

Haskell, Yasmin, ed., *Diseases of the Imagination and Imaginary Disease in the Early Modern Period* (Early European Research, 2), Turnhout, Brepols, 2012; hardback; pp. xxvi, 424; 10 b/w illustrations, 1 b/w table; R.R.P. €95.00; ISBN 9782503527963.

Editor Yasmin Haskell has brilliantly and coherently brought together papers that seem to me for the most part to deal with diseases of the imagination (indicated by symptoms of illness such as delusions) rather than imaginary disease (a term which appears to be applicable to what we now call hypochondria). It would have been convenient to have a clear definition of the two categories, although the book is very much worth reading anyway. The quality of the essays is remarkably high, and – unusually – uniformly so, with enormous learning and power of reasoning persistently in evidence, along with excellent and jargon-free English. I found it a real pleasure to read so much outstanding, interesting, and well-presented work.

The book does not deal with easy material, lucid though the commentators are. What is required of the reader is a willingness to think like our forbears in order to comprehend them. Their understanding of disease was itself largely imaginative, as they worked on the basis of ancient theories (those of Hippocrates and Galen) rather than evidence found through exploring bodies. For example, the poet Tasso (1544–1595) elaborately corresponded, as a patient, with famous Italian physicians, who willingly supplied professional help, but without examining him physically. Most of what early modern doctors thought happened in the body we now know to be largely fanciful, leading to the conclusion that they themselves constructed, when diagnosing others, diseases produced by their own imagination. I do not mean that the symptoms noted by patient or doctor were invariably unreal, but that the diagnosis was often wildly incorrect, by modern standards.

Basically, doctors or theologians concerned with disease believed that any illness could be imputed to one of two causes: either unsound functioning of the four humours in the body (blood, phlegm, cholera, and black bile), or demonic possession. At times the two causes were held to co-exist. These two presumed sources of disease function prominently in chapter after chapter.

To give a very extreme idea of the fantasies of patients, in which doctors often also believed, I shall say something about a fascinating chapter on vampires: ‘Vampires as Creatures of the Imagination’, by Koen Vermeir (pp. 341–73). It appears that originally vampires were particularly strongly believed in outside most western European countries, with Russia an important source. But insane belief (showing diseased functioning of the imagination) can spread quickly, and with a remarkable logic of its own. One

Des Noyers wrote in 1693 that in Poland and Rusland there were ‘corpses filled with blood’. To cite Vermeir: ‘[Des Noyers] mentions that these dead bodies eat their shrouds, but he stresses in particular that they suck blood. Local people believe that a demon leaves the corpse between noon and midnight and harasses the kin and acquaintances of the deceased person. The demon crushes them, presents them with the image of the deceased person and sucks their blood. It then carries back the blood and deposits it in the corpse for storage, often in such quantities that it flows through all the orifices of the dead body. The victims become weaker and weaker until they die, and the demon does not stop until the whole family has been wiped out. The local remedy is to behead the suspect corpse, to open its heart and let the large quantities of blood flow out. To protect themselves, the villagers collect the blood, mingle it with flour, knead the dough and make bread from it. The victims eat this bread in order to save them from such a terrible vexation’ (pp. 349–50).

We can see from such a passage that belief in vampires as real creatures developed relatively late during the early modern period, which has the advantage of showing us the extreme length to which a disease of the imagination could at that time go, and also of making us understand that something so astonishing would lead to its opposite, i.e., total rejection of the belief. The vampire craze could not, and did not, last indefinitely. It died out after Empress Maria Theresa put an end to it in 1755 (p. 371). Thus the end of this form of collective insanity came during the time of the Enlightenment, the eighteenth-century rationalist movement which to a significant extent reduced the intense use of the imagination which people had until that time displayed. No doubt the increasing importance and incidence of scientific discovery based on actual physical evidence, and the resulting growth of a scientific mindset among many, must be held to a large extent responsible for the marked change that occurred. Although in various ways the imagination remained an important faculty, it no longer occupied as dominant a place as it had done during the Renaissance. It continued to play a significant role in the arts, in entertainment, and in psychiatry as practised by Freud, who had no doubt about its dominant place in much psychiatric disease; but widespread belief in spirits, witches, vampires, etc., diminished sharply after the seventeenth century, and notably in educated urban environments.

In a book as good as this it would be invidious to single out special chapters, and I shall not do so, except to suggest that, independent of the matter of quality, it seemed to me that chapters on very *specific* matters, notably on group behaviour, for example, were particularly effective and revealing, such as Sharon Strocchia’s on melancholic nuns, or Judith Bonzol’s on children.

Dale Shuger's on Spain, too, was extremely interesting, as attitudes there were found to be far more prosaic and down to earth than in countries that seemed to study the imaginatively diseased with intense fervour.

I would express only one – minor – disappointment. This is a historical book, describing how diseases of the imagination were perceived and treated in the early modern period. Approaching its subject cautiously, the book leaves one with the impression that no-one, in diagnosis, looked further than afflictions caused by the four humours and/or demonic possession. However, I would have expected at least some exploration of the possibility that there were, for example, dramatists capable of thinking of proto-Freudian explanations. I must declare an interest here, as I have myself worked in that area. But, leaving my own essays to one side, surely it is likely that, for instance, the content of Ophelia's 'mad' songs about the sexual seduction and betrayal of a maid can appropriately be regarded as revealing Shakespeare's interest in repression and the unconscious?

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Holmberg, Eva Johanna, *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination: A Scattered Nation* (Transculturalisms, 1400–1700), Farnham, Ashgate, 2012; hardback; pp. 186; R.R.P. £60.00; ISBN 9781409411918.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jews were viewed by the English as outsiders, a group that was to be feared, despised, or pitied. Eva Holmberg's new book, *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination: A Scattered Nation*, explores the ways in which early modern English people imagined the Jews. Unlike previous studies, which have relied on English plays as their main sources, Holmberg prefers to focus on English (and translated) travel writings and tracts. This allows her to demonstrate how English people in England were given access to the Jewish world through the travels of their countrymen. She does not focus on just the positive or negative interpretations but, instead, prefers to investigate the entire spectrum of English understandings of the Jews. Although Holmberg constantly reminds the reader that the English viewed Jewish people as being punished for their failure to accept Christ, she goes beyond this simple interpretation and leaves the reader with an impression of the many varied English attitudes.

Holmberg begins by locating the Jews both geographically and topographically. She establishes that Jews were viewed as a 'wandering nation', one that could be found in all corners of the globe (except England).