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Anne. C. Vila, *Suffering Scholars: Pathologies of the Intellectual in Enlightenment France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. vii + 267 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4992-7.

Review Essay by J.B. Shank, University of Minnesota

An ethical tinge linked no doubt to my general pathology as a middle-aged scholar compels me to start this review with a disclosure. I am not in any way a detached, dispassionate reader of Anne Vila's scholarship. Anne is in fact an old friend and esteemed colleague whom I have known since my earliest days as a graduate student. She was an early patron, welcoming me onto panels with her at places like the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies well before I had the academic credentials certifying my presence there. I have also long considered her 1998 book *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* to be the go-to study for understanding the mesh of science, discourse, and culture at the heart of that master Enlightenment concept: *sensibilité*. [1] Yet, as if this were not enough, Anne and I also share a peculiar tie that makes our professional connections all the more intimate. In her acknowledgments, she thanks her two children, Julia and Daniel, for "brilliantly disprov(ing) the eighteenth-century belief that those who engage in over study aren't also able to engender strong, accomplished offspring" (p. 266). What she doesn't mention is that she was aided in her parental work by a Needham, MA pediatrician named Dr. Alan Stern, a man whom I know simply as "Huge" – an ironic nickname referring entirely to his readily visible physical stature. Huge was one of my close classmates in college, and as the story goes, Anne was visiting with him to discuss the pediatric development of her children, and when he learned what she did for a living, he asked her if she knew me since I was the only person he knew involved in that kind of work. "Well, yes I do," she is reported to have responded, and ever after our relationship has been sealed in this extra personal way.

You will need to look elsewhere, therefore, for cold, steely criticisms of Anne and her work, but our tie with the ginormous Dr. Stern offers a perfect segue into my contribution to this forum devoted to her fascinating new study of the pathology of intellectuals in Enlightenment France. In the same way that a professional physician serves for us as a bridge between our life as scholars and the wider society in which we live and work, *Suffering Scholars* uses eighteenth-century doctors, and especially their medical discourse, to show how Enlightenment learned life was culturally coded by understandings of the mind, the body, and their interaction in ways that connected learned labor and its vocations to wider medicalized understandings of the self, society, and the body politic. Overall, it is a terrifically smart study that combines great learning, no doubt acquired at great personal physiological and hygienic cost to her, with sharp thinking and clear cogent writing. It is to be recommended to any serious student of French Enlightenment thought and culture.

The book is very tightly organized, with an "Introduction" outlining the chronological frame and program of the study, and then six chapters and an epilogue that realize the book's mission

statement in a wonderfully incisive and readable way. At one level, the book works overall to realize the precise project announced in the “Introduction,” which is to say that it “tell(s) the story of how the bodily as well as moral exceptionalness of the learned was represented (in France) from the early eighteenth century to the era of Balzac” (pp. 3-4). It does so while emphasizing how “the intellectual evolved as a medical, social, and literary figure in French-speaking culture over more than a century – starting in the 1720s and running to about 1840” (p. 14).

Chapter 1, entitled “Medicine and the Cult of the Thinker, 1750-89,” provides an introductory “overview” of how “*les maladies des gens de lettres*’ emerged and developed up to the Revolution.” (p. 14). Chapter 2 builds from Chapter 1 “by considering how intellectual zeal was represented by moral philosophers and literary writers” in the same period (p. 14). But Chapter 2 also settles into what is really the vital heart of the book: Vila’s use of *les maladies des gens de lettres* as an interpretive lens through which to study French thought during the classic mid-eighteenth-century decades of the Enlightenment. In this chapter, she picks up the threads of the last sections of Chapter 1, which concern the influential ideas of the Swiss doctor Samuel-Auguste Tissot, in order to set up Chapters 3-5, which are the most insightful and accomplished sections of the book. These middle chapters explore in rich detail the physiological complexities of learned life as manifest in the textual representations of intellectuals, especially *philosophes*, offered before the Revolution. Arguing that an overall “growth of the medicable” in France after 1750 supported “a new intensity of writing linking medicine and medical science with writing overall” (pp. 10-11), Vila develops in these chapters a series of illuminating interpretations of Montesquieu, Buffon, Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and Stäel to name only the luminaries. She also deploys critical medical discourse and wider reflections on the body and its pathologies to offer insightful readings of a range of different Enlightenment texts. Chapter 6 and the epilogue complete the book by returning to the overall narrative so as to “follow the story of the *maladies des gens des lettres* syndrome from the 1790s to the 1830s.” After this date, “physicians stopped focusing on the supposed exceptionalism of *gens de lettres* as a unique patient group,” and the epilogue ends the book by sketching “the new ideas and tensions that were invested in the persona of the cerebralist” after 1840 (p. 16).

As projected in the “Introduction,” and then realized in the chapters that follow, there is little to criticize in Vila’s schematic history of the changing understanding of the pathological writer and intellectual between 1720 and 1840. Yet even though Vila emphasizes this diachronic frame in her presentation of *Suffering Scholars*, I find myself thinking far less about this book when considering why I liked it so much, and far more about another book found within the same covers. This other book, comprised of the middle chapters alone, is concerned less with stadial historical explanation and more with the complexities of French Enlightenment thought during the classic decades from 1730 until the outbreak of the Revolution. It is also approaches Enlightenment intellectual history as a practice of hermeneutical textual interpretation rather than as an exercise in diachronic historical explanation.

This other book begins as I see it in the last sections of Chapter 1, with the discussion of Tissot’s nosology and therapeutic diagnoses of the suffering scholar. It ends in Chapter 5 with the analysis of Stäel’s *Corrine*. These sections could really stand alone as a separate book free from the narrative account of historical change that currently ties the book in its entirety together. The analysis offered in these chapters also fits better with another of Vila’s overall arguments made in

her “Introduction,” namely her claim that a particular “Frenchness” characterizes the pathologies she considers. Having made this argument about the supposed natural character of what she is studying, Vila immediately undermines it in Chapter 1 by showing the non-French origins of the scholar’s sickness. *De Morbis Artificum diatribe*, published by the Italian doctor Bernardo Ramazzini in 1705, is “generally recognized by historians” as the originator of the idea, and in its early development it was “the English ‘hyp’ doctors such as Bernard Mandeville, Nicholas Robinson, and George Cheyne” who took the lead in developing it (p. 20). By 1750, Continental doctors were working within this frame, so this genealogy, like Tissot’s Swiss, though Francophone, origins, is only problematic when read as part of an insistent diachronic history of the syndrome overall. The middle chapters are not really concerned with this kind of historical change at all, however, and the precise French focus of the study does not present any real problems in this part of the book.

Another analytical snag – the imprecision about which sickly learned figures exactly we are looking at – also creates problems for the larger frame of the book much more than for its intricate middle sections. Vila is very careful to note that *gens de lettres* are not the same thing as *écrivains* and *auteurs*, and that *philosophes* are another thing entirely, as are “scholars,” whose identifications I wanted to see left in the original French so as to know whether Vila’s sources were referring to *érudits*, *savants*, *doctes*, or one of the many other terms of definition available to eighteenth-century learned men and women. A wide array of terms referring to learned labor and its vocations, both historical and anachronistic, are deployed throughout the book to describe the being at the center of its analyses, and while the distinctions between them matter, and need to be analyzed specifically in any precise genealogical account of the development of the *maladies* of the learned as a specific historical phenomenon, Vila’s casual neglect of these details is not a problem because so much of her book is not really focused on this kind of historical explanation. Likewise, only the beginning and ending chapters operate with the wide-lens optic and synthesizing rhetoric characteristic of narrative historical explanation, and while this leaves the more close-viewed analyses found in the middle chapters out of step with the flow and frame of the book as a whole, I was not left longing for more diachronic rigor, but for more chapters focused like Chapters 2-5, and for a continued delay of the return of the progressive narrative, which reappears in Chapter 6.

The middle chapters amount to their own unified historical analysis of French Enlightenment thought after 1730, and it is in these pages where the book really shines and does important work. The discussion of Tissot at the end of Chapter 1 opens the frame by showing how this “single medical doctor (who) was more effective at scaring eighteenth-century *gens de lettres* about their health than (any other)” (p. 32) was also a complex thinker wrestling with the very dynamics he was claiming to diagnose. In particular, Tissot worked to reconcile a general celebration of and advocacy for passionate learning with remedies that addressed the ill effects of intellectualism pursued badly or in un-reasonable ways. At the center of his influential approach were a set of binaries – mind and body most fundamentally, but also passion and restraint, enthusiasm and reticence, exertion and passivity, indulgence and denial, pleasure and dutiful refusal – that he sought to analyze in search of the golden mean between them, which was always his ultimate therapeutic recommendation. These binaries represent much more than medical taxonomies, and Tissot was much more than a doctor diagnosing a peculiar class of illnesses. They are in many ways the fundamental antinomies of Enlightenment thought itself, and what is found, therefore, in

the middle chapters of *Suffering Scholars* is less a history of a changing medical condition among intellectuals and more a book about French Enlightenment thought overall.

Especially resonant with me was how Vila's perspective brought back into view the immaterial, ideal, and purely cognitive and mental aspect of Enlightenment thought in a way that returned it to the center of our understanding. It has been a long time since any scholar of the French Enlightenment cared about Ernst Cassirer's German idealist understanding of it as a moment of triumphant mathematical rationalism and cognitive theorization, and Vila is certainly not offering us a return to Cassirer's idealism here. [2] But in the wake of the shift away from Cassirer's Enlightenment in recent decades, and toward one dominated by the bodily and the material, and epistemologies of sensate experience, materialism, and *sensibilité* rather than rational *mathesis* and cognitive analysis, Vila's study actually, and perhaps ironically given her seminal role in pushing this very turn, pulls the pendulum back in the other direction by continually showing us all the ways that the suffering intellectuals of the Enlightenment conceived of their miseries in terms of an irreconcilable relation between their bodies and their minds/*esprit*.

In other words, while this book is all about the physiological struggles of intellectuals, and the dilemmas they faced managing an intellectual's life of embodied thinking and doing, it is also a book about *intellectuals*, or those who see their work in terms of experiences of mental disembodiment and spiritual transcendence. Vila's suffering scholars are embodied beings, but also people who labor with immaterial tools like ideas, mental discourse, and the objects of the imagination. What makes the pathologies of these particular individuals especially intriguing is not their participation in the common problem of physical embodiment, but the way their work claims to transcend it. Also crucial is their conviction that there is something beyond themselves and their mortal flesh that is crucial to everything they do. This makes their pathology extra pathological because what ails them cannot be found in the physical realities of earthly existence alone.

My own interest in situating the history of Enlightenment mathematics fully within eighteenth-century culture was clearly influential in generating this perspective, and read from this vantage point *Suffering Scholars* is actually chock full of fascinating discussions of the plight of those with highly mentalist conceptions of themselves and their work. Diderot in particular appears in this book as the fully mathematical as well as *sensible* thinker that he was, and Vila's reading of his use of Leibniz to refute Helvetius' overly materialist reduction of human thought to bodily systems alone is one of many places where the book shines because it emphasizes the irreconcilable dialects between matter and *esprit*, and between embodied cognitive experience and the universal transcendence of rational insight (pp. 62-64). It was this deep and intractable tension, the one grounded in the impossible mystery of the union of matter and spirit, that made *les maladies des gens de lettres* syndrome such an important site for wrestling with fundamental Enlightenment predicaments. Vila's reading of *Le Neveu de Rameau* is also extremely illuminating in this regard precisely because of its attention to the way that the dialogue dwells on the material realities of intellectual life, but only so as to heighten the tensions they pose for its equally important immaterial and spiritual dimension (pp. 86-91).

Historians of science still use the old idea of a "Diderot-d'Alembert Debate" to define the perceived epistemological tension at the core of the Enlightenment sciences. Framed this way, the

debate is about the importance of materiality, sensate experience, and experiment on the one hand (Diderot), and the countervailing importance of abstract theory, rational analysis, and mathematicization on the other (d'Alembert). What Vila shows in her focus on the essential tension between the mind and the body when conceiving of the health and excellence of Enlightenment intellectuals is the way that this was not a debate between rival parties, but a debate present within the work of every serious thinker in the period. It's the way that *Suffering Scholars* brings us to the nub of this fundamental Enlightenment conundrum again and again through its wonderfully rendered case studies that makes the book so successful.

By way of conclusion, some further cases featuring consummate Enlightenment mathematicians rather than literary *gens des lettres* can be offered in order to show the comprehensive reach of Vila's interpretive analytic.

In the early eighteenth century, the Marquis de l'Hôpital was at the center of a series of intense public battles about the validity of the infinitesimal calculus, the mathematics that he played a singular role in developing into the modern rational analysis triumphant in the Enlightenment. The bluest of blue blooded aristocrats, l'Hôpital retired from his ancestral military commands because of his poor eyesight, but also because of his preference for a life spent in pursuit of mathematical research. His critics, including his fellow mathematicians, often used his retreat from physical exertion and manly duty (as they perceived it) to disparage his mathematics as the cognitive result of an effete and weak body. His allies, meanwhile, celebrated the *haute noblesse* of his fully liberal geometric mind. These challenges also included attacks upon his masculinity, including challenges from the wider public. For as the eighteenth-century historian of mathematics Jean-François Montucla reported, the "frivolous people of Paris" created a piece of "musical theater" (*un vaudeville et un air*) entitled *Infiniment petits* that turned the *querelle* then raging about the new mathematics into comedy. "I have done everything possible to try to find the words," Montucla wrote, but all he could report was that the songs "made jokes about the frail health of the Marquis de l'Hôpital," and about the strong distaste of his wife, the marquise, for the new geometry because of her lonely bed and the perpetual mathematical distraction of her husband. [3]

L'Hôpital's case shows how the physiological relation, and possible pathology, of the mind and the body was central to Enlightenment mathematical debates as well, and Vila further cites a few of Fontenelle's *éloges* delivered in his role as Secretary of the Académie Royale des Sciences from 1697-1740 to illustrate the way that he and others celebrated the ever-active mathematician who was willing to sacrifice his body to his higher mathematical calling (pp. 62 and 118). She could have added to her account his celebration of the mathematician Pierre Varignon, who, Fontenelle claimed, loved nothing more than doing mathematical work. He pursued his mathematical research intensely into every evening, often skipping meals and generally avoiding other social and personal distractions. This was to violate every principle of moderation recommended by Tissot, but Varignon's success was nevertheless great. Fontenelle, in fact, made his zeal the very source of his excellence, reporting that he was happy when working late into the night to hear the bells ringing three hours in the morning because it signaled the coming dawn and the beginning of another workday. [4]

Such celebrations of advanced mathematics produced through intense sacrifice of bodily pleasure were common, but they also generated contrary arguments, such as those raised by the Jesuit

mathematician Louis Bertrand de Castel. He railed in his 1728 *Mathématique Universelle, abrégée à l'usage et à la portée de tout le monde* against the overly abstract, cryptic, and purely cognitive “modern” mathematics practiced at the Académie Royale des Sciences. Against it, he argued for a more “natural,” because more humane and corporeal, approach to mathematical learning. [5] For him, geometry should be based on sensate, material, and especially pleasurable encounters with the natural mathematics found all around us. He was also responsible for an Enlightenment “New Math” curriculum instituted at the Parisian Collège Louis le Grand where he taught that applied these principles. It included innovations like a mathematical cabinet full of physical objects that students could manipulate, and a program for teaching solid geometry and conics through walks in the garden that would alert students to the mathematical order of plants and trees. Specially crafted *pâtisseries géométriques* were also used as a teaching tool. Castel’s mission overall centered on re-uniting mathematical learning with bodily attachment and pleasure in a way that challenged the overly recondite and purely cognitive mathematical analysis then ascendant at the royal academy. [6]

Castel’s voice joined a wider critical discourse that disparaged the newly emergent Enlightenment mathematical sciences as overly abstract, abstruse and bloodless in their cold detachment from the realities of sensate experience. Alexis-Claude Clairaut, by contrast, was a product of the very mathematical world criticized by Castel, and he may even have been the first recorded historical example of a familiar modern figure of intellectual prowess: the mathematical prodigy. After a rigorous mathematical education supervised by his accomplished mathematical father, Alexis stunned observers by presenting a theoretical mathematical paper before the members of the royal academy just after his thirteenth birthday. Regulations prohibited making him an academician right then even though his presentation proved his mathematical worthiness. But after the publication of his first mathematical treatise at the age of sixteen, Clairaut was admitted to the academy even though he was still three-years shy of the minimum age required.

Together with d’Alembert and Leonhard Euler, Clairaut went on to become one of the greatest of the very great mathematicians that the Enlightenment produced, and his 1759 prediction of the return of Halley’s comet to within three days was one of the great scientific accomplishments of the age. [7] According to some observers, however, it may also have led to his death. The arrival of the comet as predicted in the skies above Paris led to great public acclaim for Clairaut, turning him into an adult celebrity while cementing his image as the personification of the newly venerable Enlightenment mathematical scientist. The renown, observers said, changed him. Too busy with mathematics in his youth to marry, Clairaut rose to prominence as a bachelor, and likely celibate, mathematician, a role he shared with many of his academic colleagues. The celebrity acquired by his comet prediction, however, pulled him out of his previous life, thrusting him into the very different quotidian rhythms of *le beau monde*. This led to his undoing, observers reported. “He became focused with dining and with *soirées*, coupled with a lively taste for women,” wrote the mathematician and engineer Charles Bossut. “Seeking to make these pleasures into his day to day work, he lost rest, health, and finally life (in 1765) at the age of fifty-two.” [8]

Bossut’s diagnosis was taken straight out of Tissot, and what all of these stories illustrate is the direct resonance between the mind-body tensions and debates central to the history of Enlightenment mathematics and Vila’s analysis of *les maladies des gens de lettres* in the same period. When applied to these cases, the analytic offered in the book, at least the one found in the

middle chapters, is highly illuminating. What this match shows is how *Suffering Scholars* is really much more than a straightforward historical account of a particular cultural syndrome associated with writers and intellectuals. Ultimately, it is an interpretation of French Enlightenment thought as a whole, and its relation to some of its most fundamental categories and dilemmas. Those concerned with Enlightenment intellectual history in all its dimensions will therefore find much in it that is instructive, insightful, and highly suggestive.

## NOTES

[1] Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

[2] Ernst Cassirer, *Die philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1932). In English, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Revised Updated Edition with a new foreward by Peter Gay (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[3] J. F. Montucla, *Histoire des mathématiques, dans laquelle on rend compte de leurs progrès depuis leur origine jusqu'à nos jours*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Paris: Henri Agasse, 1799–1802), 2: p. 398. On *La Querelle des infiniment petits* overall, see J.B. Shank, *Before Voltaire: The French Origins of "Newtonian" Mechanics, 1680-1715* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), ch. 9.

[4] See "Éloge de M. Varignon," in Alain Niderst ed., *Oeuvres Complètes de Fontenelle* 9 vols. (Paris: Fayard, 1989-2001), 7: pp. 19-33.

[5] Louis Bertrand de Castel, *Mathématique Universelle, abrégée à l'usage et a la portée de tout le monde* (Paris: Chez Pierre Simon, 1728)

[6] On Castel's mathematics, see J.B. Shank, "A French Jesuit in the Royal Society of London: Father Louis-Bertrand de Castel, S.J. and Enlightenment Mathematics, 1720–1735," *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 1.1 (Fall 2012): 151-84; François de Dainville, "L'enseignement scientifique dans les collèges des Jésuites," in René Taton ed., *Enseignement et diffusion des sciences en France au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris: Editions Hermann, 1964), 27-65. On Castel in general, see Donald S. Schier, *Louis Bertrand Castel, Anti-Newtonian Scientist* (Iowa City: Torch Press, 1941), and more recently Jean-Olivier Richard, "The Art of Making the Rain and Fair Weather: The Life and World System of Louis Bertrand Castel, S.J. (1688-1757)," Ph.D. Dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 2015.

[7] On Clairaut's life and scientific career, see Jean Itard, "Alexis-Claude Clairaut," *Complete Dictionary of Scientific Biography. Encyclopedia.com* (October 23, 2018). <https://www.encyclopedia.com/science/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/clairaut-alexis-claude> Pierre Brunet, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Clairaut (1713-1765)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952).

[8] Charles Bossut, *Histoire Générale des mathématiques depuis leur origins jusqu'a l'année 1808* 2 vols. (Paris: F. Louis, 1810), 2: 428-9.

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