Neurasthenia and Manhood in fin-de-siècle France

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Let's not forget that the vigour of humanity is composed of the vigour of men.

Dr. F. Aumont, L'Estomac des gens du monde

Nervous weakness, the protean heart of neurasthenia, sits uncomfortably alongside modern representations of manhood. This is partly the case because, thanks to the association of nervousness with hysteria, it has historically been viewed as a quality more properly found among women. Due largely to the etymology of the term and the traditionally female constituency of those who were diagnosed with the malady, it is undeniable that during the nineteenth century hysteria carried definite connotations of femininity, which is partly why the 'discovery' of male hysteria during the 1870s caused such a furor in medical circles. Yet did being diagnosed with neurasthenia truly represent a way for men to be safely nervous without compromising their sense of manhood? Edward Shorter has suggested that many fin-de-siècle men welcomed the neurasthenia diagnosis as a more flattering alternative to the overtly feminising implications of hysteria. After all, he reasonably wonders, 'What forty-year-old businessman would want to see himself as hysterical?' It is also true that physicians emphasised the indiscriminate nature of neurasthenia's reach and demonstrated how, by being fuelled by all sorts of exhaustion and hyperstimulus, it respected neither boundaries of sex nor of class. Despite his insistence that male hysteria did not necessarily entail any loss of manly vigour, however, in his diagnostic practice the famed neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot seems to have reserved the neurasthenia label for bourgeois male patients with hysteria-like symptoms while placing working-class men into the category of male hysterics. Charcot even extended this division into his description of the varieties of neurasthenia, indicating that traumatic 'hystero-neurasthenia' was
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most often experienced by working-class men. This quarantining of proletarian neurasthenia from its bourgeois counterpart indeed suggests, as Sonu Shamdasani points out, a divergence between a formal medical desocialisation of neurasthenia and the lingering tendency to carve out in practice class distinctions that doubled as markers of gender difference.¹

Historical accounts of neurasthenia often follow a medical and psychiatric trajectory, plotting a course from Beard’s resurrection of the term through its falling out of favour during the 1920s, citing along the way key intellectual changes from a belief in the somatic foundations of mental disorders to more strictly psychological explanations epitomised by Freud and his followers. This chapter rather moves between the world of official medical discourses on the disorder and wider cultural understandings of what being a neurasthenic male meant in France at the fin de siècle. By situating itself within the very divergence that Shamdasani has observed, it is concerned less with the rise and fall of neurasthenia as a diagnostic category than with the shifting fortunes of male nervousness during a period when masculinity was said to be in a state of crisis. Beyond the question of the gender strategies of medical practice – that is, the subtle efforts of physicians to shield bourgeois men from too close an association with femininity – it inquires into the success of these strategies within a culture where the ‘real’ man was viewed as a vanishing breed. What did it mean for a man to be diagnosed with a disorder like neurasthenia during such a crisis period? How did fashionable affirmations of neurasthenia sit alongside competing claims that nervousness and emotivity in general were incompatible with manliness? In short, what cultural forces were at play to render the very notion of a ‘neurasthenic man’ somewhat oxymoronic?

There are no simple answers to such questions. If the pervasiveness of what Robert Nye has called an ‘organicist discourse of national decline’ highlights the difficulty of confining a discussion of neurasthenia and manhood to strictly medical parameters, it also illuminates how events that are often considered eminently ‘political’ were themselves cast in the language of such discourses.² This chapter thus argues that the shifting status of the neurasthenic male in France was as much a social and political phenomenon as it was a medical issue, and that any attempt to answer the questions posed above necessarily entails juggling a wide range of contemporary concerns. Similarly, it also means adopting a selective approach to a complex issue that has more dimensions than can be coherently broached within current space restrictions.

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