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Hysterical Impostors:
The Forensic Anxieties of Simulation Disorder in Nineteenth-Century Neurology

This paper examines the history of “simulation” or “mimicry disorder” in nineteenth-century neurology and psychiatry. Simulation disorder was defined as the pathological fabrication or imitation of disparate symptoms, and it was viewed, by the end of the nineteenth century, as a subset of traumatic hysteria. Yet, only a few decades earlier, simulation was perceived as little more than deception, malingering, and medical fraud. The paper examines the history of the medical acceptance of simulation as a viable constituent of traumatic hysteria and neuropathology in general. The author examines both the medical and socio-economic circumstances that led to the acceptance of simulation disorder as well as the medico-legal challenges it introduced.

Nima Bassiri is a Harper-Schmidt Fellow in the Society of Fellows and an Affiliate Faculty member of the Department of History and the Committee on the Conceptual and Historical Studies of Science at the University of Chicago. His writings on the history of brain and behavioral medicine have appeared in journals including Critical Inquiry and Journal of the History of Ideas. He is co-editor of Plasticity and Pathology: On the Formation of the Neural Subject (Fordham University Press, 2015).