

H-France Forum

Volume 11 (2016), Issue 6 #1

Sabine Arnaud, *On Hysteria: The Invention of a Medical Category between 1670 and 1820* Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xii + 357. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (c.l). ISBN: 9780226275543

Review Essay by Catherine Chiabaut, Yale University

Sabine Arnaud's is the product of a thesis defended in 2007 and pursued in *cotutelle* at the City University of New York and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). It is first and foremost an attempt to correct the ingrained misconception of hysteria as a nineteenth-century diagnosis invented to pathologize and control women's sexuality. But *On Hysteria* is also a book that seeks to innovate methodologically, straddling disciplines and asking its readers to think differently about ideas, their context, their genesis, and their medium. For that reason, as well as for its important contribution to the history of hysteria, Arnaud's book is an important read.

In her first chapter, Arnaud uncovers the early-modern roots of the diagnosis, starting with its elevation from a loose set of disparate symptoms to a cohesive and singular disease - then known as "the vapors" - in the last decades of the seventeenth century. Analyzing a wide array of French but also English, Scottish, and German medical treatises, she shows that what came to be known as "hysteria" was primarily associated not with gender but with class in the eighteenth century. Generally seen as a nervous condition - rather than a disease of the uterus, as its name would suggest - hysteria was attributed to both men and women of the aristocracy and intellectual elite.

Not until the end of the century, and particularly in the aftermath of the French Revolution, did hysteria become a women's disease. In her sixth and final chapter, Arnaud argues that this change was the result of two concurrent radical shifts: the attempts by French physicians to secure for themselves the role of moral and civic arbiters of the new nation, and the exacerbation of sexual difference and hierarchy in response to a post-revolutionary flattening of social distinctions (pp. 207-8; 241). The eventual feminization of hysteria, Arnaud concludes, was the result of several factors: social instability, the ways in which medicine negotiated its place in the midst of this volatility, and the projection of political anxieties onto the issue of women's hygiene and moral health.

Arnaud is interested in literary form. She is a scholar of narrative techniques and rhetorical devices, and her own formal choices in writing on *Hysteria* are significant. Rather than confining her historical narrative to an introductory chapter, she chose to divide it, dealing with its first hundred years in her first chapter, and its last fifty years in her final chapter. This five chapters-long intermission, and the resulting flattening out of her historical narrative, is symptomatic of Arnaud's strong anti-teleological stance. As a scholar, Arnaud states, she is not interested in strict historical evolution and progression (p. 4). Indeed, Arnaud is uncompromisingly critical of what she calls the "teleological agenda" underlying Ilza Veith and Etienne Trillat's canonical studies on hysteria (p. 225).[1] Both Veith and Trillat's posited that the Enlightenment gave rise to an increasingly

rationalized conception of the human body. Arnaud, for her part, analyzes the writing practices of doctors such as Pierre Pomme, Franz Anton Mesmer, or Jacques-Henri-Désiré Petetin to demonstrate not only the diversity that characterized representations of the hysterical body throughout the eighteenth century, but the enduring fantastical dimension and metaphysical aspirations of those representations.

Arnaud's anti-teleological commitment shapes both her book and the type of arguments she formulates. To avoid over-simplifying, she favors repetition, exhaustivity, and lateral movements over linearity, progression, and synthesis. Her chapters, organized around broad conceptual themes, are often broken down into discrete subsections. In her first chapter, for instance, she spends thirty-two pages drawing out a chronological medical history of hysteria and the vapors from 1670 onward, only to conclude on ten stand-alone pages regarding the religious discourse on the disease in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Likewise, her second chapter takes the form of a "catalog" of metaphors, approaching each in relative isolation. On a broader structural level, Arnaud's fourth chapter, which deals with the appropriation of the "vapors" by the French literary elite, focuses "on the same time period" as her third (p. 136), which deals with the use of literary genres by physicians. This acknowledged circularity can sometimes leave the reader with a temporary feeling of disjointedness or inconclusiveness. But in no way does this constitute a major fault. Arnaud's formal and organization choices are performative; they challenge the reader to think differently about the writing and reading of history. And, by refusing to streamline her arguments, by welcoming paradoxes and tangents, she allows herself to present a complex and exhaustive exposé of her subject. Her close-readings are meticulous, delving deeply into her many sources, not only situating them in their cultural context but highlighting their textual aporias and singularities. In that sense, *On Hysteria* is a generous book, rich in little-known sources, and eager to draw the reader into the texts it presents rather than using them as evidence for a broader synthetic argument.

Arnaud's skepticism vis-à-vis various meta-narratives explains her criticism of major historical frameworks that are contiguous to the history of hysteria. To begin with, she rejects Thomas Laqueur's theory that a "two-sex model" of anatomy and identity emerged and eventually triumphed in the eighteenth century. The idea of men and women's physical incommensurability, Arnaud's argues, largely predated the period Laqueur designates for its inception, and co-existed with rather than replaced ancient notions of sexual identity (p. 72). Similarly, writing against the Foucault of *The Birth of the Clinic*, Arnaud rejects the idea that the clinical language of nineteenth-century medicine was the culmination of an eighteenth-century impulse to observe and classify pathological phenomena (p. 77). Rather than striving for objectivity and rationality, the discourse that emerges from eighteenth-century treatises on hysteria is one that relies heavily on metaphors - analyzed in Arnaud's second chapter - and on narration - analyzed in her fifth. Indeed, as Arnaud demonstrates convincingly in her sixth chapter, physicians wrote treatises on hysteria not to observe and report but to present themselves as experts on the subjects of humanity and sociability. The goal was not to demonstrate abstract medical knowledge, but a personal connection to their patients as well as their status as moral leaders (p. 251). In no way, Arnaud's concludes, can the discursive practices of eighteenth-century doctors be presented as precursors to the clinical language analyzed by Foucault.

If Arnaud distances herself from critical giants such as Foucault and Laqueur, it is not just because she objects to their particular arguments; it is also because she is trying to theorize and demonstrate a new approach to the history of medicine, as well as to the conjoined study of literature and history. The topic of hysteria itself serves as a pretext for the testing and illustrating of such a method. In her preface, she admits that her book approaches hysteria "not as an illness, but as an example" (p. x), as a telling demonstration of what she calls "the ways that enunciation of medical knowledge operated between 1670 and 1820" (p. x). To a certain extent, Arnaud's true object of study is therefore not so much the medical category of "hysteria", but - as hinted at in her title - the process by which medical categories themselves were invented throughout the eighteenth century.

Arnaud, more specifically, is interested in the ways in which these categories were created in language. She describes her project as a "history of forms of enunciation in writings", taking pains to differentiate it from a kind of sweeping "history of ideas" (p. 6). In this, she is indebted to Foucault, from whose project in the *Birth of the Clinic* she nevertheless distances herself. Rather than charting the evolution of a specific medical language and discourse, with its own logic and grammar, she focuses on the ways in which distinct discursive practices - narration, rhetoric, figures of speech, quotations - came together to produce medical knowledge. This formal focus allows Arnaud to distance herself from another methodological tendency - the New Historicist bent of many studies of eighteenth-century literature and medicine of the last few decades.[2] Rather than seeing literature and medicine as two mutually-illuminating discourses, she applies the tools of literary analysis and rhetoric to non-literary texts, erasing the boundaries between genres, and postulating the existence of metaphor, narrative, and quotation as their common grammar.

At times, by dint of her genre-abolishing focus on form, this literary scholar might appear to neglect literature itself. In contrast to comparable studies like Anne Vila's *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (mentioned in Arnaud's bibliography) or Mary McAlpin's *Female Sexuality and Cultural Degradation in Enlightenment France: Literature and Medicine* (not mentioned), Arnaud devotes remarkably little space to literature proper.[3] Only in her fifth chapter does she parcel out a dozen or so pages to the sustained analysis of Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, Charlotte Lennox' *The Female Quixotte*, William Godwin's *Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, and Diderot's *La Religieuse*. For the literary scholar, this disproportion might be jarring; and for the historian, Arnaud's interest in formal discursive practices might lack immediate appeal. But the discomfort that her method elicits is one of *On Hysteria*'s strengths. This is an ambitious book, one that asks us to rethink the ways in which the study of history and of literature interact, while masterfully illustrating what this interaction might look like.

NOTES

[1] Etienne Trillat, *Histoire Critique de l'Hystérie* (Paris: Seghers, 1986); and Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 1973).

[2] This formal focus also implicitly distances Arnaud from approaches that could be called more "body" centered - the approach of psychoanalysis, favored by Veith, or that of gender studies. The latter get a nod in her bibliography through the inclusion of a few canonical texts of feminist theory but scarcely figure in the body of her book and do not explicitly shape her argument.

[3] Mary McAlpin, *Female Sexuality and Cultural Degradation in Enlightenment France. Medicine and Literature* (Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2012); and Anne C Vila. *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of 18th Century France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998).

Catherine Chiabaut
Yale University
Catherine.chiabaut@yale.edu

Copyright © 2016 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Forum nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum
Volume 11 (2016), Issue 6 #1