



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S33. Literature and Medicine

Thursday 31 August: 2.30-4.30pm & 5.00-7.00pm

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This seminar will bring together scholars with interests spanning from the classical to the modern periods, in order to consider the intersection of medicine and literature. This area has increasingly become a focus of critical attention, particularly with the development of the discipline of medical humanities. Topics considered might include the history of medicine as reflected in or reflecting on literature; the representation of pathologies; the treatment of ideas of illness, including its relation to creativity; the impact of modern medical technologies on literature and theories, and the relevance of literature and literary theory for medical studies.

Session 1

Illness, Medicine and Healing in Medieval Literature

Corinne Saunders (University of Durham)

This paper will explore the role of illness and the related themes of medicine and healing, in medieval literature, with a particular focus on Middle English romance – a subject that has received comparatively little attention in critical studies. Topics considered will be the attitudes to illness reflected in romance, the notions of treatment and cure, and the role of religion and ideas of providence. The special link between medicine and monasticism, and the motif of women as healers, will also be considered. Comparisons will be drawn with other medieval literary genres, such as saints' lives and devotional literature.

“What rhubarb, cynne, or what purgative drug”: Digestive Bodies in *Macbeth*

Mauro Spicci (Milan State University)

The paper aims at reconstructing the perspective of bodily pathology underpinning Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In the play Scotland's body politic is frequently depicted as a macro-system suffering from a complexional imbalance of digestive origins. More specifically, Scotland comes over as a huge stomach strangled by a carcinogenous foreign body in need of being “raze[d] out”. I hope to demonstrate that the play's conclusion coincides with the most terrible form of political surgery: Shakespeare's reiterated use of

the verbs “raze out”, “pluck”, and “purge”, commonly used in renaissance herbals and handbooks, suggests that Macbeth’s physical body is suffering from a kind of “blockage”, where herbal treatments are no longer sufficient. Nothing less than a surgical operation is needed to “purge” the corrupt body of the State dominated by Macbeth’s tyranny.

“So Much for Doctors!”: D. H. Lawrence and Alternative Healing

Peter Mortensen (University of Aarhus)

Like some other famous Modernists (Franz Kafka, for example), D. H. Lawrence vehemently criticized modern biomedicine, and throughout his career he experimented with a variety of what we nowadays label “alternative,” “untraditional,” “non-standard” or “fringe” healing techniques. In seeking alternatives to a science-based medicine which had lost sight of the patient as a psychosomatic whole, reducing her to a depersonalized object, Lawrence did not merely vent his private eccentricities and animosities – he also tapped into a public polemic causing considerable controversy during the interwar period. In this essay I seek to expand standard critical discussions of Lawrence’s attitude to “the body,” by showing how his creative writings – including not least his late novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928) – address the so-called “crisis of medicine.”

Double-vision: Imaging Techniques and the Modern Literary Imagination

Ulrika Maude (University of Durham)

In 1895, Wilhelm Roentgen developed the x-ray, which exposed the human skeleton and other organs within the living body. This device, which for the first time turned the body inside out without surgical intervention, made human beings more aware of their state of embodied being by revealing physiological processes and detailed anatomical information previously unavailable in living subjects. However, the X-ray and other imaging techniques that followed in its wake also somewhat problematically reproduced two-dimensional images of the body that transformed or reduced the living organism into pixels, graphs and information code, suggesting the body’s rewritability. This paper will explore the impact of medical imaging techniques on the modern literary imagination.

Postmodern Psychosis: the Literary Move towards New Perspectives?

Charlotte Baker (Royal Holloway University of London)

In this paper I argue that postmodern fiction – specifically, the fiction of J.G. Ballard, William Burroughs and Kathy Acker – reveals, from the inside, the secrets of psychosis, destabilizes discourses that attempt to encapsulate psychosis, and proposes a social and personal manifesto of psychosis in the late 20th Century. Postmodern Psychosis – radically different from the current clinical illnesses that comprise the psychoses – has a revelatory potential. As the first medium to explicitly form a dialogue from within a depathologised psychotic discourse rather than about psychosis, these fictions make psychosis understandable, and are the most evocative medium for examining notions of identity, individuality and experience in the postmodern age within a medical humanities context.

Literature and the ‘good doctor’ in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

Jane MacNaughton (University of Durham)

Medicine has become increasingly interested in how the values and sensibilities of doctors are developed through the educational process. Recent recommendations on medical education in the UK have allowed medical students to take courses in literature as a component of their degrees. Part of the rationale for this is to expand the students’ educational experience, but also, it is argued, the study of literature is important for the development of sensitive, insightful and empathic doctors. This paper appraises the instrumental role of a literary education for doctors through an analysis of Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday*, which deals with the dramatic events of a day in the life of a neurosurgeon.

Session 2

Challenging the Hippocratic Oath: Wilkie Collins and the Dilemmas of Victorian Medicine

Mariaconcetta Costantini (University G. d’Annunzio of Chieti-Pescara)

In the course of the nineteenth century, the medical profession underwent radical changes that paved the way to contemporary highly-specialised medicine. Victorian writers were alert to these changes, and often participated in intellectual debates on science and medicine. A case in point is that of Wilkie Collins, whose non-literary interests ranged from mesmerism to specific medical issues. My paper aims to investigate the well-knit discourse on medical practice and professionalism that Collins wove in his production, and to show how closely intertwined this discourse was with other social and ethical dilemmas faced by the Victorians. In particular, I intend to explore his dramatisation of deontological problems. The disreputable conduct of his medical practitioners, who variously challenge the Hippocratic Oath, complicates his picture of a rapidly-changing world, which hailed progress but suffered moral disorientation.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911): the Presence of Medical Subjects in Her Literary Works

María Dolores Narbona Carrión (University of Málaga)

The work of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) is of interest not only due to the quality of her writings: she included an outstanding innovation in the literature of her time by featuring female doctors as protagonists in her fiction, as evinced in her novel *Doctor Zay*, to cite but one of them. These female medics constitute examples of the “New Women” that featured in Phelps’s writings, as a way of inviting her female readers to break with restrictive traditions that were so stifling as to have an adverse effect on their health, as Phelps also suggests in her work.

Spaces of Hunger

Nieves Pascual (University of Jaén)

In 1903 Georg Simmel complained against the crowded disorder of big cities, which—he consistently argued—caused the metropolitan type to develop agoraphobia and grow fearful of touching. In much the same manner, and departing from the examination of a number of autobiographies published in recent years, I argue that anorexia is a spatial disease. Even though architecture does not cause disordered eating, it organizes perception and affective relations, informs ideologies about femininity and the language that structures desire, framing women's comprehension of their bodies and their fantasies, and eventually creating their own subjectivities.

Wandering and Suffering in History: From Tragedy to Trauma

Eluned Summers-Bremner (University of Auckland)

In both Greek tragedy and the combatant novel of the First World War, wandering is the sign of suffering from an ungraspable cause that blows apart the distinctions rendering chaotic reality as civilised experience. Tragic wandering is exclusion that yet opens onto the possibility of wisdom through the embodiment of unknowable forces. Shell shock's evacuation as a medical category once it was found that war trauma wanders through the sufferer's history, exceeding experiential frames, similarly finds expression in literature whose own incircumscribable cause is the reader.