

Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN and ALAN LEE

Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture

By Elaine Showalter. London: Picador. 1997. 244 pp. £19.99 (hb). ISBN 0-3303467-09

Following publication of her book, Showalter came under fire from a variety of quarters, in particular, self-help groups for chronic fatigue syndrome and Gulf War syndrome. While perhaps shocked by the fervour of these attacks, which were often vindictive and personal, she clearly recognised that in associating these and the other disorders dealt with in this book – satanic ritual abuse, recovered memories and alien abduction – with the term ‘hysteria’, she was courting trouble. She seems, however, partial to a little controversy. As a professor of English specialising in womens’ literature, previous books such as *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* and *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* have brought her into conflict with both the medical profession and perhaps even more dauntingly, the feminist movement. However, this book departs from her previous work by concentrating on late 20th-century epidemics and perhaps for the first time she has been faced with a new critical audience – patients themselves.

The book is divided into three sections, the first covers the rise of modern hysteria. This provides the psychiatrist reader with not only a ‘medical history’ of the changing use of the term, but also underlines the role of gender stereotyping associated with its use. Case histories of male hysterics were described by Charcot and Freud but in completely different terms. The men were more anonymous (being referred to by an abbreviated surname rather than a first name) and case histories were less frequently published. Thus, they have not become the archetypes that are Anna O and Dora. Where acknowledged, male hysteria was associated with femininity, delicateness and homosexuality. The term ‘hysteria’ can be relied upon to arouse fierce debate among feminists – to whom it represents the trivialisation of womens’

legitimate grievances. Psychiatrists have on many occasions sounded its death toll and it has disappeared or been mutated in the classification systems used in psychiatry today.

The second section looks at the intersection between the activities of the medical world and those of literature, theatre and film. She points out that the traffic has not been one way. As early as 1855, Flaubert’s *Emma Bovary* provided the subject of a hysterical narrative which went on to become a central motif in avant-garde art. More recently the genres of science fiction, horror movies and conspiracy psychodramas have provided the plot lines to fill out the anxieties which have become our modern plagues. Showalter reserves particular criticism for the feminist writing of recent times. The reinterpretation of the metaphors and silences of earlier literature to ‘rediscover’ abuse, incest and trauma in the narratives of women authors of the past, has made hysteria the “wastepaper basket of literary criticism” – not only when the heroines are mute or nervous invalids, but also when they are merely unhappy, rebellious or disorderly.

The final section deals with the evolution of the five syndromes mentioned above. Showalter admits an awesome array of source material into her book – ranging from tabloid headlines, womens’ magazines, broadsheets, self-help group literature, through to government papers, scientific articles and professional literature and also a wide range of literary sources – fiction, film and theatre. This may make some readers wary these are not scientific references, but to claim that is to misunderstand the nature of the work. The evolution of these disorders demonstrates the impact of word of mouth, mass communication and the media. She points out the impact of irresponsible journalism, not only tabloid conspiracy theorists, but also the so called ‘informed’ broadsheet articles and first-person narrative accounts which regurgitate uncritically studies of poor or dubious quality.

“Happy is the country that has no history”

The same could be said of ailments. When unencumbered by association with the term ‘hysteria’, these recent epidemics have both professional recognition and enthusiasm as well as collective face validity. As is so often the case, however, association with the psyche, rather than with some external force currently being held responsible for the miseries of the modern world, results in loss of legitimacy. Showalter points out the common themes of sexual guilt, fear of contamination and paranoia which have typified past ‘epidemics’, such as the witch hunts of the 17th century, mysticism and mesmerism of the 18th century or the hysteria and neurasthenia of the 19th century. The contents of our current epidemics are projected into the representatives of today’s feared external forces – governments, men, new technology and chemicals. Some have argued that they fulfil a need, occupying a spiritual void, pointing out the parallels between therapy and confession.

Astonishingly, Showalter remains cautiously optimistic; she is enthusiastic about the use of appropriate psychotherapies and points out the cyclical nature of past epidemics which have tended to be short-lived. However, as she hints, the model for the next hysteria is already being mapped out, the plots are there. The medical profession is complicit in the conception of these disorders. The enthusiasm of doctors to discover a new syndrome (even if naming it after themselves is now uncommon) is a constant danger. Be on the look out – it might be you.

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Cognitive Science and the Unconscious

Edited by Dan Stein. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press. 1997. 217 pp. ISBN 0-88048-498-5

Cognitive-behavioural therapy is rapidly becoming the dominant psychotherapeutic paradigm within contemporary mental health services. Analytic therapists use a number of different arguments to cope with their relative decline.

By far the most interesting response, however, is to explore the possibility that cognitive-behavioural therapy and analytic therapy use different languages to describe