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Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France (Review)

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Suffering Scholars. Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France. By Anne C. Vila. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2018. 280 p. £54. ISBN 978-0-8122-4992-7.

A leading scholar in medical humanities, Anne C. Vila chose a fascinating topic for this new book on the way enlightened physicians and their followers – at least until the 1830s – approached and constantly redefined pathologies induced by intellectual activity.

Chapter 1 focuses on the emergence of the *maladies des gens de lettres* (pathologies affecting men of letters) as a nosological category first invented by Bernardino Ramazzini as “an offshoot of professional medicine” (p. 22-23), but quickly established as a legitimate subfield from the 1720s and 1730s and given full consideration by Tissot’s famous *De la santé des gens de lettres* (1768). Chapter 2 continues to explore the topic of excessive intellectual ardor but shifts focus from medical discourse to moral philosophy and literature (although some medical writers do play a secondary role - Fouquet, La Mettrie, Zimmermann). In Chapter 3, Vila examines the new figure of the *philosophe* in the context of the harsh polemical battles between pro- and anti-encyclopedists. Chapter 4 explores Voltaire and Diderot’s views on the intimate connection between physical condition and mental activity. Chapter 5 approaches Rousseau and Staël both as erecting the modern colossus of the melancholic genius and as famous case studies for medical treatises. Lastly, Chapter 6 (by far the most interesting) examines how a general emphasis on sexual dimorphism from the 1790s to the 1830s led to the hardening of the nosological boundaries between hysteria, hypochondria and melancholy.

The scope of Vila’s inquiry is truly impressive: she masters most of the secondary literature and covers the most prominent writers and medical authors of the period under consideration (Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Staël on the one hand ; Tissot, Zimmermann, Bichat, Cabanis, Pinel on the other), while also bringing to our attention some forgotten or neglected medical writers such as Etienne Brunaud and his rather puzzling “brain-bladder comparison” (p. 167). This is a genuinely transdisciplinary study at the intersection of literature and medicine, and Vila artfully avoids subordinating either field to the other one – a very common flaw in medical humanities scholarship. She rightfully confers equal dignity and consideration to general and medical writers.

While one can only be impressed by the scope of this study, the extensive knowledge of both primary and secondary sources – displayed with no jargon whatsoever – and the mapping of this relatively new field of inquiry, this book unfortunately lacks some analytical depth and critical acumen. For instance, there is no real discussion of the category under scrutiny: is it valid to consider the usual phrase “men of letters” (*gens de lettres*) in the same light as “scholars” or even clearly modern terms such as “intellectuals” and “intelligentsia”? Vila, by referring to Didier Masseur’s work, *L’invention de l’intellectuel dans l’Europe du XVIIIème siècle* (1994) in a note, seems to imply there is no more need to justify such anachronism (p. 20). The reader might disagree with that approach, as physicians are clearly defining and redefining their objects of inquiry as they proceed. This lack of critical sophistication is also apparent in the way Vila omits to position the figures of the man of letters and of the *philosophe* both in continuity with previous models (such as the *honnête homme*) and in contrast with counter-models (such as the monk). One of the main challenges for enlightened writers was to condemn the sedentary life of

monks or nuns as useless and unhealthy, while depicting the very same sedentary inclination of the *philosophes* as evidence of the sacrifices they were making for the common good.

This lack of analytical depth is also present in the way literary and medical works are all considered as a single stream of textual evidence – not to mention the absence of actual close reading. This levelling of fiction and literary effects is evidently due to the lack of interest on Vila's part to explain how medical theories are transferred from literal to figurative uses. Vila does mention this kind of shift (for instance when she quotes La Harpe comparing Diderot's mind to an unhealthy stomach, p. 105), but she gives no thought to the reasons why this happened, or how such transfers became prevalent. Although she does give equal consideration to medical and literary texts, she thus precludes herself from understanding the way they interact and intersect. This lack of "integration," if we may say, leads to a series of digressions on famous literary works, such as Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (p. 65-67) or Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*, which are only loosely tied to the overall argument. While some chapters (especially 1 and 6) are clearly consistent and focused on the main object of inquiry, others read as a series of disconnected considerations on related topics. The book sometimes feels like a collection of very good articles (some of which have already been published) because it lacks the unity of design that would truly reshape our understanding of the field.

In spite of the aforementioned reservations, and precisely thanks to its panoramic quality, *Suffering Scholars* is a perfect gateway to medical humanities for students and professors alike. Like Vila's groundbreaking book, *Enlightenment and Pathology* (1998), this study opens a new field of inquiry full of promises and surprises.

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