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Bernadette Höfer, *Psychosomatic Disorders in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*. (Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity). Burlington, Vt., and Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009. xiii + 245 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. £55.00 UK (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6621-9 (hb), 978-0-7546-9697-1 (eb).

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H-France list members may not be familiar with Ashgate's series, "Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity," because Höfer's is its only title dealing with France. Begun in 2004 and now running to eighteen volumes, including six in 2009 alone, this ambitious project is home to authors who hail mainly from departments of English. Scholars in the modern foreign languages are nevertheless represented in the Ashgate series by Gerhild Scholz Williams on Praetorius and Arielle Saiber on Giordano Bruno, as well as by Höfer's contribution.[1] The main goal of the series does not explicitly involve the interrogation of its umbrella terms, "literature," and "science," as these terms began to come under pressure in the 1980s, and a great deal of energy has since been brought to bear on achieving some understanding of their complex developments.[2] Instead, the series prefers to build up a picture of "science" from dietaries, economic and agrarian treatises, and texts on medicine, botany, astrology, geometry, and mathematics. In the picture of "literature," Shakespeare and Milton figure largely but certainly not exclusively.[3] With this series, part of its extensive "Early Modern History" catalogue, Ashgate continues to position itself as something of a powerhouse in early modern studies, and, in spite of the fact that there remains a question mark over the designation of "early modern" itself, we must stand amazed at the new publishing landscape it has created.[4] The fact that current scholarly work in early modern studies is economically viable matters.

This series-specific support matters when approaching Höfer's study, because what she is attempting to do, with tremendous erudition and energy, is immensely complicated, and its very complexity and sense of urgency may be specific to the study and teaching of the modern foreign languages, currently fighting for their lives in the midst of government hostility and public apathy. Her project is four-fold. First, she sets out to read four seventeenth-century texts closely: the Jesuit exorcist Jean-Joseph Surin's account of his twenty-year-long illness of obsession and despair in his *Science expérimentale* (chapter two); two of Molière's sickest and most compelling characters in *Misanthrope* (Alceste) and *Malade imaginaire* (Argan) (chapter three); Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* and its secluded, suffering heroine (chapter four); and Jean Racine's *Phèdre*, his most pointed representation of a heroine truly beside herself (chapter five). These are indeed texts, but they are not read as such, and textuality is not the main point. As far as the analysis is concerned, the words on the page produce holographs of suffering bodies which are the real objects of discussion. This treatment of character complexes as though they were analysands has a long and distinguished history, beginning with Freud himself, and it is grounded, as indeed is Höfer's title, in the work of Lilian R. Furst, *Idioms of Distress: Psychosomatic Disorders in Medical and Imaginative Literature*. Furst's chapter four, "Literary Patients" (pp. 53-69), defends the practice.[5] Furst's corpus, however, begins chronologically with nineteenth-century realist fiction, and it is contemporary with the historical appearance of the word "psychosomatic." [6] Höfer briefly mentions the anachronism which lifting Furst's tactic involves (p. 6), and she notes as well that this reading practice causes genre-specific distinctions to collapse (p. 212). Fiction, non-fiction, theatre, novel,

autobiography: their common role here is to offer bodies for analysis. One can agree or disagree with the holographic conceit, but it is a given of this study and must be taken on board if Höfer's argument is to be approached.

Second, the author finds her reading of these suffering bodies on psychoanalysis, and particularly on the disorder which translates emotional and mental torment into a physical symptom that Freud called conversion, and which has some right to be called the originating disorder of psychoanalysis. This anachronism is also fundamental to this study, because its drive is towards the condition of the "psychosomatic," the holistic connection between mind and body that Höfer argues is the anti-monarchical, anti-authoritarian, anti-Cartesian stance adopted by the four authors under discussion. Again, the validity of psychoanalysis as a tool for thinking about early modern texts is debatable, and has literally been so at least since Stephen Greenblatt set the cat among the pigeons with his 1986 "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture." [7] Greenblatt's observation was that a curious temporality installs itself when early modern texts respond so beautifully, as they often do, and as indeed they did for Freud himself, to psychoanalytically-based analysis. The historical outcome of a condition of mind, psychoanalysis, appears to have been instead the historical cause of that condition of mind, as can sometimes be seen with startling clarity in early modern texts. So in this study, Höfer argues that bodily disorder in fictional and non-fictional texts undermined the ideology of bodily order the absolutist state demanded, and that this may be seen in the physical suffering which was a conversion of the mental torment this intolerable demand produced. But the assault on the "imperial self" was, it could be said, a long historical process of which psychoanalysis, with its most basic assumption of a mental apparatus divided against itself, was the result. The counter argument would then be that Höfer's sufferers' bodies were not availing themselves of psychoanalytic possibilities; they were instead engaged in creating the conditions that led to them. Psychoanalysis, not *Phèdre*, is what we could call "an act of sustained lese majesty." [8] Nevertheless, if one is going to put an episode in the French reception of Greek tragedy, not to mention an obsessed seventeenth-century Jesuit exorcist, on the psychoanalytic couch, one might just as well get on with the business of the talking cure.

Third, in an opening chapter, "The Relational Conception of Mind and Body in the Seventeenth Century," Höfer begins a contextual study for her analyses to come. Her drive is diachronic. The concern is first to establish that Descartes' mind-body split was far from tidy in his own texts, and second, that in the seventeenth century, a powerful counter-current of anti-Cartesianism held that the mind does not exist apart from the body. Spinoza is the poster child for this philosophy. He discovered, according to Höfer, that self-understanding is not based on rational thought but instead on the concrete and moment-by-moment experience of the body (p. 25). The contemporary case in point is of course melancholy, and Höfer includes welcome sections on "Medical Thought and Melancholy," and "Melancholy and the Female Sex" before briefly gesturing towards the moral dimension of the debate with some comments on La Rochefoucauld and Pascal. The pace and ambition of the chapter then take us straight to Rousseau ("Mind-Body and the Romantic Period"), quickly on to Wordsworth, thence to the Baudelaire paragraph, and a page on De Staël. It is here that the complexity and urgency of this study begin to make themselves felt in a way that may well be specific to studies in the modern foreign languages now. For, in spite of the erudition that she has brought to the explication of the scholarly areas involved in points one through three, Höfer's real interest seems to be in point four.

So, fourth, Höfer claims that at the heart of her argument is cognitive neurobiology of our own day and its affinities with seventeenth-century conceptions of the human being as an integrated subject (p. 47). The juxtaposition of cognitive studies and literary texts in order to develop a reading practice grounded in the material origins of the self is not new, and Mary Thomas Crane, for one, has read "Shakespeare's brain" with a view to looking for traces of the author's mind at work in the text. [9] Cognitive science, and accordingly, the reading practice allied to it, assumes familiarity. That is, it assumes that the physical, material construction of the brain is common to all normally functioning people across cultures, and that the power of culture to shape the self is attenuated by the brain in analysable

ways.[10] This may be contrasted with the assumption of strangeness in a study such as Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, whose reading of Augustine is much to the point for seventeenth-century French studies.[11] Brown's interest is in "the way that societies can lay their codes across the body," and he is critical of the assumption that our own bodies can be projected into the distant past, forming "the one firm bridge between ourselves and those long-ago people." [12] Höfer has thrown in her lot with the former, familiarist, camp, and bases her comments largely on the work of Antonio Damasio, one of the foremost neuroscientists of our time. In *Descartes' Error*, Damasio argued that the results of research in thought, consciousness, emotion, bodily changes and brain states proved conclusively that Cartesian dualism was wrong and that body, mind and emotion ought not to be conceptualized as metaphysically separate entities.[13] The later *Looking for Spinoza* endorsed the view that ultimate reality was neither physical nor mental but instead a neutral substance.[14] Damasio's work has been sharply criticized from a philosophical standpoint, although we do not learn this from Höfer's study.[15] She does not aim to offer a proper appreciation of the neurobiological point, for which one would have to undertake to follow her references. Damasio is mentioned only in Höfer's introduction (p. 7). Her first chapter offers five paragraphs in conclusion on neurobiology (pp. 54-56), and there are two paragraphs on the notion of "body mapping" (p. 111) and other scattered references, but there is no systematic exposure of the science which seems to have occasioned such urgency in her study.

Accordingly, the real question goes to the source and nature of that urgency. As for its nature, it takes the form of the repeated assertion that there is a "*dialogue* taking place specifically between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries" (p. 7, original italics; p. 55); that "current researchers in psychosomatic medicine, neurobiology, and psychoanalysis can find inspiration and innovative precursors in the seventeenth century" (p. 47); that there is an "affinity"; and that the seventeenth century is "connected to our current perceptions." Spinoza is a "precursor" whose work "markedly anticipates modern medical and psychological views" (p. 215). As for its source, that is a more delicate question. Clearly, these kinds of formulations spring from a deep need to understand what Greenblatt called "the way we are," [16] and to flesh out the perception of a linkage between our selves and the selves of a distant past.[17] Classicists, for example, have long been engaged in thinking through the implications of their subject's endurance. George Steiner once asserted that the continuing vitality of Greek myth was due to the fact that it can be understood as a kind of grammar that is the grammar of language itself.[18] More recently, Edith Hall has argued that we continue to be fascinated with the tragic Greeks because they are survivors, victims of trauma learning to live with consequences, as do we.[19] At the end of a lengthy engagement with the figure of the great antique child-murderess, Medea, I concluded that audience fascination with her representations stands as a sign of the human capacity to forgive.[20] But in an equally subject-specific way, Höfer has taken on the question of how and why, to what end or ends, students, scholars, citizens, and indeed neurobiologists should study French now, and why they should bother to read seventeenth-century French texts usually considered literary or philosophical. With respect to the study of the modern foreign languages generally, this question is one which is pertinent enough to have been debated at the end of 2009 in the House of Lords.[21] In addressing the current political status of work in seventeenth-century French studies, in addition to producing a study of interest to scholars in history, literature, and psychoanalysis, Höfer's work is admirable in its willingness to take on that question. In the coming years, as disciplines and departments evolve and revolve, an answer will need to be supplied. One can agree or disagree with Höfer's readings and with the tracery of bodies of knowledge that illuminates her book, but one can only welcome her contribution to the task.

NOTES

[1] www.ashgatepublishing.com [Accessed 13 April 2010].

[2] For French, see Alain Viala, *Naissance de l'écrivain. Sociologie de la littérature à l'âge classique* (Paris: Minuit, 1985); Wilda Anderson, *Between the Library and the Laboratory: The Language of Chemistry in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); and for more recent explorations, John D. Lyons and Cara Welch, eds., *Le Savoir au XVIIe siècle. Actes du 34e congrès de la North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2003).

[3] Of the eighteen volumes, three are critical editions, three treat non-English-language subjects; of the remaining twelve, eight take up Shakespeare or Milton in whole or in part.

[4] Terence Cave, "Locating the Early Modern," <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/paragraph/v029/29.1cave.pdf> [Accessed 21 April 2010].

[5] Lillian R. Furst, *Idioms of Distress. Psychosomatic Disorders in Medical and Imaginative Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).

[6] <http://dicionary.oed.com> [Accessed 15 April 2010].

[7] Stephen Greenblatt, "Psychoanalysis and Renaissance Culture," in Patricia Parker and David Quint, eds., *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 210-224. See further Carla Mazzio and Trevor Douglas, eds., *Historicism, Psychoanalysis and Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000); and, for tragedy, Amy Wygant, "Medea, Poison, and the Epistemology of Error in *Phèdre*," *MLR* 95 (2000): 62-71.

[8] Greenblatt, p. 213.

[9] Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[10] Crane, p. 23.

[11] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). Brown's work was originally published in 1988 and originated from a series of lectures in the History of Religions, sponsored by the ACLS, in 1982-3.

[12] Brown, p. xxxiii.

[13] Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam's, 1994).

[14] Antonio R. Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2003).

[15] Andrew L. Gluck, *Damasio's Error and Descartes' Truth* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2007).

[16] Greenblatt, p. 217.

[17] But see James Helgeson, "Early Modernity without the 'Self': Notes on Anachronism and the First Person," *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 29 (2007): 29-39.

[18] George Steiner, *Antigones: How the Antigone Legend has Endured in Western Literature, Art, and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[19] Edith Hall, "Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century?" in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, eds., *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-46 (p. 45).

[20] Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories 1553-1797* (Aldershot and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007).

[21] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200910/ldhansrd/text/91203-0002.htm>

[Accessed 21 April 2010].

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