

Eighth Digital DACH Victorianists Workshop

# Mediating Medicine: Health and Illness in the Victorian Age

5 December 2025



## Call for Papers

The nineteenth century saw remarkable changes in the development of medical theory and practice that were reflected in literature, which, through the revolution in print, became ever more available to an increasingly broad Victorian public. Nineteenth-century writing responded to medical reforms and scientific developments through various genres and literary movements, including the realist novel,<sup>1</sup> Romanticism,<sup>2</sup> popular genres such as the penny dreadful and sentimental fiction<sup>3</sup> as well as the periodical press.<sup>4</sup> Even beyond the novel, Victorian literature seems to “be crowded with medical events, providing an almost-too-rich resource for the scholar of 19th-century medical culture”.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Louis Stevenson’s short story “The Body Snatcher” (1884) deals with the practice of body snatching through the notorious Burke and Hare murders of 1828 which led to increased scrutiny about how anatomy schools obtained bodies for dissection. In 1832, the Anatomy Act supplied medical students with the bodies of murderers and paupers, violating the bodily integrity and agency of the working poor after their deaths. The resulting anxieties found expression in popular genres addressed to working-class readers, in particular penny dreadfuls such as J. M. Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* (1845) or *Sweeney Todd* (1846-47).

More concerned with reformist ideas than sensationalism, the Victorian realist novel draws on clinical observation as a narrative method, and new medical writing and practice inspired authors in both form and content. Novelists like Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot “made use of these broadly circulating medical facts, narratives of cure or decline, and techniques of observation and representation”, just as medical authors were increasingly aware of novelistic tropes.<sup>6</sup>

Together with providing a space for serialised fiction dealing with medicine and illness, the periodical press offered health advice and advanced the popularisation of medical knowledge, giving rise to debates about medicine across Victorian society. Alongside the founding of professional journals such as *The Lancet*, literary and popular periodicals provided a central space for exchanging ideas with medical professionals who frequently made use of literary techniques to make their writing more accessible to the public.

This one-day online workshop aims to explore questions such as: How did literature negotiate the relationship between medical science, social reform and public health? What role did medical ethics play in literary explorations of health and illness? In what ways are differences in and access to prevention, diagnostics and treatment reflected in relation to gender, class and race? Which treatments and therapeutic methods are explored in literature and how? How do alternative treatments such as homeopathy, traditional non-Western medicines but also anti-medical attitudes such as anti-vaccination appear in literature? What is the impact of religious belief and dissenting religious attitudes on medical practice in literature?

We welcome 150–300-word proposals for:

1. Papers of 15 minutes which focus on a case study or on specific historical, theoretical, methodological or didactic aspects related to nineteenth-century literature and medicine
2. Flashlight papers of 5 minutes outlining the scope and aims of a new research project (PhD thesis, postdoc project, etc.)

Papers may focus on any (inter-)disciplinary perspective and cover any medium. They might address the following topics, though these suggestions are by no means exhaustive or prescriptive:

- New forms, tropes and narratives engaging with medicine
- Discussions of the healing power of literature and reading
- Influence of genre on representation of medicine (periodicals, letters, biographies, medical writing, sentimental fiction, realist novel, poetry, satire)
- Negotiations of physical and mental resilience in relation to health and illness
- Intersectional approaches towards medicine and nineteenth-century literature (e.g., the role of gender, sexuality, race, class, etc.)
- Representation and exploration of medical education (professionalisation, university courses, nurses and doctors, midwives)
- Connections between environmental criticism and medicine (influence of pollution, poisoning, sanitation or climate on health and illness)
- Explorations of medicine in connection with political concepts and movements (Chartism, reformism, humanism, utilitarianism, liberalism, suffrage movements)
- Representation of specific medical conditions, illnesses, disabilities (tuberculosis, cholera, blindness, amputees, syphilis, etc.)
- Reflections on pedagogy and teaching
- Exploration of medical research, practice and access beyond metropolitan centres
- Representation of medical institutions (convalescent homes, asylums, seaside baths, hospitals)

Please indicate which format you want to present in and send your proposal accompanied by a short bio (1-2 sentences) to the organisers Dr Julia Ditter ([julia.ditter@uni-konstanz.de](mailto:julia.ditter@uni-konstanz.de)) and Dr Anne Korfmacher ([anne.korfmacher@uni-graz.at](mailto:anne.korfmacher@uni-graz.at)).

The deadline for proposals is **30<sup>th</sup> September 2025**.

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**DACH Victorianists** is a network that brings together scholars from the “D-A-CH” region (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) whose research and teaching focus on Victorian literature and culture. For more information, see DACH Victorianists online: [DACH Victorianists](#)

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<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, Meegan. “The Victorian Novel and Medicine.” *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, edited by Lisa Rodensky, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 459-482; Bailin, Miriam. *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill*. Vol. 1. CUP, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Caldwell, Janis McLarren. *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Vol. 46. CUP, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Gasperini, Anna. *Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction, Medicine, and Anatomy*. Palgrave, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Coyer, Megan. *Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy 464.

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy 460.