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“Hysteria Abated”: Forster’s Treatment of Women’s Mental Health in *Howards End*

In E. M. Forster’s popular novel *Howards End*, multiple female characters are forced to interact with harmful stereotypes surrounding their mental health. These notions particularly center around the idea of ‘hysteria’ and the connotation the term held during the 19th and early 20th centuries. In the way that he portrays his characters and their actions, Forster demonstrates his awareness of societal stereotypes and judgment, clearly displaying them to his readers with the option for questioning and critique. While Forster’s treatment of his female characters’ mental health perpetuates negative and sexist attitudes and beliefs, *Howards End* also offers the possibility for critiquing these attitudes and resisting traditional ideas of hysteria and feminine mental weakness.

The term ‘hysteria’ actually comes from the Greek word for ‘uterus,’ ultimately gendering the disorder from the very beginning of its creation. Using such a “woman-specific” term has perpetually placed the feminine psyche as weak and highly perceptible to affliction (Garvey 222). In the 19th century, the notion that not the uterus but the brain could be the “primary location of hysteria in the female body” became widely accepted (Koerber 47). This idea of hysteria’s connection to psychology opened the door for many people to start seeking treatments for their suffering. It became possible for both men and women to be diagnosed with hysteria, but the misogynistic belief that women’s inherent inferiority and tendency towards irrational behavior left the likelihood of a man’s diagnosis rather slim unless he presented

traditionally “feminine features” (Kang 32). Often characterized by “emotional disturbance” and nerves, hysteria was recognized in this time period as a kind of neurosis, which is essentially a milder form of mental illness than psychosis (Garvey 223-224). While the condition was technically a diagnosable illness, stigmas surrounding mental illness and women in general often did not allow those suffering from the disorder to receive the care necessary for their wellbeing. Receiving treatment or diagnosis was not only unfulfilling to the patients but was also accompanied by harsh stigmas that resulted in women being disrespected outcasts. It also seemed that “The hysterical woman came increasingly to be seen as a menace to society, starting with her immediate family and extending to the larger social system in which she lived” (Koerber 48). Like many actual women living during the 19th century, this attitude towards hysterical women holds true in Forster’s own female characters as they are perceived negatively or as burdens by other characters in *Howards End*.

While there are many instances of Forster creating hysterical female characters in *Howards End*, one may as well begin with Helen Schlegel. According to Kim Stone, author of *Recovering the Lone Mother: Howards End as Aesthetic Anodyne*, Helen, known to be politically bold and widely regarded as a feminist character, falls victim to the stereotype of a hysterical woman (44). She becomes particularly noticeable as emotional or mentally troubled later in the novel, especially before she reveals that she is pregnant. In thinking about her sister’s recent actions and correspondence, Margaret comments that “there was almost a taint of madness” in Helen (Forster Ch 34). Worried about her sister, Margaret turns to her husband, Henry Wilcox, for assistance and consolation. Instead of offering reassurance though, Henry decides that if Helen is acting in such a worrisome way, she must be ‘mad’ and needs a doctor to confront and treat her. There is a discussion surrounding Henry’s use of the word ‘mad,’ as Margaret insisted

that her sister was just unwell and that “‘mad’ is too terrible a word” to use (Forster Ch 34). Here, the stigma surrounding ‘madness’ and mental illness is quite clear in that Margaret does not even want the term associated with her sister. She seems unwilling to allow for the possibility that her sister might really need mental health medical attention, despite directly stating that she was “not well” (Forster Ch 34). Here, the debate around the vocabulary of mental illness divides the female characters from Henry and the male perspective. The risk of being perceived as a hysterical woman is regarded to such a high extent that Margaret does not even want the thought to cross a man’s mind. If Helen were to be deemed hysterical or mentally ill, author Mei-ling Chao argues that she would surely be considered a “fallen maiden who is to be shunned,” as her mental health does not fit into the role that a beautiful young woman was supposed to play in the 18th and early 19th centuries (132). The use of terms like ‘mad’ when referring to women in the novel suggests to readers that being categorized with that kind of language is inherently negative and shameful. As Chao argued, a woman who was considered hysterical was also expected to feel ashamed of their reputation. This is true of Helen’s situation, as her pregnancy only makes her even more susceptible to negative and offensive stereotypes, connecting her alleged ‘hysteria’ even more to the fact that she is a woman and can be judged for her actions based on her gender.

As such a bold and progressive woman, Helen was sure to face prejudices from men even without calling her mental health into question. Many scholars within the field of Forster do not hesitate to acknowledge this aspect of her character, but Kim Stone argues that Forster’s connection between Helen’s character and her liberal ideologies potentially “codes these political actions as a form of mental illness” (Stone 56). Because Helen is so outspoken and passionate, it would be easy for male figures to silence her with rumors of ‘madness;’ the power of a woman

would be diminished if she was thought to be hysterical. This kind of power dynamic does occur in the novel, as when Helen is in an argument with Margaret, she was “checked... and her hysteria abated” (Forster Ch 26). Margaret is far more conscious of the reputation hysteria holds in their society. In this sense, it seems to be more about male perception than actual female fact when it comes to dealing with the treatment of mental health. This further suggests that the connotation of ‘hysteria’ is misogynistic. Women are forced into boxes created by men; their fates depend on the standards set and enforced by men who have no real credibility. This is reflected in the way that Helen is regarded by the Wilcox men, as “the male characters, especially Henry Wilcox, are the key decision-makers, while the female ones have to be subject to their decisions” (Chao 131). A loud and strong-willed woman posed entirely too large of a threat against the patriarchy, giving men the opportunity to declare women as ‘mad’ whenever they saw fit. Margaret seems to come to this realization once she hears Henry’s displeasure and intense concern with Helen’s mental wellbeing. She comes to the conclusion that she must be on the protective side of her potentially ‘mad’ sister against the men, like Henry, who find hysteria problematic, ultimately stating that “they would be mad together if the world chose to consider them so” (Forster Ch 35). Margaret’s statement here is quite plausible in that a doctor would probably not hesitate to lock her and her sister up at the word of Henry Wilcox. It would only take a somewhat powerful man’s word to deem her hysterical and therefore dangerous to society. The use of this plot point could be an attempt on Forster’s behalf to point out the absurdity of the situation regarding women’s mental health. The novel seems to be self-aware in that Margaret blatantly states the likelihood that a woman defending another supposedly hysterical woman will be branded in the same way.

Because of her societal placement and presence within the lives of the Wilcoxes, Helen serves as a good example of the potential consequences of ‘madness’ or hysteria. When Henry is made aware of Helen’s supposed mental state, he intends to do something about the issue. He hatches a plan to have a doctor forcibly see Helen and proceed from there in whatever way he sees fit, most likely resulting in forced treatment and removal. This is obviously a horrendous and aggressive plan that Henry has formulated, as the narrator even states that “the plan that he sketched out for her capture, clever and well-meaning as it was, drew its ethics from the wolf-pack” (Forster Ch 34). From this perspective, Henry appears to be ready to treat Helen’s assumed condition with sinister and aggressive means in order to make himself more comfortable. Forster also seems to be exposing the power dynamic surrounding women’s mental health in writing that “the pack was turning on Helen, to deny her human rights, and it seemed to Margaret that all Schlegels were threatened with her” (Forster Ch 35). In these mentions of “the pack,” Koerber’s idea of hysterical women being “menaces to society,” or at least the threat of them being menaces to society, rings true. Henry sees removing Helen as the only viable option for the scenario, as a ‘mad woman’ is extremely inconvenient to him and his lifestyle. Seeing ill people as hindrances allows Henry, and presumably many other powerful men, to check their humanity at the door and accomplish what needs to be done in order to further their own comfort by any means necessary. With this notion of a remorseless “pack,” Forster seems to be dehumanizing Henry and his intentions. The male perspective is portrayed as animal and savage-like, suggesting that the reader should be critical and wary of the way that Henry is approaching Helen’s mental health.

Though not as intensely as her sister, Margaret battles with notions of hysteria in her own right, offering another subject for the critique or reinforcement of negative mental health stereotypes in the novel. Of course, she is directly involved in the discussions and defense of Helen's sanity, but Margaret's mind also comes into question after she leaps from a moving vehicle in order to get a look at a dead animal. Scraping up her hands and causing quite a scene, the male characters with Margaret at the time of her debacle make lots of commentary on the question of her mental health. In the wake of this event, it is said that "Albert had flattened out a cat, and Miss Schlegel had lost her nerve, as any woman might" (Forster Ch 25). It first seems problematic that Charles would automatically attribute her actions to fitting in "too well with their view of feminine nature" that the narrator notes of the male characters in the scene; Margaret is criticized for showing any sign of emotional distress over witnessing roadkill, but it also seems incredibly unfair to assume that her outburst stems from her being a woman (Forster Ch 25). In this instance, it is clear that what many men understood to be hysteria was an acceptable justification for any emotional behavior they did not understand or exhibit themselves, as "irrational behavior" was regarded as one of the most prominent symptoms of the condition (Kang 32). Charles also goes as far as to regard the incident and Margaret's behavior as disgraceful and embarrassing to the Wilcox family. The societal stigmas around mental health and hysteria threatened sufferers with social and reputational consequences, which only further pushed women to comply with patriarchal standards and try to avoid the label of a hysterical woman. This dramatic scene in the novel marks when Margaret undergoes many "psychological turns," and must start to come to terms with her own thoughts and feelings under the stress of residing in such a male-dominated and judgmental society (Chao 145). Psychological stress and

actions like Margaret's would likely be enough for a man to deem a woman emotionally 'disturbed' and in need of male and medical intervention.

In addition to Margaret's own run-in with supposedly irrational emotions, she also adopts some of Helen's politically charged and revolutionary thoughts, once again evoking the characteristics of hysteria in the minds of her male companions. Forster seems to connect Margaret's fit of hysteria with a political agenda, as after jumping from the car, she is described as "a woman in revolt" and a woman that "means mischief" by the men in the scene (Forster Ch 25). From Margaret's perspective, she can see from the behavior of the men in the vehicle that "the whole system's wrong, and she must challenge it," but from the male perspective, her actions mean that she must be discounted and silenced because of the dangers hysterical women carry (Forster Ch 25). These moments of defiance would mark Margaret as strong-willed, which, in turn, would dismiss her as a hysterical woman, much like Helen. Margaret does make some bold and revolutionary observations during the scene, but it is not the first time her progressive ideas have come to light. Earlier in the novel, it is established that both the Schlegel sisters are foils to the Wilcoxes in their values and general political opinions. In a disagreement with Mrs. Wilcox, the narration notes Margaret's dissatisfaction with her inability to truly speak out against men; "What right had such men—But Margaret checked herself. That way lies madness" (Forster Ch 13). Margaret is quite aware at this moment that if she were to speak up or challenge a man, she could immediately be perceived as 'mad' or hysterical. This passage makes it clear to the reader that suffering from a mental illness would not be received by society well; 'madness,' even if untrue, will only make a woman's life exceedingly more difficult and disadvantaged. It is also clear that a woman would not be taken seriously if she were perceived to be mentally ill, leaving them to be disregarded and ignored instead of listened to.

Margaret feels this struggle again when Henry wants Helen to be sent away for psychiatric treatment. The narrator takes on her voice, exclaiming, “How dare these men label her sister!” (Forster Ch 35). Again, Margaret is painfully aware of the mistreatment women are facing from the male perspective on mental health and female weakness. She also seems to be offering some very perceptive social commentary on normalizing judgment and misogyny, drawing attention to the fact that men are able to categorize women however they see fit. In line with the process of normalizing judgment, women that do not fit into their expected roles would be assigned the negative label of hysterical, as “When someone deviates from the norm, they immediately are classified as abnormal, substandard, pathological, criminal, or deviant” (Lorentzen). If Forster is, in fact, following the steps of normalizing judgment with Margaret and his female characters, his novel could be trying to critique this process, demonstrating to the readers how harmful and unsupported the notion of a hysterical woman is. This battle with male notions of mental health and societal implications of being declared ‘mad’ comes to a head when Margaret stands up to Henry. She has taken up the role of Helen’s protector and advocate, directly revolting against Henry’s wishes regarding her sister, and she also finds her voice in holding accountable for his unjust and unacceptable behavior. In this satisfying moment, Margaret says, “No one has ever told what you are—muddled, criminally muddled. Men like you use repentance as a blind, so don’t repent. Only say to yourself, ‘What Helen has done, I’ve done’” (Forster Ch 38). Margaret breaks down Henry’s idea that he is better than Helen or that Helen is a completely different kind of person from him because of her actions. This is Margaret’s big moment of defiance, declaring that he is not above everyone else because he is a man. Of course, this altercation and moment of resistance are short-lived as Margaret is still a woman in the early 20th century with no way of existing outside of patriarchal control, as she

must 'forgive' Henry for his discretions and carry on as his wife. The system of normalizing judgment and the expectations of female dependence force Margaret to fall back into her marriage even after standing up to her husband. This scene still holds monumental weight, being that "Margaret proves to have the strength to transcend personal anguish" (Wyatt-Brown 28). Margaret is able to speak up and call out a man without being deemed and punished as a hysterical woman. Her determination to speak her mind is stronger in this moment than her fear of being judged or disregarded as hysterical.

As a woman married to Henry Wilcox, Margaret Schlegel had to endure her husband's sexist beliefs surrounding hysteria and women's mental health in general, but she follows in the footsteps of Ruth Wilcox, a woman who had to face many of the same struggles. Dying rather early on in the novel, Ruth's main role in the story seems to gesture towards an emphasis on mental health and the treatment of ill people. It is directly said early in the novel that Mrs. Wilcox "was inclined to hysteria," giving the reader a direct usage of Forster's mental health vocabulary (Forster Ch 10). This already establishes Ruth as a mentally weak or struggling character, making 'madness,' illness, or hysteria a signal of her to the reader. The idea is extended after her death and attempted will of Howards End to Margaret, as the narrator claims that "The appeal was too flimsy. It was not legal; it had been written in illness" (Forster Ch 11). This statement completely discounts Ruth's final wishes and moments of life, sentencing her to be regarded as some hysterical dying woman who was trying to do absurd tasks in the wake of her illness. Henry and the Wilcoxes latch on to this excuse of illness, using it to justify themselves in destroying her will and taking control of Howards End as they see fit. This moment in the novel calls attention to the ways that mental illness could be taken advantage of, using a dying woman's supposed 'madness' to take control over the property. Besides using it for

personal gain, Jo Ann Moran Cruz argues that the Wilcox family seems to find Ruth's death as a "disturbing" and annoying inconvenience, worried about what other people within their social circles will think of their family ties to an ill woman (414). Cruz's note of this emphasizes that being labeled as or associated with the term 'hysterical' has consequences not only for the woman in question but also those close to her. The Wilcox family finds that in being close to their mother, they are all burdened by her perceived illness. Distancing themselves from Mrs. Wilcox aims to distance themselves from the concept of 'madness' and the unfortunate connotations that it entails. Their treatment of Ruth then reads more like a business relationship, as the narrator says "The practical moralist may acquit them absolutely. He who strives to look deeper may acquit them—almost. For one hard fact remains. They did neglect a personal appeal" (Forster Ch 11). In this passage, Forster's narrator seems to acknowledge the problematic nature of society's treatment of mental health, essentially stating that while the family had a reason for their treatment of Ruth and her will, they were still in the wrong for neglecting her wishes for the benefit of their own gain.

Forster connects Ruth to his other female characters and their experiences with hysteria, as Ruth Wilcox's suffering comes to light after her death, but when Henry attempts to force psychiatric treatment on Helen, the reader learns that he also extended this barbaric and unkind attitude to his first wife. The narrator very gravely states that Henry believed that "The sick had no rights" and that "one could lie to them remorselessly" (Forster Ch 34). Because of this sinister mentality, Henry had no problem leaving Ruth to die in a nursing home, instead of Howard End, the home she loved so much. His lies and disregard for her read like their marriage was a transaction to him; he did not view his wife as an equal or even really a valuable person. Because of this treatment leading up to her death and most likely her entire life as his spouse, Ruth's

storyline forces the reader to pay attention to her “emotional pain, her sense of betrayal, the injustices attending her last days, and the subtext of revenge in the novel” (Cruz 407). Illness and hysteria were used as tools to take Ruth’s property away from not only her but also Margaret. From this perspective that Henry unapologetically holds, mental illness acts as an excuse to dismiss women and their happiness or wishes.

Forster’s use of Henry and the ways that he treats women in the novel offers many chances for readers to question Henry and the role of society in the perception of mental health. His precise understanding and awareness of how normalizing judgment and societal standards function and exist give readers the opportunity to evaluate the social messages *Howards End* might contain surrounding hysteria and mental health overall. While his characters perpetuate and reinforce negative and harmful stereotypes of women’s mental health, their conversations and interactions also present opportunities for critiquing these stereotypes, leaving Forster’s text to be interpreted not only as an example of unfair judgments and ideologies but also as a possibility for change and reconsideration of these issues.

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