

Excursions

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**Picturing Women's Health (1750-1910) Conference, University of Warwick,
January 22nd 2011**

In conceptualizing and planning our conference *Picturing Women's Health 1750-1910*, we wanted to both enhance our own professional and academic development and to provide a venue for other scholars to discuss issues that have been under-analyzed. We easily arrived at a general conception of a conference theme about women's health as this seemed an obvious and productive overlap of our work. We chose the period 1750-1910, as it was one in which medical knowledge and practice developed and expanded significantly, and thereby provides fruitful ground for inquiry. For example, William Hunter (1718-1783) revolutionized anatomy and obstetrics through a commitment to accuracy in his anatomical drawings. Moreover, the medical and scientific legacy of these periods—the Victorian invention of institutionalization, for example—still impacts today.

From our own research and experience in attending conferences, we found that discussions of women's health were often restricted in a disciplinary sense. Yet, in the years we had chosen to explore, the growing interest in science, anatomy, and medicine was not confined to a specific group of professionals as a wide range of writers and artists documented these extraordinary discoveries and advancements. We therefore decided to explore the interface of diverse discourses that constructed ideas about women's health—these could include contemporary medical and scientific discourses, fictional/non-fictional literature, fine arts, and visual media. Recent scholarly conversations about women's health often also failed to consider the wider contexts of women's lives and experiences. Women's health would be considered solely in relation to 'the body,' for example. So, our aim was to develop a unique approach by offering a more holistic understanding of women's health in the period. We therefore solicited papers that considered representations of women's health in

relation to their bodies, as well as factors like their social roles and relationships, their mental health, and their surroundings. By developing this inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approach, we sought to examine the vicissitudes of attitudes towards women's 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' bodies over the one-hundred-and-sixty year period.

Two keynote speakers framed the day, each providing a stimulating arena for discussion. Dr. Claire Brock, from the University of Leicester, began with an engaging visual presentation into the life of women surgeons in the late nineteenth century. *Picturing the Woman Surgeon and her Patients in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain* investigated attitudes towards surgeons and surgery during this period, examining a field that was considered bloody and brutal by many, despite the developments towards painless operations. This was complicated further still with the rise of the female surgeon, who was viewed with suspicion and distrust in a male-dominated field. Dr. Brock offered intriguing insight into the life of several prominent female surgeons, including the courageous and determined Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who was thrilled by surgery; and the cautious Elizabeth Blackwell, who promoted medicine, rather than unnecessary surgical procedure. The talk generated a lively discussion, which continued throughout the day.

Examination of women's health in the light of medical and cultural history continued in the first panel sessions. The papers by Victoria Fairclough (St. Andrews) and Lisa Coar (Leicester) focused on 'anorexia,' discussing the Victorian pathologising of, and therefore the struggle to control, the female body through the branding of the term. This session fulfilled our conference aims by linking women's health and bodies to their social situation—anorexia was viewed in the context of patriarchal social control. Meanwhile, the parallel panel on 'Fashion, Exercise, and Leisure' with Clare Mendes (Leicester) and Rachel M. Johnson

(Leeds) presented a significant connection between the female body as a fashionable image and its representation in literature and leisure space. Johnson showed the connection between health and place, as she demonstrated the resort's unique interplay between physical rest and rehabilitation and fashionable society. The following sessions centred on the representation of women's health in the Romantic and Victorian literature. Discussion on the effects of work and labour on women in the Romantic period was led by Kristin Gifford (Manchester), Tabitha Sparks (McGill), and Armida M. Azada (Roehampton). This panel not only linked women's relationships to health as both sufferers and carers in the context of work and labour but also created a dialogue between literary criticism (by Gifford and Azada) and more historical work (by Sparks). Meanwhile examinations of women's disability in Wilkie Collins's novels by Ruth Ashton (Leicester), of female masturbation in John Keats's poem by Rachel Ben-Itzhak (Independent Scholar), and women's mental health in Joseph Le Fanu's novel by Valeria Angela Cavalli (Trinity College Dublin) allowed for reflection on the representation of women's physical and mental health by male authors. These papers reflected our goal of interdisciplinarity as they demonstrated the pervasiveness of medical and scientific knowledge through the periods and fiction writers' desire to accurately relay it.

The afternoon sessions had two panels focusing on Victorian female bodies—one panel in literature and the other in the history of imprisonment. Alexendra Lewis (Warwick), Cheryl Blake Price (Florida State), and Rebecca Sundharam (Reading) walked us through the works of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Olive Schreiner for an exploration of portrayals of women's bodily signs of the mind. This panel again showcased interdisciplinary issues by demonstrating fiction writers' awareness of and even propagation of medical ideas; for example, Price analysed Dickens's use of fiction to promote smallpox vaccination. The audience next door were introduced to the Victorian forms of imprisonment—the lunatic

asylum, prison, and the identity of ‘fallenness’—by Katherine Ford (Independent Scholar), Anastasia Chamberlen (King’s College London), and Maria Dorn (Hamburg). This panel created an interdisciplinary dialogue on imprisonment through asylum photographs, contemporary prison documents, and the fictional representation of prostitution. These papers, especially Ford’s asylum photographs, also highlighted a theme running through the conference of how women’s health and bodies, or indeed of health and bodies generally, are so often represented by others with very different experiences and bodies. One of the final panel sessions—‘Beauty and Health’—attracted a large audience reflecting our own time’s interest in the issues. The audience were gratified with the aesthetic pleasure of looking at colourful and entertaining images of Rossetti’s illustration in *Goblin Market* presented by Carina Hart (East Anglia) and eighteenth-century satirical fashion plates explained by Andy McInnes (Exeter). While this interdisciplinary panel was entertaining the audience with fictional and artistic representation of health, the other panel scrutinized the real-life account of the health of female authors. Chrisy Dennis (Falmouth) examined reports of the Mary Robinson’s health in the press and Ruth Bromiley (Leicester) explored the attitude of Olive Schreiner’s husband in his biography of his wife. The issue of representation was again highlighted; Dennis, for example, described the contested representations of Robinson’s body between her own depictions and those of journalists. The conference in many ways exceeded our expectations—both within papers and panels, interdisciplinary conversations arose. Women’s lives were explored in relation to a variety of social contexts including work, leisure, and place. Key issues that were raised include the interplay between representation, point of view, and power; gender and genre; and the nature of genre more generally, as the authors and artists considered used and appropriated a plethora of discourse relating to women’s health.

Those who braved the long and full day to the bitter end were treated to a compelling exploration of the attitudes towards female adolescent health, in an era that was fraught with anxieties about women's new social, educational and political roles. Professor Hilary Marland's *Unstable Adolescence?: Managing Girls' Health in Late Victorian Britain* pursued the fluid boundaries between medical literature and general readership, which detailed the contrasting attitudes to preserving and improving female adolescent health and debated whether women should engage in education, work, sport and public life. Delegates were invited to examine the works of two writers engaged in this debate: Elizabeth Sloan Chesser's *Physiology and Hygiene for Girls' Schools and Colleges* (1914) and Malcolm Morris' *The Book of Health* (1883), which added further interest to a truly fascinating presentation.

Fully packed with papers by presenters of diverse disciplines whose panels were chaired by established academics and Ph.D. students at Warwick's English department and the Centre for the History of Medicine, this one-day conference provided ample food for discussion and after-thought on the treatment and representation of women's health in previous centuries. Despite the tight schedule of the conference, delegates were generally satisfied with the organisation of many short breaks provided with refreshments, during which time people had better opportunity to form networks with other members of the conference. Bringing together postgraduate students, established academics and independent scholars in history, cultural studies, and literature not only from across the UK but also from overseas such as the U.S.A., Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Canada, and Ireland, *Picturing Women's Health 1750-1910* proved to be a truly international, inter-disciplinary postgraduate conference.

N.B. The organisers would like to advise that all papers will be available in audio format on the Picturing Women's Health blog, details of which will shortly be posted up at:

<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/events/pwhconference/>

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