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Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 248pp. £45.00 hb.

Clark Lawlor's *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* is an important contribution to the interdisciplinary study of literature and medicine. Lawlor investigates how consumption, the horrific, debilitating and often terminal wasting disease, was promoted as the ideal illness for the Romantic poet or writer. There are existing studies of consumption, such as René and Jean Dubos's *The White Plague: Tuberculosis, Man and Society* (1992), and Thomas Dormandy's *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (1999). However, Lawlor moves beyond these cultural histories to address the 'aesthetics of this disease' (p. 3). He singles out Susan Sontag's seminal *Illness as Metaphor* (1979) as flattening out the 'varied narratives' of consumption, 'into one homogenous entity stretching from the late eighteenth century to the twentieth century' (p. 3). In contrast, Lawlor aims to 'historicise Sontag's work more fully', to discover how consumption became mythologized as the 'glamorous disease' of the eighteenth and nineteenth century (p. 3).

Lawlor's informative introduction contextualises his thesis within recent approaches to illness and narrative, such as those by Arthur Kleinmann and Byron Good. He suggests that 'our perceptions of disease, pain' and 'suffering' are formed as we 'develop stories, patterns of expectation, plots and sequences of images and metaphors' (p. 3). Aligning his position with that of David Morris in his *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* (1998), Lawlor suggests that we express our 'biologically grounded ... processes' through 'language and narrative' (p. 4). For Lawlor, Romantic consumption is an 'evolving' discourse that demonstrates the fight to 'explain, contain and even manipulate' the actuality of the disease (p. 4). However, this can lead to a separation from 'biomedical reality' (p. 4), and it is the Romantic detachment from the realities of consumption that concerns Lawlor.

The book is divided into seven chapters over three parts, according to historical period: Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic and Victorian. Part I delves into the forgotten history of consumption before the nineteenth century, establishing the key narratives that influenced future discourse about the disease. Lawlor begins with an interesting assessment of the Classical discourses of consumption that persisted until the Renaissance. He then moves, albeit somewhat abruptly, to the contribution of Gideon Harvey, physician to King Charles II, in the establishment of consumption as the ‘disease of desire’ (p. 18). This introduces a fascinating discussion of how consumption was linked to disturbances of the ‘humours’ caused by love melancholy (p. 19). As such, consumption found a particularly clichéd role in love-sickness, with the consumptive death and the image of the pining lover wasting away, becoming important plot devices for novelists such as Penelope Aubin and Henry Fielding. In the seventeenth century, consumption was also an ‘actively desirable condition for the good Christian’, and was mythologised as the disease of an ‘easy and good death’ (pp. 9; 29). Physicians and clergymen contributed to the ‘story’ of consumptive death as the ideal way to depart this world (p. 29). Potent examples exist in Sir Thomas Browne’s idea of a ‘soft’ death and the Protestant divine, Thomas Fuller’s revelations of consumption as ‘a gift from God’ (pp. 31; 32). Lawlor finds these ideas readily translated into literary writings - from Cyril Tourneur’s *Atheist’s Tragedie* (1611), to Izaak Walton’s biographies of John Donne and George Herbert in the 1670’s.

During the eighteenth century, consumption became the disease of beauty and refinement. For women it became fashionable to be thin not plump, and the ‘delicate’ consumptive look was ‘in’ (pp. 43; 44). In Part II Lawlor reveals how descriptions in popular medical texts, such as Edward Barry’s *Treatise on the Consumption of the Lungs* (1726), suggested the ‘striking beauty’ of the disease: ‘a long Neck ... a clear florid Complexion, the Cheeks and lips painted with the purest red’ (p. 46). Consumption was also promoted as

desirable for those pursuing the aesthetic ideals of sensibility. The physician Dr George Cheyne diagnosed consumption as a disease of over-indulgence and of the ‘nerves’, a direct result of participating in the ever-growing consumer society (p. 44). Thus, Cheyne conversely promoted consumption as the disease of ‘greater sensibility and social distinction’ (p. 51). Lawlor also shows how Cheyne conformed to cultural discourses about female delicacy. This leads to an insightful discussion about the consumptive Clarissa in Samuel Richardson’s novel of the same name. For Lawlor, Clarissa combines the traits of consumption, love melancholy and the good and easy death, with Cheyne’s discourse of sensibility. Having dealt with Tobias Smollett’s consumptive heroine Monimia in his *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), Lawlor offers an all too short section on female writers. He focuses on Anna Seward, and then quickly moves on to Laurence Sterne’s sexual attraction to consumptive women in real life, and not just in the pages of a novel – Sterne ‘could never resist consumptive ladies’ (p. 78).

In Part II, Lawlor reveals how ‘male consumptions’ were brought on by ‘disasters of love’ mixed with fears for the family finances (p. 85). Richardson’s *Clarissa* again provides the focus, with Lawlor showing how Belton’s rakish behaviour results in emotional, moral and financial turmoil. Belton succumbs to consumption which causes him a bad death, in contrast to Clarissa’s good death. Again, a novel by a female writer – Eliza Heywood’s *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) - is tacked onto the section only to be given short treatment. In the next section Lawlor addresses the disease from the perspective of the writer-sufferer. Sterne is shown as using medical discourses of consumption to construct a role for himself as a ‘whimsical, artistic consumptive’ (p. 100). Lawlor argues that Sterne lives out Tristram and Yorick’s experience of the disease as portrayed in his *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767). This leads to Part III, in which Lawlor deals with the ‘Wasting poets’ of the Romantic and Victorian period (p. 111). Lawlor is concerned with ‘why consumption held a particular

appeal for poetic young men', and John Keats is pivotal in his exploration of the period (p. 112). Developments in the medicine of consumption driven by Romantic vitalism, showed intense passion, the hyper-stimulated state, as its cause. In this context, Lawlor makes good use of consumptive figures such as Humphrey Davy, Henry Kirke White, Michael Bruce, and medical treatises like John Brown's *Elementa Medicinae* (1770). Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'ambiguous depiction of Keats as a delicate and feminised consumptive', is interestingly developed into revelations about Shelley's own struggles with the disease, and his use of the 'trope of the consumptive poet' in his poem *Alastor; or, the Spirit of Solitude* (1815) (pp. 142; 145). Lawlor also approaches the degree of self-fashioning indulged in by the consumptive woman poet, and the popularity of the disease for woman writers such as Felicia Hemans. Here, Lawlor shows how consumption was depicted as a beautiful disease offering the chance of Christian devotion and consolation.

Romantic myths of consumption continued into the Victorian era. The nature of the consumptive death and its effect on poetic genius occupied Matthew Arnold, who linked the abilities of Maurice de Guérin, Keats and David Gray with the disease. Arnold offered a definition of the 'mysterious malady' that was influenced by theories of the conservation of energy by Hermann von Helmholtz in the 1840's (p. 174). Arnold helped shape the idea of the consumptive poet as being unable to 'conserve' energy (p. 177). According to Arnold, this was a fruit of their genius and it gave their creativity 'a unique brilliancy and flavour' (p. 177). One such poet was David Gray, who wanted to emulate Keats as an 'icon of diseased genius' (p. 179). Gray died of consumption in 1861 aged twenty-one, after writing *In the Shadows*, a sequence of thirty sonnets on the process of dying. For Lawlor, Gray 'marks the culmination of the myth of the consumptive poetic genius' in the Victorian period (p. 179).

In his conclusion, Lawlor considers how the discovery of the TB bacillus by Robert Koch in 1882, heralded the beginning of the end for the myths of consumption he identifies

in this book. Henceforth, the disease was established as a ‘contagion’; it was still mythologised as a ‘disease of genius’, but now the myth was one of ‘inspiration’, drawn from bacteria and not from a ‘heightened sensibility’ (pp. 186; 187). As revealed by the title of D.G. Macleod Munro’s *The Psycho-Pathology of Tuberculosis* (1926), the ‘new and apparently “scientific” criteria’ mixed chemistry and Freudian psychology (p. 187). Illness became constructed as a sign of ‘alterity’; consumption moved from being a ‘disease of the Self’, to a ‘disease of the Other’ (p. 189). Here bacteriology and its narratives of transmission, created discourses of racial and class difference. This “new” disease of tuberculosis’, which arose after 1882, was very different from that of the Romantic and earlier Victorian period (p. 189). It is a theme Lawlor inspiringly identifies for further study.

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