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0521843340 - Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Mary Shelley to George Eliot

Janis McLarren Caldwell

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LITERATURE AND MEDICINE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Although we have come to regard “clinical” and “Romantic” as oppositional terms, Romantic literature and clinical medicine were fed by the same cultural configurations. In the pre-Darwinian nineteenth century, writers and doctors developed an interpretive method that negotiated between literary and scientific knowledge of the natural world. Literary writers produced potent myths that juxtaposed the natural and the supernatural, often disturbing the conventional dualist hierarchy of spirit over flesh. Clinicians developed the two-part history and physical examination, weighing the patient’s narrative against the evidence of the body. Examining fiction by Mary Shelley, Carlyle, the Brontës, and George Eliot, alongside biomedical lectures, textbooks, and articles, Janis McLarren Caldwell demonstrates the similar ways of reading employed by nineteenth-century doctors and imaginative writers and reveals the complexities and creative exchanges of the relationship between literature and medicine.

JANIS MCLARREN CALDWELL practiced emergency medicine for five years before pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature. She now teaches literature and science at Wake Forest University, where she is an Assistant Professor of English. An expert in nineteenth-century literature and medicine, she has received grants for research at Cambridge University and at Harvard University’s Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Her published work focuses on medical history and ethics in Romantic and Victorian literature.

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Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as ‘background’, feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field.

This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

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In Memoriam
George L. McLarren, M.D.

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