

# The Most Beautiful Man in Existence: The Scandalous Life of Alexander Lesassier.

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## ***The Most Beautiful Man in Existence: The Scandalous Life of Alexander Lesassier (review)***

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Bulletin of the History of Medicine

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 74, Number 3, Fall 2000

pp. 614-615

10.1353/bhm.2000.0131

REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

*Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 74.3 (2000) 458-494

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The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700-1830

## Introduction

Susan Sontag's now-classic *Illness as Metaphor* presents a compelling analysis of the paradoxical nature of the disease that was variously called consumption, phthisis pulmonalis, and, later, tuberculosis. Comparing the disease with cancer, she noted a stark contrast in the metaphors generated by the two fatal diseases of modern times: while cancer stood for negative values, consumption served as a metaphor of essentially positive attributes, such as heightened beauty, refined sensibility, and artistic creativity—*La Traviata*, *The Magic Mountain*, and John Keats being obvious examples. Or, as Sontag has succinctly put it, "As TB was the disease of the sick self, cancer is the disease of the Other."<sup>1</sup> Her perceptive work has done a great deal to stimulate both medical and literary historians to approach diseases in the past from the perspective of the subjective experience, images, metaphors, and mythologies, supplementing studies of the objective frameworks of medical discoveries, therapeutic breakthroughs, and disease mortality. **[End Page 458]**

Partly following Sontag herself, and partly influenced by Foucault, many practitioners of the new cultural history of disease most commonly use the concept of the Other as its central analytical tool, while others direct their attention to the Self.<sup>2</sup> The leading proponent of the former historiography has been Sander Gilman, whose works on madness, race, sexually transmitted diseases, and so on have been pioneering the field of the iconology of diseases. Particularly in his *Difference and Pathology* and *Disease and Representation*, Gilman has shown how societies and individuals attempted to draw the boundaries between Self and Other by projecting their various anxieties onto sufferers of certain diseases.<sup>3</sup> The abjection of diseases, it is contended, not only dispelled the specters of physical and mental pollution, contamination, and dissolution but also consolidated racial, class, and gender categories. Gilman and others focus on the historical processes of stabilizing one's identity by stigmatizing these diseases as the Other. This conceptual framework seems very effective when applied to certain diseases of a virulent nature such as syphilis, madness, and AIDS, which are Gilman's main examples. Similarly, lethal epidemic diseases such as plague and cholera sit well with this model, for they were often regarded as an alien visitation from outside the community.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, diseases of the Self are more commonly found in certain diseases of a relatively mild nature, which were sought after as badges of the social and cultural distinction of the sufferers—George Cheyne's English Malady was the disease of the affluent and sensible, and gout in the eighteenth century suggested the aristocratic pedigree of the sufferer.<sup>5</sup> Rather **[End Page 459]** than being expelled to the other side of the boundaries, these diseases were integrated as vital and positive components of the Self. In other words, people anchored at least part of their identity in them, being ready to live with their unpleasant and occasionally agonizing symptoms.

In these typologies of the cultural meanings of diseases, consumption presents an interesting and apparently paradoxical case. Although it was lethal, and indeed the major killer in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its romantic allure has long been noted not only by Sontag but also by medical and literary historians, and by patients themselves in the past.<sup>6</sup> Although there are some situations in which consumption stood for the Otherness of the patient—as in Kafka's tuberculosis and Jewishness, or the more generalized instance of the lower classes—Sontag is right in that it was less abhorred than dreaded, and the "dreaded disease" (whether real or imaginary) was, at the same time, more likely to be embraced into the inner identity of the sufferers.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, such a stark opposition between one disease as a dangerous exteriority and another as a positive interiority in relation to the individual is in some senses false: no man, or disease, is an island. Consumption...

Lisa Rosner. *The Most Beautiful Man in Existence: The Scandalous Life of Alexander Lesassier*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. xii + 254 pp. Ill. \$29.95; £22.50.

This book is that most rare of beasts: a bodice-ripping medical history. Lisa Rosner has superbly exploited the treasure buried in the Edinburgh Royal College of Physicians' Library to work up the extensive journals and various correspondence of *accoucheur* (man-midwife) and sometime military surgeon Alexander Lesassier into a fascinating biography. Lesassier's claim to fame lies not in his great medical skill or knowledge, competent though he was, but in his ability to record the events of his own life, professional and personal, in florid detail, and over a number of years (1803–30). His journals, all seventy-eight of them, are especially remarkable for their explicit accounts of his many illicit sexual liaisons and consequent career-threatening scandals with all ranks of women (many of them his patients)—from foreign maidservants, to the petty bourgeoisie, to great ladies such as Lady Louisa Kintore.

If this were as much as the journals contained, the book would be fascinating enough for those interested in the titillating aspects of a philandering Romantic physician's life (or in contemporary gender dynamics); but Rosner has written a book for a general audience that contains much to inform as well as entertain the medical historian, bearing as it does the mark of its original purpose to be "a sober academic monograph on medical education and professionalization" (p. xi). In transforming the journals into a biography, Rosner (and Lesassier himself) reminds us that history is transmitted through a series of fictions—the principal one here being Lesassier's presentation of his life, to himself more than to anyone else, as the progress of a romantic hero like the ones to be found in the novels of which he was so fond, and in his own semiautobiographical *Edward Neville*. Although one might question Rosner's use of literary materials to "read" her hero's life beyond the journals, the very fictionality of Lesassier's construction of his own identity in the journals demands the cross-pollination of life and art that Rosner does so well.

In many ways Lesassier is portrayed as a man of his transitional time: caught between the aristocratic ethos of the eighteenth century and the incipient professionalization of the nineteenth, he found himself constantly striving for the independent status of a gentleman, while struggling to cope with the reality of his impecunious origins and the need to pursue an unglamorous medical career as man-midwife to his betters in Edinburgh. Lesassier's grandiose vision of his own rightful status as a conspicuous aristocratic consumer repeatedly undercut his attempts to cultivate patrons and patients alike, through his lack of necessary humility. Neither great nor good, he was often arrogant, egotistical, frankly materialistic in his attitude to other people (to the extent of hoping for the death of his wife to facilitate his finances), snobbish, and lazy. Similarly, he was far more concerned for the well-being of his patients' wallets than of their wombs. He is, in sum, a useful corrective to adulatory accounts of medical



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