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Lacan the Charlatan

PETER D. MATHEWS

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For Hyunhee, whose love and support made this book possible

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Praise for *Lacan the Charlatan*

"What authorises an analyst to analyse? *Lacan the Charlatan* makes a significant contribution to this important question and is a must read for anyone interested in the future of our praxis."

—Russell Grigg, *World Association of Psychoanalysis*

"*Lacan the Charlatan* is much more than a highly engaging study of Lacan's various critics, detractors, and would-be debunkers. It focuses in on one of the essential problems of his psychoanalytic theory: the nature of authority under conditions of modernity. Clown, guru, master, imposter, insurgent, analyst: Mathews shows how Lacan both incarnated and exposed the impasses of authority, and how his theoretical framework is crucial for understanding the charade of power and mastery we are living in today."

—Aaron Schuster, author of *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*

"Mathews is that rarest of scholars in psychoanalytic studies: someone brave enough to consult works he disagrees with, and then able to produce smart, judicious, and fair-minded commentary and critique. Likewise, his interventions into the work and legacies of the best critics of Lacan, such as Roustang and Borch-Jacobsen, is not just overdue; it is often revelatory. *Lacan the Charlatan* is a major contribution to the literature—one of interest to scholars of literature, philosophy, and sociology—that will still be worth reading in twenty years."

—Todd Dufresne, *Professor of Philosophy at Lakehead University, author of* The Late Sigmund Freud: Or, The Last Word on Psychoanalysis, Society, and All the Riddles of Life

Contents

1

Introduction

A Genealogy of the Charlatan Label

In the introduction to *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight* (1987), Shoshana Felman recalls that she initially learned about Lacan while she was a graduate student at the University of Grenoble. 'I first heard Lacan's name mentioned by two highly respected teachers in the university,' she writes. 'One of them kept referring to Lacan with enthusiasm and admiration. The other would mention Lacan in a derogatory way, advising us, in sum, not to read him' (Felman 1987, p. 3). Felman's experience is not unusual. Lacan's audiences tend to be bitterly divided between those who loathe and oppose him, and those who become his loyal disciples and followers. Not much critical space exists, it seems, for any position in between. Felman thus writes:

> How can one comprehend a figure with such a record of controversiality? With a few exceptions, most attempts to understand Lacan have assumed the shape either of a didactic exposition of Lacan's complicated thought or of a polemical defense of Lacan's position in the context of the controversy among different psychoanalytic factions. (Felman 1987, p. 4)

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The title of my own book reflects the controversial nature of its subject. It is designed to provoke with its evident boldness, but in a way that complicates and rethinks the simplistic options of being 'for' or 'against' Lacan. In truth, I am interested neither in attacking nor defending Lacan: my real concern in this book is with problems of mastery and authority, and the unique way that Lacan's charlatanry, rather than being a purely negative phenomenon, might offer a potential solution to them.

Like Felman, my own introduction to the work of Lacan came through my university studies. In my second year as an undergraduate, I took a course titled 'Postmodernism and the Novel' with Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, a renowned Dostoevsky scholar, who introduced Lacan as one of the key thinkers of postmodernism and an intellectual hero. I remember taking several pages of long-lost notes in the first class, headed by the two overlapping circles of the 'vel of alienation' from Lacan's *Seminar XI*. That diagram was followed by hermetic terms like 'castration' and 'signification,' all part of a complex theoretical language I had never before encountered. My eyes were opened to literature and critical theory in an entirely new way, and in subsequent semesters I took further courses like 'Freudian Fable' with acclaimed poet and Blanchot specialist Kevin Hart, which focused on the connections between psychoanalysis and narrative theory, 'Introduction to Critical Theory' with Elizabeth Grosz, author of *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990), and two courses, 'Deleuze and Foucault' and 'Lacan and Subjectivity' with Deleuze scholar Claire Colebrook. Lacan was a constant touchstone during this period of my education. When the time came to write my undergraduate honors thesis, I chose Lacan's use of mathemes as my topic. In what would turn out to be a fatal move for my youthful interest in Lacan, however, my extracurricular reading that year also included the two volumes of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Upon finishing the former, my impressionable mind had already been firmly swayed: psychoanalysis was a neurotic system of control mired in a hopelessly blind form of philosophical idealism. Reading *Anti-Oedipus*, in particular, persuaded me that Lacan was wrong, perhaps even a charlatan, a judgment that was just becoming prevalent in theoretical circles.

When I began this project, some twenty years later, the accusation of charlatanry had become commonplace in the critical literature about Lacan. I refer here not to the infighting and schisms that characterized Lacan's school, the École Freudienne de Paris (EFP), in which the divisions were primarily about questions of allegiance rather than the inherent value of Lacan's teaching. Nor am I referring to the various thinkers who have performed sophisticated intellectual critiques of Lacan's ideas, such as Deleuze and Guattari in the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* books, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in *The Title of the Letter* (1973), Luce Irigaray in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), or Jacques Derrida in *The Post-Card* (1980). Although these works take Lacan to task in various ways, they always assume that he is to be regarded seriously as a thinker. Instead, what has emerged more recently is a discourse that is openly hostile to the work of Lacan not at the level of ideas, but of authority. For the critics who hold this position, Lacan is not just wrong or mistaken about this or that concept—he is a fraud and a charlatan whose oeuvre should be stripped of its validity and dismissed entirely as an act of pure deception.

One of the precursors of this discourse was brought to my attention by Jean-Michel Rabaté's essay 'Lacan's Turn to Freud' in *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (2003), which recalls Lacan's skirmish with the linguist Georges Mounin. Mounin's attack, widely known at the time but now largely forgotten, took the form of an article titled 'Some Features of Jacques Lacan's Style,' which he published in 1969. Since Mounin's text is relatively obscure and has never been translated into English, Rabaté provides a helpful summary:

> To describe what had already often been called Lacan's 'mannerism,' a labyrinthine syntax that its author had preemptively defended as 'Gongorism,' a poetic manner that would force his readers to be attentive while immersing them in the fluid equivocations of unconscious discourse, Mounin listed a number of oddities in the psychoanalyst's use of vocabulary and syntax. […] On the whole, Lacan, so Mounin continued, loved nothing more than obscure archaisms, poetic inversions, or unusual turns of phrase borrowed either from German or Latin. (Rabaté 2003, p. 4)

Rabaté notes the accuracy of Mounin's analysis of Lacan's unusual grammatical choices, recounting humorously how, even after Lacan's death, it was still possible to identify his French disciples by the peculiarly tortured sentence structures they had copied from him. Mounin is one of the first to notice how Lacan's style had changed over time, becoming ever more dense and difficult. 'Mounin observed a dramatic increase in the frequency of these circumlocutions'; writes Rabaté, 'for him, the 1966 preface to *Écrits* verged on self-parody' (Rabaté 2003, p. 4). Rabaté makes the case that Mounin's concerns were grounded primarily in the disparity he saw between 'the excessive theatricality of a fustian style suggesting the image of a hamming buffoon' and the professionalism he otherwise witnessed in Lacan's work (Rabaté 2003, p. 5). 'Mounin's worry seemed justified, even inevitable,' concludes Rabaté. '[W]as Lacan a frustrated poet, a post-Heideggerian thinker progressing by opaque epigrams, a psychoanalyst wishing to revolutionize a whole field of knowledge, or just a charlatan?' (Rabaté 2003, p. 5). Rabaté contends that Mounin, as a linguist, had little real interest in psychoanalysis, and was mainly concerned with the way structuralist ideas were intruding on his academic turf. Still more concerning for Mounin was the possibility that Lacan was *becoming* a charlatan, a performer leading astray his ever-growing crowd of followers. Mounin's attack achieved what it set out to do, putting enough pressure on the head of the École Normale Supérieure, where the weekly seminar had been held since Lacan's departure from the Sainte-Anne Hospital in 1963, that Lacan was denied access to this venue and forced to relocate to his third and final seminar location at the Faculty of Law across from the Panthéon.

Although the history of the EFP was beset by rifts and schisms, during Lacan's lifetime attacks on his authority were rare. Critics were willing to criticize him at the level of ideas, or for his authoritarian leadership style, but seldom did it occur to them that he was an outright fraud. A notable exception comes from the Italian critic Sebastiano Timpanaro, who writes in his book *The Freudian Slip* (1974):

> I must confess that I am incurably committed to the view that in Lacan's writings charlatanry and exhibitionism largely prevail over any ideas of a comprehensible, even if debatable nature: behind the smoke-screen, it

> seems to me, there is nothing of substance; and it is difficult to think of a pioneer in the encounter between psychoanalysis and linguistics who has more frequently demonstrated such an erroneous and confused knowledge of the latter, whether structural or not. (Timpanaro 2011, p. 58)

Although Timpanaro's reproach bears all the hallmarks of the later charges of charlatanry, *The Freudian Slip* is a book that is concerned mainly with Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) rather than Lacan. As such, Timpanaro's comment only appears as a passing footnote to that discussion, and Lacan is barely mentioned again in the rest of the text. Another example is François George's 1979 book *L'Effet 'Yau de poêle: De Lacan et des lacaniens*, in which he accuses Lacan of being a charlatan who bamboozled his disciples by deploying a hermetic discourse that consists mainly of nonsense and word play. Despite its initial flash of scandalous success, George's book has since sunk into relative obscurity, out of print and untranslated.

Lacan's death in 1981 resulted in bitter infighting among his followers over who had the authority to carry on his legacy. In this atmosphere, factions and ideologies hardened to the point where, as David Macey points out in *Lacan in Contexts* (1988), for 'a long time, the reader of Lacan has been faced with a stark dilemma: total acceptance or total rejection' (Macey 1988, p. ix). Rejection of Lacan comes in many varieties, however, and in this period it rarely equates to the kind of hostile denigration that characterizes later detractors. Monique David-Menard's pointed 1982 essay 'Lacanians Against Lacan,' for instance, is aimed at the problematic effects produced by the EFP and, in the wake of its dissolution, the attempts to forge a Lacanian orthodoxy among his most ardent disciples:

> Lacan thought he would avoid the pitfalls of university learning by correlating his teaching and his analyses, and because he marginalized or excluded the medical or university institutions that originally sheltered his seminar[.] […] In hindsight, it can be asked if this method of teaching, ingenious as it was, did not reinforce the pitfalls of all teachings, and perpetuate a passive, spellbound relation to the discourse of an idealized Master. (David-Menard 1982, p. 100)

In the same spirit, Marcele Marini, in *Jacques Lacan: The French Context* (1986), explores the political and institutional chaos created by Lacan's passing, showing how it divided opinion about his work and legacy. 'So, who was Lacan? Was he a visionary, a shaman, or a guru?' ponders Marini. 'Was he a sorcerer's apprentice or an exemplary practitioner?' (Marini 1992, p. 3). Once again, there is little sense for Marini that this situation entails a total dismissal of Lacan's authority. If Lacan is labeled a charlatan in this period, the nuances of the epithet tend to arise from these struggles over his legacy rather than any blanket attempt to dismiss his authority as such.

The tone of the criticism changes noticeably in the late 1980s, epitomized by comments that appear in a 1989 interview in *Radical Philosophy* with Noam Chomsky. Chomsky is a groundbreaking linguist whose ideas about universal and transformational grammar are widely seen as a challenge to the structural linguistics that inspired the most famous period of Lacan's work. Chomsky is also a prominent figure of the American political left who has engaged publicly with some of the leading French contemporaries of Lacan. Chomsky's 1971 debate with Foucault, for instance, later published as *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*, is fascinating for the ideological divisions it reveals between French and American understandings of the Enlightenment and human nature. Chomsky's meeting with Lacan at MIT in 1975 was rather less successful, as Élisabeth Roudinesco reports:

> Lacan scandalized everyone with his answer to a question by Chomsky on thought. 'We think we think with our brains; personally, I think with my feet. That's the only way I really come into contact with anything solid. I do occasionally think with my forehead, when I bang into something. But I've seen enough electroencephalograms to know there's not the slightest trace of a thought in the brain.' When he heard this, Chomsky thought the lecturer must be a madman. And afterward, despite the explanations of his friend Mitsou Ronat, who did her best for several years to point out that Lacan was speaking metaphorically, Chomsky remained convinced that Lacan was so contemptuous of his American audience that he had tried to kid the MIT scientists that the seat of the human brain was in the bones or the toes. The affair gave rise to a rumor, and the rumor became a legend:

> Lacan had tried to convert America to another obscurantist 'plague' by suggesting that the source of man's intelligence was in his feet. (Roudinesco 1997, pp. 378–379)

In the intervening years, Chomsky's negative perspective on both Lacan and the French intellectual scene hardened into open contempt, as evidenced by the tone of his comments in the aforementioned 1989 interview:

> In the case of Lacan, for example—it's going to sound unkind—my frank opinion is that he was a conscious charlatan, and was simply playing games with the Paris intellectual community to see how much absurdity he could produce and still be taken seriously. I mean that quite literally. I knew him. If you took him seriously it was just embarrassing, so you had to assume something else was happening, some other level that you don't quite understand. That's the impression that I get from a good deal of this Paris-based intellectual pop culture which is, I understand, fairly popular in England and certainly is in the United States, in literary circles. But if anyone can detect any intellectual content in that, I'd like to see it. (Chomsky 1989, p. 31)

These sentiments are not a one-off statement—they are repeated, for instance, in the discussion following a lecture that Chomsky delivered in 1996, subsequently published as *The Architecture of Language* (2000). Asked about Lacan's theories of language and sexuality, Chomsky brushes off the question by again dismissing Lacan as an intellectual fraud. 'I knew Lacan personally and I never understood a word he was talking about; so I can't answer the question,' he says. 'In fact I have a rather strong feeling that he was playing jokes, that he was trying to see how crazy he could be and still get people to take him seriously' (Chomsky 2000, p. 47). Chomsky's comments about Lacan set a new tone, one that does not even attempt to tackle the question of whether Lacan is wrong or mistaken. Instead, Lacan's authority is simply rejected out of hand, without any intellectual or analytical engagement, as nothing more than fraudulent nonsense.

Imperious dismissals such as Chomsky's become increasingly prominent in the years that follow. In the preface to *Key Concepts of Lacanian*

Psychoanalysis (1998), for instance, Dany Nobus notes how 'Lacan's numerous personal idiosyncrasies are often used as arguments *ad hominem* to minimize the value of his theoretical contributions' (Nobus 2018, p. v). These attacks noticeably alter the tone of Roudinesco's writing on Lacan. In contrast to the magisterial style of her biography, the slim volume she published in 2011 titled *Lacan: In Spite of Everything* is a comparatively gloomy apology for a figure who has lost a considerable amount of his former luster. Like Nobus, Roudinesco contends that Lacan is not so much under attack for his ideas as for the extravagance of his character and acknowledged taste for luxury:

> A fetishistic collector, passionate about rare or original editions, over his lifetime Lacan had collected all sorts of objects—paintings by masters, water colours, designs, sculptures, archaeological figurines, valuable furniture, extravagant clothing made in accordance with his instructions: furs, suits in unusual materials, hard collars without flaps or collars twisted and turned up, lavallières of various sizes, made-to-measure shoes in rare skins, gold pieces, ingots. (Roudinesco 2014, pp. 111–112)

An important part of Lacan's appeal during his lifetime was his personal charisma, and these *ad hominem* attacks may be read, in part, as a backlash against this aspect of his success. It is impossible to defend the integrity of such tactics, although Roudinesco has hardly helped matters by sometimes resorting to such attacks herself.[1]

There has been a steady production of this anti-intellectual mode of criticism in recent years. In his book *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* (2015), for instance, Roger Scruton refers to Lacan as a 'criminal charlatan' (Scruton 2015, p. 177) and a 'crazy charlatan' (Scruton 2015, p. 241). Once again, his book makes only the most cursory attempt to engage with Lacan's ideas, with his argument framed by bewilderment as to why they are seen as important or influential by anyone at all. 'The influence of these seminars […] is one of the

[1] See Todd Dufresne's article 'The Making of a "Freud Basher," or Reflections of a "Supercilious Neurotic…"' (Dufresne 2014, p. 81). Citing a private email from Borch-Jacobsen, Dufresne points out, in particular, Roudinesco's use of the words '*révisionniste*' and '*négationniste*,' which he argues are terms that in French apply to Holocaust deniers, in her attacks on *Le livre noir de la psychanalyse*.

deep mysteries of modern intellectual life,' contends Scruton. 'Their garbled regurgitation of theories that Lacan clearly neither explored nor understood, is, for sheer intellectual effrontery, without parallel in recent literature. […] Lacan discovered the infinite power of the meaningless, when the meaningless is used to exert a personal charisma' (Scruton 2015, p. 177). In a chapter from the collection *Desire in Ashes: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, Philosophy* (2016), similarly, Herman Rapaport writes that 'we see this seamy side of transference love in the lecture hall as well, for example, in the charge that Lacan was a Char-Lacan (charlatan), something that a French journal once announced on its cover' (Rapaport 2016, p. 86). This emerging tendency causes John Forrester to deliver, as early as 1990, the following rebuke to critics deploying this line of attack:

> It is still common for discussions of Lacan to mention him only to dismiss him as a crank and a charlatan. Given that premise and conviction, the only thing that needs to be said about him is that he is impossible to read (and therefore must be a charlatan) and is of importance only because he is dangerous, owing to the fawning followers who disseminate his foolish theories and distort the general public's understanding of what psychoanalysis really is. The fact that he is French, the fact that he writes difficult prose in a highly idiosyncratic manner, is taken to be yet more self-evidently conclusive proof of his insignificance. Criticism of this calibre would not normally need to be rebutted. It is more properly material for the historian and sociologist of chauvinism and philistinism. (Forrester 1991, p. 112)

The problem that Forrester highlights is not that Lacan is being questioned or attacked, but that these attacks do not constitute intellectually valid forms of critique. Lacan was, in reality, a formidable critic of his own ideas, and it is a central thesis of this book that he was engaged in a vigorous and self-conscious interrogation of his own authority. There is strong evidence that Lacan saw his authority—and indeed, *all* forms of authority grounded in the symbolic order—as a kind of charlatanry, a charade of power and mastery from which there is much to be learned.

The Turn Against Psychoanalytic Authority

The recent tendency to reject Lacan's authority in this manner may be understood as a backlash against the success not only of Lacanian psychoanalysis in France, but also a reaction to the larger impact of French critical theory on Anglophone humanities departments during the 1970s and 1980s. The British novelist A.S. Byatt, herself a former academic, captures the mood of these times in novels like *Possession* (1990), in which postmodern cultural critiques inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis and French feminism focus on the smallest specks of perceived orthodoxy while ignoring the log of serious material abuses of the rising neoliberal order, and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), which shows how the appropriation of French theory by the Anglophone academy has drained that discourse of many of its most insightful, critical aspects and turned it into just another ideology. The forceful way these theories penetrated into fields such as literary and film studies is a key part of this backlash, for in many cases this hegemony was achieved not through rational persuasion, but by a kind of hostile takeover. The deployment of esoteric language and elitist assumptions about philosophical learning further helped to alienate and intimidate those not swept up by its current.

In *Lacan in Contexts*, Macey provides some useful historical background for how Lacanian theory was appropriated by Anglophone literary and film studies. 'A variety of agencies ranging from *New Left Review* to *Yale French Studies* were involved in the initial importation of Lacan, the one thing they all have in common being that they are far removed from the psychoanalytic community and from any clinical practices,' he observes. 'Indeed, *New Left Review* implies that it is *because* "Lacan's work is widely influential outside his own discipline" that "it is time it received its due international recognition"' (Macey 1988, p. 15). The ridiculousness of this claim, Macey points out, is reflected in the complete 'hostility or indifference' to Lacan's work in the British psychoanalytic establishment (Macey 1988, p. 15). The most influential medium for importing Lacan (and other high theory) into the Anglophone world during the 1970s was the film studies journal *Screen*, which established a pattern of imposing the authority of Lacan's ideas onto its readers.

> *Screen*'s approach to Lacan is from the outset strikingly instrumental. The point is never to read Lacan as such, or to situate him within the history of psychoanalysis, but to use him to consolidate the theoretical project of elaborating a theory of the subject and of ideology that can supplement Marxism. To that extent, Lacan is regarded as a pre-given theoretical entity whose concepts can be appropriated, deployed and applied quite unproblematically. The fact that Lacan displays no enthusiasm for being articulated with Marxism and has little of interest to say on that subject is simply ignored. (Macey 1988, p. 16)

Macey argues that it was strategies such as these that set the arrogant—even authoritarian—tone that marked the importation of Lacan into Anglophone academia. '*Yale French Studies* introduces an element of intellectual terrorism in its "French Freud" issue, and *Screen* refines the climate of terror by failing to resolve the contradiction between its supposed pedagogic aims and its reliance upon decontextualized theories for the furthering of its theoretical project,' he continues. 'In so doing it establishes an unfortunate precedent' (Macey 1988, p. 17). In an unwitting inversion of Lacan's concept of the 'subject who is supposed to know,' this strategy places the reader in the position of one who is 'presumed to know' (Macey 1988, p. 17). The editors of *Screen* complete their Marxist agenda by citing Louis Althusser's essay 'Freud and Lacan' (1969) in sealing their approval of Lacan, a move that Macey rightly characterizes as 'a classic appeal to authority' (Macey 1988, p. 18). Given the largely authoritarian way in which Lacan and French theory were imposed on Anglophone academia, it is not surprising that there has been such a strong backlash against both discourses.

Alongside this reaction is a growing body of criticism interrogating the validity of psychoanalysis itself. While disagreements and critiques of psychoanalysis have always been a part of its discourse, the more recent skirmishes are distinguished by their intense focus on the authority of its founder. Jason Glynos argues in *Lacan and Science* (2002) that the so-called 'Freud Wars' have predominantly been waged in the name of a scientific logic in which psychoanalysis, because it does not fit the parameters of a narrowly-defined mode of rationalism, has been

stripped of its authority. Glynos provides a useful historical summary of the key touchstones of this development:

> Of course, psychoanalysis was the subject of critique […] from its very inception. But science's onslaught over the last three decades or so has been relentless. And, finding himself on the receiving end of most of those attacks, Freud has not fared well. Either Freud mistook the shadows cast by grammar as an 'inner' unconscious (Bouveresse); or subscribed to a crypto-evolutionary biologism (Sulloway); or adopted a faulty scientific method and dubious epistemology (Popper, MacMillan, Crews, Esterton); or compromised his intellectual integrity through a self-deluded descent into pseudoscience (Cioffi, Webster, Humphrey); or if one granted him proper scientific methodology, he lacked sufficient evidence to substantiate his hypotheses (Grünbaum); or if one excused him from recognized scientific methods by reason of the peculiarly private and non-reproducible nature of the psychoanalytic encounter his personality, for the very same reason, was not: his character became fair game (Masson, Thornton, Swales, Cioffi). (Glynos 2002, pp. 14–15)

The book that consolidated this movement is Richard Webster's *Why Freud Was Wrong: Sin, Science and Psychoanalysis* (1995), which rehearses what will become a familiar accusation: that Freud's brand of psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience, the success of which can be attributed primarily to a cult of personality. In *Freud: The Making of an Illusion* (2017), Frederick Crews thus writes:

> My main concern here […] is with Freud in person—and indeed, with only one question about him. How and why did a studious, ambitious, and philosophically reflective young man, trained in rigorous inductivism by distinguished researchers and eager to win their favor, lose perspective on his wild hunches, efface the record of his mistakes, and establish an international cult of personality? (Crews 2017, p. 3)

The repetition of this accusation continues in Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen and Sonu Shamdasani's *The Freud Files* (2012), in which they also refer to Freudian psychoanalysis as a 'personality cult' (Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani 2012, p. 192).