

NOTES ON THE CAREER OF THE SOMNAMBULE LÉONIE

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ABSTRACT

This article sketches the career (of which many aspects remain obscure) of the celebrated late-nineteenth-century French multiple-personality subject Léonie (Madame B.). Léonie is of historical interest and importance for her apparent success in experiments on telepathic hypnosis and clairvoyant card-guessing, for her influence on the dissociationisms of Pierre Janet and of F. W. H. Myers, and for the role which she played in controversies surrounding the Dreyfus case.

INTRODUCTION

One of the best known and most influential of the early cases of multiple personality was that of the lady known as 'Madame B.' or (more often) as 'Léonie'. Her influence on psychopathological and psychological thinking was scarcely less than that of Félicité X. and Louis Vivé (on whom see Hacking, 1995), and on psychical research it was much greater. But although she was investigated by several leading psychologists and psychical researchers (e.g. Janet, Myers, Richet), and impinged on psychology, psychical research and even public affairs in ways to which we shall come, she remained until quite recently a somewhat shadowy figure, and different aspects of her career had not been publicly brought together.

Léonie first became known outside her own locality, and to the academic world at large, in 1886, when Pierre Janet, at that time professor of philosophy at the Lycée of Le Havre, published two articles in the *Revue philosophique* (Janet, 1886b; 1886c) describing some apparently successful experiments with her on the induction of hypnosis at a distance. Janet's articles caused some stir, and prompted investigations of Léonie by other savants.

In his *Revue philosophique* articles of 1886, Janet describes Léonie as an honest country-woman, and adds that, so far as is known, she has always enjoyed excellent health, except that since infancy she has been subject to attacks of natural somnambulism, during which she can talk and describe the remarkable hallucinations she seems to undergo. In later publications he modifies these statements considerably. Though he never questions Léonie's honesty and simplicity in her normal state, he now notes (Janet, 1888, p. 241n) that there is epilepsy and insanity in her family. She herself was afflicted in childhood with the most serious hysterical symptoms, which were modified by an animal-magnetic doctor into a "remarkable magnetic somnambulism". However, the menopause, through which she has recently (1888) passed, has brought a return of the hysterical symptoms, with violent crises, contractures, anaesthesia of the left side, and nervous asthma.

Janet always maintained strict secrecy as to the real names of his subjects and patients, and the late Dr E. J. Dingwall, who wrote at some length about Léonie, tried hard but unsuccessfully to solve the question of her identity. However Charles Richet was not quite so discreet as Janet, and in his memoirs

(Richet, 1933, p.66) says that her surname was 'Leboulanger'. From Janet's own later writings (Janet, 1925, I, 189-192), from incidental references by other writers, and from the researches of recent scholars – most notably Jacqueline Carroy (Carroy, 1991; Carroy & Plas, 1995), to whom I am further indebted for unpublished information – it is now possible to put together a fuller, though still very incomplete, account of her career.

Léonie was born in 1837 in Calvados, the child of domestic servants in a wealthy household. A natural somnambule from childhood, she developed at about the age of sixteen the hysterical symptoms referred to above. She was treated by various mesmerists, of whom the most notable was Dr Alfred Perrier, of Caen. Perrier, an occasional contributor to the *Journal du magnétisme*, was locally well known. He seems to have developed in her a state of 'artificial' somnambulism beneficial to her hysterical symptoms. But he may also have shaped the form of this 'somnambulism' according to certain preconceptions of his own, to which we shall return, and he seems in addition to have used her to demonstrate some of the more theatrical sides of somnambulism, for instance dramatic role-playing (see, for example, Janet, 1889, pp.162-163). Before long Léonie became known around Caen for the clairvoyant gifts which she seemed sometimes to exercise in the clairvoyant state. Word of these gifts reached Madame Mathilde Frigard of Caen, a ruthless and scheming woman whose sights had become set on the treasures supposedly concealed in the Château of Crèvecœur-en-Auge some 30 km from Caen. Madame Frigard persuaded Léonie, whose magnetizer she became, to stay at the Château and take part in the treasure-hunt. For many months during 1864 Léonie, and another clairvoyant, Madame Thiébaud of Paris, had visions of the treasure's location, and some encouraging discoveries were made. But the treasure was never found, and all ended disastrously (see Baissas, 1992, which is a prime source of early information about Léonie). Madame Frigard's relentless greed shortly afterwards led her to commit a murder, for which she was tried and convicted (see *The Times*, 10th-15th August 1867).

By the time of the treasure-hunt Léonie had married and had children. Her husband, whom Myers later described as a charcoal-burner from the vicinity of Cherbourg (Myers, 1888-9, p.374), was a certain Jules Françoise, but Léonie seems to have continued to use the surname 'LeBoulanger' (or 'Boulanger' or 'Boulenger') when acting as a clairvoyant somnambule. She remained locally famous in that capacity, and at some unknown place and time her path crossed that of Dr Joseph Gibert (1829-1899), a prominent physician of Le Havre (for materials concerning Gibert, see Carroy & Plas, 1995, pp.39n-40n). Gibert was an idealist and philanthropist of unquenchable zeal and total sincerity, tireless in promoting health and hygiene for the poor. As a Protestant and a Republican, and a passionate defender of justice and liberty, he became involved in public affairs on a local and national level.

Gibert was keenly interested in the old animal magnetism and the new hypnotism, to such an extent, indeed, that he was called the 'Charcot of Normandy'. Among his subjects was Léonie. In the course of his experiments with her she several times spontaneously came out with pieces of factual information which he did not know but which on investigation turned out to be correct (Dreyfus, 1978, p.48).

In 1883, Pierre Janet came to Havre to take up his appointment as professor of philosophy, and began to collect materials for the doctoral dissertation that was later published as *L'automatisme psychologique* (1889). Through the good offices of two local medical men, one of whom was Gibert, Janet was enabled to study a number of highly hypnotizable hysterical subjects, amongst whom the most influential on the development of his ideas was Léonie. Indeed Léonie's influence on Janet and on Gibert, and on others associated with them, gains her a place of some significance in the histories of psychical research and of psychopathology; and for a few months towards the end of the century it brought her an unenviable national notoriety in the political battles then convulsing France. I shall touch on each of these areas in turn.

LÉONIE AND PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

Léonie's importance in the early history of psychical research hinges on the experiments on telepathic hypnosis conducted with her by Janet and Gibert in 1885, and subsequently by various members of the Society for Psychical Research, including Richet. These experiments are extensively discussed by Dingwall (1967, pp.264-273; cf. Podmore, 1894, pp.100-112; Myers, 1903, I, pp.524-529), and do not require extended notice for present purposes. They were prompted by the observation that success in inducing her to execute hypnotic commands was heavily dependent on the degree of concentration achieved by the hypnotist. Léonie came to Havre, where she stayed with Gibert's sister, specially to take part in the experiments. The first two series—in October 1885 and February-March 1886—were conducted by Janet and Gibert. Publication of the early results in the *Revue philosophique* (Janet, 1886b; 1886c) aroused a good deal of interest, and led to a third series in April-May 1886, in which various other savants—Paul Janet, Jules Janet, F. W. H. Myers, A. T. Myers, J. Ochorowicz and L. Marillier—participated (Myers, 1885-87b, pp.131-137). The experiments were all of a similar kind. At a time previously agreed upon by the experimenters, the hypnotists—in all cases either Gibert or Janet—would strongly will the distant Léonie (distant anything from a quarter of a mile to a mile) to fall asleep, and sometimes also to carry out a further action, such as coming to the hypnotist's house. Over the three series of experiments, 18 out of 25 trials were classified as successes, in that Léonie fell asleep within a few minutes of being willed to do so. The experimenters were well aware of the risk that they might involuntarily give her cues as to their intentions, and of the need to carry out the trials at irregular and unpredictable intervals. Whether they wholly succeeded in avoiding these and other pitfalls is not within the scope of this article to determine. Some further experiments by Janet alone in the autumn of 1886 had a somewhat less striking success rate (Richet, 1888-89, pp.43-45). So far as I know he did not thereafter undertake any further experiments in telepathy, or even discuss his early involvement with the question.

Another person whose interest was aroused by the publication of the initial results was the distinguished physiologist Charles Richet, already a member of the SPR and a contributor to its *Proceedings*. He had the opportunity of experimenting on telepathic hypnotism with Léonie while the latter was staying at the house of M. H. Ferrari in Paris during December 1886 and

January 1887. Results were quite impressive (Richet, 1887-88a; 1887-88b; 1888-89, pp.32-42). A further series of experiments under the same conditions in December 1887 and January 1888 was largely unsuccessful, which Richet attributed to his own preoccupation with other matters (Richet, 1888-89, pp.45-47).

Later in 1888, Léonie spent two and a half months (29th June-11th September) at Richet's own house in Paris, where he conducted experiments in card guessing with her (he was a pioneer in the application of statistical methods to card-guessing experiments). The hypnotized Léonie was required to guess the identity of playing cards in sealed envelopes (later, in two sealed envelopes) which she was given to hold. She frequently took many hours over a single guess—Richet (who was himself ignorant of the identity of the cards) says "I have frequently sat by her side from 8 p.m. till 6 a.m." Out of 68 trials, Léonie guessed the card correctly in 12, the suit in 36 and the colour in 45 (Richet, 1889-90, pp.66-78). However in two further series of experiments, one at Myers's house in Cambridge, to which Richet took her in January-February 1889, and the other in Richet's Paris house in July-August, results sank to chance level or very nearly (Richet, 1889-90, pp.78-81).

In addition to her apparent successes as an experimental subject, the entranced Léonie manifested occasional examples of apparent spontaneous clairvoyance. Only a few of these are in print. The most interesting took place on 2nd July 1888, at 8.00 p.m. Richet had just hypnotized Léonie, and suddenly asked her "What has happened to M. Langlois?" Léonie replied that he had burned his left hand with a brown liquid. This was absolutely correct. At 4.00 p.m. that afternoon M. Langlois (Richet's assistant, known to Léonie) had burned his left hand in the physiological laboratory with bromine. Richet adds "I need not say that Léonie had not left my house, nor seen anyone from my laboratory. Of this I am *absolutely* certain, and I am certain that I had not mentioned the incident of the burn to anybody." (Richet, 1889-90, pp.69n-70n; cf., for other examples, Richet, 1888-89, p.164; Bickford-Smith, 1889-90). Such incidents had no doubt been of greater frequency in the somnambulant performances which had gained her her original reputation. Indeed during a discussion of a paper of Richet's, read to the Society for Psychical Research in 1888, F. W. H. Myers remarked that he had some years ago had the opportunity of studying hitherto unpublished records (presumably Gibert's) of some of these occurrences which had taken place at Havre (*JSPR* Vol. 3, p.347, 1887-88).

The experiments with Léonie are of modest importance in the history of psychical research for three reasons. First, Janet's accounts of his experiments with her, appearing as they did in the *Revue philosophique*, were important landmarks in the academic publication of papers on psychical research and generated a fair amount of interest in France and indeed Britain. Second, these experiments reinforced the long-established and highly influential tradition that mesmeric and hypnotic states (whatever they may be), and other altered states of consciousness, facilitate the exercise of telepathic and clairvoyant gifts. Third, some of the principal experimenters were either well known already in the world of science and medicine, or about to become so. Richet, although his Nobel Prize lay in the future, had succeeded to the chair

of physiology at the Paris Faculty of Medicine in 1887, and Janet was about to begin publication of the series of articles and books that made him (especially after the appearance of William James's *Principles of Psychology* in 1890) one of the best known psychologists in the world. That men of such calibre had involved themselves in psychical research helped to improve the subject's status in the learned world.

LÉONIE AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Janet's most important psychological work was just beginning, and Léonie played an important part in its inception. In a series of articles (Janet, 1886a; 1886d; 1887; 1888; cf. Myers, 1903, I, pp.322-331), and in his *L'automatisme psychologique* (1889), he developed, on the basis of his experiments with 'hysterical' patients, the foundation concepts of his highly influential theoretical standpoint. In these hysterical patients, Janet distinguished between 'total automatisms' and 'partial automatisms'. Total automatisms—for instance catalepsy, fugue, somnambulism, alternating personality—involve the whole person. Partial automatisms—for instance hysterical limb anaesthesias or paralysees, pendulum swinging, dowsing, table-tipping, automatic writing—involve mental or psychophysiological elements or systems as it were cut off from the main current of conscious life.

Many partial automatisms are to a greater or lesser extent intelligent, most dramatically perhaps in the case of well-developed automatic writing. It is to be presumed that some sort of conscious intelligence, sometimes rudimentary, sometimes quite complex, must lie behind these automatisms (Janet, 1889, p.22). Janet sometimes refers to the more developed examples of such intelligences as subconscious or secondary personalities. A subconscious secondary personality of this kind exists *simultaneously with* the main stream of consciousness. Janet regards these 'dissociated' streams of consciousness as resulting from a 'failure of synthesis' in the main consciousness due to a 'general cerebral exhaustion' characteristic of hysteria. The main consciousness becomes unable to 'hold together' or 'synthesize' all the elements of conscious life at one time, thus occasioning hysterical anaesthesias, shrinkages of sensory fields, etc. Sometimes the excluded sensations may become synthesized into a second perception, a second psychological existence, and further synthesis among the extruded elements may result in a rudimentary or indeed more than rudimentary secondary personality (Janet, 1889, p.317) existing so to speak alongside the principal personality.

Janet developed a number of ingenious stratagems for tapping these supposed secondary personalities even while the main personality was awake and active. There was, for example, the 'method of distraction', which he often demonstrated with Léonie. This involved distracting the patient's attention, for instance by having an assistant engage her in conversation, and, while she was thus occupied, creeping up behind and giving her trivial commands in a low voice. Often the subject would obey the command intelligently without realizing that she had received it, so indicating the simultaneous existence of two dissociated streams of consciousness.

In Léonie's case, as in others, the secondary personality thus tapped was demonstrably continuous with the consciousness of the 'somnambule' state

produced by hypnosis (or rather by mesmerism). The secondary personality (which called itself Léontine) would claim responsibility for the bizarre actions carried out while the main personality had been distracted. In fact Léontine's memory was altogether wider than Léonie's, and included a detailed knowledge not only of her own actions and experiences but of Léonie's also. Léonie, on the other hand, knew of Léontine's existence only indirectly through the effects of her often somewhat mischievous actions (cf. Myers, 1885-87a, pp. 246-251; 1903, I, pp. 322-326).

Léonie and Léontine were very different characters (Janet, 1889, pp. 128-129; Myers, 1887-88, p. 319). Léonie was a quiet, slow, timid, rather dull, middle-aged peasant woman, a good Catholic, a good worker about the house, absolutely honest and exceedingly loyal to her friends. Léontine was altogether livelier (sometimes excessively so), a Protestant, a conversationalist who could hold her own with savants, and considerably less suggestible than the simple-minded Léonie, for whom she was full of a contempt that could take a practical and somewhat spiteful turn. Sometimes Léontine would emerge spontaneously, and sometimes too she would manifest her presence by surreptitious actions while Léonie held centre stage.

Léontine's origins were largely lost in the distant past, when Léonie had been treated, or utilized, by mesmeric doctors. Also dating from that era was a third personality, Léonore, of whose existence Janet was at first unaware. Léonore would emerge when Léontine was in turn subjected to prolonged mesmerization. Léonore was a more serious and responsible character than Léontine, whom she regarded as a frivolous chatterbox, and would advise or warn, and also frighten, by means of an intrusive hallucinatory voice. However Richet tells us (Richet, 1889-90, p. 77n) that while Léonie and Léontine were both absolutely honest, Léonore would sometimes try to cheat in his experiments with her.

Of all Janet's subjects in this early but formative stage in the development of his ideas, Léonie was the one who impressed him most. In 1919 he remarked that it was "quite possible that the observation of these states of complete somnambulism in Léonie became a motive leading me to make my researches on the other patients" (Janet, 1925, p. 800). Now Janet's dissociationist approach to the understanding of psychopathological phenomena was for a time very influential on his contemporaries, and although for many decades thereafter he was eclipsed by Freud, he has of late (and especially since the publication in 1970 of Henri Ellenberger's monumental *The Discovery of the Unconscious*) been rising to prominence again. There is a flourishing school of modern neo-dissociationists who carry dissociationism well beyond the realm of psychopathology, and who look to him as their ancestor (on modern dissociationism see for instance Lynn & Rhue, 1994). One might even say that distant echoes of Léonie's influence still linger.

Janet's studies of hysterical patients were also very influential on F. W. H. Myers (e.g. Myers, 1903, I, pp. 322-331), who had in addition had opportunities of observing Léonie for himself. Myers's theory of the subliminal self has strong affinities with Janet's dissociationism, and was explicitly or implicitly adopted as a framework of thought by many psychical researchers until well after the middle of the twentieth century. So one might say that Léonie

deserves a footnote, or perhaps more than a footnote, in the history of theory in psychical research.

Léonie influenced Janet's thinking in a further way. Her transition from her normal to her somnambulatory state (and also her transition from her second to her third state) was marked by a period of lethargy in which contraction of the arm muscles could be brought about by pressure, and might be transferred to the contralateral arm through application of a magnet. Thereafter she would pass spontaneously through a series of substages, carefully documented by Janet (Janet, 1886d; cf. Myers, 1885-87b, pp.182-184) into a state of true catalepsy in which, with eyes open, suggestions of familiar or habitual actions or poses would be carried out automatically. From catalepsy she would move, again through various intermediate substages, into lucid somnambulism, and from somnambulism, likewise through intermediate stages, back to lethargy.

In an early paper (Janet, 1886d), Janet used these observations not exactly to cast doubt on the influential claims of Charcot and his school, who held that there were three definable stages of *grand hypnotisme*, lethargy, catalepsy and somnambulism, each initiated by certain physical stimuli, but to hint that these claims were over-simple and might require modification. Later (Janet, 1925, I, pp.187-192) he used them to offer an explanation of how Charcot and his followers at the Salpêtrière came to be so egregiously misled. Janet states that he eventually obtained the notes made by Dr Perrier of Caen, one of Léonie's original mesmerizers, of his sittings with her, and that he also read articles contributed by Perrier around the same time to the *Journal de magnétisme*. He learned that in 1860, and even earlier, Perrier was distinguishing phases in the mesmeric sleep of his subjects, and was already characterizing them by modifications of sensibility, by cataleptic postures, and by reflex contractions induced by various stimuli (Janet, 1925, I, p.190). The hypnotic phases which he, Janet, had witnessed with Léonie were relics of these earlier phases.

Janet goes on to cite other mesmeric writers of the mid nineteenth century who distinguished somewhat comparable phases of the mesmeric state, and concludes that "though we do not find a verbatim anticipation of Charcot's teachings in these books on magnetism, we find a sufficient number of the elements of that teaching to enable us to affirm that the doctrine of the three states and of the physical modifications characteristic of them derives from the old theory and practice of animal magnetism" (Janet, 1925, I, p.191). Janet offers some further speculations about how these doctrines may have been introduced into the Salpêtrière, and become embodied in the behaviour of Charcot's star subjects. It would, however, take us too far afield to pursue the matter further.

LÉONIE AND THE DREYFUS AFFAIR

The last, least known, and most unlikely aspect of Léonie's career is her emergence as a bit-player in that most notorious of French *causes célèbres*, the Dreyfus affair. In 1894 Alfred Dreyfus, a captain in the French army, was convicted of selling military secrets to a foreign power, and condemned to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. Dreyfus, who was of Jewish stock, was totally innocent and had been framed. There was a strong element of anti-Semitism

in the furious controversies that surrounded the case until his final complete exoneration in 1906. Gibert, passionate as always in the cause of Truth and Justice, quickly became a keen *dreyfusard*. He had Léonie come to his house and held somnambulist séances with her, at which, apparently, he sought to obtain clairvoyant information relevant to the case. He also persuaded Alfred's brother, Mathieu Dreyfus (the Dreyfus family, like the family of Gibert's wife, were mill-owners from Mulhouse), a principal campaign organizer, to come to Havre for a séance. Léonie gave Mathieu various pieces of correct information about his wife and children, and, speaking as though she could see Alfred, said in a somewhat puzzled way that he was wearing spectacles. Mathieu pointed out that Alfred always wore an eyeglass, but it later transpired that he had found it necessary to change to spectacles.

Mathieu was sufficiently impressed to return to Havre on several further occasions, where he received from Léonie (that is, from Léontine) various names and pieces of information of definite relevance to the case (Dreyfus, 1978, pp.48-51). He became interested in hypnosis himself, and was instructed by Gibert in the necessary techniques. Léonie then came to stay with Mathieu's sister in Paris. He seems to have carried out, with apparent success, experiments resembling those that Richet and Janet had previously undertaken with her (Dreyfus, 1978, pp.64-65). And she continued to provide information ostensibly relevant to the case and the campaign, and to have clairvoyant visions of the distant Alfred. On one occasion she announced that the latter could no longer see the sea—they had constructed a stockade around his hut (Carroy & Plas, 1995, p.57; Bredin, 1987, pp.117n-118n). This, though not known in France at the time, turned out to be correct. It seems that Léonie, who had a strong sense of justice, threw herself into the work with enthusiasm.

Gibert was a prominent *dreyfusard* in his own right, and he became the object of some press speculation after Félix Faure became President of the Republic in 1895. Faure came from Havre and had been a patient and friend of Gibert's. Rumours spread that he had granted Gibert a private interview and had revealed to him a fact of great potential importance to the pro-Dreyfus campaign. Not surprisingly the press got wind of Gibert's séances with Léonie. They were first mentioned in print towards the end of 1897; and for three months after Gibert's death in March 1899 they received a good deal of publicity in what came to be called *l'affaire Gibert*. (Somewhat surprisingly Léonie's surname does not seem to have found its way into the newspapers.) For *antidreyfusards* the discovery of Gibert's association with Léonie, and of the possible role of her clairvoyant revelations in the campaign, was a boon. For *dreyfusards* it was a considerable embarrassment. Some responded by emphasizing the serious and scientific nature of Gibert's work on hypnosis; others hinted that the involvement with Léonie was a senile aberration; a few even denied her very existence.

A much more detailed account of Gibert's and Léonie's roles in the affair is given in a recent, very informative article by Carroy and Plas (1995), who are, so far as I know, the first writers to bring together all the aspects of Léonie's career. It is curious that recent historians of the Dreyfus affair (e.g. Bredin, 1987, pp.116-118), though they deal with the matter of Gibert's

somnambule, have generally speaking not bothered to look further into Léonie's antecedents and her role in Janet's experiments, a role which was in fact clearly spelled out in 1903 by Joseph Reinach in a footnote to his *Histoire de l'affaire Dreyfus* (Reinach, 1903, p.172). It is even more curious that neither Richet (a strongly committed *dreyfusard*) nor Janet (a more cautious one) mentions Léonie's involvement in the Dreyfus affair, though both of them wrote about her long after it was over.

These brief notes on Léonie's career are intended simply to outline what is currently known about her. A fuller account of her "strange and eventful life" (a project which tempted Janet—Janet, 1925, I, p.189) might present her as caught up in, and also reflecting back into and influencing, several interesting movements of her time—animal magnetism and its links with French occultism; hypnotism and its affiliations with psychopathology; the vogue of multiple personality disorder in France; the beginnings of psychical research; the political agitation just mentioned. But at the moment the gaps in our knowledge of her career are perhaps too large for such an undertaking.

Several photographs of Léonie have survived. The best I have seen are two taken by Eveleen Myers (F. W. H. Myers's wife) during Léonie's visit to Cambridge. They are reproduced in W. T. Stead's *Real Ghost Stories* (Stead, 1891, pp.18-19). One is of Léonie, placid and serious, the other of Léontine, relaxed, eyes closed, and with an appropriately enigmatic slight smile.

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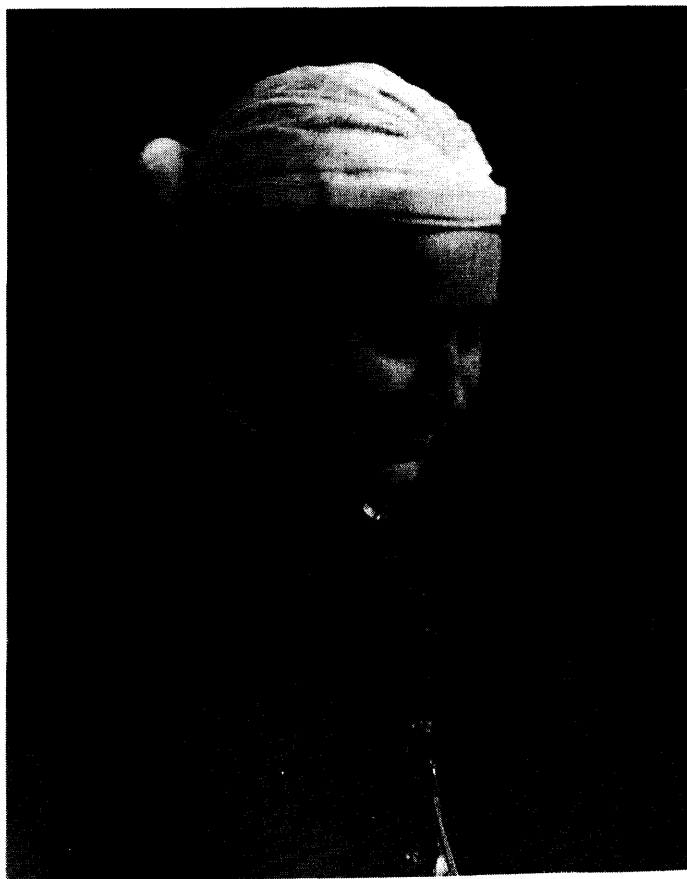
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Léonie (photo by Eveleen Myers)

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Léontine (photo by Eveleen Myers) National Portrait Gallery, London

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