



# Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness

By Mark S. Micale

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**Hysterical Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness** By Mark S. Micale

Over the course of several centuries, Western masculinity has successfully established itself as the voice of reason, knowledge, and sanity?the basis for patriarchal rule?in the face of massive testimony to the contrary. *Hysterical Men* boldly challenges this triumphant vision of the stable and secure male by examining the central role played by modern science and medicine in constructing and sustaining it.

Mark Micale reveals the hidden side of this vision, that is, the innumerable cases of disturbed and deranged men who passed under the eyes of male medical and scientific elites from the seventeenth century onward. Since ancient times, physicians and philosophers had closely observed and extravagantly theorized female weakness, emotionality, and madness. What these male experts failed to see?or saw but did not acknowledge?was masculine nervous and mental illness among all classes and in diverse guises. While cultural and literary intellectuals pioneered new languages of male emotional distress, European science was invested in cultivating and protecting the image of male, middle-class detachment, objectivity, and rationality despite rampant counter-evidence in the clinic, in the laboratory, and on battlefields.

The reasons for suppressing male neurosis from the official discourses of science and medicine as well as from popular view range from the personal and psychological to the professional and the political. They make for a history full of profound silences, omissions, and amnesias. Now, however, under the greatly altered circumstances of today's gender revolution, Micale's work allows this story to be heard.

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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

Do not waste much time on hysteria in men. Leave hysteria to women and children, advised a German doctor in 1887 in response to noted French physician Jean-Martin Charcot's notions that men could manifest hysteria. Micale, an associate professor of history and the history of medicine, University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, has uncovered a wealth of information that rebuts much of the traditional medical and popular thinking about men and emotional distress. Micale charts nervous diseases in men from the 17th century until Freud. It was only in 1859, in a medical text by Pierre Briquet, that detailed attention was paid to male hysteria, and he noted that doctors didn't see the condition because they did not want to see it. Micale's canvas is broad and, while the book has a history of science slant, it is also a work of cultural criticism, charting the changes in acceptable masculine affect, as exhibited in works like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Micale brings much fascinating information together with élan. 18 b&w photos. (Nov.)

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#### From [Booklist](#)

According to medical historian Micale, for millennia physicians have diagnosed hysteria from a great variety of symptoms, from heart palpitations to fainting to an inability to think clearly and more. Since the etymology of hysteria traces back to the Greek word for uterus, and since men do not have this reproductive item, it may seem safe to assume that men are incapable of presenting this particular nervous disorder. But not so. During some periods of history, the female specificity of hysteria was considered near gospel. During as many others, the term was applied to males, too. For reasons epistemological, political, and psychological, application was contingent upon the status of and attitudes toward female independence. In the great French revolutionary period, for instance, when women sought equal rights, the term was gender nonspecific. In the succeeding reign of Napoléon, distinguished by paternalism, the myth that men were exempt from psychic weakness was preferred. Overall, this is a pretty interesting study, a bit pedantic, perhaps, of how diagnostic specificity waxes and wanes with the tides of politics. --Donna Chavez

#### Review

An absolutely first-rate inquiry into the history of psychiatry and the shape-shifting entity called hysteria. No one concerned with the significance of gender can ignore Micale's thoughtful, engaging, and discerning analysis. *Hysterical Men* will be widely and enthusiastically reviewed -- and read. (Charles Rosenberg, Harvard University)

An excellent guide to the territory of male hysteria. Because he has so thoughtfully and self-consciously explored the elusiveness of male hysteria, Micale sees what the great modern explorer, Freud, saw when he was able to look - chiefly at himself. Micale's book should be the prolegomena to any future study of male hysteria. (Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Columbia Center for Psychoanalytic Training and Research)

*Hysterical Men* engages the problems and meanings associated with the gendering of mental illness as "male" during the late nineteenth century. Micale's account is clear, direct, and, more important, balanced in its reading of major figures involved in this debate, including that self-diagnosed hysterical Sigmund Freud (Sander L. Gilman, Emory University)

Micale documents the evasions, suppressions, and distortions in medical investigations of this archetypal 'female' disorder for over three hundred years. This is a fully-realized cultural history of hysteria which

opens to us a unique perspective on the interrelationships between Western medicine, the myriad literary representations of the disease, and the social history of gender since the seventeenth century (Robert A. Nye, Oregon State University)

"Do not waste much time on hysteria in men. Leave hysteria to women and children," advised a German doctor in 1887 in response to noted French physician Jean-Martin Charcot's notions that men could manifest hysteria. Micale has uncovered a wealth of information that rebuts much of the traditional medical and popular thinking about men and emotional distress. Micale charts nervous diseases in men from the 17th century until Freud. It was only in 1859, in a medical text by Pierre Briquet, that detailed attention was paid to male hysteria, and he noted that doctors didn't see the condition because "they did not want to see it." Micale's canvas is broad and, while the book has a history of science slant, it is also a work of cultural criticism, charting the changes in acceptable masculine affect, as exhibited in works like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Micale brings much fascinating information together with élan. (Publishers Weekly 2008-09-01)

Micale writes here about what he calls the "hidden history" of male nervous illness, or hysteria, exploring its denial and theories in males from the early modern period through the early 20th century. The author of many other books and articles on hysteria, Micale ranges from incidents in England, France, and other parts of Europe to Frenchman Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud, drawing on mostly primary sources, such as letters, diaries, essays, and novels, because the topic was excluded from mainstream historical resources. He concludes that "hysteria" was mostly thought to be a woman's disease and that the research period is one of missed opportunities, as male psychologists were incapable of seeing mental conditions in themselves. Micale acknowledges modern progress in "masculine self-understanding," though he admits that the process is still in development. An excellent book overall. (Leigh Mihlrad *Library Journal* 2008-10-15)

[A] fascinating book by historian Mark Micale, whose research is enriched by his extensive knowledge of European intellectual debates and his particular interest in France...If you are interested in the links between medicine and literature, if you are a student of gender or of mental health...you simply must buy this book. (Pauline M. Prior *Times Higher Education* 2008-12-11)

Micale has done more than tell a good story... What Micale has accomplished is a tour de force of medical, cultural, and psychological detective work. In his hands, the three-thousand-year refusal of the medical world to acknowledge the existence of hysteria in any but females is proven to have a perfectly understandable psychoanalytic basis, but it has taken a scholar of wide-ranging intellectual background and enormous perspicacity to build, era by era, to its discovery and the construction of his impressively supported thesis. He has provided a model for other scholars to follow, not least in demonstrating by example that a historian of medicine must be also a historian of culture. (Sherwin B. Nuland *New Republic* 2009-04-15)

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