

# Book Reviews

## Historical Sociology of Medical Thought

### **Hysteria: The History of a Disease.**

Ilza Veith. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965. 328 pp. Illus. \$7.95.

Ilza Veith has been blessed with the perfectly splendid idea of writing a history of hysteria. What disease illuminates and reflects more clearly in its history changes in attitudes toward women, toward marriage, toward the nature and explanation of disease itself? This book is dedicated to Henry Sigerist, and he would certainly have approved the undertaking of so fascinating a venture into what might be called the historical sociology of medical thought.

Few other diseases can boast so long a history. Veith begins with Egyptian medical papyri and concludes with the Freudian view of hysteria at the beginning of this century. Along the way we follow the thread of a disease called hysteria through Greek and Roman medicine, into the Far East, through the medieval and early modern periods, and in the thought of Galen and Hippocrates, Willis and Sydenham, Pinel and Charcot. It is a remarkable history, and perhaps most remarkable is the continuity of the ancient idea that hysteria—as the name implies—is a disease of women which has its origin in some functional or anatomical malfunction of the uterus. Equally striking, from the 20th-century point of view, is the manner in which this rather speculative and seemingly somatic explanation served with some consistency as a vehicle for the expression of views concerning the sexual function and psychological attributes of women.

With so protean a subject and so vast a stage, it was perhaps inevitable that this study would not be completely successful. The elucidation of the relationship between a particular disease, society, and medical thought demands a richness of texture and a develop-

ment of specific contexts at specific moments in time. This is not really possible on a canvas as broad as that which Veith has projected. Possibly, with the help of an abundant and varied secondary literature, a truly synthetic longitudinal study on this scale might have been successful, but on the whole such literature simply does not exist. Inevitably, the author slips into the medical historian's chronic vice of recording "contributions" by those writers whose works "merit inclusion." Veith displays some symptoms of another medico-historical ill as well—the had-they-but-known syndrome. Those medical thinkers who placed the greatest emphasis on psychogenic factors receive praise, and those who cling most rigidly to traditional theories of the uterine origin of hysteria are sometimes spoken of with little enthusiasm. (Thus, for example, Griesinger's writings are obtuse and lacking in logic, a reflection of his "regression" to a belief in the genital etiology of hysteria.)

The very flexibility of hysteria as a clinical entity makes it an excellent mirror for reflecting changing medical and social views. By the same token, however, this vagueness of definition creates certain problems of method. We are never quite sure of the relationship between the past conditions described by the author and modern disease pictures. The hysteria that Veith discusses would in some cases seem to have been psychosis, in others neurosis, in others classic conversion hysteria, and in others—doubtlessly—true organic disability. The author, for example, presents a rather lengthy discussion of possession and witch-persecution in Western Europe and Colonial America. But we are never sure of the relationship between these ideas and conditions and an ailment that we recognize as hysteria. We are to assume presumably that anyone who believed himself pos-

sessed must have been a hysteric, while those eager in the pursuit of witches and warlocks might well have suffered from the same ill. Similarly, in the chapter on ideas of mental illness in the Far East, there is an extended treatment of the idea that aberrant behavior might be caused by fox demon possession. Are we to assume that Veith is writing about hysteria or about attitudes toward, and the incidence of, mental disease generally? I was never quite sure.

One cannot help but admire the original conception that lay behind this book and the ambitious scale on which Veith has chosen to execute it. Yet it is difficult to escape the conviction that at this stage of the art a narrower and more carefully defined study would have been more advisable. But this is certainly an interesting account of an inherently fascinating subject; it will find many readers, both within and without the medical disciplines.

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## Developmental Plant Biology

### **Encyclopedia of Plant Physiology.** W.

Ruhland, Ed. vol. 15, *Differentiation and Development*. A. Lane Lang, Ed. Springer, Berlin, 1965. 3000 pp. Illus. DM. 748.

This volume includes 70 chapters written by 53 authors and containing a total of some 2900 pages. The scope and detail of the 17-volume *Encyclopedia of Plant Physiology* is so great that no library which serves those who work in the plant sciences can possibly be without it. This is true despite the formidable price and regardless of whatever shortcomings the series may have.

Thus, this review of a volume in such a series should serve two purposes. It should inform workers and students in the broad field of plant sciences that volume 15, *Differentiation and Development*, is now available, and outline the subjects that are covered in the volume. It should also assist the professional researcher in this field to decide whether volume 15 will be of sufficient value to him, and to his students, to justify the substantial financial investment required to have it on his bookshelf at all times.

Volume 15 appears to cover virtually

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