

The Dreaded Pox: Sex and Disease in Early Modern London by Olivia Weisser Cambridge University Press, 223 pages

Samuel Pepys heard in 1664 the dreaded news that his brother Thomas was dying from venereal disease. He was just one of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Londoners who navigated a city ravaged by this stigmatising disease.

Much has been written about venereal disease before, but Weisser's innovative approach moves beyond the sources left by medical institutions. Her cross-status investigation encompasses the voices of those who rarely speak for themselves in the medical historical record. Her book traverses the city's streets vividly bringing to life the experiences of poxy whores, their disease-ridden clients, abused wives infected by cruel husbands, and duplicitous medics.

Weisser's aims to show that although ostensibly a 'secret disease' (as it was often called) venereal disease was woven visibly into the bustling streets of the London cityscape. Having traversed the treacherous world of medical advertising where vendors of dubious standing declared their merits and decried their competitors as lowly bakers and tailors unfit to practice medicine, and having identified a medicine worthy of purchase, intrepid patients navigated the streets of London in search of promised cures.

Drugs both local and exotic could be purchased from the semi-private locations offered by cheesemongers, toymakers, and booksellers. Sellers clustered in 'seedy' areas with sex but also appeared across the city. Weisser's mapping of the "expansive retail networks" (49) embedded in London's shopping culture is impressive but is undermined by the cramped maps provided which make it difficult to visualise the geography of her argument.

Another central argument is that the stigma of sexual immorality attached to the disease made it the first 'modern' illness. In the sick room healers constructed their authority, based not on medical expertise per se, but on their moral superiority. The symptoms of the pox were notoriously difficult to interpret; thus, medical men relied upon contextual stories of patients' past sexual exploits to gain the truth. The medical encounter thus became a cathartic release of secrets and lies, presided over by a moralising medic.

Such moralising also appeared in home remedies that sought to punish those whose condition was the result of excessive lifestyles and inappropriate sexual encounters by punitively constraining patients' diets and freedoms. Weisser, here, deftly emphasises the mixed logic – medical and moral – that underpinned the use of cures that to a modern audience might appear bizarre.

The modernising effects of the pox are likewise visible in London's court rooms. Here women fighting for separation, in an era before divorce, used the pox to circumvent the social restrictions that prevented them talking about sex. The pox stands as visible proof of their husband's infidelities. Likewise, victims use the visible bodily damage of the pox to prove the depravity of rapists. Here where women's voices were weakest, the burden of proof moved to medical men whose job it was to verify the disease and declare its likely path of transmission.

Weisser's engaging and innovative work brings the pox out of the shadows and integrates it into the broader histories of city life. It is woven into marriage breakdown,

consumerism, and morality successfully demonstrating the centrality of medicine and the body to lived experiences of early modern life.