

With a disciple, Paul Richer, he published a collection of medieval artworks illustrating his thesis that religious experiences depicted in art could be explained as manifestations of hysteria.²⁷ Charcot and his followers also entered into acrimonious debates on contemporary mystical phenomena, including cases of stigmatics, apparitions, and faith healing. Charcot was particularly concerned with the miraculous cures reportedly occurring in the newly established shrine at Lourdes. Janet was preoccupied with the American phenomenon of Christian Science. Charcot's disciple Desiré Bourneville used the newly established diagnostic criteria in an attempt to prove that a celebrated stigmatic of the time, a devout young woman named Louise Lateau, was actually a hysteric. All of these phenomena were claimed for the domain of medical pathology.²⁸

It was thus a larger, political cause that stimulated such passionate interest in hysteria and gave impetus to the investigations of Charcot and his followers in the late nineteenth century. The solution of the mystery of hysteria was intended to demonstrate the triumph of secular enlightenment over reactionary superstition, as well as the moral superiority of a secular world view. Men of science contrasted their benevolent patronage of hysterics with the worst excesses of the Inquisition. Charles Richet, a disciple of Charcot, observed in 1880: "Among the patients locked away in the Salpêtrière are many who would have been burned in former times, whose illness would have been taken for a crime."²⁹ William James echoed these sentiments a decade later: "Amongst all the many victims of medical ignorance clad in authority the poor hysteric has hitherto fared the worst; and her gradual rehabilitation and rescue will count among the philanthropic conquests of our generation."³⁰

While these men of science saw themselves as benevolent rescuers, uplifting women from their degraded condition, they never for a moment envisioned a condition of social equality between women and men. Women were to be the objects of study and humane care, not subjects in their own right. The same men who advocated an enlightened view of hysteria often strongly opposed the admission of women into higher education or the professions and adamantly opposed female suffrage.

In the early years of the Third Republic the feminist movement was relatively weak. Until the late 1870s feminist organizations did not even have the right to hold public meetings or publish their literature. At the first International Congress for the Rights of Women, held in Paris in 1878, advocates of the right to vote were not permitted to speak, because they were considered too revolutionary.³¹ Advocates of women's rights, recognizing that their fortunes depended upon survival of the fragile new

democracy, tended to subordinate their interests in order to preserve consensus within the republican coalition.

But a generation later, the regime of the founding fathers had become securely established. Republican, secular government had survived and prospered in France. By the end of the nineteenth century, the anticlerical battle had essentially been won. In the meantime, it had become more problematic for enlightened men to pose as the champions of women, for women were now daring to speak for themselves. The militancy of feminist movements in the established democracies of England and the United States had begun to spread to the Continent, and French feminists had become much more assertive on behalf of women's rights. Some were pointedly critical of the founding fathers and challenged the benevolent patronage of men of science. One feminist writer in 1888 derided Charcot for his "vivisection of women under the pretext of studying a disease," as well as for his hostility toward women entering the medical profession.³²

By the turn of the century, the political impulse that had given birth to the heroic age of hysteria had dissipated; there was no longer any compelling reason to continue a line of investigation that had led men of science so far from where they originally intended to go. The study of hysteria had lured them into a netherworld of trance, emotionality, and sex. It had required them to listen to women far more than they had ever expected to listen, and to find out much more about women's lives than they had ever wanted to know. Certainly they had never intended to investigate sexual trauma in the lives of women. As long as the study of hysteria was part of an ideological crusade, discoveries in the field were widely applauded and scientific investigators were esteemed for their humanity and courage. But once this political impetus had faded, these same investigators found themselves compromised by the nature of their discoveries and by their close involvement with their women patients.

The backlash began even before Charcot's death in 1893. Increasingly he found himself called upon to defend the credibility of the public demonstrations of hysteria that had enthralled Parisian society. It was widely rumored that the performances were staged by suggestible women who, knowingly or not, followed a script dictated under hypnosis by their patron. At the end of his life, he apparently regretted opening up this area of investigation.³³

As Charcot retreated from the world of hypnosis and hysteria, Breuer retreated from the world of women's emotional attachments. The first "talking cure" ended with Breuer's precipitate flight from Anna O. He