
BOOK REVIEW

Medicine Is War: The Martial Metaphor in Victorian Literature and Culture
by Lorenzo Servitje (New York, SUNY Press, 2021) 352 pp., paperback,
\$36.95

Reviewed by Katherine Voyles
(*Independent Scholar*)

‘We all of us, grave or light, get entangled in metaphor and act fatally on the strength of it.’ Lorenzo Servitje quotes George Eliot’s well-known line from *Middlemarch* in *Medicine is War*, his book about how a metaphor about fatality itself became fatal. I begin with Servitje’s invocation of Eliot not because it’s where he begins—he begins with Mary Shelley—but to signal from my own beginning that *Medicine is War* is a deeply literary book. It’s about novels, it’s about metaphor, and it’s about the power of literature to shape attitudes, orientations, and ways of understanding the world. How the military and medicine are interlaced, the language used to braid them together, and how those stories move through time (both in narrative and across the long span of the nineteenth century) are all concerns of *Medicine is War*.

The martial metaphor is the heart of the book. The militarisation of medicine is at the heart of the metaphor. How wars fought far from England’s shores affected views of individual hygiene and public health in England itself and the fallout from those views takes many forms in Servitje’s nuanced telling. In tracing this metaphor, he reveals how the relationships between bullets and bacteria, ammunition and immunisation, and national security and sanitation are wound and unwound, made and remade from Romantic through Modern literature. Servitje insists that, ‘The martial metaphor is not natural; it emerged from a set of historical relations between actors, ideologies, and cultural productions’ (p.2). This reality may not be self-evident today.

Imaginative literature, according to Servitje, has the ability to naturalise the metaphor, but he’s also alive to moments when the metaphor is openly and explicitly deployed for critical ends. Because he takes this complicated view of his subject, Servitje treats the job of the literary critic as a process of denaturalising or defamiliarising. Many treatments of literature today offer new forms of reading, new ways of reading, and new definitions of form—it’s exciting to practice literature, to engage in reading, to make literature matter when how to

do so is so open. Servitje doesn't explicitly take up these issues, but there is something quite convincing about how he takes literature seriously without feeling the need to be paranoid or reparative, critical or loving, in his handling of fiction. Examining how the metaphor became naturalised and what happened after it did is the long arc of Servitje's compelling book.

Medicine is War unfolds over five main chapters, with chapters one and two making Part 1 of the book, and the final three composing Part 2. Each chapter centers on a novel or novelist: *The Last Man*, Charles Kingsley, *Dracula*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and *Heart of Darkness*. He uses this organisation to make a few interrelated interpretative moves: he shows the origins and evolution of the martial metaphor across the century, he insists on the centrality of fiction to its beginnings, and it allows him to spend time with some of the signature political and military conflicts, from the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, the Boer War, to the Scramble for Africa.

The entwined relationship between the military and medicine takes a number of different forms in Servitje's hands. Individual hygiene, public health, the politics of sanitation, biopolitics, liberalism, gender dynamics, imperialism, and Britishness are some of the crucial topics around which Servitje orients. These broad concerns take historically specific form. Servitje explains the book's organisation, 'The first part pertains to authors responding to miasma and contagion theory in the face of the first three cholera epidemics. The authors in part 2 respond to bacteriology, parasitology, immunity, and eugenics' (p.20). His compelling reading of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* illustrates how that novel exposes the martial metaphor as a metaphor even as it shows how it became naturalised, with the effect that medicine became militarised by and through and for nationalistic ends. In the chapter on Charles Kingsley Servitje dramatises how the third cholera epidemic, new developments in the sanitation movement, and the Crimean War work together to make Britain into a medical society, and that this turn is made possible by the martial metaphor's link to the military. *Dracula*, for Servitje, 'helped fashion a modern medical future by mediating a militant past' (p.110). Detection and immunity are the poles around which the chapter on Conan Doyle turns, these poles are anchored by Servitje's rehearsal of developments in bacteriology and toxicology. The final chapter, on *Heart of Darkness*, deals with what he calls '*coloniopathy*,' that is the illness of the native Congolese in Conrad's fiction, is an index of both the ravages of Colonialism and of its necessity (p.194). 'Collateral Damage' is his Afterword; it brings the fallout of the martial metaphor up to today by writing of antibiotic resistant bacteria and

the so-called War on Cancer to illuminate the long tail of the martial metaphor, and how liberal, nationalist approaches to medicine continue today.

Servitje, however, isn't merely interested in the formation and continuation of the metaphor, he's committed to excavating the political, social, and cultural forces that enable as they played out in developments in medicine and in warfare. The dynamics, however, run the other direction, too. He's equally committed to excavating how the martial metaphor enables political, social, and cultural forces as they played out in developments in medicine and in warfare. The metaphor itself works to obscure these relations, but Servitje deftly demonstrates how imaginative literature itself both assumes the metaphor, and critically reveals the assumptions imbricated in it.

His 'Addendum' brings his book into the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our moment vivifies the fatal stakes of conceptions of and responses to medicine and public health structured by the martial metaphor. The individualism and nationalism at the metaphor's heart fatally limit our collective responses by curtailing our horizons of possibilities precisely because they are simply assumed. Noting partisan political fractures in response to the pandemic is one thing, but understanding that beneath those ruptures is the martial metaphor reveals that even those cortisol-spiking differences are less pitched than they might originally appear because they are both entangled in metaphor and act fatally on the strength of it.