

# *Hysteria and Enlightenment*

## CHAPTER 3

### *I. The Great Divide*

“ Heirate! Der Ehestand heilt alle Zaubereien. Das beste Mittel ist ein Mann.”

*-Bastien und Bastienne; W.A. Mozart, 1768*

The grim picture of Fräulein Osterline’s condition that is conveyed by the letters of Leopold Mozart, doesn’t distinguish between the sufferings caused by the sudden onrush of hysteria, and the physical damage caused by her being routinely subjected to a barrage of fashionable, newfangled, far-fetched, standard therapies (including several of millennial antiquity) over a period of 3 years.

The symptoms of hysteria could be very painful, but many of them were psychosomatic and wouldn’t do much direct physical damage: the distinction between a somatogenic and a psychogenic symptom is that a psychogenic symptom has no apparent physical basis.

The shifting meanings of the word “hysteria” in the history of medicine are the more remarkable in being themselves possessed by a kind of hysterical turbulence, far greater than one might expect from a simple scientific controversy. In what has become known as the golden age of hysteria, the 19th century, the term was applied by the same doctors to radically different conditions, and, owing to a confusion with such neurological malfunctions as epilepsy and Tourette’s syndrome, erroneously by different doctors to the same condition.

The best contemporary definition for hysteria is a psychological state of acute suggestibility characterized by the somatic expression of

symptoms rooted in emotional disturbance.

It is a remarkable feature of the 20th century, ( all the more so inasmuch as it has been a century of unbelievable horrors which have created acute psychological stress on a scale previously unknown to human history) , that the kind of hysteria that afflicted Franzl Oesterline has virtually disappeared from the Western world . To quote from the excellent study book by Edward Shorter, "From Paralysis to Fatigue[1] :

*" In the social history of medicine there is no more striking phenomenon that the disappearance of classic hysteria. Enthroned in the middle of the nineteenth century as the quintessential illness of the 'labile' woman , the fits and paralyses that had been summoned from the symptom pool since the Middle Ages - spreading almost epidemically during the nineteenth century - virtually came to an end by the 1930s"*

Hysteria is still very much with us , though the motor forms have been replaced by symptoms of psychogenic pain and chronic fatigue syndromes at all levels of intensity, loosely gathered under the vague portmanteau label of PTSD .

It is impossible for anyone today to draw upon his own experience to recreate those elaborate theatrical productions which, only a century ago, were frequently seen or experienced by the general public : "*les grand crises hysteriques*" . The young Mozart frequently witnessed them during his stay at the Mesmers. It is tempting to speculate about the subconscious influence of Franzl's attacks in his portrayal of Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni, or the Queen of the Night in the Magic Flute!

The closest living relative of the hysterical fit is the epileptic

seizure. In fact the term 'pseudo-epilepsy' is sometimes used as a term for motor hysteria, a terminology which is both suggestive and misleading. There is always an element of "simulation", let us say "play-acting" in a hysterical outburst, yet inasmuch as this simulation is involuntary or uncontrollable, it is definitely sincere. When Jean - Martin Charcot, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century neurologist, took over the administration of the Salpêtrière asylum/ nursing home in 1862, he found hysterics, epileptics and anyone else with similar symptoms having a neurological basis, thrown together in the same ward. In a relatively short period of time, by regrouping them into wards characterized by specifically identified disorders, he turned this institution into a hospital and teaching college of international renown. In a tragic replay of a continually recurring scenario, Charcot then went on to contribute more to our *misunderstanding* of the nature of hysteria than anyone since Galen, author of the strangulated womb theory, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

Shorter offers a very good defense of his thesis that, historically, the symptoms of hysteria have always been drawn from a readily accessible "symptom pool" that is to a large extent culturally determined. All through the Middle Ages a symptom pool with its roots in classical antiquity was frozen. There was always a close connection between its invariant somatoform syndromes to superstitions about demonology and witchcraft. (Shorter tells us that the hysterical symptoms of Asia are quite different, but gives few examples.)

The first major paradigm shift in the theme pool of European hysteria occurred in just this period that we are concerned with, the world of

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Franz Anton Mesmer in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. His discoveries themselves were to make a significant contribution to the great scientific medical and cultural transformations set into motion by the Industrial Revolution. The great names in medicine associated with this immense paradigm shift include the Swiss physiologist, Albrecht Haller ( who discovered muscle and tissue irritability), theorists Friedrich Hoffmann and William Cullen ( inventor of the term “neurosis” to distinguish mental from physical illness) the neurologist Whytt, and others. Shorter suggests that it is through the advances made by them, together with a reluctant yet evolving public belief in the credibility of Western medicine, that victims of hysteria began to shape their symptomology on the basis of what they imagined the doctors expected from them.

The catalogue of symptoms of the valetudinarian Franzl interfaces two worlds. Things such as the “nail in the brain” headaches; the rages, the rictusing, vomiting and shrieking, recall the dark world of nameless terrors one associates with medieval superstition. One thinks of the tragic fate of the legions of sick old women skilled in herbal remedies, casting spells and curses, their forbidden knowledge shouted through mouths brimming with convulsive foam, with neurologically damaged brains, their bodies writhing with motor spasms or frozen in the clenched postures of catalepsy, the world of Inquisition dungeons and of those brute fanatics , the Dominican monks, who condemned these pitiful creatures to torture and death. One hears in the accounts of Franzl’s torments the faint echoes of that bottomless European

Holocaust, the full account of which has yet to be told.<sup>i</sup>

At the same time, both Franzl and her doctor are quintessential Enlightenment figures. Her sickbed is in the elegant chamber of an 18th century millionaire. Her medicines are gleaned from the dense, exotic hothouse of 18th century pharmacology. While Mesmer plys her with his personal library of remedies culled from Hippocratic medicine, Galenic medicine, Paracelsian iatro-chemistry, Brunonian vitalism, Cullenite classification schemes, Boorhaevian clinical practices, Hoffmannian ether theories, the homeopathy of Hahnemann, Cartesian iatro-mechanism, Wesleyan electro-shock therapy, balneology, eudiometry and others, Franzl herself is busily indulging her hypochondriac heart to the fullest extent, buying every new-fangled remedy to hit the market. The 18th century, even more than today, (if possible) was the golden age of home remedies, cornucopian medicine chests and unrestrained pill popping.<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> One often has the feeling that the peculiar pathology of Hitlerian anti-Semitism has more in common with the tenacious witchcraft superstition that rotted in the European soul for so many centuries, than with traditional anti-Semitism arising out of a conflict of ethnicities or of religious beliefs. Heresy, demonology and anti-Semitism are of course so intimately cross-braided in European history that it is impossible to separate them. See, for example "L'Ideologie Francaise", of Bernard Henri-Levi.

<sup>ii</sup> From Porter and Porter, *Patient's Progress: Doctors and Doctoring in 18th Century England* [2]:

"William Buchan thought a good home medicine chest should contain

The science of medicine in the period being covered was a hopeless stew of untested therapies, physical, chemical, astrological metaphors, snippets of classical wisdom, old wives' tales, miracle cures and dubious analogies. Concurrently with this were several notable advances which were far from being universally understood or correctly applied, such as Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood, or Leeuwenhoeck's discovery of micro-organisms. We pride ourselves today on being better informed, though pride often enough goeth before a fall.

The invention of the microscope is an example in point: Leeuwenhoeck discovered microorganisms in the 17th century; two centuries later Pasteur convinced the world that most diseases were due to invasions by these same tiny beasties. Once this was recognized, the human race implemented the only policy it has ever followed in any confrontation with alien life, human or otherwise: invasion, plunder, murder, extermination. To this day there are very few who raise their

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the following ingredients:

*Adhesive Plaster, Agaric of Oak, Ash colored Ground liverwort, Burgundy pitch, Cinnamon water, Crabs claw prepared, Cream of Tartar, Elixir of Vitriol, Flowers of sulphur, Gentian root, Glauber's salts, Gum ammoniac, Gum arabic. Gum asafoedita, Gum camphor, Ipecacuanha, Jalap, Jesuit's Bark, Liquid laudanum, Liquorice root, Magnesia alba, Manna. Nitre or Salt peter, Oil of almonds, Olive oil, Pennyroyal water, Peppermint water, Rhubarb, Sal amoniac, Sal prunell, Seneka root, Senna, Snake root, Spirits of hartshorn, Spirits of wine, Sweet spirits of nitrate, Sweet spirits of vitriol, Syrup of lemons, Syrup of oranges, Syrup of poppies, Tamarind, Turner's cerate, Vinegar of squills, Wax plaster, White ointment, Wild valerian root, and Yellow basilicum ointment. "*

voice in favor of peaceable, negotiated non-violent co-existence with this fabulous world of exotic new animals.

And the results are predictable : new, peculiarly horrible diseases emerge to replace the ones which we claim to have wiped out: Ebola, Sars, AIDS. Benign or beneficial bacteria are wiped out along with the harmful strains. Rapidly evolving resistant strains of tuberculosis make a mockery of our antibiotics. Toxic after-effects from the poisons we employ to kill these life-forms frequently do as much harm as the diseases themselves. Iatrogenic sicknesses are on the rise in the sterile hospitals where we hope to cure the sick by insulating them as far as possible from the delicate ecology of the biosphere.

The difference between then and now, is that the “orthodox medical science” of today does provide a standard against which other mixtures of ideology and therapy may be compared, whereas in the late 18th century, there did not exist any such universal standard.

Yet it is also clear that things have gone too far the other way: the modern world has become thoroughly medicalized ( or should we say ‘medicated’). All of our thinking about the human body, disease, nutrition, healthful activity, mental health, procreation, the aging process and the stages of life such as infancy, adolescence, care for the elderly, even our diagnostics and prescriptions for the cure of social ills such as poverty, homelessness, drug addiction , gang violence and so on, very quickly fall into the barren handful of paradigms bequeathed us by medical science. The general public is led to believe that nothing else is available: medical models dominate all the applied social sciences, the examples being so numerous that merely in stating them

one risks being charged with laboring the obvious.

This was not always the case : the trend towards the medical world-view began in the very period now under consideration. Naively stated, with the devalorisation of orthodox religion owing to the Renaissance and the Reformation, and with the fresh memory of two centuries of religious wars that had made a mockery of the institutions claiming to embody the teachings of the "prince of peace" , with the consequent decline in blind adulation of the Catholic priest or Protestant minister, the mantles of authority were hoisted from their shoulders and placed, without a moment's hesitation, onto the shoulders of the medical doctor . One thinks of the custom of radio DJ's, who intercut a new pop song into the fade-away of the former one so that the listening public is spared the horror of a moment's naked thought.

Franz Anton Mesmer pursued his medical career at just the right time and place to receive, from priests such as Gassner, Hell, Greatrakes and others, the wand, the holy water, the religious aura, and the demagogic power of the medieval exorcist. Religion passed into psychotherapy, gleefully the unconscious mind ran amok in search of fads and fancies, and the great benumbed mass of mankind lost less than a minute of its eternal slumber from that consuming anxiety that arises, whenever there is a vacuum in the domain of Canonized Authority.

Much research and writing is coming out these days around this historic transfer of sacral power . I began this series of articles with the intention of narrating a simple yet gripping human drama: the story of the emergence, in the Vienna of late 18th century, of the paradigms of mental illness . I quickly discovered that many others are fascinated by



the same period. One may start with Michel Foucault's studies of the histories of the asylum and the clinic; the many articles by Dorothy and Roy Porter on 18th century medicine; the extensive publications of the Wellcome Institute in England for research in medical history; Elisabeth Roudinesco's fabulous 2-volume account of the history of psychoanalysis in France.<sup>iii</sup> Together with studies on the proliferation of quasi-theological and quasi-scientific systems in the Enlightenment, I've uncovered numerous studies devoted specifically to hysteria and its symptomology, including the book by Edward Shorter cited above.

It is only now that, a full two centuries later, and in the aftermath of the long intellectual bondage to the mind-forged manacles of Freudian superstition, that thinking people are re-discovering that it was not only the material conditions of European life that were revolutionized by the intellectual, scientific and political developments of the 18th century; not only the world-views and the ideologies; but the *unconscious mind*<sup>iv</sup> as well; and not only the unconscious mind, but the *collective unconscious mind*, as evidenced in the contents of the pool of generic hysterical symptoms, which quickly adjusted to the pace of advances in medicine.

## *II. Medicine and Living Conditions in the Enlightenment*

In the period under consideration England was considered to be the healthiest nation in Europe. Even so, infant mortality was at about 20%.

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<sup>iii</sup> Her lecture about the French psychogogue Jacques Lacan at the Boston University Philosophy Colloquium series in 1989 was a catalyst for this series of articles.

<sup>iv</sup> *not* an original discovery of Sigmund Freud

It must have been worse everywhere else. Across the Continent, all social classes were battered by disease from birth to death; the most trivial ailment, such as a sore throat or a mild infection, caused for example by the removal of a splinter from one's finger or the extraction of an abscessed tooth, could turn deadly. A famous example is that of the queen of Portugal, who died from a gangrenous complication arising from having one of her earlobes pierced.

Because medical practice was known to be so unreliable, intelligent people devoted a great deal of attention to promoting their health and preventing themselves from getting sick in the first place. Far more than today, the sick took responsibility for their own treatment: no sensible person would sit and wait for the arrival of a doctor whose knowledge and skill were not, in many cases, very far above the itinerant charlatan, quack or "empiric" <sup>v</sup> hawking his snake-oils in the village square.

The neighborhood pharmacist was often more qualified to prescribe therapies and medicines than the general practitioner; indeed the prestige of an apothecary could be quite high in some places. The best doctors, (and the 18th century did have some very great doctors: Herman Boerhaave, David Gaub, Edward Jenner, Giovanni Morgagni, Hartman Haller, etc.) received their training in famous hospitals like Edinburgh and Leiden. The university-trained doctors were something of a nightmare, qualified only to quote from ancient Greek and Chaldean texts, who'd never set a limb or examined a sore throat. Then, as now, severely enforced laws protected their privileges. Universities

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<sup>v</sup> In those days the philosophy of "empiricism" was accorded the disdain it merits!

see themselves as protectors of civilization. Giving them their due, it is also true that they held back the practice of medicine for several centuries.

In 1719, a cynical doctor by the name of Edward Baynard published the following bit of doggerel concerning the art of medicine. It might be merely funny were it not so deadly in its accuracy:

*For in ten words the whole art is comprised  
For some of the ten are always advised:  
Piss, spew and spit  
Perspiration and sweat  
Purge, bleed and blister  
Issues and clyster  
These few enunciations  
Cure all the doctor's patients  
If rightly applied  
By a wise physic guide*

“Clyster” is an obsolete term for an enema; an “issue” refers to the Galenic practice of *creating* an infection at some designated spot on the body because of the belief that some kind of “sympathy” between the illness and the localized pool of pus would draw the illness out of the body. These routine procedures derived from a fifteen hundred year tradition of humoral biochemistry. Its’ influence persisted in Europe until about 1840. Since, until fairly recently, North America was backward relative to Europe in the medical domain, it must have lasted here a good deal longer.

### III. The Cure

We will now attempt an imaginative reconstruction of the sickbed drama of July 28th, 1774. One can assume that over the previous 3 years Franz Anton Mesmer had used everything he'd learned in his training as a doctor to try to cure Franzl Oesterline. Hysteria in women was still commonly believed to be due to some kind of displacement of the uterus. Using the remedies prevailing in his day, he may have burned certain particularly foul-smelling, even toxic, substances under Franzl's nose, things like asafoedita, or dung-encrusted pigeon feathers.<sup>vi</sup> Surprisingly, it would be in the considerably more advanced 19th century, and even in the 20<sup>th</sup> (particularly in the United States) that some very reputable medicos would recommend that Franzl have her uterus or ovaries removed. Mesmer would not be of that stone-age school. He was pre-eminently a disciple of the Stahlian or vitalist school of medicine, attributing psychological ailments to disfunctions of psychic energy.<sup>vii</sup>

Though stopping short of surgery, Mesmer had applied a host of savage Galenic therapies without observing a split kopeck of improvement in Franzl's condition. she had been bleed, clystered, issued, purged, cauterized.<sup>viii</sup> Her weak, emaciated body had become a

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<sup>vi</sup> Here is a quote from a doctor William Roots at the St. Thomas Hospital in London, in 1836: *" My impression is that one of the beneficial results of these foetid substances in hysterical conditions is the peculiar effect that they produce on the mind, through the medium of the olfactory nerves. You know that nothing is more common, when a woman is hysterical, than to see her relieved for a time by the burning of feathers under her nose. It would be difficult perhaps to find anything more disgusting than that. "*

<sup>vii</sup> So am I, up to a point, see <http://www.fermentmagazine.org/essays/lle1.html>

<sup>viii</sup> " In 1895 and 1896, ..., Fliess cauterized the nasal mucosa of one patient of Breuer's, Selma B., and removed part of her middle turbinate bone for neurasthenia. Freud's circle was permeated in the early years by this kind of somato-babble, with its assumption of reflex links from the nose to pelvis and brain." Shorter, op. cit., pg.

mound of bruises and wounds , covered with scabs , subcutaneous lice, and numerous infections arising from the incisions done for bleedings and issues . Her skin must have been puffy and waxen, sickly from excessive confinement.

Pots filled with bandages holding infected matter produced by 'blisterings and issues' stood by the side of her bed. Alongside the omnipresent spittoon stood other vessels holding the disgustingly swollen bodies of leeches and other bleeding agents. Others held vomit and stools from the regularly applied purgings and clysters. The odors from these accumulations of waste filled the room, mingling with the residual aroma of burnt pigeon feathers or asafoedita. Not the least, her bed was infested with generations of bedbugs, a universal plague, there being no technology available yet for exterminating them. The monarchs themselves funded the office of a "bedbug destroyer royal" in their palaces.

We can use our imaginations to place Mesmer in Franzl's bedroom, sitting at the keyboard of his glass harmonica. All that afternoon, he has tried to soothe her nerves by playing familiar arias, like "*Auch du lieber Augustine*", or "*Que dirai-je maman*", or songs from Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne* : "*Ich geh jetzt auf die Weide, betaubt und ganz gedankenleer*" perhaps , or "*Lustig, lustig! preist die Zaubereien von Colas, dem weisen Mann!*"<sup>ix</sup> As he strokes the goblets, he regards this unholy god-damned mess with undisguised loathing.

He knew , as did most competent doctors by that time, that any further excursions along the Galenist highway could only be stupid,

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<sup>ix</sup> And I have the nerve to fault Milos Forman!

brutal, and toxic. Thrown back on his own resources, he suddenly leaves the room: he has remembered his old MD thesis of 1765. He finds it sitting on a bookshelf on the third floor. He picks it up, dusts off the cobwebs and stares at it with bewilderment: *What a patchwork quilt of nonsense!*", he thinks, *"mixing astrology, influences of the planets, Newton's theory of tidal forces, folklore about lunacy and the full moon, and suchlike junk.!*

*"My Meal Ticket"*, he continues, chuckling, tapping the faded cover of the old file: *"Hey; it got me my degree, didn't it? Without that, you can bet Madame Posch - Fisher - Mesmer wouldn't have looked twice at me; and then where would I be? Washing dishes for Archbishop Colleredo - if I were that lucky! Still"*, he goes on, *"There might be something in it - magnets; tidal oscillations; Newtonian forces; ebb and flow... everything else has failed; what have we got to lose?"*

We quote from his own account:

*"On July 28th, 1774.. I applied three magnetised pieces to the stomach and both legs. Not long afterwards ... extraordinary sensations; .... painful currents of a subtle material which ... made their way to the lower part and caused all symptoms of the attack to disappear for 6 hours."*

Mesmer published differing versions of this event in journals in Vienna and France. He goes on to say that extremely painful sensations began to build up in certain key parts of her body, notably under the breast and in the arms. By pulling the magnets about he was able to cause these pains to flow around her body until they localized in the legs. From there he was somehow able to drain the currents of psychogenic pain through her lower extremities into the floor.

That a relief of six hours was evidently considered a great achievement at that point gives some indication of the severity of her condition. A regimen of magnetic treatments was therefore set up that led to a steady improvement. There were several serious relapses along the way, which Mesmer describes. After a while he concluded that the magnets' effects were largely catalytic; the same results could be obtained by stroking with the hands, pointing and other gestures.

Franz Anton Mesmer now falls into the fatal trap that was to lure, and so often ruin the careers of almost every important practitioner and theorist of hypnosis in the 19th century: the Comptes de Puysegur, the Abbe Faria, Elliotson, Braid, Charcot and so many others. This was the well-nigh irresistible urge to create one's own "suggestibility circus" that is to say, to exploit one's patients as puppets in a comedy show designed to show off the power of the hypnotist over mind and body.

After experimenting with the properties of Franzl's suggestibility over a few months, Mesmer contacted two prominent Viennese doctors, Anton van Stoerck and Jan Ingenhousz and invited them to his home to demonstrate his discoveries.

*Anton von Stoerck*, one of Mesmer's teachers at the medical faculty of the University of Vienna, has a small place in medical history for his researches in toxicology. Therapeutically he appears to have nurtured a bizarre attraction to noxious and poisonous substances such as pulsitilla and valerian. A confirmed Galenist, he gained enough clout at the Austrian court to have been designated as physician in attendance in 1781, when Maria - Theresa was suffering through her final illness in Schönbrunn palace. A man of decidedly limited abilities, jealous and

spiteful towards all competition and essentially hostile to medical progress, he will quickly become Mesmer's implacable enemy.

*Jan van Ingenhousz* is not so easily dismissed. Ingenhousz championed the cause of inoculation against small-pox. This should not be confused with vaccination, the improved method invented by Jenner.<sup>x</sup> Against this Ingenhousz campaigned vigorously, for reasons that can only be attribute to envy. Inoculation consisted in taking a bit of infected small-pox matter from a human being and introducing it into another one's body through incision (*injection had not been invented at that time*). Inoculation was effective in reducing the length and severity of a smallpox epidemic.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Ingenhousz was held in high esteem as a doctor in 3 countries: England, Holland and Austria. He is remembered today chiefly in connection with his ideas about the importance of wholesome or healthful air in the cure of disease, the so-called theory of eudiometry. He'd been recommended to Maria- Theresa by Gerard van Swieten on the basis of his reputation in England. In Vienna, Ingenhousz would become known familiarly as "The Great Inoculator".

Here is Franz Anton Mesmer's account of Jan van Ingenhousz's visit to his house to observe the condition of Fraulein Oesterline:

*"The patient was then in a fainting fit with convulsions. I told him to approach the patient and touch her. She made no movement."*

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<sup>x</sup> Though not for over a century: death *from* vaccination would claim many victims until the end of the 19th century. Its opponents were not all vindictive reactionaries; they included such eminent scientists as Alfred Russel Wallace, the co-discover of the theory of evolution.



Mesmer then *“communicated animal magnetism to him by taking him by the hand .”* Mesmer was already using the expression, *“animal magnetism”*, coined by himself to distance himself from the theories of Maximillian Hell, who still believed that the power of the magnet was directly responsible for the relief of hysterical symptoms. When Ingenhouz touched her this time , it *“resulted in convulsive movements.”* He touched her repeatedly with the tip of a finger ; each time he did so, Franzl went into spasms ; each time he withdrew his finger, the spasms ceased.

Mesmer’s second experiment, with tea-cups, was a variant of the first. It showed that Franzl, out of a set of 8 cups, responded only to the one cup he’d touched. The third experiment was of particular interest, in that it seemed to confirm his association of action at a distance with that of the gravitational and magnetic field:

*“ I pointed my finger at her at a distance of 8 paces; the next instant her body was in convulsions to the point of raising her on her bed with every appearance of pain.. ”*

After he’d witnesses all 3 experiments, Ingenhouz claimed that he was satisfied that Mesmer had made an authentic scientific discovery that could be employed in the cure of certain kinds of psychogenic illness. Once back in his own home Ingenhouz mounted a storm of disparagement and character assassination against him, possibly a dry run for the campaign he would be directing against Jenner in England in the following decade. Mesmer threatened to sue him but it came to nothing.

In the meantime Franzl’s therapeutic regime was continued until

she was completely cured, the first real success of the new methods that would make him notorious in Paris in the 80's, and the origin of all forms of hypnotherapy down to the present day. Once restored to health, she married Mesmer's stepson and became Frau Fischer. This may have accounted for a good part of her condition in the first place.

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- [8] Bastien und Bastienne; comic opera in 1 act by W.A. Mozart; commissioned by F A Mesmer, 1768; BREITKOPF & HARTEL, 1983

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