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Sophie Vasset and Alexandre Wenger, eds., *Raconter la maladie. Dix-huitième siècle: revue annuelle*, vol. 47. Paris: La Découverte, 2015. 752 pp. Figures, notes. 45€ (pb & eb). ISBN 978-2707186317.

Review by Thomas Dodman, Boston College.

First sketched some four decades ago, the study of literature and medicine has since grown into a field in its own right. Today it boasts a flagship journal (*Literature and Medicine*) and specialized book series, as interdisciplinary Medical Humanities programs spring up like mushrooms across university campuses to satisfy student demand. The eighteenth century has always served as a kind of advertisement for the field, with its (often sick) polymaths happy to straddle the scientific and the poetic in an age quite unaware that these might, one day, stand for two separate cultures.[1] But as George S. Rousseau noted in a programmatic essay from the early 1980s, there is a nagging, post-nineteenth-century tendency to assume that influence only ever goes one way, from medical research to literary representations.[2] As two authors in the present volume succinctly put it, if it is, indeed, quite possible to speak of a “médicalisation du littéraire” in the age of Balzac and co., we might equally talk about a “littérisation du médical” (p. 71) in the age of the Enlightenment.

The twenty-one essays by literary scholars, medical, art, and cultural historians in *Raconter la maladie* testify to the vitality of the field in Europe and North America. Originally given as conference papers in 2013, these proceedings make up the main section of the 2015 volume of *Dix-huitième siècle*, an annual journal that specializes in weighty thematic dossiers (recent topics include “nature,” “Africa,” and the “Republic of Sciences”). In a brief introduction the volume’s editors Sophie Vasset and Alexandre Wenger, present the articles’ main contributions in five overlapping areas: nosology, or the definition and classification of disease entities; the peculiar eighteenth-century practice of epistolary consultations; doctors’ observations and medical narratives; sufferers’ own narratives of illness in ego-documents and fiction; and the aesthetics of disease as represented in various literary, visual and theatrical works.

By paying attention to questions of narrativity, Vasset and Wenger suggest, these wide-ranging articles help draw connections between areas of research typically studied in isolation, such as the theory and practice of eighteenth-century medicine. *Raconter la maladie* shows how for every new “fashionable disease” (such as onanism and different nervous ills) or sprawling taxonomy of conditions there was a constant murmur of less glamorous, chronic (mostly gastrointestinal) disorders, by far the most common health problem at the time. The putting into narrative and intertextuality of these “récits de maladies” also bring to the fore the extraordinary circulation of medical knowledge during the Enlightenment, not only among scientific societies and personalities but also amidst anonymous local practitioners and lay actors. We thus learn about the many logics involved in the constitution of new disease entities and about the practices of epidemiological research and therapeutic experimentation, as well as how different social groups experienced illness and sought to represent their suffering in writing, images, or on stage.

The first set of essays addresses the classification of both individual disease entities and socio-professional groups deemed especially vulnerable to certain conditions. Erica Charters tracks the precocious development of statistics and of a new arithmetic of epidemiology and therapeutic testing in the British army in the second half of the eighteenth century. Contrasting British and French medical returns (which remained more qualitative), she convincingly argues that the former were a precursor to nineteenth-century medical statistics and to the wider trends of social legibility and trust in numbers associated with the modern state. National specificities are also at the center of Charles Rice-Davis' article, which offers a conceptual history of the new soldiers' disease "nostalgia." Ironically, it was the transnational web of circulating texts and medical knowledge that came to define nostalgia as a Swiss illness, similar to various other "national" diseases of the time. Turning to better-known professional ailments and doctors, Anne C. Vila and Ronan Y. Chalmin reassess Samuel-Auguste Tissot's famous *Treatise on the Health of Men of Letters*. While it certainly pursues a Rousseauian indictment of intellectuals and civilization, they suggest that it also reveals a less apparent sacralization of the doctor as a martyr to Enlightenment science who is willing to sacrifice his person for the betterment of mankind.

Tissot and his rich personal archives figure prominently in a second group of intriguing essays dedicated to epistolary exchanges between doctors and patients—a widespread practice at once quintessentially eighteenth-century but which may yet return in the age of medical smartphone apps and auto-medication. Both Micheline Louis-Courvoisier and Nahema Hanafi have mined the Tissot papers to see how patients confided with the famous doctor, describing their ills and seeking his counsel against melancholia or a dishonorable penchant for masturbating. Their close textual analyses capture verbal expressions of the pain, shame, and trust felt by these distant patients, as well as the moral authority exerted by the physician and the gender norms reproduced by twin processes of medicalization and secularization. Revealing just how extensive the circulation of medical texts was at the time, Séverine Parayre turns her attention to how wealthy parents wrote to friends about their boarding school children's health and the new practice of inoculating them against smallpox. She argues that these letters document an incipient process of "individualization of the child" (p. 131) that foreshadows the development of pediatrics. In his narratological analysis of some 300 *mémoires à consulter* from the late 1500s to the early 1800s, Joël Coste unearths commonalities in the form, style, and content of these texts, suggesting the existence of a "culture of medical narratives" (p. 83) shared by doctors and patients.

The four essays of part III turn to the more familiar terrain of medical history, focusing on an emerging tension between the case study as an effective, but necessarily subjective research tool on the one hand and the growing push for quantification and abstraction on the other. Using the tools of digital history, Philip Rieder nuances the familiar hypothesis of a sharp epistemological rupture between age-old scholastic medicine and so-called hospital medicine of the 1800s by charting the intermediary development of a "practical medicine" characterized by lay empiricism, case studies, and the professionalization of doctors. Similarly, Lucia Aschauer traces a new "poetics of observation" (p. 154) applied to childbirth as obstetrics became a clinical specialization dominated by male surgeons as opposed to female nurses. In his minute study of the Chevalier de Vivens' meteorological journal, Jean-François Viaud paints a vivid portrayal of the construction of scientific knowledge at the margins of the medical republic of letters, showing the importance of physical sensation to how contemporaries understood the intimate relation between health and environmental-climatic determinants (such as the stars, atmosphere, or dreaded earthly miasmas). Closer to the center of eighteenth-century scientific research, François Zanetti examines a study on medical uses of electricity for chronic diseases commissioned in 1776 by the *Société royale de médecine*. His article shows how the identification of the disease, testing of remedies, and assessment of findings resulted in a highly polyglot narrative informed by the physician's voice, patients' experiences, and readers' expectations.

A fourth group of essays turns to the subjective experience of illness and its transformative effects on narratives of the self as people switched passports between what Susan Sontag famously called the kingdoms of the well and the sick.[3] Robert Mankin and Mathieu Gonod pursue close readings of the autobiographical works and intimate writings of Hume, Rousseau, and Goethe to show both their extensive medical knowledge and obsessive engagement with their own health. In each case illness marked their lives, becoming almost second nature and a central component of self-fashioning and *bildung*. Turning to less famous authors, Emmanuelle Sempère and Marianne Charrier-Vozel track a similar familiarity with medical texts and concern for psychology and the transformative effects of illness in autobiographical novels and in the correspondence of four upper-class women. Samuel Macaigne underscores the importance of genre and notes how the very figure of the doctor changed decisively with the emergence of the prose novel. From a figure of ridicule in classical theatre, he became a more respectable figure of order, capable of attenuating the perceived subversiveness of the novel and even of endowing the genre with the kind of realism subsequently celebrated by nineteenth-century novelists.

The essays in the last section offer an eclectic look at the esthetics of illness narratives in prose, images, and on stage. Héléne Dachez takes on Daniel Defoe's 1722 *Journal of the Plague* to show how the plague is both represented and overdetermines this polyphonic text, in which real and imagined epidemics overlap, producing a kind of discursive contagion rendered in stylistic and thematic terms (for example with repetitions designed to convey the relentless nature of a pandemic). In a minute iconographic analysis of the illustrations in Basile Caré de Montgeron's 1730 *La Vérité des miracles*, Barbara Stenz argues that realistic depictions were used to convince readers by eliciting empathy and compassion in them. Turning to burlesque theatre, Jennifer Ruimi detects a dedramatization of illness and traces of Rabelaisian carnivalesque in the way in which the vapors and sexuality were staged in *parades mondaines*. Sex is also at the heart of Alessandria Doria and Martial Poirson's excellent contributions on the politics of eighteenth-century illness narratives. Poirson analyses the social and political critique formulated on stage by sexually explicit, scatological, and pornographic plays, whereas Doria looks at the fictional memoirs of a defrocked priest, the Abbé Blanchet, whom celibacy made sick and who was only cured by the love of a woman. The political (almost Spinozist) implications to the Abbé's story—namely that celibacy goes against natural rights and causes harm to humans by frustrating their passions—foreshadow French revolutionary debates on whether to allow priests to marry. Together, these last essays show how medical narratives fitted into the wider pre-revolutionary underground of late eighteenth-century France.

Taken as a whole, *Raconter la maladie* gives a vivid portrait of a society obsessed with disease, well versed in medical knowledge, and keen on narrating its many maladies. Both literary specialists and medical historians will find much to grapple with—as much as lay readers will find to enjoy in these engaging vignettes on an endlessly fascinating era of fashionable (and not quite so glamorous) sickness.

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Martial Poirson, "Faire vivre ou laisser mourir: la comédie allégorique comme dispositif thérapeutique"

#### NOTES

[1] Charles P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

[2] George S. Rousseau, "Literature and Medicine: The State of the Field," *Isis* 72, no. 3 (Sept. 1981): 406-424.

[3] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

Thomas Dodman  
Boston College  
[thomas.dodman@bc.edu](mailto:thomas.dodman@bc.edu)

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