

Bernadette Höfer. *Psychosomatic Disorders in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*. Farnham, England; Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2009. xiii + 245 pp. + 4 illus. \$99.95. Review by BARBARA R. WOSHINSKY, UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI.

This wide-ranging study explores the meanings of psychosomatic illness in works drawn from four classical genres: self-writing, the novel, comedy and tragedy. The author makes three main claims: that Cartesian dualism dominated concepts of mind and body in the French seventeenth century; that dualistic views reinforced the oppressive practices of the absolute monarchy; and that, in contrast, representations of psychosomatic disorders posed a “clandestine, indeed repressed challenge to the hierarchical split of body and mind” (2), revealing a close interrelation between the two. These claims are reinforced by references to a wide array of philosophical, medical, and literary authorities. Höfer’s view of repressive social practices draws on Louis Marin, Jean-Marie Apostolidès, Michel de Certeau, and John Lyons, among others. In linking Cartesian rationality with absolutist policy, she follows critics including James Gaines, Michael Koppich, and Larry Riggs. Beyond her critique of dualism, Höfer seeks to initiate a “dialogue” between classical holistic thinking and contemporary psychological theory, drawing on the ideas of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, whose books, *Descartes’ Error* (1994) and *Looking for Spinoza* (2003,) are frequently quoted. In the introduction, Höfer refers to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV)* to define psychosomatic or “somatoform” illness as “the presence of physical symptoms that are not fully explained by a general medical condition” (5). She also borrows the psychoanalytic term “conversion”—the means by which a repressed emotional trauma takes somatic form. In analogous fashions, the bodies of literary figures can “speak” their repressions; hence, “reading” the body and reading a text become linked endeavors. This multi-disciplinary approach makes the book an excellent fit for Ashgate’s “Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity” series.

The first chapter examines the “principal philosophical, medical and moral discourse of the seventeenth century regarding the relation between mind and body and includes matters of contemporary

concern” (6) to psychologists and neurobiologists. Höfer begins with Descartes’s assertion in the *Discours de la méthode* that “human existence depends primarily on the principle of thought” (15); the body, in contrast, has no direct capacity to affirm its existence. However, for Descartes “the separation between body and mind operates only theoretically” (16). In *Les passions de l’âme* and in his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, Descartes sought to clarify the relation between the two. While admitting somatic influences, the philosopher repeatedly asserted that the will, reason and *générosité* have great powers to cure the body’s ills—a premise that Höfer will question. The second part of Chapter One introduces Spinozan philosophy, which will play a key role in Höfer’s argument. Unlike Descartes, Spinoza posits “a material and psychic substance inseparably joined” (24.) A third part of the chapter examines medical thought of the seventeenth century, concentrating on De Laurens’s *Discours des maladies mélancoliques* (1598) and Robert Burton’s better-known *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). These medical theses reinforce the traditional theory of the humors, which also informed literature of the time. In conclusion, Höfer returns to the relationship between seventeenth-century holistic thought and current psychological research, asserting that “Spinoza’s idea of *modes* seems more modern than ever” (55).

The body of the book analyzes literary representations of four psychosomatic disorders: melancholy, hypochondria, raging fever, and—underscoring the persistent otherness of the seventeenth century—demonic possession. Chapter Two focuses on Jean-Joseph Surin’s autobiographical work, *Science expérimentale de l’autre vie*. Surin, a Jesuit priest who was sent to “cure” the possessed nuns at the Convent of Loudun, fell into a profound pathological state which he called “obsession”; “the takeover of his body *and* his soul by demons” (60). This illness, during which he was unable to move or speak, lasted for seventeen years, until it was cured by divine intervention. Surin’s Jesuit superiors, however, refused to consider him as possessed, instead treating him as insane. In his account, Surin rails against the practices of suppression ordered by the Jesuit community, practices that only made his condition worse. Thus, Höfer sees him as “an early rebel against dualistic models of mind and body” (70).

Chapter Three, “Melancholic Subversions in Molière’s *Le misanthrope* (1666) and *Le malade imaginaire* (1673),” posits psychosomatic disorders as both a symptom of, and a revolt against, social alienation under Louis XIV. Following Freudian psychology, Höfer views characters’ somatoform manifestations as responses to their perceived helplessness and frustration. Alceste cannot function at court because of his melancholic humor; yet he also fosters his melancholy as a sign of his difference and superiority. Argan employs a rigid ritual of medical treatment in a (fruitless) attempt to control the environment around him and to gain attention. From a social perspective, Höfer asserts that Acaste’s impotence represents the “emasculat[i]on” and loss of function experienced by bourgeois as well as nobles under Louis XIV’s rule. For Höfer, the ills of Molière’s characters are “a sign of social rupture” (97); his comedy adopts a “symptomatic language” (125) to express what society attempts to suppress. While Höfer affirms that these plays are indeed comedies, her reading of them is extremely dark: the body becomes the bearer of “psychological conflicts . . . and relentless pain” (99). Finally, she asserts that Molière, like Surin, rejects the “more culturally dominant Western and Cartesian premises prioritizing mind over body,” turning instead towards Spinozan monism (111).

In Chapter Four, Höfer connects Lafayette’s “psychosomatic fiction” to a disparate series of thinkers including Descartes, Pascal, Freud and Spinoza. On the one hand, *La Princesse de Clèves* reveals a dualistic view of the self; yet like the Jansenists, Lafayette appears skeptical of reason’s capacity to control the passions and their physical manifestations: traces of emotions leave involuntary “marks” on the body, which are visible to both characters and readers. Höfer again draws a connection between repression and illness: in Freudian terms, the princess suffers from “neurasthenia” and a strong sense of abandonment, leading her to fear taking emotional risks. She also bears the marks of her mother’s “psychotic” fear of sexuality (158). From a social perspective, however, the princess’s final departure represents a “radical refusal” of the “law of the father.” Höfer portrays the location of her final retreat, near the Pyrenees, as a “borderline” mental and political space symbolizing the novel’s ambivalence.

Seventeenth-century medicine recognized erotic disturbances as causing mental and physical disorders; Chapter Five examines this “love melancholy” in Racine’s *Phèdre*. The heroine’s distress, however, is not solely the result of frustrated love, but of a “cleavage” between love and duty. While the repression of forbidden passion provokes in her a physical illness approaching death, Phèdre is also driven by desire (libido), which is her only remaining connection to life. This Freudian territory has been explored by Jules Brody and others; but in analyzing Phèdre’s imaginative attempts to reconstruct traumatic events from the past, Höfer expands our understanding of the character. Again, she represents psychic disorders as *performed* through the body, leaving marks perceptible to other characters (and audience). Finally, as in earlier chapters, Höfer portrays the characters’ melancholy as a revolt against social prohibitions. Phèdre’s forbidden passion is a transgression against the patriarchal law that renders her “abject,” in Kristeva’s terms; and classic Freudian castration theory is literally enacted through the mutilation of Hippolytus’s body.

At times, Höfer’s ideological stance can lead to overstatement: “As decisive apparatuses for controlling the masses, bodily repression and manipulation of the self *reduced an entire society to conformity and deprivation*” (135, italics added). The same tendency leads to the repetition of the same points in every chapter. Instead of a “dualistic” opposition between Cartesian and “subversive” thought, one could envision placing more emphasis on the interpenetration of discourses: spiritual, medical, and rational thought of the period all underscore the power of the passions, and their ability to harm *both* mind and body; hence the imperative to find a “therapy” capable of harnessing them. Nevertheless, Höfer’s book is a serious complement to recent work by critics like Erec Koch and Rebecca Wilkins, who are reexamining the role of the non-rational and of the body in seventeenth-century thought. It also opens a promising dialogue with current psychological trends, which could be pursued further. Höfer alludes to the “positive thinking” movement; one could also mention the widespread use of cognitive therapies, which assert with near-Cartesian optimism that we can change our feelings by changing our ideas. In contrast, the notion of “writing out” the repressed links her work to current practices of “narrative therapy.” At a time when many feel *angst* concerning the

future of the humanities in general and seventeenth-century studies in particular, Höfer's study reaffirms the centrality of the *grand siècle* through a timely return to a larger concept of the humanities, before that other dualistic split: between science and art. This book highlights the important role of early modern thought in how we understand and express our psychic selves today. In a nearly transparent translation by Jane Marie Todd...

Keith Thomas. *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfilment in Early Modern England*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. xvi + 393 pp. + 14 illus. \$60.00. Review by CATHERINE PATTERSON, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON

In this wide-ranging and engaging book, Keith Thomas brings to bear his deep knowledge of early modern English society and culture to reflect upon the fundamental ends of life for the people he has studied during his long career. A revised version of Thomas's Ford Lectures at Oxford in 2000, *The Ends of Life* asks how early modern people found meaning in their existence and explores the ways that those meanings found expression through prescriptive literature and lived experience. The result is a rich tapestry that illuminates the changing and sometimes contradictory mental world of early modern English people.

Thomas identifies six major "roads to fulfillment": military prowess; work and vocation; wealth and possessions; honor and reputation; friendship and sociability; and fame and the afterlife. These serve as focal points for the thematic chapters of the book. While fully acknowledging that these were not the only means through which people might find fulfillment, Thomas convincingly suggests that these categories incorporate important themes running through early modern life. Interestingly, he chooses not to define religion *per se*, or spiritual fulfillment, as one of his main categories. This is somewhat counter-intuitive, given the significance of religion to every aspect of early modern society. Religious ideals, however, permeate the book and inform Thomas's treatment of nearly every topic.