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Review of Megan Coyer, *Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1817–1858* (2017)

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# Reviews

**Megan Coyer, *Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1817–1858* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017). 256 pp. ISBN 9781474431620**

Megan Coyer makes an important contribution to the study of the cross-fertilization of medicine and literature in literary periodicals. In her detailed case study of the medical content in the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, she meticulously examines the forms and modes of popular medical writings by mostly medically-trained contributors in the nineteenth century. From its foundation in 1817 until the Medical Act of 1858, which marked the creation of the General Medical Council to control the registration of medical practitioners and the beginning of a greater convergence of Scottish medicine and that of the UK, the magazine promoted a distinctive Tory Romantic ideology. Through ideologically loaded medical writings and experimental forms, the development of an overtly 'literary' popular medical culture was enabled. Contributors to *Blackwood's* emphasized the importance of moral and religious feelings in opposition to its ideological rival, the *Edinburgh Review*, in which Whig, scientifically oriented ideas were cultivated.

Coyer takes existing research, relating Scottish medicine to the Victorian cultural hegemony of Whig liberalism, as a historiographical starting point. Coyer's study aims to break new ground by analyzing *Blackwood's* oppositional Romantic medical humanism. It convincingly argues that popular medical writing in *Blackwood's* provided a counter-discourse that critiqued the hegemony of Whig ideology. The book develops numerous examples from the published volumes of *Blackwood's* and other contemporary periodicals to illustrate this point. Hence, it effectively shows how

genres and rhetorical tropes contributed to the ideological programme of periodicals.

The book is organized in five main thematic chapters and a coda, where the contributions and ideas of individual authors and groups of authors are examined. The first chapter considers the larger context of Scottish medicine and the periodical press at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It focuses mainly on the medical discourses in the *Edinburgh Review*, appearing regularly from 1802 on, before the foundation of *Blackwood's*. By illuminating the ambitions of important contributors, in particular the surgeon John Thompson, and characterizing the overall objective tone and the Whig ideology of the *Edinburgh Review*, the chapter provides a comparative context to understand the opposing high Tory Romantic ideology of *Blackwood's*.

Different from the authoritative medical discourse in the *Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood's* engagement with medicine was characterized by a valuation of subjectivity and embodiment. In the second and longest chapter, the emergence of the genre of the tale of terror is described as a major innovation in the treatment of medical content in the early years of the magazine. In contrast to the case history tradition, it is not an authoritative observer who reports about a medical case. Rather, an individual tells about physical or mental trauma in the first-person narrative mode by dwelling on the details of the undergone experiences. The experiments with the genre turned out to be a highly profitable enterprise for key contributors such as John Howison, William Dunlop, and Robert Macnish who had both medical and literary careers. The gothic tales had themes with popular

appeal such as anatomical dissections, sleep and intoxication. Interestingly, Coyer draws attention to the conflicting literary and medico-scientific cultures at the time. The described traumatic experiences were inspired by medical developments in the disciplines of pathological anatomy, phrenology and forensic medicine that valorized medical ideals of objectivity and authority. In their tales of terror, however, it is clear that the described phenomena appealed to them, not because of physiological empiric reasons, but because of their mystic potential.

In the following two chapters the mission of *Blackwood's* to reunite reason and feeling in changing medical contexts is further explored. The focus here is on the making of the ideal nineteenth-century medical practitioner. Chapter three is dedicated to David Macbeth Moir's ideas about literature, philosophy and other arts in the education and practice of doctors. Hesitant at the beginning of his career, he tried to build up a reputation as a 'man of letters' in a time in which the difference between literature and medicine was increasingly emphasized. Later on, he became more resolute in his defense of the value of literature and religious sentiments. Likewise, Samuel Warren's popular series *Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician* promoted an image of the ideal physician as a moral and religious medico-literary figure. These series, published in the 1830s, are analyzed in the fourth chapter. Though Warren, a lawyer, was the only medical writer of *Blackwood's* who was not medically trained, his writings were for a long time sold as genuine diary passages of a late physician. Coyer discusses the series in relation to several literary traditions including the tale of terror and the case history. Being a sort of re-coalescence of both genres, Warren's writings narrate the experiences of the late physician and his patients from the physician's point of view and leave room for reflections and literary experimentation. The series interested both the medical profession

and the general reading public, and soon became a model for actual physicians with literary ambitions.

The fifth chapter considers the development of medical critique of liberal political economy and utilitarianism in *Blackwood's*. By analyzing debates around the new Poor Law (1834) and public health, Coyer shows that the magazine stressed the importance of moral feelings and religious devotion in informing public health policy. The coda, finally, presents an exception to the well-organized structure of the book. Overlooking the decades between the 1850s and the 1890s, it briefly addresses the legacy of *Blackwood's* around the turn of the century. The periodical still promoted a vision of medical humanism, valuing art and religious feelings, that was at odds with 'scientific' medicine.

*Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press* provides a wealth of information on the Scottish periodical scene, including on the publishing context, development and reception of hybrid medico-literary writings. The book will mostly interest scholars who already have specialist knowledge of the Victorian periodical press. To reach a wider range of historians, Coyer's analysis of the ideas, ambitions and writings of the Scottish medical man would have profited from the involvement of the broader European context when it comes to political and literary developments. Such information and more extensive explanations of Victorian politics and romanticism had perhaps allowed even more to characterize the singularity of *Blackwood's* experiments in relation to the emergence of medical humanism elsewhere. Still, to historians of medicine and literature scholars alike this book presents a fascinating example of a well-developed methodology to study the rhetorical performance of ideology and identity in the periodical press.

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