Ursula A. Potter’s book examines the representation of women’s health, especially their sexual bodies, on the early modern stage. Potter’s main argument is that, despite the fact that all but one of the plays she chooses for analysis (eleven in total) were written and performed by men and boys, they reveal respect for the womb and understanding of it as a powerful component of both women’s health and the wellbeing of the state (1).

Potter structures her book in nine chapters. The book opens with an introductory chapter which examines contemporary attitudes to the womb, revealing them to be ambivalent in that they assign both positive and negative qualities to this organ. ‘A fulfilled womb’, as she writes, was thought by early modern commentators to ‘be a source of intense joy and pride’ (1). At the same time, the womb ‘could be a cesspit of pollution for a man’s essence, his seed’ (1). In this chapter, Potter explains the increased attention paid to women’s health in the drama by two events: the rise of physicians practising in the field of women’s health, and the Reformation with its frowning upon celibacy and encouragement of matrimonial sex, an attitude which effectively characterised virginity and extended chastity as dangerous (2). This is followed by a chapter dedicated to an examination of green sickness, the disease of virgins, which draws on contemporary medical resources, on early modern religious discourses, on the notion of the ‘wandering womb’ and medical responses to it in the form of diagnosis and treatment. These two chapters are then followed by eight chapters that focus on one or two plays’ engagement with green sickness, especially in the figure of the virgin who has just had (or about to have) her fourteenth or fifteenth birthday, theatrical shorthand, as Potter contends, of the arrival of the menarche and of ripeness for sexual experience, both biological events that trigger anxieties in (especially aged) fathers.

Potter’s selection of plays within which to examine the representation of green sickness is refreshing. Alongside such well-studied plays as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, she analyses texts which have not received similar critical attention, such as John Jeffere’s (?) *The Bugbears* (1566–70), John Marston’s *Parasitaster, or The Fawne* (1604–06) and Henry Glapthorne’s *The Hollander* (1635). The analysis shows that the early modern stage experienced an increasing interest in the topic of women’s health and especially in the womb and its influence on the female body. Potter traces this growing interest by opening her analytic chapters with *The Bugbears*, a play,
she argues, that offers a clinical explanation of green sickness because the audience who saw this play in the 1560s were not expected to be familiar with this condition. The plays that follow *The Bugbears*, Potter argues, assume more familiarity with this malady on the part of the audience, the assumption that turns green sickness into a common plot device used to explore the change that a daughter’s menarche introduces into the father – daughter relationship. This relationship, as Potter aptly shows, is more often than not characterised by tension and anxieties on the part of the father about the newly sexually ripe body of the daughter. In its later stage development, the book shows, green sickness is increasingly used by dramatists to satirise the medical profession, whose practitioners are portrayed as greedy sexual predators bent on exploiting their young, virginal and ailing charges. In the 1630s, Potter argues, dramatists show an interest in the influence of religion, especially discourses surrounding desire, on the young female body and practices of fasting and prayer that many pious young women adopted to keep it chaste and almost infantile (by causing the ceasing of menstruation through excessive fasting).

A consideration in the conclusion to the book of the way Restoration drama engaged with the virgins’ disease would have been welcome and would have offered a refreshing perspective on the plays discussed. This would have also enabled consideration of works by Restoration female authors whose perspectives on the unruly womb would be interesting to compare with those of the male authors. Nevertheless, the book constitutes an excellent contribution to the field of early modern literary studies and especially to studies of the representation of the female body (embodied as it was by a male actor) on the early modern stage.

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