

Christy Rieger, “Chemical Romance: Genre and Materia Medica in Late-Victorian Drug Fiction.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47.2 (2019): 409–437.

Within the broader scope of Victorian scholarly work focused on medicine, pharmaceutical history has often been overlooked outside of the consideration of addiction and toxicology. The field of pharmaceutical history in particular is often underrepresented in comparison to other facets of medical science. However, significant cultural work lies in the “generic work” of materia medica in late-Victorian Fiction. Christy Rieger’s article addresses this gap in scholarship by discussing the duality of pharmacological agents as technological advancements and romantic reminders of the past. In analyzing Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Machen’s “Novel of the White Powder” (1895), and Kipling’s “Wireless” (1902), as well as the historical and theoretical impact of substances, Rieger highlights the ability of drugs to permeate barriers, and thus, re-engineer the self in relation to its environment, impacting the understanding of the romance genre in late-Victorian narratives.

Rieger aptly notes that, because the visual representation of substances are unstable – not easily identifiable by sight and able to be dissolved in liquid – the “thingness” of a drug is tentative as it is able to “[become] something else,” thus “threaten[ing] the most cherished properties of selfhood” (411). Additionally, the appearance and composition of drugs allows for a different interpretation of narrative work. Drug narratives are able to connect realism and romance in the mundane object of the drug itself, in addition to the abilities it has to fuel the plot of drug fiction. Not unlike Derrida’s interpretation of language in “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Rieger underlines that drugs also have both an intended purpose and the inability to be controlled. These substances have the ability to permeate thresholds in ways that other “things” cannot and also “open the passage between opposing qualities,” inherently redefining the boundaries of the self (411). Victorian authors, much like chemists, had the ability to use seemingly innocuous agents to evoke significant transformations. These transformations direct the focus from the author of the narrative to the character’s experience and environment, allowing the reader to become more invested and impacted than the work of realism.

Rieger emphasizes that pharmacology is dependent on opposition, and grounds this analysis in historical context by explaining key moments of Victorian legislation involving drugs. While multiple laws were set into place during this time period to try to mitigate the use of substances through control and classification, drugs were not able to exist as a solely technological advancement due to the instability of their impact on different bodies. Importantly, the space of the pharmacy furthers this duality, as “a site of knowing and not-knowing” that houses substances signifying both technological prowess and reminders of ancient history (415-6). The substances housed inside are both imperial and foreign, benign and dangerous – all undetermined by the human eye.

When analyzing medical professionalization, scholars often prioritize the role of the doctor and researcher and very infrequently the chemist (and even less so the place of the pharmacy). Alternatively, Rieger focuses entirely on this valuable and underutilized facet of literature and medicine, and succinctly compacts a dense history.

Instead of reading the use of drugs in terms of material history or symbolic work, Rieger brings these threads together to generate an analysis of the “generic” work of drugs in Victorian narratives. Although discussing drugs and compounds in relation to literature has been done previously – for example, see Susan Zieger’s *Inventing the Addict* (2008), Sylvia A. Pamboukian’s *Doctoring the Novel* (2012), or Cheryl Blake Price’s *Chemical Crimes* (2019) – Rieger’s article presents a new perspective on how these substances impact the relationship between romance and realism, in a time when the latter was thought to be gaining dominance and the former was most often attributed to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In Victorian fiction, chemicals are most often tied to realism due to the relationship between objectivity embedded in the developing science of chemistry, pre-pharmacology. They also had a notorious history in relation to detective and sensation fiction: drugs moved the plot forward—poisoning, incapacitating, or otherwise impacting characters at pivotal moments. “Chemical Romances” complicates both of these preconceived uses – for Rieger, compounds are not simply plot catalysts, symbols, or mundane objects of realism. Considering pharmacology in relation to genre draws a renewed attention to the exigence of romance in Victorian literature, rather than attributing the genre to an amalgamation of more dominant genres of scholarly interests—especially those pertaining to medicine and science. Through drugs, the pharmacy, and the self-dosing subject, Rieger documents how material is just as romantic as it is realist – the pharmacological agent entangles desire, the body, and the world. Ultimately, scholars interested in literature and science will find Rieger’s article a productive point of departure to rethink how drugs function in different periods and modes of literature.

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