

Public Abstract

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Department:English

Degree:PhD

Title:Somatic Subjects: The Pathological Path to Victorian Womanhood

My project examines the intersection between gender, identity, and disease in nineteenth-century narrative.

I read novels and memoirs alongside medical texts written across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to better understand how people living in the nineteenth century understood the relationship between illness and identity, and how that relationship manifests itself in the writing of the time. I discovered that pre-Victorian and Victorian writers acknowledged that bouts with disease could potentially be transformative experiences, particularly when afflicting women. In addition, I found that certain illnesses, such as consumption or venereal disease, were more likely to be adaptable to certain genres of the novel than others. As a result, my research may help scholars of Victorian narrative genres to imagine writers experimenting with genre through writing about disease. More broadly, my research reveals that medicine and literature were deeply bonded in the nineteenth century, and this revelation may allow us to consider the ways in which medicine and storytelling interact and inform one another now.