at Nanterre on Friday, May 3, 1968 as the event which set off the May riots. When another fascist student group threatened to attack the rally, the Dean chose to close the university. At this point, the students moved to the Sorbonne (xvi-xvii). Kristin Ross provides an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the Vietnam war and the students’ awareness of the plight of immigrant workers in France. She argues that “Vietnam, quite literally, provided the initial spark that launched the student violence. For May begins when a student breaks a window of the American Express building on rue Scribe in Paris on March 20, 1968.” The protests following this event led a variety of action groups to begin working together (90-91). Students linked the plight of the Vietnamese worker with that of the immigrant workers surrounding them. Ross credits Henri Lefebvre with underscoring the location of the Nanterre campus in the middle of “the worst immigrant slums outside Paris” as the underlying cause of the May ’68 riots (95).
going cultural changes of the period. These events raised awareness of social inequalities in France, not only those arising from class and racial hierarchies, but also from distinctions of gender and sexuality. Because theatre has historically served as a forum for advancing political and social change, it is not surprising that activists in May turned to theatre as a medium to further their revolutionary aims (Miller, *Theater and Revolution* 43) both in the occupation of the Odéon and in the creation of socially conscious plays. This use of theatre as a political vehicle influenced the aims and practice of the art in the decade that followed.

Inspired by the May uprising, significant numbers of women chose to pursue careers in the theatre, a trend that continued after the movement’s mass protests faded. With a heightened awareness of gender inequality, women began writing plays that highlighted the “forgotten” women of history, that dramatized personal experiences, and that prompted women to think and act in novel ways. The plays women created in this period favored collaboration, the use of non-traditional or found spaces\(^2\) as performance venues, an emphasis on physical movement, and a change in the style of dialogue presented in traditional theatre. While the women-centered theatre of the post-'68 period is often described as “postmodern,”\(^3\) it has traits and influences that can be traced to the 1930s, and to the writings of dramatists and theoreticians such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. This new theatre by women also reflected contemporary debates in the broader cultural and intellectual spheres in France in which psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and Marxism were common frames of reference. As such, in addition to bringing into artistic play the insights garnered from Artaud’s and Brecht’s earlier theoretical and political contributions, these

\(^2\) The term “found spaces” describes a performance space which was not originally intended for performance and has been converted into a theatrical space. These can be indoors (such as warehouses, basements, art galleries, etc.) or outdoors (streets, hillsides, parks, etc.).

\(^3\) For a comprehensive definition of postmodernism, please see: Gary Aylesworth’s entry “Postmodernism” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*
productions often represented the human drama of split subjectivity\textsuperscript{4} and enacted unstable identity positions that were being conceptualized by Julia Kristeva and other French theorists of the day. The plays themselves staged this split subjectivity and created meaning through their unique interplay of semiotic and symbolic elements.

**Feminism and Theatre**

Since the late 1960s, the definition of theatre has expanded and contracted as the art form has been studied from different perspectives by feminist scholars. While traditionally theatre was defined as the performance of a dramatic text for an audience and its criticism was focused primarily on that written text, the twentieth century directly challenged the supremacy of the playwright in the creative process. Consequently, theatre criticism began to move beyond the written text to address the performance aspects of productions and new performance theories were proposed that were distinct from dramatic criticism. In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case, one of the first critics to take up the question, looks at early forms of feminist theatre. Noting women’s relegation to the private sphere and their exclusion from traditional forms of theatre and public expression, Case argues that women developed different forms of speech than men. Social events became their theatre and actors and spectators were replaced by participants:

These women have excelled in the personal forms of dialogue: letters, in the sphere of written communication, and conversation, in that of oral. This personal dialogue is created by partners in production rather than by an absent author who designs it for production in front of a reading or listening audience. It is a dialogue built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation. Personal

\textsuperscript{4} The psychoanalytic assertion that the subject is alienated from him or herself. This occurs as the subject comes into language and is thus separated from the bodily experience.
dialogue is not removed from life, so it operates not by mimesis but by enactment. It is an engaged dialogue, rooted in everyday life, rather than a mimetic dialogue, aimed at lasting repetition. (Case, Feminism 46)

Case thus expands the definition of theatre to include the work of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century salonières who orchestrated the spectacle of the salon by choosing the guests and discussion topics, making introductions, and setting the pace of the evening’s activities (46-7). Case also addresses other performance areas outside of the confines of the auditorium: political events, parades, religious performances, and Native American ceremonies (53).

While some critics, like Case, have used performance theories to expand the definition of the theatre, other theatre scholars have limited the field to works that the performers themselves label as performance. Geraldine Harris considers theatre to be any:

- live performance in front of an audience who are conscious of the fact that they are participating in a mimetic event. Such performances are not necessarily mainstream, traditional or ‘canonical’ theatre, musical or opera, but like these forms they are by some means ‘framed’ or marked off from ‘everyday life,’ and part of this ‘framing’ occurs in terms of place and time. (32)

Theories of performance can be applied to a variety of social situations as well as theatrical presentations, and dramatic theory can be used to address written texts that, while meant for performance, are divorced of a performative setting, but both performance and dramatic theories can be applied to theatre. For this study, I define theatre as a performance that is tied to a text, whether the performance stems from the text or the text from the creation of the performance. This definition incorporates the one put forth by Harris in that it involves a performance that is viewed by the performers to be just that, but it also narrows the scope of my investigation by
adding a textual requirement. It is the tension between the permanence of the text and the ephemerality of performance that makes this theatre unique. In this study of women-centered French theatre, I draw on dramatic and performance theory, examining both of these aspects of the productions I consider and exploring the interactions between them.

In addition to the ground-breaking work done by Case, many scholars point to the important work by Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Both of Cases’s and Dolan’s studies appeared in 1988 and can be seen as foundational theoretical works on feminist theatre. Case divided feminist theatre into two categories: radical and material. However, Dolan and most later scholars have added a third, earlier group of plays to the discussion: liberal. While their definition of categories is similar, not all of these critics use the same terminology. These classifications generally adopt the same categories used to define feminism while also reflecting the specific qualities of the theatre. Thus, the three most often accepted divisions of feminist theatre are: liberal/bourgeois, radical/cultural, and materialist/socialist.

Liberal or bourgeois feminist theatre emphasized the quest for the equal status of men and women. In the theatre, liberal feminists fought to increase employment opportunities and to gain positions of authority in established theatres (Steadman 17). In this earliest form of feminist theatre, women merely sought entrance to the theatrical domain without seeking to disrupt the status quo (Austin 6). Gayle Austin suggests that liberal feminist theatre is more concerned with individual women than with women as a collective (6). Included in the category of liberal feminism is scholarly work that seeks to spotlight forgotten women playwrights and practitioners (Dolan, *Feminist* 4). While this is the earliest form of feminist theatre, it continues today both in scholarship and practice as plays by women are still overlooked and underproduced. Current
work in this vein emphasizes the need for more female playwrights, artistic directors, and technicians, while also calling on theatres to produce more plays by women.

Early liberal feminism was soon followed by radical or cultural feminism which sought to create a separate female theatre: “Cultural feminists stress that women are both different from and superior to men and often advocate expressing this fact through female forms of culture” (Austin 5). Case stresses that this form of theatre rejects the objectification of women (Feminism 66) and highlights the role of witches, goddesses, rituals (Feminism 69), as well as the symmetry between women and nature (Feminism 72). Proponents of radical/cultural feminism and feminist theatre often assert that there is a discernible difference in the aesthetic practices of men and women. The notion of écriture féminine, a theory espoused by Hélène Cixous, posits that there is a feminine style of writing that is often circular rather than linear and that is characterized by its openness to an abundance of interpretations and significations. These characteristics in dramatic writing are generally seen as an expression of radical/cultural feminism (Steadman 17, Austin 5). This style of feminism and feminist theatre is often condemned for claiming that there are innate qualities of being female: “Criticism of this dynamic has come in the form of attacks against its ‘essentialism,’ which stresses not only the differences between women and men but often women’s superiority, and its seeming inversion of the model of sexist values (Steadman 17). Cixous’s early plays, including Portrait de Dora which I will closely examine in Chapter II, have their roots in radical/cultural feminism.

The third form of feminist theatre is often called materialist or is sometimes referred to as socialist feminism. Susan Steadman observes that “although there are differences among materialist, Marxist, and socialist feminism, ‘materialist feminism’ is used by Case and others as an umbrella term to distinguish it from liberal feminism and radical feminism” (18). Materialist
feminism minimizes the biological differences between men and women while stressing the negative effects that material conditions have on women (Austin 6). Gender is a social construction in which both women and men are forced into heteronormative gender roles. For women, this means greater economic hardship and restricted freedom as they are primarily responsible for childrearing duties. The subject of Chapter III, *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* by Simone Benmussa, is a prime example of materialist feminism as it centers on questions of gender representation and construction. Where liberal and radical feminism often focus on white western women, materialist feminism places significant emphasis on intersectionality and the impact that history, as well as distinctions of race, class, and sexual preference have on women’s place in society (Austin 5). Austin argues that it is only in materialist feminism that the interests of the group become more important than those of the individual (6). While more intersectional and multicultural in nature, Case notes that this form of theatre has been most influential in Britain and other European countries (*Feminism* 84). Like feminism in general, feminist theatre underwent significant change in the second half of the twentieth century moving through successive phases of liberal, radical, and materialist feminism. However, these shifts did not happen in neatly delineated time frames; instead, they sometimes overlapped or occurred simultaneously in an overall forward trajectory. This study looks at examples of radical and materialist feminism in theatre and demonstrates the movement towards more multiculturalism and intersectionality in French theatre by women.

In the last century, postmodernists have exploded the tenets of classic theatre and called into question the Aristotlian tradition of mimesis. Critics like Dolan have privileged performance art in feminist theatre precisely because it seeks to distance itself from mimetic performance and aligns most closely with material feminism. However, Elin Diamond argues that “theater is a
privileged site for feminist analysis because of, not in spite of, its long association with mimetic practice and theory” (“Mimesis” 62). As Diamond defines it, mimesis “posits a truthful relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image, or in semiotic terms, referent and sign, in which potential difference is subsumed by sameness” (“Mimesis” 58). Historically, the mimetic re-presentation of woman on the stage has been controlled by men. This has led to a feminist distrust of the truthfulness of the sign, because “this ‘truth’ – usually expressed as Truth, a neutral omnipotent, changeless essence – is inseparable from gender-based and biased epistemologies” (Diamond, “Mimesis” 58). However, Diamond points out that the feminist project aims to question these truths by allowing women to form their own. She proposes that a “feminist mimesis” will be different from traditional mimesis in that it will call into question the gendered stereotypes present in traditional theater (“Mimesis” 59). By focusing on text-based theatre, this study will examine the use of mimesis in women-centered drama and highlight the ways in which the works studied created different images of women.

Since the sixteenth century women have been seen on the French stage as actors, but it was not until after World War II that they began to gain access in large numbers to other areas of theatrical production (Miller, “Contemporary” 228). Judith G. Miller argues that women playwrights prior to the mid-twentieth century have not yet been brought to light “whose interest can be termed other than ‘socio-historical’” (“Contemporary” 228). However, Perry Gethner has shown that women playwrights such as Françoise Pascal, Mme de Villedieu, and Mme de Graffigny who wrote for the French stage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were popular in their day. While it is true their work would not be selected for modern production, few playwrights beyond Molière, Racine, and Corneille from this time period would be, and the contributions made by these women should not be diminished. Despite the increase in number
and popularity of women playwrights before the French Revolution, the nineteenth century once again silenced women in the theatre where their roles were limited to those of actresses.

It is in the middle of the twentieth century that France saw an uptick in the number of plays created by women. This new theatre by French women practitioners in the post-May ’68 period took on various forms. Because many of the women joining the resurgent women’s movement in France in the 1970s came with a background in the political activism of the 1960s, they introduced the agit-prop and consciousness-raising theatrical practices popular in these social movements (Miller “Contemporary” 229). Miller highlights two of these groups: the Parisian troupe La Carmagnole, formed in 1975 with a clear feminist agenda, a group which “encouraged the audience to discuss with the actors the ramifications of the use and abuse of power within the domestic arena” and La Théâtrelle from Reims whose members created skits relating to domestic concerns that were based on interviews they had conducted with women (“Contemporary” 229). Few of these feminist theatre companies still exist because, as Celita Lamar argues, most have folded since the early 1980s because they “found it difficult to function in the midst of the anti-feminist backlash” (xiii). Lamar shows that women were best represented in the Parisian theatre scene in the 1978-79 season when in the months of November and December there were twelve actresses in leading roles, five women directors, nine women playwrights and at least six plays about women – from Nadia Slanska at the Cartoucherie de Vincennes to Evita Peron at the Théâtre Présent. All the genres were represented, from

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5 Figures released in May 2006 reported that 92% of the theatres in France dedicated to dramatic creation are run by men, 85% of the texts that are presented in France were written by men, and 78% of the plays that are produced in France are directed by men (Prat 9). In 2016-17, the Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques stated that 79% of the plays presented in France were written by men and 73% of the directors in France were men (“Où sont les femmes?”)
the *comédie du boulevard* to classical tragedy and from the one-woman show to historical drama. (13)

Some female playwrights and women’s theatre companies created devised pieces such as Michele Foucher’s *La Table: Paroles de Femmes* (1976) that focused on the everyday lives of lower-middle-class and working women and that were based on interviews conducted with local women on the subject of the food and the table (Miller “Contemporary” 234). Others chose to adapt narratives written by or about women for the stage in an effort to put their contributions under the limelight. Women were also the primary producers of children’s theatre (Lamar 10). Some renowned mid-twentieth-century women writers also wrote for the theatre, including Marguerite Duras who had been writing plays since the 1950s but that only gained critical attention in the 1970s and Nathalie Sarraute who emphasized her role as a writer and refused to align herself with feminism. Other women, like poets Andrée Chedid and Chantal Chawaf, created works that were more radical in nature and celebrated women’s unique experiences. The popular Boulevard theatres also saw a surge in work by women, and there was a rise in the number of women directors (Miller “Contemporary” 231-2). Miller summarizes the vastness of the theatrical offerings by women in the 1970s and 80s:

> The concerns of women in French theatre, as indeed the work of women in theatre elsewhere in Europe and America fall, then, into several categories and practices: exalting values and experiences considered to be ‘feminine’ or women-centred, criticizing the exploitation of women in patriarchy, dramatizing the experience of forgotten women, questioning and revisioning the mythos of the Western tradition, creating roles for actresses in which the performers do not feel they are playing out men’s fantasies, and showing how gender is constructed through social interactions and expectations. (“Contemporary” 232)
During this period, women used an array of techniques to raise awareness of social issues particular to women which resulted in a great variety of theatrical performances.

Because of theatre’s unique characteristics, marginalized groups, including women, use the art as a public platform they might not otherwise have. Writing about the history of feminist theatres, Patti Gillespie explains why feminists chose theatre as a means of advancing their agenda: “in conflicts where competitors have vastly unequal power, the weak group often finds traditional argument and public discourse inadequate” (“Feminist Theatre” 279), and thus they search out different means of expression such as the theatre. In conventional forms of theatre, social custom keeps theatre spectators more or less silent. They do not argue with the actors on stage but rather watch passively as the world of the play unfolds. Spectators are encouraged to reflect on but not verbally object to the ideas presented (Gillespie, “Feminist Theatre” 280), a practice that allows a marginalized group to express itself fully without interruption.

Susan Steadman argues that “the traditionally male-dominated art of theatre provides a venue for feminists that is both particularly powerful and threatening to a male hegemony in the arts as well as in society as a whole” (11). While women have been excluded from many aspects of the theatre, with some exceptions, it is generally accepted as a respectable form of public performance. Spectators recognize that the actor performing on stage is not the character they portray, which allows them to say and do things they would not ordinarily do in their own lives. The fictional nature of the theatre “permits a woman to function as a persuader without violating either her own past conditioning toward passivity or society’s expectations regarding her appropriate behavior” (Gillespie, “Feminist Theatre” 280). Additionally, the public nature of theatre defies relegation to the private sphere and often requires vocalization:
Furthermore, theatre (as well as feminist criticism of it) is an art that demands *voice*. As recognized by feminist critics, Western culture has long prized women’s silence as an appropriate attribute of ‘femininity.’ To find ‘our own voice’ is a term repeatedly employed in feminist theatre discourse since its inception. (Steadman 12)

Women have long been objects to be seen in the theatre and the character, voice, and story of that image has in large part been controlled by men as they wrote, directed, and led the business of theatre. The women’s insurgence in the theatre allowed them to take control of their own image. The dramatic arts differ from other forms of performing and visual arts like dance, music, painting, and sculpture because it combines mimetic visual representation with language to convey meaning. It provides more than poetry and prose because it “combine[s] the verbal and nonverbal elements simultaneously, so that questions of language and visual representation can be addressed at the same time, through the medium of an actual body” (Austin 2-3). Theatre allows women to present themselves, and they began to do so in larger numbers after the 1960s (Lamar xiii). In the late twentieth century, female directors and playwrights presented new images of and discourses on women that were different from those historically created by male theatre practitioners.

The playwrights and directors I have studied also disrupted traditional staging practices in an attempt to emphasize their feminist agenda. Miller cautions against labeling these similarities as feminine:

Likewise, one must be wary of confusing, as do some theorists, certain characteristics of post-modern theatre – such as multiple discourses, an absence of linear plotting, the inscription of silence on stage, or the impossibility of mastering discourse – as exclusively ‘feminine.’ True, women playwrights do put to use many of these techniques.
They forego traditional texts and conventional forms and attempt to alter the audience’s experience of theatre. However, their goal in most instances is politically positive. They do not, as is frequent among many postmodern artists, evade political questions and play with the possibility of meaning. As they are finding their voices theatre women in France are also groping towards meaning. (“Contemporary” 245)

Miller identifies their ultimate goal as the difference in the usage of these practices by postmodernists and feminists. Postmodern artists seek to problematize the very notion of meaning itself, but feminists use these techniques to search for new meanings. The women playwrights studied here use the postmodern techniques that flourished at this time to advance the role of women in society. As I shall show, these practices were particularly fruitful for their endeavor.

Feminist theatre scholars also recall the one-woman shows given in the cabaret style and the various kinds of performance art that were particularly popular in Paris in this period, both of which conform to Harris’s definition of the theatre and fully embody the feminist drive to disrupt masculine order. From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, twenty percent of the shows at Parisian café-théâtres were forms of women’s cabaret. These shows allowed women to create their own content and take risks that were not possible in traditional theatre (Lamar 10; Miller, “Contemporary” 230). Cabaret and performance art, particularly solo performances, exemplify the ephemeral nature of theatre since they typically reach limited audiences and are impossible to reproduce. Dolan argues that feminist postmodern pieces such as these attempt to eliminate mimesis, but in doing so they restrict their audiences to the educated elite. She stresses the need for women to continue to engage with conventional theatrical forms:
What happens when women come to want the same kinds of success that dominant venues historically provide to white men, rather than trying to change the measure of success these venues grant? Because generations of female actors are still being trained for participation in dominant modes of theatre production, feminist critics and theatremakers need to continue to generate and comment on texts written in the more theatrical or literary tradition with which Berson and Chinoy are concerned. While performance art – on which feminist theorists tend to focus – has offered a resistant site of production, it remains culturally marginalized and ‘avant-garde’ in its traditions. […] Feminists in theatre need to consider the economic structures in which this work takes place. (Dolan, “Introductory” 6-7)

It is for these reasons that I have chosen not to examine these individually created performances despite their importance in the history of feminist theatre. While still clearly avant-garde, the plays I analyze in this study have more in common with France’s theatre traditions than they do with cabaret and performance art. Because they do not fully break with the conventions of the genre, these plays often reach larger audiences and are to some extent re-creatable, qualities which give them the power to subvert the established theatrical order from within.

Despite the evidence that women began creating theatre in larger numbers after the 1960s, their entry into this male-dominated industry remained extremely difficult, particularly in France where women produced less theatre than they did in the United States and Britain. In 1985 at a conference at La Criée Theatre in Marseilles on “La Femme et la Créativité,” participants “concluded that despite the financial difficulties of the French film industry it is still easier for women to find producers for films than for theatre” (Miller, “Contemporary” 232-3). Miller explains that the lower number of women in French theatre as compared to American and
British women is due to a lack of networking in France among female theatre practitioners. She surmises that by banding together, women in the US and the UK have been better able to overcome the hurdles that bar women from entering the male-dominated world of the theatre (“Contemporary” 233). While women in France turned to the theatre in greater numbers, they did so most often as individuals without the support of other women in the theatre community (Lamar xiii). Additionally, due to the economic constraints of the period, many directors and theatre managers in France chose to stage revivals or new adaptations of classic or foreign plays. These plays already had name recognition and were more likely to attract large audiences; therefore, they carried less financial risk (Lamar 11). It is difficult for all playwrights to get their work into the hands of those who have the power to produce it, but the lack of networking among women likely exacerbates the problem. In the mid-1980s, there were also a limited number of plays being published, which made it more difficult for both the author and the producer looking for contemporary work to stage (Lamar 12). Since most plays by female playwrights are contemporary, women’s inability to get their work published contributed to their lower production numbers.

The attributes that make theatre attractive to feminists, particularly the speed at which one can react to current events via the stage, also contribute to the difficulty of studying theatre historically: “writing seeks to preserve, record, and remember, and performance resists documentation and reproduction” (Hart & Phelan 24). Unlike film, theatre performances are not typically recorded. This is in part because of the limited potential audience for recorded performances, the technical aspects of lighting and staging that require substantial changes from a staged production, and the contractual obligations to actors, directors, and playwrights. Thus, the study of plays, particularly their staging, requires a piecing together of the written text with
still images and second-hand descriptions and reviews. As I have shown, there is already a smaller pool of plays by women. Lack of documentation further reduces the number available for study. While more cost-effective than film,

[t]he writing of plays requires mastering to some degree a male-dominated, public production machinery, something that relatively few women have been able to do over the long history of the form, and consequently there is not as large a body of extant plays by women as there is of novels. Only a handful of plays by women have entered the canon of ‘approved’ works that are published, anthologized, taught, and produced, so that we are not used to associating women with playwriting. (Austin 2)

Not every play created by women and produced on the French stage has both a published text and archival record of its mise-en-scène. This study is limited in scope in part due to the relatively small number of French plays by women that were produced and that received enough critical attention to create the documentation necessary to address both the textual and stage elements of a production. However, it is the immediacy and fleeting nature of theatre that make it both challenging and exciting as a field of study.

While it is easy to see that feminists have used theatre to further their cause, it can be challenging to label a play, playwright, or company as feminist. Must a work have a clear political agenda to be feminist? Must the playwright be a woman? Must everyone involved in the production be a woman? Gillespie remarks that “all feminist theatres are rhetorical enterprises; their primary aim is action, not art” (“Feminist Theatre” 277). According to this definition, the plays examined in this study are not all feminist works, nor have they been created by feminist theatres. None of them place action above art. Austin argues:
A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters and noticing when they do not. It means making some “invisible” mechanism visible and point out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body. (1)

According to Austin’s definition, a work is feminist when it makes women and their struggles visible, when women are not on stage as set pieces or props to advance a man’s story. Celita Lamar points out that the terms “feminism” and “feminist” are more “politically charged” in France and that an author labeling herself as such would have a clear political intent in her writing (2). Rosemary Curb, for instance, studies what she terms “woman-conscious” drama and states that this label “encompasses all drama by and about women that is characterized by multiple interior reflections of women’s lives and perceptions” and that “emphasizes sociopolitical realities rather than the dilemmas of individual characters” (302). The plays studied here more closely align with the definitions put forth by Austin and Curb. For example, Simone Benmussa’s plays can clearly be labeled feminist while those directed by Ariane Mnouchkine would fall outside the narrow definition of feminist theatre. However, all of them are conscious of the subordinate status of women and work to make them and their experiences visible.

The question of the feminism presented in the plays I examine in this study is also complicated by the varied meanings the term began to take on in the final decades of the twentieth century, which saw a proliferation of feminist critiques that called attention to the ethnic, economic, geographic, sexual, generational, cultural and political differences that often intersect and shape the complexity of women’s life experiences. This study is not limited in scope to particular expressions of feminism but rather seeks to highlight the contributions of
authors and practitioners who have addressed different aspects of the female experience with the intention of raising social awareness and fostering change. These plays have also all created stronger and more important roles for women; some have gone so far as to remove men from the stage entirely, an act that in itself is significant as traditional French theatre had fewer female than male characters (Lamar 3). All of the plays studied here focus on some aspect of female identity, but advancing a feminist political agenda is not the primary concern in them all. Obliging women to write only of women would be misogynist; women are as qualified as men are to write about the variety of experiences that make up the human condition. Thus, plays that are not solely centered on women’s concerns have not been eliminated from this study. Rather, I am looking at the female characters that appear in works by women to see if they share certain qualities with those depicted in feminist plays. It is important to acknowledge that women-centered plays are not all written by women, as we can see, for instance, in the work of Canadian Michel Tremblay whose plays focus primarily on the unique struggles of women in Quebec. However, I propose women have a distinct perspective on the world that has too often been overlooked, and I have therefore chosen to narrow this study to works created by women.

There is now a significant body of scholarship on feminist theatre. However, much of this work has primarily been done by Anglophone researchers. The categorization of liberal, radical, and materialist theatre has generally been proposed by American and British scholars. Less work has been done on feminist theatre in France, and what has been done is often the work of Americans. Jeannette Laillou Savona argues that French feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Josette Féral are more radical than American feminists: “They root their rejection of patriarchy in post-structuralist philosophy and its anti-humanist attacks on the ‘phallogocentrism’ or our cultural tradition” (542). Unlike American critics such as Dolan who view the trait more
skeptically, radical for Savona is a positive attribute of French feminism. Because these women are focused on the power of language, they call on women to express their “repressed feminine unconscious and female body” (Savona 541). Savona shows that French feminists “want to create a positive mythology of femininity through a ‘different’ discourse and a ‘different’ poetics which will subvert the dominant symbolic order” (541). However, Dolan argues against the value of this difference:

Cultural feminists fail to see that within the representational apparatus in which they work they are offering a superficial representation of gender identity that remains defined by the ideology of sexual difference, an ideological system that benefits women as social subject not at all.

Abetted by the theories of femininity proposed by l’écriture féminine, cultural feminists continue to work within the modality of sexual difference through their complicity with the representation of Woman as the transcendent, female subject.

(Feminism 99)

Because American critics, like Dolan, espouse more materialist philosophies, they have rather negative views of French feminist theory and of its strong ties to cultural/radical feminism. I will attempt to address these concerns by introducing the psychoanalytic thought of Julia Kristeva, whose theories of the subject provide a compelling theoretical framework within which to examine and understand more fully the social and cultural implications of contemporary French forms of écriture féminine.
Chapter Previews

I. Revolutionizing the Theatre in Pursuit of Revolution: Artaud, Brecht, and Kristeva

My first chapter presents the theoretical framework for the study. The ideas of Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht dominated the theatre world in the mid-twentieth century (Dasgupta 1). While their theories rely heavily on earlier theoreticians of the theatre, their work became emblematic of two opposing conceptions of the genre: these included plays that sought to stir audiences emotionally through sensory stimulation and those aimed to change society. Artaud wanted to revolutionize theatre so that it would become an almost spiritual experience. His project was to emotionally overwhelm theatre-goers with a sensory-rich experience of sound music, light, and other visual elements. Brecht, on the other hand, sought to use theatre as a means to revolutionize society through an appeal to reason and the use of disparate elements to create distance between the spectator and the performance. Audience members were encouraged to reflect on the meaning of the play and were discouraged from becoming lost in the show’s mimesis to the point where they would no longer recognize and contemplate the source of the ideas and actions presented. Women who were creating theatre in the period under study here sought to meld these two differing practices in productions which through the power of emotional response strove to encourage reflection on social injustices and to spur action to redress them. I will argue that the way these women artists negotiated Artaud’s and Brecht’s notions of theatre is consonant with the psychoanalytical theories of human subjectivity that Julia Kristeva formulated at this time.

Kristeva theorized that the subject is never fixed but oscillates between the semiotic and symbolic registers. The semiotic impulses, aligned with non-linguistic forms of meaning making, constantly disrupt the symbolic order, a realm of being associated with the socio normative
masculine traits of logic and language. In women-centered theatre, the revolutionary desire to create societal change through their art is driven by an urge to do so through the creation of sensory driven productions that favored extra-linguistic modes of expression. We have seen that liberal feminists sought to enter male-dominated sectors of society by adopting masculine traits while radical feminists felt that male-centered society should be disrupted by emphasizing the importance of traditional female roles and characteristics. However, Kristeva argues that women should embrace both of these positions (“Feminism” 116-7), a notion that the female directors and playwrights I have studied put into practice. In my first chapter, I will focus on the contributions Artaud and Brecht made in the early twentieth century that transformed the theatre and will then consider them in light of the theoretical work on the interplay between the semiotic and symbolic registers that Kristeva formulated in the 1970s and 1980s. Using this theoretical framework for my study of theatre by women in France after 1968, I will concentrate in subsequent chapters on the influence these revolutionaries had on specific plays, playwrights, and theatre troupes.

II. Fracturing Freud: Hélène Cixous and Écriture Féminine

Author and theoretician Hélène Cixous was also a preeminent voice on the French feminist political scene during this period. Calling for a new practice she refers to as écriture féminine, Cixous argued that women needed to find their own writing style, one that was different from conventional forms of writing which prized reason. The plays written by women in the 1970s often display traits similar to those Cixous espoused in their use of language, rejection of teleological order, emphasis on music, bodily movement, imagery, and the multiplicity of meaning. However, many of these characteristics are also defining elements of other non-feminist postmodern works. Cara Berger claims “that some identifiable tendencies,
present in many postdramatic practices, resonate strongly with Cixous’s *écriture féminine* and that because of this a tentative analogy may be drawn between the two even if not all postdramatic theatres produce what [she identifies] as feminine knowledge” (40). The language of *écriture féminine* is often characterized by elliptical and repetitive thoughts as well as silences. Similar to Cixous’s writing, there is a multiplicity of meanings to be found in the spoken and unspoken aspects of writing. Additionally, these plays often display an absence of a linear plot and instead exhibit a fragmentation common to other postmodern works of the time. Many of them emphasize musicality either through the introduction of traditional music or through the lyricism of the voice. Music and song flow through the plays I have studied in forms that range from Madame K’s distinctive speaking style in *Portrait de Dora*, to the Irish melodies woven throughout *Albert Nobbs*, to the music of revolution in 1789 and 1793, and finally to the melodic cadence of the speeches in *La Ville parjure*.

While some feminist critics have admonished *écriture féminine* for being essentialist and potentially pigeonholing female writers, Cixous’s ideas emphasize the role of language in perpetuating restrictive gender norms. The second chapter will explore Cixous’s call for women to write in her landmark manifesto “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975) and will further show how she herself responded to this call in writing *Portrait de Dora* (1976). In this play, Cixous retells Freud’s case history *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* in which he attempted to diagnose the causes of his young patient Dora’s symptoms. Dora’s father, Monsieur B, brought her to the famed psychoanalyst because she had a recurring cough, limp, and other ailments for which doctors were unable to find physiological causes. He also relayed to Freud that his daughter had recently accused his good friend Monsieur K of making sexual advances towards her. In his case study, Freud relates the sessions he had with Dora, her actions, and in particular
his analysis of her dreams. Cixous’s play retells Freud’s case, and while it does not make a feminist hero of Dora, her version does seek to challenge Freud’s authority to formulate a single truth about Dora’s symptoms. Cixous employs devices common to *écriture féminine* to suggest there may be multiple truths to be formed in this case. Her play reenacts scenes between Dora and Monsieur K, Dora and Madame K, and Freud and Monsieur K, as well as those between Dora and Freud, giving voice to multiple characters. *Portrait de Dora* has a montage quality where scenes overlap and occur simultaneously in different areas of the stage. The play also incorporates filmed sequences in the live performance. In this chapter, I will evoke Kristeva’s theory of the subject to examine how Cixous combines her didactic goals with respect to her feminist project with a sensory rich experience while also bringing her own theory of writing into play.

**III. Gender Construction and Suffocating Gender Norms: Simone Benmussa**

Moving from discussion of the non-linear narrative and sensory experience of *Portrait de Dora*, the third chapter makes an abrupt turn to consider a work that on the surface seems to embrace logocentrism and exemplify Kristeva’s notion of the symbolic. In a short introductory paragraph to the script, Simone Benmussa\(^6\) explains that *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* is not about transvestism but rather a woman’s material need to assume a masculine identity in order to obtain more lucrative employment. Adapted from a short story by George Moore, this tragedy is set in Dublin during the 1860s, but its correlation to contemporary women’s struggle for wage equality and gender conformity is apparent. The title character, Albert, is constrained by her assumed masculine identity, by the expectations placed on her by those around her because of

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\(^6\) Benmussa both wrote and directed this play. It is noteworthy that she also directed Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora*, a fact that highlights her embrace of multiple production styles.
her gender identity, by the linear narrative of the script, and even by the framing of the play both narratively and visually. Interwoven in the play’s phallogocentric\textsuperscript{7} structure is the question of Albert’s femininity, the mimetic doubling of bodies, and the presence of a softness that Benmussa sees as inherently Irish. \textit{Albert Nobbs} implies that the feminine cannot be entirely repressed and that it finds a way to break through to the surface of identity, a notion that conforms to Kristeva’s theory of the way the semiotic register disrupts the symbolic order.

In \textit{Albert Nobbs}, the set presents a series of boxes embedded like Russian dolls with Albert situated at the center visually representing the confinement of secretly working as a man. Benmussa, as both playwright and director, presents a stage that combines suggestive trompe l’oeil scenery with more naturalistic elements, visually underscoring the falsity of Albert’s appearance. Similar to this visual presentation, the play’s narrative framing, present in Moore’s original short-story and preserved by Benmussa, constrains Albert. The play opens with the voice of Moore and Alec, another story-teller. The voice-over narration by men at both the beginning and end of the play adds to the sense of enclosure and reinforces the notion that Albert lives in a world controlled by men, and that her identity, especially her gender identity, is created in large part through what others, particularly men say about her.

While the play is not about transvestism \textit{per se}, it centers on the formation of a gendered identity. In \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity}, Judith Butler argues that gender is not essential to one’s being but is rather constructed through the repetition of acts, or performatives, that are perceived as belonging to one gender or the other. Albert performs the male role through her dress, her occupation, and her mannerisms and does this so successfully

\footnote{Phallogocentrism, coined by Jacques Derrida, combines the notions of phallocentrism, or a favoring of the masculine, and logocentrism, an approach to meaning creation that relies on the logical and its use in language. The synthesis of these ideas reflects the intertwined relationship of privilege that genders logic as a desirable masculine trait.}
that her gender is never questioned by those around her. In fact, they are surprised to eventually learn that she is biologically female. It is important to note that Butler rejects the idea that gender is consciously performed on a daily basis as Albert does, and instead she argues that societal norms dictate the performance of gender. Albert acts as she does because she is choosing to portray a male and so conforms to the societal norms of maleness; those around her perceive her as male and reinforce this gender identity in their interactions with her.

Albert’s chance encounter with another woman posing as a man inspires her to seek out companionship, hoping for the family and homelife she lacks. She sets her eye on a new maid and attempts to woo her. It is clear though that Albert cross-dresses entirely for financial reasons and that while she longs for companionship, she does not have any romantic desire for this woman. Sensing this fact, the maid rejects Albert whose dreams of having a wife and owning a little shop are subsequently destroyed. Brokenhearted, Albert lives the rest of her life as a lonely miser until she dies in her sleep and those around her discover her actual biological sex.

Despite the fact that male characters control the story’s narrative framework, the stage is peopled exclusively with women: Albert, Mrs. Baker, Hubert Page, Helen Dawes, Kitty MacCan, and various maids. Benmussa rejects the representation of masculinity by actors whose biological sex is male. Instead, biologically male characters are only present through the projection of their voices, a move that suggests Benmussa rejects the notion that there is an inherently male and female identity and that she views gender identity as constructed through visual signs and in the ways those signs are read by society. Additionally, the audience’s attention is focused entirely on women’s need to navigate a phallogocentric world.

While Benmussa’s text reads like a form of nineteenth-century realism, her staging works against this literary form much like Kristeva’s theory shows the semiotic register disrupting the
symbolic and highlighting the conflicting gender identities of Albert. In her introduction, Benmussa explains, for instance, that the sweetness of the play’s Irish origins are never lost because Ireland’s songs and countryside watch over it, just as Albert’s female identity can never be entirely suppressed, but remains, waiting to be reclaimed. The resurgence of Albert’s feminine identity is also represented through the doubling of characters in key scenes, where additional actors appear on stage to mirror the actions of the main characters. Albert is often doubled when additional actresses playing maids shadow her movements, a move that allows Albert to be represented as both male and female. *Albert Nobbs* combines conventional dialogue with staging elements that call into question society’s gender norms, providing an important example of how theatre written, staged, and performed by women subverted the conventions of traditional theatre through the performance and interplay of the symbolic and semiotic elements.

IV. Collectively Recreating the Revolution: Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil

After exploring two plays that tend to fall on opposite ends of the spectrum from avant-garde to more conventional theatre, I will examine two plays that more fully integrate these two positions. The collectively created productions of the Théâtre du Soleil fuse Artaudian physicality and rejection of the traditional written script with Brechtian expressions of political intent. Under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine, the troupe came together in 1964 with the intention of forming an entirely democratically run theatre, where members who performed various tasks would receive the same salary (Miller, *Ariane 53*). Founded before the events of May ‘68, the theatre originally produced adaptations of classical pieces such as Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or works that began to combine improvisation with texts such as an adaptation of Arnold Wesker’s *La Cuisine*. However, beginning with *1789: La revolution doit s’arrêter à la perfection du bonheur* (1970) and *1793: La cite révolutionnaire est de ce monde*...
(1972), both of which were produced directly following May ’68 and were propelled in part by the collective action of the protests, the troupe began creating devised theatre, or shows where the scripts were entirely derived from improvisations done by the actors. The troupe then combined these short skits in the manner of montage to tell a story. 1789 presented the atmosphere of a street fair while 1793 was more introspective in nature reflecting both the changes of the historical period represented on stage and those that had occurred in contemporary France in the time that passed between the mounting of the two productions. These performances incorporated a kind of physicality that recalled both the tradition of the Commedia dell’arte as well as Artaud’s call to revolutionize the theatre by rejecting the written text and using the body as an expressive medium. At the same time, the Theatre du Soleil fostered a socio-political awareness in ways that recalled the political ambitions of Brecht’s theatre.

While the Theatre du Soleil does not have an explicit feminist agenda, the group highlighted the particular experience of women and presented direct challenges to phallogocentric notions of power and social hierarchy. Wishing to build on a story that had taken on a mythological dimension for many Frenchmen and women, the troupe chose to represent the French Revolution, but sought to reproduce it through the lives of ordinary people instead of revolutionary heroes, as they had learned it from history books: “This allowed a de-mystified view of historical events. It meant that one was seeing the well-known events and figures through the eyes of people who were not leading actors on the political stage but who gave meaning to the images that formed in their mind” (Whitton 264). Their work illustrated how the revolution did not actually better the lives of France’s poorest citizens, including women. Those whose lives were most improved by the revolution were not the popular classes, but the
bourgeoisie who in this new French society seized the social power previously held by the aristocracy, leaving the working masses to continue living in misery.

In 1789 and 1793, much of the power of the Soleil’s performances was derived from the transformation of industrial locales into theatrical space and from the manner in which they organized the spectacle in it. Lacking funds for a traditional theatre, the Soleil took over the cartoucherie, a former arms and gunpowder factory located in the Bois de Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris, which provided them a large empty space (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 8), that became a sort of blank canvas for them in a manner that conformed to Artaud’s vision of the theatre which called for the use of unadorned space. Since it was not originally used as a theatre and thus did not have a fixed stage or proscenium arch, the troupe arranged small stages throughout the space and some seating at the edges. This arrangement allowed actors to invite spectators to stand and gave them the freedom to walk around during the shows to get closer to various stages that were used in different segments of the performance. The Théâtre du Soleil did not merely break the fourth wall, they obliterated it entirely and turned the spectators into actors as well. In effect, those choosing to stand in the space became actors for those seated spectators who found themselves watching other members of the audience as they watched the troupe members, a move that affected both parties’ reception of the performance (Whitton 264-5) and that enlarged the collectivity of the creation to encompass the audience as well as the performers.

The modernist technique of retelling stories in various narrative modes and from divergent points of view, a common trait of feminist theatre of this period, opens up the productions of 1789 and 1793 to a multiplicity of interpretations. At points, major historical moments are narrated, such as the storming of the Bastille, but portions of the narration are also acted out by characters who represented either historic figures or imagined witnesses and
casualties of the revolution. The Théâtre du Soleil’s highlighting of the effect that the revolution had on women reflects the theatre troupe’s consciousness of the subordinate status of women, but these plays cannot necessarily be labeled feminist. That being said, the Soleil’s productions provide an excellent example of the ways in which a sensory laden performance can proffer a clear didactic political message in works directed by women.

V. Looking Beyond the Self: Hélène Cixous, Ariane Mnouchkine, and the Théâtre du Soleil

In the final chapter, I return to both the Théâtre du Soleil and playwright Hélène Cixous who began writing for the Soleil in the mid-1980s. This chapter advances the study into the 1990s through the examination of La Ville parjure ou le Réveil des Érinyes (1994). The play demonstrates the Soleil’s return to the written text and marks a shift in the focus of Cixous’s and the Soleil’s work from past to present and from the practice of retelling chapters of history to addressing contemporary events such as those represented in La Ville parjure. This play further demonstrates the continued influence of Artaud and Brecht on theatre produced by women and highlights the ways in which they negotiate on stage the tensions between the semiotic and the symbolic registers and infuse the practice of écriture féminine with overt political content and intent. La Ville parjure also exemplifies feminism’s movement towards greater inclusivity and intersectionality by bringing to light the plight of all those who are oppressed and marginalized. More explicitly feminist than earlier work by the Soleil, this play presents women as a healing force in the face of social devastation and does so in ways that act in opposition to traditional male-dominated politics. The play also tracks contemporary feminism’s increasing focus on appreciating a multiplicity of female experiences and on new forms of multicultural expression.

In La Ville parjure ou le Réveil des Érinyes, Cixous depicts a tragedy unfolding around her when she stages the scandal that erupted in 1991 when the public learned of the French
government’s complicity in the distribution of HIV-tainted blood to hemophiliacs in 1984 and 1985. Cixous fuses this modern tragedy with elements of ancient Greek tragedy by introducing a Chorus, the Furies, and Aeschylus as the play’s narrator/author. A mother mourning the loss of her two sons seeks understanding and vengeance by turning to the Furies who have returned from their banishment underground while a group of doctors rallies around two guilty parties, represented as X1 and X2 who deny their responsibility in the scandal. The sole dissenting voice in this group is Mme. Lion who refuses to become complicit in helping these characters deny that they were aware of the dangers the contaminated blood supply distributed to hemophiliacs carried or that it could have been purified through heat prior to distribution to the patients. The young sons and a host of other victims and societal outcasts inhabit the cemetery where the action takes place, thereby giving voice to the crisis’s voiceless. Eventually, a new king is elected, and he destroys the cemetery with a flood, ridding himself of the problem without ever resolving it. Refusing the despair of tragedy, Cixous ends the text with an epilogue in which a cast of shipwrecked souls are rescued and lifted to the heavens where they look down at the suffering on Earth.

_La Ville parjure_ presents a gendered representation of this tragedy, one in which characters complicit in the scandal are all men (X1, X2, the King, and the doctors) while those who seek truth and vengeance are primarily women (the mother, Mme. Lion, and the Furies). The men use rationalizing speeches to justify their actions and cover up their wrongdoing, while the women interpret the situation through their emotions: their grief, their indignation, and their anger. Cixous’s writing in this play conforms to her own notion of _écriture féminine_, and its structure clearly illustrates how the semiotic disrupts symbolic order. The women characters in _La Ville parjure_ call into question patriarchal law and forms of male power. The play powerfully
underscores the fact that the marginalized members of society, in this case primarily women and children, are most affected by tragic events that are beyond their control. But it also suggests that these are the very characters who are most capable of challenging corrupt systems and of bringing about healing and change.

Evidence of the semiotic intruding upon the symbolic is overwhelming in Cixous’s work. Her plays reject a strictly teleological narrative structure and are written in a poetic voice that often skirts grammatical constraints. *La Ville parjure* eschews realist conventions by introducing figures derived from classical mythology (the Furies), ancient history (Aeschylus), and nature (the Night). Cixous’s play also makes countless references to other classic tragedies. In the tradition of Artaud, she uses music and visual effects to surround the spectators in hopes of stirring a forceful emotional response to the tragedy she depicts. And yet, her play also sends a strong political message calling on the spectator to think beyond the stage to the world around them, a move that is reminiscent of the kind of political messaging Brecht favored. I will show that, in the end, Cixous works in the realm of the symbolic and the semiotic without allowing either to dominate.
In seeking to challenge the sources of women’s oppression, Hélène Cixous, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Simone Benmussa reached back into European theatre’s recent history. They drew inspiration from avant-garde figures such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht who earlier in the century had made great strides in both theorizing and revolutionizing the theatre. In its ever-changing climate of artistic innovation, the twentieth century saw both calls to revolutionize theatre and to place theatre in the service of social revolution. While not the only ones to do so, Artaud and Brecht are emblematic representatives of these two theoretical camps. Artaud sought to revolutionize theatre through a rejection of the written text and the author’s control of the theatrical production. Instead he proposed that actors be given a scenario that would become the basis for improvisation, and he favored movement, sound, and light to provoke an emotional response in his audiences. Meanwhile, Brecht sought to wrest theatre from the clutches of bourgeois conventionality and to use it as a tool to model revolutionary action and to teach the spectator behaviors and reactions that would lead to a more just society. He posited that theatre should reveal truths about society and lead audiences to reflect on how they could effect social change. While their theories are very different, these two artists had a profound impact on theatre in the second half of the century. Gautam Dasgupta claims that in the 1950s and 1960s, Artaud’s and Brecht’s contributions were “indispensable to the making of theatre” (1). Presenting these two theoreticians as representative of two opposing currents of thought, I will show how their

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8 Milling and Ley point out that Artaud was influenced by symbolist poets and that the use of sound emphasized by Artaud was “already used by futurists and Dada” (93).
dual influence is felt in French theatre written and produced by women after May ’68, and I will do so through the lens of Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories of the subject.

Building on the ideas set forth by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, in key works such as *Séméiôtiké: recherches pour une sémanalyse* and *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Kristeva argued that the human subject is forever in flux or what she calls “in process.” This happens through the interaction between a pre-linguistic register she calls the semiotic and a register controlled by language and reason that Lacan identified as the symbolic. While the subject was earlier thought to leave behind the pre-linguistic when it enters the symbolic register, in actuality, Kristeva contends, the semiotic continually returns to disrupt the symbolic. I will argue here that the emphasis Artaud places on non-verbal forms of signification can be related to what Kristeva defines as the semiotic register while Brecht’s ideas about the theatre align more closely with Kristeva’s and Lacan’s theory of the symbolic. The theatrical concepts Artaud and Brecht formulated are, of course, more complex, but invoking this dyad allows us to examine the distinctive ways in which both theorists influenced Cixous, Benmussa, and Mnouchkine. Through approaching their theoretical contributions by way of Kristeva’s understanding of subject formation, I will further demonstrate the way in which these two theoretical positions interact in the work of the playwrights I study and in doing so, create an abundance of meaning as exemplified in the theatre by women of this period. Before relating Artaud and Brecht to Kristeva, it is important to better understand how these two author-practitioners changed conventional ideas of the theatre.
Antonin Artaud: Revolutionizing the Theatre

In the 1930s, Artaud formulated a new approach to performance that came to be known as the Theatre of Cruelty. His notion of cruelty posited that bombarding the senses would stir a primal emotional response in audiences. He explains:

J’emploie le mot de cruauté dans le sens d’appétit de vie, de rigueur cosmique et de nécessité implacable, dans le sens gnostique de tourbillon de vie qui dévore les ténèbres, dans le sens de cette douleur hors de la nécessité inéluctable de laquelle la vie ne saurait s’exercer. (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 4: 98-9)

Inspired by his encounter with Balinese dance at the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 (Brandon 31), Artaud called for the performance of precise movements with the aim of creating a sign-system of gesture while inundating all of the senses with innovations in sound, light, and staging. In other words, he argued that theatre should de-emphasize the discursive, in favor of body language and what Kristeva calls de-semanticized forms of meaning-making.

Artaud is often remembered as much for his struggles with mental illness and drug addiction as for his work in the theatre. After a childhood filled with illness and a brief conscription in and subsequent discharge from the French army (Hayman xi), he arrived in Paris where he began working as an actor. His work with Charles Dullin at this time heavily influenced his later theories. In 1921, Artaud joined Dullin’s École Nouvelle du Comedien, commonly referred to as the Atelier, and was soon cast in his plays (Hayman xii). Dullin

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9 I use the word cruelty in the sense of hungering after life, cosmic strictness, relentless necessity, in the Gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue. (Complete Works 4: 78)

10 While Artaud was influenced by the forms of Asian dancing he saw at the Colonial Exhibition, James R. Brandon points out that he had limited experience with it and never traveled to Asia to see performances in context or to study it further. In Brandon’s view, Artaud’s fascination with Asian theatre was a form of orientalism, a European and American approach to Eastern culture that views it as a commodity. However, Brandon argues that Artaud did not attempt to recreate the dances he saw but used them to inform his own ideas of nonverbal communication (31).
organized his acting school as a collective “to create a different attitude toward theatre from the one which existed in the théatre des boulevards” (Deák 346). Artaud believed that Dullin was the first to use new acting techniques and improvisation in France which required the actor to feel the character’s emotions,\(^{11}\) and it was from Dullin that he first learned of the Japanese Noh acting style (*Collected Works* 2:128-9).

In 1924, Artaud joined the Surrealists and began editing their journal (Hayman xii). However, he broke with the group in 1926 when he formed the Théâtre Alfred Jarry with Roger Vitrac and Robert Aron, and in November of that year, he published his manifesto for the Théâtre Alfred Jarry in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF) (Hayman xiii). Between 1927 and 1929, Artaud, Vitrac, and Aron produced four plays with limited budgets and rehearsal time during the off-season (Jannarone 249). For the first evening of performances on June 1, 1927 they presented a play by each of the three men: Artaud’s *Ventre brûlé; ou La Mère folle*, Vitrac’s *Les Mystères de l’amour*, and Aron’s *Gigogne* (Jannarone 249). Seven months later in January 1928, they offered their second evening at the Comédie des Champs-Elysées. This time they screened Pudovkin’s 1926 film *Mat’* and offered a performance of the last act of Paul Claudel’s *Le Partage de midi* (Jannarone 255). For the third production of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, in June 1928, carried out under Artaud’s direction, the theatre premiered Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* using the author’s own French translation (Jannarone 257). A group of surrealists heckled the play claiming that the “organizers were lackeys of Swedish capitalism” (Hayman 73). Artaud took the stage to proclaim that he had only agreed to do the play because he saw Strindberg as a

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\(^{11}\) Dullin’s acting theories were influenced by Jacques Copeau who was, in turn, interested in the ideas of Edward Gordon Craig. Craig collaborated with Konstantin Stanislavski who is widely credited for developing the concept of Method Acting, an approach to performance in which the actors were to conjure in themselves the feelings of the character being portrayed in order to exhibit this emotional state authentically for audiences. The number of practitioners interested in the role of internalized emotions in acting evinces the pervasiveness of the idea at this period and makes it difficult to pinpoint its originator.
victim of Swedish society, but the surrealists warned the company not to continue with a second performance. The Théâtre Alfred Jarry asked for police protection when they went ahead with the production. André Breton and others were subsequently arrested at the following performance. It was at this moment that Aron left the Théâtre Alfred Jarry (Hayman 73). Finally, in December 1928 and January 1929, the group mounted their last production, Vitrac’s *Victor; ou Le Pouvoir aux enfants* directed by Artaud (Jannarone 261). However short-lived, the company rocked the Parisian theatre scene, and the audiences were large due to both the theatre’s reputation for scandal and the critical acclaim it won. In the end though, their finances ran out and they were forced to cease production (Hayman xiii).

It was after the closure of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry that Artaud was introduced to Balinese dance at the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 (Hayman xiii). Despite his misdrawn conclusions about the performance he had seen (Brandon 32), the precision of the performers’ gestures greatly impressed, and they would subsequently shape his thought on movement in theatre. It is also during this time period that Artaud began his theoretical writings on theatre and produced his two manifestos which were published in 1935 under the title *Le Théâtre et son double* (Hayman xiv). His first attempt to put the ideas he had formed of a Theatre of Cruelty into practice was in *The Cenci* in 1935, a work based on Shelley’s 1819 play and Stendhal’s translation of a sixteenth century manuscript that focused on the Cenci family (Hayman xiv). Despite the large amount of press coverage that it received, the play was panned by critics and forced to close after seventeen performances (Schumacher and Singleton 159). Following this failure, Artaud traveled to Mexico where he began drafting the scenario for a play that would be based on these travels while also dabbling in radio plays. Ultimately, he spent his final years in various sanitoriums and psychiatric hospitals. On January 13, 1947, Artaud gave a final lecture at
the Vieux-Colombier which was attended by over 900 spectators. The audience consisted primarily of literary men, directors, actors, and playwrights. Beginning at 9:00 PM, Artaud quickly strayed from his prepared remarks and finally stormed out at midnight (Schumacher and Singleton 159). Despite his life’s tragic nature, his writings continued to impact theatre throughout the twentieth century.

Artaud believed that the theatre spectator was moved to action through emotion, not rational thought (Fischer-Lichte 154). In his writing, he assimilated all forms of popular theatre in his day and contrasted their aims with that of avant-garde theatre:

Ce qui fait que l’on peut dire qu’il existe à l’heure qu’il est deux théâtres : un faux théâtre facile et faux, le théâtre des bourgeois, militaires, rentiers, commerçants, marchands de vins, professeurs d’aquerelle, rastas, grues et prix de Rome et qui a lieu chez Sacha Guitry, aux Boulevards, et à la Comédie-Française, et un autre théâtre qui se loge où il peut, mais qui est le théâtre conçu comme l’accomplissement des plus purs désirs humains. (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 2: 138)

The theatre he condemned was psychological in nature and sought to explain the motivations for a character’s actions. Artaudian theatre aimed to arouse passions and stir energy. Its goal was not to distract the audience from life, but to encourage it to approach life with seriousness: “Et pour cela sortir de la psychologie individuelle, entrer dans les passions de masse, les états d’esprit collectif, saisir des ondes collectives, en un mot changer de sujet” (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 5: 153). In Le Théâtre et son double, Artaud compares theatre to alchemy, arguing that neither

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12 “So that one can say two theatres now exist: false theatre that is deceptive, easy, middle-class, a theatre for soldiers, bourgeois, businessmen, wine merchants, water-colour teachers, adventurers, whores and Prix de Rome, as put on by Sacha Guitry and the Boulevards and the Comédie Française. But there is another sort of theatre that plays whenever it can, theatre conceived as the achievement of the purest human desires (Collected Works 2: 130).

13 “To that end it must abandon individual psychology, espouse collective passions, mass opinion, tune into the collective wave-lengths, in short alter its subject matter” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 88)
contains their object within themselves, but like alchemy, theatre creates something new from the synergy between the various elements of the *mise-en-scène* (*Complete Works* 4:34-7).

Writing about the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, Artaud likened attending the theatre to going to the doctor:

> Le spectateur qui vient chez nous sait qu’il vient s’offrir à une opération véritable, où non seulement son esprit mais ses sens et sa chair sont en jeu. Il ira désormais au théâtre comme il va chez le chirurgien ou le dentiste. Dans le même état d’esprit, avec la pensée évidemment qu’il n’en mourra pas, mais que c’est grave, et qu’il ne sortira pas de là dedans intact. (*Œuvres Complètes* [1956] 2: 14)\(^{14}\)

According to Artaud, the spectator should not go to the theatre to be passively entertained, but rather to be mesmerized, affected, and ultimately transformed as a result of one’s exposure to the sensory extravaganza the spectacle is creating around him. Writing in the early 1930s to Jean-Richard Bloch, Artaud proclaimed: “Ce théâtre réintégrerait devant son public la conception du spectacle absolu, donnerait l’équivalent d’une sorte de music-hall intellectuel, où tous les sens et toutes les facultés trouveraient en même temps leur satisfaction” (*Œuvres Complètes* 2: 63).\(^{15}\)

Like the surrealists of his time, he sought to overwhelm the audience with sounds using new percussion instruments such as oversized gongs, which created “les vibrations qui s’accrochent les unes aux autres, fricionment la sensibilité” and “les rythmes hypnotiques” (*Œuvres Complètes* [1976] 5: 153-4).\(^{16}\) In Artaud’s first production for the Théâtre Alfred Jarry, *Ventre-

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\(^{14}\) Audiences coming to our theatre know they are present at a real operation involving not only the mind but also the very senses and flesh. From then on they will go to the theatre as they would to a surgeon or dentist, in the same frame of mind, knowing, of course, that they will not die but that all the same this is serious business, and that they will not come out unscathed. (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 34)

\(^{15}\) “This theatre will restore for its audience the concept of absolute spectacle, it will offer the equivalent of a kind of intellectual music-hall in which all the senses and all the faculties will achieve fulfillment simultaneously” (Artaud, *Complete Works* 5:53-4).

\(^{16}\) “vibrations all clinging to one another, rubbing against the sensitivity” and “hypnotic rhythms” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 89)
brûlé, the use of overwhelming sound was already present through an incessant percussion and the accompaniment of a contrabass orchestra (Jannaron 252). The crowd was to be continually assailed by the noise that was aimed at “la sensibilité de la foule au lieu de poursuivre son entendement la préparent aux révélations psychiques que le reste du spectacle lui apportera” (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 5: 154).\(^\text{17}\)

Artaud also championed the use of extreme lighting effects that were “un décor mais provoquent des états d’esprit” (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 5:153).\(^\text{18}\) Again, in Ventre-brûlé, like the sound, the lighting was an important element, to such an extent that it became a character itself. Kimberly Jannarone summarizes the “collected memories of spectators and participants” which describe the action of the play as a short hallucination, without any (or barely any) dialogue, in which a king rocked back and forth in a chair, uttering strange chants, until he was killed by a lightning bolt. Other characters entered and died successively. A piercing violet spotlight with a life of its own acted as the assassin of each character. (252)

In Artaud’s later manifestos, he suggests that lighting should go even further to combine with sound in order to inundate the spectator’s senses. Jannarone argues that the intense sound and lighting also “pulled the scene out of the realm of the ordinary, thus giving it significance in a ‘tangential’ realm, be it symbolic or ‘magical’” (265). The sensory overload put the spectators on edge, creating an otherworldly experience for them. The theatre was both real and more than ethereal.

\(^{17}\) “the sensitivity of the masses instead of pursuing their understanding, preparing them for the psychic revelations to be made by the rest of the performance” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 89).

\(^{18}\) “not decorative but which [provoke] states of mind” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 89).
Le Théâtre et son double also calls for a revolutionized performance space as well by eliminating the separation of the stage from the house. Artaud writes:

Nous supprimons la scène et la salle qui sont remplacées par une sorte de lieu unique, sans cloisonnement, ni barrière d’aucune sorte, et qui deviendra le théâtre même de l’action. Une communication directe sera rétablie entre le spectateur et le spectacle, entre l’acteur et le spectateur, du fait que le spectateur placé au milieu de l’action est enveloppé et sillonné par elle. Cet enveloppement provient de la configuration même de la salle. (Œuvres Complètes [1956], 114-5)

In this conception of theatre, the audience would no longer be watching, safely, from their seats but would be surrounded by the action of the performance. Artaud himself moves in this direction in his production of Vitrac’s Les Mystères de l’amour, a play in which an audience member was “shot” and “killed” by one of the actors (Jannarone 253). Artaud did not wish to move attendees intellectually, or to make them think and consider their understanding of the world. Rather, he sought to touch them emotionally by provoking a visceral reaction in them. By removing the barrier between the actor and the spectator, Artaud blurs the line between reality and theatre, thereby creating the desired emotional response. Ronald Hayman argues that it is this reimagining of the theatrical space that most significantly influenced the direction of theatre (86).

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19 “We intend to do away with stage and auditorium, replacing them by a kind of single, undivided locale without any partitions of any kind and this will become the very scene of the action. Direct contact will be established between the audience and the show, between actors and audience, from the very fact that the audience is seated in the centre of the action, is encircled and furrowed by it. This encirclement comes from the shape of the house itself.” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 115)
In 1929, Artaud wrote a manifesto for the Théâtre Alfred Jarry that was published as a four-page pamphlet. In this publication, Artaud demanded a theatre that reflected the emotions and sensibilities of the time and place in which it is produced:

Nous nous refuserons toujours à considérer le théâtre comme un musée de chefs-d’œuvre, si beaux et si humains soient-ils. Sera sans aucune espèce d’intérêt pour nous et nous pensons pour le théâtre, toute œuvre qui n’obéit pas au principe d’actualité. Actualité de sensations et de préoccupations, plus que de faits. (*Œuvres Complètes* [1956] 2: 34)\(^{20}\)

Artaud did not prescribe a theatre whose subject matter was politically relevant but rather aimed to create an experience that elicited emotional responses that were particular to the period and location of the performance venue. Artaud is likely referencing Aristotle’s theory of potentiality and actuality (Durrant 206) when he demanded that theatre “obey the principle of actuality,” and insisted that theatre should not merely have the potential to create emotion, but to actually produce an affective response in audiences. By generating a surplus of sensory stimulants, the audience would, he reasoned, become emotionally engaged in the show: “Nous n’avons que faire de l’art ni de la beauté. Ce que nous cherchons, c’est l’émotion INTERESSEE. Un certain pouvoir de deflagration attaché aux gestes, aux paroles” (*Œuvres Complètes* [1956] 2: 34).\(^{21}\) The audience should not sit passively by and observe the emotions of the actors/characters, but they should instead react emotionally to the action. Artaud surmised that this visceral response could only be sparked if the performance were relevant to the moment.

\(^{20}\)“We steadfastly refuse to regard theatre as a museum for masterpieces, however fine and human they may be. Any work which does not obey the principle of actuality will be of no use to us whatsoever, or, we believe, to theatre either. Actuality of feelings and concerns, more than of events” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 44).

\(^{21}\)“We do not want art or beauty. What we are looking for are INVOLVED emotions. A certain combustible power associated with words and gestures” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 44).
The consequence of Artaud’s desire for change in theatrical design de-emphasized the written text long seen by Western practitioners and critics as the definitive source and foundation of meanings created in theatrical space. Emphasizing the preeminence of the author, Jacques Derrida suggests that “classic theatre defines theatre of words – God giving words for directors and actors to use” (“Parole Soufflée” 185). Artaud proclaims: “Le vrai théâtre comme la culture n’a jamais été écrit” (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 8: 203). However, Artaud sought to replace the authoritative position of the author with the primacy of the director. Hayman concludes that “in taking responsibility both for the way the text was spoken and for all the non-verbal elements, the director was the true author of the theatrical event” (78). Typically, theatre directors attempted to convey the author’s intentions through the staging of a written text, but Artaud argued that it should be the director’s vision alone that determined the significance of the show presented. At one point, he goes so far as to proclaim that there should be no source text. Instead, he favors an improvisational method based on a scenario. Jannarone describes Artaud’s method: “The scenario allowed an exploration of a single moment, with all its layers and meanings. As opposed to a narrative, which is extensive, a scenario is intensive” (252). Even when he worked with a script, such as his production of Strindberg’s A Dream Play, Artaud used that text as a starting point and used the writer’s specifications of how the play was to be presented “as indications of a play’s nature” (Jannarone 259). He did not tie himself to the author’s instructions but molded the play into his own creation. “Ce qui ne veut pas dire que ces spectacles ne seront pas rigoureusement composés et fixés une fois pour toutes avant d’être joués” (Œuvres Complètes [1956] 5: 41). While he wants theatre to originate in improvisation, Artaud indicates

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22 “True theatre, like culture, has never been written down” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 150)

23 “This does not mean,” he explained, “that the shows will not be rigorously composed and fixed once and for all before being performed” (Artaud on Theatre 85).
that the unfolding action should eventually become established and repeatable. In practice, the
actors’ improvisational skills were not up to Artaud’s expectations, and he blamed them for the
demise of the Théâtre Alfred Jarry (Complete Works 3:159-60). Despite this criticism of the
actors, he later stressed the importance of the mise-en-scène and the director’s control of the
production. It appears that had the Théâtre Alfred Jarry been successful, he would have gladly
taken all the credit as the director, but in its demise, he refuses responsibility.

Artaud’s notion of revolutionizing theatre was quite distinct from that of politically
oriented dramatists of his time, and he wholly rejected the artistic validity of didactic plays.
Writing to Roger Vitrac in February 1930, Artaud declared: “Il n’y a dans le théâtre que ce qui
est essentiellement théâtral qui m’intéresse, se servir du théâtre pour lancer n’importe quelle idée
révolutionnaire (sauf dans le domaine de l’esprit) me paraît du plus bas et du plus répugnant
opportunisme” (Œuvres Complètes [1976] 3 :174).24 He believed that theatre should not center
on the story being told but should rather focus on other non- or extra-linguistic forms of
communication. Artaud wanted theatre to be transformative, but emotionally, rather than
politically so.

In his essay “The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” Derrida
famously claimed that a true Theatre of Cruelty is impossible because Artaud wanted to destroy
the distinction between theatre and reality and thereby destroy theatre altogether. Derrida claims
that Artaud “kept himself at the limit of theatrical possibility, and that he simultaneously wanted
to produce and to annihilate the stage” (17). Derrida goes on to outline what Artaudian theatre
would not be. It would not be non-sacred theatre, absurd theatre, or one that privileges speech. It

24 “In the theatre only what is essentially theatrical is of interest to me; making use of the theatre to
promote any revolutionary idea (except in the domain of the mind) seems to me to be the basest and most
repugnant opportunism” (Artaud on Theatre 47-8).
would not be a theatre that creates a sense of alienation in the spectator because that only serves to reinforce the idea that the spectator is separated from the action. Finally, it would not be apolitical theatre, but it would also not be an ideological theatre that seeks to convey a message. Derrida concludes that “in thus enumerating the themes of infidelity, one comes to understand very quickly that fidelity is impossible” (“Theater of Cruelty” 247-248). He does not make exception for the work of Artaud himself. However, Jannarone argues that contrary to Derrida and much Artaudian scholarship, Artaud did in fact create the very theatre he was calling for through his use of sound and lights, his staging, his use of the scenario, and his attempts to disrupt the boundary between the actors and the spectators.

Despite Jannarone’s argument, neither Artaud’s nor other artists’ work fully emulates Artaud’s call for a Theatre of Cruelty because Derrida has rightfully shown the contradictions within Artaud’s manifesto. However, Artaud’s own work clearly moves in that direction and his ideas have inspired generations of theatre practitioners. Hayman argues that Artaud had more of an influence on the evolution of theatrical style than Adolphe Appia, Edward Gordan Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, or Erwin Piscator, despite their similar ideas or practices (86). He claims that it is through Artaud’s relationship with Jean-Louis Barrault that he had the most influence on French theatre because Barrault extended “the techniques of mime into his production ideas” and thereby validated “Artaud’s theatrical metaphysics” (101). However, Gautam Dasgupta argues that while the physical aspects of Artaud’s theatre were carried on, his philosophical ideologies were often abandoned (2). Those who did embrace his theories, did so in order to create an essential grammatics of the very nature of performance aesthetics. The new stage language that was being proposed was seen in a spiritual light, for it was creating a new
grammar of images and meaning that bypassed traditional channels of value embedded in the spoken word, a medium hugely suspect in the charged political atmosphere of the sixties and seventies. (Dasgupta 3)

While not every artist fully embraced all of Artaud’s ideas, it is clear that Artaud’s writings exerted an influence on the practice of many in the theatre. A true Theatre of Cruelty may never have been realized, but Artaud’s beliefs about theatre production and his general philosophy of the theatre had a real impact on subsequent generations, including the women whose works are examined in this study, as did those of another contemporary theoretician of the theatre, Bertolt Brecht.

**Bertolt Brecht: Theatre as Revolution**

While Artaud aimed to revolutionize theatrical conventions, Brecht used theatre as a tool to encourage political and social revolution beyond the auditorium walls. Originally seeking refuge from army conscription, Brecht enrolled in a university medical program where he also studied drama. He became politically conscious through his experiences as a medic in WWI and by observing the 1919 revolution in Germany, in which he was not actively involved (Fetscher 11). Seeking to understand the commodities market in Chicago for a play he was writing, Brecht read Marx, whose theories subsequently affected his view of both life and theatre (Fetscher 11). In adopting a Marxist perspective, Brecht sought to show spectators the artificiality of theatrical productions and strove to find ways to encourage them to think more critically about the ideas being presented. He wanted to use theatre to “provoke revolutionary political practice” (Kellner 34).

Brecht believed that the popular theatre of his time was a tool of the ruling classes that perpetuated bourgeois ideals. In writings such as “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,”
Brecht claimed that the theatre functioned primarily as a sort of entertainment machine and argued that theatre artists did not control their practice as much as they thought:

The *avant-garde* don’t think of changing the apparatus, because they fancy that they have at their disposal an apparatus which will serve up whatever they freely invent, transforming itself spontaneously to match their ideas. But they are not in fact free inventors; the apparatus goes on fulfilling its function with or without them; the theatres play every night; the papers come out so many times a day; and they absorb what they need, and all they need is a given amount of stuff. (*Brecht on Theatre* 34-35)

If artists continued to practice conventional modes of theatre, they would never truly control the ideas relayed and the theatre would remain a means of reinforcing the societal norms of the bourgeoisie. Like any other individual or entity, the theatre is the product of societal forces (Gillespie, “Feminist Theory” 106). Brecht believed that by revolutionizing the practice of theatre, he could revolutionize society because the theatre would truly become a tool of militants.

Traditionally, Brecht’s work is divided into three segments:

- an early subjectivist, or anarchist, or nihilist phase in *Baal* (I make the world), to a middle-period rationalist, or behaviourist or mechanist phase (the world makes me), to a supposed dialectical resolution of the dilemmas of phase one and two in the late plays (dialectic between self and world), presumed to usher in a third and mature phase.

(Wright 6)

Brecht’s in-depth study of Marxism in the mid-1920s influenced his transition from the first to the second phase, which occurred during the Weimar Republic. During this time, he conceived the *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays, as the term is sometimes translated in English. While these plays are often overlooked or seen as having lesser value than his later, epic plays, Elizabeth
Wright argues that they formed the foundation of his theories of the theatre (10) which began to radically change the theatre (Wright 24).

The *Lehrstücke* were designed to help the actors become revolutionaries. However, Brecht imagined these actors not as professionals, but as students and workers (Wright 12). These amateurs would serve as both actors and spectators as they exchanged roles to work and re-work a text (Fetscher 13). The goal was “to turn art into a social practice, an experiment in socially productive behavior” (Wright 13). The actors in these plays would change roles in order to experience different reactions to situations (Kellner 35). The *Lehrstücke* encouraged the actors to see political and social structures from multiple perspectives in order for them to more easily find solutions and to decide how to achieve them: “Plays could then be a means for rehearsing and practicing correct revolutionary action. They could make the lessons of history more comprehensible and encourage assuming the correct stances” (Fetscher 13). Additionally, non-participant spectators were able to reflect on the action portrayed on the stage and consider ways to effect change. These multiple and shifting points of view are one element of these plays’ modernism. Through the use of his learning plays, generally performed in small settings, both the audience and the actors were learning how to become better revolutionaries. Iris Smith suggests that Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* are more useful for feminist theatre than his later “masterpieces” because they focus on changing the way participants react (492). In subsequent chapters, I will examine the influence of Brecht’s theories of the *Lehrstücke* on French plays by women, particularly in the works of the Théâtre du Soleil.

Being forced into exile when the fascists seized control Germany in 1933 (Weber 60), Brecht abandoned the learning plays and turned to epic theatre, where he focused on forming new modes of representation instead of seeking to create a new society (Silberman 10). Like the
Lehrstücke, his epic plays were also a reaction to bourgeois theatre and were meant to “reveal the contradictions in bourgeois society” (Wright 24). As the times necessitated, these plays were less overtly political. However, Wright argues that Brecht saw his epic theatre, for which he is most well-known, as a compromise, or as a “minor pedagogy” as opposed to the “major pedagogy” of the Lehrstücke (113). Paradoxically, his late plays have become canonical, exhibiting the theatrical practices most closely associated with Brecht and that greatly influenced postmodernist playwrights. Nevertheless, these practices find their roots in the Lehrstücke, therefore the theories associated with these earlier plays should not be overlooked.

In contrast to Artaud, who favored theatrical experiences that overwhelmed the senses and thus emotionally gripped audiences, Brecht rejected the notion that spectators should be hypnotized by the action of the play (Brecht on Theatre 26). Criticizing the theatre of his day, Brecht writes: “If the séance is successful it ends with nobody seeing anything further, nobody learning any lessons, at best everyone recollecting. In short, everybody feels” (Brecht on Theatre 26). Instead of encouraging the spectator to see themselves as the protagonist, he believed they should be distanced from the play being presented. This is achieved through the V-effect, or the estrangement effect, (Verfremdungseffect): “the actor was to stand ‘beside the character’; identification and empathy were to be hindered in order to make the audience free to criticize the actions and positions that were shown” (Fetscher 13). Brecht wanted to demystify theatre by breaking the so-called fourth wall, not to make the audience part of the action as Artaud had done, but in an attempt to reveal the artifice of theatre and to keep the audience from identifying with the characters. While Artaud wanted the performance to surround the spectator in order to heighten their emotional responses, Brecht sought to dissolve the barrier between the audience and the performance in order to make the spectator more aware that they were watching a mere
representation of reality. In his thinking, if spectators empathized too greatly with the characters on stage, they would be blind to the causes and effects of the characters’ struggles just as they were to their own trials in life. By creating distance between the character and the actor, Brecht was calling attention to the fabricated nature of the “reality” being represented on stage. His main objective was to teach audiences to recognize how dominant ideologies are formed and disseminated through art forms, a process of de-mystification that, he hoped, would allow them to find ways to address the social inequalities and injustice to which they give rise.

Despite their contrasting goals, Brecht, like Artaud, was inspired by Asian theatre. He saw a performance by the Chinese actor Mei Lanfang while on tour in Moscow as well as a subsequent demonstration of his work at an informal party he attended. According to Brandon: “The Chinese theatre provided a concrete model of a nonrealistic theatre which, nonetheless, was profoundly human and emotionally moving” (30). Brecht used what he saw to develop his concept of alienation, which he presented/enunciated in an essay titled “On Chinese Acting.” It is important to keep in mind though, that like Artaud, Brecht had very limited experience with Asian theatre and was not an expert on the art (Brandon 31). The Chinese do not have the European notion of the fourth wall, and Brecht asserts that the Chinese actor does not attempt to conceal that he is performing on a stage. Additionally, he argues that the Chinese actor “looks at himself;” so that he is alienated from himself as well as from the audience (“On Chinese Acting” 130-1). Brecht also used the example of Chinese acting to confirm his theory of gestus, claiming that “he [the Chinese actor] indicates the outward signs of such a state of mind” and that “a few special symptoms are chosen out of many – obviously with great deliberation” (“On Chinese Acting” 132). This acting style, as Brecht perceived it, was achieved through deliberate movements associated with an emotional state of being without the actor needing to place
himself in that state.  It is interesting that both Artaud and Brecht were inspired by Eastern theatre practices that were very different from those adopted in Europe, but each drew somewhat different conclusions from what they saw, and each used that inspiration to reinforce their contrasting theories.

Brecht sought further distanciation, not just resisting audience identification with actors on stage, but in also placing his plays at a historical remove. Douglas Kellner explains, for instance, that “[i]n his epic theatre, [which was] built on the principles of historical specification and critique, Brecht sought to illuminate the historically specific features of an environment in order to show how that environment influenced, shaped, and often battered and destroyed the characters” (31). Brecht saw historical crises as cyclical in nature rather than occurring in a chronological trajectory (Brecht on Theatre 30), making them therefore more likely to repeat themselves. In considering comparable historical events, participants could see correlations with current events and learn ways of creating change that would break the cycle of repeating the past. Although the problems represented on stage had resemblances to past experience, they differed from the present, and Brecht hoped that audiences would see that “because the past has changed, the present is changeable” (Silberman 9). By creating temporal distance between the spectator and the action of the play, Brecht believed that the spectator could more easily adopt a critical attitude towards present-day society and its social and political problems. Furthermore, this distance allowed the spectator to see more clearly their capacity to affect the problems they saw in their own social milieu and to better understand the present problems in order to find more successful solutions.

25 This was in direct opposition to many influential acting schools of the period that espoused internally recreating emotions, the approach favored, for instance, in Stanislavski’s Method Acting.
With respect to the critical distance Brecht sought to establish between spectator and spectacle, the actors in his plays remove themselves from their character through the practice of *gestus*. In “Über gestische Musik,” Brecht explains his notion of *gestus*, a concept which John Willett translated as “gest,” in the following terms: “‘Gest’ is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explantory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men” (Brecht on Theatre 104). Brecht goes on to provide examples of what *gestus* is and is not: “The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social gest, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance if it comes to represent a badly dressed man’s continual battle against watchdogs” (Brecht on Theatre 104). What matters here is not the movement itself but the meaning the actor seeks to convey through it.²⁶ Wright sums up Brecht’s conception of *gestus*:

> the calculated pose whereby the actor shows the character’s estrangement from the role assigned to him; he does this by producing a set of contradictory attitudes, gestures, and modes of speech which reveal the difference within the subject, his being for himself as against his being for others, who confront him similarly divided. (52)

The gestic moment is not meant to encourage the audience to feel a sympathetic identification with the character. Instead, it is designed to oblige the audience to step outside of the action in

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²⁶ Editor and translator John Willett notes that “during 1937 Brecht propounded the idea of an international ‘Diderot Society’ which would circulate papers on ‘theatrical science’” and suggests that “Über gestische Musik” may have been originally written for such a venue. The choice of naming such a society after Denis Diderot shows the familiarity that Brecht had with his work. Diderot’s acting theory hinged on observing actions in order to properly recreate them, which would thereby create meaning when seen by the spectator. Brecht’s notion of *gestus* seems to have roots in this acting method based on specific actions instead of the Stanislavskian mandate that the actor feel an emotion internally which would create authentic outward signs of the inner feelings. Brecht’s famous breaking of the fourth wall also derives from Diderot, who originally coined the term. For more information on Diderot’s theatrical theory, consult his “Paradoxe sur le comédien” and Andy Byford’s “The Figure of the ‘Spectator’ in the Theoretical Writings of Brecht, Diderot, and Rousseau.”
order to contemplate the motives and actions of the character. Elin Diamond explains “Verfremdungseffekt” as “the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh” (“Brechtian Theory” 84). Through *gestus*, the familiar becomes strange and allows the spectator to consider and examine what had previously been accepted without question. Iris Smith notes that the notion of *gestus* emerged during the rise of fascism in the 1930s because “Brecht and others felt it was necessary to undermine the seductive slogans and images of fascist discourse.” It was used as a way to show the true meaning behind the Nazi’s propaganda (492-3). The *gestic* moment steps out of the sign system in order to reveal the forces producing the signs, a dynamic that challenges the signifying system itself.

Through a concerted effort to keep the audience from empathizing with the actor, Brecht showed the artificiality of the theatre and encouraged the spectator to reflect on the relation between what they witnessed on stage and their own life. Andy Byford shows that Brecht further encouraged this self-reflexive attitude by allowing spectators to watch each other during the performance (36). During the nineteenth century, theatres had used advancements in lighting technology to darken the house while illuminating the playing area (Fischer-Lichte 39). This prevented audience members from seeing one another in ways that distracted from the performance. However, Brecht calls for lighting that more fully illuminates both the stage and the house. The brightness that Brecht insists upon not only shows the theatrical mechanisms used to create illusion, but also allowed the audience members to observe others watching the show. In this way, the attendee becomes both spectator and actor, and the constructed nature of the theatre spectacle is further laid bare. By observing the act of watching the play, the spectator is further encouraged to reflect on the act of participating in a theatrical production.
Although he forces spectators to become actors for their fellow audience members, and notwithstanding the theory of the actor as both actor and spectator which he developed in *Lehrstücke*, Brecht refused to invite audience members to participate in the play itself. He did not want them to forget that the action they were witnessing was not real life, and he feared that if they joined the action on stage, they would lose sight of this fact. According to Byford: “by becoming ‘actors’ in any form, the spectators would be drawn into the illusion and thus into empathy” (38). In sum, in Brecht’s conception of the theatre, audience members are encouraged to observe the act of watching, which means they were also being watched by others; however, this critical stance also prevents them from forgetting they are at the theatre, which becoming part of the action on stage might allow them to do.

In addition to the group learning Brecht encouraged between the audience and the actors, he also advanced the idea of collectively created performances that are distinct from the production of traditional single-author plays. Like Artaud, Brecht’s theories sought to eliminate or reduce the author’s preeminence. As noted above, Artaud rejected the supremacy of the author and aimed to subordinate authorial intent to the director’s artistic vision, assigning to the latter responsibility for all aspects of the production and the meanings it formed. Artaud went so far as to reject entirely the use of scripts by calling for the director to suggest the scenario for the play or to loosely base works on known stories instead of using traditional dramatic pieces (*Complete Works* 4:75). In contrast, Brecht did not want to replace the authority of the playwright with that of the director. Like other modernists, he preferred collective authorship and working in collaboration with others whom he deemed to be an integral part of the creative process. Douglas Kellner remarks:
Such a revolution in the concept of creation, rejecting the notion of the creator as the solitary genius, was intended to alter aesthetic production radically, much as the workers’ council were intended to revolutionize industrial and political organization, thus providing a model for socialist cultural organization. (33)

For Brecht, the process of staging a play was as much a Marxist political statement as the written source material itself. By creating plays collectively, the theatre troupe could embody the Marxist ideal of equality among workers.

While it is important to recognize that Brecht had a strong influence on postmodern theatre in general, Elin Diamond outlines many of the ways feminist theatre borrows Brechtian techniques and further argues that “Brechtian theory and feminist theory, read intertextually, create the basis for a flexible materialist criticism” (“Mimesis” 61). Diamond highlights four Brechtian theatrical practices that have been embraced by feminist practitioners: _Verfremdungseffekt_, historicization, the “not, but,” and _gestus_ (“Brechtian Theory” 83). The introduction of the v-effect in feminist theatre emphasizes the arbitrariness of gender, while historicization questions its truthfulness, shows gender as a construction, and allows spectators to see how gender roles can be transformed (Diamond, “Brechtian Theory” 86-7). Diamond understands Brecht’s theory of “not, but” to be a result of alienation that allows the spectator to see both the action the character has chosen to take and the actions they have not taken. She argues that in feminist theatre this stance allows for a “deconstruction of gender” that undoes binaries and opens the way for a general proliferation of meaning (“Brechtian Theory” 86). Finally, Diamond argues that _gestus_ “makes room, at least theoretically, for a viewing position for the female spectator” because it disrupts both the spectator’s identification with the character and resists the kind of scopophilia where actors, particularly women, are objectified and exist
only ‘to be looked at.’ When observing a character, the spectator’s gaze is interrupted by the actor who can also look back at the spectator (Diamond, “Brechtian Theory” 90). Diamond has clearly shown the link between Brechtian practices and feminist theatre. However, as Elizabeth Sakellaridou points out, Brecht is not always cited as a source of feminist theatre despite the clear influence of his work (182). Instead, feminist theatre artists use these techniques while denying an affinity to Brecht. Denis Varney argues that Brecht was rejected by feminists in the 1980s because he ignored historical women and the contributions of his female collaborators (128). Their denial of Brecht’s influence could also be due to the ubiquitous nature of Brecht’s impact on theatre technique to the point that the theoretician has been forgotten. However, this disregard of Brecht’s influence may be the result of feminist practitioners seeing themselves heeding Artaud’s call to create emotional responses in audiences, a position that contrasts sharply with Brecht’s more cognitive approach to encourage audience contemplation of societal problems and possible resolutions for them. The theatre practitioners examined in this study, particularly Cixous, may well have considered these two influences to be irreconcilable and that their work could not exemplify both, but I will argue, it does precisely that.

Despite the striking differences in their ideological stances, Artaud and Brecht each exerted a strong influence on the development of women-centered theatre in France. For instance, Artaud and Brecht shared similar views on the use of theatrical space and both rejected the limitations of the proscenium arch, commonalities that can be attributed to each author’s desire to revolutionize the theatre. However, both Artaud and Brecht had very different motivations for eschewing conventional theatrical practices; As I have established, Artaud

\[\text{Their techniques can also be seen as an effort to distance theatre from the cinema. While cinema forces the audience’s perspective of the action and confines them to their position as spectators, these new theatre techniques allowed the audience to be participants in the production. This role is impossible in film, thus pushing it to the limit increases the differentiation of film and theatre.}\]
sought to gain a greater emotional hold over the audience, while Brecht sought to draw the
viewer’s cognitive attention to the nature of the theatrical artifice. Sara Lennox argues that

[i]f the unconscious, which gives evidence of our own human link to nature, is the site of
a desire which Western reason cannot allow to speak, the site of a different discourse
which can tolerate contradictions; if even, as some feminists have argued, women are
what has been repressed into the unconscious, then for feminists Brechtian dramaturgy
must be supplemented to allow that which is other than reason to emerge. (18)

Lennox suggests this could be done through the inclusion of Artaud’s theories of the Theatre of
Cruelty (18). This study answers both Diamond’s call for an intertextual reading of Brecht and
French feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva (“Mimesis” 68-9) and Lennox’s call for a theory
of feminist theatre that incorporates the insights of both Artaud and Brecht.

Julia Kristeva: On Creating Meaning and the Tension Between Language and the Non-
Discursive

While Antonin Artaud’s and Bertolt Brecht’s theories appear to be in opposition, they can
be seen as anchoring two ends of a spectrum of theatrical expression. The plays I have studied
fall along this continuum as they incorporate these influences to varying degrees. The women
playwrights I study sought to create an emotional response through an Artaudian emphasis on
sensory stimulation. Their use of music, rhythm, lighting, and movement aligns with Julia
Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic in that it embodies forms of signification that exist outside of
language. At the same time, these women also have political motivations reminiscent of Brecht’s
approach to the theatre. They represent women’s position in society and often use Brechtian
techniques to examine societal norms. Likewise, this desire to drive the spectator to reflect on
questions of gender and social justice aligns with Kristeva’s notion of the symbolic in the sense
that they deploy language and logic in enunciating their political stances. Women playwrights working in France after 1968 were able to create artistically rich and politically engaged theatre by stirring both emotion and critical reflection. Kristeva’s theories of subject formation help to explain how these writers operate in both the semiotic and the symbolic registers, two spheres of expression that also reveal the influence that Artaud and Brecht had on their work.

In *La Révolution du langage poétique*, Julia Kristeva draws on Jacques Lacan’s notion that the human subject is constituted in language and then only tenuously so, an insight informed by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories of the sign.\(^\text{28}\) Subsequently, Jacques Derrida threw into question Saussure’s understanding of the binary nature of the sign and demonstrates in his essay “Différance” that meaning produced in language is always deferred. For Derrida, “[s]igns represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. … The sign would thus be a deferred presence. … the movement of signs defers the moment of encountering the thing itself” (138). In other words, meaning is never fixed but is always suspended. Kristeva expands this notion of the instability of language and of human subjectivity. She complicates Lacan’s view that the human subject is formed in the Imaginary and Symbolic, adding to his formulation that a distinction is to be drawn between the semiotic and the symbolic where the interaction between these two registers defines the signifying process (Moi, “Introduction” 12). To understand the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic, it is first necessary to define more precisely what Kristeva means by these two terms.

What Kristeva calls the semiotic\(^\text{29}\) register is situated temporally in Lacan’s pre-mirror stage (Fortier 104) and belongs to what Freud described as pre-Oedipal primary processes (Moi, “Introduction” 12).

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\(^{28}\) For a discussion of the theoretical developments from Freud, to Saussure, to Benveniste to Lacan, see Kaja Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics*.

\(^{29}\) Although broadly influenced by its insights, Kristeva’s use of the term “semiotic” should not be confused with Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of the sign and the branch of linguistics he developed.
“Introduction” 12); it is a pre-linguistic state dominated by emotion and instinct, which is bound up with the mother’s body and what patriarchal societies often construe as “the feminine.” Borrowing Plato’s term *thora*, a word referring to a nourishing maternal space, Kristeva situates this moment of subject formation before Lacan’s mirror stage. The *thora*, she explains, is neither a sign nor an actual subject position: “Neither model nor copy, the *thora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm” (*Revolution* 26). Kristeva shows how the drives are created and explains their importance in the formation of the self:

Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body – always already involved in a semiotic process – by family and social structures. (*Revolution* 25)

Kristeva further posits that the *thora* is formed by these drives: “In this way the drives, which are ‘energy’ charges as well as ‘physical’ marks, articulate what we call a *thora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stasis in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (*Revolution* 25). The *thora* is neither sign nor signifier but rather a state of being “generated in order to attain to this signifying position” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26); it is a non-discursive movement and energy, that is, a site of extralinguistic enunciation, or meaning-making. In the *thora*, signification is produced without language, becoming the product of sound, music, rhythm, color, light, and all other forms of expression that exist outside of language.

Kristeva locates the *thora* in the pre-linguistic phase and associates it with what she labels the semiotic. She contrasts this moment with the symbolic order, a moment where the acquisition of language introduces the subject to social law and order and what Lacan called the
“Law of the Father.” As noted above, the child in its pre-linguistic state is often closely associated with the mother. The acquisition of language marks the moment when s/he enters the symbolic order and turns away from the mother towards the father (Fortier 104). With it comes the realization of difference from the other: “the symbolic – and therefore syntax and all linguistic categories – is a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures” (Kristeva, Revolution 29). In an interview with Ina Lipkowitz and Andrea Loselle in November 1985, Kristeva defines more succinctly what she means by the symbolic and the semiotic:

By symbolic, I mean the tributary signification of language, all the effects of meaning that appear from the moment linguistic signs are articulated into grammar, not only chronologically but logically as well. In other words, the symbolic is both diachronic and synchronic; it concerns both the acquisition of language and the present syntactic structure. By semiotic, on the other hand, I mean the effects of meaning that are not reducible to language or that can operate outside language, even if language is necessary as an immediate context or as a final referent. By semiotic, I mean, for example, the child’s echolalia before the appearance of language, but also the play of colors in an abstract painting or a piece of music that lacks signification but has a meaning…. (“A Conversation” 21)

In other words, while the semiotic is outside language, it may continue to interface with language but does not rely entirely on language to create meaning.

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30 In contemporary society, the child-rearing role is often assumed by someone other than the mother. However, there remains a societal expectation that places the ultimate responsibility for childcare on the mother.
Signification is produced when the thetic phase interrupts or splits the semiotic, or the chora (Moi, “Introduction” 12). Kristeva distinguish[es] the semiotic (drives and their articulations) from the realm of signification, which is always that of a proposition or judgment, in other words, a realm of positions. This positionality, which Husserlian phenomenology orchestrates through the concepts of doxa, position, and thesis, is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the identification of the subject and its object as preconditions of propositionality. We shall call this break, which produces the positing of signification, a thetic. (Revolution 43)

The thetic is the movement from the semiotic to the symbolic. All of the primary processes, such as Freud’s notions of displacement and condensation, or what might be seen as our “genetic programming,” are semiotic because they are the necessary components for the language acquisition required for subject formation through the thetic (Kristeva, Revolution 29). Kristeva concludes that “the thetic is the precondition for both enunciation and denotation” (Revolution 53). Language is not possible without the break in the semiotic, or thetic, a move that is essential for the subject’s introduction into the symbolic order.

In contrast to Freud, Kristeva argues that the subject is in constant flux, hovering in the space between the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic continuously returns to disrupt the unity of the thetic subject as a “subject always renewed in the never-ending struggle of semiotic and symbolic, feminine and masculine forces” (Fortier 104). Lacan introduces the idea of the mirror stage where the subject for the first time sees himself as a distinct being, separate, from his mother. However, Kristeva points out that instead of seeing himself as a whole, the child perceives himself to be more fragmented as he can never fully visualize himself in the mirror.
From the mirror stage on, “in order to capture his image unified in a mirror, the child must remain separate from it, his body agitated by the semiotic motility we discussed above which fragments him more than it unifies him in a representation” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 46). There is no final, fixed, territorially defined subject because it is always fragmented and forever wavering between the semiotic and the symbolic registers. The semiotic constantly disrupts the symbolic order, which in turn strives to master semiotic impulses and is forever frustrated in this quest.

In *Le Sujet en procès* (1972), Kristeva argues that Artaud’s writing represents this tension between the semiotic and the symbolic in a dynamic she calls the subject in process.

Artaud’s glossolalia and ‘eructations’ reject the symbolic function and mobilise the drives which this function represses in order to constitute itself. […] This pulsional network, which is readable, for example, in the pulsional roots of the non-semanticised phonemes of Artaud’s texts, represents (for theory) the *mobile-receptacle site of the process*, which takes the place of the unitary subject. Such a site, which we will call the *chora*, can suffice as a representation of the subject in process […]. (“From ‘The Subject’” 118)

Artaud’s writing style resembles his prescriptions for the theatre in that his style is highly rhythmic and emphasizes changes in tone. It erupts in words or phrases written in capital letters or italics, and in sentences that trail off, ending in single-word sentences. Kristeva also sees split subjectivity represented in Artaud’s art:

The fragmented and reorganized *chora* is best realized in dance, gestural theatre or painting, rather than in words. Artaud’s theatrical practice, and perhaps especially the Rodez paintings, or those which accompany the last texts, bear witness to this non-verbal
but logical (in the sense of ‘binding’) organization of expulsion. (‘From ‘The Subject’” 122).

Kristeva herself draws a clear link between the semiotic register, Artaud’s theory, and the nature of artistic expression. While she makes no mention of Bertolt Brecht’s work in comparison with Artaud’s, one can extrapolate from her theory of subjectivity that the importance Brecht assigns to critical reflection and rational, dialectical thought, which relies on an ordered use of language falls outside the semiotic register. While gesture and nonlinguistic elements certainly create meaning in his theatre practice, his aim is always to force the spectator to think logically about the meanings his plays create and to consider their relation to their life, a rational process that takes place in the symbolic register.

Kristeva aligns the semiotic with the idea of jouissance: “The semiotic is heard in rhythms, intonation, and children’s echolalia as well as in artistic practice and in discourse that signifies less an ‘object’ than a jouissance” (“unes femmes” 105). The semiotic does not create meaning through a system of signs where it points directly to a signified object. Instead, it creates meaning through emotion and ecstasy. Kristeva also recognizes that the semiotic represents those elements that are more often associated with women and sees art existing between these two:

Since our society considers mastery as well as logic and syntax to be masculine and rhythms, glossolia, and the pre-oedipal stage to be related to the mother and by extension to the woman, one could say that a creative act is a function not of difference but of sexual differentiation between these two axis. (“unes femmes” 109)

Kristeva posits that art is figured in both the symbolic and the semiotic registers, but that it has a higher concentration of semiotic elements in relation to the symbolic: “Art transforms language
into rhythms and transforms ‘aberrations’ into stylistic figures” (“unes femmes” 109-10).

Accordingly, women should neither appropriate a masculine form of power nor should they merely be relegated to the semiotic register. The means of expression associated with the semiotic can be subversive, but she argues that it is necessary to find a balance between the two registers:

It seems to me that one must try not to deny these two aspects of linguistic communication, the master aspect and the aspect that is more of the body and of the impulses, but to try, in every situation and for every woman, to find a proper articulation of these two elements. What does ‘proper’ mean? That which best fits the specific history of each woman, which best express her. (“Feminism and Psychoanalysis” 117)

The plays by women written and produced in the 1970s through the 1990s exploited this tension between the semiotic and symbolic registers. I propose that their art was more complex and their message more powerful as a consequence of their intertwining of rhythm and music with rational discourse.

However, because the semiotic and the symbolic cannot be decoupled, Kristeva also argues that no signifying practice (in our case, the writing and performance of plays) falls entirely in the realm of either the semiotic or the symbolic register:

These two modalities [the semiotic and the symbolic] are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called ‘natural’ language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are non-verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). But, as
we shall see, this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both. \(\text{\em Revolution 24}\)

In other words, because writers and artists, both male and female, operate in both of these registers, it is impossible for them to create a work of art in which meaning is produced in only one of these modalities. However, to what extent each register is brought into artistic play may well be defined at least to some extent by an author’s gender. My study of works by Cixous, Mnouchkine, and Benmussa, all representative of the contributions of French playwrights in the period in question, shows that they fully embrace the semiotic register and do so in particularly creative ways that highlight issues of gender oppression and misogyny and problematize the subordinate status of women in society.

In a later work, \textit{Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection}, Kristeva formulated the notion of “ab-jection” and defined it as a state of perpetual fluctuation located on the boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic. Feelings of horror, or the “ab-ject,” emerge in the space where one hovers between subject and object relations. A subject experiences “abjection” when it is drawn into this liminal space of the self. In Kristeva’s view, the threat of a complete breakdown in meaning and the reaction to that threat creates the state of abjection. She claims that human beings have two means of purifying the “ab-ject”: through religious and artistic practice. Art allows the subject to continually move between the semiotic and the symbolic. In essence, “…the very practice of art necessitates reinvesting the maternal chora so that it transgresses the symbolic order […] No text, no matter how ‘musicalized,’ is devoid of meaning or signification;
on the contrary, musicalization pluralizes the meanings” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 65). Kristeva shows how modernist art plays with sound, light, and movement in ways that recall the pre-linguistic forms of expression which place it in the space between the symbolic and semiotic. No work of art has only one meaning but produces instead many meanings that arise when forms of semiosis intrude upon the symbolic. For Kristeva, modernist art mimics the subject’s movement between the semiotic and the symbolic because

it repeats not a detached object but the movement of the symbolic economy. By

*reproducing signifiers* – vocal, gestural, verbal – the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semiotic *chora*, which is on the other side of the social frontier.

The reenacting of the signifying path taken from the symbolic unfolds the symbolic itself and – through the border that sacrifice is about to present or has already presented on stage – opens it up to the motility where all meaning is erased. (*Revolution* 79)

Kristeva also presents the notion of sacrifice as the end to semiotic volatility which is mastered through the violence the fracturing self undergoes as it enters into the symbolic order. Sacrifice and art become “two aspects of the thetic function: the prohibition of jouissance by language and the introduction of jouissance into and through language” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 80). Sacrifice is the repression of the semiotic by the symbolic, and art is the disruption of the symbolic by the semiotic as it erupts in language.

Kristeva shows that all art has the potential to propel the subject back to the margins of the semiotic and the symbolic, but she places particular emphasis on poetry’s capacity to do so. Poetry disrupts linguistic order by playing with grammatical structure and by privileging the sonority of signifiers over their signifieds. Poetry, by its very nature, is the semiotic (the musicality of the language) disrupting the symbolic (the logic of the words). The play between
the semiotic and the symbolic allows poetry to evoke a multiplicity of meanings through rhythm, imagery, and word play.

Faced with language and society, however, poetry no longer encounters a sacrifice that is suggestive of the thetic but rather thesis itself (logic-language-society). It can therefore no longer remain merely ‘poetry’; instead, through the positing of the thetic, poetry becomes an explicit confrontation between jouissance and the thetic that is, a permanent struggle to show the facilitation of drives with the linguistic order itself. (Revolution 81) Kristeva’s understanding of art as a cultural site where the semiotic erupts and impinges on the symbolic order has implications not just for individual subjects but for society as well. Art’s spontaneous movement between these two registers threatens the unity of society as the semiotic disrupts social law and the sign systems that support it (Kristeva, Revolution 80).

For Kristeva, jouissance is a spontaneous expression of the semiotic. In feminist theatre, the influence of Artaud and of his call to mobilize non-linguistic sign systems collides with the symbolic order of the written text and the desire to create feminist political meaning of the sort favored in Brecht’s theatre. This post-modern theatre by women does not make claims of absolute truth, but rather questions the very existence of unitary meaning while opening itself to the revelation of multiple truths. The women’s theatre I am studying destroys old and creates new meanings as it strives to disrupt established norms and what came to be identified in this period as phallogocentrism (the term Derrida coined to describe Western society’s privileging of the masculine over the feminine and language and logic over poeticized and non-verbal forms of signification).

Cixous, Mnouchkine, and Benmussa have adopted some of the practices that were favored by both Artaud and Brecht. At times they replicated Artaud’s embrace of non-linguistic
forms of signification and at others adopted Brechtian notions of theatre as a form of political praxis. This dual posture produced tensions that mirror those present in Kristeva’s theoretical formulations. In important respects, her theory of the semiotic (non-linguistic meaning-making) and the symbolic (the entry into language and the cognition associated with her understanding of “the law of the father”) bear a striking resemblance to the distinctions one can draw on the one hand between Artaud’s privileging of the sensory, and on the other, the realm of ideological and political consciousness in which Brecht’s didactic theatre operates. Elaine Aston asserts that feminist theatrical works can be classified as belonging either to the semiotic or symbolic realms (52). However, I maintain that the texts I am studying should not be assigned to one or the other of these categories, but that they exist on a continuum between these two opposing forces, leaning towards one or the other at various moments and to differing degrees. Kristeva’s conception of subject formation and her understanding of its constant vacillation between the semiotic and the symbolic registers of meaning will provide the theoretical frame to examine the influences of Artaud and Brecht on the plays studied as well as the interplay of linguistic and scenic playfulness with the desired social message these authors strive to purvey.
Despite having written more than a dozen plays, Hélène Cixous is better known as a theorist and author of poetic fiction. Her influential 1975 article “Le Rire de la Méduse” called for women to practice what she called l’écriture féminine, a subversive writing style meant to disrupt all forms of patriarchal hegemony. While theatre may not be her primary focus, her plays have been produced to critical and popular acclaim for more than four decades. Cixous’s multi-lingual and multi-national upbringing have had a profound influence on her work as her writing is characterized by wordplay, sonority, and often multi-cultural themes. The highly poetic nature of her writing style, combined with a firm commitment to political action, exemplifies the interplay of the Kristevan notions of the symbolic and the semiotic registers to create unique women-centered drama. While not all of her plays have advanced a feminist agenda, they all work to disrupt the societal status quo, often with an eye towards achieving greater social justice. Cixous has rejected the feminist label, but Toril Moi points out that Cixous actually renounces forms of bourgeois and social feminism seeking only to gain power within a patriarchal system, advocating instead that we work to dismantle it entirely. Moi claims that Cixous, in fact, strongly supports the women’s movement (Sexual/Textual 101) and can therefore be considered feminist in a broader sense of the term. As I will show, her early plays employ écriture féminine to advance a strong feminist agenda.

In “Le rire de la Méduse,” Cixous presents the idea of écriture féminine as a style of writing that emanates from the body, rejects masculine logic, accesses the unconscious, and voices the cry of the woman who no longer accepts the patriarchal system that subjugates her. What Cixous calls “the feminine” is a realm of signification that is not about women per se but points rather to the semiotic interjecting itself into the symbolic and disrupting forms of phallic
signification. I will argue here that theatre by women practitioners can often be considered forms of *écriture féminine*. The writing of the female dramatists I am studying often resembles poetry; their use of language, their rejection of teleological order, and the emphasis they place on music, bodily movement, and visual aspects all work to stir an emotional response from the audience instead of merely appealing to its analytical reasoning. I will explore Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* and then use one of her early theatrical works, *Portrait de Dora* (1976) to show how she put it into practice. The extent to which other playwrights manifest feminine writing will be examined throughout this study.

**Écriture Féminine: The Call for Women to Write**

As I have shown in the introduction, feminism in the second half of the twentieth century can generally be divided into three categories: liberal, radical, and materialist. However, feminism has followed a somewhat different trajectory in France than it has in the US and Britain. In the 1970s, American feminists tended to embrace materialist feminism while French feminists began to celebrate difference and to call for the creation of a new feminine language. As I have shown, this type of feminism was labeled as radical by some American critics who already viewed it as passé while it was thriving in France. Despite the sometimes negative reception of this strand of French feminism, it offers an important opportunity to examine the role of language in the perpetuation of women’s oppression. Jeannette Laillou Savona and Ann Wilson argue that French feminist playwrights “explore subversive forms of theatrical language through an assertion of the female body or the maternal experience as metaphor” (3). Under the influence of Lacanian psycho-analytics and Derridean linguistic philosophy, French feminists “promote the expression of the repressed feminine unconscious and female body. They want to
create a positive mythology of femininity through a ‘different’ discourse and a ‘different’ poetics which will subvert the dominant symbolic order” (Savona 541).

*Écriture Féminine* has been criticized as being essentialist in its assertion that there is even such a thing as a feminine form of writing. However, to reduce Cixous’s argument to merely the notion that there is something essentially common to women’s writing and its difference from men’s does a disservice to the complexity of her argument and disregards the role of writing in the fight for women’s equality. Cixous maintains that because women are already outside the traditional power structures, they are better positioned to write differently, and to exhibit qualities which she characterizes as *écriture féminine*. Cixous does not suggest that there is only one way of writing that is common to all women because of their sex, but that women can reclaim their power through writing. To do so requires a style that is different from everything that came before, so she cries out to women to write themselves without trying to emulate the logical masculine writing style of the past.

In “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous addresses women directly, woman-to-woman, writer-to-writer. However, she does not simply want individual women to reclaim their personal power, but she wants women to write in order to affect monumental change in society: “J’écris ceci en tant que femme vers les femmes. Quand je dis ‘la femme’, je parle de la femme en sa lutte inévitable avec l’homme classique ; et d’une femme sujet universelle, qui doit faire advenir les femmes à leur(s) sens et leur histoire” (“Rire” 39).31 Cixous sees writing as a key component of feminism because of the importance of language in how gender norms are conceived, understood, and perpetuated. French feminists saw the world as being controlled by men and

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31 “I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say ‘woman,’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (“Laugh” 875-876).
emphasized the role that language had in perpetuating gender inequity. Because their theories were greatly influenced by psychoanalytical analysis, they saw the ordered, logical world as masculine based in part on subject formation theories proposed by Lacan that associated the possession of a phallus with power and defined women as lacking. Because sexual difference is defined by a subject’s relationship to the phallus, men and women come to language differently. Lacanian theory claims that “female entry into language is organized by lack, or negativity” (Kuhn 37). Therefore, something that was new and was to be seen as breaking from this masculine order, such as a new way of writing, was labeled “feminine” as the opposite of “masculine.”

While writing has traditionally been considered a universal phenomenon that is neither feminine nor masculine, it is in fact inscribed in status quo that sees masculine modes of expression as the universal norm. Cixous points to the ways in which, historically, writing has been aligned with masculinity:

Je soutiens, sans équivoque, qu’il y a des écritures marquées ; que l’écriture a été jusqu’à présent, de façon beaucoup plus étendue, répressive, qu’on le soupçonne ou qu’on l’avoue, gérée par une économie libidinale et culturelle – donc politique, typiquement masculine – un lieu où s’est reproduit plus ou moins consciemment, et de façon redoutable car souvent occulté, ou paré des charmes mystifiants de la fiction, le refoulement de la femme ; un lieu qui a charrié grossièrement tous les signes de l’opposition sexuelle (et non de la différence) et où la femme n’a jamais eu sa parole, ceci étant d’autant plus grave et impardonnable que justement l’écriture est la possibilité
Anu Aneja notes that “Cixous sees traditional writing as closely identified with a singular
‘neutral’ discourse which speaks about the female body but will not let it speak (for) itself” (17).
Aneja’s use of quotations on “neutral” alludes to the fact that historically writing has not been
neutral at all, despite having long been set-forth as such. In order to transform how women are
perceived and defined, it is necessary to change written and spoken discourse. Thus, Cixous’s
aim is manifold. She wants women to write because they have been denied a voice and have not
been allowed to write their own experience; she also wants them to claim this power, and in
doing so to create new modes of expression.

Moi explains that for Cixous, there is a “distinction between a ‘masculine’ and a
‘feminine’ libidinal economy. These are marked, respectively, by the Realm of the Proper and
the Realm of the Gift” (Sexual/Textual 109). The Proper is related to “self-identity, self-
aggrandizement and arrogant dominance,” whereas the feminine is closely associated with
generosity (Moi, Sexual/Textual 109-111). Cixous associates feminine writing with abundance
where works overflow with words and ideas. Moi further clarifies that Cixous’s notion of the
feminine aligns with Derrida’s conception of writing which is open to the other and thus
becomes “a deconstructive space of pleasure and orgasmic interchange with the other”

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32 I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far more extensively and
repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political,
typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and
over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the
mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not
sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak – this being all the more serious and unpardonable in
that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive
thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (“Laugh” 879)
*(Sexual/Textual 111).* Therefore, *écriture féminine* is an outshoot of Derridean deconstruction but one that emphasizes the particular way in which women can disrupt power structures through writing and language. *Écriture féminine*’s abundance and generosity embraces written works that are polysemic and that speak from multiple perspectives. Cixous explains:

Par contre le commencement ou plutôt les commencements, la manière de commencer, non pas ponctuellement par le phallus pour refermer avec le phallus, mais de commencer de tous les côtés à la fois, ça c’est de l’inscription féminine. Un texte féminin commence de tous les côtés à la fois, ça commence vingt fois, trente fois. ("Le sexe” 14)

*Écriture féminine* is not teleological; instead it presents its subject matter from many places and perspectives at once. Like her fictional writing, Cixous’s plays exemplify her ideal of *écriture féminine*, although, as I will show, they do so in different ways from her poetic fiction.

To change the human culture, it is not enough to create something that is merely oppositional. Leslie Rabine argues that Cixous attempts to break free from the gender dichotomy altogether. This is similar to the 1960s activists’ desire to completely dismantle the system of production and class distinction in French society. Daniel Singer points to a document distributed during the general strike in May 1968 that read:

There are ten percent of workers’ sons in higher education. Are we fighting so that there should be more of them, for a democratic reform of the University? This would be better, but this is not the most important thing…. That a worker’s son should be able to become a director, this is not our program. We want to abolish the separation between labor and management.

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33 “Rather it’s the beginning, or beginnings, the manner of beginning, not promptly with the phallus in order to close with the phallus but starting on all sides at once that makes a feminine writing. A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over” (“Castration” 53).
There are students who, on leaving university, do not find a job. Do we fight so
that they may get one, for a good employment policy for graduates? This would be better,
but it is not the essential…. We want to build a classless society. (xxiv-xxv)

Like these students and workers who wanted to create an entirely new society, Cixous and other
French feminists ultimately sought to eliminate the gender binary through changes in language.
However, they struggled to break free from gendered language in their theory which caused
materialist feminists to dismiss *écriture féminine* as essentialist. Rabine asserts that Cixous
rejects the phallocentric system of binary opposition entirely because “the structure of dualist,
hierarchical oppositions, which shapes thought and language and on which meaning depends,
works unerringly to exclude feminine difference and make woman a mirror image of man” (27).
This happens because in oppositional pairs, such as man/woman, the second term is defined in
opposition to the first and is thus perceived as inferior.

It is helpful to attempt to trace Cixous’s semiotic theory back through Derrida who was in
turn responding to Saussure’s observation that language is diacritical. In other words, meaning is
created through opposition. An object is defined as not being something else. Derrida asserts that
in these oppositional pairs, one term becomes marginalized because a hierarchy is formed
between them. Because the first item in the pair is defined as not being the second, the first is
perceived as possessing more value than the second. Therefore, already at the linguistic level, the
binary man/woman is unequal because the second term is defined in opposition to the first and is
thus relegated to the margins while the first term, in this case man, is privileged within
phallocentric signification. Nevertheless, Derrida also problematizes the stability of this
relationship through his notion of the undecidable, or “something that cannot conform to either
polarity of a dichotomy” (Reynolds 46). Jack Reynolds explains that Derrida argues that “in all
texts there are inevitably points of undecidability that betray any stable meaning that an author might seek to impose upon his or her text” (46). Cixous uses the instability of language to challenge phallogocentric forms of signification and their marginalizing effects.

Rabine points to Cixous’s use of homonyms as one of the ways in which she subverts the linguistic and social system (28). For example, the use of the word *voler* in the “Laugh of the Medusa” combines the meanings of “to steal” and “to fly” and does so in such a way that the word contains both meanings yet cannot be contained by either one or the other. Reynolds suggests that Derrida’s work shows that “this kind of equivocation breaks open the meaning that an author seeks to impose upon their work and exposes it to alternative understandings that undermine the explicit authorial intention” (46). However, Cixous uses the undecidability of homonyms explicitly to create a proliferation of meaning. In doing so, Cixous disrupts the entire sign system of language by underscoring the degree to which language lends itself to the disruption of binary signifying practices. Cara Berger claims that Cixous “advocates replacing the culture of opposition, in which one term is sacrificed for another, with a culture of difference in the Derridean sense” (42). Through *écriture féminine*, culturally fixed binary oppositions are thrown into question in ways that disrupt the social hierarchies they support. Cixous’s writing offers “plurality against unity; multitudes of meanings against single, fixed meanings; diffuseness against instrumentality; openness against closure” (Kuhn 38). Cixous’s writing is polysemic; it explodes with meaning. Each of her assertions and questions can be broken open and dissected to reveal a multitude of connotations. Cixous not only calls for a change in the way women write, she also writes both theoretical and fictional works in a manner that disrupts traditionally accepted writing practices.
Cixous’s interruption of conventional discursive forms is not relegated only to her creative use of language as exemplified by homonyms but is evident in her other innovative uses of language as well. Rabine shows Cixous’s fluid use of pronouns in “Le Rire de la Méduse” as a destabilizing characteristic:

Her address to the reader as “you” at the beginning of the essay plays into her strategy of undoing phallocentric discourse as this pronoun slips into the unstable shifting between first, second, and third person feminine pronouns. I, you, she, they, and we merge into each other, change places, give each other to each other, and in general deny the stable positionality of the phallic subject. (31)

While Cixous begins the essay speaking to the reader, it quickly becomes apparent that she is speaking to herself as well as she slides between pronouns. There is no unified, single audience for her writing, neither you, them, nor I. This allows her to call into question the stability of the subject in general by disrupting the unity of the audience. Cixous’s emphasis on the instability and fracturing of the subject in writing echoes Kristeva’s theories of the same.

Traditionally, writing is judged, at least in part, on the writer’s ability to write clearly and logically, which is perceived as the best way to convey meaning to the reader. However, Cixous labels conventional writing as masculine and calls into question the supremacy of reason in writing: “Presque toute l’histoire de l’écriture se confond avec l’histoire de la raison dont elle est à la fois l’effet, le soutien, et un des alibis privilégiés. Elle a été homogène à la tradition phallocentrique” (“Rire” 42).34 She uses poetic language to disrupt the primacy of reason while aligning poetic expression with the body using women’s reproductive ability as a metaphor for the creative process. According to her, by writing with and through the body, women will create

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34 “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallocentric order” (“Laugh” 879).
an entirely new form of expression that will help to dismantle masculine hegemony. Further aligning feminine writing with the body, Cixous, along with other feminist theorists of the period, equates women’s writing with jouissance, meaning both orgasm and ecstasy:

These French women agree that resistance does take place in the form of jouissance, that is, in the direct reexperience of the physical pleasures of infancy and of later sexuality, repressed but not obliterated by the Law of the Father. Kristeva stops here; but Irigaray and Cixous go on to emphasize that women, historically limited to being sexual objects for men (virgins or prostitutes, wives or mothers), have been prevented from expressing their sexuality in itself or for themselves. If they can do this, if they can speak about it in the new languages it calls for, they will establish a point of view (a site of différence) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory, but also in practice. (Jones “Writing” 248)

Seeing an equivalence between the repression of women’s sexuality and their perceived intellectual inferiority in traditional society, Cixous and other French feminists create a link between sexuality and freedom and favor women finding ways of expressing both. Luce Irigaray, one of Cixous’s contemporaries and fellow proponent of a feminine style of writing,36 draws the analogy between female orgasm and an explosion of creative production, describing the jouissance of women’s writing: “Nor would this movement go in any single direction. The text would explode in all directions at once, exactly the way woman’s body (and sex organs) explode into fragments” (Féral “Building up” 55). Through writing, women can reclaim their bodies

35 While Jones labels this a “site of difference” using one of the standard French spellings, she may be referring to the Derridian différence, as Cixous’s theories build upon Derrida’s.
36 Toril Moi stresses that “[i]t is interesting to note that in spite of certain divergences, Irigaray’s vision of femininity and of feminine language style of writing is almost indistinguishable from Cixous’s” (Sexual/Textual 142). Irigaray contends that women have a specific language, “le parler femme,” that happens when women speak with each other but disappears in the presence of men (Moi Sexual/Textual 143-4).
(Cixous “Rire” 43) and in doing so, the writing they produce expresses an unbridled creativity and a proliferation of meaning. Women of the 1960s were taking control of their sexuality; by connecting writing with sexuality, Cixous and her contemporaries argue that women can also reclaim power by thrusting themselves into the intellectual spotlight through their novel use of language, and in particular, through writing.

There is a clear link between écriture féminine and Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic. Kristeva associates the semiotic with the chora, a state that exists prior to the subject’s entry into language and logic, or what she and others, including Jacques Lacan, call the symbolic. The semiotic is strongly tied to the mother because it is the pre-cursor to language. Since language is associated with the father in Lacanian psycholinguistics, what comes before it is naturally linked to the mother as historically, she established a relationship with the child before the father.37 Similarly, Cixous associates écriture féminine with the figure of the mother: “Cixous, then, presents this nameless pre-Oedipal space filled with mother’s milk and honey as the source of the song that resonates through all female writing” (Moi, Sexual/Textual 113). Cixous’s writing is thus filled with maternal imagery and metaphors (Dane 244). Women’s writing conserves the mother’s influence that came first before the subject confronted the Law of the father (Storelv 372). Despite the inherent contradiction, écriture féminine is the manifestation in writing of the semiotic. It is the attempt at the impossible: to recreate the rhythmic freedom of the semiotic through the symbolic order, the most prominent expression of which is human language. Unlike Cixous, Kristeva proclaims that writing is not defined by one’s biological sex but, she claims, there are still stylistic and thematic particularities in women’s writing. However, she goes on to state that it is impossible to determine whether these qualities come from

37 In an older schema, the Mother/Father dyad was itself a patriarchal ordering of the world. Now, this could be associated with social agents who engage with pre-verbal children.
sociocultural influences or from one’s biological sex (Storelv 376). Regardless, Cixous’s theory of écriture féminine closely resembles Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic, and Cixous strives to evoke it in a literary practice that aims to disrupt the patriarchal status quo. Furthermore, she does so in a manner similar to the way poststructuralist psychoanalysts like Kristeva see the semiotic continually returning to disrupt the subject’s stable positioning in the symbolic order.

Cixous also argues that women’s writing has the privilege of accessing the unconscious because they too have been repressed: “Les poètes parce que la poésie n’est que de prendre force dans l’inconscient et que l’inconscient, l’autre contrée sans limites est le lieu où survivent les refoulés: les femmes, ou comme dirait Hoffmann, les fées” (“Rire” 43).38 Women, and their writing, have survived despite being marginalized. The relationship between women and the semiotic reinforces Cixous’s assertion that women have more ready access to the unconscious. This space, in a sense, has become a privileged space of creativity where women are not bound by traditional rules and expectations of expression. Instead, like the unconscious mind, their writing can run free because they can better access the unconscious wilderness. Cixous’s own writing, particularly her use of homonyms, sentence fragments, and questions, suggests an unbridled creativity that has tapped into the free play of the unconscious.

The notions of birthing as a metaphor for writing through the body, writing as jouissance, and the assertion that oppressed identities having freer access to the unconscious provide poetic inspiration for women to take up writing. However, these ideas have also led critics to claim that écriture féminine is essentialist. As early as 1981, just 6 years after the first publication of “Le Rire de la Méduse,” critics were already taking Cixous and other proponents of écriture féminine

38 “Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed manage to survive: women, or as Hoffmann would say, fairies” (“Laugh” 879-880).
to task for being essentialist. Ann Rosalind Jones argues that Cixous “is convinced that women’s unconscious is totally different from men’s, and that it is their psychosexual specificity that will empower women to overthrow masculinist ideologies and to create new female discourses” (“Writing” 251). Jones maintains that Cixous believes that there are inherent differences between men and women that cause them to write in a manner specific to their sex. She worries that this plays into stereotypes that are turned against women:

I myself feel highly flattered by Cixous’s praise for the nurturant perceptions of women, but when she speaks of a drive toward gestation, I begin to hear echoes of the coercive glorification of motherhood that has plagued women for centuries. If we define female subjectivity through universal biological/libidinal givens, what happens to the project of changing the world in feminist directions? Further, is women’s sexuality so monolithic that a notion of a shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race and in culture among women? What about changes over time in one woman’s sexuality (with men, with women, by herself)? (Jones “Writing” 255)

Jones argues that by forming a connection between creative production and human reproduction, Cixous is playing into the stereotype of women as mothers instead of moving them beyond this predetermined role. Additionally, Jones argues that *écriture féminine* groups all women together neglecting differences in class, race, and sexuality. Finally, she worries that by allying women’s writing with spontaneous creative flow through the notion of *jouissance*, their writing will not be viewed as the serious work it is. Jones rightfully points to the fact that Cixous’s use of homonymcs evinces the effort she puts into her own writing, and that it is not merely a flow of ideas streaming from her unconscious. Instead, Jones suggests that women would be more
encouraged to write if they understood that it was natural to struggle with writing, instead of believing that it comes in bursts of instinctual creativity ("Writing" 260).

Cara Berger and Anu Aneja point out that more recent critics like Toril Moi, Gayatri Spivak, and Jill Dolan have also criticized the notion of *écriture féminine* for similar reasons (Berger 41, Aneja 18). They have accused Cixous of “utopic” writing that envisions the workings of an ideal society, though they acknowledge that an idealist vision of the future may encourage positive transformation in a non-ideal world (Aneja 23). Moi, Spivak, and Dolan also emphasize the ways in which *écriture féminine* forces a homogeneity on women and ignores differences between women, particularly non-Western women and those who are excluded from writing altogether. However, Aneja argues that in later essays, it is clear that Cixous is aware that not all women have the privilege of being able to write (23). In an interview with Verena Andermatt Conley, given the title “Voice I,” Cixous acknowledges these women: “Another evidence is of course that there is a part of the world which cannot write and which will always only write in silence” (59).  

In writings subsequent to “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous elaborated on the concept of *écriture féminine* and clarified her understanding of the terms “masculine” and “feminine” as not reducible to the biological differences between men and women:

So, it is true, that when one says “feminine writing,” one could almost think in terms of graphology. One could say, it is the writing of an elegant woman, she is this or that. That is obviously not what is at stake, rather than saying feminine writing or masculine writing, I ended up by saying a writing said to be feminine or masculine, in order to mark the distance. In my seminar, rather than taking this elementary precaution, I speak of a

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39 This interview was conducted in English.
decipherable libidinal femininity which can be located in writing that can have been
produced by a male or a female. The qualifier masculine or feminine which I use for
better or for worse comes from the Freudian territory. (Cixous and Conley, “Voice I” 51-
52)

Cixous goes on to emphasize that “libidinal femininity” does not inherently belong to women
any more than “libidinal masculinity” does to men (Cixous and Conley, “Voice I” 54). She
makes a concerted effort in her later writing to make this distinction, but even in “Le Rire de la
Méduse,” Cixous suggested that men could create \textit{écriture féminine}. She lists only three writers
who she feels have so far produced writing which she would label as feminine: Colette,
Marguerite Duras, and Jean Genet (“Rire” 42, “Laugh” 878-879). The inclusion of a male writer
already implies in this early essay that \textit{écriture féminine} is not limited to women. However, she
has proposed that while the traits associated with \textit{écriture féminine} are not limited to women,
they are themselves feminine: “Continuité, abundance, dérive, est-ce que c’est spécifiquement
féminin? Je le crois. Et quand il s’écrit un semblable déferlement depuis un corps d’homme,
c’est qu’en lui la féminimité n’est pas interdite” (Cixous, “La Venue a l’Écriture” 68).\textsuperscript{40} This
infers that men as well as women are limited by traditional masculinity and femininity. The
markers of \textit{écriture féminine} are feminine not because of biological sex, but because they are not
masculine. They are characteristics that have been repressed by traditional writing standards
which are masculine by virtue of male power in society, but they are not limited to women.
When not bound by traditional ideals of writing, men too can exhibit the linguistic freedom of
\textit{écriture féminine}.

\textsuperscript{40} “Continuity, abundance, drift – are these specifically feminine? I think so. And when a similar wave of writing
surges forth from the body of a man, it’s because in him femininity is not forbidden” (Cixous “Coming to Writing” 57).
Not only are men fully capable of producing écriture féminine, but Cixous argues that most women writers, at least historically, have not practiced it. She recognizes that there are women who emulate the logic-laden norms of conventional writing that she has labeled as masculine instead of writing differently. When she wrote “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous contended there were very few women who wrote in the style she espoused. Historically, she found that those women who wrote did so in a fashion that “ne se distingue en rien de l’écriture masculine, et qui soit occulte la femme, soit reproduit les représentations classiques de la femme” (“Rire” 42). She goes so far as to denounce women who insist that they are not women writers but rather writers plain and simple as perpetuators of patriarchal ideologies (Cixous, “Castration” 51-52). Indeed, Cixous wrote “Le Rire de la Méduse” not as theory based on current practice, but as a manifesto calling for something new and with hopes of inspiring more women to write.

While there are justifiable arguments that Cixous presents women as a more or less unified class of subjugated beings, she also recognizes the heterogeneity of women in “Le Rire de la Méduse:”

Mais il faut dire, avant tout, qu’il n’y a pas, aujourd’hui même, et malgré l’énormité du refoulement qui les a maintenues dans ce « noir » qu’on essaie de leur faire reconnaître comme leur attribut, une femme générale, une femme type. Ce qu’elles ont en commun, je le dirai. Mais ce qui me frappe c’est l’infinie richesse de leurs constitutions singulières : on ne peut parler d’une sexualité féminine, uniforme, homogène, à parcours codable, pas plus que d’un inconscient semblable. (“Rire” 39)

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41 “is in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women” (“Laugh” 878).
42 “But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the ‘dark’ – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no
Cixous argues that feminine writing will not take a single form and that it will reflect the differences in and particularities of the women doing the writing. Berger suggests that “Cixous stresses that these different ways of approaching things are not innate, ahistorical, or bound to biological bodies, but are produced by, and in turn produce, cultural and social discourses” (56). Additionally, Aneja emphasizes that Cixous sees writing as working “in the in-between spaces of feminine and masculine desires and economies” and that differences develop through culture instead of nature (18). Different women produce different writing, but it is only by breaking from the cultural expectations for writing that women will produce texts that reflect their identities and experiences. In fact, Cixous claims that it is “impossible to define” women’s writing:

…on ne pourra jamais théoriser cette pratique, l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours que régit le système phallocentrique ; elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique. Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu’aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais. (“Rire” 45)

The only way she can describe women’s writing is that it will go further than and be different from that which has been previously produced. Her purpose is not to prescribe what women should create, but to inspire them to create through their own bodies with their own mode of expression that comes from their inner being.

one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another” (“Laugh” 876).

43 “…this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatismes, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate.” (“Laugh” 883)
Despite the criticism that *écriture féminine* is essentialist, the concept maintains importance both for contemporary critics as well as for its value as a marker of a moment in contemporary feminist theory and history. Aneja argues that by rejecting Cixous’s use of the maternal metaphor and brushing Cixous’s work off as merely essentialist, critics are also accepting stereotypes and espousing the idea that women must accept and seek power through the masculine (21-22). Because women bear children, all work related to child rearing has been labeled women’s work and has thus often been denigrated. While rejecting feminine stereotypes is a common practice for feminists seeking equal rights, doing so continues to relegate this work to a subordinate status. On the flip side of this binary of gender roles is the social norm that aligns traditional masculinity with power. In order for women to access power, they are expected to embrace a comportment that is typically described as masculine while rejecting the traditional feminine attributes of expressing emotion and providing nurture. When Cixous associates writing with childbirth in her use of the maternal metaphor, for instance, she is asserting that there is power in women’s procreative capacities. She is arguing that women do not have to leave behind everything they have known and become like men in order to access power through writing. Instead, they already have the means to do so, they just need to draw on the creative power they already possess. *Écriture féminine* appreciates the often-devalued traits that women have historically embraced or that they have had thrust upon them.

**Cixous on Writing Theatre**

As a theorist, Cixous has also written about her experiences as a playwright. She has an affinity for classical theatre and Shakespeare. Cixous says that she “suckled the theater at Shakespeare’s breast” (“Theatre, History, Ethics” 452) and that she admires Aeschylus “as one of the most creative and audacious playwrights [she] knows” (“Theatre, History, Ethics” 445).
Her work for the theatre has been greatly influenced by these authors, but in an article published in *Le Monde* in April 1977 titled “Aller à la mer,” she announced: “je n’allais plus au théâtre: pour ne pas assister à mon enterrement: parce qu’il ne donne pas lieu à une femme vivante ni, ce n’est pas un hasard, à du corps ni même à de l’inconscient” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19). Using examples from Shakespeare and plays from Greek antiquity, she condemns these great authors and calls out the sexism displayed in conventional theatrical productions of their work where “il faut toujours qu’une femme soit morte pour que la pièce commence. Le Rideau ne se lève que sur sa disparition ; à elle la place du refoulé, tombeau, asile, oubli, silence” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19). Similar to her call for women to write in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous’s essay “Aller à la mer” calls on women to revolutionize theatre. Creating theatre must be a political act which works to change “ses modes de production et d’expression” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19). Cixous maintains that theatre has the potential to accomplish something that film cannot, which is, to create a fully embodied woman: “Temps enfin que les femmes rendent au théâtre sa chance, sa raison d’être, sa différence: qu’il y soit possible de faire passer du corps, réel, parlant, là où le cinéma fait écran à ne nous refiler que de l’image” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19).

As I will explore in the final chapter, Cixous seems to abandon some of these ideas in her later work, but at the time she wrote “Aller à la mer,” she sought to remove “theatricality” from the theatre (“déthéâtraliser cet espace”), or the theatrical conventions that sought to create the illusion of reality. Her early plays avoided teleological plots and traditional narrative arcs. She

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44 “I stopped going to the theatre; it was like going to my own funeral, and it does not produce a living woman or (and this is no accident) her body or even her unconscious” (“Aller,” Modern Drama 546).
45 “it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up; she is relegated to repression, to the grave, the asylum, oblivion and silence” (Cixous, “Aller,” Modern Drama 546).
46 “its means of production and expression” (Cixous, “Aller,” Modern Drama 547)
47 “It is high time that women gave back to the theatre its fortunate position, its raison d’être and what makes it different – the fact that there it is possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body, whereas the cinema screens us from reality by foisting mere images upon us” (Cixous, “Aller,” Modern Drama 547).
endeavored to “faire sauter tout ce qui fait ‘spectacle’” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19).\(^{48}\) Her words recall those of Artaud, who also sought to revolutionize conventional modes of theatrical production. According to Claude Schumacher, Artaud sought “to renew life by revolutionizing the theatre” (xxi). Cixous wants theatre to go “beyond the confines of the stage” (“Aller,” *Modern Drama* 547),\(^{49}\) but, unlike Artaud, she wants to rely less on visual aspects of drama and “insister sur l’auditif; apprendre à aiguiser toutes nos oreilles, surtout celles qui savent saisir les battements de l’inconscient, entendre les silences et au-delà” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19).\(^{50}\) She rejects the idea of distanciation, presumably understood in the Brechtian sense, but claims “au contraire, cette scène-corps n’hésitera pas à approcher, approcher à (se) mettre en danger, mais de vie” (“Aller,” *Le Monde* 19).\(^{51}\) Again, her use of the word “danger” echoes Artaud who called on the theatre to be a place of danger: “Il est un moyen de canaliser des passions, de les faire servir à quelque chose, mais il doit être entendu non comme un art, une distraction, mais une action grave, il faut lui render ce paroxysme, cette gravité, ce danger” (*Œuvres Complètes* [1976] 153).\(^{52}\) Marc Silverstein notes that:

> While Cixous offers her manifesto as a contribution to the development of a specifically feminine (if not feminist) aesthetic, ‘Aller à la mer’ echoes a persistent desire within performance theory, from Rousseau’s concept of the festival through Artaud’s alchemical theater, Grotowski’s paratheatrical experiments and Schechner’s work on ritualized performance: the desire for a theater in which the closure of representation yields the

\(^{48}\) “to work at exploding everything that makes for ‘staginess’” (Cixous, “Aller,” *Modern Drama* 547)

\(^{49}\) “dépolder la rampe-barre” (Cixous, “Aller,” *Le Monde* 19)

\(^{50}\) “stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them” (Cixous, “Aller,” *Modern Drama* 547)

\(^{51}\) “on the contrary, this stage-body will not hesitate to come up close, close enough to be in danger – of life” (Cixous, “Aller,” *Modern Drama* 547)

\(^{52}\) “It is a way of channeling passions, of making them serve something, but it must be understood not as an art or a distraction, but as a serious action, and paroxysm, seriousness, danger must be restored to it” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 88)
plenitude of the real; in which the line dividing subject/object, audience/character and spectator/spectacle dissolves in an undifferentiated totality. Cixous dreams of a theater in which the stage, rather than a space of semiological mediation structured by absence, would serve as a site of phenomenological immediacy disclosing presence. (508)

While the sound, sensation, and emotion that Cixous seeks to stir are reminiscent of Artaud’s vision of the theatre, she has a clear political agenda that extends beyond the confines of theatrical production, a stance that had been rejected by Artaud (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 47). Despite her rejection of Brechtian aesthetics, Cixous’s emphasis on the use of theatre to change society is more in line with Brecht’s views of the theatre and that of other politically motivated theorists of the time.

Cixous sees her theatrical work divided into two distinct periods, her early works which she describes as psychological and her later ones which she sees as being more properly theatrical. Although she has always had a great love of the theatre, she does not see herself as a playwright and considers the theatre to be something of a foreign country (“Le théâtre était, est encore pour moi le pays étranger” [Cixous ‘Théâtre Enfoui’ 72]).53 The theatre is for her both enticing and unknown, because it is not a genre in which she has felt comfortable writing. In particular, she does not view her early plays as theatrical because they do not move beyond dialogue to represent action or events (McEvoy 23). In other words, her plays do not follow the traditional presentation of chronologically ordered scenes of conflict unfolding between characters which ultimately reach a climax and then unwind in their denouement. Consequently,

53 In “The Two Countries of Writing: Theatre and Poetical Fiction,” Cixous has equated the idea of the foreign country with the maternal body. She talks about writers who, like herself, have been exiled from their countries of birth, but who recapture aspects of that country through their writing. With her writing she has re-created Algeria, a country that she knew from a very young age was not really hers. It was her home and yet she always felt as an outsider there. This “other country” that she recreates through writing is her place of birth, a metaphor for a return to the maternal presence (192).
as Julia Dobson argues, Cixous only practiced her signature *écriture féminine* in her early theatrical works because her use of language in her later plays is not as polysemic as her fiction works (qtd. in Berger 40). In Chapter V, I will show how Cixous’s later plays continue to employ *écriture féminine* but do so differently from her early works. Now though, I will show how Cixous uses *écriture féminine* in one of her early plays, *Portrait de Dora* (1976), to intertwine the theatrical theories of Artaud and Brecht in a manner that reflects the Kristevan semiotic intruding on the play’s symbolic order.

**Focus on the Self: *Potrait of Dora***

Cixous’s first major theatrical success came with *Portrait de Dora*, staged by Simone Benmussa at the Théâtre d’Orsay in 1976 (Prenowitz vii). In it, she challenges the conclusions Sigmund Freud reached in his well-known case study *Fragment of Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. While she had earlier written the play *La Pupille* (1971), she generally refers to *Dora* as her first experience with the theatre, and, at times, she credits Benmussa (author and director of *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* which is addressed in the next chapter) for having drawn her to the theatre. Cixous describes their meeting as the kind of fortuitous moment of chance necessary for theatre to exist:

>Là-dessus il y a eu un évènement supplémentaire qui est, à mon avis, l’occasion, le déclancheur de la production réelle d’un texte théâtral : la rencontre avec quelqu’un qui appartient au monde du théâtre, qui est sur la rive vers laquelle tend la pièce, celle de la mise en scène, en l’occurrence, c’était Simone Benmussa, qui m’a fait le signe d’accueil et d’encouragement. (Cixous, “Théâtre Enfoui” 73)

Benmussa read Cixous’s books and told her that “she saw a play” in *Portrait du soleil* (Prenowitz 1). While Cixous claims that she lifted *Portrait de Dora* from *Portrait du soleil* and
“cut and pasted the text” (Prenowitz 2), the texts of the two works have little in common. They do, though, have some thematic similarities. Likewise, Dora and Freud appear in the narrative of *Portrait du soleil* and there are glimpses of scenes which appear in the play, but it is clear that Cixous did much more than rearrange the text of fiction into a multi-vocal piece for the stage.

At other times, Cixous downplays Benmussa’s role54 in spurring her move to the theatre and claims to have herself sensed the presence of a play among the “characters” in *Portrait du soleil* (Cixous, “Théâtre Enfoui” 72-3). She also credits the figure Dora for bringing her to the theatre: “… c’est, d’abord, Dora qui a commencé. Le vrai Dora, celle qui marque, discrètement mais fortement, de son faux (si vrai) nom le passage du siècle. Parce qu’elle a fait une scène à Freud. Quand nous faisons une scène, nous faisons, sans le savoir, du Théâtre” (“Théâtre Enfoui” 72). In these and other comments, Cixous highlights the link between feminist activism and the theatre. Dora speaks out for herself against Freud and causes a scene in both the figurative and the literal sense. Women speaking out is, in itself, a powerful theatrical moment in which the personal becomes political. Dora’s moment of seizing power compelled Cixous to stage this moment of drama.

*Portrait de Dora* disrupts the teleological narrative Freud crafted to explain the hysteria of his patient “Dora.” In 1900, Freud met with and diagnosed a teenager named Ida Bauer, to whom he gave the pseudonym Dora in the famous essay he wrote about this case, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Dora’s father brought her to Freud to be cured of a number of symptoms associated with the disorder then known as hysteria, including recurring loss of voice, hoarseness, and an occasionally pronounced limp. Dora’s father confided to the doctor that Dora

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54 There does not appear to be a motivation for the discrepancies in the way Cixous frames her entry into the theatre. It may simply be the result of time and a fading of recollections. Or, it may be a change in the way Cixous sees herself as she becomes more assured of her ability to write plays.
had accused his friend Herr K, with whom the family vacationed, of propositioning her during a walk near a mountain lake. Dora had refused him and run away. When confronted, this friend, in turn, had accused Dora of being overly interested in sex and of reading illicit material (Freud 32-3). Through discussions with Dora and analysis of two of her dreams, Freud determined that Dora, who resented Frau K as a rival for her father’s love, had been traumatized by an earlier sexual encounter with Herr K, and that she wanted her father to protect her from Herr K’s advances like he protected her from bedwetting as a child. Freud justified his diagnosis through an elaboration of associations that tenuously link symptoms and causes.

For the most part, Cixous’s play follows the events of Freud’s case and assumes the spectator’s familiarity with his work. However, she rearranges these events and undoes Freud’s narrative. His analysis of Dora focuses on two dreams, but these dreams are fragmented, and their content changed in Cixous’s play. In Portrait de Dora, rather than telling Dora’s story prior to his discussion of the treatment given, as Freud did in his essay, Cixous has Monsieur B (Dora’s father) relate this information about Dora’s childhood, the story of her involvement with Monsieur K, and the symptoms she was displaying throughout the play. As the character denoted as the voice of the play describes it, the account of the scene by the lake “est comparable à un courant qui ne serait pas navigable, à un courant dont le lit serait tantôt obstrué par des rochers, tantôt divisé par des bancs de sable” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 15). The story of the scene by the lake serves as a sort of through-line to the play with other scenes introduced that obstruct the storyline in the way a river’s flow encounters obstacles. Scenes between Dora and Freud, between Dora and other characters, between Monsieur B and Freud, and amongst other characters drift in and out, shift, and overlap with one another. While Freud’s case study is

55 “may be compared to an unnavigable current, a current whose course would now be obstructed by rocks, and now divided by sandbars” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 31)
related through the statements and actions of the various characters, Cixous creates a play where
the story is relayed in bits and pieces without following the chronological order of events as they
are delineated by Freud, which gives the production a dreamlike quality.

The blurring of the boundaries between scenes creates a montage effect where focus
shifts between characters and between areas of the stage. Through this fragmented style, Cixous
changes the way in which Dora’s story is presented. Mairéad Hanrahan observes that Freud’s
“objective is to replace an ambiguous, open form by a linear narrative, to close down semantic
multiplicity in favor of one meaning” (“Whose Voice” 50). Cixous’s play attempts to restore to
Dora’s story an ethereal quality that favors multiple, open-ended interpretations. The use
of montage is characteristic of écriture féminine. It calls into question the very notion of an
infallible Truth. Sharon Willis explains: “What Freud strove to organize into a complete
narrative account is reproduced in the play as fragmented, divided, a stream that is perpetually
disrupted by obstacles or diverted in detours” (291). Through these montage sequences, Cixous
disrupts Freud’s logical presentation of the case and calls into question the verity of his
interpretation. Willis expands this idea and argues that the stage becomes “an hystericized body
– a giant relay where identifications are acted out, but never consolidated in identities” (294).
Marc Silverstein confirms the subversive power of the representation of hysteria in Cixous’s
work:

While Cixous’s re-vision of the Dora case seemingly runs the risk of reifying the
category of the hysteric, the woman who finds herself subjected to the interminable
scrutiny of the ‘demystifying’ medical gaze, it is precisely her project to examine how the
patriarchal scopic regime maps ‘hysteria’ onto the corporeal field of women’s bodies.
Cixous’ Dora transforms hysteria into a subversive performance, an active soliciting of
the clinical gaze in order to reveal its truth – its complicity with a system of power threatened by a desire that must remain invisible and unnamable. (510)

Cixous has destroyed the linear nature of Freud’s narrative and recreated the hysteric on stage, using it to subvert forms of patriarchal power.

An exchange between Freud and Dora highlights the capacity of écriture feminine to undo the logical order imposed by phallocentrism. Cixous rewrites a scene from Freud’s case concerning a reticule that Dora brings with her to one session. As he did in his analysis of Dora, Cixous has Freud suggest that this small sack represents Dora’s genitals, and he sees her constant fiddling with it to be a physical manifestation of her desire to masturbate. Dora states: “Tenez: voyez comme elle est dure. On n’arrive pas à l’ouvrir” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 51).56 Freud suggests to her that her words might “s’appliquer à une autre signification de ce petit sac” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 51)57 to which the stage directions indicate she replies “angoissée:” “C’est ce que pensent les hommes” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 51).58 Freud states his psychoanalytic objective and refers to his theories of transference and association: “Les mots équivoques sont, dans la voie des associations, comme des aiguilles” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 52).59 Dora’s response is particularly germane: “Piqué, percé, cousu, décousu. C’est un travail de femmes” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 52).60 While sewing is traditionally associated with the women’s sphere, Cixous has argued that women’s writing subverts patriarchy and relates traditional women’s roles to their power. In her view, it is imperative that women defy what is presented as logical truth, that they unravel it, and that they contest the fallacies it aims to

56 “Here: look how tight it is. It’s impossible to open” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
57 “Be referring to something other than [her] handbag” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47)
58 “That’s what men like to think” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
59 “Ambiguous words are like needles on the path of free association” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
60 “Pricked, pierced, sewn, unraveled. That’s women’s work” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
Cixous’s play does just that. It disrupts Freud’s discourse of medical authority and presents different possibilities for the sources of Dora’s ills.

In Freud’s write-up of his treatment of Dora, he maintains his position of authority, monitors her through a clinical gaze, and imposes on her his diagnosis and treatment plan. At another moment in Freud’s *Dora*, he posits that her jewelry case also represents female genitalia, to which she responds: “I knew you would say that,” and he answers back: “That is to say, you knew it *was* so” (Freud 85). As a psychoanalyst, Freud forces his interpretations upon Dora, even when she rejects them. He completely disregards Dora’s unwillingness to accept his assessment and removes her agency in the therapy. Freud insists on the logic of his analysis to prove its truthfulness. In “La Tâche aveugle d’un vieux rêve de symétrie,” Irigaray makes a similar accusation of Freud. She argues that psychoanalysis, and Freud in particular, have assumed women’s psychological drives to be the same as men’s:

> “Up to this point, the main concepts of psychoanalysis, its theory, will have taken no account of woman’s desire, not even of ‘her’ castration. For their ways are too narrowly derived from the history and the historicization of (so-called) male sexuality. From that process by which consciousness comes into being and woman remains the place for the inscription of repressions” (Irigaray 55)

Freud projects his own desires on his subjects. Irigaray claims that if a woman is hysterical, it is because “her sexual instincts have been castrated, her sexual feelings, representatives, and representations forbidden” (59-60) by male psychoanalysts. Cixous’s Dora calls Freud to task for his own projections.

As I have shown, Cixous’s play allows Freud’s character to perform his analysis but then critiques it and questions whether his conclusions are the only ones that can be drawn. This
scenario plays out again in Cixous’s representation of the case when Dora recounts her dream about the house fire. Freud suggests to Dora that her mother was once her rival for her father’s love. Dora replies, “Je ‘savais’ que ‘vous’ alliez dire ça!” to which Freud responds, “Donc vous savez qui remplace qui” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 56). In this theatrical version, Dora’s response to Freud’s assertion that she “knows” something about her dreams questions the trustworthiness of knowledge and truth: “Savoir. Savoir. Mais personne ne sait rien. Qu’est-ce que ça veut dire: Savoir? Est-ce que je sais ce que je sais, est-ce que je le sais? tout ne veut rien dire” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 56). The patient does not passively accept the doctor’s claims. Once again, Cixous uses Dora to upend Freud’s assertion that he knows the truth about Dora through his interpretation of her dreams. This passage goes even further in calling into question the very notion that one can ever know anything. Portrait de Dora remains ambiguous and allows for the neat package of Freud’s interpretation of Dora’s symptoms to be cracked open and fleshed out in multiple directions.

Not only does Cixous’s play disrupt the teleological drive of Freud’s narrative and opens it up to multiple interpretations, but the author also claims that in Portrait de Dora, she gave Dora a voice and allowed her to “crier: ‘Ce n’est pas moi qui suis muette, je suis tue par ta surdité” (“Aller,” Le Monde 19). However, critics have accused Cixous of continuing to victimize Dora because she did not alter the analysis enough and because her Dora was not recreated as a “positive role model” (Hanrahan, “Cooking the Books” 273). It is true that

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61 “I ‘knew’ that ‘you’ were going to say that,” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 49). “So now you know who stands for whom” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 49). In the original French version and in its English translation, Cixous and her translator use quotation marks to denote words and phrases that should be emphasized by the actor.
62 “To know. To know. But no one knows anything. What does it mean, to know? Do I know what I know, do I know it? Everything means nothing” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 49).
63 “cry out, ‘I’m not the one who is dumb. I am silenced by your inability to hear’” (Cixous, “Aller,” Modern Drama 547)
Cixous’s *Dora* does not change the premise of the case or remove Dora’s symptoms of hysteria. Instead, it shifts the interpretation of her affliction, emphasizing the role misogyny has played in formulating and defining the ailment instead of ascribing pathology to Dora herself, as Freud had clearly done. For example, in a stream of consciousness moment, Dora describes her feelings of suffocation:


Dora decries having no voice and describes her lack of agency in terms of feeling buried under the earth, dead and unable to move or speak. Spectators do not conclusively know who killed her spirit or robbed her of voice nor whom she blames for this circumstance.

> A short time later, it seems as though Dora blames Madame K for killing her. Dora asks Madame K to tell her everything that a woman must know. Cixous’s play suggests a sexual tension between Madame K and Dora. As in Freud’s case study, Dora and Madame K are quite close, and Dora spends much of her time with the K family while they are in the mountains. In

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^64 DORA. (an immediate stream of associations in a very low but abrupt voice, with violent outbursts on the words between quotation marks) I’ll write a letter it will be hesitant. It will start with these words: “You have killed me.” And I’ll write “You, my dear, have killed me.” Then I’ll write another letter on very thin paper, tissue paper, that will start with these words, “That’s what you wanted.” I’ll leave it ambiguous, for him to complete [“]himself.” Because I don’t know what he wanted. However, I’m “the one” who’s dead. My body is buried. In the forest. It’s dark there. I have no voice. (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 38)
Cixous’s version, after Dora asks that Madame K tell her about women, Madame K asks Dora to draw the curtains. The stage is obscured as Dora states:


(la voix de Dora lointaine)

Tantôt le plein, tantôt le vide, et c’est toujours sombre. On pourrait tout comprendre. On pourrait ensuite transformer le monde. Ce temps s’ouvre et se ferme comme des yeux hésitants. Ne le dites à personne, ce que je sais. (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 41)\(^\text{65}\)

The imagery of a cave might be seen simultaneously as a metaphorical configuration of the uterus and as the construction of woman as a site of lack. This scene between Dora and Madame K advances a feminist discussion of the role of women in society while further suggesting that Dora desires a sexual relationship with the older woman. In an earlier scene, Dora asks Madame K to let her kiss her, but Madame K calmly refuses her (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 41). Returning to Dora’s accusations of being murdered, at the end of an exchange between them, in a tone described as “sharply, hissing,”\(^\text{66}\) Dora cries out: “Vous m’avez tuée! Vous m’avez trahie. Vous m’avez trompée!” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 41).\(^\text{67}\) However, further on, Dora is in dialogue with Monsieur K to whom she says, “Vous me disiez – ‘tu’ hier” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 43).\(^\text{68}\) This use of “tu” echoes the use of “tu” in the earlier passage of her suicide letter and suggests she is telling Monsieur K that he killed her.\(^\text{69}\) It is perhaps both Monsieur K’s proposal and Madame

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\(^\text{65}\) “It looks like a cave! Where are you? It looks like a cave; It’s me! Me inside myself, in the shadow. In you. (in a faraway voice) Sometimes the full, sometimes the void, and always darkness. One might come to understand everything. And then one might change the world. These moments open and close like hesitant eyes. Don’t tell anyone what I know” (Dora 42-43).

\(^\text{66}\) “apre, sifflante” (Cixous Portrait de Dora 41)

\(^\text{67}\) “You killed me! You betrayed me! You deceived me!” (Cixous Dora 43).

\(^\text{68}\) “Yesterday you called me ‘my dear’” (Cixous Dora 43).

\(^\text{69}\) In both of these passages, the translator has used “my dear” to stand for the use of the informal French “you” (“tu”). The link between these two passages is therefore even stronger in the original text as both stress the use of
K’s refusal of Dora’s advances that afflict Dora. Both acts come from hetero-normative pressures which encourage men to proposition young women but refuse to acknowledge the possibility of intimate relationships between women. Societal expectations and norms have silenced Dora.

In “Tâche aveugle,” Irigaray claims that Freud projects his own desires and fears onto women. Cixous’s Dora echoes this claim as the author turns the tables on Freud. Celita Lamar remarks: “Effectively, the patient assumes control of the therapeutic process” (151). When she begins to tell Freud about her dream of cake, he urges her to “tell me” about it. She answers: “Je sais faire…” He asks, “Qu’est-ce que vous savez faire?” and she replies, “Faire monter les rêves, les souffler, les faire cuire, les rouler, les prendre dans ma bouche” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 52). Dora then describes a dream in which she is sitting with her grandmothers eating cake. Cixous invented this dream for the play and the character of Freud does not interpret nor even respond to it. Dora does not need him to do so; she can take control of her dream life and make her own interpretations. However, Cixous goes further and allows Dora not only to take control her own therapy, but to begin to apply Freudian concepts to the doctor’s own actions.

Later, Dora calls Freud out on his own nervous habits: “Pourquoi faites-vous tourner votre stylo sept fois dans vos mains avant de me parler?” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 62). While the script does not explicitly state so, based on Freud’s earlier suggestion that Dora’s fiddling with her purse conveys her desire to masturbate, one can infer from the shape of the pen that Dora is perhaps positing that his nervous habit suggests that he too wants to masturbate. Freud is unable

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70 “I know how to…” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
71 “What do you know how to do?” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
72 “How to make dreams rise, inflate them, roll them, take them in my mouth” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 47).
73 “Why do you twist your pen seven times in your hands before talking to me?” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 51).
to handle his patient becoming the doctor: “Il faut respecter les règles!” Dora mimics his demand back to him, mocking his insecurities (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 62). Cixous uses her play to allow Dora to speak back to Freud and to turn his psychoanalytic theories against him, and the therapeutic process itself against both the doctor’s medical authority and the misogyny of his times.

The text of *Portrait de Dora* raises questions about the exact staging methods and blocking (or the directed movements of the actors) that Benmussa used in her production. At times, characters interact with one another in multiple scenes that are performed simultaneously. In other words, a single character may be present in two scenes that are being presented at the same time. This happens near the beginning of the play when Dora is telling Freud about the scene at the lake. The stage directions indicate that there is “un silence. pendant que se joue dans un autre temps (Dora à quatorze ans) la scène de la porte côté escalier” (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 17). Parts of the dialogue that follow are offset in a column on the right side of the page. These sentences are written in the present tense while those which are full-page are written in the past tense. The effect is that the demarcation between the past and the present is blurred. However, there is no indication that these were staged as separate scenes or vignettes, and despite the change in tense, they are a continuation of the same story. Marguerite Duras created filmed sequences for the production. There is evidence that some of the filmed sequences represented the event that transpired between Dora and Monsieur K at the lake (“Hélène Cixous, auteur”), but the stage directions do not stipulate if part of the dialogue in this scene was presented on film or if the film projected on stage was silent. It is possible that the portions of the

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74 “You must respect the rules!” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 51).
75 “a silence, during which a flashback scene – DORA at age fourteen is performed by the door near the staircase” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 32).
dialogue which are off-set on the page were represented in the film or they may have just provided visuals that accompanied dialogue spoken on stage. In addition to rejecting the chronological unfolding of time, the montage of scenes that simultaneously figure the past and the present, makes it difficult to clearly distinguish the play’s characters since their voices and motivations often converge. Hanrahan observes that the play

is not divided into acts and scenes, but comprises a series of scenes that dissolve into each other with no formal indication, just as Freud said a dream keeps switching between various lines of association. As is clear at the opening of the play, these sudden switches have the effect of establishing connections between the characters, emphasizing their interchangeability. (“Whose Voice” 56)

In particular the characters of Monsieur K, Dora’s father, and Freud appear to blend together, particularly in the ways they see Dora as an object of sexual exchange.

In addition to the overlap of scenes recommended in the play’s stage directions, there is evidence that the scenic design heightens this effect. Benmussa’s staging of Cixous’s play incorporated a number of screens and doorways. Scrims, backdrops made of a gauze-like fabric, become transparent when people or objects are lit while behind them and opaque when the fabric is lit from the front. Through the use of this device, areas of the stage became visible at times and concealed at others (Willis 289). The filmed images were also projected onto these screens. The use of doors and scrims divided the stage into different areas where scenes were performed, sometimes simultaneously, at others sequentially. At one point in the play, for instance, Dora highlights the similarities between her being propositioned by Monsieur K and her father making similar advances towards Madame K. She begins by explaining the scene at the lake: “Il a dit: ‘Vous savez que ma femme n’est rien pour moi.’ Dès que j’eus compris son intention, je le
souffletai et je m’enfuis” (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 16). The stage directions indicate that “this next event is performed on the side” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 31). Monsieur B and Madame K act out the encounter in a separate area of the stage as Dora describes the scene: “Dès que madame K. eut compris l’intention de papa, elle lui coupa la parole, le souffleta et s’enfuit” (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 16). While it helps to draw parallels between these two temporally distinct events, this highly theatrical use of space melds the past and the present and heightens the fragmented quality of the story being told. Because the staging underscores each character’s subjective perception and gaps in their knowledge, it is impossible to form a singular Truth about what actually transpired.

Similar to the textual and scenic discord evident in these segments of the play, there is evidence that the director and playwright experimented with the use of sound in the production. Noises, for instance, are disassociated from their object and location of occurrence to create a further fragmentation of the senses. Willis points to an example where Dora asks Freud where his cigarettes are, and the stage directions indicate the “sound of a cigarette lighter” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 51). Willis stresses “we hear it, though neither character speaks of it, and above all, we never see the expected flame which follows the only sound a lighter emits” (297). Additionally, Silverstein emphasizes the moment when audiences hear an amplified sigh. Dora asks Freud if she can take off her shoes. The stage directions indicate: “Freud silence soupiré” (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 73). The English translation suggests that Freud “is silent” followed by “a sigh” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 55). Silverstein specifies that “we hear an amplified sigh

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76 “He said ‘You know, my wife means nothing to me.’ As soon as I understood what he was after, I slapped him and ran away” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 31).
77 “sur scène latérale” (Cixous, *Portrait de Dora* 16)
78 “As soon as Mrs. K. had understood what Papa wanted, she shut him up, slapped him, and ran away” (Cixous, *Portrait of Dora* 31).
issuing from speakers rather than from Freud himself” (510). Once again, the sound has been isolated from its source. The sensory disassociation that occurs through the use of amplified sound contributes to the dreamlike quality of the play and furthers heightens the overall sense of fragmented meaning that Cixous creates through the text. Perceptions of reality are thrown into question as conventional relations of cause and effect are unsettled. The disassociation between the sound and the body presumed to have created it also points to the frustration that Freud is feeling, but attempting to conceal from Dora, revealing unspoken dynamics of the psychoanalytical cure.

The sense that the unfolding of the play’s intrigue has been disrupted is increased through the introduction of Duras’s filmed sequences. One scene in particular illustrates Dora’s fractured psyche. In Freud’s account of his work with Dora, she relays the content of a second dream in which she is trying to return home to see her dying father. She associates this dream with her lived experience of visiting Dresden where she spent two hours at a picture gallery looking at the Sistine Madonna. Cixous weaves this trip into her play by using a filmed sequence which establishes parallels between the infant Jesus and Dora and between the Madonna and Madame K. Dora begins:


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⁷⁹ I went to Dresden. My cousin wanted to take me to the Gallery. I refused. I ran to the door. I left. I wandered aimlessly through the foreign city. I went to the Gallery alone. There is a painting I can’t look at without…. I stood
The image of pearls, pearliness, and whiteness have all been associated with Madame K throughout Cixous’s text in her descriptions of the pearls Madame K lent to Dora and those her father bought for her (Portrait of Dora 39, 46), in her comments on the whiteness of Madame K’s body (Portrait of Dora, 39, 41, 42), and in her insistence that Madame K always wore white (Portrait of Dora 39, 40). Therefore, the use of “pearly” to describe the Madonna’s teeth establishes a semantic link between the figuration of the holy mother and Madame K, and by extension, between Dora and the Christ-child. This association is made clearer with the insertion of a filmed sequence. Just before introducing the filmed images, the stage directions make a second association between the infant and Dora: “D’un coup, l’évidence, celle qui échappe peut-être à tout le monde: l’enfant Jésus porté par la Madone n’est personne d’autre qu’une petite Dora” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 36). 80 This statement is followed by another that also associates the Madonna and Madame K: “sequence filmée, en 3 plans. La Madone Sixtine substitution de la Madone, et Mme. K. En miroir Dora derrière la Madone” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 36). 81 The directions go on to stipulate that in the dialogue that follows, “On ne saura pas laquelle (Marie ou Mme K?) parle” (Cixous, Portrait de Dora 36). 82 Because of the uncertainty about who is speaking, the dialogue may not be spoken but replayed through the audio system while the filmed images are projected. Cixous repeatedly inserts distance between the dialogue and the

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80 “Suddenly, the evidence that perhaps no one is aware of: the child Jesus in the Madonna’s arms is none other than a miniature DORA” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 40).
81 “Filmed sequence, in three shots: The Sistine Madonna, substitution of the Madonna and MRS. K., DORA mirrored behind the Madonna” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 40-1).
82 “it’s not clear which woman – Mary or MRS. K. is speaking” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 41).
filmed images shown. This artistic choice once again emphasizes her rejection of realist modes of representation and highlights the play’s dreamlike quality. Willis observes:

But the staging of two representational modes here still leaves open the question of referentiality: how are we to read it, as memory or fantasy? While the spoken discourse throws into question the historical status of the events recounted by the hysteric, the filmed image might be taken to contradict speech, since the images necessarily attest to the existence of some pro-filmic event. (291)

Through this fragmentation of the characters of Dora and Mme K, the spectator is reminded that what they are seeing is not real, that there is not one truth to be formed about the events that occurred, and that everything is open for interpretation because the audience cannot fully trust their own eyes and ears. If what the spectators can see and hear is confounding, then using their senses may also be an ineffective means of discerning the truth of the situation.

Cixous also calls for a certain musicality in the delivery of dialogue, particularly for Mme K’s. In an essay included with the published English translation of the script titled “Stage Work and Dream Work,” Cixous stresses that Mme K’s speech enunciates meaning in non-linguistic ways: “[Mrs. K] must” she writes, “speak her lines musically, in order to convey the deeper meaning of things, rather than the meaning of words” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 16). The idea that music can communicate meaning more readily than words chimes with Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic. Kristeva argues that the semiotic qualities of art, poetry, and music allow them to convey a multiplicity of meaning beyond that which is signified by the linguistic sign. Madame K is more than the words she speaks; she represents the “system of bourgeois lies that Dora rejects” (Cixous, Portrait of Dora 16). Madame K is caught up in the sexual politics that allows
Monsieur B to believe he can trade his daughter’s sexuality to Monsieur K for his silence and to remain in willful ignorance of Monsieur B’s affair with Madame K.

Previously, Western philosophy and the metaphysical tradition relied upon the existence of a single, discoverable Truth in language. Modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary critical thought all propose that it is impossible to arrive at indisputable truths in human affairs. The postmodern use of montage, fragmentation, and disruption in literary texts challenges the notion that one can form a single Truth about the world. I have shown how Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora* favors the polysemic and encourages open-ended interpretation through the insertion of filmed images, and the play’s scenic and sound designs. In her use of these devices Cixous encourages the spectator to reflect on what truth is and how it was formed. The Brechtian use of these same devices also sought to disrupt viewing pleasure, to keep the spectator from being fully engaged in the “reality” of the play and force them to consider the play’s implications for society. While somewhat different in aim, both the postmodernist and the Brechtian use of montage and fragmentation prevent the spectator from identifying completely with and thus losing themselves in the story being told while also urging them to consider the possibility that multiple interpretations can be formed of the meaning it holds.

This questioning of the idea of a singular Truth is reinforced in Cixous’s theoretical work. In her writing about writing, she recalls that she once hesitated to write because she knew that she could not make singular truth claims about the world, because she saw herself and her identity, as being composed of multiple truths: “L’écriture n’était-elle pas le lieu du Vrai? Le Vrai n’est-il pas clair, distinct et un? Et moi trouble, plusieurs, simultanée, impure. Renonces-y!” (Cixous, “La Venue à l’écriture” 39). What Cixous describes here as her original understanding

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83 “Wasn’t writing the realm of the Truth? Isn’t the Truth clear, distinct, and one? And I was blurry, several, simultaneous, impure. Give it up!” (Cixous “Coming to Writing” 29).
of what writing entailed, is that which she goes on to label masculine writing, a mode of expression that is both logical and orderly. She sees her own writing practice, l’écriture féminine, as a form of expression that shatters Truth and multiplies meaning. Her writing for the theatre does just that. While she claims to have no use for Bertolt Brecht and his representational practices, she may have more affinities with Brecht’s view of the theatre than she realizes. In her own writing for the theatre, the techniques she favors have political aims similar to Brecht’s, chiefly that of forcing the spectator to form multiple interpretations of the scenarios being staged before them. Cixous rejected Brecht’s theory of the theatre, particularly as it concerned the distance he introduced between his actors and the characters they played. To her mind, an actor cannot become the character s/he is playing without emotionally embodying it. The acting style she favors through her writing seeks to stir spectator emotion in the manner prescribed by Artaud. However, one can see in Portrait de Dora that it is the presentation of fully realized, emotionally authentic characters in a setting that has features of Brechtian distanciation, both of which combine to create a more affectively charged and politically powerful play.

Cixous uses her nascent idea of écriture féminine to re-write Freud’s case study. As I have shown, this style of writing is intimately bound up with the maternal and thus also aligned with the Kristevian notion of the chora. Gabrielle Dane notes that Cixous is “consciously adopting hysterical rhetoric” as a means of revolutionizing language:

While the established phallocentric tradition of language is linear, logical, objective, this hysterical discourse is discontinuous, libidinal, subjective. An economy of excess, this rhetorical style eschews the bonds of conventional discourse, lacking closure, spending language lavishly, delving into the underworld of the psyche to explore phantasy and desire. (241)
The text of *Portrait de Dora* can be seen as a semiotic recasting of Freud’s case. Cixous uses plot points and descriptions present in Freud’s case, but she breaks them apart, and redistributes them throughout her own work. She twists his words, ideas, and descriptions and adds her original material to them in order to call into question Freud’s view that his interpretation in Dora’s case was the only viable one to be formed. Cixous’s text as a whole can be seen as an attempt to create a semiotic experience that disrupts Freud’s provision of a logical explanation for the source of Dora’s ills which, in turn, can be seen as an imposition of the symbolic order. Kristeva argues that semiotic impulses constantly return to disrupt the symbolic register in which human beings come to meaning. By creating an intertextual dialogue between Cixous’s play and Freud’s case study, the semiotic nature of the play throws into question the veracity of Freud’s original text and does so by creating new meanings that speak differently about women’s experience.
Contrasting sharply with the previous chapter’s exploration of the nearly pure semiotic and sensory experience of Hélène Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora* (1976) is Simone Benmussa’s *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* (1977). Whereas Cixous’s production relied on fragmentation and montage to subvert the notion of a singular truth, Benmussa’s work seems, on the surface, markedly phallogocentric. Further investigation of this feminist adaptation of a short story by George Moore reveals the numerous ways in which the semiotic, as defined by Kristeva, disrupts its forms of logical expression. The play’s Brechtian elements interrupt the spectator’s emotional identification with the eponymous lead character. The resulting psychological unrest places the audience in a state of distress that is not unlike Albert’s own emotional state, while also encouraging the spectator to draw connections between the play and contemporary society. This dual effect exposes the constructed nature of gender roles. It also calls attention to the pain caused by forcing women to conform to these norms and to the anguish that follows when women are compelled to subsequently deny their resulting gendered identity to achieve monetary success. Such material circumstances oblige the main character to attempt a complete erasure of her femininity, an undertaking that is ultimately unsuccessful. Instead her feminine qualities refuse repression and unsettle the stability of her identity.

Born to a Jewish-French family in Tunisia, Benmussa left the country in 1955 to attend college in Paris where she studied philosophy (Case, “Gender as Play” 21). She began working
with Jean-Louis Barrault when the Renaud-Barrault Company was formed (Calder) and in 1958 she became the editor of the Cahiers Renaud-Barrault (Cohn, “Benmussa’s Planes” 51). In the interlude between Barrault’s departure from the Odéon following the events of May ’68 and before the company took up residency in the Gare d’Orsay, Benmussa created and headed a theatrical agency for the publisher Gallimard (Calder). As theatre critic Colette Godard notes, Benmussa’s work reflects her strong background in literature and philosophy:

_Le Portrait de Dora_, d’Hélène Cixous, d’après Freud, est, en 1976, le premier d’une longue liste de spectacles qui tous se tiennent dans une ligne d’exigence littéraire – on pourrait dire philosophique -, dans la mesure où les textes choisis traversent les sinuosités de l’esprit, du caractère humain, ses ambiguïtés, ses contradictions, ses retournements, ses incertitudes. (Godard, “Simone Benmussa”)

When the Renaud-Barrault Company erected a theatre in the nearly abandoned Gare d’Orsay, Benmussa returned to work as Barrault’s personal assistant (Calder). It is here that she was allowed access, almost by accident, to the traditionally masculine sphere of directing after a dance troupe’s cancellation permitted her to stage _Le Portrait de Dora_ (Case, “Gender” 22) which was explored in Chapter II.

Benmussa, as writer, director, and designer, exemplified the figure of the genius director. While she workshoped her plays with a small group of actors before they reached their final form (Case, “Gender” 21), Benmussa’s work still evolved directly from a single-authored written text. Her productions were often her own adaptations of short stories. Such is the case of

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84 As noted in Chapter I, Ronald Hayman argues that Artaud had the most influence on French theatre through his relationship with Jean-Louis Barrault who extended “the techniques of mime into his production ideas” (101). Benmussa also worked closely with Barrault, signaling an indirect transmission of ideas from Artaud to her.

85 This method is similar to that of Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil which will be addressed in Chapter IV.
La Vie singulièrè d’Albert Nobbs which was first produced at the Théâtre d’Orsay in November 1977 with Juliet Berto in the lead role. It was subsequently staged in London (1978) starring Susannah York and New York (1982) where Glenn Close portrayed Albert Nobbs. In 1988, the play returned to Paris for a reprise. After the closure of the Théâtre d’Orsay, Benmussa followed Barrault to the Théâtre du Rond-Point where she was put in charge of the smaller auditorium. There, she continued to write and direct her own plays until Barrault’s death in 1994 when the theatre became a playhouse for touring productions. After leaving the Théâtre du Rond-Point, she started her own touring company and continued to work and write until her death in 2001 (Calder).

La Vie singulièrè d’Albert Nobbs is set in Victorian Ireland where the titular character, an orphaned woman, assumes masculine attire and the name Albert Nobbs in order to secure gainful employment as a waiter at Morrison’s hotel. Keeping her biological sex a secret, Albert becomes a respected employee living a lonely, isolated life despite the hustle and bustle of her hotel surroundings. Her situation remains the same until the arrival of the painter Hubert Page, who discovers Albert’s biological sex. By a remarkable coincidence, Hubert reveals to Albert that she, too, is a woman who assumed a male persona after escaping her abusive husband. Unlike Albert though, Hubert has a wife and lives happily in the home they have created together. This revelation sparks a desire in Albert to find a wife of her own with whom she can open a small tobacco shop with her savings. Unfortunately, she sets out to woo the frivolous young maid Helen, who conspires with her boyfriend Joe to use Albert in order to gain chocolates and gifts, before rejecting her solely because of her lack of manliness. Albert’s inability to find love and to reconcile her feminine identity with her masculine persona leads to a miserly and lonely existence for the remainder of her life.
In many respects, Benmussa’s text reads like nineteenth-century realist fiction, a form of writing which is chronological and straightforward. The simplistic language of the play and the realistic costuming lead the spectator to expect an entirely naturalistic production. In essence, they create the play’s symbolic tone to which it is assumed its other elements will stylistically conform. But like Albert’s femininity, which cannot be repressed, the text is interrupted by elements that could be considered feminine or outside of classic forms of narration. The realism of the plot line and certain aspects of the mise-en-scène represent the multiple ways in which Albert finds herself constrained. They heighten the spectator’s awareness of the oppression the women on stage face and point to the artificiality and constructed nature of gender roles. However, these naturalistic features are constantly interrupted by other more poetic and unreal aspects of the performance: the music, the lighting, the set design, the disembodied male voices, as well as other staging elements. Instead of being presented in a cohesive style, whether that be naturalistic or more figural, both modes of representation are constantly interwoven in ways that display Albert’s unstable identity and her inability to repress the semiotic and her feminine self. As I will show, these disruptions, often reminiscent of Brechtian estrangement, create a sensation of unease for the spectator as s/he oscillates between identifying with the character and being kept from becoming fully lost in the story. This unsettled feeling mimics what Albert experiences as she attempts to reconcile the masculine and the feminine parts of herself.

A Feminist Adaptation

Despite their vast stylistic differences, Albert Nobbs like Portrait de Dora is undeniably an example of feminist theatre. Unlike the works by Mnouchkine I examine later in this study, Albert Nobbs does not merely present strong women and address feminist concerns, but focuses entirely on questions of gender construction and its relation to the patriarchal oppression of
women. This production is not only created by a woman, but as critic Jean Mambrino states, it is an example of “Théâtre de femme, sur des femmes, par des femmes” (374). The play is written, directed, designed, and acted by women and addresses their specific position in society.

Benmussa created a feminist adaptation of a nineteenth century short story written by George Moore, using the male author’s own words to subvert his original work through slight, nearly imperceptible alterations that expose the violence of gender norms and the oppression of women in contemporary society.

*La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* is an adaptation of a short story, from the collection *Celibate Lives*, by George Moore. Benmussa’s play is based on the first French translation of this collection done by Pierre Leyris which was published by the *Mercure de France* under the title: *Albert Nobbs et autres vies sans hymen* (1971). Moore’s story reinforces the male/female binary by presenting the tale for mere amusement and without questioning the oppressive nature of the constructed gender roles it depicts. His omniscient narrator legitimizes the other characters’ perception that Albert is unnatural because she is neither one sex nor the other. However, Benmussa’s adaptation of Moore’s original short-story critiques the author/narrator’s complicity in reinforcing patriarchal culture, while stylistically countering the realistic aspects of the original work. In doing so, she transformed Moore’s veiled misogyny into a feminist study of the constraints placed on women through the imposition of strict notions of gender. Albert’s efforts to repress her gender identity result in a shattered sense of self, and through her story, Benmussa manages to call into question the formation of a gendered identity while simultaneously revealing the violence of attempts to suppress it.

Benmussa’s adaptation of “Albert Nobbs” subverts the conventional narration of the original work in what could be seen as an example of *écriture féminine*. Like many
contemporary critics, Elin Diamond denounces the theory of *écriture féminine* for what she sees as its essentialist claim that there are innate qualities that are common to all women. However, Diamond herself argues that Benmussa’s text constitutes an interruption of teleological narrativity, which is a key feature of *écriture féminine*. As I have shown previously, when Cixous urges women to write “through their bodies” (“Laugh” 256), she calls on them to dismantle phallogocentric forms of writing. While *Albert Nobbs* follows conventional norms of writing and does not display the strong poetic characteristics seen in other works such as those of Cixous herself, critics nevertheless have identified poetic qualities in Benmussa’s adaptation. Her staging elements destabilize the sense of rational order that is on display in the dialogue Benmussa borrowed from Moore’s short story. Benmussa exposes “a representational form that delimits the female” while simultaneously “interrupting those processes of audience participation that collude in female subjugation” (Diamond, “Refusing the Romanticism” 275-276).

Benmussa’s fracturing of Moore’s text emphasizes Albert’s own unstable identity and throws the reader into a similarly liminal emotional state.

The play that resulted from Benmussa’s adaptation clearly constitutes a feminist revision of Moore’s short-story. In “Benmussa’s Adaptations,” Elin Diamond explores the playwright’s work, the contraposition of author and adaptor, and their parallel relationship with the distinctions to be drawn between playwright and director:

The opposition between authoring and adapting, the former signifying authentic creativity, the latter its mere simulacrum, and the more general distinction between writing and directing. I would suggest that Simone Benmussa’s theater, her adaptations and productions, both interrogate and collapse these categories. Her process of adapting “the literary material of others” is never ideologically innocent but rather functions as a
critique of that material, and her directing aims at the density of writing, with the effect
that spectating becomes a kind of reading, an activity of self-conscious interpretation.

(64)

Diamond maintains that both adaptor and director are often seen as inferior to writer and
playwright, and that a play’s artistic force is perceived to emanate from the latter while the
former merely profit from others’ creativity. However, Diamond argues that with Benmussa, this
is not the case; instead, her work as both adaptor and director creates an entirely new text which
consciously throws into question the work of the original artist.

It is evident that Benmussa drew from Leyris’s translation of Moore’s *Celibate Lives*. Her
copy of Leyris’s translation, which is housed at the *Institut Mémoires de l’Édition
Contemporaine* (IMEC), contains penciled notes on the *mise-en-scène* indicating that Benmussa
worked from this translation in composing her playscript. In addition to archival evidence found
in her annotated copy, long passages of the play quote portions of Leyris’s translation. Compare,
for instance, the following excerpt from Leyris’s translation to Benmussa’s script:

Maintenant que *je me mets à y penser*, je vois le Morrison’s *presque aussi clairement que
Moore Hall* : la porte d’entrée donnant sur un vestibule sans profondeur flanqué d’une
demi-douzaine de marches *qui menaient dans la maison*, les portes vitrées *du bar* qu’on
distinguait dans la pénombre et, devant le visiteur, un grand escalier qui montait au
second étage. (Leyris 39, emphasis mine)

Maintenant que *j’y pense*, je vois *très clairement* le Morrison’s : la porte d’entrée donnant
sur un vestibule sans profondeur flanqué d’une demi-douzaine de marches, les portes
The striking similarity between these passages and others show Benmussa’s reliance on Leyris’s translation for her own work. However, she expands on the narrative framing presented in Albert Nobbs et autres vies sans hymen and Celibate Lives by returning to an earlier version of Moore’s short story for additional source material.

When Moore republished In Single Strictness (1922) as Celibate Lives (1927), he borrowed the story of “Albert Nobbs” from A Story-teller’s Holiday (1918) to replace another story for this new publication (Leyris 9). Celibate Lives, which was later translated as Albert Nobbs et autres vies sans hymen, was a collection of unrelated short-stories. However, in the earlier book, A Story-teller’s Holiday, where “Albert Nobbs” first appeared, Moore presented a collection of short stories and Irish folk tales woven together by the story of a first-person, unnamed narrator’s travels to Ireland. While there, this narrator meets Alec Trusselby, a nature lover and fellow storyteller. Each of these characters considers the other to be the better storyteller. Benmussa names Moore’s unnamed narrator after the author and uses details from A Story-teller’s Holiday to create the characters of George and Alec who play important roles in this stage adaptation. In the opening lines of Benmussa’s “Prologue,” the character George claims that Alec is a descendent of storytellers from Mayo, an Irish county. The referencing of their ancestry and geographical location is a leitmotif of the interactions between the two storytellers in A Story-teller’s Holiday, but it is not mentioned in the short story version of “Albert Nobbs” found in Celibate Lives or in Leyris’s translation. Similarly, the play’s George asks Alec: “Quelle histoire vas-tu me raconteur aujourd’hui, Alec?” (Benmussa, La Vie “Prologue”). His inquiry as to what story Alec will tell on that day suggests that Alec had told
him stories previously, a statement only found in Moore’s earlier book. These details clearly show that Benmussa referred to both Leyris’s translation and Moore’s earlier untranslated works when transforming the short story into the stage production.

While Benmussa’s play closely follows Moore’s short story, she is able to change the overall focus of the narrative precisely because she adds to the source material, making “subtle shifts in structure” and “clever use of mise-en-scène” (Ammen 310). These shifts are evident beginning in the playscript where there is a juxtaposition of direct excerpts from Moore’s text used as dialogue, which tends to be somewhat dry and matter-of-fact, and the stage directions, which often have a melodic figurative tone. For example, Benmussa describes the mood when Hubert returns to Morrison’s after Albert’s death: “Dans cette lumière douce de printemps, la porte bat au souffle des voix” (La Vie “Le retour d’Hubert”) which contrasts the simple greetings exchanged between the painter and the hotel workers:

HUBERT PAGE. Il y a quelqu’un?

HUBERT PAGE. Bonjour tout le monde !

VOIX. Bonjour Hubert !

Tiens, Hubert Page !

Eye-witness descriptions of the stage performance indicate that the realization of these stage directions gave the production a fairy-tale like quality.

To place the dramatic focus of the play entirely on the experiences and lives of female characters, Benmussa eliminated male actors from the stage; they are only present in the form of offstage voice-overs. The narrator’s placement offstage replicates the narrator’s omniscient presence in the play’s source text. However, all of the male characters in the play are heard, but not seen. Men traditionally have a more visible place of power in society, a fact that is so
prevalent and accepted that it often goes unnoticed. By rendering the male characters invisible, Benmussa actually highlights the effect the dominant male discourse has on women. It is through the erasure of the male body that its discursive power becomes more apparent. Bodily presence humanizes and individualizes characters, which allows spectators to attribute patriarchal/masculine control to individual personalities instead of seeing it as an imposition of the power structure ordering society. Additionally, creating theatrical space reserved only for women calls attention to the gender specificity of their problems. This understanding is often lost when the male experience is universalized in ways that marginalize or erase the feminine.

The off-stage presence of the male characters increases the perception that the women’s movements on stage are controlled by invisible puppeteers; the men’s voices act as the puppet strings that manipulate the women’s bodies and psyches. This assertion of male authority would have been veiled in the play, as it had been in the short story, had the men been present on the stage where their physical beings would have suggested that the characters were engaged in a true dialogue and that the men and women had an equal position in their interactions. Instead, the men’s voices represent an ever-present regulation of the women’s lives. Harry J. Elam Jr. remarks: “The non-appearance of the men, in conjunction with their heard voices which surround the stage, signifies powerfully to the audience the invisible confines of the patriarchal system, limiting the social mobility of the onstage, visible women” (313). Without an embodiment of male authority, the spectator clearly sees that the women do not exert the same kind of influence on men as men have over them; they are trapped, like the spectator herself, in a world created by men over which they have little control.

By giving the narrator the name of the story’s author, George Moore, Benmussa draws attention to the maleness of the narrator who controls Albert’s story.
found that while “Moore told this story with a great deal of respect, tenderness and humour,” he was telling the story as a “man telling a woman’s story” because his “humour was tinged with irony” (Benmussa, “The Singular” 24). As a woman, Benmussa identified with the character Albert and sought to highlight Moore’s narrative control of the presentation of the female characters. By naming the narrator and revealing his gender, Benmussa calls into question the objectivity of his observations and emphasizes the perspective he adopts in creating the story being told. By presenting only women on stage, Benmussa shows that they must function in a phallogocentric world. The play’s female characters do not hold the subject positions of their own stories, but are the objects of patriarchal control symbolized by George’s invisible but ever-present vocal control of the action. Albert’s identity is created through George and Alec’s performative speech. In fact, George speaks for Albert when she first arrives on the stage during her opening scene with Mrs. Baker. The storyteller relates the thoughts, emotions, and excuses that Albert and Hubert form in response to Mrs. Baker’s request that Albert allow Hubert Page, the painter, to share her bed for the evening since he has nowhere else to go:

VOIX DE GEORGE MOORE. Albert Nobbs accepta, devant la colère de Mrs. Baker.
Vous n’en ferez rien Mr. Page, répétait-il.

MRS. BAKER. J’aime à le croire !

VOIX DE GEORGE MOORE. J’ai le sommeil léger, bougonnait-il.

MRS. BAKER. Nous avons déjà entendu ça, Albert ! (s’en allant) : vous ne dérangez en rien, Page. (Benmussa La Vie “Prologue”)

Further on in the play, the indications that George is speaking Albert’s words are removed and the narrative voice-overs fade to show scenes of Albert’s life in a staged form of free indirect discourse:
ALBERT NOBBS. Avec une vraie associée, quelqu’un qui mettrait son Cœur dans
l’affaire, nous pourrions gagner jusqu’à quatre livres par semaine, deux cents livres par
an! Nous aurions un chez-nous aussi coquet et aussi heureux qu’aucun autre dans toute la
ville de Dublin.

VOIX DE GEORGE MOORE. Deux chambres et une cuisine, voilà ce qu’elle prévoyait.
Les meubles peu à peu commencèrent à se glisser dans sa rêverie. Un grand sofa couvert
de chintz près de la cheminée !

ALBERT NOBBS. Le chintz se salit vite à la ville

VOIX DE GEORGE MOORE. Un sofa en velours sombre ferait peut-être mieux
l’affaire. (Benmussa *La Vie “Le rêve d’Albert”*)

When George enunciates Albert’s dialogue and expresses her internal thoughts for her, the power
the storyteller exerts over his character is laid bare. She is not in control of her own thoughts and
actions, but they are instead created and enunciated through the voice of the narrator.

The play’s meanings are formed in multiple layers, most notably in George and Alec’s
extradiegetic narrative and in the action taking place in the diegesis of Albert’s story. Added to
these two overarching planes are moments of metadiegetic narrative where Albert tells her
history to Hubert and where, in return, Hubert briefly outlines her own past. The changes in
narration cause the spectator’s focus to constantly shift, disrupting the teleological unfolding of
the plot and preventing the audience from identifying fully with Albert’s story. According to
Elam:

Benmussa asks that Albert be presented on two distinct levels; as a character within the
context of the play, and as a character within George Moore’s narration. The director
must shape these levels so that spectators identify with Albert and her struggle to survive,
but also remain aware of the narrative presence of Moore and the conscious that they are witnessing a play. (290)

Brecht argued that one of the problems with popular methods of acting in his time was that they encouraged the audience to enter a sort of hypnotic trance as they identified with the play’s characters (Brecht on Theatre 26). To counter this process, Brecht saw a need for creating an estrangement effect which would disrupt the spectator’s emotional identification with the character so that they could better critique the character’s actions: “Like Brecht, Benmussa juxtaposes narrative and dramatic voices within the structure of her play and continually disrupts the dramatic flow” (Elam 291). As a result of this move, the audience is forced to engage intellectually with the play and is allowed to make connections between the patriarchal control exerted in the story and in their own lives, connections that were not encouraged in Moore’s original short story.

In A Story-teller’s Holiday, the collection in which “Albert Nobbs” originally appeared, the narrator hopes to impress his fellow storyteller, Alec, with a story of wonder, a legend, or a fairy tale and so tells him the story of the Biblical Adam’s first wife, before the arrival of Eve. (G. Moore 206). However, Alec returns to him later and asks for a real story like he writes in his books, to which the narrator responds that he will tell him a story that comes from a memory (G. Moore 263). It is here that the narrator recounts the tale of Albert Nobbs. By stating that the story comes from a memory, the narrator suggests that it is autobiographical and true in nature. While Moore’s short story already has the framework of the first-person narrator and suggests that the narrator witnessed the events, Albert’s story, stripped of its expanded intradiegetic framing as it is later transmitted in Celibate Lives, does not emphasize the truth of the recitation as it did in A Story-teller’s Holiday. In contrast, Benmussa’s characterization of George explicitly exclaims
that he is telling a true story: “je te raconterai une histoire vraie” (La Vie “Prologue”). This unequivocal emphasis on the reality of Albert’s tragic life prevents the audience from writing her off as a fictional character caught up in an impossible intrigue. Despite this insistence on the reality of Albert’s story, Matthieu Galey of the Quotidien de Paris remarked in his review of the original performance that only in Brighton or Dublin would you be able to find old couples living together and who upon their death it is discovered that the husband is a woman. Galey effectively denies the existence of such couples in France in a veiled attempt to discredit the truthfulness of such a tale. This shows the reluctance on the part of the spectator, particularly the male spectator, to accept the reality that a woman would need to become a man to be financially successful, that she would be capable of the work, and that she could do so without being discovered. Through George’s insistence on the truthfulness of the story he is to tell, Benmussa attempts to keep the spectator from believing this is merely an Irish fairy story and instead, it forces them to consider the reality of women and the travails they face in the workforce and the real possibility of women passing as men to secure better jobs.

This adaptation of Moore’s short story also eliminates the original’s surprise reveal that Albert is a woman. Benmussa did this purposely in order to avoid staging a coup de théâtre where Albert’s biological sex would be dramatically divulged to the other characters and the audience. Benmussa eliminates the element of surprise surrounding Albert and Hubert’s biological gender by sharing this information in the description of the play printed both in the playbill and in advertising for the production and by announcing Albert’s gender masquerade during the opening scene of the play. This has the result of removing elements of titillation present in Moore’s story in which the reader is left to believe Albert is biologically male until she is found out by another character in a sexually compromising situation.
When Albert is forced to share her bed with the visiting painter Hubert because there are no other rooms available, she is awoken in the middle of the night by a flea bite. She removes some of her clothing to scratch, and Hubert wakes to discover that she is sharing a bed with a woman. This scene is present in both Moore’s and Benmussa’s versions of the story, but while spectators of Benmussa’s play were already aware of both Albert’s and Hubert’s biological sex, readers of Moore’s short story would have been shocked by this sudden turn of events. Furthermore, in Moore’s original version, Hubert does not immediately confess to Albert that she, too, is a woman. Instead, the reader is left in suspense as Albert stands with her shirt up. On two occasions, Moore stresses the fact that Albert’s shirt is raised, first when Hubert awakens (“If Albert had had the presence of mind to drop his shirt over his shoulders and to answer”) and then again when Albert begins to tell Hubert her story: “It is very cold, she said, and shuddering dropped her shirt over her shoulders and pulled on her trousers” (G. Moore 274). The second time Moore emphasizes Albert’s lifted shirt, he further clarifies that her trousers were removed as well, causing the reader to imagine her naked. There is no indication that any nudity was involved in the stage production, and in fact reviewers commented on its absence of sensuality. Moore’s articulation of Albert’s lack of clothing in conjunction with believing that Hubert is a man leads readers to ponder an inevitable sexual encounter between the two. By removing the emphasis on the naked body and the assumption that Hubert is a man looking at a naked woman, Benmussa has diminished the sexual overtones of the piece.

Even after Albert has finished telling Hubert her story, and she proclaims that she is a woman too, Moore continues to arouse sexual anticipation in the reader. In the original short story, when Albert refuses to believe that Hubert is indeed a woman, Hubert suggests that Albert reach under her shirt to verify this for herself. Hubert’s invitation to feel her breast stirs in the
reader an anticipation of a lesbian encounter between the two women which will be continued as Albert begins to woo Helen. In the play, the subject matter may have encouraged the audience to infer that latent homosexuality may be involved; however, all comments from reviewers and evidence within the script points away from this possibility. Sharon Ammen suggests that Benmussa has removed all of this sexual tension from her adaptation by eliminating Hubert’s suggestion and later rendering “the Helen-Albert courtship scene less steamy by omitting the seductive kiss that Helen manages to plant on Albert before she pulls away” (309). Writing in *Le Nouvel observateur*, Guy Dumur remarked after seeing the production that it was characterized by its extreme modesty: “Ce qui frappe à la scène, peut-être plus qu’en lisant la nouvelle, c’est l’extrême pudeur de cette histoire, où n’apparaît jamais l’homosexualité, même latent, du personnage.” Through these revisions, Benmussa defuses every moment of sexual suggestion present in Moore’s original work. By shifting the story away from the realm of sexual possibilities, Benmussa focuses the attention on Albert’s material motivations for dressing as a man. This new emphasis rejects the story as merely a means to shock and amuse the reader. Along with removing men altogether from the stage and creating the character George, the narrator, the absence of sexual tension allows Benmussa to turn the story into a feminist commentary on the economic plight of women.

**The Impossibility of Gender Repression and Unease of Unstable Subjectivity**

Plays classified as expressions of cultural or radical feminism, such as Cixous’s *Portrait de Dora*, are often criticized for essentializing feminine identity or implying that there are core personality traits common to all women (Alcoff 414, Dolan 84). At first glance, *Albert Nobbs* might be disparaged as essentialist if Albert is perceived as having a false identity and a true one. However, Benmussa does a balancing act in which she both emphasizes the futility of seeking to
repress femininity, which would normally imply that there are qualities that are innate to women, while also insisting that gender norms are a social construct. Benmussa achieves this through both the juxtaposition of naturalistic and suggestive artistic elements of the *mise-en-scène* as well as through the character of Albert herself. Albert successfully manages to pass as a male by adopting the dress and mannerisms of a man, thereby highlighting the fact that gendered dress and actions are not a reflection of a biological predisposition but a matter of acting in conformity with societal demands. At the same time, *Albert Nobbs* is ultimately a tragedy because Albert is unable to integrate her two gender identities in a way that brings her personal fulfillment. In dressing as a man, Albert signals her entry into the phallogocentric order, but she is unable to entirely repress the feminine qualities she tries to leave behind. However, Benmussa does not present these as innate qualities but points to the fact that Albert’s identity as a woman had already been formed in childhood.

The actresses cast as Albert and Hubert in each of the major productions in Paris, London, and New York have conventional feminine features; that they are dressed and accepted as males within the play’s diegesis makes the play’s other gender roles seem false as well. This artificial nature of gender and the emotional response to conforming to gender expectations is the centerpiece of the production. Women are given an opposing set of norms to comply with. They are expected to be emotional and nurturing, but these qualities are not readily accepted at work. Instead, historically male attributes like stoicism and logic are prized. Like Albert, women of the 1970s had to mold themselves to a business-like demeanor more aligned with traditional masculinity. This required a certain amount of emotional gymnastics to integrate these personas, a task Albert finds impossible to accomplish.
While thinking about the gender construction evident in the play, it is helpful to consider Judith Butler’s theory of performative acts, which she defines as:

[…] forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements that not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. (“Critically Queer” 17)

Gender identity is formed through speech acts which place the subject in one gender category or another. This subject position is continually reinforced by discourse and the threat of punishment for non-adherence to the traits assigned to that category. One’s gender identity, Butler argues, is the result of a “regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint” (Butler “Critically Queer” 21). Pronouncing “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” at the birth of a child, or even earlier in today’s age of sonograms and sex reveal parties, is a performative that immediately begins the construction of the child’s gender. This gender is then affirmed and reinforced through various means of constraint such as the threat of punishment, ridicule, or rejection by society.

While she has shown that speech acts create gender positions, Butler argues that her work has been misused to suggest that the subject itself creates its gender through choice. She objects to the notion that drag, for instance, is the prime example of the function of performatives in gender construction. Butler clarifies:

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86 In Bodies that Matter, Butler argues that not only gender, but sexual identity as well is constructed through performatives.
The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that
gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in
the morning, that there is a “one” who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the
wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a
voluntarist account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering.
(“Critically Queer” 21)

Gender is not chosen freely by the subject but is created for her by the speech acts of those
surrounding her. In Bodies that Matter, Butler emphasizes the role of history in the operation of
performatives. They do not allow the subject on his/her own to create something by naming it
but rely on the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and
constrains” (Butler Bodies 2). Performatives only have power because they are tied to historical
norms. According to Butler, there is no essential identity prior to the formation of one’s gender
through performatives.

Albert Nobbs is not a play about transvestism, homosexuality, or transgenderism, but
gender identity is one of its central preoccupations. In the introduction to the play, which was
also included in the original program, Benmussa explains:

Albert Nobbs n’est pas une histoire de travestis. L’habit masculin est le déguisement que
deux femmes ont chacune dû emprunter par détresse, pour se soustraire aux violences de
la pauvreté, pour trouver du travail, pour garder leur place. Cette apparence d’homme
relève donc d’une dure nécessité, et la nécessité ne prête pas plus à rire qu’à jouir.
Qu’une femme doive cesser d’être femme pour faire valoir son droit au travail, c’est là
une évidence trop souvent oubliée par la lutte des classe, évidence différemment présente
aujourd’hui, mais toujours aussi tenace. (La Vie)
The play does not present the story of two women who chose to dress as men out of an inner sense that they were men, as would be the case if they were transgendered. Instead, they are both presenting themselves as male in order to gain employment and improve their lives, which in Hubert’s case involves escaping an abusive husband. Likewise, Hubert’s second marriage and Albert’s interest in Helen are not expressions of homosexual desire. Hubert tells Albert how she and another woman were both feeling alone, and so they decided to live together and share expenses. Since Hubert was dressed as a man, their situation caused the neighbors to gossip, and thus the two decided to get married. While their relationship is never directly investigated, and in fact, the unknown details of the arrangement drive the action of the play as Albert seeks to emulate Hubert’s happiness, it is suggested that Hubert sees her wife as a roommate and companion instead of a love interest. Similarly, Albert searches for a wife so that she will no longer be lonely, and she clearly feels uncomfortable seeing Helen as an object of sexual desire.

Both Albert and Hubert identify as women while simultaneously attempting to forget that they are women. The use of Butler’s theory of gender performativity would appear to be a misappropriation in the case of Albert and Hubert because both of these women have freely chosen to adopt a male identity. However, prior to her assumption of a male persona, Albert’s gender was already fully constructed as female, a fact that is evident through Albert’s recollection of her life prior to working at Morrison’s hotel. As the illegitimate child of an unknown wealthy couple, Albert was raised in a convent, an exemplary location for the type of social constraints and taboos outlined by Butler as central to the process of gender construction. Failure to conform to female gender norms would have resulted in derision or punishment. As Butler makes clear, gender is not formed in a single utterance but through repetitive discursive acts and one’s subjection to constant surveillance. We can assume based on other accounts of
similar settings, that Albert would have learned modesty, a defining characteristic of classic femininity, at the convent. This speculation is supported by her reaction to the living and working conditions placed on her by her reduced status after her parents’ death. She is appalled by having to live among the poor who she calls “des gens grossier” (La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”) and terrified of the men who viewed her as a sexual object and openly lusted after her: “mais moi c’était les hommes qui me tracassaien; le chef de fanfare ne voulait pas me laisser tranquille. J’ai attendu plus d’une fois qu’il fasse clair dans l’escaler, j’avais peur, si je le rencontrais, qu’il me coince, qu’il me fasse voir” (La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”). Having grown up in the sheltered atmosphere of the convent, Albert has the modesty and innocence associated with the classic feminine ideal of a young woman of means. Therefore, Albert adopts a male identity not as her primary gender but as a willfully chosen secondary one. Her primary gender formation had already taken place through her subjection to the process of performativity active at the convent prior to her adoption of a masculine persona.

In addition to the repression of her original female identity, Albert lacks certain aspects of self-identification that contribute to her instable subjectivity. The names of her parents were kept from her as a child, and the only person who held that information, Albert’s nanny, died before sharing it with her. Perhaps because she does not know her lineage, Albert never divulges what her name was before adopting the moniker of Albert. Beyond the fact that her character is under the control of the storyteller George, Albert never occupies a subject position in her own right. Carol J. Smucker points out that all of Albert’s actions come at the suggestion of someone else: her first employment is found by her nanny; she then chooses to dress as a man and seeks a position as a waiter at the suggestion of another chambermaid, donning the clothes of her former employer. It is also another character, Hubert, who reawakens her femininity and encourages her
to find a wife and marry as she has (Smucker 75). Albert’s identity is so disjointed that she is unable to define herself and act of her own volition. This sort of fragmented subjectivity is feature of postmodern art, but its use by Benmussa shows how specific it is to the formation of female subjectivity.

Albert almost literally “goes to the wardrobe of gender” (Butler, “Critically Queer” 21) and chooses to put on the clothes of a man in order to become one. She appropriates the clothing of her former employer, Mr. Congrave, and assumes the occupation and mannerisms of a male. Her male persona is not formed through the same unescapable performativity that acts on individuals in ways that Butler describes the formation of gender identity. In this case, performativity is still at work in the sense that Albert’s actions alone do not create this new gendered identity for her. She conforms to the societal norm of masculinity and as a result, those around her perceive her as male. They then reinforce and repeatedly buttress her male identity through their performatives. As previously shown, for the audience, Albert’s gender is formed primarily through her costume, but it is also instantiated through the voice of the male storyteller, George. According to Elin Diamond “Moore’s disembodied voice is the voice of phallic power for whose privileges, sanctioned and perpetuated by history, Albert sells her sexuality. She gains no new powers of enunciation, but merely assumes the gender markings appropriate to the status quo: that of a male” (“Refusing the Romanticism” 281). In Diamond’s view, George represents the patriarchal society that enforces gender norms through performatives; while Albert adopts the gender constraints imposed on them, she does not ultimately benefit from the power that accrues to men within the patriarchy.

The process of social conditioning Albert undergoes is so thorough that she begins to internalize the gender norms she has adopted, never fully abandoning, however, her former
femininity. The tension between her masculine and feminine selves increasingly fractures her sense of identity. Albert fantasizes about what a normal life should be like, dreaming of the shop she will own with Helen. Smucker argues:

Albert’s continual fantasies of what to her appears to be a normal life box her in every bit as much as outside pressures from society. She has internalized the Victorian notion of what it means to be a woman, so that although she is acting out a very unusual role for herself, she believes she is indeed following the norms set up around her. (79)

Albert’s vision of a traditional life with a home and a wife revolves around the material objects which she imagines that life would entail, including, among others, the clock on the mantel, the fabric of the sofa, and the living quarters placed in proximity to the shop. She fathoms the outward appearance of this existence, but not the inner feelings or dynamics of the personal relationship she hopes to create with Helen. This leaves Albert stumbling awkwardly in their interactions.

Even before adopting a male disguise, Albert was unable to find love, due largely to the discrepancy between her diminished station in life and her upbringing in a convent as the daughter of unknown, but well-to-do parents. Her identity had been constructed by life in the convent, which undoubtedly placed a premium on modesty, chastity, and notions of traditional femininity. When she leaves the convent, Albert is thrust into a world of the poor and destitute. In her own words: “Quand on est pauvre, on vit comme des bêtes, d’une manière indécente, et une vie sans décence est à peine supportable” (La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”). She finds the men surrounding her to be dirty and vulgar, wholly unsuitable companions for her. As a result of her illegitimacy, a man of her own station is no more available to her than the men of her milieu are acceptable to her as life partners. Albert realizes later that she had fallen in love with her
employer, Mr. Congrave, but was heartbroken when he brought a woman from France to live with him. She was able to love him because of his refined appearance and higher social standing but was not able to marry him because her status did not match his. Even before confining herself within an assumed gender, Albert was denied love and happiness because of the social conventions of her society. When forms of class and gender oppression intersect, women such as Albert who are assigned a lower socio-economic status experience greater hardship in patriarchal systems than women with more economic security.

Albert’s assumption of a male persona pushes her further into isolation as she is forced into a situation in which she is divided between identifying as male or female, never fully occupying one gender position or the other. Sharon Ammen argues that Albert had already been indoctrinated with romantic ideas of love and courtship which close off her ability to imagine a relationship outside the bounds of heteronormativity: “She was forced by a patriarchal society to pretend to be a man in order to survive, yet that same patriarchy has supplied her with the romantic myths of a love that she can now never have” (308). Albert has an idealized understanding of how relationships between the sexes were to be performed, but because she did not fully fit either sex, she is unsure how to go about pursuing Helen. Hubert sparked a desire in her to find love and introduced the possibility that she could find happiness married to another woman, but this is a possibility that Albert does not know how to realize. As Smucker notes: “Albert is caught between two definitions not recognized by a moralistic Victorian society: the unmarried female disguised as a male on the one hand and the ‘husband’ in a woman-woman marriage on the other” (72). Because she does not fit the accepted gender binary, she has no place in society. Mary Lydon refers to this as “the non-place occupied by women in a man’s world” (34). Women cannot be both successful and feminine. Smart women who succeed in the
public sphere, or who engage with men intellectually, are neither allowed to maintain their femininity nor are they ever fully accepted as equals, and so are left with no place to exist. Albert is no longer a woman, but she is never fully a man either. She tries to follow Hubert’s example but without clear guidance on how Hubert was able to find a wife, Albert chooses to follow romantic models of courtship and is ultimately rejected because her performance of manliness is insufficiently masculine.

After Albert confesses her story to Hubert in the act titled “Le Récit d’Albert Nobbs,” Hubert remarks that she has the thoughts of a man and the feelings of a woman. This is an apt description of Albert’s situation as she attempts to enter a male-dominated workplace where stoic rationality is the accepted model of masculinity but where her emotional impulses return to destabilize her adopted identity. Like all subjects, Albert does not have a stable identity, but hers is considerably more destabilized because she is actively attempting to repress her femininity. She is neither man nor woman, but she has not successfully integrated these two halves either. According to Kristeva, the ultimate goal for the individual is not a fixed identity. The process of identity formation is a work in progress in which the human subject wavers constantly between the semiotic and the symbolic registers of being (Moi, “Introduction” 14). Albert is unable to do this because she is forced by society to conform to one gender or the other which is impossible for her because she feels like a woman but needs to present herself as a man in order to earn a living.

The regret Albert has for her lost self is apparent throughout the play. George, the narrator, begins Albert’s story with his own childhood recollection of his interactions with the waiter, Albert, when George frequented Morrison’s hotel with his parents. He was always afraid to run into her because he was fearful she would pick him up and kiss him: “J’hésitais à ouvrir la
porte du salon car j’étais sûr de le trouver là, attendant sur le palier sa serviette jetée sur son épaule gauche. J’avais peur qu’il me soulevât de terre et m’embrassât” (La Vie “Prologue”). Albert’s reaction to the young boy suggests an inclination on Albert’s part to mother a child, a stance which is not perceived as a typical male response to encountering a young boy. Kristeva argues that what creates feelings of abjection is that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Powers of Horror 4). George experiences a sense of abjection because he senses that Albert’s reaction to him breaks societal codes of how men are to interact with children. Even though it would violate the code of masculinity, Albert is unable to suppress her urge to react as a woman with motherly instincts would to a small child. Albert expresses her regret for her choice directly to Hubert: “C’est beaucoup plus triste encore que je ne le pensais et, si j’avais su combien c’était triste, je n’aurais pas été capable de le vivre” (La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”). She entered into the position without fully understanding all that she was giving up and the loneliness and the loss of self-identity that such an endeavor would engender. She claims that the arrival of Hubert has awoken the woman in her, but it is clear through her prior interactions with the young George, that even when she thought she had fully repressed her former identity, it was still present.

Benmussa chose to cast actresses with traditionally feminine silhouettes which made it impossible for the spectator to simply accept that Albert is a man as the characters in the play do. The refusal to mask Albert’s physical feminine qualities also reflects the characters’ inability to entirely repress her femininity. Instead, it relentlessly reasserts itself by visually impinging upon her masquerade of masculinity, much as the semiotic continuously disrupts the symbolic in Kristeva’s theory of subject formation. Benmussa specifically cast women in the roles of Albert and Hubert in each of the major productions in Paris, London, and New York, where they were
not described as having traditionally masculine physical features. Seeking a more conventional storyline, some reviewers criticized the casting of these women and doubted that anyone would ever believe they were men. Commenting on the London production Michael Billington of the *Guardian* stated:

I must admit that the casting of Susannah York as Albert does for me create a slight problem; as I noticed in Peter Pan, male attire only serves to heighten Miss York’s radiant, undisguisable femininity. She acts fear and solitude perfectly: one notices her constant slight surprise at even being talked to. All one misses is that hint of ambisextrousness that could make her pass easily as a man.

Commenting in *France-soir*, François Chalais did not feel that anyone – particularly other women – would have believed the actresses playing Albert and Hubert were men:

Ce qui est admissible quand on parcourt un roman, le lecteur fixant lui-même les limites de sa crédulité, devient impossible sous les projecteurs impitoyables d’un théâtre. Juliet Berto n’est plus qu’un amoureux de Peynet auquel il manquerait une tulipe et un cœur en sucre rose. Quant à Brigitte Catillon, elle pourrait à la rigueur évoquer George Sand; pas Musset.

These critics expected the character to conform to all the traits of masculinity dictated by gender stereotypes and failed to consider that Benmussa specifically chose actresses who did not manifest physical qualities that are customarily perceived as masculine. They ignored the possibility that the director did not want the spectators to forget that Albert and Hubert had no fixed gender identity and were instead negotiating the space between the male-female binary.

The presentation of a woman with a traditionally female silhouette dressed as a male is incongruous with societal notions of masculinity or femininity. As Sue Ellen Case points out:
“The drag role makes all gender roles appear fictitious” (“Gender as Play” 23). Through the portrayal of a woman impersonating a male, the spectator can see how “social constructs are inscribed on the body: A woman in drag plays how the male body reads and how the female fantasy recedes from the body” (Case, “Gender as Play” 24). The audience is purposely kept from seeing the characters as either male or female but is constantly confronted with stereotypical images of both in the same body from which they must create one character (Elam 316).

During certain scenes, Benmussa puts an even greater emphasis on the instability of Albert’s identity by having actresses dressed as maids act as Albert’s double on stage so that her physicality mimics the fragmentation of her identity. There is no longer a single representation of Albert’s body, but two: one presenting herself as male (the actress playing Albert) and the other as female (the maid). If in spite of the discordance between the actress’s feminine traits and her masculine attire, the spectator has been able to see Albert as wholly male, the doubling of her movements by the presence of these other feminine actors once again dispels the illusion that Albert is in fact a man. This disillusion also occurs primarily later in the play and signals Albert’s increasing fragility as she becomes ever more dissatisfied with her life and her efforts to repress the feminine become increasingly onerous. The body double becomes a visual representation of Albert’s emotional state as well, indicating to the spectator her inner disaccord. The audience can see Albert’s femininity intruding on her attempt to present herself as male.

The first appearance of Albert’s body being doubled by one of the chambermaids occurs after Hubert’s departure when Albert reflects on Hubert’s revelation that she, too, is a woman and that she has a wife to boot! As Benmussa notes, this is a scene that gives voice to three identities/perspectives: George Moore’s character, Albert’s, and Albert’s interior voice. This
multivocality melds in such a manner that Albert’s thoughts surround the space with a haunting musicality. During this reverie, a maid appears behind Albert: “une soubrette, le double, le corps féminin d’Albert se profile derrière celle-ci, va la suivre, l’aider, l’accompagner dans sa rêverie” (La Vie “La rêve d’Albert”). However, the maid does not give voice to Albert’s interior self; this entity appears as an off-stage voice-over, which reinforces the sense of Albert’s splintered identity. As Sharon Ammen observes: “This mute feminine double is somewhere with Albert, but never allowed really to speak; for Albert is a shattered personality, a multiplicity of identities which cannot fuse” (308). The mute maid represents Albert’s femininity which is hidden beneath her masculine appearance. The previous night’s confession to Hubert has strengthened Albert’s feminine self to the extent that she has a bodily presence on stage besides the masculine persona represented by the actress playing Albert. No longer able to repress the woman inside, Albert has become two. Albert’s character has become even more visually dispersed and the spectator, who already was confronted with the feminine silhouette in masculine attire, is more fully aware of her multi-faceted identity.

The doubling of the body is not a technique employed exclusively for Albert. Her love interest, Helen, is also given a double. Like Albert, Helen is trapped in a world controlled by men as her own actions are performed at the command of her boyfriend Joe. Like the storyteller George, Joe is merely heard as his voice pulls Helen’s invisible puppet string and controls her actions from offstage. After having gone out a few times, Helen is confused because Albert does not act like her other suitors and has made no sexual advances. Helen finally convinces Albert to kiss her, but the result is awkward and chaste. Feeling that the relationship is abnormal, Helen breaks things off. Albert, under the delusion that things are going well and that they will marry, attempts to convince Helen to stay with her. In this climactic scene where Helen rejects Albert
because of his lack of virility, two additional maids appear as Albert’s and Helen’s doubles. Benmussa stipulates that the two women are always placed where Albert should be in front of Helen so that Helen always faces three Alberts – two female Alberts and one male. These two additional maids also represent Helen to Albert so that she is surrounded by three Helens. The four women on stage are seen circling each other in a dance where each character is always surrounded by the other, further trapping Albert in a dizzying swarm of bodies. Benmussa suggests that this mirroring process indicates a complete refusal and an incomprehension of Helen’s rejection (*La Vie* “La rupture”). I argue that these body doubles also serve to represent the fragmentation of Helen’s character and the similarities between the two women. They render visible the unstable identity that Albert’s character displays throughout the play, but also extend it to Helen and further generalizes the trait to encompass all women.

Like Albert’s identity, the play itself is destabilized as semiotic impulses interject themselves into the symbolic order of the production. I have already addressed textual disruptions and incongruences as they relate to the transformation of Moore’s work into a feminist play. Additionally, the play introduces an Irish musicality that softens the angularity and restrictiveness of Benmussa’s set design. While the visual aspects of the production are dark and severe, the music was melodious and soothing. In her introduction to the playscript, the *auteur* explains: “Dans la mise en scène de ce conte, la douceur natale n’est jamais tout à fait perdue, comme si l’Irlande par ses chansons et par ses paysages, continuait mystérieusement à veiller” (*La Vie*). *Douceur’s* dual translations of sweetness and softness are both traits traditionally thought of as feminine. The French term “natale” is more linguistically connected to notions of birth than the translation “native” is in English. Thus, Benmussa’s use of “*douceur natale*” reinforces the tie between the feminine and the semiotic, or what is prior to the entry into the
phallogocentric system. The sweet softness of Ireland’s songs and the beauty of its lush
countryside are its essential elements linguistically tied to the idea of birthing and thus
motherhood as well. Through her word choice, Benmussa creates a strong relationship between
the traits she sees as being Irish, in particular the music, and traditionally feminine qualities. The
play’s Irish music artistically introduces a semiotic femininity that steadfastly hovers over the
play and never disappears, just as Albert’s female gender is never entirely lost, but continues to
unsettle her adopted male identity.

Similar to the estrangement effect created through the play’s multi-level narration, its
visual design also calls the audience’s attention to the theatre’s artifice and reminds them that
they are watching a facsimile of life. In Benmussa’s production, the patriarchal constraints
placed on Albert, which coerces her into assuming a male persona, and the artificiality of gender
norms are highlighted by the design elements. Not only was Benmussa the playwright and
director, she also worked as the scenographer for the production, exerting nearly complete
control in establishing the play’s artistic vision. The set for the original production was
constructed using items gathered from the old Hôtel d’Orsay that were on loan from the SNCF
and made available due to the theatre’s location within the emptied Gare d’Orsay (Fontenay).
The stage setting was not, however, a fully reconstructed, box-set style representation of the
hotel. In her Brechtian use of suggestive set pieces, Benmussa does not attempt to create a
naturalist setting but rather one that is purposely and obviously fake. She envisions the play
opening with two maids drawing back the curtain to reveal an open space marked by two
minimalist doorframes on either side of the stage. On the left: a swinging door to the kitchen and
on the right: a revolving door leading to the street (Benmussa, La Vie 3). Between and behind
these two doorframes there is a large, austerely constructed stairway and a trompe-l’oeil
backdrop of closed doors and windows (Benmussa, *La Vie* 3). The hotel is populated with images of employees painted on canvas: “une toile de fond: les différentes portes des chambres aux étages, des personnages: clients, soubrettes, valets, etc. peints en trompe-l’œil, certains entrant dans les chambres, d’autres portant des plateaux, des soubrettes se penchant par-dessus la rampe pour regarder à l’étage au-dessous” (Benmussa, *La Vie* “Prologue”). The actors interact with the trompe l’oeil scenic elements despite their two-dimensionality. Theatre critic Julia Ria described the concert scene from the London production which was similarly indicated in the stage directions: “two maids bring in a Victorian painting of a concert in front of which the audience sits, music coming from the loudspeakers.”87 The extensive use of trompe l’œil juxtaposed with the materiality of the actors’ bodies reminds the audience that they are at the theatre and that the stage is an illusion. This mix of painted objects, physical objects, and live actors leads spectators to question the relationship between what is real and what only seems real, between the *vrai* and the *vraisemblable* (Surgers), reinforcing, once again, the distinction between Albert’s feigned masculinity and the gender stereotypes that are taken to be essential, immutable traits in contemporary society.

While structurally open, the set design creates an angular visual effect of boxes nested within the larger box of the stage, framed by the platform, side masking curtains, and the proscenium arch. At the opening of the show, Albert is seen sitting in the middle of these squares, midway up the stairs, surrounded by the illusion of activity for she is the only live actor on stage in a world peopled with two dimensional representations of maids and guests. That she is the sole live performer on stage reflects the loneliness she feels despite living in the busy hotel. Her placement on the stairs that join two floors, not fully grounded on one or the other, suggests

87 Ria also comments on the innovation of this staging and likens its simplicity to the work of Peter Brook.
the in-betweenness of her gender identity (Elam 314). At the same time, her location at the center of all of these various angles and boxes reinforces the notion that she is trapped by the world around her, relegated to her subordinate position at the hotel, with no hope of escape. The scenery’s two doors move on their own accord: the door to the kitchen swings open and shut as employees pass, while the revolving entrance doors to Morrison’s hotel turn as invisible guests come and go. Benmussa specifies the fairy-like quality of the beings that pass through these doors: “comme si des visiteurs ou des soubrettes fantômes, des fées ou des voix passaient par là” (La Vie “Prologue”). Ammen argues that these spirits are a reflection of Albert’s confinement in a world she did not create: “She can leave this world through the swinging doors, but they will always return her to the inside; they never function as exits or modes of escape. It is on the outside of this frame that the controllers of her society exist” (307). Albert leaves the hotel momentarily when she steps out with Helen, and is confronted with the possibility of an escape, but she ultimately returns to the confines of the lobby and the freedom she seeks never becomes reality. Her life is restricted to her workplace from which she is unable to break free and find the happiness for which she tragically searches.

The visual effect of enclosure and the fragmentation of Albert’s self is further enhanced by the lighting of the production, which is itself broken up, restricting the spectator’s view of the space. The entire stage is never fully lit; instead, pools of light isolate actors in constricted fields of sight, further segmenting the stage in ways that reflect the play’s disjointed action (Roud) and limiting interaction between locations (Smucker 71). Darkness defines borders between spots, keeping characters from fully connecting with those in other areas. The play’s lighting design also represents inaccessible freedom outside the space inhabited by the characters, as the brightest light sources are placed outside the confines of the hotel. Lesly Hamilton’s photographs
of the London production show a backlit stage where bright light streams through the imaginary windows, leaving the stage where Albert is trapped dark and gloomy. Albert has no access to the light and freedom beyond the gender constraints that confine her and necessitated her assumed identity.

In her introduction to the script for *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs*, Benmussa explains that a third design element, the realistic period costuming, plays a central role in the play for both the audience and the performers themselves. Benmussa explains that she intentionally cast women who were not perceived to be mannish because she did not want to create the impression that Albert’s story could only happen to an unattractive woman (“The Singular” 25). As such, she works to create Albert’s male persona primarily through her dress, explaining that “the costume makes the body believable” (Benmussa, “The Singular” 26). However, the suit in which Albert is dressed also affects the actor’s carriage. Speaking of his own production of *The Singular Life of Albert Nobbs*, Elam recalls the physical qualities of the costumes he chose, which were undoubtedly similar to those used in the original production as well: “The male attire that she puts on is constricting, hard, heavy, and firm – the male shoes, the waiter’s vest, the shirt collar that must be buttoned to the top, the bow tie” (314-315). The weighty strictures of the suit affect the actor’s movements so that they become more conventionally masculine.

Albert is not the only character who is limited by her costuming; the other actors are as well. The corsets and heavy dresses worn by the maids and Mrs. Baker impede their movements and mannerisms and shape the contours of their bodies: “By putting on the costumes, the actors are literally constructed as Victorian women. While accenting the line of the garment and the body, corsets greatly restrict movement, so that the actors cannot move or sit in a contemporary fashion” (Elam 316). Despite the fact that these characters’ gendered appearance conforms to
their biological sex, their gender is every bit as fabricated as Albert’s. The only actor not obliged
to don such restrictive costumes is the one playing Hubert Page, who is seen wearing the loose
clothing of a house painter. Hubert’s comfortable attire reflects her own carefree character,
which stands in sharp contrast to Albert’s constricting suit and inhibited existence (Elam 315).
Hubert has successfully integrated her masculine and feminine identities to find contentment and
freedom. These two women’s clothing is an outward expression of their inner physic states of
turmoil, for one, and contentment for the other.

Benmussa points to the dual role Albert’s suit plays in her life: “She is imprisoned in this
costume, which is at the same time armour, yoke and defense” (“The Singular” 22). Because of
her manner of dress, Albert is perceived as a man and as such is able to work and hold a certain
authority over the hotel’s female maids; but it is this same clothing which traps her in a world of
loneliness and requires her to conform to gender norms which leave her feeling ill at ease.
Because she is obligated to present herself as male for economic survival and not because she
identifies as being male, she is neither entirely male nor entirely female; she is a “perhapser” or
an “entre-deux” as she calls herself (La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”). Due to her masculine
attire, Albert is perceived as male, and therefore she is expected to conform to male gender
norms and her demeanor must remain stoic and unemotional. The difficulty of playing this role is
clear when she breaks down crying after telling her life story to Hubert: “c’est moi qui suis une
sotte de pleurer ainsi” (Benmussa, La Vie “Le récit d’Albert Nobbs”). Hubert responds,
oberving that Albert thinks like a man but feels like a woman. In complying with male gender
norms, Albert must repress all of her feelings. Becoming a man and assuming masculine attire
may have freed her from financial worry, but it has also dampened her emotional life.
As I have already shown, Albert’s character is placed in a liminal state, caught in the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. Albert has been forced to assume a masculine persona because of unequal wages based on gender, the result of a system that limits women and sees them as inferior to men. The violence enacted on her character through the repression of her gender identity causes a splintered and wholly unstable subjectivity in which Albert is unable to find balance between the symbolic and semiotic impulses. The narrative layers, the fragmented visual elements, and the forced perspective of both the masculine and the feminine within the single character of Albert puts the audience into a similar liminal state. Erika Fischer-Lichte refers to this as instances of perceptual multistability where the spectator experiences an “oscillating focus between the actor’s specific corporeality and the character portrayed” (147). These moments cause the audience to focus on the transitions (Fischer-Lichte 148), which in turn draws them out of the world of the play and leaves them with a sense of unease (Fischer-Lichte 157). This reflects the instability of the subject which is always in a state of flux. As a feminist play, Benmussa does not just compel the audience to reflect on gender norms in a logical fashion; she also recreates the same feelings of subject instability in the spectator in the ways she deploys these same elements. The audience inevitably strives to impose a single identity on Albert and is encouraged to identify with her. Yet at the same time, the semiosis Benmussa’s design elements introduce disrupts this fusionary process, leaving her audiences in a state of subject instability that mirrors Albert’s fractured being. This uneasiness disrupts the spectator’s identification with the character and causes them to question the truth of gendered identity.

**Albert and the Modern Woman**

The Brechtian notion of estrangement discussed above allows the viewer to intellectually engage with the play and reflect on the connections between the story being told and the
workings of contemporary society. For while Albert’s story is presented as an anomaly, the financial reality that created the situation, the necessity to repress a feminine identity in the workplace, and the emotional turmoil that this masquerade engenders are not unique. Nor have they been eliminated by the multiple waves of twentieth-century feminism. Honor Moore observes that there are two distinct types of feminist plays: the autonomous woman play, which centers on one woman’s actions, and the choral play, which instead reflects on the effects of sexism by presenting a group of women. *Albert Nobbs* is an example of the former, which approaches “women’s experience through the strategy of telling the story of an individual woman’s struggle for autonomy” (H. Moore 85).

As I have previously shown, some critics were blind to Benmussa’s intent when she underscores the ambiguity of Albert’s sex through her casting of “feminine” actresses. However, others understood this move as a conscious decision. Colette Godard noted that it is by this very means that *Albert Nobbs* shows the feminine condition in society (“La Vie singulière”). Jean Mambrino remarked how their feminine appearance recreated the solitary nature of woman:

Nous voyons avec évidence, dès le premier instant, que la fine Juliette [sic] Berto est une femme. Ce qui est recrée par petites touches (où le familier est presque le sordide se fondent avec légèreté dans la fantastique), c’est la solitude de l’être féminin, son indestructible fragilité, et la qualité particulièrement douloureuse de son silence. (374)

Those who were open to the feminist aspects of the production were able to draw connections between Albert and the social status of contemporary women through her incongruous gender appearance.

The gender constructs shown in *Albert Nobbs* closely reflect the struggles felt by women of the 1970s. While the play is set in the historical past when gender roles were more starkly
defined, the issues Benmussa raises remain relevant to contemporary women: “Surely, in this age in which women are assimilated into male professions, this is a contemporary problem. In this play, the career mask of male-identification becomes a character on the stage” (Case, “Gender as Play” 23). Albert was forced to give up her femininity to gain financial stability, a point that is made clear when she shares her story with Hubert. After her parents’ death forced her to leave the convent, Albert and her nanny live humbly from their wages as maids which earns them a combined income of eighteen shillings per week. As a man, she is able to immediately earn ten shillings a night, even when she has not yet learned her job properly. She stresses that her first night as a waiter she was maladroit, underfoot, and ran into everyone, and yet at the end of the night she walked away with ten shillings - more than half what she and her nanny earned for working an entire week. After learning how easily she can slip into the role of a man and experiencing the financial rewards of doing so, Albert finds a position at Morrison’s hotel and assumes the masculine role permanently (Benmussa, La Vie “Le Récit d’Albert Nobbs”). She is described as the best and most well-liked servant in the hotel: “Pourtant, tout le monde aimait bien Albert Nobbs. Et la patronne l’aimait, car c’était dans tout l’hôtel le domestique sur lequel on pouvait mieux compter” (Benmussa, La Vie “Prologue”). The job at which Albert excels is a post that is reserved for men only. Despite being a woman (or perhaps because she is a woman), she is the best at doing a man’s job. Both the vast wage disparities between the compensation of work performed by men and that by women as well as the fact that Albert proves herself to be both physically and mentally capable of doing a man’s job better than a male underscore the plight women face in Albert’s world.

After Albert’s death and the discovery that she was biologically female, the employees of the hotel guess that she had first dressed as a man in order to earn better wages. However, none
of them question the injustice of this fact: “VOIX DE GEORGE MOORE. Personne ne discuta cette question des gages, tous sachant bien qu’un homme est mieux payé qu’une femme” (Benmussa, La Vie “La mort d’Albert”). The idea that a man should earn significantly more than a woman is normal for Victorian Irish society, but the mention of this normalcy in France of the 1970s would have shocked the audience and caused the spectator to once again consider the relationship between their own society and Albert’s. The play might lead them to wonder what unjust practices they accept as normal. While wages had increased since the nineteenth century, at the time men still had earning power far superior to women. The new, more lucrative identity Albert has assumed does not free her, as one might expect but leaves her feeling trapped. Elam argues that: “Albert’s decision to identify herself as a man within the Victorian patriarchal economic system, however, erases her female identity, suppresses her female sexuality, and extinguishes any hope for her emotional satisfaction” (Elam 286-287). I propose that Albert’s new male identity does not actually erase her femininity. Rather, Albert’s attempts to suppress it are unsuccessful. Yet Elam is correct in noting that Albert’s assumption of the male identity stifles her ability to form emotional bonds with others, a consequence of her gender masquerade that leave her in a constant state of psycho-social distress.

Contemporary women are no more able to gain equality in male-dominated workplaces by adopting traditionally masculine traits than Albert is. Women entering the male dominated workforce by attempting to conform to workplace expectations of comportment, which mimic accepted ideals of masculinity, are forced to deny certain aspects of their femininity. Once they are resigned to adopting male norms of behavior in the hopes of gaining workplace equality, women are still unable to reach comparable status in terms of power and income. In the program for the original Paris production, Elisabeth de Fonetenay explicitly equates Albert’s struggle with
that of the women in the audience: “Qu’une femme doive cesser d’être femme pour faire valoir son droit au travail, c’est là une évidence trop souvent oubliée par la lutte des classes, évidence diffèrentement présente aujourd’hui, mais toujours aussi tenace” (Program notes). That women suffer when they are obliged to deny the self in the search for professional fulfillment has long-lasting consequences, and in Albert’s case, these consequences lead to her premature death after a short illness. The play suggests that her death is due primarily to loneliness. As Ruby Cohn argues: “Benmussa’s production opposes the long theater tradition of disguise, which inevitably leads to revelation. In contrast, Albert Nobbs’ disguise leads to illusion, fantasy, and finally death” ("Benmussa’s Planes” 53). Albert does not gain insight or fulfillment through her transformation, only material wealth, which fails to compensate for the repression of her gender identity.

The women presented in Albert Nobbs are confined to a world controlled by men, an experience that mirrors the forms of oppression women in 1970s France continued to face. While the play revolves around Albert’s particular struggle, she is not the only woman constrained by the story’s plot. As I have previously shown, it is George, the male storyteller, who retains control of Albert’s life story just as Joe Mackin manipulates through his off-stage voice the actions of the maid Helen Dawes. Albert is propelled by Hubert’s example to find a wife and chooses Helen as the object of her advances. Although already entangled with Joe, this new maid agrees to step out with Albert after encouragement from Joe. It is he who suggests that Helen go out with Albert in order to find out what he is up to and it is he who encourages her to entice Albert to buy her chocolates: “tu peux sortir avec Albert, il n’y a pas malice en lui. Asticote-le pour savoir ce qu’il cherche, et puis emmène-le dans une confiserie et rapporte une boîte de chocolats” (Benmussa, La Vie “La rencontre avec Helen Dawes”). Helen successfully convinces
Albert to buy her not one, but two boxes of chocolates, one to eat right away and one to take back to the hotel. Having achieved this objective, Joe pushes Helen to manipulate Albert for cash:

VOIX DE JOE. *Mais dis voir, ma vieille, puisqu’il les crache si facilement, tu pourrais me rapporter quelque chose ; une pipe de bruyère avec une livre ou deux de tabac c’est le moins que tu puisses lui soutirer.*

HELEN. Pour ça, il faut que je lui demande de l’argent.

VOIX DE JOE. *Et pourquoi pas. C’est le premier souverain qui coûte, après, ça pleut comme des pois qu’on écosse.* (Benmussa, *La Vie* “Promenade dans la rue”)

Joe’s off-stage presence impels Helen to take advantage of Albert’s desire to make her happy. Helen is reluctant to ask for so much, but Joe presses her further exploitation of Albert. As Helen’s and Albert’s relationship becomes more serious, Joe begins to dictate how Helen relates to Albert. When Helen announces to Joe that she does not wish to continue seeing Albert because he is too pensive, Joe cajoles Helen to push Albert into a physical relationship as a test of Albert’s masculinity: “La prochaine fois que tu sortiras avec lui, chauffe-le un peu et tu verras bien s’il a quelque chose dans le ventre ou s’il ne vaut pas mieux qu’un chapon” (Benmussa, *La Vie* “Promenade dans la rue”). Helen accedes to Joe’s demands and agrees to continue seeing Albert to figure out why he has not attempted to kiss her. Helen’s reluctance to continue using Albert in order to obtain gifts and money leaves the spectator with the impression that Helen is fond of Albert. While she does not consider him a love interest, she does not wish to exploit his good intentions. She is not interacting with Albert as she would prefer; she is bullied by Joe into seeking expensive gifts and money and is being pressed to engage in sexual intimacy with Albert. Like Albert, Helen also struggles to act autonomously in her own life and to assert her
own subjectivity. By extending the male vocal control that George has over Albert to another character, Benmussa encourages the contemporary female spectators to question the social power men have over their own lives.

After Helen ends their relationship, Albert happens upon a prostitute, Kitty MacCan, and begins a conversation with her. Instead of attempting to gain access to the kind of power men exert in the social world by adopting a masculine persona, Kitty accentuates her feminine appearance and exchanges sexuality for the money men are willing to pay her. She considers prostitution a better way of earning a living than washing clothes for nothing in a convent (Benmussa, *La Vie* “La rencontre avec la prostituée”). The juxtaposition of Albert’s and Kitty’s methods of succeeding financially reflects the choices faced by contemporary women to abandon their femininity in an attempt to enter the male domain of the workplace or to play on their femininity to get financial support from men. Kitty is just as trapped by her gender role as Albert is by hers. She speaks to Albert of ships, the sea, green prairies, and faraway lands. The two seem united in their longing for another world and for a time, there is hope that the two will fall in together and escape their parallel forms of confinement: “The motif of ships and lands only heard of but never seen by either Kitty or Albert suggests a possible avenue of escape, and a mode of existence beyond the entrapment of Dublin, the Morrison Hotel, and, by extension, beyond a stifling patriarchal society” (Ammen 311). Benmussa seems to suggest that the solution to society’s patriarchal control can be found in other women to whom they can turn as a means of escaping their circumstances. Sadly, the moment slips away as Kitty leaves to catch up with an old acquaintance hoping to earn her night’s wages. Even Hubert, who seems to have gained happiness and freedom through her choice to adopt a male persona, realizes in the end what she has given up to free herself from her husband’s control: she has lost her two daughters whom she
left behind. Despite their efforts to survive in a male-dominated economy, Benmussa’s female characters are unable to gain power and fulfillment through their sacrifices. By showing these women’s parallel stories, Benmussa encourages the audience to relate Albert’s predicament to the lives of all women, both in history and in the contemporary world.

By placing the play in nineteenth-century Dublin and distancing it from the spectator’s reality, Benmussa actually brings the world of Albert Nobbs and contemporary society closer together. She appears to subscribe to Brecht’s belief “that one could best adopt a critical attitude toward one’s society if the present social arrangements and institutions were viewed as historical, transitory, and subject to change” (Kellner 31). However, unlike Brecht, who represented past events in order to examine the social forces of the historical moment that created the action portrayed in his plays, Benmussa allows her spectators to witness the gender oppression women have historically suffered. In doing so she creates distance between the spectator and the problem which leads them to think critically about the past, while also drawing parallels with status of women in contemporary France. Benmussa presents a story set in Victorian Ireland, where the workplace was even more visibly defined by gender hierarchies. Her aim is to show her spectators the effect women’s subordination has on Albert while also suggesting its continued costs in contemporary society.

One way Benmussa underscores the temporal distance between past and present is by emphasizing the importance of dress in establishing gender dichotomies. Even though contemporary women no longer wore corsets and long dresses, in their attempts to be taken more seriously, women of the 1970s chose workplace attire that mimicked that of men. Like Albert, they were (and are) expected to conform to traditional male dress codes which define workplace
norms. However, unlike Albert, their adoption of masculine dress and behavior has not necessarily allowed them to gain equal footing in the contemporary workplace.

To create further distance between the characters and the spectators, Benmussa rejects a traditional realistic acting style in which the actor tries to embody the character to such an extent that the distinction between them is lost. Critics remarked the particular manner in which lines were delivered, saying that Juliet Berto should have acted more instead of merely reciting (Jamet) and that the play resembled a comic book where the actors spoke in speech bubbles: “Simone Benmussa s’est bornée à découper un texte dont elle fait commenter les lacunes en coulisse. C’est de la bande dessinée distinguée. Les répliques paraissent sortir de la bouche des comédiens, enfermées dans des bulles” (Chalais). Meanwhile, Godard found that the play was “dite à plat plutôt que jouée” and that “les femmes, désincarnées, sont comme les signes abstraits d’une écriture élégante, sans floriture” (“La Vie”). Benmussa did not direct the actors to deliver their lines in an entirely life-like manner; instead they hesitate, leave pauses, and open up room for reflection. It is clear that her actors were not encouraged to use a Stanislavski’s style of Method acting which relies on a psychological fusion between the actor and the character they are portraying. Brecht suggests that with this school of thought, acting is done “by means of hypnosis. They go into a trance and take the audience with them” (Brecht on Theatre 26). As suggested by the negative critiques of the actors’ performance, audience members were not encouraged to lose themselves in the characters portrayed but remained objective observers, able to reflect on the significance of the piece and its relation to their lives.

In the original short story, “Albert Nobbs,” Moore describes Albert as a rather ugly, manly woman. However, Benmussa calls attention to the sexism of such a portrayal: “I found it misogynous and trivializing that people would be able to say: That sort of thing only happens to
ugly women” (”The Singular” 25). Relegating Albert’s experiences to those of an “ugly woman” marginalizes the reality faced by all women entering the workplace where they face lesser wages and often succumb to the pressure to assume masculine attire and mannerisms. Her story is not the story of unattractive women; it is the story of all women who are forced to conform to workplace norms which tend to discourage the expression of traditionally feminine attributes such as emotional responsiveness.

Despite its focus on Albert, La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs is not just the story of one woman. While Albert may have gone to extremes in securing her living, her situation is not unique. The split subjectivity on display in both the short story and the play is applicable to all women. As Ammen notes “Benmussa suggests, then, that it is not only through a missing ‘feminine’ side (like the one that Albert has been forced to suppress) that women can become fragmented. This fragmentation is also evidenced in the constructed gender idea of ‘woman’” (308). Benmussa has shown the artificiality of gender construction and the ways in which women in particular are trapped by gender norms. Throughout the play she uses Brechtian theatrical techniques to encourage the spectator to relate the ideas presented to circumstances in their own lives. Albert is forced to repress her feminine identity to enter an economy defined by patriarchal codes. Her donning of suit and tie becomes a visual representation of the signifying process where the subject enters the symbolic order through the split in the thetic and the repression of the semiotic impulses. Although history had evolved between the 1860s, the time-frame of the play, and 1977 when this play was staged, the obligation women felt to adopt a masculine pose in order to gain access to the workplace persisted. Like Albert, women attempted to suppress their femininity to win acceptance in what was then a male-centered work world, but as Kristeva shows, the semiotic can never be fully erased and continuously returns to disrupt the
logic and order of the symbolic. The subject is never stable but requires a balance between these two registers, a balance that tragically, Albert is never able to achieve. She thus dies alone without the human comfort and understanding she so desperately sought. Through the text and the *mise-en-scène*, both of which employ Brechtian distancing, the spectator experiences the instability of split subjectivity and intellectually engages with *Albert Nobbs*, drawing parallels to the plight of contemporary women in the working world.
IV. COLLECTIVELY RECREATING THE REVOLUTION: ARIANE MNOUCHKINE AND THE THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL

It is as difficult to separate the work of the Théâtre du Soleil from its director Ariane Mnouchkine as it is to separate the director’s influence from the troupe. While the group started in 1964 with the idealistic aspiration of being theatre company that functioned fully as a collective, Mnouchkine and the Soleil are creatively fused; the latter would likely not have achieved the distinction it has without the guiding artistic vision of the former. The Soleil began by producing scripted plays, but after the events of May 1968, the company strove to better fulfill its collectivist ideals and turned to creating devised theatre pieces by improvising with characters drawn from the Commedia dell’arte tradition. The troupe’s early work in the 1960s and 1970s effectively integrated intense emotion and corporality as espoused by Antonin Artaud with Brechtian political engagement in a desire to spur their audiences to action. The semiotic elements of music, dance, and de-semanticized sound combine with symbolic elements such as historic quotations to better fulfill the didactic aims of the Soleil. The troupe’s work continues to evolve, and despite the fact that Mnouchkine is the only remaining original member, the company is still producing theatre after more than fifty years.

From the beginning, Mnouchkine was a prominent force in the Soleil’s work. The first seed for the troupe was sown in 1959 upon her return to Paris from England. With little prior experience, Mnouchkine has recognized the theatre practitioners who were willing to meet with her, a young student who knew nothing, and answer her questions about starting a theatre troupe (“L’Art”). In 1959, she established the Association Théâtrale des Étudiants de Paris (ATEP) with Martine Franck and in 1961, she directed her first play, Genghis Kahn (Williams 224). Produced in the Arènes de Lutèce, a Roman amphitheater in the heart of Paris, Genghis Kahn had the
energy, color, and large cast that would later be found in many of the Soleil’s works. However, Mnouchkine occupied the role of a traditional director and meticulously planned the actors’ movements on paper before rehearsals began (Kirkland 46). Through this experience, she realized that traditional directing methods were too restricting for her, and this was the only production in which they were employed. Following Genghis Kahn, Mnouchkine abandoned the ATEP to travel in Asia for a year where she first encountered the Kabuki and Kathakali traditions that continue to be a controlling influence in her work to this day (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 53).

Returning to Paris in 1964, she and nine friends each contributed 900 francs to found the Théâtre du Soleil as a workers’ cooperative where each company member would have an equal say in the management and artistic direction and would each receive the same salary (Miller, Ariane 7). In 1976, Jean-Claude Penchenat, an actor and administrator with the theatre at that time, explained the structure of the company:

All members of the company receive the same monthly salary, twelve months a year: 1200 francs at the moment – or partial payment on account when money’s too tight. The company is constituted as a workers’ cooperative, directed by an elected committee. Members of the cooperative have more duties than rights. Out of thirty-five present members of the company, twenty-two are cooperative members. One can become a member upon request, after a six-month probationary period. (Copfermann, “What is the Difference” 31)

Actors took turns fulfilling diverse roles for the theatre, and some eventually abandoned acting to become specialists in other areas. While rehearsing together, the troupe also shared communal meals prepared and served by a rotation of company members helping to strengthen their group
cohension. From the beginning, not all decisions were made by the group. Small decisions were left to those who had the greatest expertise in that area. However, major actions, such as the decision to let go of a company member, were decided as a whole (Williams, Collaborative 26-7). Despite its desire for full equality, even in the initial stages of the troupe’s existence, Mnouchkine had more influence on the direction of the company than other members, which occasionally caused tension within the group (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 10). Despite these moments of disagreement, the Soleil has sustained its collective structure for over fifty years, a feat not achieved by any other theatre company and one that can only be attributed to Mnouchkine’s determination to keep it so (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 6).

The Théâtre du Soleil’s first productions were adaptations of classical pieces beginning with Arthur Adamov’s translations of Maxim Gorki’s Les Petits Bourgeois which opened in November 1964 (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 54). For their second production in 1966, company member Philippe Léotard adapted scenes from Théophile Gautier’s Le Capitaine Fracasse (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 54). Neither of these shows garnered much attention, so the company sought to improve their craft and Mnouchkine enrolled in Jacque Lecoq’s mime school. She attended classes during the day and returned to the Soleil in the evening to share what she had learned (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 54). This physical work was evident in the company’s first true success, their third production, Arnold Wesker’s La Cuisine which opened at the Cirque Medrano on April 5, 1967. Company members rehearsed while observing the operations of a large kitchen in Paris. Mnouchkine watched their work and chose the scenes to be presented in their final production. La Cuisine was well received, drawing large audiences which allowed members of the Soleil to earn modest wages (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 54). The Soleil turned to Shakespeare for its next production. For a long time, Mnouchkine had wanted to
direct Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and in 1967, the company began working with Jules Supervielle’s translation of the play. However, Léotard eventually reworked the text to make it more acceptable to Mnouchkine and the company (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 57-8). The show opened at the Cirque Médrano in Paris in February 1968, but the run was interrupted by the events of May ’68 (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 54).

As a result of the May uprising, the Soleil’s attention turned toward activism. Because they were a workers’ cooperative and not a traditional theatre, the situation did not give rise to the same worker-management conflict that other theatres faced at the time (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 63). Their unique status among theatre companies put them at the forefront of a trend towards collective and popular theatre following May ’68. As the Soleil had done, theatre companies began forming as collectives where members shared the roles and responsibilities for their operation (Champagne 23). There was also a renewed interest in reaching non-traditional theatre audiences through performances that both entertained and spoke to their problems (Champagne 29). Although *Midsummer* went into hiatus, as an already established theatre collective, the Soleil continued to work despite the strikes. Because they had recently staged *La Cuisine*, which addressed many of the social issues raised during the nation-wide strikes, they revived the production of this play and were able to give theatrical expression to the political passions of the day (Kiernander 63). They began performing it “in factories occupied by workers as an expression of solidarity with the movement” (Champagne 35). In doing so, they acted immediately on their new-found resolve to be a theatre of the people. In addition to this conventional play, the company also did some short agit-prop pieces at factories between 1970 and 1977 (Champagne 34). They performed “one on the Paris Commune of 1871, one on the Vietnam War, one with the Groupe *Informations Prisons* of a re-enactment of a trial of prisoners
in Nancy with Mnouchkine as one of the defense lawyers and the participation of Foucault” (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 87).

The company was already functioning as a cooperatively-run theatre, but during this period, the Soleil sought to heighten the collaborative nature of their production process. They abandoned scripts, or any written text, in favor of creating devised pieces through improvisation. The unrest of May and the subsequent hiatus in the run of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* had hurt the company’s finances (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 64), so to save money, the troupe retreated from Paris to the countryside where they began working with masks and characters from the *Commedia dell’Arte* tradition (Cohn, “Ariane Mnouchkine” 53-4). Their increased commitment to collective creation caused Mnouchkine to step back from her clearly defined director’s role. The resulting show, *Les Clowns* (1969), listed her only as the director of the company and not the play’s director (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 66). Her attempt to relinquish her direct control over the production resulted in greater conflict within the troupe though. Mnouchkine observed the actors during rehearsal but did not suggest the direction that they should go with their work. However, their improvisations created more material than they could use, and the task fell to Mnouchkine, as it had previously, to decide which sketches were presented in the final production. Because she was more removed from the creative aspect of the play, some actors felt that her role was in fact more authoritarian, and they felt personally rejected when their work was cut (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 67). While the troupe continued to collaborate in writing subsequent plays, *Les Clowns* was the only production where Mnouchkine did not acknowledge any role as director.

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88 On the Soleil’s website, [www.theatre-du-soleil.fr](http://www.theatre-du-soleil.fr), Mnouchkine is credited with the *mise-en-scène* for *Les Clowns*. However, in the original program for the show, she was not.
French theatre at this time moved in two distinct directions. Many companies had a renewed interest in popular theatre, while other French practitioners sought to capture the spirit of civil unrest that had swept through the streets of Paris (Champagne 29). In *1789: La Révolution doit s’arrêter à la perfection du bonheur* (1970), The Soleil combined these two ambitions, a Brechtian desire to engage theatre in political activism and an embrace of the physicality of a fairground atmosphere favored by Antonin Artaud. These two positions on the artistic spectrum, one advocating didacticism, the other, sensory bombardment, were uniquely balanced in the Soleil’s production. Each of these driving principals worked together to enhance the overall effect of both.

*1789* won critical acclaim, drew large crowds, and cemented the troupe’s place in French theatre history. The Soleil’s production of *1789* was deeply grounded in the events of May ’68. The troupe sought to comment on contemporary social and political unrest by showing how the French Revolution, a rebellion begun by the people, had been co-opted by the bourgeoisie (Champagne 36). In addition to the clear parallels between the events of 1789 and contemporary society, the actors chose to represent the Revolution because it had taken on a mythical dimension in the minds of the French people (Copfermann, “The Search” 17). While traditional accounts of the Revolution focus on the actions of great men, the troupe’s rendition emphasized its material effect on the lower classes. In improvising performances of familiar historic events, the troupe collectively created the text and chose a fairground setting as the framework for the skits. Actors, appearing as street performers, introduced and commented on the events represented, and after the retelling of the Storming of the Bastille, for instance, the entire theatre erupted into a circus featuring acrobats, jugglers, and carnival games. This fairground atmosphere disrupted the traditional narrative of the Revolution as a “psychological conflict
between great men” (Champagne 37) and was reinforced by the placement of members of the audience who were allowed to sit in stands or to stand and move among five stages placed around the room. Starting with the summoning of the Estates General and the creation of the cahiers de doléances, the play highlights a number of historic events of 1789 and the subsequent years of revolutionary turmoil, including the storming of the bastille, the August 4 announcement that the feudal system had been abolished, and the attempted flight of the royal family in 1791.89

The actors had too many sketches for one play though and being stuck after a month and a half of rehearsals on the events of August 10, 1972, they chose to end 1789 with the Champ de Mars Massacre of July 1791. The follow-up to 1789, 1793: La cite révolutionnaire est de ce monde (1972), was more somber, mimicking the turn from the jubilant excitement of the start of the Revolution to the horrors of the Terror. The festive air of the carnival was replaced by the dark austerity of a deconsecrated church being used as a meeting hall. This second production centered around the actions of a section of the Sans-Culottes and the daily lives of a group of the sectionnaires’ wives. The five trestles were replaced by three large platforms which encouraged a more stationary audience than 1789. The public’s participation was also subtler in 1793. The play encouraged introspection and called on the spectators to reflect on what was happening instead of inciting them to react (Saurel 316). 1789 is the joyful hope of a better future; 1793 is the realization that radical change is not easy. Audiences experienced the backlash to the revolution and formed a new understanding that nothing had really changed for those at the bottom of the social pyramid. Whereas 1789 attempted to recreate and allow audiences to relive the excitement felt during May ’68, 1793 resonated with the feelings of despair felt during the following years when little changed (Garcia 119). According to Joëlle Garcia, Mnouchkine saw

89 An event which for the contemporary audience member brings to mind Charles de Gaulle’s disappearance from Paris during the May uprising.
1789 as the end of the Middle Ages and 1793 as a contemporary piece because it addresses the beginnings of modern society (114). 1793 represented the moment the bourgeoisie replaced the nobility as the tyrant oppressing the people, a system that was still in place in 1973 and that had not been truly overthrown by the events of May ’68.

Because the revolutionary stories of 1793 were less well known, the troupe had to put more exposition into their skits (Garcia 116). Each of the actors worked to create a character, based in part on one of their own ancestors, who had their own individualized history. These different characters and their societal role embodied the different political ideas of the period (Champagne 38). Where 1789 followed primarily famous events, 1793 focused on individual stories (Tartakowsky). The play follows a section of the Sans-Culottes as they discuss daily political events and prepare for action. It also presents a group of lower-class Parisian women who are attached to the section. The play’s focus on these women is of particular note. They struggle to survive as their men follow the false promise of wages by enlisting in the army and going to war. Similar to 1789, there are moments when the play attempts to expand its commentary to areas outside of the Hexagon through the character Louise from Saint-Domingue. Unlike 1789, 1793 presents the genders in separate scenes. This may come primarily from their rehearsal process. The male and female actors worked separately during much of this period. The end result is a greater focus on the revolution’s effect on women in particular. Perhaps because of its more introspective nature, the critic and public alike were divided in their reactions to it. 1793 failed to draw the crowds that had come to see 1789; there were only 102,100 total spectators compared to its predecessor’s 300,000 (Garcia 122). While 1789 successfully integrated the semiotic and symbolic, 1793’s more dispirited atmosphere failed to achieve this
same balance and remained more didactic in nature. Nevertheless, it remains an influential part of the Soleil’s history and serves as an important counterpoint to the more popular 1789.

After 1789 and 1793, the Soleil continued to work collectively using the same methods. The actors would improvise on subjects and Mnouchkine would watch, pinpoint when actors had found a character or a moment, and push them to continue in that direction. However, their next production, L’Âge d’or, addressed contemporary issues directly, “investigating the everyday struggles, the events hardly familiar before they come to seem banal, which fill newspapers and newscasts, that unite and divide all manner of political groups, and which compel the erratic push and pull of government in France” (Kirkland 45). It would also be their last devised piece for almost thirty years. Following the run of L’Âge d’or, many of the company members left to pursue other opportunities. The process of collective writing was long and arduous, so in the 1980s the troupe returned to scripted work with a cycle of three of Shakespeare’s plays (Champagne 43-6). The Soleil’s success continues to this day, but there was a clear shift in the company’s operations after 1976. While they did not return to a collective writing process for many years, they continued to rehearse and create through a collaborative process with playwright Hélène Cixous, a part of the company’s history that I will address in Chapter V.

The emergence of the feminist movement has not been a primary political concern of the Soleil; however, Mnouchkine believes it to be a feminist company (Kiernander, “The Role” 327). The troupe’s emphasis on the equality of all members extends beyond the theatrical hierarchy to all traditionally conceived disparities among sexes and classes. Mnouchkine insists that “the women and the men of the company are in every sense equal and that there is absolutely no question of the women being subjected to the kinds of insult, as women, that might happen in
other work situations” (Kiernander, “The Role” 327). The troupe’s emphasis on collaborative creation and the rejection of traditional theatrical hierarchy reflects what Susan Steadman observed in other feminist theatre groups of the period (22). In addition to ensuring women’s equality within the troupe, their plays have presented the unique problems faced by women in meaningful ways. That the Théâtre du Soleil pursued gender equality in the form and content of the troupe’s artistic life warrants the Soleil’s inclusion in this study of theatre by women.

In the ten years following May ’68, the Soleil had a clearly didactic goal. Through their work, they sought to propel audiences to consider social problems and to react in ways that continued beyond the confines of the performance. This aim relies on reason and directly reflects the influence of Brecht on theatre of this period. However, the company also strove to revolutionize theatre, rejecting the psychological theatre of Stanislavski and the Method Acting he introduced. The emphasis the company placed on the body, their use of masks, and particularly the inspiration they drew from Asian theatrical traditions similarly points to the influence of Artaud at the time. The Soleil mixed these two influential strains of theatrical practice in a manner that suggests the balance and struggle between the semiotic and symbolic registers as theorized by Julia Kristeva.

**Influences on the Soleil’s Practice**

Mnouchkine claims to not have had any theatrical influences when the Soleil was formed and that she did not even really know theatre. She was soon inspired by forms of Asian theatre from her time spent traveling but did not realize until later that she had theatrical maîtres (“L’Art”). Despite her lack of formal acknowledgement or cognizance of those who influenced

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90 Recent revelations brought to light by the #metoo movement underscore the singularity of this environment within the entertainment industry.
her, it is impossible not to be shaped by contemporary trends and theories. The Soleil formed under the resurgent emphasis on popular theater that had been earlier championed by Jean Vilar and was also influenced by the practice of politically engaged artists who followed in Brecht’s footsteps. Similarly, the events of ’68 brought a renewed interest in disrupting traditional forms of theatrical production, and the emphasis theatre artists placed in this period on non-linguistic practices is reminiscent of Antonin Artaud’s manifestos. Mnouchkine and the Soleil were heavily influenced by both of these camps, even if they have not acknowledged the direct influence Brecht and Artaud had on their works.

Adrian Kiernander maintains that Brecht did not have a significant influence on the company’s vision and that similarities between them are artificial (Ariane Mnouchkine 3). However, he acknowledges that the Soleil was working on some short plays by Brecht during their daily training sessions that took place while the group was touring with 1789 (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 81). In an interview with Béatrice Picon-Vallin conducted in 2016, Mnouchkine revealed that before beginning work on 1789, she had done significant work preparing Brecht’s Baal. In fact, she had already retranslated it and gotten the rights to perform it before abandoning the project because she felt that she had done too much work individually determining the direction of the play without input from the rest of the company. Whether intentional or not, there are significant resemblances between Mnouchkine’s and Brecht’s approaches to the theatre and a definite convergence in their political goals. Judith Miller argues that Mnouchkine “believes that if spectators can see themselves as part of a system, then they will also be able to see that history can be changed and acted upon” (Ariane 29). This desire to inspire spectators to become revolutionaries by revealing how power structures work and showing how individuals relate to them has a clear resonance with Brechtian theory. Brecht
wanted to use theatre to “provoke revolutionary political practice” (Kellner 34). Whether intentional or not, like with many other theatres of the period, there is a clear link between the Soleil and Brecht. It was a popular ideology of the time, but given the evidence of the Soleil’s experimentation with Brechtian drama, the similarities between the two cannot be brushed off as mere coincidence or a byproduct of the cultural zeitgeist of the period.

The Soleil employs the Brechtian technique of historical distancing to encourage spectators to take action. Brecht believed that tragedy was cyclical and that tragic events repeated themselves (Brecht on Theatre 30). By showing historical events, Brecht hoped audiences would see the similarities with contemporary events and discover ways for a society to break the cycle of repeating the mistakes of the past. The Soleil had similar goals. While the subject depicted was the French Revolution, the history of this event was chosen for its contemporary implications. By showing the exploitation of the people by the nobility and the clergy as well as their ability to rise up against this tyranny in 1789, the company created a link between the eighteenth-century Revolution and the revolutionary actions of 1968. The jubilance felt following the storming of the Bastille and the stripping of the church’s and the nobility’s wealth is quickly extinguished by the scene of the Vente aux Enchères where the Bourgeoisie buys those riches and rises to take the place of the elite. The end of 1789 suggests what is to come in 1793. Nothing has changed for the people of France except for the faces of their tyrants. This reflected the post-’68 situation. Agnieszka Karch explains:

By contradicting the concepts of timelessness and universalism perpetuated in bourgeois theatre, Brecht presented history as a closed chapter to which public access was denied. Revolutionary personages from Mnouchkine’s play guard their historical reality by making sure that the audience is not immersed in it by identifying with the characters.
Watching historical events from a temporally conscious perspective allows the spectator to adapt a critical approach. (3)

By seeing this historical revolution, the spectators were encouraged to step back and examine the power struggles at work. The historical nature of the play creates distance between the spectator and the action of the play, which in turn allows the spectator to reflect on the presence of these forces in contemporary society.

These scenes also serve to demystify history. The French Revolution is enough removed from the present that the truths of the Revolution are hard to find. The stories of the Revolution have been told so many times that they have taken on a mythical status. According to numerous historians, the bourgeoisie were the true beneficiaries of the Revolution and were thus able to shape the way in which the Revolution was retold and to do so in ways that ignore their own complicity in the oppression of the people. By showing different points of view of the Revolution rather than the dominant narratives about the event, the troupe encouraged audience members to think critically about it. This was done in part through the decision to incorporate various performance styles such as melodrama, puppetry, silent film, mime, cabaret, and circus tricks into the play. Champagne explains:

The troupe decided to use popular forms in the show because they wanted to avoid showing history as a psychological conflict between great men or reducing its significance and dimensions. Instead, the popular forms were well suited to expressing the energy and presenting the forces of the revolution. (37)

The choice of introducing a street fair atmosphere radically altered traditional views of the revolution while recreating the excitement of both the revolutionary period and the barricades of
Mnouchkine explained their choice of how to present the Revolution to Emile Copfermann in September 1970:

We could have undertaken a production on the French Revolution through its central protagonists; we would have obtained that kind of mystificatory spectacle in which History becomes the succession of psychological conflicts between ‘great men.’ Or else we could have taken something more anecdotal as a starting point – the story of a worker, of an ordinary family in the face of the events. When we looked closely at this option, it proved to be every bit as fraudulent as the first one, and drew us towards edifying imagery. We have opted for a third way. We try to show the Revolution played throughout on the level of the people, but with a critical distance. (“The Search” 17) 1789 does not focus on individuals, but on the people as a group. This perspective prevents the spectator from identifying psychologically with the characters portrayed, which is easily recognizable as a form of Brechtian psychological distancing. The Soleil did not want the audience members to connect emotionally with the characters; they wanted them to remain detached to allow them to reflect on the action and its relation to their lives.

Brecht believed that theatre was an apparatus controlled by societal forces. Its purpose was to entertain, and while the theatre artist believed he controlled the theatre, it actually controlled him (Brecht on Theatre 34-5). Brecht wanted to revolutionize theatre so that theatre could in turn revolutionize society. He wanted to show theatre’s mechanisms to allow the

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91 For a historical study of spectacle of the street fair, see Le Théâtre de la foire, la Comédie italienne et l’Opéra-comique. 1ère série, 1658 à 1720: recueil de pieces choisies, jouées de la fin du XVIIe siècle aux premières années du XIXe siècle, avec étude historique, notes et table chronologique edited by Maurice Drack and published in 1889.

92 This approach to history, looking at the micro histories of the period and the social histories that reveal deep structures and the collective mentality of historic events, was practiced by the Annales historians. In Béatrice Picon-Vallin’s interview with Ariane Mnouchkine and actors from 1789, presented as the film 1789, 40 ans après by Stefano Missio, Mnouchkine relates that the Soleil worked with a number of historians while creating 1789 including Jean Massin, Albert Soboul, and Madeleine Rebérioux.
spectator to realize that what they were seeing was an illusion and therefore think critically about the work presented instead of emotionally identifying with the characters. Similarly, the Soleil sought to decrease the physical distance between the spectator and the actor in order to demystify theatre and encourage critical reflection. Typically, theatres open the doors to the auditorium twenty to thirty minutes before the start of the show, after the actors have finished warming up and the technicians have finished the lighting and sound checks. The lights are set to encourage a desired mood as the spectators enter. In contrast, the Soleil opens their doors an hour or more before showtime. The audience is invited in to watch as the actors put on their make-up, do their hair, and finish putting on their costumes. The means of production are shown to the spectators. In addition to showing the actors’ preparation, other production processes are shown as well. Karch points out that the movement of props is not hidden and that actors change costumes in sight of the audience (4). Showing the actors as themselves, separate from their characters encourages the spectator to remain separate from the characters rather than emotionally identifying with them. It also serves to demystify the theatrical experience and its illusory quality.

This distance is also encouraged through the use of narration and the announcement of scenes. Brecht sought to break up the dramatic action of his plays through “songs, film strips, and captions, in order to interrupt the audience’s customary field of perception, its tendency to take art for life” (Wright 79). The Soleil creates a similar disruption in the action of the play through their use of narration. Actors who play street performers remain outside the action of the scenes in order to narrate them. The written script begins with a typical fairy-tale opening: “Il était une fois...” (“Once upon a time...”) (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 7). A presenter announces a subsequent scene with the cries of a ringmaster: “Approchez, approchez! Mesdames et
Messieurs, nous allons vous jouer la célèbre comédie: La réunion des États-Généraux” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 14). At the conclusion of the États-Généraux, another actor declares that Louis XVI became extremely angry. In this scene, “Le lit du justice,” the street performer announces the scene and the characters who will take part in it: “…dans la célèbre séance du ‘lit de justice’ du vingt-trois juin mille sept cent quatre-vingt-neuf, qui oppose d’une part, Louis, ce dernier rejeton de la dynastie maudite des Capet et, d’autre part, ce lion superbe, ce Démosthène du dix-huitième siècle, j’ai nommé le comte de Mirabeau…” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 18). The stage directions specify that the street performer playing Louis XVI mocks his character by making him beg tearfully (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 18). This contradicts the earlier claim that he was incredibly angry. Karch remarks that through the ridiculous manner in which the character is played, the actor highlights the fact that he is separate from the character (4). Through the creation of a laughable parody of Louis XVI, the actor draws a distinction between himself and the character portrayed while also dispelling the aura of authority around the powers and classes represented. By looking at the character critically, the actor encourages the spectators to take a critical distance from what they have learned of this history and how its players have been represented in history as well.

While the street fair atmosphere was abandoned for 1793, the technique of announcing scenes continued. The script opens with a parade of the great figures of the Revolution:

“Mesdames et messieurs, nous allons vous jouer la parade des années 1791-1792, interprétée par les plus grands personnages de l’histoire” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1793 49). The annunciation of

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93 “Step right up! Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to perform for you the celebrated comedy: The meeting of the Estates General”
94 “…in the famous ‘bed of justice’ meeting of the twenty-third of June, seventeen eighty-nine, that puts in opposition in one corner, Louis, the last offshoot of the damned Capet dynasty, and in the other corner, the superb lion, the Demosthenes of the eighteenth century, I name the count of Mirabeau”
95 “Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to perform for you the parade of the years 1791-1792, interpreted by the greatest figures of History.”
scenes continues as a narrator advances the action of the play by describing each scene and relating it to previous scenes. Judith Miller emphasizes that these street performers and narrators often used microphones, an anachronism that showed that the critiques of the Revolution could also be made against contemporary society (*Ariane* 69). The use of microphones also emphasized the irreal nature of the performance and kept the audience from becoming entranced by the action.

The Théâtre du Soleil sought to encourage their audiences to think critically about their plays. However, the creation of their plays in itself recalls Brecht’s *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays. As discussed in Chapter I, these plays were written to be performed by amateurs to encourage them to become revolutionaries (Wright 12). They would be both actors and spectators exchanging roles to experience different points of view and manners of reacting to situations (Kellner 35). While members of the Soleil were professional actors with the ultimate goal of performing for an audience, their improvisational method of working encouraged them to take on different roles and perform them from new perspectives. The rehearsal process for 1789, 1793, and other works by the Soleil became a social and political learning process for members of the company. Mnouchkine explains that at the beginning of the rehearsal period, there are many actors experimenting with the same character. By watching each other’s improvisations, the actors learn more about the nature of the personalities of these historical figures. Mnouchkine gives the example of Lafayette:

> And at first, we saw a Lafayette who was exactly the fine hero described in schoolbooks.

> Then one group presented an improvisation on a meeting between Lafayette and Marat; Lafayette wanted to buy him. Through this scene we discovered the other face of
Lafayette, and the previous improvisations were superseded. This happened very often. (“Equal” 27)

Exchanging roles allows the Soleil to consider historical figures differently from their traditional representations and is reminiscent of Brecht’s emphasis on the theatre as an educational vehicle for the actors as well as the audience.

There are also many parallels that can be drawn between the Soleil and Artaud’s theory of the theatre, but it is much harder to show a clear connection between the two than it is to show one between the Soleil and Brecht. Mnouchkine specifically claims that she avoided reading Artaud, remarking: “I realized that I wanted to find by myself what he had discovered already” (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 141). Nevertheless, either through their common interests in Asian theatre or through their desire to revolutionize theatrical practice, Mnouchkine, and by extension the Soleil, share much in common with Artaud. Judith Miller explains:

Although Mnouchkine only began to read Artaud after several years of doing theater and has never claimed him as a source, we can find Artaudian echoes throughout her work, as, indeed, throughout the experimental work of countless companies formed in the 1960s and 1970s. To cite the most obvious, we note parallels between Artaud’s emphasis on sensory stimulation in order to engage fully one’s public with Mnouchkine’s kaleidoscopic use of music, color, lighting, and movement: This is constant throughout her mises-en-scène. Moreover, Artaud’s exhilarating and confounding writings underlie and bolster theoretically her move away from textual centeredness to performances that take their meaning notably through gesture, sound, and spatial configurations. (Ariane 17)

While the Soleil’s Artaudian lineage is tenuous, Mnouchkine was directly influenced by another theoretician and theatrical practitioner who emphasized corporality over mental and vocal
activity, the actor, mime, and instructor Jacques Lecoq with whom she had studied (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine*) 3). She says that he changed everything for her and that while he was not a grand actor or director, he reminded actors that they had a body. It was Lecoq who explained to her that in Asia, the actors knew they had a body and helped her put her Asian inspiration into practice (“L’Art”). It is through contact with Asian theatre and Lecoq that we can trace a line back to Artaud. The connections between Artaud’s writings and the Soleil are remarkable. It appears that Mnouchkine did in fact discover for herself that which Artaud had discovered a few decades prior.

As we have already seen, Mnouchkine staunchly rejected psychological theatre. Both Brecht and Artaud renounced psychological theatre, but for different reasons: Brecht rejected it in order to foster critical distance while Artaud was more focused on ways of generating sensory stimulation. As noted above, the Soleil rejected psychological theatre to create distance between the actor and the spectator to allow the latter to maintain a critical viewpoint. However, like Artaud, they also wanted to emphasize the importance of the body and the senses. This is particularly apparent with the Soleil’s Shakespeare cycle, produced between 1981 and 1984. The characters’ psychological motivations are often highlighted in their productions of Shakespeare’s plays. Mnouchkine’s productions focused on metaphor and sought to show the overarching movements of countries at war. In an interview with Alfred Simon after the opening of *Richard II*, Mnouchkine explains: “For me today, the idea of theatre as mirror in insufficient. That’s what it was for a while, but in the present time that is no longer enough. I think the aspect of surgery, autopsy, the opening of a man, is what is most important” (“Of Loss”). The similarity between Mnouchkine’s thought and Artaud’s is unmistakable. In an eight page pamphlet on the Théâtre Alfred Jarry published in 1926, Artaud wrote:
Both Mnouchkine and Artaud compare attending the theatre to undergoing a surgical procedure. They both seek to transform the audience by breaking them open and releasing a deluge of sensory stimulation.

Mnouchkine felt that the acting techniques prescribed by Stanislavski’s Method Acting were a necessary component of theatrical performance, but that they were insufficiently impactful on their own. In addition to stepping into the character’s state of mind, the actor also had to be aware of the external physicality of the character. Adrian Kiernander explains: “The actor has first to discover the état, the total physical, mental and emotional state of the character in the situation and then look for ways of expressing that state externally so that it will have its full theatrical impact on the audience” (Ariane Mnouchkine 36-7). By creating the character’s physical state of being, the actor can more fully portray the entirety of the character. The movements of the body are as important as the character’s state of mind and do not automatically appear when the actor has recreated the psychological state of the character; therefore, they must be specifically rehearsed. Mnouchkine’s later work with masks encourages the creation of a unique silhouette for each character that portrays who that character truly is.

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96 “Audiences coming to our theatre know they are present at a real operation involving not only the mind but also the very senses and flesh. From then on they will go to the theatre as they would to a surgeon or dentist, in the same frame of mind knowing, of course, that they will not die but that all the same this is serious business and they will not come out unscathed.” (Artaud, Artaud on Theatre 34).
The emphasis that both Artaud and Mnouchkine place on the body comes from the influence of Asian theatre. Artaud did not travel to Asia; instead, he was influenced by the Balinese dancers at the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 (Hayman xiii). In August 1931 he wrote:

…le théâtre Balinais nous en propose une réalisation stupéfiante en ce sens qu’elle supprime toute possibilité de recours aux mots pour l’élucidation des thèmes les plus abstraits; - et qu’elle invente un langage de gestes faits pour évoluer dans l’espace et qui ne peuvent avoir de sens en dehors de lui. (Œuvres Complètes 4: 74)\(^97\)

He was inspired by the Balinese dancing because it created meaning through gesture instead of words. In 1961, very early in her theatrical career, Mnouchkine traveled throughout Asia and was similarly struck by the use of the body in Asian theatre. But neither Artaud nor Mnouchkine truly studied this ancient theatrical practice, nor do they attempt to faithfully recreate it. Jane Milling and Graham Ley claim that Artaud misinterpreted the Balinese theatre and point out that orientalism, or reductive exoticizing and essentializing of Eastern cultures, was a contemporary trend (93). Mnouchkine herself confessed that she knew very little about the specific techniques of Asian theatre, but that it was merely an inspiration. Speaking specifically of the Shakespeare cycle, she reveals that the play’s Japanese influence comes more from films like Kurosawa’s *Kagemusha* than from actual Asian theatre practice (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 110-1).

While neither Mnouchkine nor Artaud formally studied Asian theatre, Françoise Quillet argues that neither one sought to replicate the corporeal language of the Asian theatre but rather borrowed from it in creating their own theatrical forms (143). She continues:

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\(^{97}\) “…the Balinese Theatre offers us an outstanding production that suppresses any likelihood of recourse to words to clarify the most abstract subjects; it has invented a language of gestures to be spatially developed, but having no meaning outside it” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 102).
Les signes corporels ont des significations bien déterminées dans le théâtre oriental, alors qu’au Théâtre du Soleil ils ne font que suggérer un état du personnage. La gestuelle est inventée par l’acteur, elle n’est pas le résultat de l’apprentissage technique d’une gestuelle orientale. Seul l’esprit des références est gardé : économie et sobriété des gestes, retenue de l’énergie, netteté dans l’exécution. (144)

Mnouchkine claims that theatre practitioners have always looked towards Asia when they have sought to transform the theatre (“Shakespeare” 94). In an interview with Josette Féral in March 1988, she asserts that everything comes from the East and acknowledges this similarity with Artaud:

I think that we go to the East to look for theatre. Artaud said, “All theatre is oriental.”

This thought goes very far. He doesn’t say, “There are oriental theories that are interesting for theatre;” he says “All theatre is oriental.” I believe Artaud is right. So I tell actors to look for everything in the East. Myth and reality, interiority and exteriorisation and the autopsy of the heart by the body that we talked about.

We also go to look for non-realism or theatricality. The West has only given birth to the commedia dell’arte – and even this comes from Asia – and to a certain type of realism, from which great actors escape. (“Building Up” 173)

Asian theatre has had a profound influence on its Western counterpart. It has inspired practitioners to look beyond language and has shown them the importance of the body in performance. This emphasis on communication that lies beyond language is a return to the semiotic impulses that interrupt the language of the symbolic. It creates meaning that could not be formed through language alone.
1789 differs from the majority of the plays in this study because it is one of only two (the other being Cixous’s and the Soleil’s La Ville parjure) that has been captured on video, thus allowing a more thorough study of the performance aspects as well as the play’s text. This is a fairly rare phenomenon for live theatre. Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that “all attempts to record [theatrical performances] aurally or visually are bound to fail and only highlight the unbridgeable chasm between the performance and a fixed reproducible artifact” (75). Indeed, a recorded play is never able to create an emotional reaction in the spectator equal to that of a live performance. Nor does it induce the same response as films do. If a filmed play is produced for the cinema, it loses the scope of the theatre where spectators can choose, to a certain extent, where to focus their attention as cinematic productions control more heavy-handedly the viewer’s gaze.

However, despite their artistic limitations, filmed plays allow for better documentation of historical productions. In 1973, the Soleil, over the course of thirteen performances, filmed 1789 as it was presented to a live audience (Miller, Ariane 64). As producers, writers, and performers, company members of the Soleil had unique control over the choice of whether or not to film their creation, and they originally refused to have their performances filmed. However, while watching a televised documentary, Mnouchkine saw a short clip of an old play that she wished she had been able to see in its entirety. She realized that she wanted the Théâtre du Soleil to have a permanent a spot in theatrical history, and it was at this moment that she chose to allow the filming of the shows (“L’Art”). Because she did so, certain semiotic moments were captured that were not effectively documented by the stage directions in the script.

The filmed version of 1789 allows us to see the way in which the body was used in its production. The opening scene of the film does not exist in the play’s script, perhaps because its emotional impact would largely be lost in text. It begins with “La Fuite à Varennes” which
depicts the king and the queen’s attempted escape in 1791. The two actors furtively cross the stage as a street performer tells the story of their capture in Varennes and return to Paris, before announcing: “Mesdames et messieurs c’était une façon de raconter l’histoire, mais nous avons choisi une autre. La voici.” Most stories of the French Revolution portray the major historical figures of the period, and 1789 is no different in this regard. However, the Soleil has chosen to show the story as it affects the French popular classes.

Despite the difference in focalization between this opening scene and the rest of the play, it still exemplifies the use of body and music found throughout the production. The king and queen dressed in long cloaks slink across the stage with exaggerated body movements in a solemn pantomime. They take a few steps forward, stop, sway, stretch out their cloaks with their arms, and bring them around in front of their faces like iconic cartoon villains. Their movements follow the haunting melody that envelops the space. Single spotlights narrowly focused on them and the narrator in an otherwise darkened room create an emotionally charged atmosphere. After they are discovered, during their return trip to Paris, the king places his right arm around the queen, she joins her left hand to his left hand, and they stop in a pose reminiscent of a dance promenade. They move slightly back and forth, both mimicking the movement of a carriage and creating a soft, swaying dance that follows the music. Similarly, Barnave arrives to escort them back to Paris and moves towards them for a few leaping steps, then stops, takes a half-step backwards, sweeps his right arm across his body in a flourish, and continues prancing towards the royal couple. The exaggerated body movements reflect an Artaudian influence that contrasts with the previously described use of Brechtian narration. The movements and music create the semiotic pulses of the production while the monotone enunciation of the fairytale-like narration.

98 “Ladies and gentlemen, this was one way of telling the story, but we have chosen another. Here it is.”
represents the symbolic. The two function together to create an eerie scene that heightens the emotional charge and ominous quality of this commonly known historical event.

Words are not enough to truly capture the overwhelming cries of mothers and fathers unable to feed their children. The filmed version of 1789 allows the viewer to more fully experience this semiotic inundation of sound. The first scenes of the text of 1789 focus on women, children, and the injustices done to them. These scenes immediately follow the flight to Varennes in the filmed production. Miserable Marie squats on the floor of one of the stages and scrapes at a bowl of food with her hand; the makeup around her eyes causes her face look hollow and malnourished. Two actors, the Prelate and the Lord, appear behind her. They tell her that God will bless her house and that the Lord will protect it, and then the Prelate begins to demand her tithe and the Lord his champart, or his share of her harvest. She begins to whimper and then scream as they approach from behind, each grabbing a side of her bowl and breaking it in two, so that she is left with nothing. Her cries of agony carry throughout the space. The stage directions state: “Elle hurle sa révolte et sa misère, les mains tendues vers le public qu’elle prend ainsi à témoin. Son cri s’éteint, la lumière baisse, le conteur continu…” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 8). However, her screams last for 45 seconds and the light dims as she is still crying out. 45 seconds is long enough to cause the spectators to have a heightened sense of revulsion. The reality of the moment cannot be fully represented through the stage directions where a reader might misjudge the length and power of these screams.

While the stage directions in the previous example fall short of conveying the immensity of the semiotic experience of the live production, in many cases, Sophie Lemasson, Mnouchkine’s assistant who transcribed the script, left notations about the intensity of these

99 “Ladies and gentlemen, this was one way of telling the story, but we have chosen another. Here it is.”
vocalizations completely out of the stage directions. The emphasis on the revolution’s impact on the suffering bodies of women and children continues in the next scene. The peasant Anne is in labor and her friend Marie is helping to prepare for the birth by gathering clean cloths and heating water. Her preparations are interrupted by Seigneur who arrives after the hunt in the wild and demands his feet be washed and dried. Unable to be persuaded to leave, he soils the water and the cloth that had been readied to receive a newborn. As he does so, Anne, now in labor, and Marie begin to let out blood-curdling screams. This tableau is quickly followed by the announcement that in this kingdom the women were too weak to feed their children. Four women with babies are shown on four stages, signifying the widespread nature of this problem. Four men, presumably their spouses, arrive to tell the women that they were unable to find wood for the fire or food for their bellies. They ask to take the babies in order to rock them, caress them, and put them to sleep. They cradle the infants and we see the fathers save them from their misery by killing them (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 9-10).

The space is eerily quiet, and the men are largely silent but for short statements coming from various stages that echo around the room. The women cry out in anguish as they realize what their husbands are about to do. The screams of the women, joined by the men, fill the air and the souls of the spectators as a royal march begins to play and the king arrives on the scene. The cries the peasants emit, like the screams of miserable Marie, are pure emotion that overwhelm the audience in both their volume and their expression of distress. Unlike miserable Marie’s cries though, the screams of Anne and Marie and of the four women are not called for in the stage directions that accompany the published script. Without the film recording, they might be lost entirely. The film allows the viewer to look back and experience with the audience the emotional tension of the moment.
The Théâtre du Soleil’s use of theatrical space is reminiscent of Artaud’s quest for an unadorned space. Artaud wished to remove the distance between the actor and the spectator and to allow the spectator to be part of the action (Artaud on Theatre 115). From the start, 1789 had been conceived as a touring performance. To create a street fair atmosphere, the troupe needed a large open space, so it was designed to fit the size of a basketball court. This space could be found in any town throughout France, and unlike soccer or handball fields which are “particularly interesting on a tactical and strategic level,” the basketball court is conceived in a way that spectators can see the players from close-up and from a distance since “individual players’ actions are interesting to follow” (François 36-37). Even so, Mnouchkine had trouble finding hosts for the production because, in her mind, they refused to entertain the notion of alternative theatrical space (Copfermann, “The Search” 21-2). Without provincial theatres willing to accommodate them, the troupe looked for a place to perform in Paris. They had previously performed productions, both La Cuisine and A Midsummer Night’s Dream, at Cirque Medrano, but this location was not available for 1789. Simultaneously, the Soleil was also under pressure from the French government, who was subsidizing the theatre at the time. Officials were unhappy with the way in which the company functioned, their cooperative nature, their production methods, and their lack of a fixed locale (Copfermann, “The Search” 22). Mnouchkine knew that the troupe needed their own permanent space.

Through a bit of luck, the Soleil took over the Cartoucherie during preparations for 1789, originally more or less squatting there while they transformed it into a theatrical space (Mnouchkine, “L’Art”). An old munitions factory, the Cartoucherie provided a vast open space which served both their scenic needs for 1789 and advanced an Artaudian drive to revolutionize the means of theatrical production. Surrounded by walls in the middle of the woods on the
outskirts of Paris, the Soleil was given four large hangars in the Cartoucherie complex (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 16-7). In a mere three weeks, members of the company readied the abandoned factory to welcome their audiences (Ariane Mnouchkine – L’Aventure).

Kiernander describes the condition of the space: “In the depths of a Parisian winter there was no heating, the skylights in the roof were broken, the walls and floor were badly damaged, and the gutters leaked. The vast expanses inside the bays of the factory were completely bare” (Ariane Mnouchkine 76). Two of the four hangars were “combined to form one large space, divided by a row of cast-iron pillars, where the performances take place” (Kiernander, Ariane Mnouchkine 17). This large empty space answers Artaud’s call for a theatre where there would be no barrier between the actor and the spectator:

La salle sera close de quatre murs, sans aucune espèce d’ornement, et le public assis au milieu de la salle, en bas, sur des chaises mobiles qui lui permettront de suivre le spectacle qui se passera tout autour de lui. En effet, l’absence de scène, dans le sens ordinaire du mot, invitera l’action à se déployer aux quatre coins de la salle. (Œuvres Complètes [1956] 4: 115)^100

Fulfilling Artaud’s vision, the Cartoucherie offered a large open space which the Soleil could remake as it wished, and which allowed them the opportunity to eliminate the invisible fourth wall separating the stage from the theatre’s seating area.

The set for 1789 had already been designed before the Soleil moved into the Cartoucherie. Influenced by the designs that Roberto Moscoso had developed for the company’s

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^100 “The hall will be enclosed by four walls, without any kind of ornament, and the public will be seated in the middle of the room, on the ground floor, on mobile chairs which will allow them to follow the spectacle which will take place all around them. In effect, the absence of a stage in the usual sense of the word will provide for the deployment of the action in the four corners of the room” (Artaud, Theater and Its Double 96)
abandoned production of Brecht’s *Baal* (Kiernander, *Ariane Mnouchkine* 70), the set was composed of five stages placed throughout the hall. At the beginning of the rehearsal period, the company “constructed makeshift ‘Italian-style’ demountable stages; in other words [they] used planks and nails to make runways for provisional configurations which could be transformed very quickly, always using a very fast method of joinery” (François 36). Using period techniques discovered in carpentry books, these demountable platforms were actually pegged instead of nailed, making it easier to reconfigure them. The actors worked with these set pieces during rehearsals until they found their best configuration, finally settling on five stages spread around the room leaving a large open rectangle in the middle of them (François 37). Many of the stages were connected by ramps and each of them could be reached by these ramps or by stairs on at least three sides (Kirby 4).

As Artaud had imagined for his Theatre of Cruelty, *1789* encircled the spectators. The audience had a choice of two viewing areas. They could either stand in the center of the space amongst the five platforms, or they could sit in bleachers erected on one side of the performance area (Champagne 37). This allowed spectators to move among the stages if they desired. Lenora Champagne explains that while the audience was physically more engaged with the performance, they were not necessarily contributing to it:

If a spectator chose to stand in the central area, rather than to sit on the bleachers, he or she was free to move around to watch the actions that took place on the different platforms, in fact [they] had to move to make room for the actors who pushed their ways through the crowds to get from one stage to another. However, this involved only a change in the spatial relationship of the performer and the spectator, which, while
significant, was not a real change in the *role* of the spectator. The physical passivity of
the spectator was challenged, but his or her potential creativity was not. (37)

Because there was both seating on the floor and in the bleachers, the spectators on the floor
became part of the performance for those seated around them. In fact, according to David
Whitton: “In either case each group of spectators’ experience of the performance was
conditioned by the presence of the other” (264-5). The spectator-actors were conscious that the
spectator-spectators were watching them, and the spectator-spectators were conscious of
watching the spectator-actors as well as the company members. Therefore, while they may not
have contributed creatively as Champagne suggests, they did in fact become part of the
performance. Just as the play was a collective creation by the Théatre du Soleil, during the
performance, the spectators become part of the collectivity. This in turn reflects the manner in
which those on strike in ’68 became participants in the collective action. While the role of the
audience in the play has often been highlighted by critics, it is important to note that the majority
of the spectators were still watching the performance from a fixed location. There was room for
about 200 spectators on the floor and another 800 in the bleachers (Miller, *Ariane* 71). Those on
the floor may not have changed the course of the action, but the arrangement did dissolve the
space between the actor and the spectator, allowing them to be more fully immersed in the
corporeal elements of the production.

**The Play of the Semiotic and the Symbolic in 1789 and 1793**

From the beginning, Mnouchkine and the Soleil integrated both Brechtian and Artaudian schools
of theatrical thought, usually considered specific and disparate entities. In an interview with
Béatrice Picon-Vallin for the film *1789, 40 ans après*, Mnouchkine describes how theatre goers
told her over and over again that they thought they were really there, at the scene of the
Revolution. She argues that it is necessary that they become emotionally involved, but that they should never forget that they are at the theatre. She maintains that spectators need both:

je pense que cette petite dimension d’illusion, comme dit Stendahl, elle est quand même nécessaire, et je pense que, quand même Brecht ne chassait pas ce miniscule part d’illusion, parce qu’il faut les deux, il faut les deux. Il faut voir les projeteurs, à tout instant voir que c’est du théâtre bien sûr, et en même temps s’y croire.

1789 balanced the Brechtian didactic aim of social commentary and of propelling the spectator to action, which can be seen as coming from the symbolic register, with the Artaudian sensory bombardment of music, color, and movement, which gives expression to the semiotic register. Each of these constantly disrupts the other such that together they create a performance that is intellectually challenging and emotional stirring, while also forming a call to political action.

Beginning with Les Clowns (1969), the Soleil rejected the written text. Both 1789 and 1793 were devised through a process of collective creation. The actors embodied characters while improvising based on available historical information. At the outset of 1789, no actor was assigned a specific role. In an interview with Irving Wardle, Mnouchkine explains that there were a number of actors all improvising on the same character: “For example, at the beginning, everyone was improvising characters; we had lots of Marats, Lafayettes, Marie Antoinettes” (“Equal” 27). While the actors worked in groups on improvisations, it was decided that these groups would not remain the same. In fact, the same four actors could only work together for a single morning. Because they were all improvising on the same characters, each actor had to be ready to cede that character to another actor (Mnouchkine, “Equal” 27). While the actors improvised their characters and scenes, Mnouchkine watched. She assured that there was coherency to the production and fixed the final order of the scenes (Miller, Ariane 70).
way, the company was able to combine a Brechtian desire for collective authorship with Artaudian improvisation.

While Artaud sought to create theatre through improvisation, he replaced the authority of the author with that of the director. For him, the actors were to follow the storylines he created, improvising the dialogue and blocking until they were fixed. In Mnouchkine’s approach to collective art, she and the Théâtre du Soleil sought to share the responsibility of creation with the whole company while not entirely dispensing with the role of the director. This method of collective creation aligns more closely with that espoused by Brecht, who wrote plays but also valued collective creativity. He did not see either the writer or the director as a sole creative genius. He viewed the production process itself as a political act (Kellner 33), much the way the Soleil views its collaborative processes to be a political statement of who they are.

In creating the scenes for 1789 and 1793, the actors played on historical quotations, and wove them into the improvised scenes. The intermingling of the historic speeches with the improvised words of the actors in the playscripts for both 1789 and 1793 represents an interplay of the symbolic, the historic texts, with the semiotic, the improvisation performed on those historic documents by the actors. The authentic texts are clear in the script as they are set apart by bold face type. However, as Danièle de Ruyter-Tognotti points out, the spectators may have been unaware that these were bits of authentic speech and not fictional ones invented by the actors (375). For the contemporary historian, the act of reading the script, where these details are obvious, while watching the filmed production creates an additional layer of meaning in which the symbolic text interacts with the more semiotic visual representation. The text, and the knowledge of what was authentic speech and what was not, creates a Brechtian distancing and pulling back from the moment of the play’s performance. Today’s viewer of the filmed play
experiences the true historical distancing between their present and the moment of the play’s production, as well as a second degree of distancing between the moment of the production and the time of the play.

The ways in which the semiotic and the symbolic registers meld to create meaning can be clearly seen at moments when non-linguistic utterances intrude on historic quotations. One such instance is the scene of the “Convocation des États Généraux,” which immediately follows the scene of the mercy killing of four infants described earlier. As shown above, this scene ends with the women’s piercing cries of grief and horror. As the new scene starts, the king takes center stage and the screams of the women who have lost their children continue to resonate. Using historically authentic quotations, the actor playing Louis XVI encourages the people to send him their complaints by way of their representatives who have been called before the Estates-General. Throughout his speech, the mothers and fathers continue to cry out. In the performance of this scene, the semiotic erupts into the symbolic register when the actors’ howling overwhelms the king’s authoritative pronouncements, rendering his words and actions ineffectual. The king’s speech, the ultimate expression of the Law of the Father under the ancien régime, are rendered futile. Here we see the royal state working to silence the protestations of its starving people but is ultimately unsuccessful in doing so.

The staging techniques the Soleil used also hindered the spectator’s emotional identification with the characters and created heightened moments of semiotism in the Kristeven sense of the term. The Soleil chose to incorporate various types of performance, particularly street performance in 1789. This created their desired atmosphere of festivity reminiscent of the affect that animated collective action groups of May ’68. One of these performance styles was puppetry. France, much like the rest of the world, has a long cultural history of using puppetry to
make political commentary. In the seventeenth century, when theatres were highly regulated and restricted to a few licensed companies, puppetry escaped regulation by differentiating itself from theatre which was defined by the presence of spoken dialogue. Stories told through song or by a narrator were not considered to be a form of theatre and therefore were not regulated by the state. Puppet theatres already incorporated both of these narrative styles and so moved further in this direction to avoid being closed (Blumenthal 166-7). The popular Guignol theatre was created by Laurent Mourguet in the early nineteenth century. Similar to the English Punch and Judy, Guignol uses physical comedy, where the puppets spend a considerable amount of time hitting and yelling at each other. Guignol puppetry targets those who abuse their power and wealth and was able to sustain this form of social commentary even when all scripts had to be written and approved in the mid-nineteenth century (Blumenthal 173).

The Soleil used large doll-like puppets, approximately three feet in height, and which are held by a handle on their backs. The arms and legs are flexible and simply moved by the handlers like one would a doll. While not the traditional Guignol puppets, those presented in 1789 use the same physical comedy seen in Guignol puppet theatres. A scene titled simply “Les Marionnettes” depicts the king calling the Etats-Généraux through these puppets. The movements of the puppets are exaggerated: Necker bends over, folding in half, to kiss the feet of the king, and Marie Antoinette convulses in tears, writhing on the stage, because they have no money and then kicks herself in the face while dancing a cancan. The puppets resort to violence as well; the nobility and the clergy convince the puppet representative of the Third Estate to bend over and then kick him and jump on him, Marie Antoinette delivers a series of slaps to Louis’s face when he refuses to immediately dismiss Necker, and she kicks him to hurry him along to shut the door on the Third Estate. The exaggerated body movements of the puppets create a
comic element which, in conjunction with the seriousness of the events depicted, encourages the audience to think critically about these historical events.

These puppets are manipulated by costumed actors who at other moments play, as traditional actors, the same or different characters. No effort is made to hide the actor-puppeteers or to change their appearance while they are operating the puppets, nor is there an attempt to create unity between the puppet and its handler. The actors pick up and cast aside the puppets in full view of the audience while running from one skit to the next. Both the puppets and the actor-puppeteers can be seen by the spectators. Puppetry is already further from reality than live actors, and thus it discourages audience identification with the characters. The visible presence of the actor behind the puppet, as well as their exaggerated movements and physical comedy, further separate the spectator from the character. This Brechtian distancing encourages the audience to think meta-critically about the events enacted. At the same time, there is heightened sensory stimulation through the exaggerated movements, a bodily-centered signifying practice which is reminiscent of Artaud’s theories of non-discursive theatricality. These elements combine to emphasize the treatment of the Third Estate while also ridiculing the royal couple, the nobility, and the clergy for their political obtuseness.

The Convocation of the Estates General had already been depicted in an earlier scene in which the action is presented in a much different tone. Previously, the actor playing the king had recited verbatim the discourse the sovereign spoke at the convocation, which is presented in a royal monotone while the cries of the people, too impoverished to feed their children, echoed around him. This modernist technique of depicting the same events through multiple perspectives is also encouraged by Brecht. The presentation of different viewpoints encourages critical reflection on the part of spectators. The earlier scene of the Convocation of the Estates
General highlights the ineffectiveness of the king while the second emphasizes the insincerity of the concern that the royalty, nobility, and clergy purport to have for a famished people. While both of these are true, it may be difficult to show them in the same representation.

Another form of spectacle used in 1789, and similar in some respects to their use of puppetry, is slapstick. The company’s preoccupation with the body and movement aligns with the exaggerated motions and emotions found in slapstick comedy. Louis XVI calls for the French people to send him their grievances and they respond. A man, Gaspard, and two women, Nestine and Marie, rejoice on stage that “tout c’qui est bon c’est pour nous et toute la merde c’est pour eux!” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 12).101 They decide to write to the king about their biggest problem: the salt tax (la gabelle). They search for something to write on and choose a clean sheet. Then, they realize they need something to write with and run frantically around the stage searching for a writing instrument and asking the audience if they have one. The dialogue for this scene in the playscript does not include these improvised lines nor does it fully suggest the peasants’ frenetic running about. Finally, the three notice an imaginary chicken, catch it, and pluck a feather from it to write with, only to realize they have no ink. The dizzying crisscrossing of the stage resumes as the three search for something black or blue, once again engaging the audience with their questions. The actors holler and scream over one another, until Gaspard suggests they cut his arm to write with the blood. This sets off an argument over who will do the cutting until finally, Gaspard cuts himself. Nestine excitedly dips her feather into Gaspard’s arm and begins to write: gabelle. Immediately, she comes to the realization that she does not know how to write. She demands: “Comment qu’on fait un gueu?” (Théâtre du Soleil, 1789 13).102 The grievances are collected. The king’s efficient declares: “Où sont vos doléances?” (Théâtre du

101 “Everything that’s good’s for us and everything that’s shitty’s for them!”
102 “How do you make a gueu?”
Gaspard, Nestine, and Marie interrupt him crying out “Comment qu’on fait un gueu?” The officiant assumes they have no grievances. They shout out that yes, they do, the salt tax. He tells them if they have not written anything down, nothing will change. They scream and shout and Gaspard tries to cross through the audience to reach the officiant on the opposite stage. However, their cries are drowned out by the beating of his snare drum. It is not that the people had nothing to complain about, but that the method they were given for registering those complaints was inaccessible to them. The triplet of French commoners, the most miserable group, is unable to send their complaints to the king.

In the written script, the scene ends there. However, in the filmed version it continues through the strata of classes with each being unable to ensure that his or her complaints reach the ear of the king. The acting also becomes more exaggerated and farcical. A man arrives on another stage ridiculing Gaspard, Nestine, and Marie as illiterate fools. While this farmer is also illiterate, he sees himself as smarter because he had the idea to draw a picture of his problems. He happily shows his painting to the audience. On the paper is drawn a sad cow next to a sad man and two happy cows next to a happy man. The farmer is sure the king will understand that instead of one sad cow, he needs two happy ones. He takes his painting to a rich farmer to pass it along for him, tripping and laughing as he walks in a circle to signify his journey. The rich farmer has a stuffed belly and the happy-go-lucky attitude of the poor farmer. He agrees to pass the grievance to the king, but as soon as the poor farmer leaves, he rips his painting in two and declares that he has his own problems with his pasture to worry about. He jumps on an imaginary horse and click clacks around the stage holding his hat to keep it from flying off as he rushes about. The rich farmer takes his complaint to the apothecary, a small shopkeeper who repeats the

103 “Where are your grievances?”
rich farmer’s response to the poor farmer: he accepts to relay the complaint to the king’s emissaries but rips it in two after the rich farmer gallops away on his horse. Instead, he will take his own complaints concerning his apothecary to the town deputy who is a close friend of the king. With a kick and a jump, he gets into his imaginary carriage. Like the other characters presented here, his movements are exaggerated and fluid. He swings his arms and it appears that he could fall at any moment as he makes his journey in his carriage. The sound of which is evoked with a drum roll. The deputy is the most comic of all the characters. He is bent over backward in an effort to support his giant belly. He stretches out his neck to look up over his stomach to take the apothecary’s grievance. He reads the complaint with a humming mumble of sounds. Of course, after the apothecary leaves, the deputy reveals that he will not take it to the king because business and high finance are the country’s greatest concern.

In the end, only the bourgeoisie’s complaints will be relayed to the king. In addition to this strategic forgetting of the problems of the lower classes, Ruyter-Tognotti points out that the inability to transmit their grievances to the king mimics the troupe’s own limitations. They cannot show every perspective of the Revolution, and the one they have chosen is just one among several. The other points of view have not reached the audience just as the complaints did not reach the king (369). This encourages the audience to consider what stories are not being told in the world around them and wondering whose experiences are being forgotten. Like the use of puppetry, the exaggerated movements and emotions of the actors encourage the spectator to remain emotionally detached from the characters presented. The interaction with the audience prevents them from becoming mesmerized by the action on stage. All of this works together to encourage critical reflection and propel the audience to consider what material barriers are keeping people in contemporary society from being heard.
The street fair atmosphere of 1789 can be seen as a form of carnival, which, it has been argued, could express revolutionary desires. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie argues that Carnival was “Particularly apt as an instrument of social change” and while often slow, it was “a satirical, lyrical, epic-learning experience for highly diversified groups. It was a way to action, perhaps modifying the society as a whole in the direction of social change and possible progress” (316). Historically, carnival was a ritualistic moment of the annual calendar where members of the lower classes assumed temporary power over their superiors who in turn good-naturedly accepted their short-lived demotion (Ivanov 11). In this way, the idea of a permanent carnival could be seen as a revolution. In 1789, the actors as street performers play the roles of the nobility, inverting the normal power structure. In doing so, they point to the weaknesses of the ruling classes. As such, it could be argued that the Soleil carnivalized the Revolution to spur a new revolution as they sought to encourage their audience to change contemporary society. One should note, however, that Le Roy Ladurie also points to the ways that Carnival revelry strengthened normative structures (322), and Umberto Eco challenges the notion that carnival is a form of revolution, arguing that instead of creating long-lasting liberation, carnival reinforces the existence of laws. For amusement to be found in the breaking of social norms, those laws and traditions must be known and normally followed. Eco argues that modern carnivals are spatially limited to areas such as theatres (6).

While it is true that carnival on its own provides only moments of reprieve to subdue the masses, 1789 is not merely carnival. It is precisely through the interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic that it becomes more than a form of transitory distraction. Eco goes on to describe humor as more than carnivalesque amusement:
Very seldom does the business of entertainment display real humor. More frequently it sells carnival. When a real piece of humor appears, entertainment becomes avantgarde: a supreme philosophical game. We smile because we feel sad for having discovered, only for a moment, the truth. But at this moment we have become too wise to believe it. We feel quiet and peaceful, a little angry, with a shade of bitterness in our minds. Humor is a cold carnival. (8)

1789 leads the audience to laugh and to experience emotional and physiological responses to the semiotic moments of the play, to the carnival atmosphere, and to the Artaudian sensory bombardment, but it does not leave them there. It does not allow them to become absorbed in the emotion of the play. Instead, it reveals itself as theatre through Brechtian distancing which allows the symbolic register to hold the semiotic in balance, and it demands the spectator reflect on the contemporary meaning of the performance.
V. LOOKING BEYOND THE SELF: HÉLÈNE CIXOUS, ARIANE MNOUCHKINE, 
AND THE THÉÂTRE DU SOLEIL

The plays studied in the previous chapters were all produced in the 1970s or early 1980s. During this period, women-conscious theatre focused primarily on white women and created the impression that women were a unified group. Moving towards the end of the twentieth century, women of color called white feminists to task for ignoring their unique perspectives and for erasing the differences in their lived experience (Aston 79-80). Reflecting these changes, Hélène Cixous and the Théâtre du Soleil continued to focus on questions of social justice in their theatrical productions but broadened their scope to include all those who find themselves without a voice in society, the politically oppressed, immigrants, and those who for whatever reason stand outside the structures of power. Sofia Varino argues that Cixous’s plays mirror the evolution of feminist theatre and feminist theory in the last decades of the twentieth century from “the psychoanalytical discourses of the 1970s and 1980s to intersectional, postcolonial and decolonial, new materialist and ecological critiques” (8). That is, Cixous no longer focuses on gender as the sole source of social inequality but rather on the relationships between race, class, and gender that cause individuals to experience oppression differently. Additionally, beginning in the 1980s, Cixous began working closely with Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil. Using plays Cixous wrote for the Soleil, in particular La Ville parjure (1994), I will show this move towards more multicultural productions and the ways in which Cixous and the Soleil continued to combine a sensory-rich production style with a strong political message.
Emine Fisek’s study of theatre created by North African immigrants in the 1970s points to the difficulties women had in expressing their double minority status as both Algerians and women. Fisek describes La Kahina theatre troupe founded by a French-Algerian woman, Salikha Amara, in the 1970s: “Troubled by the gender bias that plagued immigration politics, Amara gathered friends, family, and other activists and wrote a series of plays that portrayed Algerian women’s lives on both sides of the Mediterranean” (“Animating Immigration” 42). Amara’s first play, *Pour que les larmes de nos mères deviennent une légende* (1975), was written in three languages, French, Arabic, and Kabyle, and portrayed the lives of women in France and Algeria bringing to light problems of forced marriage and divorce.

The Faculté de Vincennes invited the troupe to perform the production for a feminist celebration, but the audience forced them off the stage because the play included male actors. Following this incident, La Kahina distanced themselves from the feminist movement (Fisek, “Animating Immigration” 50). Fisek argues that “the immigrant woman’s distinguishing feature was the dual oppression resulting from her gender and socio-ethnic status” (“Animating Immigration” 50). The women I studied, Cixous, Mnouchkine, and Simone Benmussa, chose the opposite path and seemingly ignored their own complicated ethnicities in their theatrical productions.\(^{104}\) It is likely that their economic status and education distanced them from the hardships other immigrant women faced and allowed them to more easily see women as a

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\(^{104}\) Hélène Cixous was born in Oran, Algeria and is of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish heritage. She moved to France in 1955 (Prenowitz VII). Ariane Mnouchkine’s father was a Russian Jew. The family hid in Bordeaux in the 1940s while her grandparents remained in Paris and were later deported and killed in Nazi camps (Miller, *Ariane* 4). Simone Benmussa was born in Tunisia to a Jewish-French Family. She too moved to Paris in 1955 to attend university and remained (Case, “Gender as Play” 21).
unified group. French feminists struggled in the 1970s with their political affiliations and status as women. Claire Duchen argues:

For feminists it became a question of identity: whether they identified first as socialists/communists or as feminists, and whether women identified first as women and second as working-class or middle-class or vice versa; or whether, indeed, the entire concept of class had to be reformulated in order to account for gender. (18)

Cixous was involved during this period with the group Psychanalyse et Politique (Psych et Po). Informed by psychoanalytic theories, this group placed the category of woman above others arguing that they “experience their bodies and express their experience in fundamentally different ways” (Duchen 20). In the 1980s and 90s though, women in theatre, including Cixous and Mnouchkine, turned their theatrical eye towards immigrants and multicultural situations and influences.

**Cixous as Playwright of the Soleil**

The beginning of Cixous’s work with the Théâtre du Soleil marks a significant change in her writing for the theatre. As I have shown in Chapter II, her early plays were similar to her poetic fiction in that they were primarily concerned with taking a psychoanalytic look at the self. While working with the Soleil, her plays began to face outward in an effort to understand others. Instead of focusing on subject formation, her later plays look at events and examine conflict between characters. This shift in focus is evident in the last play she wrote before beginning her work with the Soleil. According to Cixous, she first began to think theatrically with *La Prise de l’école de Madhubai* (1984) (“Théâtre Enfoui” 74), a play that was written well after her first entry into theatre with *Portrait de Dora*, but just before she began working with Mnouchkine. She describes this experience as “the first time I let events come to me, which is to say the first
time I myself engaged in a voluntary exercise in which I said to myself ‘This time I am going to open my interior space, my interior theatre, to events’” (“On Theatre” 2). While she sees *La Prise de l’école de Madhubaï* as having more theatrical qualities, it was still limited in action and had only three primary characters and two additional secondary roles. This play is based on the true story of Phoolan Devi who turned herself in for leading a massacre of men in an Indian village (Jenson 198). The play’s first act is a dialogue between Pandala and Sakundeva, who represents the historical Devi, in which they discuss where Sakundeva has been and why she has come home. In the second act, a government minister has come to speak with Sakundeva to convince her to turn herself in to the government to stand trial for the offense she committed. However, during much of this act, she remains hidden until she finally shows herself and negotiates the creation of a school which she will make the site of her surrender. The play is composed primarily of dialogues, first between Pandala and Sakundeva, then between Pandala and the minister, and finally between Sakundeva and the minister. This represents a limited number of characters, locations, and conflicts.

The economy of characters in *La Prise de l’école de Mudhabaï* contrasts sharply with the first play Cixous wrote for the Théâtre du Soleil, *L’Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk, roi du Cambodge* (1985), a work in which she created a modern epic with a cast of over forty characters. The story was split in two parts and performed over consecutive evenings, with each night’s performance running more than four hours. Following the tradition of Shakespeare, Cixous abandoned the three unities of classic French theatre and wrote a play in which the action spanned from 1955 to 1979, took place in multiple locations, and included more than one intrigue. This represents a clear evolution from her earliest work, *Portrait de Dora,*

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105 Eric Prenowitz conducted this interview with Cixous specifically for a collection of English translations of four of her plays. It was presumably conducted in English as no French version is included.
which focused primarily on problems of subject formation, through *La Prise de l’école de Madhubaï*, where she begins to incorporate more conventional plot lines, and on to her work with the Soleil where she presents a multitude of characters and the conflicts that arise among them. It is here that Cixous’s work became truly theatrical in nature and where she largely abandons questions concerning the formation of human subjectivity and its relation to constructions of sexual difference. Celita Lamar observes: “the focus of her theatre evolved from women to minorities and from political feminism to support for the oppressed” (149). In other words, from this point forward, Cixous’s plays written for the Soleil show a marked shift in focus away from her preoccupation with the psychological self to larger questions concerning how societies construct the Other, and where her involvement with the theatre becomes a means of understanding “other” people. Cixous’s work with the Soleil also coincides with the troupe’s own movement towards taking up more contemporary political concerns such as multiculturalism, the inclusion of marginalized groups, and themes of exile and immigration. Judith Miller argues:

> Mnouchkine is now convinced that by representing onstage some configuration of ‘the stranger,’ or ‘the other,’ she will force the public to really look and listen. The psychic attachment to a symbolic other self, aesthetically distanced from the everyday, will be, she believes, profound and jolting. (*Ariane* 34)

Cixous and the Soleil evolved together towards creating emotionally charged plays that are rich in meaning and focused intently on a critique of the subordinate status of women and minorities.

In an interview with Anne Franke and Roger Chazal conducted in June 1988, Cixous described her first encounter with Ariane Mnouchkine, director of the Théâtre du Soleil, and how she came to write plays for the company. They met when Cixous attended a performance of
At the time, Cixous, along with Michel Foucault, was involved in a small political action group called the Groupe Information Prison (GIP). This group invited Mnouchkine to put together a short play of about four minutes in length which could be performed in the streets outside of prisons. However, the performances were generally cut short by the arrival of the police and often ended in violence. After their experience with the GIP, the two women remained friends and continued to do political work together in the women’s movement. In 1983, Mnouchkine asked Cixous if she would like to try to write for the Soleil. Cixous uses the word “try” because both women claim that they did not know if the collaboration would work. Cixous was unsure if she could write theatre on the scale of the Soleil’s productions, and Mnouchkine was still unsure about working with a playwright (147-8). Since this first collaboration on *L’Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sihanouk* though, Cixous has gone on to write numerous plays for the Soleil, and she is the only contemporary playwright with whom the group has worked.

After authoring *Sihanouk*, Cixous observed that for her, writing for theatre was like writing with her left hand: “With my right hand I have been writing a lot of poetical fiction and now I’m using my left hand in order to write plays” (“Two Countries” 191). While she maintains that writing fiction comes naturally for her, she finds writing for the theatre is as awkward as the physical act of writing with her non-dominant hand. With theatre, she says she must write on a scale that is unnatural for her. With poetical fiction, Cixous finds that she can write extensively on one small moment, but in plays she must adhere to time constraints and conform to a need for action (“Two Countries” 196). However, Cixous explains how her plays favor a proliferation of meaning and perspectives in a manner different from her books. In a work of fiction, it is possible to recreate the way in which a subject is the product of many different moments, voices,
and social forces. In a play, “the weaving of signifiers” is impossible to recreate in the same manner because “you don’t have all the time and space on the stage you have when you write a book” (Cixous, “Two Countries” 197-8). Cixous argues that this diversity of perspectives is instead distributed across multiple characters:

And yet there is that multiplicity. What happens with it? What happens on the stage with all those characters who belong to the regions of our unconscious? Actually, the vision, composition, the ambivalence of the subject are distributed into different characters. On the stage you will have five different characters to express one struggle, one conflict of the self. Whereas in the text one conflict of the self has five voices that intermingle into one. (“Two Countries” 198)

Despite her change in focus and the enlarged scale of her plays, her work continues to display the linguistic richness associated with écriture féminine to do so, and thus creates a stronger message.

In writing for the stage, Cixous is able to create male characters as she is not able to do in her poetic fiction: “I write as a woman. As a woman I can write of women. As a woman, I can use my body to inscribe the body of a woman. But I can’t do that for a man. If I wrote a novel, I would have, on the one hand complete women and on the other hand semi-real men” (Cixous, “Two Countries” 203). As she theorized in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous writes with her body and when she does, she feels as though there is an intimate connection between her biological sex and the creative energies she mobilizes in writing, a force which allows her to write female characters as whole and complete beings. Because she is not a man, she believes therefore, that in writing fiction, she does not have the same life force as a man to be able to write a complete male character in the same way she writes her female characters. In writing plays, she can create
fully-realized male characters because the actors contribute the bodies her writing cannot create (Cixous, “Two Countries” 203). As a result of allowing the actors to complete the characters she has created through the presence of their own bodies, Cixous is less concerned with sexual difference in theatre than she is in fiction (Cixous, White Ink 122). This is perhaps why some critics have argued that she no longer adopts écriture féminine in her theatrical works (Berger 40), but she has not entirely abandoned the notion of feminine writing either. It is true that her plays become more temporally linear in nature and contain more events. However, Sofia Varino observes that while Cixous’s plays for the Soleil have a “lack of metatextual self-reflection,” this is “compensated by the troupe’s collaborative mise-en-scène, layered with lavish scenography and eclectic acting styles that introduce self-reflexivity onstage” (5). Additionally, these later theatrical works still display the word play and poetic qualities characteristic of écriture féminine. Cixous’s writing style and the Théâtre du Soleil’s acting style work together to heighten the effect of the interplay between the semiotic and the symbolic registers.

While much of her more recent theatrical work has been done for the Théâtre du Soleil, Cixous continues to write plays for other theatres as well, such as L ’Histoire (qu’on ne connaîtra jamais) (1994), Rouen, la trentième nuit de mai ’31 (1998), and La Fiancée aux yeux bandés (2004) for Daniel Mesguich. Moreover, the plays she has written for the Soleil have also been staged by other theatre companies. However, her relationship with the Soleil is different from her involvement with other directors and companies. Cixous has stated that working with the Soleil nourishes her in a way the others do not. In a 2004 interview with Eric Prenowitz, she explains: “I have to say to begin with that the trunk and the roots are the Théâtre du Soleil. This is not to suggest that what I do outside the Théâtre du Soleil is only branches, but that the apprenticeship,
the vitality, the sap, the nourishment come to me from the Théâtre du Soleil” (“On Theatre” 6). It is clear that Cixous’s work with the company allowed her to grow as a playwright.

There are also practical differences in the creative method Cixous adopted in her work with the Théâtre du Soleil. For example, Cixous and Mnouchkine agree on a subject together before Cixous begins writing (Cixous, *White Ink* 98). At a certain moment in the writing process, Cixous shares what she has written with Mnouchkine, who provides her feedback (Cixous, *White Ink* 117, 119). It is clear that Cixous trusts Mnouchkine’s theatrical instincts more than she does her own skill as a playwright. She explains:

Il y a aussi le cas de figure où d’avance elle me dit « là, tu n’es pas sur le théâtre, là c’est un texte, ce n’est pas du théâtre ». Si elle en est absolument sûre, je le refais tout de suite, ça ne passe même pas du côté de la répétition. Je lui fais confiance parce que d’abord il y a un non-vérifiable, et surtout parce que moi je ne sais jamais ce que je fais. Ce que je fais est très trompeur, très étrange, je n’ai pas en moi d’instance critique en ce qui concerne le théâtre, le genre théâtral. (Cixous “L’auteur” 60)

Additionally, Mnouchkine will generally begin rehearsals for the play before Cixous has finished writing, which keeps everyone involved in the creative moment rather than focused on what is to come next:

Even when working with Cixous, Mnouchkine is so concerned by a process that keeps everyone in the present that she will often start rehearsals well before Cixous has finished the last scene. This does preclude actors playing to an ending. It also keeps them awake

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106 This interview is assumed to have been conducted in English.
107 There’s also the case where, from the outset, she [Mnouchkine] says ‘You’re not in the theatre here – this is a text, it’s not theatre.’ If she’s completely sure, I rewrite it immediately, it doesn’t even go to rehearsal. I trust her because, firstly, it’s not something that can be checked, and, above all, I never know what I’m doing. What I’m doing is very deceptive, very strange, and I don’t have any critical instinct with regard to the theatre, to theatrical writing. (Cixous *White Ink* 119)
to discovery. But this also keeps Cixous at the drawing board, rewriting, and being
‘rewritten’ sometimes up to the last weeks of rehearsals. (Miller, *Ariane* 54)

For the Théâtre du Soleil then, there is a certain amount of collaboration and rewriting that
occurs throughout the production process. While Cixous maintains that the troupe does not alter
her text (Cixous, *White Ink* 99), Mnouchkine has more control over the script and the way in
which it is produced than is normally the case for a director. Judith Miller observes: “Yet
Mnouchkine still exerts considerable influence in the writing sphere, uneasy, as she always has
been, about the role of the text in the collaborative process. We might even suggest that she feels
as free to jettison and alter texts as she does to tamper with music, space, and masks” (*Ariane*
53). In this way, the play ultimately becomes a collaborative project between Cixous,
Mnouchkine, and the troupe.

Cixous often writes twice as much material than is needed for a *Théâtre du Soleil*
production (“Ariane Mnouchkine fête trente ans”), which must then be made to fit into a certain
time frame once rehearsals begin. It is here that Cixous “economizes” by cutting words and lines
from her written text (Cixous, *White Ink* 114). Of course, when other theatre companies produce
these same plays, she cannot be present to oversee this editing process. She believes,
nonetheless, that a text she wrote for the Soleil may not work the same way when it is performed
by other companies in other spaces, and so she allows directors to rework her scripts themselves
(Cixous, *White Ink* 114-5), a practice contemporary playwrights rarely permit, but one that is
more common with classic Greek tragedies, Shakespeare’s plays, and works in the public
domain. While other theatre companies have produced the plays she wrote for the Soleil, because
of Cixous’s unique relationship with the troupe, I will focus my discussion here only on its
staging of her work. While the textual elements of Cixous’s plays remain largely the same,
regardless of the company that performs them, the *mise-en-scène* and the particular way in which it brings the text alive changes each time a play is produced.

**La Ville parjure: A Contemporary Tragedy with a Classical Aesthetic**

With the creation of *La Ville parjure* (1994), the Soleil was finally able to produce a play concerning contemporary society, an undertaking they had been attempting since they created *L’Âge d’or* (1975) (Mnouchkine, “Entretien” 70). Following the Soleil’s *Atreids* cycle, Cixous and Mnouchkine began searching for the subject of their next production. At first, they focused their attentions on the fall of the Soviet Union and then events taking place in Czechoslovakia. At the same time, a public scandal broke in France when it was revealed that over 1000 French hemophiliacs had been given blood transfusions that were contaminated with the AIDS virus. The tragedy dominated the news cycle for an entire year, and Mnouchkine and Cixous felt compelled to address it (Cixous, “On Theatre” 17). Scrutiny of the circumstances that led to this crisis revealed a chilling disregard for human life on the part of the doctors and government officials deemed responsible for this disaster.

At the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, doctors at the French Centre National de Transfusions Sanguines (CNTS) had been alerted that their blood supply might be contaminated by the virus. In March 1983, medical researchers in the United States had discovered that the AIDS virus in blood could be killed through a heating process. Travenol-Hyland, the company that had made the discovery, sent a letter to Michel Garretta at the CNTS, seeking to market this process to the French (Riedmatten & Roberto 15). Adopting the techniques that the Americans had developed could have eliminated the contaminants in the French blood supply and obviously saved lives. However, ignorance of this emerging disease and distrust in the efficacy of the heating process being proposed led French officials to simply
disregard the letter in question. Then, in early spring 1985, another American company created a screening test for HIV and sought approval for it to be made available in France, but a French company was nearing completion of its own screening test (Riedmatten & Roberto 16). The request for approval of the American test was not immediately given a response. In the meantime, on March 12, 1985 a memo confided to top officials at the CNTS that all blood product from Parisian donors was contaminated with the AIDS virus (Riedmatten & Roberto 16-7). An inter-ministerial meeting finally took place in May 1985 where officials considered approving the request the American company had made three months before to market its HIV screening test in France. At this meeting, a representative of then Prime Minister Laurent Fabius asked that the release of the American test be delayed, a move that would allow the French company developing a similar screening test additional time to bring its own product to market (Riedmatten & Roberto 17). The government’s request was ultimately granted despite the fact that approval of the American test would have immediately slowed contamination of the country’s blood supplies.

Just weeks later, Garetta revealed at an internal meeting that all blood products in France had been contaminated with HIV, further proclaiming that the CNTS, the agency he oversaw would experience serious financial hardship if it halted distribution of blood for transfusions (Riedmatten & Roberto 17). A month after informing colleagues that all French blood stocks were contaminated, Garretta sent a memo to French transfusion centers informing them that the use of unheated blood products would remain the standard procedure until the current supply was depleted (Riedmatten & Roberto 18). In July 1985, government officials announced that the Sécurité Sociale would cease reimbursing the costs of unheated blood products on October 1, 1985, at which point, systematic screening of blood supplies would be implemented (Riedmatten
& Roberto 18). This six-month delay between the time a screening test had become available and when its use was finally implemented cost many hemophiliacs their lives. It is unclear exactly how many hemophiliacs were affected by the choices Garetta and other government officials made. Before the end of the crisis, CNTS officials at one point estimated that 30 to 60 hemophiliacs could be infected each month, putting the number between 120 and 240 (Aldhous 781). However, in 1993, it was reported that French cases accounted for 57.6% of the 2000 cases of AIDS acquired through blood transfusions in the twelve-member European Union. This same report indicated that not more than a dozen hemophiliacs would have been infected between August 1, 1985, when the decision was made to withdraw unheated blood products from distribution and October 1, 1985 when that decision was implemented (Dorozynski 959). Despite uncertainty about the exact number of cases directly caused by the decision to delay withdrawal of the contaminated stock, the fact that the overwhelming majority of these cases occurred in France suggests that other countries made better choices sooner and that the French could have done so as well. The French government knew of the contamination and chose to place financial concerns over the safety of country’s blood supply and those whose lives depended on it.

Charges against officials from the Health Ministry and the CNTS were first leveled by the Association of the Polytransfused (Aldhous 781). Those who were ultimately convicted of fraud, as related to consumer protection, received minimal sentences. Michel Garretta was sentenced to four years in prison, the maximum allowed by French law (“France’s Blood Scandal” 759). Nature reports that: “Professor Jacques Roux, director general of health in 1985, who had been warned, was given a suspended sentence of four years for having failed to challenge Garretta’s policy and for having failed to warn his political masters with sufficient urgency of the dangers” (“France’s Blood Scandal” 759). A handful of other officials were
indicted and those who were convicted received shorter sentences. To much of the French public, these sentences seemed like a slap on the wrist, particularly when compared to the loss of life affected hemophiliacs suffered. Others, however, claimed that these officials were unfairly convicted through a trial conducted by the mass media. Indeed, a group of 97 physicians, researchers, and public health workers wrote a public letter to President Mitterand asking him to pardon those convicted stating that “months, and often years, must pass before a scientific discovery is validated, recognized and integrated into the general consciousness. Only then can such discoveries be brought to bear upon decisions concerning public health” (“Appeal to Mitterand” 312).

While it is true that knowledge of AIDS and HIV was limited at the time, Cixous and Mnouchkine, like many French people, were shocked by the government’s actions. Cixous explains that “the story of AIDS-contaminated blood passed before us, as if it were a meteor shooting by. It was something that was not the product of historic events reaching across the twentieth century, it was an accident, but a moral accident of Western Culture” (“On Theatre” 17). Cixous was reluctant to write about the blood scandal because she could not believe that it was actually true (Cixous, “On Theatre” 17-8), but eventually, she could not deny it and was emotionally compelled to use this story as a metaphor for the treatment of individuals in France where money is often given priority over humanity. At this point, Cixous, Mnouchkine, and the Théâtre du Soleil began creating La Ville parjure.

The play was difficult, though, for Cixous to write as she was haunted by the knowledge that there could well be hemophiliacs in the audience who were dying because of the negligence they were seeing represented on stage. In an interview with Prenowitz, Cixous explains her frame of mind thus:
The consciousness of the immediacy and the proximity of this tragedy did not leave me for a second. In every domain: the patients, the victims, the mothers, the children, the men, the women, the doctors, a universe I know very well. And I thought: This cannot be put on stage without the help of all the gods in the world. Which is to say without being transposed, without it becoming something that has been torn away from the newspaper page, and which protects all those who are presently suffering. (“On Theatre” 18)

Given these circumstances, Cixous modeled the play on a Greek tragedy and chose to introduce a mythical aura to the play to diffuse the impact of the harsh reality it depicted.

**Theatrical Écriture Féminine: Writing and Mise-En-Scène**

The story she tells concerns a mother who has lost her two young sons presumably to AIDS as hemophiliacs. It is implied that they were victims of the blood scandal. She looks for them at the public cemetery, which is guarded by Aeschylus and inhabited by the city’s homeless outcasts. The mother’s arrival and the grief she expresses awakens the three furies who had been asleep for thousands of years. In seeking vengeance on the mother’s behalf, they chase and capture the doctors, X1 and X2, who are responsible for her sons’ deaths. The furies put the doctors on trial with the Chorus and audience as jurors. But the mother is not looking for revenge; she only wishes to see some expression of remorse in the doctors who caused her loss, something they seem unable to give her. The king of the realm in question is impotent to quell the public unrest over the scandal that has erupted, and a rival stokes his subjects’ outrage in hopes of winning power for himself. In the end, this minister is elected the new king despite being more morally corrupt than his predecessor. He immediately unleashes a flood that drowns the cemetery’s inhabitants. The central tragedy staged in *La Ville parjure* becomes the people’s inability to affect any real change in their society.
Cixous’s script is composed primarily in free verse. There is no strict adherence to a system of rhythm or rhyme, but the dialogue is broken into verses and stanzas. Traditional sentence structure is often disrupted in a poetic fashion and attention is given to the sonority of the language. For example:

Parce que nous sommes sans le sou,

Sans le toit, sans le droit,

On croit facilement que nous sommes sans les mots,

Sans la lettre, sans l’esprit, mais pas du tout! (Cixous, Ville parjure 42)

The statement begins by explaining their frame of mind which is a somewhat less conventional sentence structure. The poetic sonority of these lines is enhanced through the repetition of the word “sans” which stresses the Chorus’s perceived status of having nothing, including no voice. Cixous further emphasizes the /s/ sound with her use of the words: parce, sommes, sou, facilement, and esprit; the unvoiced quality of this sound also reflects the Chorus’s lack of voice. Additionally, there is a repetition of the /wa/ sound in the three words toit, droit, and croit.

Together these sounds cause the first three lines quoted and the first half of the fourth to have a very drawn-out and lisp-like quality to them. The Chorus creates a hissing murmur; the sounds of which lull the listener into a momentary trance reflective of society’s tendency to ignore and gloss over this segment of the population. The sounds of the second half of the fourth verse abruptly interrupt the spectator’s trance-like state. In contrast to the previous three and a half verses, this one lacks these lisping sounds and is comprised of four one-syllable words. These words are marked by the sharp sounds of the fricatives /p/, /d/, and /t/, particularly /p/ and /t/ which are unvoiced. The stress on “pas de tout” emphasizes the fact that this commonly held
opinion that the homeless have no voice is untrue. The above citation is emblematic of the free verse Cixous employs throughout the text and represents, I argue, a form of *écriture féminine*.

There are a few instances where the play’s dialogue is not presented in verse. These are times when characters are particularly poignant in their expressions of ambition and greed. The difference in cadence at these points draws attention to them. This happens in much of the fourteenth scene where a group of doctors and professors are discussing the doctors accused of inaction in the French blood scandal (X1 and X2) and whether or not they believe that those in charge of the country’s blood supply had acted criminally. This is also the scene where they must decide if they will sign the letter which, while not explicitly stated, presumably refers to the one written to President Mitterrand imploring him to pardon the convicted doctors. By refraining from using verse during much of this scene, Cixous set it off from the rest of her text, pulling the audience from the entertainment of a mythic tragedy and confronting them with the contemporary reality of the tragic situation. The use of prose also emphasizes the use of ordinary language and logic to explain away and justify the atrocities that have been committed. Logic and language are traditionally associated with the masculine. Notably, the characters speaking these lines are all men, except for Madame le professeur Lion who remains the voice of dissent and whose dialogue switches between prose and verse. This differentiation by sex in points of view and style of speech further emphasizes the alignment of the feminine with the poetic and the masculine with prosaic. The use of prose in this scene connects logic and language in a way that designates these speeches as belonging to the phallocentric order and contrasts them to the rest of the play which is more strongly associated with emotion and therefore subversive of the *logos*. This contrast of prose with poetic verse for the dialogue of the play exemplifies the tension between what Kristeva theorizes as the semiotic and symbolic. The semiotic is similarly
associated with poetry while the symbolic is represented by prosaic language and logic. In other words, the doctors’ statements represent the symbolic order while much of the rest of the play is more firmly anchored in the semiotic register. The logical argument between the doctors and professors is called into question, both in the play and in contemporary events, through the poetic structure of the rest of the play.

It is not only the use of verse that contributes to the poetry of the text. While not as linguistically rich as her works of fiction, there are instances of Cixousian word play present in the dialogue. As is common for Cixous, she puts words together or breaks apart single words to create new meanings. An example of this is the compression of the words voulu (wanted) and tuer (to kill) into one word: voulutuer in scene 12 where the furies put the accused, X1 and X2, on trial. The lawyers in the scene argue that even though the children are dead, X1 and X2 did not intend to kill them. The furies’ use the compressed word voulutuer to hurl their accusations at the accused, combining the ideas of premeditation and murder (Cixous, Ville parjure 117). The term emphasizes the ridiculousness of drawing a distinction between negligent homicide and premeditated homicide. In both cases, the victim is dead, and premeditation or lack thereof does not change the outcome. The furies stress the fact that if the doctors had truly not wanted to kill the children, they would have done everything possible to avoid doing so, which was not the case. Instead, they chose to not treat the blood supply with heat nor to begin testing the blood as soon as tests became available. Their inaction was in fact a form of deadly action. If they had truly not wanted people to die, they would have acted swiftly to impose regulations requiring the treatment and testing of blood supplies, no matter the fiscal costs. They would have done everything possible not to kill. Because they did not, the furies argue that the doctors did in fact want to kill.
Similar wordplay takes place in scene 10 between X2 and his echo.\textsuperscript{108} The echo repeats words or sounds spoken by X2 to create a dialogue that questions the truth and motives of X2’s claims. For example, X2 bemoans:

Celui qui, en chef absolu, commanda l’hécatombe,
J’ai fait pour l’arrêter
Tout ce qu’un second peut faire absolument.
Remontré, désapprouvé, tapé du pied,
Claqué les portes. Et pour rien.
Ou bien j’aurais dû le tuer,
Sortir de cet état second. Ou bien partir. (Cixous, Ville parjure 102)

The echo responds: “Tu es… tuer” (Cixous, Ville parjure 102), morphing the words tuer (to kill) into tu es (you are). While “Tu es… tuer” (You are… to kill) is not a sentence, putting the ideas of “you are” and “to kill” in close proximity stresses the culpability of X2 in the deaths of the children. X2 tries to deny his complicity in a decision that proved fatal, but his echo uses his words against him to accuse him of wrongdoing. This echo can be seen either as an expression of X2’s moral conscience or of his unconscious thoughts. While he tries to convince the audience and himself that he did everything in his power to stop the actions of X1, it is clear that he feels guilty for what has happened. Cixous uses word play to create tension between what is being said and what is felt. Once again, she introduces a linguistic effect commonly associated with \textit{écriture féminine}. Furthermore, the echo can be seen as a manifestation of semiotic impulses

\textsuperscript{108} In an annotated copy of the script available at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France which was used during rehearsals, there is also an echo included in another scene which had been crossed out and is not present in the published text. It appears that Cixous originally hoped to make use of this device elsewhere in the play.
intruding on the logical argument X2 is trying to make to himself. These unconscious energies subvert the logic of the argument the character is presenting in his conscious thought.

Working from a script changed some of the rehearsal methods the Théâtre du Soleil had previously used in creating its devised works, but *La Ville parjure* still entailed a significant amount of improvisation and collaboration. Mnouchkine maintains that the troupe did not improvise with Cixous’s text, but with everything else in the production (Mnouchkine et al., “Leaving Room” 207). This means that prior to being definitively cast, multiple actors tried out different roles and experimented in groups with how the characters moved on stage (Cixous, *White Ink* 108, “Ariane Mnouchkine fête trente ans”). This trial-and-error method carries over from those developed when the company worked on their collective creations like *1789* and *1793*. Cixous describes the moment when rehearsals start as the beginning of an adventure (Cixous, *White Ink* 99) because she never knows how things will change as the actors begin to work: “La Compagnie est le premier public. Les personnages et la Compagnie, c’est le public” (Cixous, “L’auteur” 47). The actors play with the script until the characters are portrayed to Mouchkine’s and the company’s liking. Cixous finds this attitude of improvisation and collaboration exhilarating since it fosters a sense of collectivity that is completely different from the solitary nature of her fiction writing: “Il y a aussi l’expérience commune de cette espèce de bateau extraordinaire qu’est un théâtre, avec toute la troupe qui travaille. Mais là aussi c’est spécifique au Théâtre du Soleil ; c’est quelque chose d’heureux, ça pourrait ne pas l’être. C’est une aventure collective et on en a peu” (“L’auteur” 63). As I have already shown in my

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109 “The company is the first audience. The characters and the Company – that’s the audience. Then lots of unpredictable things happen” (Cixous, *White Ink* 108).

110 “There’s also the shared experience of this extraordinary sort of ship constituted by a theatre, with the entire troupe working together. But it’s also specific to the *Théâtre du Soleil*; it’s something joyful, it could be different. It’s a collective adventure, and that’s something which is rare” (Cixous, *White Ink* 121).
discussion of Mouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, this collectivity functions in a feminist mode that is very different from the hierarchical, often male-dominated, director-centered norms of French theatre.

When the Théâtre du Soleil began working with written texts, its set designs changed drastically from those used for their collectively created productions such as 1789 and 1793 where the audience was integrated into the performance space and allowed freedom of movement. Miller observes:

Mnouchkine’s approach to history has been more oblique and less preoccupied with immediately stirring up her public. Indeed, she has changed the form of her performance space in such a way as to put some physical distance between audience and actors. While the spectators sit on bleachers, the performers play on a vast open platform facing – and sometimes extending under – the bleachers. This has established a fixed and more contemplative rapport between the audience and the actors. Performance now calls for rapt attention and instills in the public the sense of attending an often shattering ritual – for the Soleil’s more recent productions body forth trauma, genocide, political corruption, and the lust for power. (Ariane 32-3)

In fact, this trend had already begun with 1793 where the spectator seating was more fixed than in 1789, which encouraged the audience to contemplate the action of the play instead of participating in it. This change in spatial relations reflects the company’s maturing ideology. Their work is still politically motivated, and they strive to move audience members to think and act differently, but because long-lasting change did not take place causing general disappointment following May ’68, the company knows that it will take time for a true ideological revolution to come to fruition. Their change in the use of space forces the audience to
be more contemplative and detached from the action, leading them to consider what they can do
to change society. This is further supported through the direct call to action put forth during the
epilogue to La Ville parjure where the Mother says to the audience: “Notre pièce est finie. Mais
que la vôtre commence” (Cixous 202). The audience is encouraged to act on the emotions they
have experienced. However, the rest of the plays reflects the reality that people are often unable
to create lasting societal change. The epilogue stands in direct contrast to the tragic nature of the
rest of the play as Cixous grapples with the gravity of the blood scandal and writing a play that
might be seen by those whose lives are affected by this real-world tragedy who she does not
want to leave in despair. The epilogue suggests that despite evidence that long-lasting,
revolutionary changes in cultural views, norms, and politics are nearly impossible to achieve, the
audience members should not abandon hope entirely and should continue to strive for a more just
society. The Soleil no longer has the blind idealism of 1789, but maintains a belief that change
can happen, albeit slowly.

The cemetery of La Ville parjure, designed by Guy-Claude François, is separated from
the audience and placed on a traditional raised platform with spectators sitting on bleachers
facing the stage. The stage floor is surrounded on the two sides by niches resembling tombs
where the Chorus, comprised of the outcasts of the town, finds refuge. In back, there is a high
wrought-iron gate closing the cemetery off from the town. A ceiling is created with white fabric
draped over multiple supports suggesting the soft billows of ominous-looking clouds.
Mnouchkine describes this set, with its contours of a modern cemetery and the suggestion of
prehistoric caves (Shevtsova, “Sur ‘La ville’” 69) as having a universal significance. The
Bibliothèque National de France has 84 pages of research that François did for the set of La Ville
parjure. Included in these are photos and images of tenth-century Iraqi dishes, tile work from the
Palais des Hôtes in Rabat, the decoration of a bed chamber in the Akhavân-e Haghighi house, Islamic mosques and doors, palaces, the windows of the Heydari House, Kâshân tiles, and mihrab niches. François drew inspiration from Morocco and other Islamic and North African areas when creating the cemetery for *La Ville parjure*. According to Mnouchkine, his design even included frescos reminiscent of Pompei. The letters in Hebrew and other forms of ancient script carved into the set’s niches signal that the play takes place in multiple time periods and merges the past with the present (Shevtsova, “Sur ‘La ville’” 69). While the cataclysmic events represented in the play take place in contemporary France, Cixous and Mnouchkine see the sources of this tragedy as universal, a stance that is spelled out in the preface: “Cette pièce a été écrite entre décembre 1992 et septembre 1993. Les événements de ce récit se sont produits entre 3 500 ans avant J.-C. et l’année 1993. Par la suite sont arrivés, dans la réalité, des faits qui leur ressemblaient” (Cixous, *Ville parjure* 17). Critic Yves Bourgade notes that the set blends the look of a cemetery and the Greek forum where the accused are put on trial. The timelessness, universality, and multicultural aspects of the design convey what Cixous and Mnouchkine are saying about the human condition.

These same notions of multiculturalism and timelessness are conveyed through the costuming as well, particularly for the inhabitants of the cemetery: Aeschylus, the Mother, and the Chorus. These characters are wrapped in layers of clothing which Bourgade indicates were borrowed from cultures bordering the deserts between the Near and the Far East. The clothing is billowy, dirty, and primarily colored in creams and browns. Due to the color and the drape of the multiple scarves, their costumes occasionally bring to mind Greek statuary. Many members of the Chorus have their heads covered, some with head scarves, some with small rounded skull caps resembling the kufi or topi caps worn by men in Africa and India, some with floppy-
brimmed hats, and some with fedora or trilby style hats. This clothing indicates these characters’ status as outcasts of the town since it often appears to be tattered, mended, and dusty, but it also suggests a variety of ethnicities. The heavy layers of clothing often erase gender differences.

Critic Danielle Dumas commented on the asexual appearance of Aeschylus:

Son nom est Eschyle. Elle a dû naître femme, mais elle est aujourd’hui asexuée, vêtue de guenilles, morceaux d’étoffes enroulées, gilets superposés, braies loqueteuses, qui en perdant leurs couleurs ont gagné celles de la poussière sur laquelle elle couche. Elle a le teint terreux, les cheveux gris. (56)

Their dress gives the inhabitants of the cemetery a unified appearance and identity while removing markers of the era in question. The costume choices indicate that the story being told is as true today as it was a hundred or a thousand years ago while also emphasizing that the characters wearing them have become outcasts because of their ethnic otherness.

In addition to the layers of clothing worn by the Chorus and Aeschylus, these characters’ faces are covered in what appears to be a chalk-white dust. It is not the solid white make-up commonly used in Japanese theatre and employed in other plays by the Soleil. It is rather a thin layer of white powder that barely covers the skin tone of their faces, thus, in effect erasing racial distinctions. Heavy brown lines also wrinkle their faces and their teeth are blackened and made to appear jagged and snaggled. While the costumes suggest the Chorus’s ethnic diversity, similarities in their layered and worn condition create an overall disheveled appearance that points to the degraded social status they share. The makeup and the costumes become a sort of full-body mask for the actors. The Soleil, influenced by the traditions of the commedia dell’arte which they have studied since the 1970s, has regularly employed the use of masks in their productions. The bodies and the physical features of the individual actors are nearly lost beneath
their makeup and clothing. Through the use of this full-body mask, the actor is not portraying an individual character, but his or her status as part of a group which functions as a visual statement. Singleton explains:

Collectively, characters all live independent, decontextualized existences on stage and are positioned in a corporeal scenography. The result is a series of visual statements which do not arise from individual psychological motivations. The political impact of this approach on the actor is one of subjugating her/his role to that of receptacle. When both ‘la tête’ and ‘le corps entier’ of the actor are masked s/he becomes the representative of a hieroglyphic sign-system, forced to dance to unmotivated tunes, to eliminate gender, age, race and class subjectivity, and become the property of a theatrical landscape signifying only in the present. (619)

The costumes and makeup the Chorus wears create an external, visual characterization instead of a psychological one. As in the classical Greek Chorus, Cixous’s Chorus had a fixed function: to signify suffering (Singleton 620). This function is conveyed in their esthetic appearance.

Through the use of a full-body mask, the character becomes instantly recognizable (Singleton 619). Mouchkine has referred to the actors achieving the correct silhouette or ‘state’ of the character, an impression created through both their movement and their physical appearance on stage. This specific silhouette or ‘state’ is figured with some variation across the entire Chorus.

Representing the suffering and marginalization of an entire social group111 while simultaneously stirring feelings of revulsion and sympathy is achieved through the movement of

111 It is important to recognize that despite the tragic nature of the events which inspired this play and Cixous’s and the Soleil’s desire to shed light on those marginalized by society, the play does not address the ways in which the AIDS epidemic was affecting homosexuals, IV drug users, and prostitutes. This is reflective of French society at the time the play was written. The blood scandal dominated headlines while other sufferers of HIV and AIDS were further marginalized. For a dramatic depiction of an interaction among members of the group ACT UP Paris concerning conflicting views of the blood scandal within the community, see Robin Campillo’s film 120 Battements par minute (2017).
the Chorus. In the play’s film adaptation, the scene that introduces the Chorus has one member in particular speaking. As she comes forward to tell of their treatment and choice of home, she walks in a shuffling, stumbling manner. Her movement is a cross between the swaying and staggering of a drunkard and the swinging, weaving, and short, quick steps of a folk dancer. Her arm movements add a certain grace and delicacy to her gait that is not expected in the drunkard’s lurching. She speaks in a rhythmic sing-song voice that has an upbeat lilt despite its sorrowful message. Often there is an assumption made that a homeless person who is staggering is an alcoholic and therefore should not be taken seriously. By changing these movements in a way that becomes dance-like, the value of the alcoholic homeless person’s speech is highlighted instead of being ignored. What this character is saying is important, but it is being conveyed in a manner that is usually dismissed by polite society. His statements are not delivered in the straightforward, logical way that the lawyers and doctors, normally highly respected members of society, will make their arguments later.

In terms of the theoretical notions that have framed my analysis, this Chorus member’s movement and speech have the rhythm and musicality characteristic of semiotic impulses while the logical arguments of the doctors and lawyers belong to the symbolic register. As I have shown previously, what Kristeva calls the semiotic is situated before the subject fully acquires human language. It is related to the mother and the maternal while the symbolic is associated with the father and the masculine. The semiotic is that which exists before language: music, rhythm, and sensation, and it constantly returns to disrupt the symbolic. The Chorus in La Ville parjure as well as the Aeschylus, the Erinyes (or furies), and the Mother are characterized by

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112 The script has the dialogue of the chorus split into strophes and antistrophes, but the film adaptation has this chorus member speaking parts from both of these. It is unclear whether additional chorus members spoke in the live production. There is no evidence of group recitation by the chorus as a whole.
their semiotic qualities and function to disrupt and call into question the logical arguments set forth by the government, the doctors, and the lawyers in both the play and in the real-life discourse surrounding the blood scandal. Similarly, because it is aligned with the feminine, through its musicality, the monologue enunciated by this member of the Chorus also fulfills Cixous’s desire to create a form of *écriture féminine* that challenges phallogocentric signification. Her marginalized characters are given value, and their feminized forms of communication and expression are valued in ways they typically are not in patriarchal societies.

Using actors to express emotion without ascribing psychological motivations to them conforms to Antonin Artaud’s conception of the theatre. In a letter to Natalie Clifford Barney dated August 12, 1933, he wrote:

> Or le théâtre est un exorcisme, un appel d’énergie. Il est un moyen de canliser des passions, de les faire servir à quelque chose, mais il doit être entendu non comme un art, une distraction, mais une action grave, il faut lui rendre ce paroxysme, cette gravité, ce danger. Et pour cela sortir de la psychologie individuelle, entrer dans les passions de masse, les états d’esprit collectif, saisir des ondes collectives, en un mot changer de sujet[.] (*Œuvres Complètes* [1976] 5: 153)\(^{113}\)

In *La Ville parjure*, the Chorus as a group both represents and evokes suffering. Their appearance and actions move the spectators to a state of collective mourning. This effect is not created through a study of the psychology of individual characters, but through their costumes, movement, and distinctive speech patterns which stir an affective response in the spectator.

\(^{113}\) But theatre is an exorcism, a summoning up of energy. It is a way of channeling passions, of making them serve something, but it must be understood not as an art or a distraction, but as a serious action, and paroxysm, seriousness, danger must be restored to it. To that end it must abandon individual psychology, espouse collective passions, mass opinion, tune into the collective wave-lengths, in short alter its subject matter.” (Artaud, *Artaud on Theatre* 88)
The ways *La Ville parjure* uses music also heightens its semiotic effects. Since *Mephisto* (1979), Jean-Jacques Lemètre has been working with the Théâtre du Soleil to create original music for their productions. While he is inspired by Eastern music and instruments, these did not create the exact sound he sought for this play. Therefore, Lemètre created his own instruments:

“Ayant constaté que la lutherie contemporaine occidentale ne convenait pas aux mises-en-scène de Mnouchkine, il a construit lui-même ses instruments et s’est par ailleurs tourné vers les instruments de musique du monde entier” (Quillet 147). Lemètre has a workshop in the Cartoucherie compound, the Soleil’s home on the outskirts of Paris where he has created hundreds of his own instruments. In *La Ville parjure*, Lemètre and his instruments were positioned on a platform on the right side of the stage above the cemetery niches. While he is not brightly lit, he is visible to the audience. Often, the music for *La Ville parjure* comes from a haunting string instrument. Lemètre filled the soundscape with the rich vibrations of low notes. This music stirs a general feeling of mournfulness that amplifies the Chorus’s suffering.

Music, dance, and puppetry come together to create a particularly touching scene between the mother and her two lost sons. While the mother sleeps, she is visited by the spirits of the two boys who are portrayed by marionettes animated by two child actors. The puppets are dressed in long tunics with black hoods that resemble the garb of medieval peasants while the actors controlling them are dressed in red sweaters and blue pants. The puppeteers look like contemporary school children while the marionettes appear as wooden figures from another era, underscoring the timelessness of this contemporary scandal. In the filmed version of the play, a single soprano sings a haunting tune while the mother hugs the marionettes close to her and caresses their cheeks. When she sees her sons, she cries tears of joy that are accompanied by beautifully chilling music. The use of the puppets to represent her sons creates distance between
her and them, a way of signaling that the Mother can no longer physically embrace her sons as they have succumbed to the AIDS virus. While the musical score along with the tenderness and affection the Mother displays evoke strong emotions in the audience, the use of marionettes prevents it from becoming entirely entranced by the scene. Instead, in a Brechtian distancing move, the dissonance created by the presence of both the boy puppeteers and the marionette boys keeps the audience members on edge and reminds them of the illusory quality of the play they are watching. It also underscores the tension created between the semiotic and the symbolic: whereas the music played and the emotions it expresses are semiotic elements, the sense of discord created between fiction and reality figured in the presence of the puppeteers and the marionettes belongs more to the realm of logic typically associated with the symbolic register. These two forces come together to increase the sense that seeking a solution to the problems created by the actual blood scandal is entirely futile.

While music is associated with the semiotic register and elicits emotion, it can also be used, often simultaneously, to create Brechtian distance between the audience and the action taking place on stage. Bernard Dort reminds us of Brecht’s use of music noting that

[o]ne should also consider the role that Mnouchkine assigns to music, beginning with her Shakespeare productions. Indisputably, she is inspired by Far Eastern models. But these are not incompatible with Brecht. One can too easily overlook Brecht’s close working relationship with composers, from Weill to Dessau and including Hanns Eisler, who influenced him profoundly, and the importance that Brecht attributed in the development of his epic theatre to what he called gestic music. (102)

Lemêtre’s music in *La Ville parjure* is not only eerie, it is unfamiliar to the Western ear. It does not fade into the background but constantly keeps the spectator on edge. The music prevents the
spectator from slipping into a state of passive reception. Instead, the loud crashes of drums and overwhelming deep vibrations of the stringed instruments disrupt the association with the character and create distance between the audience and the play. Interestingly, the same musical elements that create strong emotion also serve to keep the audience from identifying fully with what is taking place on stage.

In addition to their work with Cixous, in 2003 the Théâtre du Soleil returned to creating collectively devised productions with *Le Dernier caravanséréil (Odysées)*. This play focused entirely on the problems faced by immigrants in France. It was created based on interviews with refugees at camps in places such as Sangatte near Calais (Fisek, “Le Dernier” 205). Despite their desire to raise awareness of social justice issues internationally and at home, the Soleil has been plagued with accusations of cultural appropriation (Miller, *Ariane* 55). Their recent production *Une Chambre en Inde* (2016) dealt with the question head on as the protagonist, a French woman and a director, wrestled with how she would stage portions of *The Mahabharata*, an ancient Indian epic, while being trapped in India with her theatre troupe. Even more recently, the Théâtre du Soleil halted rehearsals briefly for their current production *Kanata – Épisode I – La Controverse* (2018) after receiving a letter from a group of Canada’s indigenous artists and intellectuals and their non-indigenous allies denouncing the production for its cultural appropriation. The play addresses the oppression indigenous peoples have faced throughout Canada’s history, but the troupe does not employ any indigenous actors. Mnouchkine maintains that cultures have always intermingled and that artists have always been inspired by those which are different from their own. After the conflict was only partially resolved, she and director Robert Lepage decided the best response would be to continue with the production and let it be

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114 Robert Lepage is directing this production. This is the first time in the theatre’s 50-year history that someone other than Mnouchkine has directed the troupe.
judged when it was finished (Mnouchkine, “Les Cultures”). While the Soleil has evolved to become a troupe of diverse actors presenting work that seeks to bring to light injustice, this incident highlights the delicacy and cultural diplomacy this work requires for theatre groups, particularly those whose members do not belong to the groups they are trying to represent.

Through her theatrical writing and her collaboration with Mnouchkine, Cixous has indeed created a revolutionary theatre. In her writing for the theatre, she has opened a creative space where women can see themselves represented in all their complexity. Her plays, like late twentieth-century feminism, have become more intersectional. One’s status as a woman does not make her experience identical to that of other women, but it does affect her role in society in a way that stems from her status as a woman. This is also true for one ethnic or immigrant identity. Many of Cixous’s later plays are not concerned primarily with women in the way that Portrait of Dora was, but in them she strives to show injustices done to all marginalized and oppressed peoples. Through the use of semiotic elements that conform to her conception of écriture féminine, Cixous’s plays subvert the symbolic order that produces and naturalizes these injustices. In stirring emotion in the manner of Artaud and practicing forms of Brechtian distanciation, Cixous brings the semiotic and symbolic into forceful interplay with one another. She places high value on representing otherness and on othering phallogocentric language itself, and she does so as a means of revolutionizing both theatre and society.
CONCLUSION

After the mass protests and nation-wide labor strikes that occurred in France in May and June of 1968, its citizens were inspired to continue the fight for a more just society. As I have shown, women during this period sought more equal treatment and some of them used theatre as a means to address societal problems. The plays by Hélène Cixous, Simone Benmussa, and Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil I have studied here exemplify the ways in which women used theatre in the post ’68 period to question all forms of phallocentrism and to highlight the specific struggles women faced in a patriarchal society. They strengthened this message through the integration of Antonin Artaud’s theories which emphasized the importance of stirring emotional responses in theatre audiences through sensory bombardment. They also favored the use of Brechtian distancing techniques that encouraged spectators to reflect on the relation between the theatre and their own lives and to consider how they might enact change. I have argued here that the interaction of these distinct approaches to the theatre is similar to the interplay between the semiotic and symbolic registers of human subjectivity that Julia Kristeva theorizes in *La Révolution de langage poétique*. While Cixous’s early plays accentuated non-verbal modes of expression and although Benmussa’s *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs* is presented in a more conventional dialogue and dramatic structure, in neither of their works do we see the semiotic and the symbolic registers overwhelming the other. Both Cixous’s and Benmussa’s plays feature elements of music, movement, and lighting that work both with and against each other in ways that impede the rational unfolding of meaning. Artaud and Brecht exerted an even stronger influence on Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil in their collectively created productions *1789* and *1793*, and the impact of their thought is also felt in
women’s theatre of the turn of the twenty-first century when women working in theatre began to stage works that featured greater diversity and new multi-cultural perspectives.

While Artaud’s and Brecht’s ideas diverge in many ways, some of the production techniques they introduced are the same. Artaud sought to revolutionize theatre by creating a heightened sensory experience, one that would become something of a spiritual experience for the theatre goers. Through the use of loud noises, such as clanging gongs, and in the dramatic use of lighting, Artaud sought to overwhelm and mesmerize theatre audiences. Influenced by an exhibition of Balinese dance he saw at the 1931 international colonial exhibition in Paris, Artaud sought to create meaning through bodily movement rather than speech. His ideal performance space was one with little or no décor and that eliminated the distance between the audience and the actors. In Artaud’s view, spectators should be surrounded by the performance to better incite strong emotional responses in the spectator. In his treatise *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), Artaud also minimized the importance of the written text on which most plays were then based. Instead, he encouraged directors to propose scenarios that actors used to improvise performances that could eventually be fixed before being presented to an audience. Unfortunately, Artaud was unable to use this technique effectively in his own theatre. However, I have shown here that under Ariane Mnouchkine’s direction, the Théâtre du Soleil, very successfully put Artaud’s ideas into practice.

Bertolt Brecht’s vision of the theatre was very different; he did not seek to arouse the emotions of his spectators nor encourage them to identify too closely with a stage production. He saw the theatre as a means of revolutionizing society. Brecht wanted spectators to remain aware that what they were witnessing was constructed rather than real and encouraged them to reflect on the production process itself. By stressing the artificiality of theatre, Brecht hoped audiences
would be better able to see the connections between the action taking place on stage and the state of contemporary society. Brecht, too, was influenced by Asian theatre, and he espoused an acting style in which the actor did not fully embody the character, believing that the spectator should be aware of the presence of both the character and the actor. Brecht also preferred to produce plays which depicted historical events. This choice of subject matter allowed the audience to see parallels between the historical moment represented on stage and contemporary circumstances. By calling attention to the cyclical nature of the kinds of social injustice he represented on stage, Brecht hoped the spectator would be able to better imagine ways of breaking these cycles of oppression. For Brecht, conventional theatre was merely a money-making venture that provided entertainment as a means of placating audiences and distracting them from social realities. Only by revealing theatre’s artificiality could directors, playwrights, designers, and actors truly master the medium and use it as a revolutionary tool.

Cixous, Benmussa, and Mnouchkine introduced both Artaud’s and Brecht’s ideas in the plays they created, and I have argued here that Julia Kristeva’s psycholinguistic theories help to explain the power of this theatre. Kristeva argued that the subject is never stable because the semiotic, or extralinguistic forms of signification, constantly returns to destabilize the symbolic register which is ordered first and foremost by language and logic. Kristeva posits that certain forms of art can stir a proliferation of meaning because they introduce elements like music, color, rhythm, image and movement and other non-discursive forms of meaning. For Kristeva, human artistic expression, especially poetry, has the capacity to subvert the institutions and ideologies that logocentrism supports and thus has the potential to change society.

Invoking other post-structuralist theories of the day, most notably Derridian deconstruction, Cixous encouraged women to adopt a new mode of expression which she
describes as écriture féminine. Cixous argues that by writing through the body, women can create differently. While écriture féminine is neither practiced solely by women nor do all women who write reject a conventional, or as Cixous sees it, a masculine writing style, she views women as uniquely positioned to write in a less conventional style because they are more attuned to the maternal, a sphere that Kristeva called the *chora sémiotique*, a site where remnants of our pre-linguistic lives can be accessed. Because human societies have oppressed women in particular ways, Cixous argues that they are more in touch with unconscious drives and are thus freer to express them in writing.

Cixous herself practices a form of écriture féminine in her theoretical writing, as well as in her fiction and drama. In her explicitly feminist play *Portrait de Dora*, Cixous called into question Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory by challenging the definitive conclusions he reached in *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, his famous case study of female hysteria. Cixous’s use of semiotic elements to retell Dora’s story directly challenges Freud’s authority. While Cixous firmly grounded her play in this source material, modifying only minor details in Freud’s narration of the case and adding some additional material, Benmussa’s staging of this production entirely changes the focus of Freud’s narrative.

While for Cixous, Dora is no feminist hero, to her mind, she did give Dora a voice she did not previously have by allowing her to turn the tables on Freud and to use his own interpretations against him. Cixous shows how in the course of his treatment, Freud, the historical figure, had projected his own subjectivity onto Dora. Cixous’s Dora turns this situation around and projects Freud’s thoughts and feelings back onto the psychoanalyst she brings to the stage. Cixous has Dora take control of the psychoanalytic cure Freud offers and shows that she too can interpret dreams and make associations between current behaviors, her past, and her own
desires. In directing the play, Simone Benmussa, introduced filmed sequences, screens, doorways, and lighting which segmented the stage and broke the play into fragments. Cixous wrote the play so that multiple scenes could be acted out at once, thereby allowing her to emphasize connections between characters and similarities in situations which Freud had ignored. The montage effect Benmussa created in her staging gives the production a dream-like quality which, along with other semiotic elements, shows that all of the subject matter presented is open to the spectator’s interpretation; like Dora, Freud’s readers no longer need to accept that Freud’s conclusions are the only truth that can be formed in this case.

While the semiotic is freely expressed in the text Cixous entrusted to Benmussa, the dialogue and structure the director adopts in the script she wrote for her own play, *La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs*, is much more conventional and largely unfolds in the symbolic register. And yet Benmussa’s script, which she adapted from a short story by George Moore, allowed her to stage the play in ways that disrupted this more conventional realist narrative. Like *Portrait de Dora*, *Albert Nobbs* has a clear feminist perspective, but its ideology is more aligned with material feminism in that the play shows how gender is constructed, how gender stereotypes oppress women, and how difficult it is to repress one’s true self. Albert cross-dresses as a man in order to make a decent living, but she is never able to find happiness and fulfillment in this role.

In Benmussa’s play, only female actors appear on stage. By relegating the male presence to voice-overs, Benmussa both stresses the control men exert over women’s lives and prevents audiences from identifying with male figures on stage. The feeling of constraint created by the omniscient male narrator is further heightened by her choice of décor and in her use of lighting. The angular nature of the stairs, the doors that lead to nowhere, and the small pools of light contribute to the sense that Albert is trapped in her situation. Benmussa actually discourages
audience identification with Albert’s character since her casting and staging choices make it difficult for audiences to see Albert as a man. In multiple productions of *Albert Nobbs*, Benmussa cast women in the role of Albert whose overall appearance remained feminine despite wearing masculine clothing. Benmussa also reminded the audience of Albert’s femininity by having actresses who portrayed maids shadow her movements, thereby presenting dual images of Albert to the spectators. The non-discursive means she used to point to the incongruity between Albert’s dress and her actual gender identity worked against the more conventional aspects of her script.

Relying heavily on Brechtian principles, Benmussa created distance between audiences and the action unfolding on stage in other ways as well. Like Brecht, she made use of title boards to announce scenes. She also stressed the artificiality of theatrical representation through the juxtaposition of *trompe l’oeil* props and naturalistic period costumes. Finally, while the play was set in the nineteenth century, the connections she makes to the treatment of women in contemporary society were clear. Benmussa embraced Artaud’s and Brecht’s thought, bringing semiotic visual and auditory elements constantly to the fore. She kept the audience members from losing themselves in the action presented and forced them to consider the ways gender norms unwittingly shaped their lives.

Under the direction of Ariane Mnouchkine, the Théâtre du Soleil collectively created two plays, *1789* and *1793*, in which key scenes in the history of the French Revolution are improvised on stage. While they are not necessarily explicitly feminist plays, these productions were conscious of struggles that were particular to women of the time. In keeping with this awareness of the women’s subordinate place in French history and society, the company functioned as a collective and worked to ensure an equality between the sexes in all aspects of its
operations. The troupe’s work seamlessly intertwined semiotic elements of music, movement, and other non-verbal forms of expression in their representation of French history and did so with a clear aim of creating revolutionary change in contemporary society. Actual quotations from prominent figures of the revolutionary period were woven into the scenes, but they were introduced in ways that allowed the Soleil to challenge dominant narratives about the meaning of the French Revolution. In creating a street fair setting in an unconventional performance space, the audience was pulled into the performance, but they were never allowed to entirely forget that they were at the theatre.

1789 highlighted the effect the Revolution had on the most vulnerable members of society, particularly women and children. Audiences heard the shrieks and cries of peasants suffering from famine, which created an uneasy and even tormented feeling for the spectator. The use of puppets, slapstick, and comically exaggerated movements served to both ridicule those in power and to point out the failures and limits of a revolution that was supposed to liberate the French masses and create a more just society. Audience members were overwhelmed by the spectacle taking place around them as they stood to watch the show and found themselves free to move among the multiple stages where the action was taking place. In this novel representation of the historical past, audiences could not help but recognize the similarities between the story of the Revolution being presented to them and the events of May ’68. Injustice reigned both inside and outside the theatre’s walls.

To prevent the audience from fully forgetting they were at the theatre, however, the Soleil made the inner workings of the production visible. Audience members were able to see the actors getting dressed and putting on make-up before the performance; the actors changed costumes in sight of the spectators; and actors manipulating puppets remained in full view while doing so.
Mnouchkine followed Brecht’s call for theatre practitioners to make the apparatus of the theatre visible. All of these elements combined to form a powerful indictment of those who had actually benefited from the French Revolutionary (the emerging bourgeois class) while also bringing to light the continuing oppression of those who did not.

While these plays from the 1970s focused to varying degrees on women’s concerns and addressed questions of economic inequality, the stories they told remained focused primarily on the plight of white women and tended to ignore the intersecting nature of various forms of social oppression. Progressing into the 1980s and 1990s, feminist groups became more demographically diverse and began to focus intently on how gender distinctions interacted with forms of race, sexuality, and class oppression to throw up obstacles that barred the route to greater social inclusion and opportunity. Plays of this period also began to address similar concerns, including those that the Théâtre du Soleil produced that were based on scripts written by Hélène Cixous. While their work and their company became more socially diverse and multicultural in nature, these artists were plagued with accusations of cultural appropriation and struggled to introduce authentically multicultural perspectives.

In *La Ville parjure*, Cixous took up the question of the Blood Scandal that was enveloping France in the early 1990s. Her play calls to account officials of the French government who had knowingly continued to distribute blood supplies contaminated with the HIV virus to hemophiliacs, doing so despite the availability of screening tests that would have detected the contamination taking place. Because the tests had been created by an American company, for financial reasons, the French government chose to delay implementation of the test until a French company could make one available. Cixous’s play showed the effects this decision had on a mother who had lost two sons to this fiasco. She further highlighted both the role the
government officials had played in causing these deaths and their lack of remorse for doing so. For Cixous, the scandal became a metaphor for the poor treatment reserved for immigrants and other social outcasts in contemporary France.

As she did in the other works she wrote for the Soleil, La Ville parjure is not as fragmented as her earlier plays such as Portrait de Dora. Modeled on the Greek tragedies which she knew well, La Ville parjure is presented primarily in verse, a choice that allows Cixous to continue to incorporate within the play’s more conventional structure aspects of écriture féminine such as sonority and word play. In addition to the dialogue in verse, Cixous occasionally employed conventional prose dialogue, deliberately selecting the characters and scenes in which it is spoken so as to stress the treacherous nature of the arguments justifying the government’s conduct. At the same time, she uses poetic dialogue to give voice to those who are often denied one. The poetic manner in which they speak truth to power subverts the logic government officials used to justify their actions, providing a potent example of how, in Kristeva’s view, the semiotic register can disrupt the symbolic order.

Mnouchkine’s staging of the play also incorporated multicultural themes and emphasized non-verbal ways of creating meaning. As the Soleil has done in many of their productions, Mnouchkine used puppetry in La Ville parjure. In this case, the puppets representing the two sons victimized by the government’s actions enhanced the unreality of the dream sequences in which they appear, reminding audiences of their presence in the unfolding drama while also underscoring the impossibility of their mother ever truly reuniting with them. The set design of the cemetery and the costuming drew inspiration from North African cultures, which further allowed the play’s subject matter to symbolize the French government’s maltreatment of other
marginalized groups, particularly immigrants whose contributions are a great benefit to the national economy but who are nonetheless treated very poorly.

*Portrait de Dora, La Vie singulière d’Albert Nobbs, 1789, 1793, and La Ville parjure* have all demonstrated their playwrights’ and directors’ indebtedness to Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. In each of these plays, the interplay of the semiotic and symbolic registers highlights the fragmented, unstable nature of human subjectivity. By staging a constant eruption of semiotic forces through the use of various theatrical devices, Cixous, Benmussa, and Mnouchkine have all found ways to challenge phallocentric norms, to highlight the unique struggles of women and to link them to those of other oppressed groups in society. By forming a space in which the semiotic and the symbolic can do battle on stage, their plays directly challenge the status quo and advance the notion that our societies can and should be working to achieve greater equality and justice for all.
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