SBReview_5:

Lesel Dawson. *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-19-926612-8; 244 pp. £50 (hardcover)

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Reading representations of melancholia, hysteria, or erotic sickness in the context of period medical conceptions of disease, Lesel Dawson's *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature* offers an authoritative and scholarly account of an absorbing subject. At times wryly ironic, brutally direct, or overtly relishing her unwholesome quotations, Dawson combines an engaging and lively candour with diagnostic precision, offering directed and illuminating readings of texts by major dramatists, medical practitioners, and period commentators. Situating the discussion within a critical lineage, Dawson receives support from, as well as offers alternative positions to, the work of Mary Wack, Carol Neely, Helen King, Juliana Schiesari, and, importantly, Elaine Showalter.

Dawson negotiates the period's permeable distinctions between mental and physiological illness, charting the complex relationship between the somatic and the psychological to allow female lovesickness to be diagnosed as much more than a merely uterine disorder and diagnosis itself to be much more than uncomplicatedly empirical. A real success of this study is that although depictions of a troubled early-modern interior can be described in terms inflected by psychology and even occasionally psychiatry, the discussion is characterized by precise employment of specific early modern terminology,

couching textually analytic reading amongst graphic, impassioned, bloody, and lascivious period voices: "a gamesome bedfellow," we hear, is the "sure[st] physician."

Dawson undertakes a detailed anatomization of gendered medical and cultural assumptions concerning erotic sickness. So after suggesting that "whereas male lovesickness is classified as a form of melancholy–a malady associated with creativity, interiority, and intellect–the female version is considered a disorder of the womb"; Dawson further complicates this distinction by showing how the role of erotic melancholic is appropriated by women, requisitioned to claim an intellectually and artistically sensitive identity. Uncovering and thereby demystifying "gender-based dichotomies" concerning male and female models of lovesickness, Dawson suggests that a condition "that we often think of as overwhelmingly debilitating can function, at times, as either [a] site . . . of pleasure or form . . . of empowerment."

Chapter One considers period medical conceptions of desire, diagnosing the "disease of love" and exploring its symptoms and cures from phlebotomy to clysters, vomitting to astrology, taking characteristic care to distinguish between competing aetiologies of lovesickness. We hear of visually infected lovers and suicidal mania, of phantasmal visions and insatiable sexual appetites collated from literary, medical, and historical sources, as Dawson describes a complaint understood both as a genuine corporeal condition, and as a carefully constructed performance; a particularly fascinating section considers the strategic employment of lovesickness, aggressively enacted in avoidance of unwanted matrimony. Here, as throughout this study, lovesickness is shown to be far more than a merely passive complaint, potentially excusing freedom of expression and allowing

the articulation of otherwise unspeakable desire. Here, as elsewhere, Dawson mediates between the lived corporeal experience of lovesickness and the social affect of its pose.

Further evidencing cleanly articulated distinctions between different forms of erotic melancholy and the love disease, Chapter Two offers diagnostic reading of the symptoms of gendered erotic maladies. Dawson demonstrates how period medics and contemporary critics alike can–potentially misleadingly–conflate distinct but not discrete diseases, acknowledging the thin diagnostic distinctions between them. Here, one of the more vicious ironies of this often witty study emerges: that the diagnosis of green-sickness would often be strategically misapplied to illicitly pregnant women, proscribing sex as a cure for an "illness" already sexually transmitted. Dawson offers set-piece discussion both of Shakespeare's Ophelia and the jailor's daughter from *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, questioning critical consensus, and, as the study progresses, demonstrating the influence of these Shakespearean figures on later literary and non-literary texts.

Chapter Three's discussion of intellectual female melancholy turns to Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* and John Ford's *The Broken Heart*, alongside a wide range of contemporary dramas, juxtaposing the earlier discussion of Ophelia with consideration of two heroines whose wilful, if self-destructive, manipulation of their maladies is typical of a more assertive enactment of cerebral melancholy. Aspatia of *The Maid's Tragedy* in particular is shown to "fus[e] the role of Ophelia with that of Hamlet" as she accepts the twin roles of "faithful, devoted mistress and . . . angry [melancholic] avenger": her ability to exert control over her complaint, Dawson concludes, "provide[s] a

proto-feminist commentary on the misogynistic cultural tradition from which she derives, revealing how lovesickness can operate as a complex strategy for self-assertion."

Addressing a continental Neoplatonic vogue in Chapter Four, Dawson describes the cautionary employment of lovesickness, offered in reproof in order to temper the heat of courtly romanticism; conversely, it seems "Platonic love inverts much of the medical advice for what Renaissance doctors hold to be healthy in love," advocating a regime of abstinence and spiritually inflected adoration that would leave the lovelorn dangerously susceptible to sexual frustration and erotic constipation. Elsewhere in the chapter, describing how the figure of Narcissus surfaces in erotic texts, Dawson demonstrates the inherent proximity of neoplatonic and narcissine desire discussed in relation to Ford's *'Tis Pity*, before concluding, perhaps with more optimism than might have been expected, that "Platonic love was beneficial to women" in "justif[ying] a prolonged period of courtship," "grant[ing] the female beloved an elevated spiritual significance, . . . endors[ing] flirtation as morally educative," and "offer[ing] women a new way of envisaging love, in which one was encouraged to find, not a lord and master, but a second self."

If Chapter Four's conclusion is generous in its evaluation of arguably oppressive Platonic idealism, the remaining two chapters–on remedying both lovesickness and love itself–respond with earthy pragmatism, concluding that "the female beloved can be damned, as well as exalted, by exaggerated praise": firstly, exploring the dramatic and medical implications of blood-letting in some of the more brutal plays of the early seventeenth century; then, the purgative function of copulation which, in the words of William Vaughan cause "the vaporous fumes of the seede [to be] taken away from the Patient, which

[otherwise] doe infect his braine, and lead him into melancholy"; before discussion of the restorative power of humiliation, which entails the kind of misogynist vilification of the beloved as can be found in Donne's notoriously "rank" and "defile[d]" in "Elegy 8." The final chapter, elaborating on the theme of humiliation and disgust, offers extraordinary material on the utilization of menstrual blood to cure, through repulsion, the erotic fixation of the male lover that brings this energetic study to a suitably unflinching conclusion.

Eric Langley lectures on Shakespeare at University College London and his book, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (OUP), will be published in November 2009.