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psychiatry in literature

Dermatitis artefacta (factitia) – a mystery in 17th-century Deptford – ‘I thought worth the notice’

Greg Wilkinson 

John Evelyn FRS (1620–1706), illustrious diarist, begins his memoirs with an account of his birth and continues until his death, documenting life, people, travel, culture, politics and events, in the most extensive historical record of the period. Evelyn encounters incidentally a classic example of *dermatitis artefacta*: deliberately produced skin lesions, hidden or denied, often in linear or bizarre patterns.

‘5th August, 1670. There was sent me by a neighbour a servant maid, who, in the last moneth, as she was sitting before her mistresse at work, felt a stroke on her arme a little above the wrist for some height, the smart of which, as if had ben strock with another hand, caus’d her to hold her arme a while ‘til somewhat mitigated; but so it put her into a kind of convulsion fit, or rather Hysterick. A gentleman coming casuall in, looking on her arme, found that part poudred with red crosses, set in most exact & wonderfull order

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      X
    X   X
  X   X   X
    X   X
      X
  
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neither swelled up nor depressed, about this shape and bignesse neither seeming to be any ways made by artifice; of a reddish colour, not so red as blood, the skin over them smooth, but the rest of the arme livid & of a mortified hue, with certaine prints as it were of the stroke as of fingers: This had hapned three severall times in *July* at about 10 days intervall, the Crosses beginning to ware out, but the successive ones set in other different (yet uniforme) order: The Maid seem’d very modest, no *Phanatic*, but well disposed to the Church established: she was borne northward and came from *Lond*: to *Deptford* with her *Mistris* to avoid the discourses & importunity of curious people; made no gaine by it, pretended no religious fancies, had never any commerce with the *Popish* Priests &c but seemed to be a plaine, ordinary, silent working wench, somewhat fat, short, & high colourd: she told me divers *Divines* & Physicians had seene her, but were unsatisfied; That she had taken some remedies against her fits, but did her no good; that she never had any fits ‘til this happn’d; but that she once since seem’d in her sleepe, to heare one say to her, that she should tamper no more with them, nor trouble herselfe with anything that happn’d, but put her trust in y^e Merits of *Christ* onely: This being the substance of what she told me, & of what I saw & curiously examin’d.’

Evelyn contrasts the stigmata of the ‘impostorious nuns of Loudune’ because:

‘this poor wench was willing to submit to any trial; so that I profess I know not what to think of it, nor dare I pronounce it any thing supernaturall.’

Mysterium solvitur?

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