

Introduction

Gilles de la Tourette

*A Familiar Name, a Misunderstood Illness,
a Forgotten Man*

Some, to the fascination of a name, suspend judgement.

Why a Biography?

The name Gilles de la Tourette is recognizable for many people. They intuitively think of the disease while remaining unaware of its clinical picture or reducing it to tics alone. The name is more familiar to physicians and well known to neurologists. But who was Georges Gilles de la Tourette (1857–1904; Figure I.1)? Scholarly, exhaustive biographies have been written about his teacher, Jean-Martin Charcot (1825–1893; Figure I.2), and his most famous colleague, Joseph Babiński (1857–1932). And lesser-known students of Charcot have had the honor of a biography, for example Désiré-Magloire Bourneville (1840–1909), Charles Féré (1852–1907), Edouard Brissaud (1852–1909), and Henri Parinaud (1844–1905). And yet, very little has been written about the life of Georges Gilles de la Tourette.

Certain historians take the slightly condescending view that biography is a hybrid form, blending all of the “different lives” of an individual—intellectual, social, and professional—without any pretension of literature, the result being nothing beyond a minor record of history. However, biographies are



FIGURE 1.1 Georges Gilles de la Tourette around 1893.
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essential. We take our memories with us when we go, and the only way to collect them—and to recollect them—for today and for tomorrow, is through narratives that put a life and a life’s work into perspective.

Made Famous by an Eponym

Gilles de la Tourette’s posthumous fame is recent. The 1936 edition of a leading French encyclopedia, the *Larousse*, contains a dozen lines on Gilles de la Tourette, whereas the 1960 edition makes no mention of him at all. Medical fame is evanescent; it comes and goes, and, by dint of circumstances, it may return. Gilles de la Tourette once again gained prominence in the 1960s as interest grew in the syndrome that bears his name. As the English author MacDonald Critchley (1900–1997) wrote: “The Malady of Gilles de la Tourette: what a compelling and grandiloquent choice of words! As a matter of fact, it is a fragment of poetry with its iambus following a dactyl. More than



FIGURE 1.2 Jean-Martin Charcot around 1890.
Postcard, private collection of the author.

that, it is a musical theme which reverberates in one's imagery. Little wonder that the eponym fixates itself in the mind of every student at the outset of his career in neurology, there to remain throughout his life like a limpet."

The eponym's pretty ring has thus played a role in Gilles de la Tourette's fame. There is a touch of exoticism for English-speakers, as well as an evocation of onomastic and nobiliary pride. One patient's mother reportedly told Arthur K. Shapiro (1923–1995), "What a pretty name for such a terrible disease," indicating that those familiar with the syndrome are much more ambivalent about the eponym.

The affection Charcot had for Gilles de la Tourette stands in stark contrast to the slanderous remarks made by many of their contemporaries, and this paradox alone may justify examining Gilles de la Tourette's life. But, in delving into previously unpublished documentary sources, acquired through the Gilles de la Tourette family archive and a delight for any historian, one finds even further reasons to resuscitate this physician, writer, historian, and

theater critic who worked in one of the world's largest centers for neurology at the end of the nineteenth century, the Hôpital La Salpêtrière.

Previously Unpublished Family Archives

After their mother's death (September 10, 1979, in Saint-Fargeau-Ponthierry), the children of Jeanne Dalpeyrat (1890–1979) decided to donate the family archives she had maintained to Loudun's Charbonneau-Lassay Museum. Two crates in the museum's attic contain numerous letters from Gilles de la Tourette's correspondence with friends and colleagues, administrative documents concerning his personal and professional affairs, and unpublished family photos. This biography draws on these previously unpublished archives.

Gilles de la Tourette's Personality

Gilles de la Tourette's passion and diligence, so appreciated by Charcot, led to a very high output; he published in all of the fields that interested him: medicine, history, journalism, and theater. Intensely ambitious, Gilles de la Tourette also completed the obstacle course of competitive exams that structure the medical and university professions in France. As he climbed his career ladder, Gilles de la Tourette met men for whom he developed deep admiration and staunch attachment, especially Charcot and Paul Brouardel (1837–1906).

His loyalty as a friend was only matched by his loyalty to his roots, in Poitou and the town of Loudun. His first historical works centered on characters who gave Loudun its place in history, namely, Théophraste Renaudot, the father of journalism and advertising and an important source of personal inspiration for Gilles de la Tourette in his own journalistic pursuits. Later books focused on Urbain Grandier and an Ursuline Mother Superior, Sister Jeanne des Anges, the protagonists in the town's legendary confrontation with demonic forces. These two figures, emblematic of intolerance and superstition, provided material to which he could apply the neuropsychological knowledge gained at La Salpêtrière, along with his republican, progressive, and anti-clerical ideals.

Aided by his friend Bourneville, a physician and politician who held similar views, he was able to start publishing his medical writings at a very early age, even before his doctorate. His first articles appeared in Bourneville's journal *Le Progrès Médical*, then in *Les Archives de Neurologie*. He would later be involved in founding *La Nouvelle Iconographie de La Salpêtrière*.

French National Archives and Library

When Georges Montorgueil (1857–1933), editor-in-chief of the major evening newspaper *Le Temps*, died, all of his correspondence was entrusted to the French National Archives, including the numerous letters he received from Gilles de la Tourette. Their correspondence, from 1892 to 1901, sheds light on hidden and perhaps secret aspects of Gilles de la Tourette's quest for notoriety. For example, the letters reveal Gilles de la Tourette's constant need for recognition and all of the subterfuge he engaged in to attain it. The mainstream press of his day features prominently, as it often reported on the work carried out at La Salpêtrière and by Gilles de la Tourette in particular. But, of course, avidly seeking media attention has its disadvantages, which Gilles de la Tourette learned when journalists highlighted stories, some of them scandalous, in which he found himself involved against his wishes. For the first time, these events will be examined based on several sources from the French National Library and the family archives.

The Journalist

Jules Claretie (1840–1913), novelist and chronicler of late nineteenth-century Parisian life, was a close friend of Gilles de la Tourette, and their epistolary exchange provides a window on the artistic life in which they actively participated, including theater. Gilles de la Tourette wrote regularly in the cultural periodical *La Revue Hebdomadaire* under the pen name of Paracelsus whose articles focused on psychiatry, hygiene, theater productions, and so on. On the whole, Gilles de la Tourette's writings are characterized by an elegant literary style with occasional flights of lyricism, but they also bear the mark of his work method, which at times bordered on plagiarism. The emblematic example is his first book, the biography of Théophraste Renaudot, published in 1884. His mastery of the subject matter is surprising for such a young man, but, in fact, he drew much inspiration from the book by Eugène Hatin (1809–1893) and omitted to credit him.

The Eponymous Disease

When Gilles de la Tourette was still a medical student, he translated English articles on various types of abnormal behavior for *Les Archives*

de Neurologie, a journal founded by Charcot, who took an interest in the articles as well as their precocious translator. Shortly thereafter, Charcot accorded Gilles de la Tourette the task of publishing observations of patients that Charcot had treated and for whom the diagnosis of chorea left him unsatisfied. Charcot quickly realized that the article initially published by Gilles de la Tourette was incomplete and its title misleading. Yet, because of the esteem and friendship he felt for Gilles de la Tourette, whose name was so melodious, Charcot named the disorder after him. He did, however, task Georges Guinon (1859–1932), the *interne* who replaced Gilles de la Tourette, with adding the psychopathological elements in a second publication.

Given how attached Gilles de la Tourette was to many of his other publications, it is curious that he took little pride in this seminal paper. It should be noted, however, that the article generated little interest at the time.

The Author

The two books that Gilles de la Tourette considered to be his magnum opus—*L'hypnotisme et les états analogues* and *Traité de l'Hystérie*—were rapidly outdated and have today lost all of their significance. Nonetheless, analyzing them gives some measure of the difficulties that nineteenth-century physicians faced in making well-founded diagnoses and ensuring truly curative treatment at a time when their only tool, clinical medicine, was in its infancy and treatment methods were often more iatrogenic than therapeutic. These works also reveal the unspeakable suffering endured by some of the patients and their stupefying resignation. Evoking the treatments they were subjected to is a sort of homage to these patients and a way of thanking them for the medical progress we currently enjoy.

A Man of Acclaim

Gilles de la Tourette's brazen ambition, born of a need for recognition and fame, was gratified when he was appointed to the sought-after post of Chief Physician for the 1900 World's Fair in Paris, entailing four years of preparatory construction. The effusive and unanimous praise he garnered in this role are proof of his skills and talents as an organizer, even though he had obtained his position through opportunistic tactics.

The Fatal Kiss of Aphrodite

Arx Tarpeia Capitoli proxima (“the Tarpeian Rock stands close to the Capitol”). In other words, a fall from grace is always possible. Gilles de la Tourette’s life was haunted by a disease that, unknown to him, was insidiously undermining his health: general paralysis. The condition was clearly in evidence by 1893. Some of his writings reveal a flight of ideas resulting from a delirious megalomania, which reached its height in 1901. It is pathetically illustrated in the hitherto unpublished cover letter, presented in this volume, of Gilles de la Tourette’s candidacy for the Chair of History of Medicine—the last rung in the university career ladder before full professorship, which Gilles de la Tourette never achieved. After three years of progressive mental deterioration, Gilles de la Tourette succumbed; he was only forty-seven years old.

Justification

This brief summation of such a productive, intense existence should suffice to demonstrate that Gilles de la Tourette is deserving of a biography. The famous historian and professor Jean Tulard often told his students, “Never write the biography of a man you don’t like!” Indeed, it may very well be the biographer’s role to share with readers the affection inspired by his or her subject.

About This Book

This book is divided into four parts. The first part explores the name of Gilles de la Tourette and the family’s origins, the basis for establishing the family tree; a family that produced no fewer than twelve physicians in four generations. Georges Gilles de la Tourette’s brilliant academic career as an adolescent and, later, as a medical student is recounted in detail. Previously unpublished documents are used to elucidate the murder attempt that Gilles de la Tourette was victim to in 1893. His nomination as Chief Physician for the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris provides an opportunity to disprove the scandalous rumors targeting him at the time and to enumerate the many duties and responsibilities he successfully managed. While the few existing biographies of Gilles de la Tourette offer little information about his unfortunate demise, the discovery of new documents make it possible to present the final three years of his life in detail.

The second part of this book analyzes the works and medical publications of Gilles de la Tourette. After a short first chapter on his doctoral thesis, a longer chapter addresses the eponymous syndrome in depth, including the origins of this seminal work, the initial errors, and the essential role played by Jean-Martin Charcot. The various books published by Gilles de la Tourette are analyzed within the framework of their historical context, with a special emphasis on *Le Traité de l'Hystérie*, a source of insight concerning the controversies that have developed since its publication with regard to this area of Charcot's work.

The third part of this book examines the works that Gilles de la Tourette published as a historian and his polemic pieces as a journalist. Some of these articles are not well known, given that he wrote under the pen name Paracelsus. Gilles de la Tourette was also friends with a high-profile journalist at the time, Georges Montorgueil. Their friendship lasted many years and was motivated in part by self-interest. The chapter on their correspondence, which is held by the Archives Nationales in Paris, analyzes their exchange and reveals hidden aspects of Gilles de la Tourette's personality. This biographical sketch is followed by a brief and surprising chapter consisting of two poems that Gilles de la Tourette wrote while traveling.

The fourth and final part of this book consists of an annotated summary of all Gilles de la Tourette's publications, useful as a historical research tool.