

An Examination of Dr. Paolo Maspero's *Dell' Epilessia (1859)*

Rachel Holen

University of Minnesota

“A disease so serious in its manifestation and in its effects, and so remarkably extended in every class of people, would seem to require the attention...of all times and all nations.” This is how Paolo Maspero described epilepsy in his 1859 treatise, *On Epilepsy and the best way to cure it*.¹ The relationship between 19th century Italy, epilepsy, and hysteria is a complicated one and Maspero was at the forefront of epilepsy diagnoses and treatment while many others were hiding behind the ever-popular diagnosis of hysteria fueled by the uterus. This paper will serve to examine the history of the study of epilepsy prior to Maspero, the symptoms and consequences of epilepsy that Maspero described in his treatise, and the relationship between epilepsy and hysteria.

To begin, it is necessary to shortly review the history of the study of epilepsy. The disease has been recognized as an ailment since the ancient times of Hippocrates and Celsus Aretaeus, but in the meager documentation that exists, symptoms are often left out or described vaguely and it is difficult to distinguish the disease from other common ailments of the time. Frequently cited reasons for any ailment of this kind were the angering of the heavens and the influence of the stars and moon. Along with these fantastical causes, the remedies left much to be desired. Countless foods and drinks were

¹ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 2). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

said to ease symptoms as well as other more unorthodox methods, like ingesting the blood of the beheaded.²

From this point, religion strongly inhibited medicinal study since dissection was not an accepted practice, which thereby limited the study of disease pathology. It wasn't until 1530 that the Royal College of France began dissecting the corpses of epileptic individuals and diligently recording their findings.³ Unfortunately, the knowledge of anatomy and function of the brain was still lacking. At the end of the 18th century, doctors finally began to understand diseases of the nervous system like epilepsy. Solvents were used in the brain in order to differentiate healthy tissue from damaged tissue, which helped highlight the anatomical changes in the epileptic brain.⁴ From this point, physicians began to conclude that the cause of epilepsy was undoubtedly due to brain mass.⁵

With a thorough understanding of the history leading up to Maspero's treatise, it is now necessary to review his understanding of the symptoms and consequences of epilepsy in the 19th century. The symptoms of epilepsy had long been recognized and

² Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 15). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

³ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 1). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi

⁴ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 3). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

⁵ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 3). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

were described as the universal agitation of limbs, contortion of the face, rapid and violent rotation of the eyes, foamy saliva and bloody lips, and overly deep sleep.⁶ In addition to the recognition of the symptoms, the permanency of the disorder was apparent to 19th century physicians. Maspero described how once the disease infests the victim, it will never abandon them no matter the variety and efficacy of the various remedies used against it.

Maspero also had a deeper understanding of the symptoms within the brain. He describes that every time the brain endures the severe shock of an epileptic seizure, there are some disorders of circulation and blood stasis (stagnancy that causes build-up). He noticed that it was this blood congestion that was frequently present in the bodies of those who had died from epilepsy.⁷ As this blood congestion occurs, the blood is unable to penetrate into the muscles which Maspero believed caused the stiff spasms that are frequently associated with epileptic seizures.⁸

While Maspero was attempting to decipher the biological causes of epilepsy, he was also sorting through some anecdotal evidence that suggested that tumors were at the heart of fatal epilepsy. For example, a soldier started having epileptic episodes in 1775 (under a Dr. Odier) after a sword injury to the head. Dr. Odier attempted many

⁶ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 1). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

⁷ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 6). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

⁸ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 7). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

medications to treat the episodes, but found that if the patient pulled a cord around his neck to bring his head closer to his arms, the episodes subsided. Unfortunately, the patient forgot one night in a fit of drunkenness and his epileptic seizures became more violent and unstoppable. Upon his death, a dissection showed a tumor near the base of his skull.⁹ Maspero was unwilling to accept this as the sole cause of epileptic episodes, however. He examined the timeline of the soldier's previous injury and had questions about whether the tumor developed immediately after his brain injury, or closer to the onset of seizures. And regardless of the time, was the tumor causing the seizures and not the other way around?¹⁰

He continued using the process of elimination to decipher whether epilepsy was the true cause of death in other anecdotal stories. For example, he describes the case of a child that suddenly became ill and began having seizures. The frequency of the episodes increased and after a period of four years, the child passed away. Upon examination of the child's brain, it became apparent that the convulsions and paralysis the child was experience was not due to fear (a commonly cited cause of seizures) or epilepsy, the child had what Maspero suspected to be acute encephalitis and meningitis.¹¹ It was this kind of

⁹ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 10). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

¹⁰ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 13). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

¹¹ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 36). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

critical thinking that led Maspero to be a leading researcher on epilepsy and the differentiation between epilepsy as a disease and other possible ailments.

Lastly, it is important to consider how epilepsy was related to hysteria during the 19th century, particularly in Italy. Maspero was one of many personal physicians for Princess Cristina Belgiojoso, a revolutionary political scientist and artist who was very active during the Italian Risorgimento.¹² Belgiojoso was convinced that she was suffering from hysteria due to the uterus and described herself as so, while Maspero maintained that she was suffering from epilepsy. This distinction is important considering the status that epilepsy had during this time. As far as the medical knowledge expanded, it was a commonly accepted fact that epilepsy was a death sentence. No person who suffered from epileptic seizures wanted to be labeled as epileptic-epilepsy was to 19th century medicine as HIV was to the 1980s. It was perhaps with this fear that Belgiojoso began labeling herself with the much more common and acceptable 'hysteria.'¹³ However, Maspero was quite convinced of the differences between epilepsy and hysteria. He described hysteria as being caused by the nerves of the abdomen and uterus, while epilepsy was caused by the brain.¹⁴ Additionally, the

¹² Susanna Ferlito (2012) Hysteria's upheavals: emotional fault lines in Cristina di Belgiojoso's health history, *Modern Italy*, 17:2, 161, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2012.665286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.665286)

¹³ Susanna Ferlito (2012) Hysteria's upheavals: emotional fault lines in Cristina di Belgiojoso's health history, *Modern Italy*, 17:2, 163, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2012.665286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.665286)

¹⁴ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 403). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

symptoms of hysteria were somewhat controlled by will and were capable of being staved off by controlling the emotions, whereas epileptic attacks were entirely unpredictable.¹⁵

The question still remains whether Belgiojoso or Maspero was correct. Though Belgiojoso had some convincing arguments regarding her uterus and the episodic syncope with her menstrual cycle, she also described pain in the same brain region Maspero was certain related to epilepsy.¹⁶ In later letters to Maspero, Belgiojoso expressed great frustration that he refused to take her ‘hysterical’ symptoms seriously and she stated that she “would not take it upon myself to blindly accept your opinion.”¹⁷

This interaction leads the modern viewer to a fundamental piece of the relationship between epilepsy and hysteria during the 19th century. Though the symptoms and scientific processes used to define what epilepsy was at the time are intriguing, what is extremely interesting are the social implications of *having* epilepsy versus hysteria. Presently, epilepsy is a somewhat common (with nearly 3 million cases in the United States) ailment and there is very little stigma attached.¹⁸ However, hysteria

¹⁵ Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1, p. 406). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.

¹⁶ Susanna Ferlito (2012) Hysteria's upheavals: emotional fault lines in Cristina di Belgiojoso's health history, *Modern Italy*, 17:2, 166, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2012.665286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.665286)

¹⁷ Susanna Ferlito (2012) Hysteria's upheavals: emotional fault lines in Cristina di Belgiojoso's health history, *Modern Italy*, 17:2, 166, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2012.665286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.665286)

¹⁸ Epilepsy Foundation of America. (2012). *Incidence and prevalence*. Retrieved from <http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/aboutepilepsy/whatisepilepsy/statistics.cfm>

is no longer a clinically recognized illness (though some common symptoms may be attributed to other modern illnesses, ex. Premenstrual Syndrome).¹⁹ How could it be that within the span of approximately 150 years, epilepsy became a commonly accepted illness and hysteria was outdated? The answer lies within the evolution of medicine. As medicine evolved prior to Maspero's time, it has evolved since then. New technology lent doctors the ability to diagnose illnesses with more sensitive measures and medications allowed for the effective treatment of symptoms. Meanwhile, growth in psychology gave women a voice in the face of medicine that allowed them to express their symptoms and have them connected to actual ailments, instead of just forced to undergo ridiculous therapy sessions in order to "control their emotions." In this way, Paolo Maspero made a major contribution to the evolution of epilepsy in medicine. Before Cristina Belgiojoso attributed her symptoms to epilepsy and not hysteria, he so attributed them. This certainty in the medical and not the psychological changed the face of epilepsy research.

Epilepsy has a long and complicated history, with Dr. Paolo Maspero serving at the forefront of the examination of it with his treatise *Dell'Epilessia*. His personal relationship with Christina Belgiojoso served as a backdrop for the changing face of medicine and psychology in 19th century Italy and forever changed the relationship between epilepsy and hysteria.

¹⁹ Maines, Rachel P. (1998). *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria", the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. [ISBN 0-8018-6646-4](https://www.jhu.edu/~books/maines_rachel/ISBN_0-8018-6646-4).

Acknowledgments

I would like to personally thank Susanna Ferlito of the University of Minnesota for being my faculty mentor on this project. I would also like to thank the University Research Opportunities Program for the opportunity to research this fascinating topic. Lastly, I would like to thank the University of Pavia in Pavia, Italy for allowing me to visit the campus and examine a 150 year old treatise that has been excellently preserved.

References

- Epilepsy Foundation of America. (2012). *Incidence and prevalence*. Retrieved from <http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org/aboutepilepsy/whatisepilepsy/statistics.cfm>
- Ferlito, S. (2012) Hysteria's upheavals: emotional fault lines in Cristina di Belgiojoso's health history, *Modern Italy*, 17:2, 157-168, DOI: [10.1080/13532944.2012.665286](https://doi.org/10.1080/13532944.2012.665286)
- Maines, Rachel P. (1998). *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria", the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. [ISBN 0-8018-6646-4](https://www.jhu.edu/pubs/ISBN-0-8018-6646-4).
- Maspero, P. (1859). *Della epilessia e del miglior modo di curarla*. (Vol. 1). Milan: Tipografia e libreria di Giuseppe Chiusi.