

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

Hysteria Complicated By Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux. By Jan Goldstein. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 246 p. ISBN 978-0-6911-52370 \$24.95)

Harold Merskey

Volume 35, Number 1-2, 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014004ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014004ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Merskey, H. (2012). Review of [*Hysteria Complicated By Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux*. By Jan Goldstein. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 246 p. ISBN 978-0-6911-52370 \$24.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 35(1-2), 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014004ar>

Copyright © Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association /
Association pour l'histoire de la science et de la technologie au Canada, 2012

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

the plate which means from this reviewer's point of view not necessarily engaging in another educative program of women but rather eliminating the obstacles in the way of making the choice to breastfeed.

Both books under review overlap in many areas. *Babies for the Nation* is both narrower and broader. Narrower because the focus is Quebec and in particular French Quebec. Broader because Baillargeon takes a more encompassing look at motherhood and what infant feeding means culturally, socially, politically, and religiously. *The Best Way?* addresses many of those but not as deeply for it is trying to cover the country and 150 years of history and does so through policy decisions and efforts on the part of the federal government. Women's voices and lives come out more in the first and science more in the second. Common to both books is the tension between the private sector and the public, between the 'experts' and women. But as with any good book the three authors leave this reader wanting to know more about the marketing of infant food—a fascinating topic which needs more examination both as a business and cultural endeavour. Similarly, trying to figure out how any educative program can convince a population is a question that doesn't really get answered in either of the books. What both books do is to expand our awareness of health care's various stakeholders and the challenge of getting them to work together even when all are agreed on the necessity of protecting our most vulnerable of our citizens—infants.

WENDY MITCHINSON
University of Waterloo

***Hysteria Complicated By Ecstasy: The Case of Nanette Leroux.* By Jan Goldstein.** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. 246 p. ISBN 978-0-6911-52370 \$24.95).

Jan Goldstein is a leading social historian of French nineteenth century medicine. The book tackles classical eighteenth and nineteenth century ideas of hysteria by presenting two major manuscripts dealing with a single case. Two 19th century terms in her title require definition. Ecstasy refers to what is more often called Catalepsy, i.e., a sudden loss of consciousness not due to epilepsy and usually brief in duration. Ecstasy was most common around the time of Franz Anton Mesmer who had begun treatment called "animal magnetism," later transmuted into hypnosis. In the early nineteenth century, the term Hysteria implied a disorder mediated by the nervous system and accompanied by symptoms of mood change in women and matched in men by something called Hypochondria. These conditions were often accompanied by sadness less than that of

melancholy. Thus in one viewpoint it was probably an umbrella term for anxiety, moderate depression, and various physical symptoms.

Antoine Despine (1777-1852) was a physician practicing in Aix les Bains, a small town in Savoy, where he had followed his father as head of the state-run spa. Despine recorded at length an unusual case of a country girl, Nanette L., treated in the spa, but he wanted it reported as a scientific study. Alexandre Bertrand (1795-1831) was a young physician and scientist from Paris whom Despine recruited to describe the unusual case scientifically. Bertrand died at age 35 in an accident and his manuscript seems not to have been completed before his death. Savoy, a backward part of France, had not long before been ruled by the Dukes of Piedmont and the social conditions, changes and social attitudes are meticulously described.

The present book is distilled from the study of several manuscripts, principally two, describing the case. The manuscripts are meticulously described and reviewed by Goldstein.

The case history is presented, as well as local laws and the contemporary treatment that we might today call hydrotherapy. Miss Leroux, a young woman of eighteen, attributed her symptoms to being frightened repeatedly by an evil policeman who on several occasions “tried to offend her modesty.” The symptoms commenced in the summer of 1822 when she manifested a variety of “nervous symptoms.” The most prominent included convulsions, lethargy and the rigid immobile posture then called Catalepsy—stiff muscular contractions with fixed arms, legs and other body parts in the positions that they happened to occupy when the symptoms took hold. She also engaged in sleep walking with her eyes closed, performed tasks or acted out “scenes” as if on a stage, and then would recall nothing that had transpired.

“The first therapeutic breakthrough occurred in January 1833 due to the interventions of the layman Mailland.” He assured her strongly and eloquently that her speech would return, but the cure was not lasting. Mailland spent time with her and played various roles in which she cast him, including that of her fantasized suitor. Mailland used sign language when she was mute. When she had nightmares he comforted her on his knees. She continued, changing nevertheless despite her friendship with him. Despine treated her with hydrotherapy, in particular the Scottish Shower, a stream of cold water directed at one part of the naked body while the rest of the body is already immersed in hot water. “Advances” in the mode of treatment led to jets of water at 110 degrees Fahrenheit and temperatures as low as that of melting ice. Alternatively, hot water might be provided first and then, when sweating began, a barrel of ice cold water was poured abruptly over the body followed by immersion in cold water “just like a blacksmith douses his red hot iron”. She did not like those treatments and seemed to get out of having them with a little

Scottish shower of her own invention which was gentler and more efficacious than the genuine article. Late in the course of the illness she took a drinking glass and marched it over her body, placed it mouth down like a cupping glass over her left nipple and experienced an “overall shudder” plus “an electric fire” to her insides. She then found her nervous illness was gone, became happy, active and hard working and married in January 1825. With marriage and pregnancy symptoms recurred but only briefly and the account ends there.

At the time she had received sensations in peculiar ways. Once she told Mailland (p.156-157) that to be understood by her, one had to be in touch with some of the portals of the communicating regions on the surface of her body. Her mother arranged for her to work with a maid by tying a string around their legs: by this means they had spoken to one another perfectly. Once this phenomena had been observed it led to other instances of the transposition of the senses, e.g., when a book was placed against her pubis (p.160). She said to a companion “take an egg, break it at both ends, if the whites come out from one side and the yolk from the other, put a little of the white on my left breast, cook the rest for me to eat.” While the eggs cooked she complained of a devouring fire. She threw herself on the ground with cries of lamentation. The cooked egg was given to her. She began to eat it and had hardly eaten a bite when she was cured. Later she had supper and ate with a healthy appetite. At 9:00 pm “she goes to bed where she is immediately seized with convulsions, and suffers throughout the night in every conceivable way.”

Such extreme contradictions in common sense as well medical knowledge are not tolerated in practice—except in the production of multiple personality disorder, now inadequately camouflaged as “dissociative identity disorder” in which it is still possible for patients to have impossible experiences. Nevertheless the record is interesting and frequently astonishing in the detail provided of the patient’s antics and the Doctor’s tolerance.

The author attempts to provide an explanation in terms of either Foucauldian or Freudian theory. She does not take into account the substantial social historical evidence that has demolished the credibility of Freudian theories. While the mechanisms of defence are still fairly credible, Freud’s own interpretation and his claim to have discovered them are not. Nietzsche’s description has priority and Freud’s interpretation has lost credibility thanks to the evidence of blatant inconsistencies, unreliability and fanciful thinking by Freud. Ellenberger’s *Discovery of the Unconscious*, the Freud-Fliess letters edited by Jeffrey Masson, typical writings of Adolf Grunbaum and Frederick Crews, and the precise studies of Allen Esterson, all combine to make it clear that Freud cannot be taken to be a reliable scientist and that the mechanisms that he most convincingly presented were not those original to himself.

Comparing Freud with Foucault is useless not only because of the weaknesses to be found in Freud's work but because of the wide divergence of Foucault's ideas from any practical form of psychiatry. Today, the Hysterical paradigm is rarely found in psychiatric practice in developed countries. Typical forms are usually recognized immediately. Lesser forms seem to come, if they come at all, in a context of anxiety and depression which gives a suitable focus for positive treatment. Apparent cases in neurological centers may be found to relate to physical disorders.

It is disappointing that a meticulous scholar like Dr. Goldstein treats with apparent respect theories that have no reasonable credibility in scientific medicine. Her work of social historical scholarship and documentation is impressive, but the claim by her publisher's blurb of an extraordinary contribution is overblown.

HAROLD MERSKEY

University of Western Ontario

***Contested Medicine: Cancer Research and the Military.* By Gerald Kutcher.** (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. x + 247 p., notes, bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-226-46531-9 \$40.00).

In 1959, Dr. Eugene Saenger proposed a study to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) which would test the effects of total-body irradiation (TBI) on the human body. From 1960 to 1971, Saenger (under contract to the DOD) headed a trial which exposed advanced cancer patients to high levels of radiation. According to Saenger, the primary objective of the trial was to improve the treatment of patients with advanced cancer. Of secondary importance, he claimed, was the military component: that is, while the investigators would gather data about the effects of radiation on the human body during treatment, this would have no impact on clinical decision-making. However, as Gerald Kutcher points out, in essence Saenger was using these patients as "proxies" for soldiers, in order to understand how radiation would affect combatants while operating on the nuclear battlefield (p.5). While Saenger's colleagues in general levied only mild criticism of his study, his work was vilified in the contemporary press, particularly in 1971, and has been criticized since as "among the most egregious experiments of the cold war period" (p.1). In 1972, the study was closed down completely. However, according to Kutcher, this was not due to ethical concerns on the part of Saenger's peers per se. Rather, significant media and public pressure forced the president of the University of Cincinnati to shut down the study: the catalyst was the public discovery that Saenger had secretly negotiated a contract renewal with the