

Peter Kitson, “The Strange Case of Dr. White and Mr. De Quincey: Manchester, Medicine, and Romantic Theories of Biological Racism.” *Romanticism* 17:3 (2011): 278–287.

In “The Strange Case of Dr. White and Mr. De Quincey,” Peter Kitson persuasively examines the relationship between these two remarkable men, beginning on the occasion of the death of De Quincey’s nine-year-old sister, Elizabeth. The article describes the personal and creative influence on De Quincey of leading Manchester physician Dr. White’s work on anatomy and race and argues that this influence was instrumental to De Quincey’s writings about medicine, mummies, and Manchester. Beginning with his investigation of the traumatic occasion of Elizabeth’s death, Kitson writes with the conviction that this event and the subsequent attention paid to Elizabeth’s deformed skull as an example of aesthetic excellence were a catalyst for De Quincey’s obsession with White, and his work.

The article questions De Quincey’s fixation on White’s presence compared with that of Dr. Thomas Percival, a “major figure in Manchester’s cultural and scientific life,” and suggests that White’s appreciation of Elizabeth’s deformed and diseased skull is the reason for the commencement of his lifelong mania for White and craniology (278). Kitson examines the way in which De Quincey’s attention is selective, as the latter ignores White’s work as a respected obstetrician, and expresses only his interest in the doctor’s publications in the field of craniology. Thus Kitson introduces his discussion of the troublesome Romantic relationship between anatomy and theories of racial difference.

Kitson next describes the influence of the anatomical collection displayed at White’s premises on King Street in Manchester, locating the site of origin of De Quincey’s morbid obsession. White’s medical education is described by Kitson as entrenched in assumptions of racial gradation and the intellectual and aesthetic superiority of the European race. In this way, Kitson examines the problematic Romantic application of pseudo-scientific evaluation to questions of racial difference, locating Manchester as the “cradle of biological racism in Britain” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries due to the prevalence of this thinking among its leading medical practitioners (284). It is pseudo-scientific, Kitson argues, because proof of superiority, for White, was to some extent a matter of aesthetics. White, for example, describes the European anatomy as the most “beautiful of the human race” (285). Despite his ability as an intellectual sophisticate to reject extreme theories of gradation such as those advocated by London-based surgeon William Lawrence, De Quincey’s later “vehemently racist” writings are, Kitson argues, a clear product of this influence (286).

The article also argues persuasively that the obsession with the imagery of the broken and bandaged skull in turn informed De Quincey’s Orientalism, specifically the symbolism of the swaddled head as the source of the reoccurrence of the turban or ruined crown motif in De Quincey’s work, and the representation of White as an Eastern figure from the Arabian Night’s tales, a “lamp bearing Aladdin” (279) or a “Bluebeard” figure in his biographical writing (281).

Using specific examples of human remains prepared by White and known to have been seen by De Quincey, Kitson examines the role of bodily spectacle and exhibition in the latter’s work. Kitson examines the doctor as a show-man, revealing or concealing artefacts at his pleasure, and taking paying visitors at his Manchester

home to gaze upon the embalmed body of former patient Hannah Beswick and the skeleton of the highwayman and convicted murderer Thoman Higgins. The potent effect of viewing these remains on De Quincey was to produce “the finest heights of his wonderfully baroque prose style” (281).

Kitson’s article adds to the established canon of scholarship on connections between Romantic literature and medicine, which includes such texts as Sharon Ruston’s *Shelley and Vitality* (2005), Nicholas Roe’s *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* (2001), and Hermione De Almeida’s *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (1991) that provide studies of Romantic poets and their knowledge of, connections within, and influence by, the medical profession and scientific debates. Critical works such as these have successfully disputed the early twentieth-century view of Romantic writers as individuals isolated from their society who somehow transcend their historical moment. Instead, these works posit an alternative Romanticism that was very much connected with contemporary debates about human scientific progress. As with these works, Kitson persuasively uses a historicist approach in his research, and draws on De Quincey’s own accounts of the relationship and known biographical details as evidence of how his obsession with White and his work informed his writing.

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