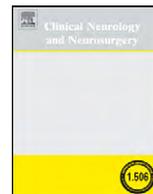




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Discussion

Gilles de la Tourette's criminal women The many faces of *fin de siècle* hypnotism

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ABSTRACT

Gilles de la Tourette is now known for the disease which now bears his name, but his activities in the management of hysterics and in hypnotism, which gained him most of his lifetime reputation, have been largely forgotten. As one of the closest followers of Jean-Martin Charcot, he always remained faithful to his mentor's views, and was one of the most vehement defenders of *La Salpêtrière* school during the quarrel with Hippolyte Bernheim and the Nancy school on the question of the specificity of hypnotic susceptibility in hysteria. This controversy became critical during medico-legal assessment of crimes supposedly committed under hypnotic suggestion. Gilles de la Tourette's involvement in criminal hypnotism was striking, as shown by his own experiments, the most famous of which being his suggested poisoning of a colleague by Blanche Wittman, the celebrated Charcot's hysteric patient in the 1887 Brouillet's painting. Gilles de la Tourette also acted as expert in murder trials, and his *Épilogue* in the Gouffé's trunk case, where he affirmed that no murder in real life could be due to hypnotism, and considered that Gabrielle Bompard, the murderer's accomplice, was not under hypnotic suggestion, had a considerable impact. Finally, he was confronted to the issue of murder under hypnotism in his private life, since in 1893, a former patient, Rose Kamper, came and shot him in the head at his home, claiming that hypnotism sessions had changed her own person, and that she had been hypnotized "at distance". These acts from three very different "hysterical" women highlight the Salpêtrière's theories on hypnotism and their inner contradictions in the *fin de siècle* ambiance, a few years before Joseph Babinski renewed the concepts on hysteria.

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Jean-Martin Charcot, the "father" of modern neurology in France and beyond during the second half of the nineteenth century, introduced hypnotism in the management of hysterics around 1878, at a time when esoteric practices using hypnosis were gaining a considerable interest in the public [1]. Georges Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904), who had started to work with Charcot in 1884, became one of his closest disciples, along with Joseph Babinski, Achilles Souques, Paul Sollier, and Pierre Marie, among others. He is best remembered for his 1885 paper on the disease which now bears his name [2], but during his lifetime, he was mainly known for his work on hysteria and hypnotism, which he summarized between 1887 and 1895 [3,4]. Upon the stimulation and support of Georges Brouardel, medical-legal expert and long-lasting dean of the faculty of Medicine, he developed medico-legal interests [5], which were critical during a famous dispute between the Salpêtrière and Nancy schools, the latter being mainly repre-

sented by Hippolyte Bernheim and Jules Liégeois, who contested that susceptibility to hypnotism was a feature of hysteria [6]. They also sustained that murders could be committed under hypnosis (Liégeois had done experiments using fake weapons), while *La Salpêtrière* members claimed that rape was the only possible crime associated with hypnosis (but the hypnotized person was the victim of the crime, not its perpetrator) [3,7]. Gilles de la Tourette's involvement was critical in these discussions on criminal hypnotism, and through events associated with three "hysterical" women of the time, this paper attempts to revive a largely forgotten aspect of Charcot's most faithful pupil.

1. Blanche Wittman: Gilles de la Tourette as practitioner of criminal hypnotism

In his 1887 book [3], Gilles de la Tourette reported (pp. 131–135) a striking experiment of suggested murder under hypnosis in one of the most famous hysterics of Charcot's circle, Blanche Wittman (the woman fainting in Babinski's arms during Charcot's teaching in the 1887 painting by Brouillet). Previous reports of this experiment were inaccurately translated [8], so it is useful to summarize it. Gilles de la Tourette reported that in June, 1884 at *La Salpêtrière*,

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he hypnotized Blanche W. . . in front of colleagues and other people, including the playwright Jules Claretie. Then, he pursued a conversation with her, in which he soon introduced the command: “When you will be awake, you will poison Mr. G. . .”. The conversation continued: “But why do you want me to poison Mr. G. . .? He has done nothing to me, he is a very nice chap. – I want you to poison him. – I will not poison him. After all, I am not a criminal. – However, you know well that he is the cause of your dispute with Mrs. R. . . – Come on! – For sure. – I have no poison, perhaps I could stab him with a knife or shoot him with a gun? – The gun is too noisy (. . .) here is a glass, I am pouring some beer and adding the poison, now you need to have Mr. G. . . absorb it, when you will be awake. Whatever happens, you will not remember, if questioned, that this is me who told you to poison Mr. G. . . (. . .) – Alright, sir”. Then the patient was waken by a soft air blow on the eyes. She said hello to the people, chatting with Claretie, before going to Mr. G. . . : “My God! How hot it is here, are you not thirsty? I am dying of it, I am sure you must be thirsty. Mr L. . ., don’t you still have any bottles of beer? Please, give us one”, and the conversation went on with Mr. G. . . : “Not necessary, I can assure you, Miss, that I am not thirsty. – With this heat, this is impossible, you cannot refuse, by the way Mr. L. . . was kind enough to give us some beer a moment ago, and here we are, this is a full glass (she offered him the glass with the fictive poison), please accept it from my own hand, and drink. – Thank you, but I am not thirsty, however, I can agree to take it, but not without a kiss”. Gilles de la Tourette mentioned that the patient firstly went backwards, but since she “must” accomplish the fatal order, she smiled, and would even have given herself if necessary. She went on: “You are demanding, but . . . (he kissed her). Now, drink. Do you fear that there is anything bad in this beer? See, I drink some it myself (she put the glass to her lips, avoiding to take any beer). You kissed me, I drank in your glass: we are equal”. Then, G. . . drank and fell on the floor, while the patient muttered: “This is done”. After the body of Mr. G. . . was carried in the next room, the “experiment” continued with interrogations by an investigator. When questioned if she knew that there was poison in the glass, Blanche replied: “Sir, I can affirm that there was none, and the proof is that Mr. G. . . kissed me, and I had taken the liberty to drink in his glass, but you can see that I am perfectly alright”. Gilles de la Tourette emphasized that she had created a counter-proof, and that it was impossible to obtain further information. But since she was getting hyperexcited, he put her asleep again, and told her that the scene had never taken place, in order to quieten her.

Gilles de la Tourette also quoted another hysteric, H. E. . ., who was told under hypnosis that she should shoot an *interne*, about whom she had been complaining for inefficient treatment. After being awakened, she was given a “gun” and she shot the *interne*, subsequently explaining that she had done it because his treatment was poor. These “experiments” show the contradictions of the Salpêtrière school at the time of the quarrel with Bernheim and Liégeois: the facts were presented in a way highlighting that murders can be provoked by hypnotic suggestion, even though only in hysterics, while at the same time, it was claimed that rape was the only crime associated with hypnotism [8]. Gilles de la Tourette contested Liégeois experiments of hypnotic crimes with weapons [9], but indeed his two cases are identical. He claimed that such suggestions could only be performed in a laboratory, with a set up scenario. However, it is now difficult to understand the reason why they could not also take place in real life.

2. Gabrielle Bompard: Gilles de la Tourette as criminal hypnotism expert

In 1889–1890, a criminal affair with a famous trial captivated the public, “Gouffé’s trunk” [10]. The body of the bailiff Gouffé had been found nearby Lyons on 13 August, 1889, and it was subsequently

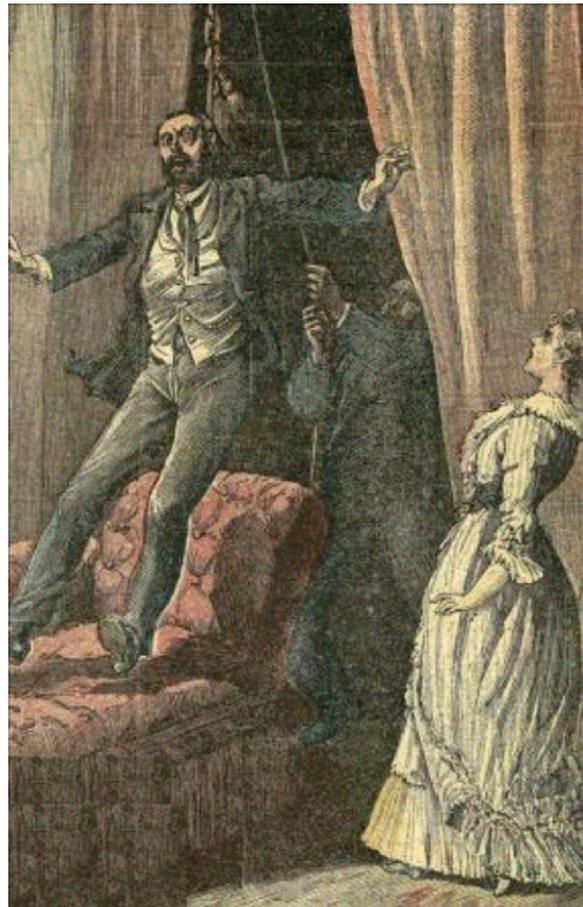


Fig. 1. Representation of Gouffé’s murder in the newspaper «Le Progrès Illustré».

proven that it had been carried from Paris (where he had been killed on 26 July) in a huge trunk, which had been bought in London. The murder was particularly pervert, as Gouffé had been set up by a young woman, Gabrielle Bompard, who had invited him to her apartment and placed him on a *chaise longue*, where she playfully put the bell of her peignoir around his neck and discretely attached it to a hanging system, which had been installed by her accomplice Michel Eyraud. He was hidden behind the couch during the preliminaries between Gouffé and Gabrielle, and suddenly pulled on the end cord of the system, hanging the bailiff who died within two minutes (Fig. 1). The murderers found no money on Gouffé and at his office, and they flew away after having transported the corpse and left it nearby Lyons. Gabrielle finally gave herself up on 22 January, 1890, and since that time, it was repeatedly noted that she behaved like an unworried child, with her jokes, coquettishness and childishness being reported and commented upon in the press [11]. When she was taken by train to the place where Gouffé’s body had been found, she behaved like an actress, sending kisses to the public in stations, and receiving flowers and sweets. Eyraud was subsequently arrested, and the trial took place on 16 December, 1890. Gabrielle’s lawyer based her defense on the fact that she had been hypnotized by Eyraud, a possibility which was reinforced by Jules Voisins, who had had the opportunity to hypnotize her, as a prison doctor. Bernheim also supported that view, but because of a broken leg, he was unable to attend the trial. Liégeois replaced him, putting forward his own experiments of crimes under suggestion. However, he was ridiculed by the experts Paul Brouardel and Gilbert Ballet, who re-emphasized the Salpêtrière doctrine that no murder under hypnosis did exist, concluding that Gabrielle was not ill, but had an incomplete development of moral sense con-

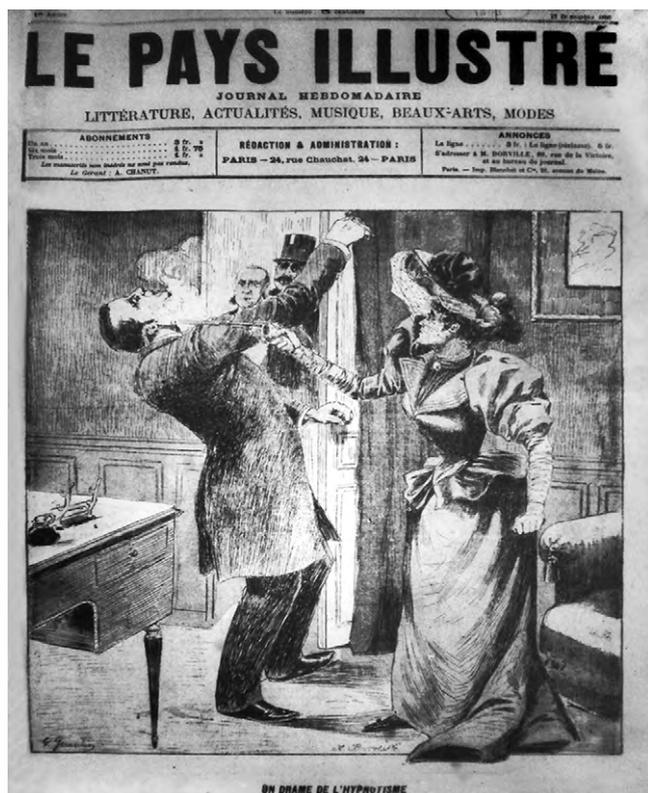


Fig. 2. Front page of the newspaper «Le Pays Illustré» depicting the assault against Gilles de la Tourette.

trasting with good intellect [10]. The trial also somewhat inverted the roles in underlining the seducing, “hypnotizing”, power of certain women on men. Eyraud was sentenced to death, and Gabrielle got 20 years to jail. On that occasion, Gilles de la Tourette wrote a famous, “definitive”, *Épilogue* [12] destroying the Nancy school, and proclaiming the victory of Charcot’s theories, and emphasizing that actual murders could not be performed under a hypnotic state. However, this victory may have had a bitter taste, since the Salpêtrière school was also damaged, as he said three years later in an interview for *L’Éclair* (21 August, 1893): “I remember that after the spectacular trial, in which Gabrielle Bompard was the heroin, my poor master told me: ‘this is now done for ten years with hypnotism. We will have to leave it for a long time to those who have now put their hand on it’”.

3. Rose Kamper: Gilles de la Tourette as a victim of hypnotism

On 6 December, 1893, at 18:45, at Gilles de la Tourette’s domicile, 39 rue de l’Université, a young woman asked for him, and since he was not back from the hospital, she said she would wait for him. When he arrived fifteen minutes later, she immediately followed him and told that she had been hypnotized many times, being now without resources and asking for 50 francs. He vaguely remembered to have seen her (and indeed she had participated to several hypnotism sessions), and told her to give her name and address. Since she asked for money again, he went to the door, when he heard a shot and felt a violent shock in the back of the head (Fig. 2). Two new shots followed, but he could leave the room, feeling blood pouring down to his neck. This story was shortly reported in *Le Pro-*

grès Médical by Georges Guinon, who arrived a few minutes later, and saw the woman quietly sitting in the waiting room, apparently satisfied [13]. Guinon’s article was published with the purpose to stop the already spreading rumors of an assault perpetrated under hypnosis, since this would have been a major challenge to the *La Salpêtrière* school theories that no crime could ever be accomplished during a hypnotic state. The wound was not severe, and the same evening, Gilles de la Tourette was able to write to his friend the journalist Georges Montorgueil: “*What a strange story*” [14]. Previous mentions of the event inaccurately reported that it led to a famous trial [15], while there was no trial at all. The woman, named Rose Kamper (born Lecoq, on 23 June, 1864, in Poissy) indeed was recognized to be insane. She had already spent time at the Sainte-Anne asylum, and was known to have written threatening letters to the administrator of the *École Polytechnique* Mr. Rochas. She later told that she suspected Gilles de la Tourette to be in love with her, but also that she had been hypnotized without her consent, with the consequence that her will had been annihilated. She reported that she had been hypnotized “at distance”, and that there was another person in her, who had pushed her to shoot [16]. She was examined by Brouardel, Ballet and Jules Falret, who concluded to what nowadays corresponds to paranoid schizophrenia, so that she was sent back to Sainte-Anne and other hospitals, from which she was intermittently released. Interestingly enough, a couple of days before the assassination attempt, Gilles de la Tourette and Montorgueil had published an article in *L’Éclair* on hypnotism contesting the Nancy school.

Gilles de la Tourette never changed his mind on the hysteric nature of susceptibility to hypnotism, and in an 1897 letter to Montorgueil, he was still opposing Bernheim [5]. In 1900, the first signs of general paresis developed, and he died in 1904 at the Lausanne psychiatric hospital of Cery, where his family had managed to have him admitted, with the help of Jean-Martin Charcot’s son Jean-Baptiste [5]. Contrary to another famous pupil of Charcot, Joseph Babinski, who spectacularly distanced himself from his mentor’s views [17], we do not know whether he would also have modified his opinion on hysteria and hypnotism.

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