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Heather Meek, 2023. *Reimagining Illness: Women Writers and Medicine in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press)

The last decade has witnessed a significant increase in scholarship at the intersection of literary and medical studies, and the eighteenth century has been a particular subject of scrutiny. Such a focus is unsurprising, since the period is frequently considered to be one of growing interest in the human body and psyche, as well as corporeal and mental afflictions, and potential cures. The eighteenth century also marks an important shift in literary development, particularly in the British context, with 1719 seeing the publication of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which is often viewed as the first British novel (for instance, by Margaret Drabble). The novel as a genre subsequently grew in popularity, leading to the formation of other subgenres (the sentimental novel, the Gothic novel, the picaresque novel, etc.). The period also saw a steady rise in the popularity of journals, diaries and collections of letters, as well as travelogues and political pamphlets. Appropriately termed the Age of Reason, the eighteenth century was conducive to the development of philosophical thought, which affected the approach towards different literary and medical matters. These overlapping topics have been explored in several volumes including *The Female Body in Medicine and Literature* (2011, edited by Andrew Mangham and Greta Depledge), *Medicine and Narration in the Eighteenth Century* (2013, edited by Sophie Vasset), Andrew Budd's *John Armstrong's "The Art of Preserving Health": Eighteenth-Century Sensibility in Practice* (2016), *Disease and Death in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fashioning the Unfashionable* (2017, edited by Allan Ingram and Leigh Wetherall Dickson), *Literature and Medicine Volume 1: The Eighteenth Century* (2021, edited by Clark Lawlor and Andrew Mangham), *Literature & Medicine During the Eighteenth Century* (2022, edited by Marie Mulvey Roberts and Roy Porter), and *Novel Notions: Medical Discourse and the Mapping of the Imagination in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* by Katherine E. Kickel (2023). Two

of the collections mentioned above (the 2017 and 2021 ones) include contributions by Heather Meek, whose 2023 work *Reimagining Illness: Women Writers and Medicine in Eighteenth-Century Britain* brilliantly complements the academic analysis situated between the worlds of literature and medicine (and to some degree philosophy, sociology, history and culture) in the long eighteenth century.

In her book, Meek discusses six female authors: Jane Barker (1652–1732), Anne Finch (1661–1720), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762), Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi (1741–1821), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) and Frances Burney (1752–1840). The term "long eighteenth century" aptly summarizes the time scope of the volume, for Barker's early forays into literature date back to the end of the seventeenth century, whereas in the case of Burney, Meek refers to her 1812 letter, even though Burney's most celebrated texts, *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, belong to the 1770s and 80s respectively. Although such a selection might initially seem random, Meek explains that "Barker, Finch, Montagu, Piozzi, Wollstonecraft, and Burney have been chosen as the primary subjects of this study because each of them can be understood as at once a major woman of letters and a medical thinker" (7). Undeniably, all six women demonstrate medical knowledge that they can translate into the language of (widely understood) literature. Moreover, they combine the discourse of eighteenth-century healthcare with literary tropes across different genres and literary conventions (prose, poetry, letters, pamphlets). Is this sufficient to justify examining them together, despite personal or generic differences? Meek's defense of such an authorial choice of protagonists appears valid, even though one would perhaps expect stronger reasoning, which could positively affect the overall perception of the book.

The first heroine of the volume, Jane Barker, certainly had ties to the medical world – not only did her brother Edward study medicine, but she herself "seems to have worked for a time as an unlicensed practitioner" (34). Meek positions Barker against several contemporary medical figures (such as Richard Lower), which proves particularly useful in the context of Barker's *Galesia Trilogy* and its depiction of female hysteria, for which Barker finds a cure: the rejection of marriage, female celibacy as a means of achieving autonomy, and the search for fulfillment in art. Meek underlines how revolutionary and unorthodox such opinions were at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Anne Finch, the protagonist of the second chapter, also believed in the recuperative power of the artistic impulse. In her poetic output, Finch frequently refers to her own experiences, especially her struggle with spleen/melancholy

(these two terms interchangeably used by her). Meek notes that Finch "presents spleen both as a disabling condition and as a muse and companion" (67), thus portraying the illness from two perspectives: the medical and the literary. However, Finch's poetry goes further as it criticizes the contemporaneous male tendency to belittle female writing and ridicule female melancholy.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the focus of chapter three, was equally critical of the male authorities of her time, especially in the realm of medicine. Meek emphasizes Montagu's status as the only figure in the volume whose writing actually contributed to major developments in medicine. Montagu's singularity seems justified due to her staunch support of smallpox inoculation, a method she first observed in Ottoman Constantinople. She promoted this early form of vaccination both personally (via letters to her friends and relatives) and more openly as pamphlets that she published anonymously. Her mission was surely motivated by her sense of duty toward her children. The topic of motherhood and its ordeals is also explored in the next chapter, devoted to Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi. According to Meek, Piozzi's "writings not only inform ideologies of motherhood but also engage with medical discourses of childrearing, midwifery, maternal grief, and hysteria" (135) and as such remain in dialogue with other chapters in the volume. Meek subtly, yet powerfully, narrates the story of a woman of letters whose traumatic life experiences (the loss of eight out of twelve children she had given birth to) affected her literary oeuvre.

The topic of motherhood is also present in the chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft, even though Meek concentrates mostly on the subject of consumption, as portrayed by Wollstonecraft in her two novels, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798). Both novels demonstrate that Wollstonecraft advocated for gender equality not only in her feminist texts such as *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), but also in her fiction. Therefore, the texts simultaneously imply that the personal is political, to use a phrase popularized by Carol Hanisch in the late 1960s. A similar approach was adopted by Frances Burney, the heroine of the final chapter, whose mastectomy letter is "an intensely personal yet carefully crafted piece of autobiographical writing and a medical document that offers a rare contribution to our understanding of breast cancer in the long eighteenth century" (193). Burney moves beyond a minute description of her health problems and the treatment she underwent to save her life to discuss

the dynamics between patients and doctors more broadly, frankly indicating that a female patient is more at risk of objectification and mental distress.

The volume reads very well, mainly thanks to its carefully crafted, coherent structure. It consists of six chapters, each devoted to one writer. Meek follows a chronological order, logically moving from Jane Barker, whose literary career started at the end of the seventeenth century, to Frances Burney's text written in the early nineteenth century. Preceding the analysis of the six female writers is an elaborate, detailed introduction that paints an intricate portrait of the eighteenth century and the events that led to such literary, medical and philosophical turmoil. Meek refers to numerous medical and literary predecessors of Barker and others, and she also quotes extensively from the public and private writings of various eighteenth-century authorities. As a result, she successfully situates her female protagonists against a very complex backdrop that certainly lacks homogeneity. Mixing literary, medical, philosophical and historical discourses might increase the risk of disorder and unintelligibility in the text, but Meek expertly combines attention to all the disciplines, thereby creating an informative, interdisciplinary narration.

Overall, Meek offers a genuinely insightful, multi-perspective overview of the literature of a period that was rife with intense intellectual tumult. Her analysis is accompanied by a thorough bibliography. As the author claims in the conclusion, one of her primary goals was "to illustrate how a group of major women writers drew on medical experience and discourse in ways that shaped their literary work – and thus to contribute in a broad sense to the process of recuperating eighteenth-century women writers" (220). She surely achieves this aim, inviting her readers on a fascinating journey that encompasses literature, history, philosophy, culture, sociology, and medicine.

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