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Reclaiming Space: Feminist Hysteria in Cixous and Clément, Gilman, and Ferrante

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Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore the concept of "hysteria" as it is reclaimed by the feminist thinkers/authors Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Elena Ferrante. I begin with a brief overview of the historical connotations of hysteria, showing how the metaphor of hysteria mythologized a patriarchal notion of femininity before being re-mythologized for feminism. I then investigate how Gilman and Ferrante have situated themselves within this myth, using *The Newly Born Woman* by Cixous and Clément to contextualize Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Ferrante's first two novels, *Troubling Love* and *The Days of Abandonment*. I identify a similar process used by both Gilman and Ferrante in which the female protagonist reinvents herself as a "newly born woman," which I outline in three stages. First, the subject *somatizes* patriarchy, percieving it with spatial metaphors and thus representing it in a nonverbal, non-rational way. Second, she encodes a hallucination of oppressed femininity within the patriarchal space, exploring her oppression and potential liberation through a progressively more real "alter ego." This culminates in the protagonist blending her physical self with her hallucinated alter ego, claiming a new agency just as she appears to be claimed by hysteria. My analysis shows how hysteria has been repurposed by these feminist authors/thinkers as a foil for patriarchal, rational, and phallogocentric structures of thought.

Keywords: Women's Studies, Hysteria, Comparative Analysis, Feminism

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Introduction

This paper examines uses of hysteria to mythologize femininity and feminism. To illustrate the prominence of this mytholigization in the West, I examine texts spanning from early to contemporary feminism and operating in three different languages/cultures. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an early American feminist whose 1892 short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper” became a classic protest againt the "rest cure." Elena Ferrante is a contemporary Italian author whose first two novels, *Troubling Love* (1992, English translation 2006) and *The Days of Abandonment* (2002, English translation 2005), chronicle current-day women struggling with patriarchal social and cultural dynamics. Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément were French feminists whose 1975 book *La jeune née (The Newly Born Woman)* advocates for an embodied, feminized language that challenges phallogocentrism. This paper’s international lens stresses the connections between these texts rather than their specific cultural differences, framing them within an overarching experience of Western patriarchy. Specifically, these authors are linked by a central concept, hysteria, which they use to outline both feminine oppression and to suggest feminine liberation. They repurpose hysteria as a signifier for the feminine psyche itself, exploiting the term’s dual connotation of oppression and transgression to redefine the stereotypes exemplified by hysteria as a source of feminine power. In this way, they co-construct a *mythos* of femininity under Western patriarchy, using the very terms signifying feminine oppression to structure a new conception of a liberated, feminized, consciousness.

The term "hysteria" has long been synonymous with a patriarchal myth of femininity. The now-defunct medical term connotes a wide swath of symptoms which include somatization

(displacing psychological anxieties into physical symptoms), volatile emotions, and uncontrolled bouts of dramatic behavior (New Oxford American Dictionary). Hysteria thus describes a caricature of an irrational, dramatic woman. But the term not only *resulted* from these biases; the notion of hysteria was also used as a tool to keep women within the constraints of patriarchal society. In the case of Dora, one of Freud's early hysterical patients, her "treatment" was actually intended to make her complicit with a web of male exploitation: keeping quiet about her father's affair with a woman whose husband had assaulted Dora at 14 (Showalter 317). Dora's case is an example of the psychiatrist being another link in a chain of male oppression. In fact, many doctors revealed this dynamic by describing their hysterical patients as contemptuous and rebellious (301). But the comparison also went the other way: early feminist activists—being rebellious and "contemptuous" of the current order—were branded as hysterics (306). More than a medical diagnosis, hysteria is a label for transgressive women in an effort to keep them in check.

In fact, hysteria's significance hinges upon it being specifically coded as feminine. After all, the disorder itself was applied to both men and women; even Freud argued for a deeper exploration of male hysteria (Showalter 300). But the term has always maintained a close association with femininity, as male hysteria was supplemented with a variety of terms such as "shell shock," which connoted more manly attributes. In fact, female hysterical patients were sometimes complicit in performing an identity of the "hysterical woman," as in early demonstrations by the neurologist Charcot (310-311). Later, feminists began recasting the "hysterical woman" as a symbol of a unique feminine agency. For example, Cixous sanctifies Dora, who ended up walking out on Freud's treatment, as a proto-feminist who escaped the pressures of male discourse. This illuminates the duality twisted within hysteria as a term: it

describes stereotypes—such as volatile emotions—which also connote abstracted transgressions from the patriarchal social and symbolic order.

Here, I explore a "re-mythologization" which reclaims hysteria as the birth of what Cixous and Clément call "La jeune née" ("the newly born woman"). Indeed, in her essay "Sorties," Cixous states that she cannot operate outside of the mythic mode. She searches the Western canon beginning with the Greeks, and finds no representation of a woman she can fully "slip into"—no alter ego for her to emulate (77). She herself, then, will *write* the myth of the woman she aspires to. Cixous further suggests a mythic mode to her writing when she asserts that this new conception cannot be "theorized, enclosed, coded"—rather, this new woman must be narrated (92). I continue Cixous' train of thought by searching for other female writers who have written similar stories, finding Gilman and Ferrante. Gilman and Ferrante's texts also engage this mythological mode by using hysteria as a layered allegory for overcoming patriarchy. Their protagonists use hysteria to convert patriarchal pressures into a *somatized symptom*, which then can be conquered within and through the hysterical mode itself. In fact, they use hysteria to hallucinate a "new woman," an alter ego who begins to understand and challenge the protagonist's experience of patriarchy. Finally, they blend themselves with this hallucination, reinventing themselves as "newly born women" and redefining hysteria as a new mode of feminist thought. This paper examines each stage of this process, and its implications.

Somatizing Patriarchy

Hysteria's dual nature makes it ripe for both oppression and liberation: as hysteria is itself a symptom of patriarchal pressures, hysterical symptoms actually imply the subject's increased awareness of patriarchy. Further, hysterical *somatization*, or displacing psychological symptoms into physical sensations, makes patriarchy appear within hysteria rather than hysteria simply

appearing within a patriarchal superstructure. Thus, as Clément argues, hysteria is actually more of a *cure* than a symptom, as somatization represents the subject processing trauma, even if under the guise of a hysterical hallucination (36). In fact, somatization undercuts the verbal, rational mode of discourse, which keeps the subject's mind "[b]locked in the unspeakable; blocked for the inquisitor and the psychiatrist, but not blocked for [the subject]" (36). Somatization, as a metaphorical process, entails re-casting trauma in order to overcome it (20). Clément refers to this as the subject realizing they are "bound by material cords [...and] ready to break loose, release lions" (11). The hysterical somatization of patriarchy, a "material" consciousness that one is "bound," is the precondition for release.

Gilman and Ferrante's protagonists exemplify the somatic mode by encoding patriarchy into the space itself. The room of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" asserts male dominance: "the windows are barred for little children" and the woman's "great immovable bed [...] is nailed down" (Gilman 650). The space both infantilizes and sexualizes the protagonist in its methods of constraint. In Ferrante's *The Days of Abandonment*, the protagonist Olga becomes progressively more trapped inside her apartment. First, the telephone and electrical companies cut off service (45), and finally she can't open the lock to her door (117). In this moment, the door is "massive on massive hinges," alluding to a hulking masculinized presence (118). Patriarchal space diminuitizes and constrains the subject.

At the same time, patriarchal space penetrates the subject's psyche, symbolized by insidious and subtle scents. In *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga's apartment is constantly "invaded," first by "pollen," then by "insecticide" following an ant invasion, and at the climax of her torment, the "acid odor" of her son's vomit (Ferrante 35, 49, 90). Each of these smells infiltrates her physical and symbolic order: the pollen makes her dog, left with her by her ex-husband, "wild with energy"

(35); the insecticide can "might well be a living extension of [her] organism" (49); her son's vomit is "making [her] sick," turning her into "the body of incest" (92). In *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, the scent of the wallpaper "creeps all over the house [...] lying in wait for [her] on the stairs [...] it gets into [her] hair [...] quite the subtlest, most enduring odor [she] ever met [...] it is like [...] the *color* of the paper! A yellow smell" (Gilman 654). It predatorily infiltrates her "hair," her femininity, marking her with its "yellow" scent like a male animal peeing on its territory, “enduring" though subtle. The space enters the subject's body, the scent-based description implying a violation of her sexuality and feminity.

Clément highlights the importance of scent in hysteria. She refers back to Freud, who suggests that the sense of smell eroticizes experience, making “hair, faeces, [*sic*] the whole surface of the body, and blood as well play a sexually exciting role. Perhaps this fact explains the sensitization of the sense of smell in hysteria” (Freud, qtd. in Clément 38). But Clément takes this further by implying that perceiving scents more clearly is actually the first step in the hysteric’s liberation; scent is a signifier for her *eros,* which has been suppressed (39). Thus, heightened sensory perception reveals a fundamental cognitive shift, making the subject not only more sensitive to patriarchy, but also more sensitive to her own latent power to challenge it.

This figures concretely in Gilman and Ferrante’s texts, where the authors use imagistic description to critique patriarchy without the subject explicitly acknowledging this. The yellow wallpaper, looking "as if a boys' school had used it," "commit[s] every artistic sin," its lines "not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry," "destroy[ing] themselves in unheard-of contradictions" (Gilman 650-651). This image contains an implicit critique of masculine knowledge: the "boys' school" seems to ignore both aesthetic and rational principles, revealing structural and logical deficiencies. Ferrante also critiques male aesthetics in

Troubling Love: the protagonist's father, a painter, depicts a crude" and trashy" "portrayal of a half-naked Gypsy" which [h]e ha[s] made for decades, and continue[s] to make innumerable copies [...] supplying for a few lire the constant demand of petit-bourgeois living rooms for ugly pictures" (15-16). This intertwines age-old patriarchy, ugliness, and space in a layered symbol. Pointing out flaws in male-dominated images displaces the feminist critique: rather than engaging outright, the subject speaks to that which is *not* language. I argue that this somatizes critique in the same way the subject somatizes her experience of patriarchy.

Fundamentally, this type of somatization entails collapsing outer social and societal dynamics into the subject's inner consciousness; in Lacanian terms, the societal Symbolic becomes represented within, or collapsed into, the subject's Imaginary. The stories of Gilman and Ferrante, by critiquing patriarchy through sensory images, pluck patriarchy from its perch in the social order and instead make it play within the bounds of the subject's consciousness. Cixous alludes to this:

> If woman has always functioned "within" man's discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this "within," explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers, take it in, take it into her women's mouth, bite its tongue with her women's teeth, make up her own tongue to get inside of it. And you will see how easily she will well up, from this "within" where she was hidden and dormant, to the lips where her foams will overflow. (95-96)

The hysteric redefines the meaning of "within:" she gets "within within," investigating her place within patriarchy in a way which makes patriarchy within her own mind. But just as hysteria contains a dual signification, representing as well as infiltrating patriarchy, the hysteric's identity

is itself multiple, existing outside of herself as well as within, conscious of both her oppression and the potential for her liberation.

Hallucinating Femininity

I now explore how the hysteric responds to the consciousness of her oppression by displaceing herself into a hallucinated alter ego. This is a second step following from somatizing patriarchy: she locates an image of herself within the patriarchal space, an "alter ego" which embodies her oppression, but also infiltrates the space. This is an important allegory for the nature of the "newly born woman;" Cixous describes her as "two-faced: one face still looks toward the old order; one face envisages the new power" (109). Cixous' claim builds upon a long-held belief that femininity is "double:" for Cixous, women are kept under control but at the same time inaccessible, embodying the regular and domestic while also representing the untameable and distant (8). A "double image" of the protagonist appears in all three of the texts I examine here; *The Yellow Wallpaper's* woman in the wallpaper, *The Days of Abandonment's poverella*, and the memory of the mother in *Troubling Love* all function as "alter egos." And these alter egos are themselves double: women "of the past" who also look into the future, eventually pointing the way forward for the protagonist. Importantly, as the alter egos gain power in outlook, they also gain corporeality; this parallels their increasing power over both the masculinized space and the protagonist's own psyche.

The alter ego appears at first as a shadowy image. In *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, the narrator notices simply, "I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to skulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design" of the wallpaper (Gilman 650). Later, she notices, "It is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern" (652). Her exploration of psychological space leads to a gradual shift in attention from the "front design" to the definition

of the woman behind the pattern, awakening the female presence *inside* the masculinized space. In *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga first "remember[s]" the *poverella* as "a dark figure of [her] Neopolitan childhood, a large, energetic figure who lived in our building, behind Piazza Mazzini" (Ferrante 15). Again, the figure is inscribed in space, "behind" the Piazza, but initially she is only a "dark" memory. *Troubling Love* begins, "My mother drowned on the night of May 23rd, my birthday, in the sea at a place called Spaccavento, a few miles from Minturno" (Ferrante 1). Her presence is also inscribed in specific places, but at the same time "drowned" and subsumed by the "sea" at "night," which cloaks her in ambiguity. But the overlap between the narrator's birthday and her mother's death suggests a vital linkage between feminist subject and alter ego which grows throughout all three of these texts.

The alter ego becomes a motif, asserting her presence over physical space. The woman in the wallpaper interacts directly with the pattern: "The front pattern *does* move—and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!" (Gilman 654). The narrator s hallucination thus exposes the potential impermanence of the patriarchal patterns traced within the wallpaper. She also escapes the space, appearing "on that long road under the trees, creeping along," and multiplies, the narrator wondering "if I could see her out of all the windows at once" (654). In *The Days of Abandonment*, the *poverella* also asserts herself more strongly: with her second appearance in the text, the narrator questions, "Maybe I had [her] beside me, stiff as a sepulchral statue" (Ferrante 44). She takes on the weight of a "statue," at the same time moving closer, no longer "behind" but "beside." Eventually, she appears as a real person might, "[c]rouching in a corner, beside the banister," and soon after she begins interacting with the characters thesmselves, "resting her bare feet on [the dog's] body" (113). In *Troubling Love*, the narrator remarks, The streets of topographic memory seemed to me unstable, like a carbonated drink that, if shaken, bubbles up and overflows. […] I

had the impression that my mother was carrying off the places, too, and the names of the streets" (Ferrante 17). The mother's memory reveals the space's inherent instability: like water, her mother washes away "the places" and "the names," removing the historical denotations summed up with the phrase "topographic memory." The alter ego, in taking power over the symbolic order, converts it from a dominating place to rather a place *to be* dominated.

At the same time, the alter ego also begins to control the actions of the narrator as their identities begin to fuse. *The Yellow Wall-Paper*'s narrator increasingly identifies with the woman in the wallpaper. She at first empathizes, saying, "It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight! […] I always lock the door when I creep by daylight" (Gilman 654). This linguistic parallel suggests the narrator's complicitness, and even equivalence, with the hallucination. In *The Days of Abandonment*, the *poverella* also begins to take control of the narrator's actions: in response to remembering the *poverella*, the narrator picks up an olive branch "to evoke the spirits, perhaps to chase them away" (Ferrante 52); she soon uses this same branch to whip the dog (who belonged to and reminds her of her ex-husband) (53). The narrator herself "evokes" the spirit of the *poverella*, who coopts her own hands to attack a symbol of patriarchy. The *poverella*'s influence becomes more and more explicit throughout. At the climax of Olga's torment, the *poverella* "advise[s] [her] in a strong Neapolitan accent," "'Go to Carrano'" (114). Carrano functions as a foil to the patriarchal masculinity of Olga's ex-husband in the novel: a musician who struggles to get an erection, he buries Otto the dog (who he may have poisoned), symbolic to his helping Olga move on from her ex-husband's abandonment (187). The *poverella*'s advice leads Olga to accept an alternative, empowering masculine presence, guiding her to sanity just as she seemingly descends into madness.

The increasing presence of the hallucinated alter ego reverses the traditional narrative of overcoming one's demons. Clément suggests that this "overcoming" narrative simply returns hysterical women to patriarchy: as hysteria contains the inklings of a liberated femininity, curing it merely ends the "celebration" (22). Gilman and Ferrante's stories enact a very different "cure" than the traditional psychoanalytic treatment for hysteria. While psychoanalysis exorcises the "demons" through speech, in these cases, the *hallucination* does the talking, eventually taking complete power over the hysteric by becoming her. This process connects to Clément's idea of the "festival," a liminal space inscribing alternative cures, roles, and epistemologies. She writes, "Social life is 'right side up' (not real social life but whatever the era's mythical image of it is). The festival is 'upside down.' Everything happens backward…" (22). The process itself is backwards, with the "madness" represented in the alter ego gradually becoming the subject, possessing her rather than being exorcised. However, this possession entails a paradoxical liberation.

Feminizing Subjectivity

Hysteria enables the feminine subject to do more than simply process patriarchal oppression. In finally stepping into the hallucinated feminine, she reconstructs herself as an empowered, authorial, and creative woman. *Troubling Love* presents the clearest example of a woman retaking the pen: in the novel's closing image, the narrator draws her mother's hairdo onto her own ID card, "sketch[ing] a rebel curl" and pronouncing finally, "I was Amalia" (her mother's name) (Ferrante 139). The narrator's father had previously appropriated her mother's hairdo for his crude Gypsy portraits, but here, the narrator reclaims the hair as an image in its own right, and by proudly blending herself with her mother, she transmutes the trauma of generational oppression into the strength of a larger self. At the climax of *The Days of Abandonment*, Olga suddenly

realizes the *poverella* is part of her own reflection in the mirror. Later in the same scene, the *poverella* actually attains physical presence, and Olga realizes she is "keeping herself alive with my veins [...] Even the throat, the vocal chords, even the breath to make them vibrate belonged to me" (Ferrante 126). And yet the *poverella* speaks to Olga in the voice of a feminist: "To write truly is to speak from the depths of the maternal womb" (127). At the conclusion of "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the narrator blends herself with her alter ego in a similarly empowering way: with a subtle syntactic twist, she asks, "I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?" (Gilman 656). Suddenly, the hallucination has possessed both the pronoun "I" and the narrative body, assuming both linguistic and corporeal agency. This agency translates into the way the narrator speaks: she talks directly—and demeaningly—to her husband for the first time in the story, saying, It s no use, young man, you can t open [the door]!" (656). Just as the first-person "I" has become her hallucination, her husband has become the second-person "you," potentially implicating the reader themselves. The narrator's hallucination speaks out of the story itself, transcending the ultimate boundary of the text.

The protagonist's "new birth" thus manifests in her verbal affirmation that she is becoming the alter ego. This superimposition has important implications for Cixous' "feminized language:" it encodes the new woman within the protagonist's physical body, manifest in speech. In incorporating the alter ego in this explicit, first-person way, the woman not only claims the alter ego, but embodies it. In this way, "she vitally defends the 'logic' of the discourse with her body; her flesh speaks true" (92). Cixous initially intended this statement to mean that the rhythms of speech and poetic cadence embody the woman's liberated libido, but Gilman and Ferrante imbue it with a more imagistic interpretation. They "write the body," as Cixous encourages, through an allegorical narrative of reclaiming the "I" voice, the first person, of an "other" who represents their

liberation. In fact, the entire process of reclamation in these texts takes place within a physical allegory: from somatizing patriarchy, to hallucinating an alter ego, to the first-person blending of the subject and the hallucination. This physicality has important implications for femenist language.

Conclusion

Reclaiming “hysteria” is a symbolic appropriation and inversion of patriarchal tools; but it becomes important to a feminist *epistemology*, and not just to feminist rhetoric, because of the implications which arise from it—namely, the redressing of a feminist post-rationality which uses “hysteria” to rewrite self/other dichotomies. This was the project of *La jeune née* all along: transforming the desire centered around a phallocentric “lack” into a more inclusive relation which loves “fully," overflowing rather than reifying boundaries surrounding personhood. With this project, Cixous and Clément redefine a dualistic self-conception inscribed in philosophical thought since at least Hegel and inherited from Descartes. Rather than differentiatig self from other and remaining biased to what is fundamentally the "selfsame," Cixous prioritizes an acceptance and incorporation of the "other" (74). I don’t aim to draw a full correspondence between Cixous’ critique of masculinist dialectics and the process of re-incorporation outlined in Gilman and Ferrante's fiction; rather, I find that the process I have examined here brings up interesting interpretations of how "masculinist" dialectical thought might be reconsidered. First, the process of hysteria involves *self*-splitting, as the subject conceives of the alter ego, which implies that hysteria plays with identity, fragmenting the self into multiple parts. Cixous echoes this when she opens the space of the self: a “‘where-am-I,’ a ‘who-enjoys-there,’ a ‘who-I-where-delight’: questions that drive reason, the principle of unity, mad, and that are not asked, that ask for no answer, that open up the space where woman is wandering, roaming (a rogue wave), flying

(thieving)" (91). The self-splitting process asks these questions without "asking them;" it rather *enacts* them, questioning a "principle of unity" just as they reconsider the subject's sanity.

Hysteria, when appropriated as inherently feminist, reveals another face: while initially resulting from a woman's place in male-dominant society—exemplifying stereotypes placed upon her as well as succumbing to its dominating pressures—it actually implies a threat to that system. This is not only because "hysteria" transgresses norms; on a deeper level, it reconfigures a relationship with the self, or rebirths a new sense of self, as exemplified by the process of blending with an alter ego. Cixous stresses this dynamic in the feminist self-conception, being born out of patriarchy:

> And mysterious to herself, something she has been disturbed by for a long time, made to feel guilty for not understanding herself (taking herself in) or knowing herself (cunt-born), because all around her they valorized a "knowledge" (cunt-birth) as ordained, as a mastery, a "control" (cunt-role) of knowings (cuntbirths) established on repression and on "capture," arrest, sub-poenis, confinement. (91)

Hysteria enacts a non-discursive, somatized mode of "anti-discourse"—that which suspends the norms of discourse by its very nature of destabilizing the subject's own reality, as well as destabilizing the conception of selfhood—and within that destabilization, begins to find a home. In other words, reclaiming the space of hysteria turns the space upside-down, questioning the stability of long-held ideas which have affirmed the patriarchy: the strict division between self and other, as well as an emphasis on coherence and unity. These texts use hysteria as the beacon for a new mythology, that which reclaims the pariahs of Western patriarchy as the basis of a newly born subjectivity.

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