

## REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

**Heather Meek, *Reimagining Illness: Women Writers and Medicine in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2023)**

HEATHER MEEK'S *Reimagining Illness: Women Writers and Medicine in Eighteenth-Century Britain* examines six relatively well-known women writers (Jane Barker, Anne Finch, Mary Wortley Montagu, Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Frances Burney) and six different ailments that they wrote about (hysteria, melancholy, smallpox, pregnancy, consumption, and breast cancer). Through Meek's in-depth analysis of the poems, essays, novels, journals, and letters they produced in the long 18th century, these women writers emerge from this study as thoughtful – though too often marginalized – members of the medical scientific community. By engaging deeply with questions regarding the diagnosis and treatment of sickness, and by using their literary texts as socially acceptable platforms through which they could share their medical ideas, these women demonstrated their engagement with (and sometimes influence on) the increasingly entrenched male medical establishment. In Meek's portrayal, the long 18th century was an era of a multiplicity of views and overlapping perspectives about illness, “a unique moment in which constructive, if sometimes tension-filled, conversations flourished between men and women alike.” (5) The women examined in *Reimagining*

*Illness* were able to capture their experiences with illness in writing, Meek argues, which allowed them to communicate to readers the inexplicable and often inescapable reality of living with sickness in an era wherein sickness itself was generally an amorphous concept.

Each chapter of *Reimagining Illness* focuses on one author and one ailment at a time, an approach that allows Meek to thoroughly compare and contrast the women's literary descriptions of an illness to the orthodox scientific descriptions of that illness that were produced by male medical professionals of the era. This case-study structure is generally quite effective, and it will also likely make the book particularly accessible for students. The first two chapters analyze mental illnesses that were quite similar and often highly gendered – hysteria and melancholy. Chapter one covers Jane Barker, who is both the earliest writer in this collection and the only one that seems to have herself been a medical practitioner, having a particular specialty in “cures” for gout. Barker's writing on hysteria, especially in her semi-autobiographical novels, demonstrates how medical knowledge and literary representations could become entangled and mutually reinforcing, a fact that allowed Barker to ultimately capture a “nascent psychological realism” (50) in her depictions of female characters trapped by restrictive social conventions. Probably the best known work of Anne Finch, the subject of the second chapter, is an autobiographical poem titled “The Spleen,” a

name for the “nebulous physio-emotional condition” (66) she experienced that was similar to melancholy. Spleen emerges from Finch’s writing as a particularly inexplicable and incurable illness that frequently undermined the hubris of many medical practitioners that tried to confront it.

The subsequent four chapters each tackle a physical ailment over which the possibility of death loomed dramatically: smallpox, pregnancy, consumption, and breast cancer. Uniquely amongst the subjects of this book, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is already a well-known figure in 18th-century medical historiography, as she is recognized as playing a central role in promoting smallpox inoculations in England. Meek demonstrates that Montagu was ultimately more attuned to the psychological stresses that illness caused and less likely to ignore marginalized medical practices than were the male authorities that she engaged with. Chapter four examines the medical complications that were so often the result of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood in this era through the writings of Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, who gave birth to twelve children but saw only four of them survive to adulthood. Piozzi’s diaries document the “relentless maternal trauma” (155) she underwent, ultimately challenging the medical orthodoxy that frequently underestimated the perils of maternity. Meek then scrutinizes the depictions of consumption that are present in Mary Wollstonecraft’s semi-autobiographical novel *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) in chapter five, demonstrating that Wollstonecraft used the narrative to argue that unjust and patriarchal social conditions “rendered women not only weak but also gravely ill.” (167) Finally, chapter six examines Frances Burney’s experience of breast cancer and the letter she wrote to her friends and family that described her harrowing mastectomy. By comparing

this letter to the more traditional case studies of illness that were written by medical men in the period, Meek shows that Burney’s relationship to her surgeons was a particularly significant yet fraught aspect of her traumatic experience with cancer.

The depth and originality of Meek’s textual analysis is *Reimagining Illness’s* biggest strength. Through her engagement with a variety of genres of texts, Meek repeatedly and conclusively demonstrates that these women writers were aware of and influenced by (and sometimes themselves directly influenced) the medical discussions of their time. By highlighting the detailed ways that symptoms were depicted by these women and the specific language they used to describe particular illnesses, Meek shows that medical thinking was not restricted to scientific writing or to male practitioners. Nevertheless, while Meek does an excellent job of comparing these depictions of sickness in women-written literary works to technical medical treatises, some brief discussions of how these particular ailments were represented by literary works written by men in the same era would have been a useful way of emphasizing the ways that women’s approaches to illness were distinct from the attitudes of their male counterparts. This is fruitfully done in chapter two when Meek connects the work of Anne Finch to Alexander Pope’s representations of hysteria, but the other chapters could have benefited from similar analysis.

Meek explains in the introduction that women were increasingly being excluded from the medical profession over the course of the long 18th century, yet she admirably refuses to portray this transition as a linear narrative of progress. However, an unintended side effect of Meek’s resistance to the scientific advancement and professionalization narrative is that the medical context and

historical specificity within which these six women lived sometimes becomes homogenized or glossed over. These women writer's lives spanned nearly two centuries – the earliest woman was born in 1652 and the latest died in 1840 – but there is little sense in this book that much meaningfully changed in the field of medicine during that time. Therefore, some direct comparisons between the earlier and later writers in the conclusion would have helpfully highlighted the specific ways in which women's approaches to illness had changed or remained constant over that period. Finally, and most trivially, a bibliography also would have been appreciated by this reader. Overall, Meek's detailed and convincing analysis makes it clear that illness could not help but occupy the imaginations of those who put pen to paper in the 18th century. But sickness was an embodied subject whose experience was captured with particular nuance by the many women who have, until now, more often been remembered for their literary works.

MELISSA GLASS  
University of Calgary

**Jean-Félix Chénier et Yoakim Bélanger, *Résister et fleurir*, (Montréal : Écosociété, 2023)**

À LA FOIS COURS d'introduction à la pensée politique; essai documentaire sur une lutte territoriale dans un quartier montréalais; récit de la quête personnelle d'un des auteurs à la recherche d'utopies concrètes; et recueil d'œuvres peintes qui donnent vie et couleurs à une communauté, la bande dessinée *Résister et fleurir* de Jean-Félix Chénier et Yoakim Bélanger présente une réflexion stimulante et magnifiquement illustrée sur la tension entre utopie et dystopie à l'heure des pandémies mondiales et du capitalisme décomplexé.

Le livre est ancré dans le contexte du confinement lié à la pandémie de COVID-19. On y rencontre Chénier, professeur de science politique au Collège de Maisonneuve qui, obligé d'enseigner ses cours en visioconférence, discute avec ses étudiant.e.s des classiques de la littérature utopique et dystopique, en les mettant en dialogue avec les dynamiques politiques mondiales actuelles. Comment définir l'utopie? Sur quels socles doit-on fonder nos actions quand notre monde est en phase de devenir dystopique? Comment défendre nos territoires, comment transmettre le « sens du possible »? La bande dessinée prend pour cas d'étude la lutte menée par les habitant.e.s du quartier Hochelaga-Maisonneuve pour la création d'un parc nature sur un terrain vague, lui-même convoité par une entreprise pour la construction d'une plateforme logistique liée aux activités portuaires. Au fil des pages, on assiste à un véritable cours de science politique appliquée où l'on rencontre les acteurs et actrices de cette mobilisation qui oppose l'utopie du parc nature à la dystopie de l'entreprise Ray-Mont Logistiques.

L'ouvrage s'ouvre avec l'extrait d'un essai rédigé par LyLou Sehili, une étudiante du cours *Pensées et écritures politiques* enseigné par Chénier. Cette dernière nous amène au terrain vague d'Hochelaga au crépuscule. On y découvre une grande friche urbaine à l'abandon fréquentée par les résident.e.s du quartier, qui viennent y promener leur chien ou pique-niquer. Au cœur des paysages du terrain vague teintés des couleurs du soleil couchant, Sehili écrit : « Dans un monde où il n'est pas permis de perdre son temps, nous venons ici pour prendre le temps de nous perdre » (13). Tout le monde, insiste-t-elle, connaît le chemin.

Cet essai, nous raconte Chénier, l'a « illuminé ». Il a ouvert pour lui de