

## Book Reviews

This book is a truly admirable history of the College's first two centuries. Its involvement with the medicine of Philadelphia and its responses to events elsewhere in America and in the wider world are as clearly set out as are the detailed biographical sketches, at which Dr Bell excels, of the many personalities, many long forgotten, who served the College in so many capacities through so many years. The illustrations are profuse and excellent, including an extraordinary silhouette of the apparently hook-nosed Dr Redman. Philadelphia has been well served by its College of Physicians. Even Dr Fothergill would be hard put to cavil at its achievements.

Sir Christopher Booth, Royal College of Physicians

PHILIP W. MARTIN, *Mad women in Romantic writing*, Brighton, Harvester Press, New York, St Martin's Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. x, 198, illus., £29.95.

This book forms a welcome addition to the growing body of work which considers literary treatments of madness in relation to contemporaneous psychological discourse. Martin is not concerned, however, with influence hunting, with tracing causal relationships between the two spheres of writing; but rather with the functions of the figure of the madwoman as a rhetorical trope. His approach, which draws extensively on the techniques of deconstruction, produces many subtle readings of the chosen texts, though it also imposes certain limitations on analysis.

A helpful summary of the treatment of female madness in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century psychiatry is followed by an intricate exploration of that ubiquitous figure in Wordsworth's poetry—the female vagrant. Here Martin is at his best, using close textual analysis to show how Wordsworth worked and transformed his material. The chapter on 'Secret Lives' sets the selected Romantic and Victorian novels within an interesting new focus, highlighting their internal ambiguities, while the final section on Freud's story-telling offers significant insights into Freud's indebtedness to the generic structures of nineteenth-century fictional narrative. By far the weakest chapter is that on *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where Martin eschews his own deconstructive method, imposing a rather traditional reading on *Jane Eyre* as a text that proposes an antithetical relation between insanity and sanity and construes female sexual desire as monstrous, in order that Jean Rhys's text can perform the labour of radical revision.

All writers seeking to cross disciplinary boundaries are faced with problems of presentation and integration, of untangling the forms of historical claims they wish to make. It is in this area that the limitations of Martin's approach are most in evidence. In his rather confusing methodological introduction the techniques of historical and deconstructive analysis are first set in opposition, and then defined as complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. The main problem seems to arise from Martin's conception of history as something distinct from the texts he is considering, as if they themselves did not form part of the historical process. He speaks, therefore, of reserving the right to "deflect into history", as if it were a totally different sphere, defining his approach as one which concentrates "on writing (though not exclusively) as a largely self-enclosed and self-reflexive activity". Such an approach enables Martin to trace the trope of the madwoman through a century of literature, but leaves him without any mechanisms to explain the subtle shifts in figuration. Despite the historically-based introduction to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century psychiatric thought, and the appendix which offers examples of case-studies, the actual discussion of the literary texts draws on only loose associations with a psychiatric tradition, which is itself projected as unchanging. Problems of periodization arise here, since the general label "romantic" cannot adequately cover both the late eighteenth century and the transformations in psychiatric thought or literary practice within the Victorian period. The problems in Martin's text are intimately related to its strengths, however, and arise from his very willingness to eschew traditional methodologies and to work across accepted disciplinary and period boundaries.

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