

Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction, Medicine and Anatomy: The Victorian Penny Blood and the 1832 Anatomy Act (2019) by Anna Gasperini

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Anna Gasperini's first monograph explores the relationship between a long-rejected literary oddity and nineteenth-century conceptions of medicine. The sensationalist, serialised tales known as penny bloods are investigated in the light of the law that allowed the use of 'unclaimed' bodies in hospitals or workhouses for dissection by medical professionals as well as the use of corpses that relatives would 'donate' to anatomy schools – in exchange for burial at the school's expense. Passed a few years after the Burke and Hare scandal and in the contexts of resurrectionism and bodysnatching, the Anatomy Act immediately preceded the rise of penny blood literature. With this study, Gasperini opens up a dialogue between these two events and proceeds to outline questions of dissection, bodily integrity and class-related experiences of death by exploring the anxieties that the penny bloods codify via their horror and sensationalism.

Contributing to the recent scholarship that aims to re-examine the penny bloods phenomenon after more than a century of academic disdain, Gasperini describes them as literary monsters, which she defines in her preface as "a gargantuan combination of scattered pieces from those cultural forms that did not have a place in mainstream knowledge, an abomination for those social strata that could not control it, but wonderful for the masses that ... were discovering the pleasure of leisure reading" (ix). Drawing on seminal work by other scholars of the field (see Louis James), she explains that penny bloods can and must be analysed with appropriate tools rather than read against standards that usually apply to middle-class Victorian fiction, as they require different and more productive criteria and techniques (such as sampling).

The author brings to light "continuities, resonances, patterns" (232) in the shape of complex and nuanced themes addressing the contemporary questions of ethics and medical advancements, thanks to a cross-section analysis that dedicates a chapter each to four of the most successful 1840s penny bloods: *Manuscripts from the Diary of a Physician*, *Varney the Vampyre*, *The String of Pearls* (the original story of what is now known to modern audiences as *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*) and *The Mysteries of London*. The recurrent 'danse macabre' of displaced

bodies and unethical doctors is analysed first as the expression of the fearful potential of the working classes' post-mortem bodily integrity being violated, but Gasperini also defines it as the circulation of an underlying discourse of contemporary issues that allowed the lower classes to be aware of their social and cultural reality. All four narratives, she argues, interact with early-century changes in the medical field through various coping mechanisms and displacement strategies, such as popular themes, in order to address anxieties and to make sense of the changing legal situation.

The first chapter provides a thorough contextualisation of the rise of penny blood literature as well as the 1832 Anatomy Act. Gasperini also presents a brief survey of the existing scholarship on cheap Victorian serialised fiction and of recent medical history studies and proceeds to gather these threads in order to present her analytical perspective. She explains how she aims to “deconstruct the ‘master narrative’ ... that still influences our perception of the penny blood” (21) by investigating the role they performed as a cultural *and* literary artefact.

The first penny blood up for analysis is *Manuscripts from the Diary of a Physician* (1844-47). Using precise scenes from this still relatively unknown text, Chapter 2 examines ‘power’ through the concept of the medical gaze as defined by Foucault. It also defines cemeteries as liminal spaces and deals with various kinds of medical men, from the monomaniac scientist to the ‘super-doctor’. Here Gasperini links the different characters of (more or less ethical) doctors with the deontological issues that surrounded the Anatomy Act, from the pauper’s position in society to the needs for improvement that the medical community faced.

Chapter 3 focuses on *Varney the Vampyre* (1845-47) and links the concept of ‘knowledge-based power’ theorised by Foucault with the potential ‘truth’ endowed by the medical gaze, by analysing the ambiguity that characterised the stance of the medical fraternity towards the Act. The chapter develops the discussion on medical ethics with regards to empathy and humanity – rather literally, in fact, as the supernatural protagonist’s humanity is compared to the doctor’s. Gasperini persuasively suggests that both *Manuscripts* and *Varney* use the same type of coping mechanism in that they also present reassuring and positive medical figures: although no solution is provided and although they do feature ‘gothic’ mad doctors, both narratives include heroic doctors who bring back some order.

'Truth' and 'power' are also explored and brought together in Chapter 4, in which *The String of Pearls* (1846-47) is analysed in order to address the ideas of discourse control, language and taboos surrounding the fate of paupers' bodies. The story of Sweeney Todd also echoes narratives of cannibalism, murderous medicine, disappearance and burking that pervaded Victorian London's culture. Moreover, this chapter explores the concept of 'vertical space' as intrinsically connected with medicine in the context of the metropolis of London, as subterranean spaces become the sensational locus of truth and death.

Chapter 5 dedicates itself to *The Mysteries of London* (1844-45), the most political of the four texts selected by the author, and extends the issues of power, truth and language to the political discourse surrounding the Act and the social discussion of poverty that it provoked. Through an analysis of the narrative's political aesthetics, the previously introduced concept of 'vertical space' is explored as an expression of a political message wherein an either literal or metaphorical fall is at stake. Neither *String of Pearls* nor *Mysteries* present any positive depictions of the medical community, as opposed to the first two texts, but Gasperini convincingly explains that "dramatic, but just, solution[s] to the power conflicts between characters" (233) are staged in the narratives' real and imagined sensationalised spaces of medicine and death.

By way of conclusion, Anna Gasperini provides a brief survey of medical-ethics anxieties in late-nineteenth-century fiction, from Wilkie Collins to Robert Louis Stevenson and Bram Stoker, and succeeds in showing a form of continuity between the penny bloods, sensation fiction and late-Victorian gothic texts. Gasperini's writing is overall acute, smooth and accessible, and the rich endnotes and bibliography to each chapter give credit to the work already accomplished in the field while providing readers with opportunities to explore the matter even further. The one regret I would express is that by performing a cross-section analysis, the serialised format of the penny blood and its idiosyncrasies are not addressed sufficiently, and the content of the primary texts becomes the only focal point. Nevertheless, through this meticulous examination of highly popular texts in the light of medical history, she convincingly shows that penny bloods outlined nuanced issues for their readership by circulating, more or less intently, discourses of social and political power that pertained to the readers' everyday reality. This interdisciplinary study presents a literary analysis of penny bloods not as cultural commodities but also as stories whose content requires

and deserves our attention. In addition to being a fascinating read, it is an extremely welcome stepping-stone in the scholarly analysis of penny bloods by contributing to a better understanding of their place in early-Victorian culture and their legitimisation as a key literary phenomenon within a historical, social and artistic context.