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Popular Medicine, Hysterical Disease, and Social Controversy in Shakespeare's England (Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity)

Kaara L, Dr Peterson

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Mining a series of previously uncharted conversations springing up in 16th- and 17th-century popular medicine and culture, this study explores early modern England's significant and sustained interest in the hysterical diseases of women. Kaara L. Peterson assembles a fascinating collection of medical materials to support her discussion of contemporary debates about varieties of uterine pathologies and the implications of these debates for our understanding of drama's representation of hysterica passio cases in particular, among other hysterical maladies.

An important aspect of the author's approach is to restore, with all its nuances, the debates created by early modern medical writers over attempts to define the boundaries and resonances of hysterical ailments, which Peterson argues have been largely erased or elided by historicist criticism, including scholarship overly focused on melancholy. One of the main goals of the book is to stress the centrality of gendered concepts of disease for the period and to reveal a whole catalog of early modern literary strategies for representing women's illnesses.

Among the medical works discussed are Edward Jorden's central text A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother (1603) and contemporary plays, including Shakespeare's Pericles, Othello, King Lear, and The Winter's Tale; Webster's The Duchess of Malfi; and Chapman's Bussy D'Ambois.

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