



Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare's England (Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity)

By Kaara L. Peterson

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Mining a series of previously uncharted conversations springing up in 16th- and 17th-century popular medicine and culture, this study explores early modern England's significant and sustained interest in the hysterical diseases of women. Kaara L. Peterson assembles a fascinating collection of medical materials to support her discussion of contemporary debates about varieties of uterine pathologies and the implications of these debates for our understanding of drama's representation of hysterica passio cases in particular, among other hysterical maladies. An important aspect of the author's approach is to restore, with all its nuances, the debates created by early modern medical writers over attempts to define the boundaries and resonances of hysterical ailments, which Peterson argues have been largely erased or elided by historicist criticism, including scholarship overly focused on melancholy. One of the main goals of the book is to stress the centrality of gendered concepts of disease for the period and to reveal a whole catalog of early modern literary strategies for representing women's illnesses. Among the medical works discussed are Edward Jorden's central text *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (1603) and contemporary plays, including Shakespeare's *Pericles*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Winter's Tale*; Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*; and Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois*.

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Editorial Review

Review

'The strength of this work lies in the originality and rigour of its analysis, the richness of its research and primary source material, its close engagement with contemporary medical debates, and its contribution to interpretations of important dramatic texts. Kaara Peterson not only competently and intelligently situates her study within existing scholarship but she also breaks new ground to bring us an absorbing book full of exciting new insights into the role of a complex and fascinating conundrum in the medical history of the female body in the early modern English cultural imagination.' Louise Noble, University of New England, Australia '...a valuable addition to scholarship of the early modern period and will be of particular use to readers interested in historical understandings of female health, medicine in literature, Shakespeare scholarship and representations of women on the early modern stage.' British Society for Literature and Science 'In elucidating hysterica passio through meticulous attention to primary texts, set in dialogue with each other and with literary representations, it makes an important contribution to the understanding of medicine in early modern England, particularly with regard to gender and the gendered aspects of disease.' Renaissance Quarterly 'Replete with extensive notes and bibliography, Peterson's book does what the author sets out to achieve; it demonstrates that since the time of Hippocrates fits of hysteria were thought to be exclusively female and uterine in origin and that this assumption had been completely absorbed and understood by the general public, as evident in Tudor literature. Peterson is at her best when she integrates contemporary medical opinion, well-known cases of bad female behavior, and theatrical dialogue. ... contribute[s] to a better understanding of some complex scenes in early modern English drama and to what audiences understood about their meaning then that we do not now.' Journal of British Studies '... Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease and Social Controversy is a model for rigorous research, and serves to greatly enhance our knowledge of early modern gender, medicine and disease, and the hitherto little known debates about hysterical illness.' Social History of Medicine 'Popular Medicine is an interesting volume. Peterson provides insight into the importance of hysterica passio in early modern culture... presents a compelling look at the medical and social history of hysterica passio...' CLIO '... Peterson's demonstration of the widespread cultural awareness of hysterica passio in early modern England as well as her novel readings of very familiar scenes in plays by Shakespeare, Chapman, Webster, Middleton are rewarding.' Shakespeare Jahrbuch 2012 'The archival work undertaken here is meticulous and includes considerations of the researches of Chamberlayne, Culpeper, Raynalde, Bright and Forman. [Peterson] builds a persuasive case for reinvestigating the cultural impact of hysterical disease and highlights how, even with topics as well known as these, there is a lot of critical work to be done still and that the historically-nuanced skills of interdisciplinary scholarship will play an important role in such efforts.' Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory

About the Author

Kaara L. Peterson is Associate Professor of English Literature at Miami University, USA. She is working on a new project about the portrayal of virginity in early modern literature and art.

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