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TRANSATLANTIC CONSUMPTIONS: DISEASE, FAME, AND LITERARY NATIONALISMS IN THE DAVIDSON SISTERS, SOUTHEY, AND POE

Clark Lawlor.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

Lawlor looks at the dispute in the early nineteenth century between Robert Southey and Edgar Allan Poe over that "glamorous wasting disease of poets and beautiful young women," and in particular at their respective reading and marketing of pulmonary tuberculosis. Among other things, Southey was attacked with ferocity by Poe, not on grounds of poetic quality, but on grounds of gender and in furtherance of a masculinized and Americanized view of literary criticism.

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It is full of melancholy interest. We see a brain of preternatural and precocious activity embraced in a frame of extreme delicacy and susceptibility, and that the latter must very soon wear out is obvious from the beginning to an observing eye.... gentleness, tenderness, and depth of feeling, religious sensibility, moral purity and the beautiful impulses of genius. (141)

Have the annals of recorded genius anything to show more remarkable than this?

-North American Review 146

This is the first quotation in the advertisement for a second edition of the *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson (1841)*, a now little-known American poet of the early nineteenth century. She, like her older sister Lucretia, achieved fame partly by a precocious devotion to poetry, an early death from consumption, and subsequent hagiography composed by such literary luminaries as Samuel Finley Breeze Morse, Washington Irving, and Robert Southey. Theirs was a fame that reached across the great divide of the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of the literary motherland, Great Britain.¹ At a time when positive British critical recognition of American writing was rare, the poet laureate Robert Southey's praise of Lucretia in the 1829 *Quarterly Review* greatly impressed the American literary establishment—apart from the ever-combative Edgar Allan Poe. In his 1841 reviews for *Graham's Magazine* of both Washington Irving's biography of Margaret and Catherine Sedgwick's of Lucretia, Poe took the opportunity to lambaste the subservient posture adopted by a supposedly fawning American critical community.

Poe did this, as the opening quotation implies, at the expense of one of America's own favoured poets. Ever the iconoclast, he was willing to take figures as important as Washington Irving and Catherine Sedgwick to task over their failure to separate

biography from poetic merit, thus driving a wedge in the critical dictum of the Romantic period that art can and should be read through the author's character. What we moderns and post-moderns now know as the authorial fallacy was then assumed to be part of the literary-critical process and, crucially, part of the marketing process.² In this paper I will argue that the dispute between Poe and the "Davidson industry" of the time about the literary authority of Britain over America is mediated via the paradoxical disease of consumption. Pulmonary tuberculosis, as it came to be known in this period, was a glamorous wasting disease of poets and beautiful women, despite some of the actual symptoms being consequent on the lungs' disintegration. Epidemic in Europe and America, consumption was thought to kill almost one in four people: almost everyone was touched-if not one of their immediate family, then one friend or another would invariably be affected by this "White Plague" of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.

Southey's valorisation of the Davidsons was prompted at least partly, if not mostly, by their early deaths from consumption. An inveterate "collector" of young consumptive poets and an editor of largely posthumous editions, he gathered as protégés Thomas Chatterton (although not a consumptive), the influential Henry Kirke White, the not-so influential Herbert Knowles, and others. Poe's dispute with Southey centered on both literary nationalism and the value of marketing diseased-especially consumptive-poets.

Before we go into the dispute proper, it is worth briefly sketching out the place of consumption-pulmonary phthisis, tuberculosis, or tabes-in the nineteenth century.³ There was no cure: the dread diagnosis of "consumption" was often thought of as a death sentence, as Keats's famous pronouncement on coughing up a drop of blood on a white handkerchief affirmed.⁴ Its symptoms were paradoxical because, on the one hand, the lungs' disintegration caused choking on the often putrid matter the consumptive expectorated, foul-smelling breath, fevered nights: all again recorded in the letters of Keats. On the other hand, because the lungs are not greatly supplied with nerves, the patients often felt little pain as they wasted away, remained *compos mentis*, and frequently took a long time before the final "decline" (as the

disease was euphemistically known) set in. Along with this, the classical idea of the "spes phthisica," or "hope of the consumptive," suggested that consumptives acquired a burst of energy before their deaths that rendered them either more beautiful (if female) or more creative (if male). These apparently positive symptoms helped generate a more idealised mythology of the condition: consumption had long been thought to be the disease for a good Christian death—a phenomenon that was making a comeback in the Victorian period in both America and Britain—and a reflection of beauty and creativity (Lawlor and Suzuki, "Disease").⁵

Susan Sontag amongst others has detailed the glamorous image that accrued to the condition in the nineteenth century; poets, as Shelley told Keats, were especially prone to being "consumed" by their hyper-sensibilities (Sontag; Shelley 2: 220-21). For a poet to be over a certain weight in Paris in the Romantic period was almost a crime against art. During a large part of the century women aspired to the tubercular look, or "consumptive sublime," as Bram Dijkstra has called it (25-28). The reasons for consumption's popularity are complex and have been discussed elsewhere,⁶ but here it suffices to say that the disease's usually chronic wasting of the body dovetailed with medical ideas of nervous refinement and religious asceticism to produce a mythology suited to the times (Lawlor and Suzuki "Disease").⁷

The youthful Davidsons were not unusual in succumbing to consumption. Their uniqueness came in the fact they were both female poets as well as sisters. Lucretia Maria Davidson (b. 1808), who "died at Plattsburgh N.Y., August 27, 1825, aged 16 years and 11 months" (Morse), wrote in a simple, largely sentimental, and pious mode domestic poems praising her mother, sister, and friends, although a development towards greater depth was discernible as she became increasingly preoccupied by her disease and the prospect of her own death. She was made famous on both sides of the Atlantic by Samuel Finley Breeze Morse in his edition of *Amir Khan and Other Poems: The Remains of Lucretia Maria Davidson*, published in 1829. Lucretia's poems went through fifteen editions on both sides of the Atlantic in thirty years, with translations into German and Italian as late as 1906. As Cheryl Walker has observed, Lucretia "became a symbol of the frail female poet literally

consumed by her own sensibility" (Walker 23) and provided the model for the character of Emmeline Grangerford in Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, a thoughtless poetess who churns out verses—largely concerned with death—in great quantities (Walker 23).

To Twain, writing later in the century, this was an object of satire, but to Margaret Miller Davidson (1823-38), her older sister showed her a way of achieving poetic distinction and a career that avoided the drudgery of mundane female existence. Margaret's posthumous fame was assured by Washington Irving's *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson* (1841); the book went through twenty editions by 1864. The extent of the Davidsons' fame is expressed in Edgar Allan Poe's confident assertion at the start of his *Graham's Magazine* review in 1841:

The name of Lucretia Davidson is familiar to all readers of Poetry. Dying at the early age of seventeen, she has been rendered famous, not less, and certainly not more, by her own precocious genius than by three memorable biographies,—one by President Morse, of the American Society of Arts, another by Miss Sedgwick, and a third by Robert Southey. ("Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson" 219)⁸

The Davidsons became the subjects of a struggle by male critics and patrons for control of the narrative and mythology of their idealised lives and equally idealised consumptive deaths.

Although the Davidsons attract the immediate attention and even patronage of a number of male literary heavyweights, theirs is at least presented as a peculiarly feminised world. As an early twentieth-century commentator pointed out, to read the extensive biographies one would hardly know that there were any males involved in their lives (Winterich). In fact, they had a father (a doctor) and at least one brother, who himself died of consumption. By far the most dominant figure in the reconstruction of the sisters' lives and works is their mother, whose own frustrated ambitions, subsequently released by the opportunity afforded by her daughters' deaths, were later revealed in her own *Selections from the Writings of*

Mrs. Margaret M. Davidson. *The Mother of Lucretia Maria and Margaret M. Davidson* (1841). In the introduction she confesses her secret desire to follow in the steps of her daughters as a female poet.

The question of how these women managed to achieve such universal fame from relatively brief poetic careers is one later tackled by Poe; for the moment we can note that it depends partly on their self-conscious manipulation of a discourse of the consumptive poet combined with the specifically female discourse of sentimental domesticity.⁹ This phenomenon is less pronounced with Lucretia, but her sister Margaret had been provided with a role model and exploited this "advantage," if one can call it that, until the time of her death. After that, others were to do the same.

The Davidsons were part of a publishing phenomenon that we might term "the consumption of consumption." Poetry about consumption was extremely popular in Britain and America for a number of reasons: one obvious factor is the need for consolation. Certain female poets—such as Lydia Sigourney (a regular presence alongside the Davidsons in poetry anthologies of the period)—specialised in softening death by consumption through the vehicle of religious reward. "Escape from reality" is too crude a way of conceptualising this poetry; rather, consumption was framed acceptably by a long-standing religious discourse. In Britain and America families were being decimated by consumption—the Brontes being possibly the most notorious example. John Winterich commented dryly on the environment the Davidson sisters faced: "By comparison with this baleful dwelling on the shores of Lake Champlain the Bronte parsonage seems a fount of miraculous healing."

Less savoury motivations, at least to the modern reader, included the vicarious thrill of the survivor, the death of the other as confirmation that the self has remained alive, and the possibly sexual pleasure in lingering descriptions of attractively fading young women: the most common subject matter of these poems even in religious anthologies.¹⁰ Especially interesting to readers were those poets who actually suffered from the disease themselves and, better yet, died young, with their writing published posthumously. Consumption was in a sense confirmation that the

individual concerned was a true poet because consumption, along with madness, was the malady of poets. The Hendrixes and Morrisons-or their female equivalents-of their day, these poets' art was inextricably bound to their biographies and, better yet, autobiographies. The Davidsons-like Keats and lesser-known poets such as the Irish Mary Tighe, the Scottish Michael Bruce, and (best-selling) Robert Pollok-were highly successful in their posthumous sales precisely because they were posthumous.

A particularly strong influence on America and the Davidsons was Henry Kirke White. He was a Nottingham poet who had died young of consumption (allegedly caused by the emotional turmoil consequent to a bad review) and had written about suffering this creative disease in a suitably Romantic manner. White died in 1806 and was made well known largely due to the work of Robert Southey, who edited the *Remains of Henry Kirke White* in three volumes, published between 1808 and 1822. In 1823 he published a tenth three-volume edition. Viewing White's collected papers, Southey claimed that Chatterton's manuscripts "excited less wonder than these" (qtd. in Gilfillan xli).

Lucretia Davidson's identification with this precursory consumptive poet manifests itself at the tender age of thirteen when she writes a double-quatrain poem, "To the Memory of Henry Kirke White" (Sedgwick, 126). The first stanza utilises Kirke White's own melancholic landscape of a gloomy valley to situate the mourning nine Muses, sighing "o'er White's untimely grave." The second stanza clarifies her direct point of connection to a fellow poet:

There sits Consumption, sickly, pale and thin,

Her joy evincing by a ghastly grin;

There his deserted garlands with'ring lie,

Like him they droop, like him untimely die. (126)

This is an image of the goddess Consumption partly supplied by White himself in his

Shakespearean fragment "The Dance of the Consumptives" (written at the age of fourteen), and is another point of comparison with the young poetess.¹¹ It cannot have escaped Lucretia that consumption had been a mixed blessing for Kirke White, both destroying him in "untimely" fashion, yet also bringing him great posthumous fame through the image of a suffering sensibility and a premature death. This was the kind of fame that Romantic poets had come to desire most, as Andrew Bennett has shown: Kirke White's illness narrative provided an example that Lucretia could use, both psychologically and poetically.

Like Kirke White's, the Davidsons' poetry was not exceptional so much for its quality as for its biographical and autobiographical circumstances. A literary industry devoted to Romantic illness, primarily in the forms of consumption and madness (and its result, suicide), sought out instances that the public would happily consume.

Morse's 1829 biography of Lucretia Davidson inaugurated a masculine appropriation of the Davidson phenomenon. Although he treated her as a female Keats to a certain extent, he still had a predominant tendency to convert her into a sentimental and domestic heroine. Morse, in common with the treatment of other writers like Kirke White, homed in on the supposed last poem Davidson wrote. Again, it was a useful marketing device because it provided a sentimental "hook" to draw the reader into the rest of the volume and, indeed, into the writer's life. Lucretia had apparently written "The Fear of Madness" on her deathbed, prompting Morse to assert that "No one" can read it without being "affected": "even its defective metre, in some parts, adds to its pathos, and the abrupt termination before the sense, or the stanza is completed, must strike everyone as in melancholy keeping with her history" (xvii). The poem breaks off in the third line of the fourth quatrain: "But let not dark delirium steal..." (Morse 227).^u This was becoming a familiar trope to the contemporary reader, although the admission of "defective" qualities-beyond the Romantic preference for the fragment-was allowable in female poetry, presumably on the basis that female writing often was not judged at the same level as male writing. More than this, because women were supposed to be innately fragile, beautiful defects in their writing are in some sense as attractive as their consumptive

bodies. The more immediate point, of course, is that the interruption of the poem enacts the premature end to Lucretia's life, feeding the pathos desired by the sentimental reader. According to Morse, art must mirror life: Lucretia's writing must be as beautiful and melancholic as the author herself (xvii).

Washington Irving's contribution to the Davidson mythology came in the form of his *Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson* (1841), later part of Harper's Family Library and even translated into German (*Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*) in 1844. Irving became a family friend and evidently was smitten by the myth of the consumptive feminine sublime, to adapt Dijkstra's term. Irving's beloved Matilda Hoffman had herself died of consumption at the age of seventeen, an event he personally had given the status of the consumptive sublime: "I saw her fade rapidly away beautiful and more beautiful and more angelical to the very last" (qtd. in Kasson 30).¹³ Irving collaborated with Mrs. Davidson to produce a panegyric to the powers of the young Margaret, stressing both the young poetess's exemplary poetic powers and, at least as importantly, her moral excellence and devotion to domesticity, again employing the neutralising trope of domestic sentimentality against the more overt careerism of a literary female. Irving says he has read "poetry more artificially perfect in its structure, but never any more truly divine in its inspiration" (79).

Irving's narrative ascribes to Margaret the typical extreme sensibility of the poetic consumptive: inspired by Lucretia's example, Margaret's "intense mental excitement" and the "brilliance and a restless excitability" of her mind "astonished and alarmed" (*Biography and Poetical Remains* 10, 46). Irving had early advised that Margaret should be prevented from the "exciting exercise of the pen," but her driving ambition continually prevented the execution of such a plan; as she said herself: "I must write!" (72). Mrs. Davidson put the case plainly: "I thought she was too feeble for close mental application, while she was striving, by the energies of her mind and bodily exertion, (which only increased the morbid excitement of her system,) to overcome disease, that she feared was about to fasten itself upon her" (54). This "morbid irritability of her system" paradoxically verified her status as a

poet for Irving, even as it inhibited her efforts to write (72).

Alongside this medical discourse of poetic consumption came the related religious discourse of the body's purification via the mind's power. Irving was convinced that "the soul was wearing out the body" and that, as manifested by "the fragile delicacy of her form, the hectic bloom of her eye," Margaret "was not long for this world; in truth, she already appeared more spiritual than mortal" (Biography 11). For Irving, as for others, her strong religious education worked with her spiritualising disease to add an "ethereal lightness to her spirit," "elevating and ennobling her genius; lifting her above every thing gross and sordid; attuning her thoughts to pure and lofty themes" (17). Irving combines the discourse of the Romantic poet as bearer of divine inspiration, soaring above the mundane realities of the world, with that of fragile and ethereal woman as the privileged source of spirituality and morality. This dazzling vision is indeed sublime for Irving, and consumption is the perfect disease to manifest the blending of the two discourses.

A third factor enters this equation, with the revelation that Margaret would dream of heaven and angels, and of roaming with her dead brother and sister. Mrs. Davidson suggests these visions are not sleep's fancy but "moments of inspiration" (61-62). The vogue of familial reunion in heaven was strong in this period, responding to anxieties about the afterlife in general and a strengthening of the immediate family unit in response to the pressures of capitalism (Aries 452). This domestic sentiment was bound in with the religious responsibilities of women; in proving that Margaret is exemplary both in her purity and privileged contact with the divine, Irving and her mother are also keen to establish the unthreatening nature of Margaret's more earthly role as the member of a family. The bond between mother and daughter, their "holy relationship," is especially stressed throughout Irving's biography (12).

This myth-making on the parts of both Irving and Margaret's mother is understandable enough in the light of their culture's prevailing values, but what is more remarkable is Margaret's self-conscious participation in the creation of this image. She lived the myth herself, determinedly following her desire, encouraged by

her mother, to emulate Lucretia's "soarings into the pure regions of poetry" (Irving, Biography 78). Her conception of her own position as a consumptive poetess is clearly outlined in her "Stanzas" on "The power of the mind, the force of genius" (64). She follows the idea of poetry as divinely inspired, with the poet as the bearer of Promethean fire to man. Genius raises the soul to higher things "with sublimest force"; "This prison-house of clay" (170) is transcended by the mind's urge to return to heaven, its origin. Poetry is a manifestation of this divine privilege, as is consumption, a disease that blends both genius and spirituality:

Oh, how sublime the very thought

That this frail form of mine

Contains a spirit destined soon

In purer worlds to shine. (231-32)

On the other side of the Atlantic, Robert Southey, the compulsive seeker of consumptive poets and early demise, rose to the occasion of Lucretia's death in 1825 by writing a review of *Amir Khan and Other Poems* in the prestigious *Quarterly Review*. So exceptional was such a puff at this time, that, as Poe observed, "this sentence was still sufficient ... to establish upon an immovable basis the reputation of Miss Davidson in America" ("Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson" 224). Morse had written to Southey and other British critics, his covering letter comparing Lucretia with Kirke White and Chatterton, and describing "this new genius which sprang up and bloomed in the wilderness, assumed the female form and wore the features of exquisite beauty and perished in the bloom" (Faust 1: 147). Of course, the comparison would flatter Southey, who had edited the works of the two male poets; the bait was taken, and an eleven-page review in the *Quarterly* ensued.

This was a rare positive acknowledgement of American literature, and made Lucretia's work instantly famous. Southey lost no time in comparing Lucretia to those poets he himself had made noteworthy: "In our own language, except in the cases of Chatterton and Kirke White, we can call to mind no instance of so early, so

ardent, and so fatal a pursuit of intellectual advancement" ("Amir Khan" 293). Southey largely paraphrased Morse's view of Lucretia as a consumptive prodigy, remarkable for her moral, physical, and intellectual beauty, although Southey couched the final part of that triad in terms of potential rather than actual achievement, finding the verse largely imitative, although with glimmerings of originality (310).

Southey also saw Lucretia's development, as he had seen Kirke White's, as youthful genius consuming itself too early: "an intellectual fever seems to have gathered strength with her growth" ("Amir Khan" 293). Repeating Morse's quotation, he noted that Lucretia's habit of placing her harp by the window when composing was an example of "artificial excitement, feeding the fire that consumed her" (293). Sensitive to music, a song would have a striking effect on her "nervous system, already diseasedly susceptible" (294), while her desire for knowledge "possessed her like a disease" (296). His Bristolian colleague Thomas Beddoes had raged against the deleterious effects of music in female education in his *Hygeia*: "even when it charms, it cooperates with weights, already suspended with too little consideration upon the nervous system, and all pulling in the same direction" (1: 53).¹⁵ Southey also lamented that she followed Kirke White's "example" rather than the "warning" that her early death constituted: "stimulants are administered to minds which are already in a state of feverish excitement" ("Amir Khan" 297).

Southey considered the broken ending of Lucretia's last lines in her "Fear of Madness" even more moving than the final lines of Kirke White's "Christiad" ("Amir Khan" 299). As well as poetic genius, Southey also ascribed the requisite good death and physical beauty to Lucretia (299). His description of her "fair complexion," "luxuriant dark hair," "high open forehead," and "melancholy" expression completed the romantic vision of the poetess, combining the various elements of intellect and beauty in her glamorous physical appearance (300). This was a seductive image, both to male patrons of female poets and even to Lucretia's own sister, Margaret.

Southey's dilemma as to how to prevent such compulsive poets from destroying themselves was not resolved in the Quarterly article. As he states at the end: "it is as

perilous to repress the ardour of such a mind as it is to encourage it" (301). He previously had observed that youthful excellence was not designed to flourish on earth but developed here only "for transplantation into a world where there shall be nothing to corrupt or hurt them" and where they can be perfected (292). He later expressed the hope that spiritual things, like all matter, are indestructible so that "those hopes are not in vain which look beyond this world for their fulfilment" (301). The essay ends with the vague wish that, with the wider diffusion of education and books, such prodigies would become less rare and so less indulged by themselves and society at large—an ironic conclusion, considering Southey himself had been guilty of such indulgence in the past and had benefited financially from that indulgence. Hence, Southey generally paints Lucretia as a female Kirke White rather than a female Keats, partly because the myth of Kirke White was, at this stage, more established than that of Keats, but also because Kirke White had been Southey's own protégé.

Critics (almost all male), therefore, became part of the narrative of consumption in ways not previously possible: the likes of Southey made a career out of editing the works of consumptive poets that he had "discovered"; often, his editions were posthumous, adding further value to their reputation and consequently their price and profitability. Southey had "collected" William Roberts, a Bristolian who died aged nineteen, and Herbert Knowles, who met the same fate (Browne 157, 204; Stedman 71). Southey also seems to have been concerned for his own health following the deaths of his mother and his cousin, Peggy Hill, from consumption around 1801-02, writing to Governor Bedford on 18 April 1816 after the death (very likely from the same disease) of his ten-year old son: "long anxiety has wasted me to the bone, and I fear it will be long before grief will suffer me to recruit. I am seriously apprehensive for the shock which my health seems to have sustained" (Life and Correspondence 4: 161-64). Southey regarded himself as consumed by grief, but lived to fight another day—unlike many of the young poets he befriended.

The final piece in the biographical jigsaw was the respected critic and novelist Catherine Sedgwick's *Poetical Remains of the Late Lucretia Maria Davidson*,

Collected and Arranged by Her Mother (M.M. Davidson): With a Biography, by Miss [CM.] Sedgwick (1837). Here, Lucretia's "moral loveliness" was valorised over her actual ability: "Few may have been gifted with her genius, but all can imitate her virtues. There is a universality in the holy sense of duty, that regulated her life" (73)."¹⁷ According to Sedgwick, Lucretia was indeed possessed of the "deep and quick sensibility" necessary to the poet, but it was her "angelic spirit" that predominated (53-54). The mother's encouragement of her gifts "added to the intensity of the fire with which her genius and her affections, mingling in one holy flame, burned till they consumed their mortal investments" (25). Sedgwick collapses two discourses here into the consumption itself—both a sign of Lucretia's poetic genius and her purity of spirit and sensibility; both consumed her body with their "intensity."

Edgar Allan Poe reviewed both Irving's biography of Margaret and Sedgwick's of Lucretia in *Graham's Magazine* in 1841. These reviews were later combined by Poe himself with the intention of including them in his projected book on "Literary America" and eventually printed in the third volume of Griswold's 1850 edition of Foe's works. Poe evidently saw these reviews as striking a blow (through the critical industry of consumptive creativity surrounding the Davidsons) against both British literary-critical hegemony and the usurpation of American literature by a feminised aesthetic.

Perhaps ironically, Poe concurred with the other male critics about the suitability of these women as the objects of masculine admiration at the biographical level even as he attacked the Romantic critical dictum that the poetry should be read through the life of the author, as the industry of consumptive literature demanded vis-à-vis the Davidsons.¹⁷ Morse, Irving, and Southey, with Sedgwick as their accomplice, were guilty of overvaluing the verse because of their knowledge of the life, according to the iconoclast Poe. Irving "seems more affected by the loveliness and purity of the child than even by the genius she has evinced"; when Irving does discuss the poetry, Poe finds his commentary at least hyperbolic (222). Poe has no problem at all with the biography; indeed, he seems as transported as Irving in his admiration for the domestic sentimentality the Davidsons embody; Margaret's relationship with her

mother is a "thrilling" picture of "exquisite loveliness," while "few books have interested us more profoundly" (220).

Predictably, Poe, the lover of beautiful female decay, is deeply moved by the letter from Mrs. Davidson to Sedgwick-quoted in Irving's biography-detailing the consumptively sublime death, deeming it to be so "full of minute beauty, and truth and pathos, that to read it without tears would be to prove one's self less than human" (220). Both Poe's mother and his wife died of consumption: one does not have to be a Freudian critic like Marie Bonaparte to realise that these events affected Poe deeply-not only in his literary representations of women but also in his "philosophy of composition," which affirms the aesthetic of the consumptive sublime by asserting that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic subject in the world (Bonaparte; Poe, "Philosophy of Composition" 165). Poe was part of a culture that not only experienced such deaths (as had Irving) but also valued them for reasons religious and aesthetic (Silverman 72).

Poe expressed his disagreement with Irving in a relatively mild manner for the combative critic: his respect for Irving as a great American writer no doubt tempered his assessment. Poe was indeed lavish in his praise of Irving's unobtrusive manipulation of the tale, although the modern reader might compare Irving's "Pride of the Village" in his *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* as a fictional equivalent of this biographical presentation of consumptive femininity.¹⁸ Catherine Sedgwick's biography of Lucretia provided Poe's true opportunity (albeit at the expense of a female he respected) to undermine Southey's influence. Poe had become more hostile to Southey in the early 1840s, as opposed to his favourable reviews of works like Southey's *Early Naval History of England* (1835) and his positive comparison of Southey with America's own Irving ("Critical Notices" 780). Poe consciously chose the British poet laureate to encourage the ascendancy of American literary criticism in the United States, even if it meant undermining the great popularity of one of its own writers: no doubt the fact that the siblings were female poets, and could therefore be relegated to a different level of literary value, sugared the pill.

Although he found Lucretia the better poet, Poe's opinion was essentially the same on the subject of the sisters' critical reception. He attacked the fawning acceptance that met Southey's praise of Lucretia: "this was at a period when we humbled ourselves, with a subserviency which would have been disgusting had it not been ludicrous, before the crudest critical dicta of Great Britain" ("Poetical Remains" 221).¹⁹ In this version Southey becomes an opportunist, exploiting young poets for his own profitable ends, consuming the consumptives for personal publicity. Southey, "after his peculiar fashion, and not unmindful of his previous furores in the case of Kirke White, Chatterton, and other of precocious ability, or at least celebrity, thought proper to review them in the Quarterly." Poe's continuing diatribe is worth quoting at length:

It pleased the laureate, after some squibbling in the way of demurrer, to speak of the book in question as follows: - "In these poems there is enough of originality, enough of aspiration, enough of conscious energy, enough of growing power to warrant any expectations, however sanguine, which the patrons and the friends and parents of the deceased could have formed." Meaning nothing, or rather meaning anything, as we choose to interpret it, this sentence was still sufficient (and in fact the half of it would have been more than sufficient) to establish upon an immovable basis the reputation of Miss Davidson in America. Thenceforward any examination of her true claims to distinction was considered little less than a declaration of heresy. (224)

Poe's sarcasm at the expense of "the laureate" and his condescending ambiguity are designed to unseat the religious worship of the false British idol. Significantly, he repeats the word "laureate" in the next sentence-"Nor does the awe of the laureate's ipse dixit seem even yet to have entirely subsided"-and goes on to criticise Sedgwick for deferring to Southey's "far more authoritative praise" (225) of Lucretia, as she had put it ("Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson").

While repeating that he still has great respect for Sedgwick, Poe drives the nail into the coffin of Southey's reputation, claiming that Southey "took definite leave of his wits" after writing *The Doctor*, a work that Poe himself had reviewed ambiguously

without knowing the author.²⁰ Poe finishes his opinions on Southey and the British establishment by echoing the sentiments of a masculinised American revolutionary defiance: "Happily the day has gone by, and we trust forever, when men are content to swear blindly by the words of a master, poet-laureate though he be. But what Southey says of the poem is at best an opinion and no more." Sedgwick, as Southey's unknowing lackey, is damned with faint praise: Poe condescendingly regards her generous feminine "cant of a kind heart" as "perhaps the only species of cant in the world not altogether contemptible" ("Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson" 225). She, unlike Poe, is unable to distinguish

that which, in our heart, is love of their worth, from that which, in our intellect, is appreciation of their poetic ability. With the former, as critic, we have nothing to do. The distinction is one too obvious for comment; and its observation would have spared us much twaddle on the part of the commentators upon Amir Khan. (226)

The implicit contrast is masculine intellect and reasoned judgement over female intuition and unreasoned emotionality, however generous it might be. For Poe, the masculine qualities are necessary for good criticism and, indeed, for good patriotism. Poe concludes the combined essays by stating rather rudely that "It is a creditable composition; nothing beyond this. And, in so saying, we shall startle none but the brainless, and the adopters of ready-made ideas" (228). This is hardly complimentary to Sedgwick or Irving, let alone Southey.

As far as the early death of such poets went, Poe uses the organic metaphor that Southey himself had used to describe developing talent:

The analogies of Nature are universal; and just as the most rapidly growing herbage is the most speedy in its decay, -just as the ephemera struggles to perfection in a day only to perish in that day's decline, -so the mind is early matured only to be early in its decadence; and when we behold in the eye of infancy the soul of the adult, it is but indulging in a day dream to hope for any farther proportionate development. Should the prodigy survive to a ripe old age, a mental imbecility, not far removed from idiocy itself, is too frequently the result. ("Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria

Davidson" 223)

Southey's trumpetings about genius thwarted become in Poe's hands false expectations that would have been dashed had these delicate plants of too-rapid growth survived. Poe's agenda is the beauty of female consumptive death as the object of and inspiration for male poetry, not female genius itself. His analyses of these female poets reflect the discourse of male genius and inspiration, giving the Davidsons' poetic reputations a severe mid-century dent in the process. His appreciation of their biographies was possible because they conformed to his pure ideal of female domesticity and maternal affection; their poetry was in many ways beside the point.

Poe took the transatlantic worship of a feminised discourse of consumptive femininity and attacked it in order to assert a masculinised and Americanised brand of literary criticism. The literary industry that consumed consumption through the life rather than the art of the author needed to be corrected and a more modern- and ultimately modernist-brand of criticism imposed. It is one of those ironies of literature that Poe himself constituted his art via his own experiences of consumption in the lives of the women closest to him. Obsessed with the disease himself, he nevertheless used some of its most famous sufferers in the persons of the Davidson sisters to make literary criticism healthier through his own philosophy of composition.

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[Footnote]

NOTES

1 For the influence of Davidson farther afield, see Patrick H. Vincent, "Lucretia Davidson in Europe: Female Elegy, Literary Transmission and the Figure of the Romantic Poetess."

2 see Lawlor and Suzuki's "The Disease of the Self: Representations of Consumption 1700-1830" for more on the marketing of diseased poets.

3 see Lawlor and Suzuki, "Disease of the Self."

4 The anecdote from Keats's friend Brown is described in Bate 635-36.

5 see Pat Jalland, *Death in the Victorian Family*; see also Katherine Ott, *Fevered Lives* 14-15.

6 In Lawlor and Suzuki, "Disease of the Self."

7 see also Lawlor and Suzuki's anthology *Sciences of Body and Mind* for more on ideas of nervous refinement going into the nineteenth century.

8 Poe, "Biography and Poetical Remains of the Late Margaret Miller Davidson. By Washington Irving." All future references will be to Poe's combined review with the "Poetical Remains of the Late Lucretia Maria Davidson," also originally in *Graham's Magazine*. The combined review was retitled "Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson" and is collected in *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 3 (1850).

9 For a discussion of these discourses at play in Irving's biography, see Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* 75-78.

10 For the aesthetics of beautiful female death, see Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*.

11 White intended to send a letter to the *Nottingham Journal* in which he bemoaned consumption's deathly presence in that city: the unfinished missive is reproduced in Charles Vernon Fletcher's thesis, "The Poems and Letters of Henry Kirke White: A Modern Edition" 2: 364.

12 Quotations from Davidson's poetry will refer to the later, revised edition of *Poetical Remains of the Late Lucretia Maria Davidson, Collected and Arranged by Her Mother: With a Biography by Miss [C.M.] Sedgwick*.

13 see also Banks 255.

14 see also page 102: "her views of the divine character and attributes had ever been of that elevated cast, which, while they raised her mind above all grosser things, sublimated and purified her feelings and desires, and prepared her for that bright and holy communion, without which she could enjoy nothing."

15 This extract is also reproduced in Lawlor and Suzuki's anthology, *Sciences of Body and Mind*.

16 References will be to the revised edition, *Poetical Remains of the Late Lucretia Maria Davidson, Collected and Arranged by Her Mother: With a Biography by Miss [CM.] Sedgwick*.

17 Although, surprisingly, the new *Romanticism* volume of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* manages to avoid indexing "biographical criticism."

18 "The Pride of the Village" in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* is reprinted in *The Works of Washington Irving*, vol. 2 (1876), 239-46.

19 Reprinted in "Margaret Miller and Lucretia Maria Davidson" 224.

20 Foe's review of *The Doctor* appeared in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, July 1836.

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