

“A Sentence of Death Had Been Passed on Her”: Representing the Experience of Breast Cancer in Britain through the Long Nineteenth Century

In this project, I revise current histories of women's experience with breast cancer in nineteenth-century Britain, including assumptions that women remained silent about the disease, through an interdisciplinary study relating medicine to three genres in the nineteenth century—medical nonfiction, personal nonfiction and life writing, and fiction—noting the ways those genres address and incorporate experiences with breast cancer. Though the three genres I have identified seem distinct, the dissertation will argue for connections that bring them together through the genre category of breast cancer narratives.

In *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability, and Life Writing*, Thomas Couser suggests that, though breast cancer narratives are “conditioned by the physical manifestations of the disease and the medical protocols of treatment,” they are ultimately “women’s responses to the disease, individually and collectively” (37). Because he focuses on the experiences of women patients with breast cancer, Couser describes the breast cancer narrative as “an autobiographical... subgenre” that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (39). In this dissertation, I revise Couser’s definition of the breast cancer narrative genre in two ways. First, I expand the idea of breast cancer narratives by including the voices of doctors in medical texts and those of writers in fictional texts. For this reason, I read the genre of the breast cancer narrative concurrently with the traditional genres of medical nonfiction, life writing, and fiction. Second, I demonstrate that the genre of breast cancer narratives emerged much earlier than the 1970s and 1980s through my extensive use of nineteenth-century source material and my identification of a number of narrative trends that clearly emerged in these texts.

The project recovers primary texts that relate to breast cancer in the period, some of which have been published with little (if any) discussion of the impact of breast cancer on the text. Many others, however, have remained unpublished and have been recovered from archives and libraries for the purposes of this project. In discussion and analysis of those texts, I put theories from three main fields of knowledge—gender studies, disability studies, and literature and medicine—into conversation with one another.

The larger implications of this project include four key areas of significance. First, I offer possibilities for a change in the way we discuss assumed silences in women’s experience, with this study specifically expanding current knowledge about breast cancer in the nineteenth century to include voices and narratives that have been frequently overlooked. Second, this study will propose a method for reading the hidden narratives of breast cancer and for analyzing details beneath the surface texts of life writing. Additionally, though this project focuses on assumed silences specifically related to the experiences of breast cancer, it provides a model for reading other seemingly hidden narratives in print culture and recognizing alternative means of expression that have remained effaced and submerged. Finally, this project offers an interdisciplinary and transhistorical approach to women’s experiences with breast cancer. In order to fully analyze life writing, fiction, poetry, periodicals, medical texts, art, and more generally women’s experiences with illness, the study adapts and develops models for making connections among the fields of literature, periodical studies, history of medicine, art history, gender studies, and disability studies.

After an introductory chapter situating the project within the theories of genre and history of medicine discussed above, I consider four genres and approaches to breast cancer in the nineteenth century, selecting representative texts and cases for closer analysis. Chapter two considers the experiences of doctors treating patients with breast cancer through medical literature published in medical textbooks, advice books, and periodicals for both the medical

community and the general public. Chapter three addresses the perspective of the women patients facing breast cancer through the life writing found in letters and diaries. Chapter four discusses the experiences of the family and friends of women patients through post-mortem memoirs published about the women and their experiences with breast cancer. Chapter five connects the nonfiction forms from the previous chapters with fictional representations of breast cancer in novels and short stories.

In addition to considering the ways breast cancer was represented in a specific genre, each of the chapters considers parallels between the experiences of nineteenth-century women with those of the past 50 years. In chapter two, the medical texts reflect the power of knowledge about breast cancer and the ways it was often contained within the medical community. Chapter three explores the agency many women claimed through their strategic uses of speech, silence, and language. Chapter four addresses the importance of community for women facing breast cancer as well as the emotional impact of the disease on their families and friends. Finally, chapter five covers the ways that representations of breast cancer in the fiction of the nineteenth century links with fictional forms like television and films of the past few decades. The coda brings together all of these comparisons in an exploration of how the experiences and narratives of breast cancer in the nineteenth century inform our own experiences in the past few decades.