Rapport and Subversion: Mesmer's Treatment of Paradis and Its Influence On the Fiction of ETA Hoffmann' and The Cost of Light (a novel)


Abstract

This is a thesis in two parts, a novel and a critical project. Both are about Maria-Theresavon Paradis, a blind and possibly 'hysterical' pianist and composer, and Doctor Franz Anton Mesmer, the founder of Mesmerism, who temporarily managed to cure her with this controversial treatment.

In the novel, The Cost of Light, Paradis's confessions to Mesmer allow me to show that her possible hysterical blindness arises from a complex cluster of motives, for example, a refusal to see, and too great a desire to witness, forbidden sights. In this way, the novel demonstrates the malleable nature of eighteenth-century hysteria, which, for Paradis, transforms itself constantly in relation to her psychosocial conditions and familial constraints. Her sudden blindness, her miraculous recovery of sight at Doctor Mesmer's hands and then its subsequent loss could therefore remain considered hysterical symptoms.

The related critical project, 'Rapport and Subversion: Mesmer's Treatment of Paradis and Its Influence on the Fiction of E.T.A. Hoffmann' is divided into three chapters. 'Chapter 1: The Blind Musician' explores the nature of Paradis's possibly hysterical blindness and suggests that, for her, blindness may well have had subversive and creative compensations. Her experiences are compared to those of the blind harpist, Charlotte Seuerling, and to those of Beethoven.

'Chapter 2: The Miracle Doctor' argues that the relationship between Mesmer and his famous patient and between other mesmerists and their subjects is one of power and control, reinforcing normative eighteenth-century gender roles. It examines the effectiveness of Mesmerism in treating Paradis's blindness, and argues that her possible hysteria, and other factors, were potent subversive forces in undermining Mesmer's treatment.

'Chapter 3: The Mesmerised Writer' establishes how E.T.A. Hoffmann's characters in 'The Sandman', 'Councillor Krespel' and 'New Year's Eve Adventure' operate as paradigms for the Paradis/Mesmer relationship. This chapter also shows how Hoffmann's awareness of Mesmerism influenced his short stories, 'Automata', 'The Magnetiser' and 'The Golden Pot.'