
H-France Review Vol. 22 (January 2022), No. 12

Jessie Hewitt, *Institutionalizing Gender: Madness, the Family, and Psychiatric Power in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020. 252 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5017-53312.

Review by Alison Downham Moore, Western Sydney University.

Jessie Hewitt's first major work is filled with nuanced and measured interpretation of the kind one might expect of an experienced scholar in the history of psychiatry. But a freshness of approach is also generated by the author's novel engagement with the emergent fields of disability history and of mad studies—focused on the subjective experience of those deemed medically insane—along with a determination to consider the history of psychiatric institutionalization from below, reading both between the lines of alienist accounts, as well as the letters and published works of their patients.

The theoretical decision to define the subjects of nineteenth-century psychiatry anachronistically as people living with disabilities is an important response to the failure of historians of psychiatry to pay adequate attention to the perspectives of those in the past who were patients. The poignancy of that position is illustrated particularly in early nineteenth-century French treatments of alienism, a major focus of this book, which frequently entailed such violent practices as blasting cold water repeatedly into the faces of asylum patients in the view that it might reawaken their forgotten rationality. The disability frame brought to bear on the history of French psychiatry is clearly a presentist imposition—there was patently no such category of meaning in medicine of this period—though notably even without such a frame, alienism's contemporaries still sometimes construed patients as innocent victims and aspects of their treatment as cruel, pointless and unjust.

Historians are generally wary of obvious presentism on the grounds that it obscures the unique contours of meaning that defined past concepts and ways of seeing. But Hewitt navigates this territory with much finesse, attending closely to the rationales clinicians provided for their practices and to the discursive norms that informed their ways of interpreting patient responses. The use of anachronistic terms to describe a past before such concepts were formed is an important heuristic technique of many of the styles of historical inquiry to emerge since the 1970s and which have sought to uncover past people overlooked by previous historians. New interpretative frames informed both by changing definitions of the subjects of human rights and by re-readings of the past according to new societal values are necessary for the continued relevance of historical inquiry, weighed against the commitment of historians to try to see the

past through the eyes of those who lived it. Hewitt straddles these two demands with great subtlety in her thoughtful reading of nineteenth-century doctors and patients.

Hewitt reminds her readers that “doctors in the nineteenth century did not recognize the distinction between sex and gender. The idea that masculinity was a construct rather than a fact of nature would have struck them as absurd” (p. 3). However, French doctors of the early nineteenth century did sometimes ponder if women’s apparent inferiority to men was natural or merely a product of their education and societal restriction. Perhaps what they would have found more absurd is the idea that their patients were living with something understood as a disability, though here too it might be argued that an emerging view of patients as blameless sufferers of an illness was certainly a concept in French alienism by the 1840s. While Hewitt explicitly recognizes the presentism of the term “gender,” she does not flag a similar complexity in her use of the term “disability.” While the discussion of gender is pivotal to Hewitt’s analysis of alienists’ ideas about how men and women should behave and of the roles they imagined for themselves, the disability frame is never specifically brought to bear to unlock something about psychiatric treatment in the same way, but instead is woven into consideration of the intersectional nature of how some patients (particularly women) were treated as mad with reference to their unconventional familial roles. The disability frame also appears foundational to Hewitt’s inquiry into patient letters and writings with a view to capturing more of their complete personhood, not merely their roles performing as the subjects of the unfolding drama of French psychiatry’s treatment regimes. The book ends with a reflection on still current ways of categorising mental illness and a call for the “eradication of rationality’s equation with personhood” (p. 175).

The book utilizes the frame of gender in a dazzling multiplicity of ways in the analysis of nineteenth-century French psychiatric thought and practice, examining both how failures to adhere to normative ideals of men’s and women’s behavior and roles often underlay the diagnosis of patients as mentally ill, but also how the role of the family was ambivalently understood as both the source of psychopathology or even of degeneration, and yet re-integration of patients into the family was often nonetheless viewed as a signifier of treatment success. It considers how alienists understood themselves as father figures and infantilized their patients, and how they used ideals of masculine honor in the psychological charades in which they engaged patients. There is close consideration of the involvement of the families of psychiatric patients in their institutionalization, which is contextualized in relation to changing cultural values of paternal authority in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The consideration of gender crosses between the differing approaches to men and women as patients, but also the role of women as unofficial alienists in the private asylum system and the response of psychiatric men to them.

The first two chapters of the book concentrate on the period from the time of Philippe Pinel under the Directorate until the July monarchy of the so-called bourgeois king Louis Philippe, during which time French psychiatry gained continual esteem, culminating in the *loi sur l’enfermement des aliénés* of June 30, 1838, that mandated the provision of a public asylum in every *département*. This law formalized two distinct pathways for the institutionalization of an individual, via either the police or the request of the family, both of which relied upon the authority of psychiatric clinicians. Jean-Étienne-Dominique Esquirol and his students Félix Voisin and Étienne-Jean Georget, as well as the debate between the doctors François Leuret and Esprit Blanche about *le traitement moral*, are the focus here. Hewitt evokes the founding “fathers” of French psychiatry motif ironically to draw attention to the gendered personae crafted by these

alienists, as well as to their use of ideals of masculine honor to shame their patients into treatment compliance.

Chapter three provides a riveting account of the Brierre de Boismont family's unique private asylum in which patients were integrated into a bourgeois familial social world, complete with its own salon for debate. Perhaps the most intriguing feature of this was the utterly idiosyncratic childhood it generated for the daughter, Marie Rivet, who was both raised and living in her parents' asylum alongside the patients, and later ran her own private asylum at Saint Mandé in the Val-de-Marne *département* near Paris. Chapter four is the one most clearly demonstrating Hewitt's commitment to the history of psychiatry from below, featuring three case histories of people who found themselves on the wrong side of the 1838 law, it seems, largely because their authoritarian fathers objected to their life choices. In each case, their resistance to treatment was read as a sign of *délire de persécution*, according to the diagnostic criteria of the Charenton alienist, Henri Legrand du Saulle. Such cases are contextualized with reference to the growing intellectual concerns in French culture about unjust asylum commitment evoked in theatrical plays from the 1840s to the 1870s.

Chapter five focuses on the response of asylum directors throughout the 1870-1871 invasion, civil war, and siege of Paris. Again here, there are fascinating anecdotes drawn from the diaries and letters of psychiatrists that demonstrate their continual preoccupation with matters of masculine honor. In this period, as in both 1830 and 1848, Hewitt shows the complicity of French psychiatry with the state repression of revolutionary movements through the generation of views about revolutionaries as maniacs. Chapter six examines the growing criticism of psychiatry at the fin-de-siècle, the importance of degenerationism in the psychiatric view of families, and the reform of the asylum system away from a model that assumed curing the insane was possible and toward a view of institutionalization as a means to protect society from patients who were now deemed both incurable (because degenerate) and a menace to society, as seen in the account of Charles Féré. As a bonus, the conclusion offers further substantive consideration of patient experience in the case of Marie Esquiron, about whom other historians have also written because, unusually, she published a memoir of her incarceration in 1893, in order to plead her case for release to the ministry of justice. Hewitt offers a new interpretation of this case, suggesting evidence that, tragically, this highly lucid woman's pleas went unheard and that she spent the remainder of her life in an asylum until her death in 1912.

The English translation of the *le traitement moral* as "the moral treatment" clearly fails to convey the peculiar significance of this term, owing to the numerous meanings and uses of the French word *moral* in the nineteenth century, which signified variously something equivalent to the terms "mental," "psychological," "emotional," "spiritual," "personal," or "principled." It seems that Pinel's use of the word to refer to a forceful form of psychiatric treatment that aimed to dissuade patients of their troublesome passions encompassed indeed all these meanings. Other historians writing in English before Hewitt have similarly used this inadequate translation, but some attempt to define Pinel's term in this book might have been helpful, given the importance of the treatment method among Hewitt's examples of the gendered motifs in nineteenth-century alienist personae.

Hewitt's engagements with existing scholarship on the history of French psychiatry concentrate heavily toward the work of Jan Goldstein, Ian Dowbiggin, Robert Nye, and William Reddy. The most directly relevant specialist works in French are also cited and discussed, such as those of

Jacqueline Carroy, Jean-Christophe Coffin, Aude Fauvel, Nicole Edelmann, Laure Murat, Yannick Ripa and, of course, Michel Foucault, who is taken to task for letting individual alienists too readily off the hook by depersonalizing the discourses they promoted. The ratio of engagement with secondary Anglophone relative to Francophone secondary scholarship is markedly skewed toward the former, as is conventional in Anglophone books on the history of France. Some of the generalist French scholarship on the history of psychiatry with which Hewitt might have been expected to engage is certainly less relevant since it has been concentrated on the twentieth century, such as Jean-Noël Missa's superb *Naissance de la psychiatrie biologique: Histoire des traitements des maladies mentales au XXe siècle*, which covers a period beyond the scope of Hewitt's own study.[1] But there are also some notable generalist French works covering nineteenth-century psychiatry that French scholars might be surprised to see not mentioned, including Yves Pélicier, *Histoire de la psychiatrie*; Claude Quézel, *Nouvelle histoire de la psychiatrie*; Jacques Postel, *Eléments pour une histoire de la psychiatrie occidentale*, as well as Ginette Jubinville, *L'Art et l'architecture au temps des premiers aliénistes français*, which is based on her Montréal doctoral work of 2014 on the broader representation of French psychiatry in nineteenth-century culture.[2] But for a short book such as this one, the breadth of scholarly engagement is already substantial. And as those of us who work between different languages know all too well, one cannot cite every piece of relevant scholarship as comprehensively as monolingualist historians might do.

This is a specialist study that also yokes the history of French gender and family in psychiatry to the larger movements of cultural change in familial roles and in class consciousness through the tumultuous perturbations of French politics and society in the nineteenth century. Hewitt shows asylum life to be a lens for the shift from authoritarian paternal authority in the eighteenth century toward the bourgeois affective order of the nineteenth. As such, it would make excellent reading for university courses in gender history, medical and psychiatric history, or French social and cultural history. Wonderfully too, this stellar piece of highly original scholarship is available both as a very affordable paperback and as an open access ebook via the Cornell University Press website, which is fortunate since it most certainly deserves to read.[3]

NOTES

[1] Jean-Noël Missa, *Naissance de la psychiatrie biologique: Histoire des traitements des maladies mentales au XXe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006).

[2] Yves Pélicier, *Histoire de la psychiatrie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971); Claude Quézel, *Nouvelle histoire de la psychiatrie* (Paris: Dunod, 1994); Jacques Postel, *Eléments pour une histoire de la psychiatrie occidentale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007); and Ginette Jubinville, *L'Art et l'architecture au temps des premiers aliénistes français* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2020).

[3] Cornell University Press URL as an open access ebook for non-commercial purposes: <https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501753329/institutionalizing-gender/>.

Alison Downham Moore
Western Sydney University
Alison.Moore@westernsydney.edu.au

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172