

Constructing Medical Identities

Chair: Masha Belenky, George Washington University

Over the course of the nineteenth century, doctors came to have increasingly widespread influence throughout French culture and society. With the rise of medical authority and the pervasiveness of medical discourse across disciplines, nineteenth-century medicine could be described as assuming its own sort of empire. This panel will explore the literary and visual dimensions of the nineteenth-century medical empire through consideration of medical figures in both novels and painting. In “The Chiropodist in the House: Edgar Degas’s *Le pédicure*,” Marni Kessler will explore how Degas fuses the Creole feminine with the medico-scientific, demonstrating how Degas’s representation of the medical scene affirms the association between Creole identity and physical degeneracy. In “Dissecting Doctors and Corpses,” Mary Hunter will continue the examination of medical figures in painting by analyzing Henri Gervex’s large oil painting *Autopsie à l’Hôtel Dieu*. She will demonstrate the role of autopsies and dissection in both reinforcing doctors’ authority and challenging their elevated status. Exploring the limits of medical authority, Rachel Mesch’s paper “Medicine in the Boudoir: Doctors and Wives in Fin-de-siècle Women’s Writing,” will consider how women authors challenged nineteenth-century medical doxa by portraying the doctor as a threat to the institution of marriage that he was meant to promote. Finally, in “Proust, Dr. Max Nordau and the Aesthetics of Degeneracy,” Michael Finn will investigate the tensions between Max Nordau’s theories of degeneracy and Proustian aesthetics, both of which offer theories of the psychological and physical dynamics of the creative process. In bringing together visual culture, literary texts, and medical discourse, this panel will probe the multiple arenas through which medical identities were constructed and deconstructed in nineteenth-century France, thus contributing to a fuller understanding of the mechanisms of this medical empire.

Marni Kessler
University of Kansas

The Chiropodist in the House: Edgar Degas’s *Le pédicure*

When he visited New Orleans for 6 months in 1872-3, Edgar Degas painted numerous images of ill females, most of whom were friends or members of his mother’s Creole family. While these pictures relate in subject to the artist’s family portraits from 1860s Paris, they differ markedly as they foreground sickness, bodily disintegration, and pain. In this paper, I propose to explore specifically Degas’s *Le pédicure*, which depicts the artist’s 9-year-old cousin Joe Balfour slumped on a chintz settee, while her feet are examined by a chiropodist. Despite the suggestion of a domestic interior, this scene evokes a decidedly medical situation, one that verges also on the sexual. Indeed, Joe’s unanimated unclothed body, combined with the bandage-like effect of the sheet that lies across it, promotes a scene of ill health at the same time that it conjures up a sexually charged scenario in which a young girl is cared for by an elderly male figure.

Just as he does in other images of female family members in New Orleans, Degas here fuses the Creole feminine with the medico-scientific. In addition to analyzing the painting within the context of late 19th-century pediatric podiatric practice, I will also examine the ways in which Degas formulates a visual vocabulary that capitulates to the widespread stereotype that constructed the Creole—as an ethnic group and a geographic location—as feminine, degenerate, and weak.

Constructing Medical Identities

Mary Hunter
McGill University

Dissecting Doctors and Corpses

During the late nineteenth century, medical men in Paris acquired an identity unlike that held in any other historical period. The successes of scientific medicine, disseminated to the public as glorified front-page news, significantly altered the way in which the public viewed these men and their profession. As opposed to the ‘quacks’ of the past, whose prescriptions and surgeries often caused more harm than good, these ‘new’ doctors came to be regarded, in most cases, as trustworthy modern heroes. This idealisation is evident in Horace Bianchon’s introduction to *Nos Grand Médecins d’aujourd’hui* of 1891: “...le médecin d’à présent s’est placé tout en haut de notre échelle sociale, en un rang qu’il mérite, parce qu’il est l’un de nos grands éducateurs et l’un des dirigeants actifs de notre civilisation.”

This paper will explore the emergence and construction of modern medical identities through a discussion of Henri Gervex’s large oil painting *Autopsie à l’Hôtel Dieu*, shown at the 1876 Salon in Paris. This work shows two doctors and a hospital orderly leaning over the dead body of a naked man – the bearded professional cuts into the corpse’s inner thigh while his colleague rolls a cigarette. Like the laboratory and clinic, autopsy theatres helped construct medical identities as modern, republican and learned. Despite their popular understanding as grotesque and frightful places, dissection rooms were also considered sites of educated male sociability. Both doctors and artists frequented dissections and autopsies – they studied dead bodies in order to expand their knowledge and improve their skills. This paper will explore medical, artistic and popular understandings of dissection in order to examine how the cutting of corpses both reinforced and threatened the rational identity and elevated status of medical men.

Rachel Mesch
Yeshiva University

Medicine in the Boudoir: Doctors and Wives in Fin-de-siècle Women’s Writing

Nineteenth-century medical discourse gave marriage a central role in ensuring public health, placing doctors at the helm of this vital institution. In the hopes of reversing trends of depopulation, doctors promoted eros in marriage as a healthy expression of sexuality, provided procreation was the ultimate goal. An indirect result of this medical emphasis on marriage was the sometimes unwelcome introduction of the doctor into the conjugal bedroom and a host of medically induced pressures upon the nineteenth-century wife.

Women writers at the fin de siècle, from Colette to Gyp to Marcelle Tinayre, depict female resistance to traditional marriage structures with increasing frequency and insistence. One means of this resistance that has not been adequately explored, however, is the way in which the critique of patriarchal marriage structures is often tightly linked to a critique of nineteenth-century medical discourse, with its very narrow view of women’s roles. Although—or perhaps because—women were largely excluded from medical professions, they often used fiction as a form of counter-sexology, in order to respond to notions of femininity and female sexuality proposed by doctors and scientists. With the novels I present here, I will examine how, in light of the expanding role of medicine in determining marital health, the critique of marital injustice gets

Constructing Medical Identities

cast upon the doctor and the medical discourse he represents, rather than the husband, its more likely target. In works by Rachilde, Jane de la Vaudère and Camille Pert, the institution of marriage is challenged in a variety of ways, but the doctor is the object of the most scathing criticism, portrayed as one of the greatest threats to the institution he sought to promote and ensure. In demonizing the doctors in these texts, women authors bring into relief the way that nineteenth-century medicine transformed what it meant to be a wife. Their writings add another dimension to the decisive ambivalence French authors showed towards the medical counterparts who so often influenced and informed their writing.

Michael R. Finn
Ryerson University, Toronto

Proust, Dr. Max Nordau and the Aesthetics of Degeneracy

In 1894, the same year as Max Nordau's blockbuster success *Entartung* was translated into French as *Dégénérescence*, the twenty-three-year-old Marcel Proust enrolled at the Sorbonne in the *licence* program in philosophy. As a published author whose work already dealt with homosexual themes, as a devotee of impressionist art and of then-contemporary French music, and as a philosophy student, Proust cannot have been impervious to the controversy swirling around Nordau's study. The latter's aim was to root out all the degenerates in literature, music and painting and to denounce publicly aesthetic modes which, he said, were simply forms of intellectual decomposition (*Dégénérescence*, 1, vi-vii).

Embedded in Nordau's denunciations and claims, however unfair, is in fact a medico-psychological theory of creativity with which Proust's own aesthetics, especially in that section of *À la recherche du temps perdu* that he originally titled *L'Adoration perpétuelle*, clash directly. Nordau insists that his study is a work of scientific criticism because his judgement of the individual artistic work proceeds from what he calls "les éléments psycho-physiologiques qui lui ont donné naissance" (1, vii). Part of this paper aims, then, to uncover just what psychological and physical elements in the creative process would identify its product, a work of art, as degenerate. In observing how Nordau's thinking fits into broader developments in psychophysiology at the fin de siècle, our second purpose will be to explore how memory, the involuntary and the unconscious, elements so integral to Proust's own aesthetic system, were viewed by at least one school not only as specifically incapable of generating creativity, but as part of a syndrome that pathologized the individual who depended on them.