

1 BOOK REVIEW

2

Le Bal des Folles

3 **Review of:**

4 The Mad Women's Ball

5 By Victoria Mas

6 Translated by Frank Wynne

7 Doubleday 2021

8 ISBN: 9780857527035

9

10 And:

11 The Mad Women's Ball, a film directed by Mélanie Laurent starring Lou de Laâge, Mélanie Laurent and
12 Emmanuelle Bercot on Amazon Prime (2021)

13 In 1868 the dilapidated St Laure building at the *Hospice de la Vieillesse-Femmes de la*
14 *Salpêtrière* was closed and its long-stay lunatics transferred to other Parisian hospitals. In the
15 internal reorganisation that ensued Jean-Martin Charcot was asked to take over the care of 150
16 women who had been relocated to the *Petites Loges* facility of the hospital. Many of these
17 women had convulsive disorders of unknown cause and Charcot saw his new responsibility as an
18 opportunity to further characterise a group of disorders, which had hitherto been relegated to the
19 custodianship of alienists. Many of these women had been admitted to the Salpêtrière as teenage
20 girls, frequently for their own protection or at the request of others supposedly acting in their
21 best interests. Almost all were from deprived backgrounds, and many were illiterate. Some had

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1 been abused physically and sexually, others obliged to become surrogate mothers while still
2 children because of neglectful and alcoholic parents, while the illegitimate orphans among them
3 had been raised without love or gentleness in austere, unforgiving religious institutions.

4 At the time Charcot began to study these women's incoherent behaviour a popularly held
5 medical view was that hysteria resulted from a discontented wandering uterus and that
6 compression of the ovaries could sometimes be curative. His own views evolved over 15 years of
7 study but he remained convinced that hysteria is a brain disorder, which needs to be
8 distinguished from simulation, malingering and imposture. It is sphynx-like, lacking the solidity
9 of nervous disorders where a consistent, circumscribed lesion has been identified at post-mortem,
10 and a malady, which he linked with other 'neuroses' such as epilepsy, tics, Parkinson's disease
11 and chorea. He agreed with Paul Briquet that sexual abuse was a risk factor and that physical
12 trauma could trigger similar symptoms in men but that there were also hereditary antecedents. In
13 1892, Pierre Janet introduced Charcot to the notion of hysteria as a dynamic disorder where an
14 idea representing an organ, or its presumed function, anchored itself in a person's mind and was
15 then through a process of dissociation converted into a physical symptom.

16 During Charcot's lifetime, writers including Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant and J-K
17 Huysmans described nervous ailments in a few of the characters of their novels, and his views on
18 hypnotism and hysteria were familiar to the general public through wide publicity in newspapers
19 and magazines. Although his reputation as the Father of Neurology has remained secure,
20 influential modern medical historians have been critical of Charcot's reluctance to acknowledge
21 the importance of psychological factors in hysteria, and of his trenchantly expressed erroneous
22 views on the mode of action of medical hypnosis. Even in France, his name and work now

1 remain as only a distant echo in the public imagination. After his death in 1893 several of his
2 disciples continued to study hysteria, distancing it further from psychosis and thereby reducing
3 its stigma. Babinski believed that hysteria could be brought on by suggestion and improved by
4 persuasion and discovered ways of distinguishing it from other nervous disorders on physical
5 examination. Freud believed it represented a metamorphosis of psychological problems often
6 arising from repressed sexual conflicts into somatic manifestations, while Janet advanced the
7 notion of the medical interview as a method of cognitive therapy.

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9 In the last twenty-five years a number of novelists have been attracted by the personality of
10 Charcot, his treatment methods, and the relationship that he had with some of his famous patients
11 like Blanche Wittmann and Louise Augustine Gleizes. Some of them have portrayed him
12 unjustifiably as a charlatan, a misogynist and an abuser, while others have used presentism in an
13 attempt to impugn his medical reputation.¹⁻⁴

14 Victoria Mas' novel is a dark story that focuses on the emotional bond that develops
15 between a rebellious teenage girl called Eugénie Cléry and Charcot's long serving nursing
16 superintendent, Geneviève Gleizes. Since the age of twelve Eugénie has been seeing ghosts that
17 talk to her but are never frightening. As she grows up she begins to openly challenge her lawyer
18 father's authority and the suffocating mores of Parisian society. She learns about a book written
19 by Allan Kardec and tracks down a copy to a bookshop selling esoteric and arcane texts on the
20 Rue St Jacques. While her father is preoccupied in finding her a husband, she learns from *The*
21 *Spirit's Book* that there are mediums who, like her, are able to communicate with the dead.

1 After her deceased grandfather has helped her locate his wife's long-lost pendant in a
2 crack at the bottom of a drawer she unwisely confides her secret power to her incredulous
3 grandmother. When her father learns what has happened he fears his daughter is a devil
4 worshiper. Determined to preserve the family name he tricks Eugénie into taking a carriage ride,
5 which ends with her being dragged by her father and brother into the receiving room of the
6 Salpêtrière. The head nurse, a stern seemingly unfeeling spinster named Geneviève is charged
7 with admitting her to the care of Charcot, one of France's greatest living physicians:

8 She has witnessed patients faint at the touch of Charcot's hand: seen others feign seizures in order to get
9 his attention. On the rare occasions when he visits the ward, the atmosphere abruptly changes; from the
10 moment he arrives the women simmer, some show off, some fake a fever, others sob or plead, still others
11 make the sign of the cross. The nurses giggle like startled schoolgirls. He is at once the man they desire,
12 the father they wish they had had, the doctor they admire, the saviour of minds and souls. As for the
13 doctors, assistants and students who trail behind him as he moves between the beds, they too form a
14 faithful, deferential entourage that further reinforces the status of the man whose authority in the
15 hospital is unchallenged.

16 The narrative explores the experiences of the women on the ward and their encounters with
17 Charcot's retinue, including notables such as Babinski and Gilles de la Tourette. On the ward there is a
18 sixteen-year-old girl called Louise who confides in Eugénie that one of the young doctors is in love with
19 her. While the two girls are talking, a nurse comes to inform Louise that she has been chosen once again
20 for Charcot's lesson of the week. The demonstration began as usual with Gilles de la Tourette swinging
21 the pendulum before Louise's eyes. A tuning fork was then struck, and Louise swooned backwards into
22 the arms of two interns. On Charcot's orders she then assumed a praying position followed by an
23 attitude of crucifixion, before finally going into a series of ecstatic convulsions. Some of the audience

1 believed her to be possessed and openly made the sign of the cross. When Louise comes around from
2 deep hypnosis, she is unable to move her right arm and leg.

3 The novel also describes how the relationship between Eugénie and Geneviève evolves over
4 time. When the donated costumes for the Mardi Gras ball arrive at the hospice, the women are busy
5 sewing and adjusting their chosen gowns. Meanwhile in the fashionable salons and cafés of Paris men
6 who refer to the occasion as the Mad Women’s Ball have started to imagine nudes running flirtatiously
7 through the long corridors of the hospice or spreading their legs to welcome imaginary lovers. They
8 remember the year when fifteen hysterics simultaneously convulsed at the clash of the cymbals and
9 when a nymphomaniac dressed as a marchioness rubbed her crotch lasciviously against the male guests.

10 When the night of the Lenten ball arrives, and the male guests enter the great hall they are
11 surprised at the calmness and decorum of the mad women standing and talking quietly in groups. Finally
12 the orchestra strikes up and the quadrilles begin and Geneviève helps Eugénie to escape, but is then
13 apprehended by three doctors at the hospital gates. After an internal inquiry she is stripped of her
14 responsibilities and is herself detained as a patient on Charcot’s ward.

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16 The character of Geneviève Gleizes in the book is loosely based on Marguerite Bottard (1822–
17 1906), Charcot’s long serving senior nurse surveillant (1), while Louise bears a close resemblance to
18 ‘Augustine’ a grande hystérique who in 1880, despite her ‘celebrity’ status, fled from the Salpêtrière,
19 disguised as a man, and was never heard of again (Figure 1) (2). In *The Story of San Michele* Axel Munthe
20 wrote that he attended some of Charcot’s lectures while completing his medical studies in Paris and that
21 he had the utmost admiration for him and his powers of observation. It was only after he had qualified
22 and become a *médecin en ville* that he became critical of Charcot’s inability to see that the young

1 women under his care were almost all histrionic fakes and that hypnosis worked by enhancing
2 suggestibility.

3 He goes on to describe how he hatched a plan to rescue a grande hystérique, called Geneviève
4 from Charcot's clutches and return her to her family. One day in La Salle St Agnès he hypnotised
5 Geneviève, instructing her that she must leave the ward and proceed by carriage to his apartment,
6 where a nurse would be waiting to escort her back to her parents' farm in Normandy. Munthe's plan
7 was foiled by an observant nurse, and an incandescent Charcot banned him from ever attending the
8 hospital again. Munthe who became a fashionable doctor in Rome never let a good story get in the way
9 of the truth but it is likely that there is some substance to this escapade.

10 In the late nineteenth century Parisians flocked to masked carnival balls, which served as
11 catharsis, releasing them for a night from the unbending rules of the Republic and temporarily
12 subverting the social order. Dr Gilbert Fredet, a physician from Clermont, was invited as a guest
13 to Le Bal des Folles on March 28th, 1889. On entering a spacious, brightly lit hall decorated with
14 flowers, the first thing which caught his eye was groups of beautiful women dressed as
15 Circassian princes, Spanish ladies, musketeers, chimney sweeps and peasants of Bourbonnais.
16 From time to time a nurse, dressed all in black, would glide silently among the women, like a
17 mother mourning the loss of her children. There were rows of uncommunicative, elderly women
18 hunched over benches and a long trestle table piled high with cakes and pastries.

19 In marked contrast to the impeccable manners of the hospice's female residents, many of
20 the guests behaved in a rowdy and agitated manner leading Fredet to observe that an outsider
21 would guess that it was the men who were the mental patients. At the call of the band the women
22 took their places sedately on the dance floor and danced quadrilles and polkas in a fashion that

1 would have graced any high society ball. Not a single woman had a hysterical crisis during the
2 event, leaving him to conclude that it would be in the interest of the authorities at the Salpêtrière
3 to consider having more frequent balls as a form of therapy (3) (Figure 2).

4 The capacity of dance to improve mental health is also illustrated by the life of Jane Avril
5 (born Jeanne Louise Beaudon, 1868–1943), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec’s muse. Fifty years after
6 her internment at the Salpêtrière she wrote in her published memoirs that while still a child she
7 had shared a dormitory with some of Charcot’s famous hysterics. In 1884, dressed in an elegant
8 carnival frock provided by Charcot’s daughter, she attended a transvestite ball at the hospice
9 where, transported by the music, she felt compelled to spring up like a fawn, and dance a waltz
10 with a rhythmical grace that earned her acclamations from many of the male guests. This light-
11 bulb moment showed her that she could channel her symptoms into creative choreography and
12 thereby alter her destiny. After the ball her nervous symptoms rapidly abated and she was
13 discharged from the hospital. She began to frequent Parisian dance halls, and at the Closerie des
14 Lilas, a bar and restaurant in Montparnasse, she came into contact with influential intellectuals in
15 the art and literary world, who supported and encouraged her. In 1889 she began to dance at the
16 Moulin Rouge under the patronage of its proprietor, Charles Zidler, and rapidly rose to become
17 one of the cabaret’s most popular can-can dancers. One observer defined her dancing style as
18 like ‘an orchid in frenzy’, another as having an attitude of ‘depraved virginity’.

19 In her memoirs Jane Avril described her neurological diagnosis as ‘predestination’. From
20 the few available photographs and Toulouse-Lautrec’s lithographs (Figure 3) it seems likely that
21 her highly distinctive dance style was a gift associated with her psychopathology (she had been
22 diagnosed by Charcot as suffering from la danse de St Guy, a generic term used to describe

1 grimaces, contortions, and abnormal sinuous movements of unknown cause) but she also
2 incorporated into her dancing the passionate attitudes she had witnessed in some of the women
3 with whom she had shared a ward for 18 months. She makes a brief appearance in the *Mad*
4 *Women's Ball*, when an increasingly disillusioned Geneviève visits her in search of reassurance
5 in her apartment in Pigalle. Jane tells her that the Salpêtrière had been the first place where she
6 had ever felt anyone cared about her.

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8 Allan Kardec (born Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail) (1804–1869) considered his 'Spiritist
9 Doctrine' to be a science. His research on mediums led him to conclude that we are all immortal spirits,
10 obliged to temporarily inhabit bodies in order to attain moral and intellectual advancement. Charcot
11 and his clinical assistant Gilles de la Tourette were also keen to find rational explanations for miracles
12 but were critical of Kardec's methods (4). In the sixteenth lecture in his *Oeuvres Complètes*, Charcot
13 warns that attempting to contact the dead can lead to hysteria in genetically susceptible individuals (5).
14 Despite continuing concerns from the medical profession, Spiritism based on Kardec's codification has
15 survived as a religion and a philosophy in 35 countries and now has four million adherents in Brazil.

16 Eugénie's ability to see and talk with the dead made me mull over what might happen today
17 to a young person who tells her parents that she is able to see and talk to dead people. I suspect
18 neurologists and psychiatrists would soon be involved, brain scans and electroencephalograms ordered,
19 and when no structural cause was found, a period of observation in the Maudsley Hospital or The Priory
20 recommended.

21 ~ o ~

1 Mas has carefully studied the iconography and annals of the Salpêtrière and as a result her story
2 is more nuanced and authentic than some of the novelists who have travelled the same ground before
3 her. For example, rather than vilifying Charcot, she portrays him as a man of his time:

4 Charcot has helped bring back a little light and cleanliness inside the hospital, and to
5 bring conditions of care a little more decent. Before, there was not even the idea of
6 treating.

7 Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of Mélanie Laurent's highly anticipated screen
8 adaptation of the book, which despite its lavish trappings and handsome production, comes over as a
9 shallow costume melodrama. The grisly scenes depicting women being treated with ice-cold baths and
10 vaginal cauterisation seem unreal to the clinical gaze and the adapted rape scene where a doctor assaults
11 Louise while the ball is going on comes over as contrived. Hysteria lends itself to the moving camera but
12 none of the scenes on the ward replicated the clown-like antics and pseudo seizures described in such
13 detail by Charcot and his associates. The portrayal of Charcot himself and the format of his Friday
14 lecture was sensationalised and lacked genuineness. Perhaps most damningly the film adaptation makes
15 no attempt to get inside the emotions of Eugénie, Louise and Geneviève (played by Laurent) who ended
16 up coming across as uninteresting and unsympathetic ciphers.

17 In one chastening paragraph in her book Mas draws attention to the distress felt by some
18 women during a medical consultation, which more than any scene in the film, serves as a reminder to
19 male doctors that the removal of a woman's clothes must be preceded by full explanation as to why it is
20 medically necessary and that the physical examination must then be performed sensitively and
21 discretely, whenever possible in the presence of a chaperone:

1 Nobody appreciates a consulting room more than a doctor. For those whose minds are steeped in science,
2 it is here that diseases are diagnosed, that medicine progresses. They relish wielding instruments that
3 terrify those on whom they are used. For the patients, who are forced to undress, the consulting room is a
4 place of fear and uncertainty. Those who meet here are not equals; the doctor announces the fate of the
5 patient; the patient takes him at his word. For the doctor what is at stake for him is his career, for the
6 patient it is life itself. This rift is all the more pronounced when a woman enters the consulting room.
7 When she offers up her body to be examined, a body simultaneously desired and misunderstood by the
8 man conducting the examination.

9 The Mad Women's Ball is a short story and I would recommend that readers follow on by reading
10 its 35-page forerunner, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, written by Charlotte Perkins Gillman in 1892. Here, the
11 female narrator is diagnosed by her husband with a 'temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical
12 tendency'. In an attempt to cure his wife, the doctor rents an old mansion in the country and insists she
13 follow a rest cure. This requires her confinement in an upstairs nursery, where she is not allowed to see
14 her newborn baby, exercise, have visitors or even write letters. During her period of therapeutic
15 incarceration, she develops an obsession with the wallpaper in the room, becoming convinced a woman
16 is trapped behind it. She offers this insight about her therapy:

17 John is a physician, and perhaps—(I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a
18 great relief to my mind)—perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.

19 History matters, but the best novels boast a sort of truth that scholarship can never claim.
20 Victoria Mas' book made me reflect that while unquestionable progress has been made in our
21 understanding of hysteria (now known as functional neurological disorder) it remains one of the most
22 challenging conditions in the whole of neurology. *The Mad Women's Ball* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are
23 salutary reminders of how some methods used to treat inconvenient behavioural disorders by well-
24 meaning physicians have the capacity to aggravate mental and physical distress and push people to the

1 verge of insanity. If more successful outcomes are to be achieved in functional neurological disorder, the
2 potential power of the therapeutic interview in rehabilitation must be exploited to its limit and
3 judgemental errors of the past avoided.

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7 A. J. Lees is Professor of Neurology at the National Hospital, Queen Square and author of ‘Mentored by a
8 Madman: The William Burroughs Experiment’ (Notting Hill Editions and New York Review of Books). The
9 sequel ‘Brainspotting’ will be published in April this year.

10 **Acknowledgements**

11 I would like to thank Drs Jon Stone and Alan Carson from Edinburgh University for generously sharing
12 their views about the importance of Jean-Martin Charcot’s work on hysteria.

13

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ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

1 **Figure legends**

2 **Figure 1** Photographs by Albert Londe of Augustine Gleizes showing her at rest (left) and when adopting
3 'une attitude passionnelle' (right). Courtesy of BIU Santé Paris.

4 **Figure 2** The Mad Women's Ball at the Salpêtrière: a sketch by Paul-Eugène de Mesples.
5 Courtesy of Musée d'Histoire de la Médecine, Paris.

6 **Figure 3** Lithograph (1899) by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec of Jane Avril, emphasising her serpentine
7 choreography and swaying body.

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Figure 1
89x56 mm (4.7 x DPI)

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Figure 2
144x107 mm (4.7 x DPI)

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Figure 3
368x559 mm (4.7 x DPI)

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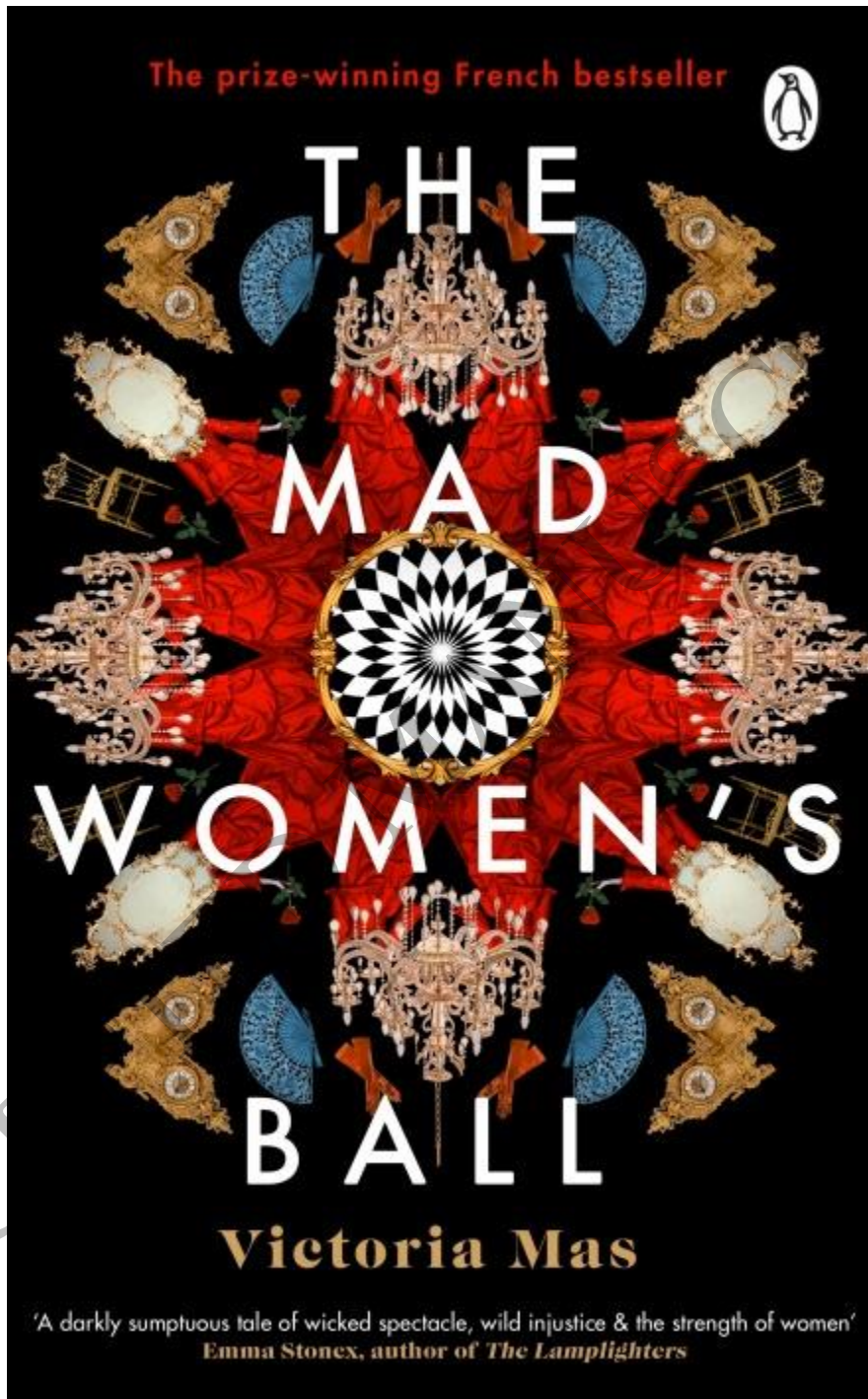


Figure 4
116x187 mm (4.7 x DPI)