



Kent Academic Repository

Duffy, Larry (2022) *Review of Sean M. Quinlan, Morbid Undercurrents: Medical Subcultures in Postrevolutionary France. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021. Review of: Sean M. Quinlan, Morbid Undercurrents: Medical Subcultures in Postrevolutionary France. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021 by Quinlan, Sean M.. H-France Review, 22 (155). pp. 1-6. ISSN 1553-9172.*

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/99123/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

https://h-france.net/vol22reviews/vol22no155_Duffy.pdf

This document version

Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

H-France Review Vol. 22 (September 2022), No. 155

Sean M. Quinlan, *Morbid Undercurrents: Medical Subcultures in Postrevolutionary France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021. xiv + 318 pp. Index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-501-75833-1; \$29.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-501-75835-5.

Review by Larry Duffy, University of Kent.

“Morbid undercurrents” denote a range of “unusual trends” (p. 4) emerging in medical and pseudo-medical writing and practices in the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution during which modern medicine was born, but during which “no cultural consensus had emerged” (p. 7). Such undercurrents, examples of which include the Frankensteinian redeployment of morgue specimens, “medical apologias” for libertinism, mesmerism, somnambulism, and “physiological” depictions of society (p. 4), represent more than simply a matter of cultural production borrowing narrative methods from medicine, but rather a “dynamic exchange between science and culture,” whereby “the cultural and social setting helped shape medical ideas and language,” and at the same time medicine “permeated vital areas of intellectual culture” (p. 5). At a moment when notions of “what it meant to be human” (p. 18) were being transformed, medicine offered privileged access and authority to writers engaging with transformed social relations, through “a common language and set of ideas...a shared way of talking about ever-shifting social and political realities” (p. 8). Ultimately, “medicine could explain the mind and body” (p. 18), and “informed and shaped the mindset of the educated classes” (p. 12). Methodologically, Quinlan eschews a narrowly (and implicitly Foucauldian) “social control approach” (p. 17), adopting instead a “cultural perspective” that sees the deployment of scientific knowledge “not only as a means of control but as a creative force [that] inspired them to look differently at themselves, nature, and society” (p. 6). Moreover, Quinlan’s understanding of “culture” is not one that equates it with “hegemony” (p. 14), which might risk overlooking “creative and subversive trends in medical culture” (p. 17).

Following an introduction setting out a “dramatis personae” (p. 9), each chapter in turn explores a particular medico-literary genre or cultural phenomenon. Chapter one, “Settings,” reminds us that the postrevolutionary phenomena central to the book actually began a few decades prior to the Revolution, and examines the new clinical medicine’s appeal to educated people in light of a number of cultural developments, notably the new figure of the “médecin-philosophe” (typically, and crucially, also a writer deploying a *savant* style appealing to a broad educated audience), widespread enthusiasm for popular or “prophetic” (p. 22) science (typified by electrical shows, animal magnetism, and ballooning), and utopian ideas about physical and moral regeneration. At the same time, the medical profession was undergoing transformation at a structural, institutional level. Reform of a multi-tiered profession served to enhance the prestige of medicine, now associated with enlightenment and benefits to humanity, not least on the grounds that

doctors somehow “possessed special insights about the human condition that traditional theologians and philosophers lacked” (p. 26). Accordingly, doctors were able to engage in public debate on social questions and propose hygiene-based solutions to “social pathologies” (p. 35). This tendency was intensified by the Revolution, itself a “medical event” that “changed how individuals understood their bodies and their minds” (p. 36). Quinlan presents a representative case study for crusading radicalism in the person of François-Xavier Lanthenas, whose political activities were premised on the notion that “political life shaped the health of the nation itself” (p. 37). Numerous other figures are included in the story, including Condorcet, Alibert, Pierre Cabanis, and Marc-Antoine Petit, who echoed the position of many medical writers in seeing the Revolution as “a psychological trauma, both individual and collective, that doctors could diagnose and mediate” (p. 40).

Chapter two, “Medicine in the Boudoir,” surveys the Marquis de Sade’s transposition of medical values to culture, central to which was *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* (1785), a pre-Revolutionary work that “helped usher in a new world of medical writing and subcultures following the Reign of Terror, connecting medicine and culture in the postrevolutionary moment” (p. 45). The “precise historical setting” for Sade’s engagement with medicine remains overlooked, whereas he “used medicine for specific political and ideological reasons rooted in the revolutionary experience” (p. 46). As against medical proponents of revolution as regeneration of the individual and society (who decried libertinism as a cause of demographic decline), Sade attacked utopian (and authoritarian) visions, as well as the moral agenda of sentimental writers. Notably, he used medicine for a self-enlightening “plumbing [of] the depths of what it meant to be human” (p. 47), within the concrete historical setting of debates about morality, social class, and the family, mocking the regenerative positions of moralizing medical crusaders. The materialist and taxonomically precise understanding of the body and its erotic functioning articulated in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir* was central to its protagonists’ (and by extension all libertines’) assertion of their physical and moral qualities, and moreover to their ultimately political control over health and fertility.

Chapter three, “Writing Sexual Difference,” considers the writings of a range of doctors on what is termed “the natural history of women,” a topic “unique to French sciences and letters” and “decidedly *nontherapeutic*” (p. 69). Such writings “focused less on female disease and healing treatments than on philosophical questions about women’s minds, bodies, and ethnic varieties,” and provided a distillation of “new medical, naturalist and social-scientific ideas about women” (p. 69) drawn from figures as diverse as Montesquieu, Condorcet, Rousseau, and Cuvier. The non-clinical approach of the writers “established a new dialogue between medical texts and their readers, serving also to express an understanding of “human nature and personal identity in the postrevolutionary moment” (p. 70). Prominent among them were Pierre Cabanis, Jean-François de Saint-Lambert, Jacques-Louis Moreau de la Sarthe, and Julien-Joseph Virey, all of whose interests and activities went beyond medicine. Their specific interest in the subject of women and sexuality lay, says Quinlan, in their individual desires for “status and recognition in the republic of letters,” rather than in any collective “disciplinary will to power” (p. 74). Cabanis offers an interesting example of a commentator on gender relations who, while seeing women as innately governed by sentiment and devotion, saw himself as a moderate “steer[ing] a middle ground” between reactionary and revolutionary attitudes towards women and their potential emancipation (p. 80). Saint-Lambert was a decidedly literary writer who exposed ideas akin to Cabanis’s using an analytic framework for the discussion of men, but literary forms (such as dialogue) for the discussion of women. Moreau de la Sarthe presented women’s moral existence

as being determined physiologically not so much by an imagined procreative destiny but by their very sexuality. Virey, who focused on love and relationships, drew on anthropological and travel literature in situating women's nature as civilizationally determined.

Chapter four, "Seeing and Knowing," offers a rehearsal of Johann Kaspar Lavater's ideas on physiognomy, in his own words the "talent of knowing man's interior by his exterior" (p. 99). It then situates the dissemination and popularity of these ideas within the revolutionary experience, specifically in two contexts: increasing interdependence between art and medicine, and urban change. Medical writers, both named and (as in the case of the author of *Le Lavater portatif* [1803]) anonymous, placed increasing value on anatomical training for artists, but also in some cases on innate talent or intuition grounded in "dynamic sensibility" (p. 104). The chapter's central case study is of J.-M. Plane's *Physiologie*, first published in 1797, which condensed the physiognomic ideas of Lavater and others, and at the same time used the stylistic techniques of didactic science writing and narrative fiction, along with extensive illustrations (notably of famous writers and public figures), in what was essentially a handbook for non-expert readers that would allow them to gauge character in individuals from appearance. The work was also firmly grounded in its postrevolutionary historical moment, and underpinned by ideas drawn from Rousseau and Voltaire (themselves featured in the illustrations). Ultimately, physiognomy was "connected to new democratic impulses." For Lavater's French followers, every person "held an inner sensibility and moral character," "an individual dignity" (p. 126).

Chapter five, "Sex and the Citizen," identifies, around the time of the Revolution, a shift in emphasis in sex manuals from the mechanics of sex and warnings of moral and physical dangers to sex and domestic hygiene as combined means for producing and raising children (in particular, male children) in line with a postrevolutionary ideological agenda of demographic and moral regeneration. An important producer of literature around these topics was Jacques-André Millot, who disapproved of the republican political dispensations emerging from the Revolution, and accordingly wrote with the new elites of the Consulate in mind. Millot believed that sexual technique could inform the gender of children conceived, since right and left ovaries contained the preformed germs of boys and girls respectively. Another writer, J.-L.-M. Robert, while plagiarizing significant elements of Millot's work, shifted the emphasis from gender to the creation (and education) of ideal republican citizens. As such his work can be situated within "medical debate about the health consequences of the French Revolution" (p. 139), key among which, in the view of more conservative writers, was a proliferation of passions, which could only be cured by sexual hygiene of a type that rejected libertinism, free thinking, and anything likely to encourage them, such as novels. What works of this kind from all political perspectives share is an invocation of medical authority in a pitch to readers seemingly desirous of specific political and gendered ideals.

The centrepiece of chapter six, "Sculpting Ideal Bodies," is a discussion of physician and artist Jean-Galbert Salvage's study of the *Borghese Gladiator*, an ancient sculpture seen as an epitome of male beauty and anatomical precision. Salvage's project was a collective one. A group of colleagues and students testing "radical forms of male fraternity" (p. 155) sourced bodies of beautiful young men from Paris morgues, and Salvage used body parts for sculpting models of the gladiator (and similar works). The project's aim was to investigate the sculpture's anatomical accuracy, with implications for the controversial question of whether dissection took place in the ancient world, and thus for the question of "whether Greco-Roman art reflected *idealized* or *realistic* forms of human beauty," which had been transformed by the cultural politics of the

French Revolution into “a pressing, if not incendiary, ideological issue” (p. 160). Beyond the aesthetic debate, there was another important one concerning art and artists (and their training) in society. Salvage’s endeavours promoted the view that “to make great art, society needed to provide artists with solid education, scientific training, and dynamic leadership” (p. 165). Fraternity was important to this project, liberty less so. Quinlan argues that “fraternal impulses extended to artistic and medical circles,” creating heterotopias (in Foucault’s understanding) that were both revolutionary and “homosocial” (p. 168). Male artists, under the tutelage of a David, might take turns posing naked for the group while medical students, encouraged by a Bichat, might raid graveyards for corpses. Accordingly, “transgressive social behavior” became “a fraternal bonding experience” (p. 169). Ultimately, doctor-artists such as Salvage sought “to find a political and aesthetic ideal in the medical undercurrents of the postrevolutionary decades” (p. 175).

Chapter seven, “The Mesmerist Renaissance,” examines a resurgence of mesmerist ideas, particularly in the form of the “animal magnetism” promoted by the Marquis de Puységur, in the critical context of “the cultural anarchy and porous medical world of the postrevolutionary period” (p. 178). Whereas mesmerism had effectively been stifled administratively by two royal reports published in 1784, seven years after the beginning of Anton Mesmer’s controversial sojourn in Paris, Mesmer’s disciples, enthusiasts for “prophetic science,” continued to promote his ideas in radical if occasionally sectarian ways. The disciple at the centre of the discussion was Puységur, who concluded from experiments he conducted that the material paraphernalia of mesmerist practices were not necessary. Rather, the “will to magnetize other people,” expressed in his motto “croyez et veillez” (p. 184) was all that was necessary to put them in a state of somnambulism. Innovative about somnambulism were its supposed revelations about the “inner life of feeling and thought.” That is, it offered a way of knowing the self, not only psychologically for the human subject, but also in terms of a pathological “sens intérieur” (p. 185), allowing insights not yet available to doctors. With the exception of a number of “medical apostates” (p. 207), doctors largely rejected this “new mesmerism,” sometimes on political, for example anti-German, grounds, but its popularity thrived on account of “the ambiguous status of medical knowledge in postrevolutionary France” (p. 206), and of the interest in religious and spiritual matters among the intellectual classes and those engaged in cultural production, such as Balzac, who understood the appeal of the notion of the mind as an active rather than passive force in human experience.

Chapter eight, “Physiology as Literary Genre,” explores the early-to-mid-nineteenth-century vogue for the “physiologies” satirizing urban types and manners, the scientific settings of which, says Quinlan, have not been thoroughly analyzed, to the extent that “important dynamics between medicine, readership and subcultural values” (p. 218) have been overlooked. The chapter examines four key physiologies in different fields (medicine, gastronomy, literature, and politics): Alibert’s *La Physiologie des passions* (1825), Brillat-Savarin’s *La Physiologie du goût*, Balzac’s *La Physiologie du mariage* (1830), and Morel de Rubempré’s *La Physiologie de la liberté* (1830). These works are invoked for Quinlan’s argument that physiological science had a twofold impact upon a characteristically digressive literary genre aimed at an audience of lay readers. First, writers adopted an observational and analytic style, and second, writers adopted the formal structure of medical texts. Physiological science, though expounded initially in medical texts by Bichat, Magendie (and, later, Bernard), had an appeal that went beyond medicine to “a wide diversity of thinkers and writers in the sciences, arts, and letters of the Restoration period” (p. 220), such as Laplace, Cuvier, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Comte, Cousin, and even de Maistre. Its impact on

“physiological literature” lies in its concern with the uniqueness of life, in its capacity to provoke debate on the meaning of life, and in its potentially scandalous appeal to general readers. As such, physiologies had much in common with texts representative of the “medical undercurrents” described elsewhere in Quinlan’s book and exemplify “the ever-shifting dialogue between medicine and intellectual culture” (p. 250) during the period.

An epilogue, “Medicine, Writing and Subcultures after the Revolution,” reiterates the importance of the new medicine’s capture of “the imagination of intellectuals and lay readers alike” (p. 251) through its provision of “cultural tools” (p. 252) for understanding the radical transformations brought about by the Revolution. The impact of new medical writing’s deployment of varied stylistic techniques, despite a gradual loss of medicine’s more literary and philosophical qualities, was to have an impact on literary culture going far beyond the nineteenth century.

The volume is handsomely produced and illustrated (with many fascinating contemporary images), but would have benefited from more careful editing and proofreading. There are numerous typographical and spelling errors, particularly in French (e.g., “esprit du corps” [p. 22], “hommes des lettres” [p. 27], “gens des lettres” [p. 36], “Mémoires secrets” [p. 30], “bête noir” [p. 49], “L’Amour conjugale” [p. 129], “des grands homme” [p. 137]), and errors of translation (for example, the picture caption “Je lui dois mes forces et mes vertus,” rendered incorrectly as “I owe him my forces and my virtues” [p. 143], instead of “I owe her my strengths and my virtues,” the “lui” denoting an idealised mother discussed in Millot’s text).[1] There is also some anachronism, for instance references to twentieth-century cinema and the Hauts-de-France (p. 176), an administrative region created in 2016. These unfortunate minutiae aside, the book provides an entertaining and wide-ranging account of its subject, even if its mildly (though far from stridently) Foucault-sceptical tone risks overlooking the fact that Foucauldian accounts privilege precisely the kinds of peripheral narratives presented here, as well as radical shifts in social concerns and practices at turning points in their discursive history.

NOTE

[1] Jacques-André Millot, *L’Art d’améliorer et de perfectionner des hommes, au moral comme au physique*, 2 vols. (Paris: Migneret, 1801), II, 15.

Larry Duffy
University of Kent
w.l.duffy@kent.ac.uk

Copyright © 2022 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views

posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172