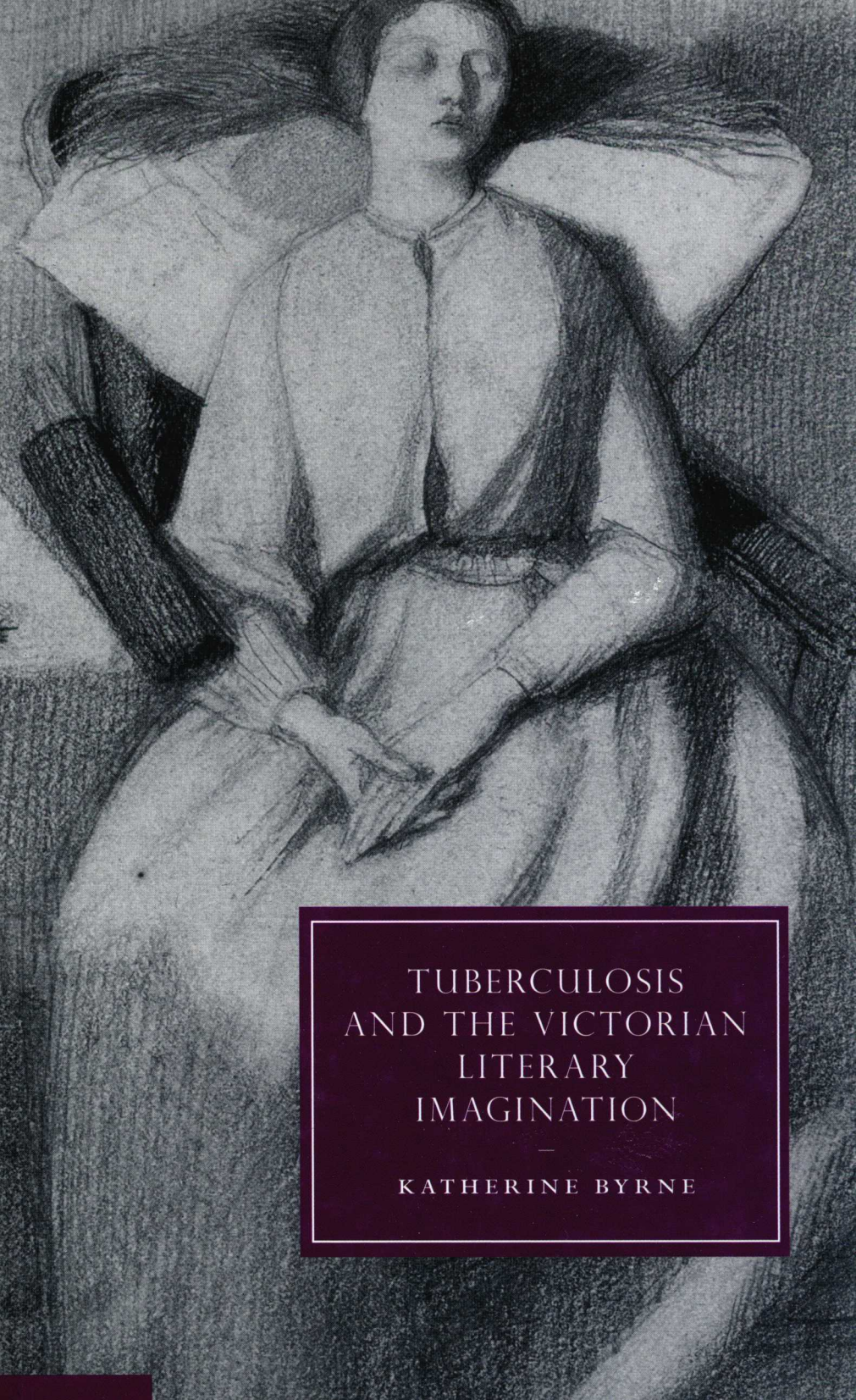

TUBERCULOSIS AND THE VICTORIAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

KATHERINE BYRNE

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TUBERCULOSIS AND THE VICTORIAN LITERARY IMAGINATION

Tuberculosis was a widespread and deadly disease which devastated the British population in the nineteenth century: consequently it also had a huge impact upon public consciousness. This text explores the representations of tuberculosis in nineteenth-century literature and culture. Fears about gender roles, degeneration, national efficiency and sexual transgression all play their part in the portrayal of 'consumption', a disease which encompassed a variety of cultural associations. Through an examination of a range of Victorian texts, from well-known and popular novels by Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell to critically neglected works by Mrs Humphry Ward and Charles Reade, this work reveals the metaphors of illness which surrounded tuberculosis and the ways those metaphors were used in the fiction of the day. The book also contains detailed analysis of the substantial body of writing by nineteenth-century physicians which exists about this disease, and examines the complex relationship between medical 'fact' and literary fiction.

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CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as 'background', feminist, Foucauldian, and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.

For my parents, with love and thanks

Illustrations

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Contents

Introduction

Pulmonary tuberculosis has played an influential but analytically understated part in social and cultural formation throughout human history. It has of course formed a perpetual accompaniment to that history, for the disease known to the ancient Greeks as phthisis[1] can be traced back to at least 3000 BC,[2] and – despite the hope for eradication which accompanied vaccination and the antibiotic revolution in the middle of the twentieth century – remains one of the biggest global killers even today. In this book, however, my interest is confined to the western world and the latter stages of this disease's existence. The full significance of this tiny bacteria can best be displayed through its impact upon the nineteenth century, as this was the last age in which tuberculosis was at its height in Europe, and this is the rationale behind the historical framework of this work, which covers the seventy years of Queen Victoria's reign.[3] I am concerned here with revealing the ways in which tuberculosis influenced the construction of the nineteenth-century social body through its pathologising of the gender, class, and economic and aesthetic status of the individual body. The health of a nation is necessarily dependent upon the health of its citizens; disease disrupts social functioning by negatively intervening in the lives of the people. It also fractures society's view of itself as a robust, operational, organic whole, causing a separation between healthy sections as 'Self' and diseased bodies as 'Other', and the tensions this pathological split creates are at the heart of this study.

In the Victorian era consumption killed more people than cholera and smallpox combined, and was equalled only by syphilis in the extent of its effect upon the contemporary political and literary imagination. Tuberculosis and syphilis functioned as sites of social anxiety in Victorian times as cancer and HIV/AIDS do in ours, and as such provided entry into a whole world of sexual and social as well as medical discourse. Fears about femininity, (hereditary) inheritance, degeneration, national efficiency and sexual transgression are all epitomised by consumption, mainly because it

is, as Susan Sontag suggests in *Illness as Metaphor,* a 'disease of individuals', an infection which singles out its victims rather than affecting the whole community like the fever epidemics.[4] Thus the consumptive seems to be set apart from his neighbours: his disease is different, therefore by implication he is in some way different too.

Disease becomes invested with a particular significance when it is not the common affliction of the whole community. This significance was very clear in the case of syphilis, a disease well known to be a consequence of sexual contact, as it indicated that the sufferer had overindulged in (probably illicit) sexual behaviour, or was the offspring or spouse of someone who had. Syphilis's physical symptoms contributed to this sense of moral certainty about its cause, for the primary chancre usually appeared at the site of initial infection and this frequently confirmed the sexual nature of its means of transmission. This enabled syphilis to be used as a political and moral tool against potentially deviant, subversive sexualities, making it, as Claude Quetel has pointed out, the 'most social of social diseases' in terms of the extent of the cultural and political response it has generated.[5] However, Sontag has described syphilis as 'limited as a metaphor because the disease itself was not mysterious, only awful', and it is true that the disease's meanings and its means of transmission were and are irrevocably linked.[6]

Tuberculosis's metaphors, in contrast, were anything but 'limited'. This disease encompassed a remarkable fluidity of meaning and associations, largely because its origins were shrouded in mystery. Tuberculosis took many forms and affected many different parts of the body – brain, spine, stomach and skin as well as lungs – with the result that it resembled a number of different diseases rather than a single killer, though it is only the most common, pulmonary form of the disease which concerns me in this study. Its one known 'calling card', internal lesions, frequently varied from soft cheesy pustules to hard chalked cavities, depending on the progression of the disease, and this complicated even its post-mortem diagnosis. It had thus evaded the medical profession for centuries, and it was not until Robert Koch's identification of the tuberculosis bacillus in 1882 that its cause and means of transmission finally became known. Even when its infectiousness was established this did not account for the seemingly random distribution of victims, however, as frequently those exposed to and infected by the disease did not go on to become actively tubercular. While 'it is possible that a near totality of the population of many large European cities in the nineteenth century . . . would have tested positive for exposure to the tubercle bacillus', only a small proportion of those would have actually

become consumptive, and this inscrutable selection of victims added to the elusiveness of the disease.[7] As it was apparent to doctors and laymen alike that consumption's infectiousness worked differently from that of other diseases, individual susceptibility seemed dictated by an unknown X-factor which could be perceived as the workings of fate or Providence, or which could be the result of the victim's own actions, a comment on the inherent pathogenicity of their behaviour or their lives. There seemed to be a metaphysical element involved in the propagation of tuberculosis, and this enhanced its symbolic potential by allowing it to encompass a number of different meanings.

Consumption's capacity to act as a manifold metaphor made it a malleable vehicle for social expression and discussion in the art and literature of the nineteenth century. Tuberculous subjects are plentiful in the Victorian era and some of the traits associated with them have persevered to the extent of becoming part of our cultural and literary history. As this study will reveal, the disease has been associated, often simultaneously though not always congruously, with youth and purity, with genius, with heightened sensibility and with increased sexual appetites. The resulting images have become famous textual tropes: the languishing consumptive poet whose thwarted desires and personal frustrations seem to have brought about his illness; the Christlike innocence of the child who dies because they are too pure for the world; the beautiful but wan and pining girl whose decline owes as much to her broken heart as to the bacilli invading her body. Hence the inclusion of consumption in any text engages that text with the wider cultural associations that surround the disease.

This book focuses upon the Victorian novel, as this was the artistic medium through which consumption was most commonly explored and its myths and meanings disseminated throughout nineteenth-century society. No other cultural form touched and informed people across the classes to the extent that the novel did, and hence it is the best means of examining how the disease was represented and understood in popular culture in this era. It is true that much could also be said about consumption's influence on other branches of the creative arts – in particular French theatre and opera[8] – but an examination of such diverse forms is necessarily beyond the scope of the present work. However, in order to explore all the possible manifestations of consumptive imagery, I do invoke and discuss some of the representations of phthisis in British poetry and painting of the period where it is relevant to and bears upon my argument, in particular Dante

Gabriel Rossetti's paintings of his wife, which owing to their important influence on the consumptive aesthetic I explore in some detail in Chapter 4.

I have also chosen to confine this work to an examination of British texts. There is a substantial body of tubercular literature in the United States in the nineteenth century, with the novels of Louisa May Alcott, L. M. Montgomery and Harriet Beecher Stowe all containing important consumptive characters,[9] but while these have many points in common with those I explore here, it is clearly not possible to assume a continuity of the meanings and metaphors which surround the disease. This is especially true regarding the perspective of the American medical profession, whose opinions on the cause and treatment of the disease differed from those of their British counterparts. Hence my concern remains with the English experience of the illness, the only exception among the novels being Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, which, as it was written and set in England, asserts itself as a product of British discourse about consumption despite the nationality of its author. As regards the body of medical writing about the disease, it is impossible to discount the work of several influential European physicians, particularly those colleagues of Koch who were involved in the identification of the tubercle bacillus, but I have only used as sources those works which were published in Britain, in English, and which therefore were accessible contributions to the Victorian medical profession's views about phthisis.

Chapter 1 is introductory in nature and sets out to establish a medical framework for the study, by interrogating the substantial body of literature written about consumption by physicians in the nineteenth century. I establish here a paradigm which is central to this whole argument: that a complex and symbiotic relationship seems to exist between medical writing and the popular fiction of the time. I explore the origins and nature of this relationship and the ways that the two genres interact with one another to construct the dominant stereotype of the consumptive and to produce widely held assumptions about the disease. As we shall see, a detailed examination of medical publications reveals how, through debates on the cause, diagnosis, and treatment of consumption, doctors consolidated and validated some existing cultural myths about this illness, and developed or even created others. This chapter identifies a number of the most enduring medical theories about the illness, particularly the belief that it was not infectious, that a certain type of person was likely to become consumptive, and that a lifestyle that was socially deviant in any way encouraged tuberculosis to flourish. I discuss how these representations are the attempts of struggling physicians to cope with a mysterious and incurable disease, and

are made to serve certain political and personal agendas, namely to facilitate the social management of the illness and to validate and reinforce the authority and importance of the medical profession.

The second chapter begins my exploration of the Victorian novel. I have taken as my starting point the Condition of England novels of the 1840s and 1850s, as they are the first body of Victorian literature in which tuberculosis appears as a recurrent and central theme. Through their preoccupation with the class system, the effects of industrialisation and the state of the social body these novels reveal one of the most intriguing aspects of consumption: its association with capitalism. My argument here is that consumption works as both a disruptor of the capitalist, commercial world, and a metaphor for it, and that this produces interesting tensions within the industrial novel. This synthesis of disease and economics in the context of class issues is clearly not a new one in academic terms, and there is a huge body of work concerned with the pathologising of the industrial working class in this era. However, the majority of this criticism, from Kate Flint's *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change* to Anthony Wohl's *Endangered Lives,* focuses on the diseases most obviously linked to industrialisation and urbanisation – cholera, typhoid and typhus.[10] Yet consumption possessed symbolic potential as a metaphor for the consequences of capitalism in a way that these miasmic infections could not. Fevers were limited as metaphors because they represented such specific problems and issues, such as the sanitation debates, the need for improvement of the physical – and moral – cleanliness of the masses, and middle-class guilt at working-class suffering. Hence their inclusion in a novel must invoke these kinds of questions. Tuberculosis in contrast could not be used as a simple signifier for social conflict and social responsibility, for it did not have an identifiable environmental cause and it was not, despite a definite link with impoverishment, a disease of poverty and squalor which was confined to the lower classes. Consumption's ability to infect all social spheres rendered it a perfect symbol for the capitalist system as a whole, rather than just a means of expressing its effect upon one section of the population. In Dickens's *Dombey and Son* the presence of tuberculosis among the bourgeoisie indicates that the effects of industrialism extend beyond contaminated water or cramped living conditions, and suggest that it may have a harmful impact upon the soul of the capitalist as it does upon the body of the worker. Similarly, while Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* associates phthisis with the factory system, it also suggests that this disease is not only about the deprivation born of exhaustion and overwork. Bessy Higgins's illness may be contracted in her workplace, but is also linked

to the use and ingestion of luxury goods. The process of consumption – which was of course shared by all classes – is as dangerous as the process of production: capitalism, it seems, is pathological at any stage in the system.

The focus of tuberculous literature appears to undergo a shift from the pathologising of economic status to the pathologising of femininity as the century progresses. Class remains a concern, but questions of gender predominate. In the most general sense, the rest of my study is therefore centred around the consequences of the social perception of tuberculosis as a female disease, in the context of the sexual anxieties that surrounded the approach of the *fin de siècle*. It is difficult to establish conclusively from the statistical evidence whether or not consumption actually was 'female', or, in other words, whether it did affect substantially more women than men. It certainly seems to have done in some regions of Britain, as Scotland and Ireland both have higher mean death rates from pulmonary tuberculosis for women until the turn of the century, but this does not seem to be true of England itself. Any gender difference in incidence of the disease was probably due to environmental factors, but it was still utilised as a signifier of increased female susceptibility to the disease. With some significant and usually emasculated exceptions (like the subject of my final chapter, Ralph Touchett in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*) the classic literary consumptive is inevitably a woman in the Victorian era.

Huge critical attention has been given to the figure of the sickly woman in literature, but this has also been focused upon diseases other than consumption, namely syphilis, hysteria and anorexia.[11] Tuberculosis has significant links with these illnesses, and here I am concerned with revealing how it interacts with them to construct and reveal new pathologies of femininity. Consumption was traditionally associated with mental disorders and was regarded by the medical profession as more likely to afflict those with a certain personality type, or those suffering emotional distress. Hence it became viewed as the concrete physical manifestation of psychological problems: a kind of hysteria made flesh. As consumption signified heightened sensibility, its sufferers were portrayed as refined, intelligent and sensitive members of the upper classes – a desirable identification – yet through its association with subversive, self-inflicted diseases like anorexia, they could also be regarded as a social threat. Chapter 3 explores these and other complex and paradoxical attitudes towards the Victorian invalid through a reading of a best-selling but critically neglected late-century novel, Mrs Humphry Ward's *Eleanor*.[12] An examination of this text's consumptive central character reveals phthisis's unique ability to act as a signifier of purity and spirituality on the one hand, and sexual deviance on the other. Eleanor

herself is consumed by unreciprocated love and desire as much as by tuberculosis, and this compromises her virtuous femininity, as she becomes less passive and less self-restrained. Her desires are even more unacceptable because to satisfy them, to marry and reproduce, would perpetuate her disease and contaminate the bloodline of an old family (there are clear parallels with syphilis here). She is socially pathological in other ways too, for she is able to undermine patriarchal authority because of the powers of persuasion and manipulation which her invalid status grant her. However, this novel reveals how the consumptive patient can also function as the self-sacrificing female ideal. *Eleanor* utilises the cultural myths of spirituality which surround the disease in order to engage in debates about sin, punishment and the possibility of redemption. Ward represents her dying heroine as a Magdalen figure who, through the cleansing effect of her illness-induced suffering – and through the partly self-induced wasting of her body – transforms herself from fallen woman into a kind of female messiah.

These questions about the power and appeal of the consumptive woman are developed further in Chapter 4, on the rise of the tubercular aesthetic, which explores how such a painful, debilitating and fatal disease became a fashionable, even sought-after illness in the Victorian era. In this chapter I build upon the work of Bram Dijkstra in the influential *Idols of Perversity* by examining how the nineteenth century's 'cult of invalidism' developed into the consumptive aesthetic. This phenomenon was strongly influenced by the art and literature of the period, which glamorised consumptive women and portrayed them as ethereal rather than emaciated, graceful rather than ghostly. Perhaps the most persuasive tubercular images were the pallid and fragile models and muses of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and in this chapter I, like Elizabeth Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body*, include a case study of one of the most famous: the sickly wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal. I discuss here the ways in which Siddal's disease was much more than an unfortunate affliction, suggesting that it was in fact a useful and powerful force which assisted her dramatic social rise, created her distinctive appearance, and lent her a romantically mysterious and tragic public persona. Post-Siddal, the tubercular look soon became the prevalent form of fashionable beauty, a process facilitated by the rise in popularity of the corset, a deeply political garment which fashioned its wearer into a stylishly fragile near-invalid who resembled the classic consumptive. This deliberate, constructed pathologising of the female body is highly revealing, raising questions about the nature of art, fashion and the physically damaging pursuit of an aesthetic ideal in relation to femininity