

You have to tell a story many times to get it right.
At first the parts don't go together right.
It doesn't say what a story is supposed to say.
So you have to keep practicing on it.
You have to get it right, so that it says
what you know it says, but it doesn't say yet.

- Robert Ashley, *Dust*, 1998

The idle uterus, to Plato, was the root cause of hysteria—like a rat caught in plumbing, he believed, it would grow restless and wander around the body, obstructing its functions, wreaking havoc. Virgins, homes to wayward wombs, are not by this logic fully agentic. But the women of Salpêtrière *invented* hysteria when they learned how to perform it for Charcot's camera—how to grammatize it. Ecstasy, agony, epiphany, duress; with each image, Augustine, these women, were implicated in their own subjugation. There was agency there. Hysteria feigned or hysteria-infected, it is historically a feminine symptom, a feminized word. Julia Kristeva wrote of the temporality of hysteria. Nonlinear, it is rather a "heterogeneous semiotic space"—of hallucinations and meaninglessness—in which production irrupts the symbolic order. The gestures and expressions of hysteria, vermin in the body of language, obstruct its functions.

Ritual, on the other hand—the refrain—marks space. Like a braid, it orders things. As Deleuze had it, one evokes a refrain as protection, a reminder of the systems and territories to which they belong. Ritual, the refrain, these are forms within which the self and society alike reassemble themselves over time, forms that can serve, too, oppressively.

Mandra Gora, Mandra Gora / Agnus Castus, Agnus Castus—the first chant invokes the aphrodisiac mandrake root, the second the "chaste tree." Together, these trochees pit sexuality against celibacy, as though they were a binary. This imaginary binary is also the imaginary that houses that slippery symptom of hysteria. Here, their incantation foils a virginal sacrifice meant to bring about a "Spontaneous Opening of Expanded Awareness"—this contrived spontaneity the true contradiction. What if we think of hysteria as a rejoinder to ritual, to phallogocentrism, to linear time? A hysteric dance-off to off the need to feign hysteria?

By Annie Godfrey Larmon