ORCA – Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/138680/

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Cock, Emily 2021. Noelle Gallagher. Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal disease in the eighteenth-century imagination. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 288. $65.00 (cloth). Journal of British Studies 60 (1) , pp. 193-195. 10.1017/jbr.2020.169

Publishers page: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2020.169

Please note:
Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.

NOELLE GALLAGHER. *Itch, Clap, Pox: Venereal Disease in the Eighteenth-Century Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. Pp. 288. $65.00 (cloth).

Venereal disease was the secret disease that everyone was talking about. Assuredly curable, but liable to corrupt the family line and perhaps the entire nation. The diseases of strangers brought into the home and the centers of power.

In her elegantly written *Itch, Clap, Pox*, Noelle Gallagher deftly demonstrates the ubiquity and flexibility of venereal disease in imaginative British sources of the long eighteenth century. Gallagher offers readings of an extraordinary range of artistic and literary sources from the period—some focused on venereal disease and others utilizing passing references and oblique hints in the service of other concerns. It is perhaps through the latter that she offers the greatest contribution: her readings bear up her contention (supported by other scholars) that saturation of British culture with venereal disease references not only demonstrates anxieties about the medical and health ramifications of the disorders themselves, but also shows how these anxieties were metaphorically harnessed to a wide range of social, political, economic, and cultural concerns. Gallagher rightly contends that these include many of the most important themes and areas of research for the period: "commercialization, globalization, changing gender norms, shifting class boundaries" (2). She is especially interested in the utilization of venereal diseases in imaginative responses to shifts (and the threat of collapse) of social boundaries and hierarchies—"racial, sexual, financial, political, speciational" (5). Thus, the resonance of pox anxiety through different discursive fields means that the book will be of interest to scholars of the period far beyond the literature of medicine.

Chapter 1 considers the representation of venereal disease in relationship to masculinity, male power, and patriarchal structures. A good dose of the pox figured both as

the inevitable consequence of roguish masculine sexuality and as an invitation to impotence and sterility that threatened patriarchal authority and the legitimacy of male power. As in most of the chapters, Gallagher takes a cumulative approach to sources in the bulk of the chapter before zeroing in for a close reading of a text particularly apt to the chapter theme: in this case, John Durant Breval's poem *The Progress of a Rake: Or, The Templar's Exit* (1732), which captures both sides of the pox's relation to power and masculinity.

Chapter 2 begins with an exploration of venereal disease and prostitution. Gallagher demonstrates the discursive relationships between tropes of comedic poxed whores and wives who are innocently infected by philandering husbands, and sympathetic depictions of the diseased prostitute that predate more familiar "fallen women" literature of the nineteenth century. The most interesting section of this chapter is the examination of prostitution and pox in political satires, which metaphorically implicate figures such as Charles James Fox and George IV with whoredom.

Chapter 3 takes on the issue of foreignness. The pox in particular was commonly given foreign nicknames—such as the French disease, the Neapolitan disease—which fed off social and political prejudices and attempted to distribute blame elsewhere. Gallagher makes the innovative distinction that Britain used metaphorical disease not to blame the enemy, but to criticize the "foreign self" (115)—allies and rivals that infiltrated and influenced home, always threatening to destabilize national borders and identity. She addresses France (the most familiar), Spain as a colonizing rival, and Scotland as both an old ally of France, and uneasy neighbor and then co-citizen of a new United Kingdom. Gallagher points out that each use of venereal imagery was rooted in socioeconomic anxiety, but that while France symbolized the weakening effects of luxury, Scotland was associated with fears of the mass migration of impoverished and vulgar Scots to steal English jobs. The chapter closes with a

fascinating discussion of anti-Scotch pox rhetoric in satires on John Stuart, third Earl of Bute and prime minister (1762–63).

The book finishes with a topic close to my heart: the nose. Gallagher offers a deft examination of how the nasal deformity associated with venereal disease (an association rooted in medical reality but picked up with an enthusiasm that far surpassed any possible number of affected people) was harnessed to comment on a diverse range of anxieties. She focuses on how "the deformed nose allowed the boundary between the diseased and healthy to run parallel to the boundaries between classes, races, and species—boundaries that seemed to some, much like a syphilitic's nose, in imminent danger of collapse" (160). Again, sections that draw material from a wide variety of sources with different levels of investment are complemented with focused close readings—in particular Henry Fielding's *Amelia*, William Hogarth's oeuvre, and, of course, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.

Readers of the *Journal of British Studies* will be well placed to engage with the book. There is meat for Scottish scholars in the detailed discussion of the "Scotch Itch" and anti-Scotch prejudice, though Wales and Ireland receive limited direct attention. The majority of discussion rests on English sources, and English (even London) cultural concerns are foregrounded (although many of the texts discussed enjoyed widespread distribution across the British Isles). Gallagher explicitly engages with imaginative responses rather than lived experiences of venereal disease, meaning that the book will be of most interest to literary and cultural historians. Nevertheless, she addresses the identified tension between the serious medical realities of illness and the often jocular treatments they received in imaginative sources, and she productively contends that this tension is itself evidence for the ambiguity and adaptability of pox in the period.

Emily Cock

Cardiff University

cocke@cardiff.ac.uk