

My installation is about female hysteria, the historical prejudice against uncontrollable, overly emotional, or just plain annoying women that originated from it, and the promotion of male dominance in medical fields that came as a result of it. Combined with the video, my project aims to look at how hysteria is represented in the media as well as how the increased availability of news, especially through social media, can create a culture of misinformation and a general lack of knowledge, thus leading to the creation of mass hysteria.

I wrote the entire story of *The Yellow Wallpaper* on yellow wallpaper. I had read it many times before, but transcribing it on the wallpaper forced me to look at the story more closely. As the story progresses, the narrator seems to be swallowed up by the yellow wallpaper, and constantly moving the paper up more and more almost gave me a sense of vertigo. For the sculptural part, I wanted to show the more modern definition of hysteria which is one that forgoes the word's medical origins and smooths it over as just another word that means overly emotional or excited, and I, therefore, decided to represent hysteria's historical meaning as a dark mass, lurking somewhere below a swath of bright colors that obstruct the original intent of the word's meaning.

I have always questioned gender roles and wondered why women are expected to do things that men are not and vice versa. This project made me wonder why women are expected to be less active than men and clean up messes rather than make messes themselves, and it also made me wonder why men, especially in medicine, are authoritative figures that give themselves the power to belittle or dismiss women's thoughts, feelings, and concerns. Asking myself these questions has made me notice more power imbalances in my life and realize the immense power in defying norms.

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# The Sane Conclusion: Female Hysteria and Mental Illnesses

Lucy J.



## *Preface*

I'm named after my great-grandmother Lūcija Alutis-Kreicbergs who was the only female photographer that owned her own studio in Riga, Latvia just after World War I. Famous Latvian photography historian Pēteris Korsaks calls her a “prominent and legendary personality in Latvian culture”<sup>1</sup>. She was doing the unthinkable — she was a woman who owned her own business at a time when not many women had their own businesses, and in doing so, she influenced the art and cultural scene in Latvia.



My grandmother, Ingrida Jurēvics, was an ophthalmologist who emigrated to Canada from Latvia during World War II, graduating from the University of Western Ontario in 1955 with a bachelor's degree and in 1956 with a medical degree. She became a Fellow in the American College of Surgery and a Fellow in the American Academy of Ophthalmology, and after retiring in 1994, she continued to support Latvian ophthalmologists by teaching eye surgery in Latvia and supplying medical instruments to Latvian ophthalmologists.

In short, these were women who stood tall and strong in the face of adversity and didn't take any shit from anyone — they defied many preexisting stereotypes to push the boundaries of their careers. Despite the strong example they set, women in their fields were still pushed aside as they were dominated by men. Common misconceptions like the idea that women aren't capable of leadership or that if women are mad or annoyed, it's because they're on their period, continue to allow men to dismiss women's feelings and knowledge, and this isn't a new tactic. The idea of female hysteria has been around for centuries and used to be a common diagnosis for women presenting symptoms of a “tendency to cause trouble for others,”<sup>2</sup> but how does the creation of and continued use of the medical term “hysteria”, especially as applied to women, further promote male dominance?

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<sup>1</sup> "Leģendārajai fotogrāfei Lūcijai Alutis-Kreicbergs — 120." *Foto Kvartāls*, June 2009, 86-89. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://fotokvartals.lv/2006-2010/17/eindex.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Maines, Rachel P. *The Technology of Orgasm: “Hysteria”, the Vibrator and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female\\_hysteria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Female_hysteria).

## *A History of Hysteria*

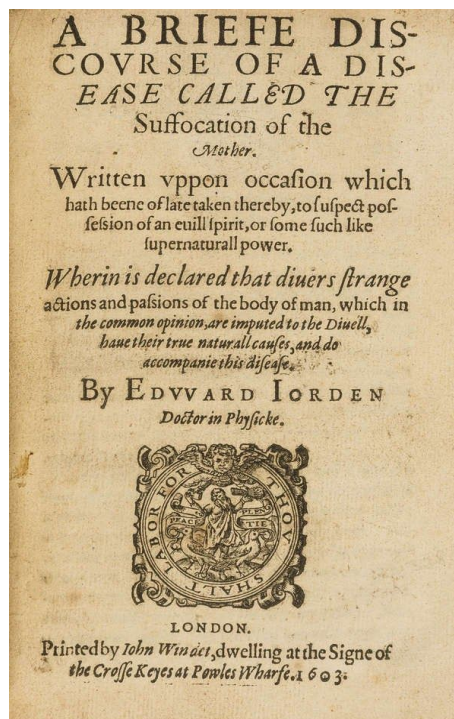
Hysteria was the first mental illness that could be attributed to women, dating all the way back to Greek and Egyptian beliefs that a woman's uterus could wander around her body and it would infect any organs it came into contact with. It became a catch-all medical diagnosis with symptoms ranging from anxiety, fainting, and insomnia to being uncontrollable, overly emotional, or irritable<sup>2</sup>. In fact, it was only removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, and up until then, it was a "formally studied psychological disorder"<sup>3</sup>. If anything, this vast period in which female hysteria was either a physical ailment or a mental illness goes to show the extent of male dominance in the field of medicine. The fact that its classification changed from a physical ailment to a mental illness goes to show that this was a rather common point of deliberation — it was talked about and studied enough that professionals decided to change the category it was in.

Regardless of what category it was in, it could only affect women because they had a uterus. There were many different ideas about how the uterus's role in female hysteria, from philosopher and physician Galen (130-210AD) who thought that keeping the "female seed" in the woman's womb was the cause of her symptoms, to classical authors who drew up almost any

troublesome or worrisome behavior in women to their sex organs<sup>3</sup>. Still others thought it was menstruating that was causing these symptoms. Edward Jorden, a "Doctor in Physicke" (a physicist, 1569-1632), wrote about female hysteria in his 1603 book, *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, the first English text on this topic:

But if this blood wanting his proper use do degenerate into the nature of an excrement, then it offendeth in quality as well as in excess, and being detained in the body, causeth diverse kinds of symptoms, according to the quality and degree of the distemperature thereof....

Lastly, the perturbations of the mind are oftentimes to blame both for this and many other diseases. For seeing we are not masters of our own affections, we are like battered cities without walls, or ships tossed in the sea, exposed to all manner of assaults and dangers, even to the overthrow of our own bodies.<sup>4</sup>

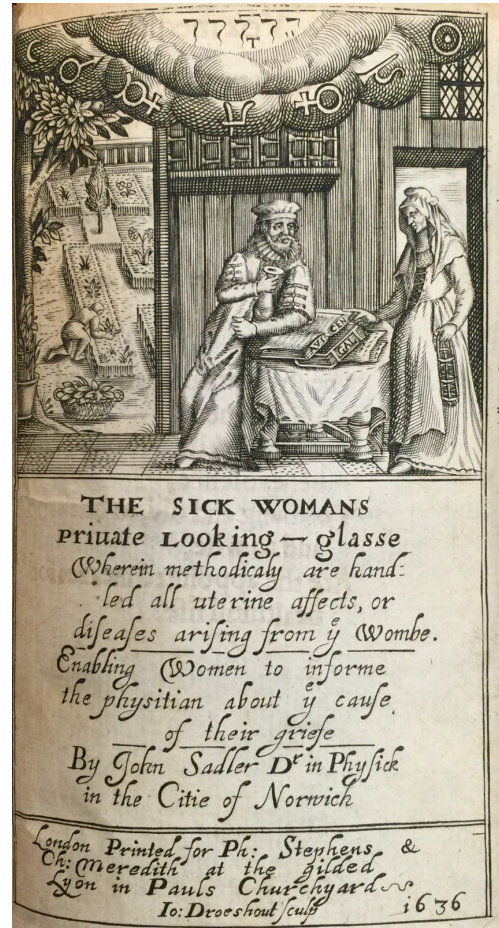


<sup>3</sup> McVean, Ada. "The History of Hysteria." McGill Office for Science and Society. July 31, 2017. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history-quackery/history-hysteria>.

<sup>4</sup> Jorden, Edward. "From A Brief Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother (1603)." In *King Lear: Evans Shakespeare Edition*, by William Shakespeare, compiled by Vincent F. Petronella, 269-71. Boston, MA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2012. Accessed April 25, 2020.

In this excerpt, Jorden describes the impurity of menstrual blood and the problematic symptoms it causes. He says that by blood seemingly voluntarily leaving the body, it must be evil or there must be something wrong with it, and given that humans can't control who they are attracted to, a woman's mind must be pretty messed up to unconsciously force some of itself out. He describes menstruating as a sickness, showing that he could label a natural process in women as an illness or disorder and have people believe him without questioning his qualitative logic. He sets out the parameters for this disease so that anyone whose blood is leaving their body for no apparent reason could have it, and although it is a rather broad prognosis, it definitely fits more women than men. His somewhat sexist diagnosis was the first of its kind, thus setting an example for future doctors to further promote male dominance in medicine.

Given Jorden's example, many scientists continued to blame everything wrong with women on their menstrual blood and other "offending fluids"<sup>2</sup>. John Sadler (1615-1674) was an English physician who wrote about the "uterine affects, or diseases arising from the womb" in his 1636 book titled *The Sick Woman's Private Looking-Glass*:



## II. Of the Retention of the Months

The suppression of the terms is an interception of the accustomed evacuation of the blood, which every month should come from the matrice, proceeding from the instrument or matter vitiated. The part affected is the womb, and that of itself, or by consent.

### *Cause*

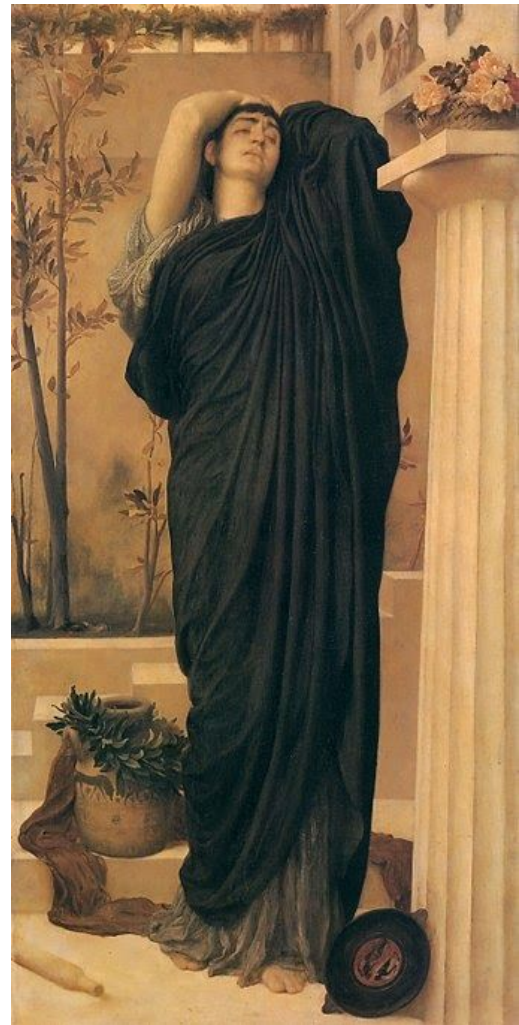
The cause of this suppression is either external or internal. The external cause may be heat or dryness of the air, immoderate watching, great labor, vehement motion, and the like, whereby the matter is so consumed, and the body so exhaust[ed], that there is not a superplus remaining to be expelled; as is recorded of the Amazonites, who being active, and always in motion, had their fluxions very little, or not at all. Or it may be caused by



cold, which is most frequent, making the blood viscous and gross, condensing and binding up the passages, that it cannot flow forth.<sup>5</sup>

Sadler here takes another stab at the topic of menstruation. This time, it's argued that women suppressing their menstruation is what makes them crazy — the blood must be “evacuated” every month or else it affects the womb and its ability to keep the woman sane. He writes that the Amazonites (the Amazons), an infamous band of fierce women who were famous for killing men, hardly menstruated because they were so active. With this mention of the Amazons, Sadler basically recommends that women stay inside and be as inactive as possible in order to stay mentally sane. It's also interesting to note Sadler's descriptions of the weather and climate and “dryness of the air” in their impact on a woman's body — he warns against being too hot or too cold because it would make the body exhausted or risk freezing the blood, and either way is cause enough to make women stop menstruating and go crazy. In essence, Sadler advises women to sit inside all day (preferably in a temperature-controlled room) and do nothing. If anything, this clearly benefits men, as they no longer have to worry about women indulging in troublesome or worrisome behavior because doing so would make them hysterical. With the clever use of a “medical” diagnosis for behavior they find unpleasant in women, men were able to promote their existing control over women with logic that, at the time, was indisputable.

Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893) was one of the first French neurologists who studied hysteria through close observation and was thus able to describe specific symptoms. He thought there was a specific physical cause for hysteria<sup>6</sup> and even believed that it was due to a weak hereditary neurological system, therefore using hypnotism to induce in his patients hysteria-like symptoms as he believed a hypnotized state was “very similar to a bout of hysteria”<sup>7</sup>. He lectured on his findings to medical students, one of



<sup>5</sup> Sadler, John, *The Sick Woman's Private Looking-Glass* (Norich: John Droeshout, 1636; Ann Arbor, Text Creation Partnership, 2011), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A11278.0001.001/1:10.2?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

<sup>6</sup> Plessen, K. "Jean Martin Charcot and his controversial research on hysteria." PubMed. December 10, 1996. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9019881>.

<sup>7</sup> "A Science Odyssey: People and Discoveries: Jean-Martin Charcot." PBS. Copyright 1998. Accessed April 25, 2020. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/bhchar.html>.


Preeminent healer **Doc CONSTANTINE** affirms  
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whom was Sigmund Freud, who continued researching and developing Charcot's theses and wrote a number of studies on female hysteria over a 35 year period from 1880-1915. Freud came to the conclusion that there wasn't a physical catalyst causing hysteria but instead some kind of "psychological scar produced through trauma or repression"<sup>3</sup> — which he found to be the realization in young females that they had no penis and were castrated. He referred to this realization as an "Oedipal moment of recognition,"<sup>3</sup> one that developed even from the womb as boys grew "castration anxiety" and girls grew "penis envy". From this stemmed a hatred in women towards their own sex for not having a penis<sup>8</sup>, for which the treatment was to marry

a man and have children (and thus lots of marital sex). Having children with penises would help her get over her penis envy. This set out a medical basis for women to socially and sexually please men, furthering their subservience to male dominance.

However, if marriage wasn't a good or viable option, another option became popular in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century — the uterine massage — and it's exactly what it sounds like. Thure Brandte, a Swedish Army Major, invented it originally to help soldiers with conditions like prolapsed anuses and soon it was used to treat just about everything in women. Brandte opened several super successful clinics around the world, each of which would treat 117 patients a day at most, and quite obviously, each session (which ended when a "paroxysmal convulsion", now known as an orgasm, was achieved) was "long and physically exhausting" for doctors, and this led to the creation of vibrators<sup>3</sup>. Although in retrospect the sexual aspect of these treatments is hard to miss, it wasn't officially acknowledged, and doctors at the time wanted to avoid it becoming conflated with sex, so the sane conclusion that some advocated for was to hurt female patients, "or at least causing them discomfort"<sup>3</sup>, which leads down a long road of unethical medical practices on women. However, at some point after 1910 or so, this practice fell into the category of alternative medicine, thus bringing its widespread use (mostly) to an end.

**Aids That Every Woman Appreciates**



**Portable Vibrator.**  
 No. 57P6301 Neat, compact vibrator with three applicators, as shown. Very useful and satisfactory for home service. Shipping wt. about 3½ pounds.  
 Price.....\$5.95



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 Include the special connection, three applicators and handle. Not necessary to buy a complete vibrator if you have the Home Motor. Shipping weight, about 8 ounces.  
 No. 57F6302 Price.....\$1.35

<sup>8</sup> Gay, Peter. *The Freud Reader*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989. Accessed April 25, 2020. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus\\_complex#Feminine\\_Oedipus\\_attitude](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oedipus_complex#Feminine_Oedipus_attitude).

## Modern Hysteria

Despite the medical term hysteria being deleted from the official Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980<sup>9</sup>, the word continues to be used beyond its medical origins. The word “hysteria” comes from the Greek word *hysteria*, meaning womb<sup>9</sup>, and thus it’s no surprise that this is the word used that historically described an illness specific to women. But as this definition died off (or really, just as it was disregarded and swept under the rug), a similar definition came up — one with a similar meaning that’s just a bit softer around the edges. Googling “hysteria” reveals that the word now only references “exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion or excitement, especially among a group of people” and cites Christmastime-induced frenzy. It gives the psychiatric and medical definition a “controversial history as it was formerly regarded as a disease specific to women” and notes that it is “not now regarded as a single definite condition”<sup>10</sup>.

Although the historical medical meaning of hysteria is now disregarded, another kind of hysteria crops up: the creation of mass hysteria. It’s been around for centuries, recorded as early as the dancing plague of 1518<sup>11</sup>, and later, the Salem witch trials in the late 1690s, but it seems to come up more now as we have access so much information at our fingertips. With social media becoming ever more prevalent, fake news and other disinformation is increasingly common and it’s getting harder to tell what’s real and what’s not<sup>12</sup>. From this can stem misinformation and a general lack of knowledge. The trouble with fake news and misinformation is that anyone can read it and believe it’s true — even the president of the United States, who recently suggested that “disinfectants could be injected or ingested to fight COVID-19”<sup>13</sup>. “He’s like the family member around the dinner table that doesn’t have a grasp of what reality is and is willing to speak



<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “hysteria,” accessed April 25, 2020.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hysteria>.

<sup>10</sup> “Hysteria.” In Google. Accessed April 25, 2020.

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=hysteria&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>.

<sup>11</sup> Viegas, Jennifer. “‘Dancing Plague’ and Other Odd Afflictions Explained.” *Discovery News*, August 1, 2008.

Accessed April 25, 2020.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20121013075434/http://dsc.discovery.com/news/2008/08/01/dancing-death-mystery.html>.

<sup>12</sup> BBC. “The rise and rise of fake news.” November 6, 2016, BBC Trending. Accessed April 27, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-37846860>

<sup>13</sup> Riechmann, Deb, and Aamer Madhani. “No, don’t inject disinfectant: Outcry over Trump’s musing.” *AP News*, April 26, 2020. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://apnews.com/697d9ecef7f89cf5e9abb3b008c7faa7>.



with confidence despite it,” said presidential historian at Princeton University Julian Zelizer to AP News<sup>13</sup>. The day after Trump’s claim, NPR accordingly reported that “New York City says its poison control center received a higher-than-normal number of calls,”<sup>14</sup> and many disinfectant companies have released blunt statements telling customers not to ingest cleaning products<sup>15</sup>. The Surgeon General even tweeted:



**U.S. Surgeon General**  @Surgeon\_General · Apr 24

A reminder to all Americans- PLEASE always talk to your health provider first before administering any treatment/ medication to yourself or a loved one.

Your safety is paramount, and doctors and nurses are have years of training to recommend what’s safe and effective.

 8.6K

 6.6K

 26.8K



This all goes to show that if there’s one thing that Donald Trump is good at, it’s stirring up mass hysteria — he’s able to spread potentially deadly misinformation, and given his status, he’s able to pass it off as speculation or sarcasm or even flat-out deny that he’d said it. This is a dangerous power for the president of the United States to have and it sets a negative example both for future presidents and other men across the world.

Although Trump suggesting that people inject disinfectants to clean their lungs may be the most recent example of him inducing mass hysteria, it’s certainly not the first. Since the 1970s, more than 25 women have accused Trump of sexual misconduct, who, in response, “repeatedly denied the accusations, denouncing his accusers as ‘liars’”<sup>16</sup> and threatened to sue all of them. He alleged that not only were the claims false, but the women who “fabricated” them were being paid great sums of money to hurt his political campaign<sup>16</sup>. Whether or not the claims were true, the White House said that “Trump’s election proves the American people don’t consider the allegations disqualifying”<sup>16</sup>. In this case, Trump created hysteria centered on women’s bodies, and by denying the allegations against him with a wave of his hand, he belittled women’s ideas and concerns and denied them the right to their own bodies.

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<sup>14</sup> Slotkin, Jason. "NYC Poison Control Sees Uptick In Calls After Trump's Disinfectant Comments." *NPR*, April 25, 2020. Accessed May 1, 2020.

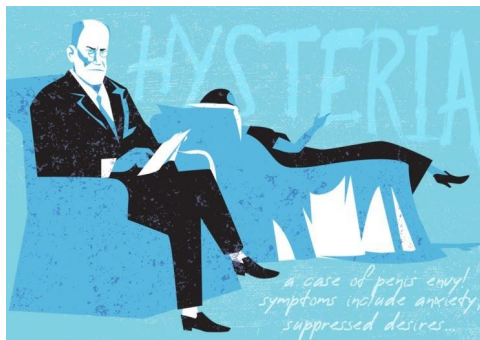
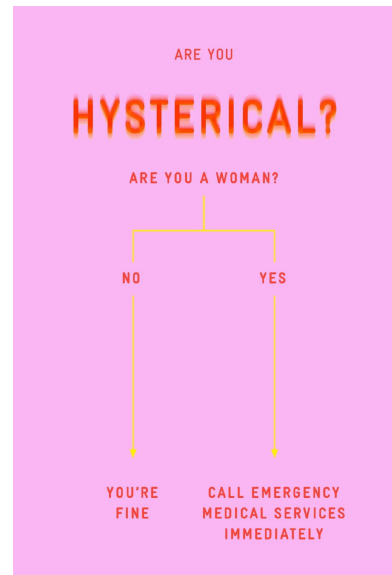
<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/25/845015236/nyc-poison-control-sees-uptick-in-calls-after-trumps-disinfectant-comments>.

<sup>15</sup> Valinsky, Jordan. "Lysol maker: Please don't drink our cleaning products." *CNN*, April 24, 2020, CNN Business. Accessed May 1, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/24/business/lysol-disinfectant-trump-coronavirus/index.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Relman, Eliza. "The 25 women who have accused Trump of sexual misconduct." *Business Insider*, May 1, 2020. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/women-accused-trump-sexual-misconduct-list-2017-12>.

### ***Lingering Impacts and Implications of this Legacy***

As the word “hysteria” and its meaning evolve to be used increasingly beyond its medical origins, ideas like the Greek and Egyptian wandering womb theory and Freud’s “penis envy” hypothesis are not forgotten and cannot be erased. Even though the word now means overly emotional and excited, people in power continue to use it to disparage and belittle women’s bodies and emotions. Hysteria continues to be represented in the media with stories like [\*The Yellow Wallpaper\* by Charlotte Perkins Stetson](#) and is similar to gaslighting (defined as “manipulat[ing] (someone) by psychological means into questioning their own sanity”<sup>17</sup>), a term that originates from a 1944 black and white movie entitled [\*Gaslight\*](#). Modern magazines like Vogue have released articles explaining [\*What It Really Means When You Call a Woman “Hysterical”\*](#) and delve into hysteria’s medical origins.



The historical reign of male dominance in medicine continues, and further research could be done into how this historical prejudice continues to impact women in the field of medicine today, both as doctors and as patients.

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<sup>17</sup> "Gaslight." In *Google*. Accessed May 3, 2020.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=gaslighting&oq=gaslighting&aqs=chrome..69j57j0j46j015.1582j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>.

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