

Mattia Zangari (ed.)

# ***Pazze di Lui* — Mad for Him:**

**Hagiographic Stereotypes,  
Mental Disturbances  
and Anthropological Implications  
of Female Saintliness  
in Italy and Abroad  
from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**



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# Paroxysms, stigmata and dolls in convents

## Female Sanctity and Mental Illness between the Middle Ages and the Contemporary Times (introduction)

Mattia Zangari

This book compiles the works conducted by several scholars, both men and women, who attended the conference *Mad for Him. Female Sanctity and Mental Illness between the Middle Ages and the Modern Ages*, which was held at Ca' Foscari University of Venice in November 2021. On said occasion, the author asked the speakers to reflect on the sensitive relationship between female sanctity and mental illness. Specifically, they were asked to investigate whether the famous paroxysms experienced by the mystique women could be compared to events that nowadays, through the lens of the medical code, are normally considered pathological. The critical perspectives provided were extremely inspiring, as historians, philologists, art historians and anthropologists, as well as psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and theologians, participated. The structural framework given to the various studies cited is especially noteworthy, as the interpretative approach to the texts allowed a comprehensive examination of the matter at the core of the *topic*, without losing sight of the *focus*. The reflections, all characterized by a different heuristic praxis, highlighted not only the possibly pathological aspects of the mystical language, but also the shaping power of the assumptions underlying hagiographic presuppositions attributable to madness and, likewise, the anthropological applications inherent to sensibility marked by spatiotemporal lapses attributable to the protagonists of the holy madness.

This introductory essay aims to outline a speech illustrating how specific well-known mental disturbances, such as hysteria, delirium and dermatographism, are evident and may also be documented in contexts associated with female sanctity. The analysis shall include a brief introduction of the bibliography, centered on the matter of *sancta insania*, followed by a presentation of the clinical cases.



Bernard de Chartres stated that ‘modern people’ are dwarves on the shoulders of giants<sup>1</sup>. This image effectively captures the difference between the outcomes of this study, which will hereinafter be shown as «shortly» and «with defect», and the extensive pre-existing bibliography. Regrettably, only the most important works consulted shall be quoted and the overview will be particularly tachygraphic. In particular, beginning with Positivism, both ‘transgressive’ experimentalism and more diplomatic readings lent their ear to more endogenous, subversive, centrifugal narrative currents, in the attempt to address the personality of those saints who were ‘analyzed’ through a seemingly abusive process that conferred psychoanalysis retroactive validity.

A paradigm with an axial interpretation would have been provided by the work of nineteenth-century doctors, committed, in various ways, to examining the phenomenology of a thousand-year-old evil: the wandering uterus, hysteria, with which the mystics have often been associated. Once the antiquated theory that the uterus caused crises as it migrated from one part of the woman’s body to another had been superseded, the paroxysms of hysterics were attributed to organic and psychosomatic causes. Jean-Martin Charcot, the neurologist of the Salpêtrière, asserted that mystical ecstasy was a hysterical manifestation<sup>2</sup>, while also Cesare Lombroso, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and even Sigmund Freud and Jaques Lacan<sup>3</sup> shared this idea as research on hysteria progressed.

The contribution of Pierre Janet proved indispensable for the advancement of studies in Christian psychopathology. As a fellow physician affiliated with Salpêtrière, Janet, through his work *De l’angoisse à l’extase* – published between 1926 and 1928 – recounted the experiences of his patient, Madeleine, who frequently experienced ecstasy, stigmata, and assumed crucifixion postures<sup>4</sup>. He also drew parallels between Madeleine and Teresa of Ávila<sup>5</sup> (†1582). Teresa of Ávila was the mystic *doctora* of *siglo de oro*, and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the occasion of a writing contest held in Salamanca to celebrate three hundredth anniversary of her death, skepticism arose regarding her personality, leading to concerns about her canonization. For example, Belgian physiologist and Jesuit father Guillaume Hahn, one of Charcot’s scholars, in his acclaimed essay *Les phénomènes hystériques et les révélations de sainte Therese*, stated that

1 Giovanni di Salisbury: *Metalogicon* (III, 4).

2 Jean-Martin Charcot: “La foi qui guérit”, in: Jean-Martin Charcot – Paul Richer: *Les démoniques dans l’art suivi de “La foi qui guérit”*, Paris: Macula 1984, pp. 111-123.

3 For a review on these studies: Cristina Mazzoni: *Saint Hysteria – Neurosis, Mysticism and Gender in European Culture*, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press 1996, pp. 17-18.

4 Pierre Janet: *De l’angoisse à l’extase – Études sur les croyances et les sentiments*, Paris: Alcan 1926-1928, 2 voll.

5 Ibid., vol. 1, p. 181.

the Saint from Avila suffered from hysterical-epilepsy and a severe hysteria<sup>6</sup>. Subsequently, from Krafft-Ebing to Lacan, a critical perspective was outlined claiming that the Avilana saint had essentially enjoyed sexual pleasures, rather than celestial ecstasy. Lacan went as far as inviting skeptics to go to Rome to admire Bernini's famous *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, and personally verify the sensual undertone of the sculpture. He stated: «ça ne fait pas de doute, elle jouit», which translates to «there is no doubt about this, she is having an orgasm»<sup>7</sup>.

In recalling the salient features of the cultural climate that sought to investigate the history of spirituality, including the 'mystical' implications of the case examined with other tools, such as psychoanalysis, one cannot overlook the work of Michel de Certeau, who had also participated in the establishment of the *École française de psychanalyse* set up in France by Lacan<sup>8</sup>. According to Certeau, mysticism would have anticipated the need to pose several problems that manifested in the course of spiritual experiences in the form of motifs, which, *mutatis mutandis*, would have led to the development of multiple disciplines, including, but not limited to, psychology and psychiatry<sup>9</sup>.

In this review, which aims to provide a broad overview of 'holy madness', it was deemed essential to mention the contribution of feminist thought, recalling what Simone de Beauvoir wrote about the mystical woman. The French philosopher writes that beneath the profile of the mystical woman often resides an erotomaniac, who, as the French philosopher writes, «feels enhanced by the love of a superior being»<sup>10</sup>.

Henceforth, the analysis shall delve into the question posited in the title of this essay, which is divided into five brief segments. The initial four will illustrate the links between the sanctity of women and hysteria, which are expressed in various ways, depending on the 'communicative scenarios'. The final part shall still focus on sanctity, albeit shifting its focus from the layers of hysteria, towards the realms of delirium and dermatographism. These two 'chapters' on

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6 Guillaume Hahn: "Les phénomènes hystériques et les révélations de sainte Thérèse", *Révue des questions scientifiques* XIII (1883), 5-123.

7 Jacques Lacan: "God and the *Jouissance* of T/he Woman", in: Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose edd.: *Feminine Sexuality – Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, New York: Norton 1982, p. 144.

8 Michele Ranchetti, *intr.* a Michel de Certeau: *Storia e psicoanalisi – Tra scienza e finzione*: Torino Bollati Boringhieri: 2006, p. 11 (trad. it. di *La Fable mystique, 1. XVI-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: 1982).

9 Michel de Certeau: *Fabula mistica – XVI-CVII secolo*, nuova edizione, ed. Silvano Facioni, con un saggio di Carlo Ossola, Milano: Jaka Book 2008, p. 7.

10 Simone de Beauvoir: *Il secondo sesso*, prefazione di Julia Kristeva, postfazione di Liliana Rampello, Milano: il Saggiatore 2016 (trad. it. de *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris: 1949), p. 649.

psychiatry are distinct from hysteria. The conclusions shall also include a few final considerations.

Henceforth, it shall be assumed that the elucidation presented is appropriately positioned in the contexts of the so-called ‘devices’ – quoting Giorgio Agamben<sup>11</sup> – in the contextual mechanisms that constitute the basic coordinates of the mystical and para-mystical experience, namely, the iconography, the sacred representations, the praises, the devotional texts and the preaching, which often prepared the ground for ecstasy<sup>12</sup>. It is worth considering all the cases where the painted images became animated, so as to dramatize the dimension of the mystic praying in front of statues, frescoes, stained glass windows and altars<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, the analysis will refrain from recalling important proximal contexts of the mystical life, such as the effects of starvation, practiced to the bitter end by the protagonists of the life of perfection, which seemed equally noteworthy. Indeed, as demonstrated in the last century by Aldous Huxley, who studied

11 Giorgio Agamben: *Che cos'è un dispositivo?*, Roma: Nottetempo 2006.

12 Mattia Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali fra Medioevo ed età moderna*, Roma-Bari: Laterza 2022, pp. 73-82.

13 Bibliography on this topic is impressive; here I am only recalling the following texts: Chiara Frugoni: “Le mistiche, le visioni e l’iconografia – Rapporti ed influssi”, in: *Temi e problemi della mistica femminile trecentesca*, Todi: Accademia Tudertina 1983, pp. 139-159; Ead.: “«Domine, in conspectu tuo omne desiderium meum» – Visioni e immagini in Chiara da Montefalco”, in: Claudio Leonardi, Enrico Menestò edd.: *S. Chiara da Montefalco e il suo tempo*, Atti del Convegno di studi storici ecclesiastici organizzato dall’Arcidiocesi di Spoleto, Spoleto 28-30 dicembre 1981, Spoleto: CISAM 1992, pp. 155-175; Monica Chiellini Nari: *La contemplazione e le immagini – Il ruolo dell’iconografia nel pensiero della B. Angela da Foligno*, in: Enrico Menestò ed.: *Angela da Foligno – Terziaria francescana*, Atti del Convegno storico nel VII centenario dell’ingresso della beata Angela nell’Ordine francescano secolare (1291-1991), Foligno (17-19 novembre 1991), Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo 1992, pp. 227-247; Hans Belting: *Il culto delle immagini – Storia dell’icona dall’età imperiale al tardo Medioevo*, Roma: Carocci 2001, p. 505 (trad. it. di *Bild und Kult*, München: 1990); Elvio Lunghi: *La Passione degli Umbri – Crocifissi di legno in Valle Umbra tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Foligno: Orfini Numeister 2000; *Krone und Schleier – Kunst aus Mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern*, Ruhrlandmuseum: Die frühen Klöster und Stifte, 500-1200. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Die Zeit der Orden, 1200-1500: eine Ausstellung der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, in Kooperation mit dem Ruhrlandmuseum Essen, Jutta Frings, Jan Gerchow edd., München: Hirmer 2005; Elvio Lunghi: *Francesco d’Assisi, Chiara da Montefalco, le mistiche umbre e le immagini*, in: Roberto Tollo ed.: *Santa Chiara da Montefalco – Culto, storia e arte. Corpus iconografico*, Tolentino: Biblioteca Egidiana 2009, pp. 137-143; *Dal visibile all’indicibile – Crocifissi ed esperienza mistica in Angela da Foligno*, Massimiliano Bassetti, Bruno Toscano edd., Spoleto: CISAM 2012; Mattia Zangari: *Tre storie di santità femminile tra parole e immagini – Agiografie, memoriali e fabulae depictae fra Due e Trecento*, Tübingen: Narr 2019.

extensively the effects of fasting in ascetic practices, the lack of sugars decreases the biological efficiency of the brain, causing vitamin deficit, modifying perceptiveness, and, in turn, leading to visions<sup>14</sup>. One may also think of visions induced by hallucinogenic substances, such as cervigia, which the mystics would ingest during fasting as a basic maintenance substance, together with bread, which is, for example, the case of Saint Lutgard of Tongeren<sup>15</sup>.

Certain ‘communicative situations’ were deemed of interest due to the typology of the sources involved in the process under investigation, namely the dolls representing the Baby Jesus which, together with especially sophisticated cradles (*pictures* 1, 2, 3) were used to implement the cult of the Divine Infant, especially in women’s monasteries<sup>16</sup>. These borderline sources, midway between iconography and devotional objects, lend themselves to extremely rich and complex interpretations. The shape of the cradle, often a reliquary, may depict a cathedral with all its pointed arches, spires and pinnacles, not to mention the dialectic presence/absence of the Child inside the cot – the empty cradle clearly refers to the «devoted soul» awaiting, during the Advent, the descent of the Child-Eucharist<sup>17</sup>.



Figure 1: Cradle of the Baby Jesus, XV century, Namur, Musée des Arts Ancien

14 Aldous Huxley: *Le porte della percezione*, Milano: Mondadori 2008, pp. 117-120.

15 «Et hinc ergo septem annis continuis Lutgardis in panem tantum et cerevisiam ieiunavit». Thomas Cantimpratanus: *Vita Lutgardis Virginis in Aquiriae Brabantia*, (BHL 4950), in: AASS, Iunii, III, Antuerpiae: 1701, pp. 234-263, cfr. pp. 243-244.

16 Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit., pp. 55-71.

17 Caroline Walker Bynum: “Encounter – Holy Beds”, *Gesta* LV/2 (2016), 129-131; Mattia Zangari: “Il Giardino spirituale di Arcangela Panigarola (1468-1525) e la devozione a Gesù Bambino – Note a margine”, *Analecta Augustiniana* LXXXIV (2021), 91-114, see p. 113.



Figure 2: Cradle of the Baby Jesus, XV century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The merely devotional dimension shall be transcended so as not to burden the work. Nevertheless, in the course of this investigation, eighteen texts of holy women were marked – from Saint Angela of Foligno (†1309) to Saint Veronica Giuliani (†1727) – where the mystics adopted blatantly maternal attitudes towards the Baby Jesus, which is attributable to the theoretical construct that psychiatrist Daniel Stern defined as «maternal constellation»<sup>18</sup> towards the end of the last century. This may infer that said effusions towards the Child, particularly when the cult of the Divine Infant is carried out through dolls and cradles, can be considered a form of sublimated motherhood intended to substitute situations of real motherhood, namely, the same motherhood denied to all those women bound by monastic or para-monastic choices. For example, Margarete Ebner<sup>19</sup> (†1351) not

18 Daniel Stern: *La costellazione materna – Il trattamento psicoterapeutico della coppia madre-bambino*, Torino: Bollati-Boringhieri 1995.

19 For *Rivelazioni* by Margerita Ebner: Pilipp Strauch: *Margaretha Ebner und Heinrich von Nördlingen – Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Mistyk*, Freiburg-Tübingen: 1882 (rist. anastatica: Amsterdam: P. Schippers 1966), p. LXII; we also note: *Heinrich von Nördlingen e Margherita Ebner – Le lettere (1332-1350)*, Lucia Corsini ed. and with a «Preface» by Donatella Bremer Buono, Pisa: Edizioni ETS 2001. The correspondence is characterized by the presence of many recipients and we have only one letter directed by Margaret to the confessor Henry of Nördlingen (letter LXVII). As regards the contents, the metaphors, of biblical or liturgical origin, are very interesting, as is the theme of suffering when the two correspondents are forced to move away from each other. Among the various characters mentioned in the epistulae, the prioress of Mendingen, Elsbeth Schepach, deserves special mention; she collaborated in the drafting of the revelations and, perhaps, sometimes wrote in response to Henry at the hands of Margarete. For a biographical overview and an anthology of texts relating to Margarete: *Scrittrici mistiche europee*, Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, Antonella Degl'Innocenti, Francesco Santi ed., Firenze: SISMEL 2018, vol. II, pp. 129-153. Also consider: *Der seligen Margareta Ebner Offenbarungen und Briefe*, Hieronymus Wilm s ed., Vechta in Oldenburg: Albertus-Magnus 1928; *Margaretha Ebner: Die Offenbarungen der Margaretha Ebner und der Udelheid Langmann*, Josef Prestel ed., Weimar: Böhlau 1939, pp. 7-109; Augustan, *Vindelicorum seu Ordinis Praedicatorum, Confirmationis cultus ab*

only had a Baby Jesus doll she routinely nursed and fondled, but also experienced a pregnancy – a hysterical pregnancy? – during the night of March 1347 when – according to her spiritual autobiography – she gave birth to the Baby Jesus with the help of three sister-midwives<sup>20</sup>, moreover, pregnancies, perhaps similar to pseudocyesis – or hysterical pregnancy – were also experienced by Lukarda of Oberweimar (†1309), Bridget of Sweden (†1373), Clare of Rimini (†1346), Dorothy of Monteau (†1394), Prous Boneta (†1328), Maddalena della Croce and some ‘heretics’ of the Swabian Riesed<sup>21</sup>.

Investigating the apparently morbid forms through which the devotion to the Child took shape was certainly fascinating. This devotion, which was also the subject of harsh reproaches by Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), was also confirmed by the way Adelheid von Frauenberg used her nun’s veil to make a diaper for the Baby Jesus<sup>22</sup>. An even more representative – and disconcerting – example is the experience of Columba Weigl (†1783), an eighteenth-century Bavarian Dominican nun who, as the memorials of her monastery document, aside from the cradles and ribbons to tie her dolls so that they would not fall off the cot when they moved, she also set up a bona fide *nursery* within the Altenhohenau convent, equipped with clothes, shoes and various accessories for the care of the Little One<sup>23</sup>.

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immemorabili tempore praestiti servae Dei Margaritae Ebner, moniali professaee Ordinis S. Dominici “beatae” nuncupatae († 1351) / Sacra Rituum Congregatio, Roma: Tipografia Guerra e Belli 1963-1978]; Albrecht Classen: “The Literary Treatment of the Ineffable – Mechthild von Magdeburg, Margaret Ebner, Agnes Blannbekin”, *Studies in Spirituality VIII* (1988), 162-187; Manfred Weitlauff: *Margherita Ebner ed Enrico di Nördlingen – «La tua bocca che parla di Dio mi rende muto...»*, in Peter Dinzelbacher, Dieter R. Bauer (Marco Vannini) edd.: *Movimento religioso e mistica femminile nel Medioevo*, Cinisello Balsamo: Paoline 1993, pp. 338-97; Kirsten M. Christensen: “The Conciliatory Rhetoric of Mysticism in the Correspondence of Heinrich von Nördlingen and Margaretha Ebner”, in: Diane Wolfthal ed.: *Peace and Negotiation – Strategies for Coexistence in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, Turnhout: Brepols 2000, pp. 125-143.

20 In the text we read: «Then loud cries came and lasted a long time [...]. These cries came to me seven times, until night, and, due to the violent blows that were delivered with great force to the heart, three sisters had to hold me, one under the heart on the left side, and the other instead on the back, on the same side. They said they had to press with all their strength against each other, feeling that, under their hands, something alive, and nothing else, was moving internally in my body. The third sometimes supported my head. Sometimes I couldn’t bear it, and then the strongest blows came, breaking me internally, so much so that I swelled especially in the front part, like a pregnant woman». p. 119 and ss. (Weitlauff: *Margherita Ebner*, op. cit., p. 389-90) [my translation].

21 For all of them: Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit., pp. 37-72.

22 Caroline W. Bynum: “Formen weiblicher Frömmigkeit im späten Mittelalter”, in *Krone und Schleier*, op. cit., pp. 118-129.

23 Karl Besler: *Columba Weigl von Altenhohenau 1713-1783 – Eine Mystikerin des Bayernlandes aus dem Dominikanerorden*, Reimlingen: In Selbstverlag des Verfasser 1991, pp. 165-166.





Figure 3: Cradle of the Baby Jesus, XVII century, Madrid, Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales

In all these instances, it may therefore cautiously be suggested that there was an element of sublimation of the desire for motherhood, which inevitably implies the same concept of strenuously denied sexuality – a well-known fact – as it was in the case of the mystical brides of Christ. As a transitional object or as a fetish, the doll – according to the applicable secular reading – could be interpreted as a theatricalized representation of the object of desire, or rather of the erotic object. Swaddled, breastfed, fondled as if she were a real child, she would have become the concretization of a missing part, substituting both the child and copulation with the man. In a hetero-representative form, within the para-mystical experience of the ‘mothers’ of the Baby Jesus, it appears that everything was transferred onto an object rather than towards a relationship with the Other. However, according to a ‘normal’ relationship process, as the doll was ‘outside’ them, outside their body<sup>24</sup> it was not a thought, no longer, or not only. In light of the aforementioned deductions, it might be appropriate to consider the mystics briefly analyzed as hysterical, as they evidently had an irrepressible desire for the real object – the child and therefore the man – with such a desire being accompanied by an acute sense of fear/repulsion towards the desire itself<sup>25</sup>. Subsequently, several other dimensions linked to the realm of the maternal could be explored, such as the concept of waiting, Otherness, and care. However, it was deemed appropriate not to dwell further on these aspects in order to focus on the identification of the thematic highlights of the next aspect, namely, the relationship between the holy women, the hysterical body and the Passion.

24 For the principle of otherness connected to the ‘concept’ of the mother: Massimo Recalcati: *Le mani della madre – Desiderio, fantasmi ed eredità del materno*, Milano: Feltrinelli 2019<sup>3</sup>, pp. 13-14.

25 David W. Abse: “L’isteria”, in: Silvano Arieti ed.: *Manuale di psichiatria*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 1969 (vol. I), pp. 284-304.

As the fortunate definition by Giovanni Pozzi posited, the complex «alphabet of the Saints»<sup>26</sup> is variegated and polymorphic. Ecstasies, visions, levitations, stigmata, but also flights, dances, pantomimes, rigidities and episodes of self-harm emerge beautifully against the background of the experiences of otherness that characterize mystical life. These phenomena, which are not exclusive to women, seem to culminate when the mystical women retrace, with their mind and body, the liturgical moment of the Passion. All these modalities, which can be linked to the 'shrine' that is the female body in its liminal dimension – the body of Eve, but also the body of Mary<sup>27</sup> – might be considered hysterical manifestations. It is essential to specify that the term «hysteria» should not be considered in its most prominent etymological implications – «isterum», as is widely-known, translates to «uterus» – which, may be deemed to some extent as sexist. On the contrary, the term *passepertout*, is intended to mark the various paroxysms in a pathological sense, connecting them, at least through the lens of the medical code. Nevertheless, its application remains, unfortunately, partly unsuccessful given the fact our diagnoses must be conducted *in absentia*, without subjecting to a Freudian-type interview those who, in doing so, would go from being mystics to – as previously explained – being analyzed. In essence, the problem of the ambiguity of the term «hysterical» exists to the extent that hysteria is a varied, brittle, extensive reality that was previously inclusive of disorders, while nowadays is better defined as personality and behavioral disorders.<sup>28</sup>

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- 26 Giovanni Pozzi: “L’alfabeto delle sante”, in: Giovanni Pozzi, Claudio Leonardi edd.: *Scrittrici mistiche italiane*, Genova: Marietti 1988, pp. 21-42.
- 27 Fiorella Giacalone: *Impronte divine – Il corpo femminile tra maternità e santità*, Roma: Carocci 2012, pp. 140,141, 157, 159 and passim.
- 28 For a more general overview on hysteria, I visioned the following studies: the ‘super classic’ Sigmund Freud – Josef Breuer: “Studi sull’isteria (1892-1895)”, in: Sigmund Freud: *Psicoanalisi dell’isteria e dell’angoscia*, Roma: Newton & Compton 2018, pp. 229-251, cfr. Sigmund Freud-Josef Breuer: “Comunicazione preliminare – Meccanismo psichico dei fenomeni isterici”, pp. 233-244, a p. 239; Jean Lhermitte: *Mistici e falsi mistici*, Milano: 1955<sup>2</sup>; Abse: “L’isteria”, op. cit., pp. 284-304. For an analysis on hysteria from the eighteenth century to today: Karl Jaspers: *Psicopatologia generale*, Roma: Il pensiero scientifico 1965; Joyce Mc Dougall: *Teatri del corpo – Un approccio psicoanalitico ai disturbi psicosomatici*, Milano: Cortina 1990; Antonio A. Semi: “Sull’isteria e l’identificazione isterica”, *Rivista di psicoanalisi* XLI/2 (1995), 237-253; Mazzoni: *Saint Hysteria*, op. cit.; Filippo M. Ferro – Giuseppe Riefolo: *Isteria e campo della dissociazione*, Roma: Borla 2006; Federica Lefons: “L’isteria e le altre – Storie ed attualità”, *Psychofenia* XVIII (2008), 173-201; American Psychiatric Association: *Manuale diagnostico e statistico dei disturbi mentali (DSM)*, Massimo Biondi ed., Milano: Cortina 2014<sup>5</sup>; Massimo Fontana: *La diagnosi e le sue implicazioni nella clinica psicoanalitica*, Roma: Fioriti 2017; Vittorio Lingiardi – Nancy Mc Williams: *Manuale diagnostico psicodinamico*, Milano: Cortina 2018<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the study by Elena Brambilla: *Corpi invasi e viaggi dell’anima – Santità*,



In order to produce an analysis that takes into account a behavioral profile connected to the clinical standard of the hysterical phenotype, approximately twenty significant figures of holy women were identified. Three notable examples include Saint Margaret of Cortona (†1297), Saint Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi (†1607) and the venerable Maria Crocifissa Tomasi (†1699).

The ecstasy of Margaret of Cortona<sup>29</sup>, which occurred on Good Friday, exhibits well-known 'symptoms' of hysterical conversion, namely the presence of what the renowned hysteric Anna O. from Breuer called a «private theatre», the «condition seconde», the state of serenity following visions and, above all, the stiffening (or hysterical numbness), which, in the case of Margaret, manifested itself in concert with the blackening of the limbs and the contractions<sup>30</sup>. Turning to the hagio-biographical text of Margaret of Cortona, the ecstasy of Good Friday is described. It reads:

This spectacle, so new and compassionate, moved the citizens of Cortona so much that, after having interrupted their offices and jobs (...), left the children at home in

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*possessione, esorcismo dalla teologia barocca alla medicina illuministica*, Roma: Viella 2010 is also important for the historical contextualization of hysteria.

- 29 For the reconstruction of the biographical events of Margaret of Cortona we have the *Remissorial Process* of the Sacred Congregation of Rites in Cortona, held under the pontificate of Urban VIII, between 1629 and 1640. From the Process are deduced *Fioretti di santa Margherita da Cortona*, for which we suggest Ottorino Montenovesi: "I Fioretti di santa Margherita da Cortona", *Miscellanea Francescana XLVI* (1964), 234-93. As per the version of *Vita* given by Bollandian, we remind *Acta Sanctorum* with both their prologue and chapter XII. We own the following critical edition: Junctae Bevegnatis: *Legenda de vita et miraculis beatae Margheritae de Cortona*, ed. Fortunato Iozzelli, Grottaferrata: Bibliotheca Collegii S. Bonaventurae 1997. For critical bibliography see: Giunta Bevegnati: *Leggenda della vita e dei miracoli di Santa Margherita da Cortona*, Eliodoro Mariani ed., Vicenza: LIEF 1978 (here we will quote texts translated into Italian from the work *Leggenda della vita*); Franco Cardini: "Agiografia e Politica – Margherita da Cortona e le vicende di una città inquieta", *Studi Francescani LXXVI* (1979), 127-36; Mariano D'Alatri: "L'Ordine della Penitenza nella Leggenda di Margherita da Cortona", in Raffaele Pazzelli – Lino Temperini, edd.: *Prime manifestazioni di vita comunitaria maschile e femminile*, Atti del Convegno di studi Francescani, Assisi 30 giugno – 2 luglio 1981, Roma: T.O.R. 1982, pp. 251-62; Anna Benvenuti Papi: "Cristomimesi al femminile", in Ead.: « *In castro poenitentiae* » – *Santità e società femminile nell'Italia medievale*, Roma: Herder 1990, pp. 48-51; Ead.: *La famiglia, territorio negato*, ibidem pp. 171-203; Enrico Menestò: "La mistica di Margherita da Cortona", in *Temi e problemi della mistica femminile trecentesca*, op. cit., pp. 181-206; Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli: "Margherita come Francesco", in: Fortunato Iozzelli ed.: *Margherita da Cortona*, Atti della Giornata di studio di Firenze, 26 ottobre 2013, *Studi Francescani CXI* (2014), 359-88.
- 30 For a comparison of the extasy of Margaret of Cortona and conversion crisis Anna O. and Emmy von N. suffered from Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit. pp. 86-91.

their cribs or beds, to rush, several times to the Oratory of our Convent (...) and filled it with tears. They saw Margaret struck by ferocious pain, not as if she were near the Cross but almost placed on top of it (...). Due to the violence of the pain, she chattered her teeth, she writhed like a worm and a snake, she took on the color of ash, her pulse slowed down, she lost her ability to speak, her body froze; and her speech became so hoarse that one could not understand her when she came to her senses. In fact, until the Ninth Hour, she had lost all external sensitivity and visual ability, so much so that she did not notice the people gathered and crying, nor did she recognize the faces or voices of the ladies who assisted and held her<sup>31</sup>.

The story of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi<sup>32</sup> provides an opportunity to review, within the fervor of the mystical behavior, what the neurologist Charcot called

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31 *Leggenda della vita*, p. 76 [my translation].

32 Bibliography on Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi is huge. Here we mention only the viewed studies. For revelations: Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: *Tutte le opere di Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, dai manoscritti originali*, ed. Fulvio Nardoni, Firenze: Centro Internazionale del libro di Bruno Nardini 1960-1966, 7 voll.; Ead.: *Le parole dell'estasi*, ed. Giovanni Pozzi, Milano: Adelphi 1984; Ead.: *I quaranta giorni*, con una nota di Angelo Morino, ed. Maurizio Rolfo, Palermo: Sellerio 1996; Ead.: *Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, ed. et transt. Armando Maggi; preface E. Ann Matter, Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press 2000; Ead.: *L'epistolario completo*, ed. Chiara Vaschiaveo, Firenze: Nerbini 2009; Ead.: *Revelatione e Intelligentie*, ed. Chiara Vaschiaveo, Firenze: Pagnini 2016. For the critical bibliography: Giuliano Agresti: *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi – L'amore non amato. Un'antologia delle sue opere*, Roma: Città Nuova 1974, pp. 9-88; Bruno Secondin: *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi – Esperienza e dottrina*, Roma: Institutum Carmelitanum 1974; Benedetta Papisogli – Bruno Secondin: *La parabola delle due spose*, Torino: Gribaudo 1976; Ermanno Ancilli: *Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi – Estasi, dottrina, influsso*, Roma: Edizioni del Teresianum 1976; Giovanni Pozzi: "Patire e non potere nel discorso dei santi," *Studi medievali XXVI* (1985), 1-52; Id.: "L'identico del diverso in s. Maddalena de' Pazzi", *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie XXXIII* (1986), 517-551; Tiziana Zaninelli: "Influssi culturali nell'esperienza mistica di santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi", *Rivista di ascetica e mistica I* (1992), 53-55; Paola Moschetti – Bruno Secondin: *Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, mistica dell'amore*, Milano: Edizioni Paoline 1992; Sara F. Matthews Grieco: "Modelli di santità femminile nell'Italia del Rinascimento e della Controriforma", in: Lucetta Scaraffia, Gabriella Zarri edd.: *Donne e fede*, Bari: Laterza 1994, pp. 320-322; Armando Maggi: "The Voice and the Silences of Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi", *Annali d'Italianistica XIII* (1995), 257-281; Anna Scattigno: "Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi tra esperienza e modello", in: Gabriella Zarri ed.: *Donna, disciplina e creanza cristiana dal XVI al XVII secolo – Studi e testi a stampa*, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura 1996, pp. 85-101; Ead.: "Un commento alla regola carmelitana – Gli *Ammaestramenti* di Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi", in: Gabriella Zarri ed.: *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall'Alto Medioevo al secolo XVII*, Verona: Il segno dei Gabrielli 1997, pp. 283-302; Francesca Brezzi: *La passione di pensare – Angela da Foligno, Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi, Jeanne Guyon*, Roma: Carocci 1998; Armando Maggi: *Uttering the Word – The Mystical Performances of Maria Maddalena*

the «hysterical stigmata»<sup>33</sup> – multiple identifications, catatonic immobility, somnambulistic trances, split personalities, hallucinations and rigidity. For instance, one of the texts in which Pazzi's 'ecstasies' are described reads:

And having uttered these words, she rose from (...). And turning three times in a circle, she then sat down again (...) began (...) to walk around the Novitiate room, turning her face this way or that, looking with great amazement and admiration. She showed she was seeing great things, making beautiful gestures, in marvelous ways. Having gone around the room three times, she prostrated herself on the ground with her entire body; and having stayed like this for a little while, she stood up, going around the room a few more times, and she prostrated again (...). And having prostrated three times, she stood up again and began to go around the room like in a dance, and performed beautiful reveries and exchanges with her feet, with dexterity and such a beautiful grace that she did not resemble a human creature but an Angel descended from heaven. (...). She went around like that, a little in her voice, and not in her face (...). She performed a beautiful dance in the middle of the room, one of those we perform down here, but that wasn't an earthly dance but one of those dances in paradise<sup>34</sup>.

Shortly after Pazzi's experience, another nun of noble birth, a Benedictine from Agrigento, consummated her existential and para-mystical experience within the cloister of Palma di Montechiaro: Isabella Tomasi who became a nun with

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*de' Pazzi, a Renaissance Visionary*, Albany: State University of New York Press 1998; Anna Scattigno: "Una comunità testimone – Il monastero di S. Maria degli Angeli e la costruzione di un modello di professione religiosa", in: Gianna Pomata, Gabriella Zarri edd.: *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura tra Rinascimento e Barocco*, Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura 2005, pp. 175-204; Miguel Gotor: *I beati del papa – Santità, Inquisizione e obbedienza in Età moderna*, Firenze: L.S. Olschki 2002, pp. 30-33; Anna Scattigno: "La costruzione di un profilo di santità femminile nella Firenze del XVII secolo", *Annali di storia di Firenze* VIII aprile (2014), 145-170. Available on the web: <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/asf/article/view/14444/13456>. Consulted on: 17 June 2019 doi:10.13128/Annali\_Stor\_Firen-14444. For the works about Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi's neuropathy, see Eric J. Dingwall: *Very Peculiar People – Portrait Studies in the Queer, the Abnormal, and the Uncanny*, London: Rider 1950, pp. 119-144.

33 Jean-Martin Charcot: *Le démoniaques*, op. cit., p. 107. Id.: *L'hystérie*, Étienne Trillat ed., Toulouse: Privat 1971, p. 160; Désiré-Magloire Bourneville: *Science et miracle – Louise Lateau ou La stigmatisée belge*, Paris: Delhaye 1897, p. 9.

34 Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi: *Opere*, op. cit., vol. III, pp. 232-233 [my translation].

the name of Maria Crocifissa<sup>35</sup>. Tomasi's story warrants additional scrutiny due to a few intriguing aspects of hysteria emerging.

As documented by a few monastic reports, the young nun was the protagonist of an experience that was carefully chronicled as «regression to a child state», more specifically, an intermittent state consisting of three phases<sup>36</sup>. Maria Crocifissa appears to have regressed substantially to the point of becoming, once again, a child. Aside from their inability to speak, she no longer knew how to put food in her mouth, dress herself, go down the stairs, and so forth<sup>37</sup>. Simultaneously, her behavior aroused a combination of surprise, interest and anxiety, especially when, during this regression, she grabbed a pair of scissors and attempted to gouge out the eyes of a sister, or when she cradled some Baby Jesus dolls until she suddenly tore them apart and threw them into the air. Maria Crocifissa was subjected to careful medical examinations, as evidenced by the nosographic information found in the monastery, and was tortured with «strong ligatures», «brain clouding» and «stinking odors». In the end, the conscientious directors, in concert with the nuns who had witnessed Tomasi's regression, concluded what follows: the nun entered a state of grace in which, by divine will, she would have experienced the condition of the infant, the condition of little ones, exalted on several occasions in the gospel<sup>38</sup>. This account prompts a parallel with the regression to the state of a child experienced in the twentieth century by Bavarian mystic Therese Neumann (†1962) who also endured other symptoms such as, for example, amaurosis – hysterical blindness – and subsequently declared hysterical by the doctors who examined her – who also accused her of simulated sanctity.

An analysis that hypothesizes the existence of neuropathic conduct in the behavior of the female mystics allows for the identification of many other cases of women who were considered 'mad for Him'. Noteworthy instances include: the hyperthermia crises of Saint Angela of Foligno; the contortions

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35 For a "pen portrait" of Maria Crocifissa della Concezione: Sara Cabibbo, Marilena Modica: *La santa dei Tomasi – Storia di suor Maria Crocifissa (1645-1699)*, Torino: Einaudi 1989; for the «childish status» Tomasi experienced: *ibid.*, p. 133 and ss. Also useful: Luigi Mezzadri: "Contemplare a viso scoperto – L'esperienza di Isabella Tomasi (1645-1699) a tre secoli dalla morte", in: Maria Concetta Di Natale, Fabrizio Messina Cicchetti edd. (fotografie di Enzo Brai): *Arte e Spiritualità nella Terra dei Tomasi di Lampedusa – Il Monastero Benedettino del Rosario di Palma di Montechiaro*, San Martino delle Scale: Officina della Memoria 1999, pp. 19-27; Anselmo Lipari: *Cenni sulla spiritualità di suor Maria Crocifissa della Concezione*, *ibid.*, pp. 35-39.

36 I analyzed texts about Tomasi existential para mystic experience in *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit., pp. 113-119.

37 Vd. *ibidem*.

38 *ibidem*.

and hysterical contractions of Blessed Vanna from Orvieto (†1306); the mutism of Blessed Chiara from Rimini; the ‘paroxysmal’ dances of Saint Francesca Romana (†1440); the confused speech and disturbing movements of the blessed Stefana Quinzani (†1530); the trips to the monastery, the unstable mood and the absences of Saint Veronica Giuliani<sup>39</sup>.

Transitioning to the third part of this work, which aims to illustrate how the stigmatizations, namely the underlying element of the simulation of the *Passio Christi* – also known as Christomimesis – far from being considered an amazing manifestation, it can be easily explained as a psychosomatic phenomenon, often reconnectable – once again – to the «great simulator»: hysteria.

In the spectrum of stigmatized mystics who lived between the Middle Ages and the modern age, a distinction can be made between an initial group of *stigmiferae* virgins who carried invisible stigmata on themselves – such as Catherine of Siena (†1380) – and a second group of women whose stigmata were visible and bloody<sup>40</sup>. From the map of stigmatized women drawn during the

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39 For all such cases, *ibid.*, pp. 73-131.

40 Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit., pp. 132-178. An investigation into the stigmata could start from: Pierre Debongnie: “Essai critique sur l’histoire des stigmatisations au Moyen Age”, *Etudes carmelitaines* XX (1936), 52-59. See also: Franz L. Schleyer: *Die Stigmatisation mit den Blutmalen – Biographische Auszüge und medizinische Analyse*, Hannover: Schmorl & von Seefeld 1948; Nicolas Kluger, Bernard Cribier: “Les stigmates – De Saint François d’Assise à l’hématidrose idiopathique”, *Annales de dermatologie et de vénéréologie* CXL (2013), 771-777; Gábor Klaniczay: “Illness, Self-inflicted Body Pain and Supernatural Stigmata – Three Ways of Identification with the Suffering Body of Christ”, in Christian Krötzl, Katariina Mustakallio, Jenni Kuuliala edd.: *Infirmity in Antiquity and the Middle Ages – Social and Cultural Approaches to Health, Weakness and Care*, London: Routledge 2019, pp. 119-136, see p. 119. For an overview about stigmatization from the medical point of view, vd.: Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre: *La stigmatisation, l’extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes*, Clermont Ferrand: L. Bellet 1894; Alfred E. Hoche: *Die Wunder der Therese Neumann von Konnersreuth*, München: J.F. Lehmanns Verlag 1933; Josef Deutsch: *Ärztliche Kritik an Konnersreuth! – Wunder oder Hysterie. Motto. Vitam impendere vero!*, Lippstadt: Selbstverlag 1938; Joseph V. Klauder: “Stigmatization”, *Archives of Dermatology and Syphilology* XXXVIII (1938); Franz Pollak: “Zur Klinik der Stigmatisierungen – Ein weiterer Beitrag zur Frage des psychozerebralen Bauplanes”, *Zeitschrift für gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* CLXII (1938/1), 606-626; Boleslas Poray-Madeyski: *Le cas de la visionnaire stigmatisée Thérèse Neumann de Konnersreuth – Étude analytique et critique du problème*, Paris: P. Lethielleux 1940; Gottfried Ewald: *Die Stigmatisierte von Konnersreuth – Untersuchungsbericht und gutachtliche Stellungnahme*, München: J.F. Lehmanns Verlag 1927; Ted Harrison: *Stigmata – A Medieval Mystery in a Modern Age*, London: Penguin 1994; Otmar Seidl: “Zur Stigmatisation und Nahrungsolosigkeit der Therese Neumann (1898-1962)”, *Nervenarzt* LXXVIII (2008), 836-844, see pp. 840-841; Fiorenzo Conti ed.: *Fisiologia medica*, Milano: Ermes 2010, vol. I, p. 831.

surveys, seventeen European women with stigmata living between the Middle Ages and the modern age with visible and bloody stigmata were identified. One noteworthy case is the instance of hysterical self-harm involving Maria von Mörl<sup>41</sup> (†1868). The domestic violence suffered by the girl at the hands of her alcoholic father, who beat and raped her on several occasions, seems to have had a pivotal role in the development of her hysterical behavior. After her mother's death, Mörl began to experience convulsions and imitate the sound of animals such as a dog, a monkey and a bear<sup>42</sup>. The convulsions resulted in several losses of speech—yet another case of hysterical mutism?—and impaired vision—another occurrence of amaurosis?—as documented by biographer Maria von Buol. Furthermore, actual physical 'transformations' occurred when Mörl relived the Passion: she «turns pale, has a thick tongue, swollen and livid lips, her eyes covered with a veil of tears which, raining down on her face, wet her clothes and the bed»<sup>43</sup>. Maria von Mörl is included in the group of *stigmiferae* virgins because two days after the solemnity of Candlemas in 1834, the confessor found a cloth in her hands, intent on dabbing the blood that leaked from them. The woman, oblivious to the cause of her bleeding, suggested that she may have cut herself, however, the spiritual father 'corrected' her asserting that Mary had received her stigmata. According to the analysis provided in the biography of Johann Joseph Görres, the woman seemed to have confessed that she had harmed herself. Nevertheless, the conscientious director did not admit that Mary's wounds were of natural origin and she claimed that they were of divine origin. She was accused of severe hysteria by the neuropsychiatrist Jean Lhermitte<sup>44</sup>, who noticed that the ecstatic phenomena ceased when Mary no longer felt observed, and when the confessor died, in 1865, all of Mary's charisms disappeared: the ecstasies, the stigmata, and the mysterious mutism had all disappeared – «She was speaking now!»<sup>45</sup>.

One of the most disturbing aspects of the story of the Tyrolean Maria von Mörl is possession. Nonetheless, it was decided to focus on other cases of possessed holy women, thus illustrating the other critical angle chosen to question the selected sources. During the investigation, a few cases that might

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41 For Maria Mörl biography: Antonio Riccardi: *Relazione storica di Maria Morl di Caldaro* (...), in *Le tre mirabili vergini viventi nel Tirolo*, Milano: Bravetta 1836, pp. 6-36.

42 Jean Lhermitte: *Mistici e falsi mistici*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero 1952, p. 89.

43 Riccardi: *Relazione storica di Maria Morl*, op. cit., p. 32.

44 Lhermitte: *Mistici e falsi mistici*, op. cit., pp. 89-91.

45 Maria von Buol: *Maria von Mörl, mistica stigmatizzata – Biografia*, Bolzano: Ed. Praxis 3 1997 (trad. it. di *Ein Herrgottskind – Lebensbild der ekstatischen Jungfrau Maria von Mörl aus den Dritten Orden des Heiligen Franziskus*, Innsbruck: 1927), p. 171.

be assimilated – depending on the hysterical manifestations, hallucinations, or coprophagia – to obsessive personality disorder and delusions emerged, especially in those that were placed by the hagiographers, or the transcribers of the *βίος*, within the saint's topical struggle against the Demon. The most notable cases are the Blessed Christina of Stommel<sup>46</sup> (†1312), the Blessed Eustochio from Padua<sup>47</sup> (†1469), Sister Jeanne des Anges (†1665), who was the protagonist of the *Loudun affair* and who died in the concept of sanctity. Seizures, hysterical pregnancies, obsessive thoughts, cracking of bones, screams, and ocular revulsions emerge in the background of the life of Sister Jeanne des Anges<sup>48</sup>. She and the other Ursulines protagonists of the possession of Loudun continually «scratch, bite, crawl, whistle, bark»<sup>49</sup> as Michel de Certeau wrote. It follows that 'behind' possession, there often seem to have been concealed elements, namely the various categories linked to hysteria – which today are considered psychotic states, phenomena of suggestibility, hallucinations – and other areas of psychiatry, such as obsessive personality disorder and delirium, which pertains to the 'chapter' of paranoia<sup>50</sup>.

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46 For a psycho-pathological view of Cristina's possession: Zangari: *Santità femminile e disturbi mentali*, op. cit., pp. 186-190.

47 For a psycho-pathological view of events connected to Eustochio *ibid.*, pp. 191-195.

48 I read the following studies: Ferdinand Cavallera: "L'autobiographie de Jeanne des Anges d'après des documents inédits", *Recherches de Science religieuse* XVIII (1928), 224-235; Thérèse Griguer: "Historiographie et médecine – À propos de Jeanne des Anges et de la possession de Loudun", *Annales de Bretagne et de pays de l'Ouest* XCIX/2 (1992), 155-163; Antoinette Gimaret: "L' Autobiographie de Jeanne des Anges (1644) – Histoire d'une âme ou réécriture d'une affaire de possession?", *Études Épistémè* XIX (2011), 22-49; Michel Carmona: *Soeur Jeanne des Anges, diabolique ou saint au temps de Richelieu?*, Bruxelles: A. Versaille 2011.

49 Michel de Certeau: *La possession di Loudun* (2005, Français), transt. Rossana Lista, Bologna: CLUEB 2011, p. 247. Jeanne's following crisis seems significant: «And as she returned to her senses, the creature was ordered to sing the verse *Memento salutis*, and wanted to pronounce *Maria mater gratiae*, a horrible voice was immediately heard coming out of her mouth saying: "I deny God. I curse him". And then she bit her tongue and then her arm like a fury, despite the exorcist's efforts to prevent her from doing so». Jeanne des Anges: *Storia delle mie possessioni* (Français, 1644), Denise Sainte Fare Garnot ed., transt. Mino Bergamo, Roma: Castelvecchi 2017, p. 186 [my translation].

50 For paranoia and delirium: Jaspers: *Psicopatologia generale*, op. cit., p. 114-116 and *passim*; Norman Cameron: "Stati paranoidi e paranoia", in *Manuale di psichiatria*, op. cit., cfr. vol. I 1969, pp. 709-742; Giovanni Jervis: *Manuale critico di psichiatria*, Milano: Feltrinelli 1984<sup>15</sup>, pp. 240-253; American Psychoanalytic Association, International Psychoanalytical Association, Division of Psychoanalysis (39) of the American Psychological Association et alii edd. (comitato scientifico italiano: Massimo Ammaniti, Nino Dazzi, Franco Del Corno et alii): *Manuale diagnostico psicodinamico*, Milano: Cortina 2008, asse P, pp. 27-29; James Morrison: *DSM-5 made easy – Percorsi alla diagnosi*, Emilio