

James S. Olson. *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer and History.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. x + 302 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6936-5.



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Cancer, Culture, and Science

James S. Olson's *Bathsheba's Breast: Women, Cancer and History* is a well-written, accessible account of the history of breast cancer from ancient times to today. Olson's motives for writing the text were personal and professional. On a personal level, he saw the book as a way to deal with his own battle against cancer and the subsequent loss of his left hand and forearm to the disease. On the professional level the availability of rich sources, the drama of gender dynamics between female patients and male physicians, and the controversies and contradictions that characterized therapies and theories also intrigued and inspired Olson. Utilizing women's voices across the centuries as well as a variety of primary sources, Olson does a fine job relating breast cancer to ideological, cultural, and technological transformations over time.

Olson's ability to give voice to women who suffered from breast cancer is praiseworthy. Scholars of women's history readily acknowledge the difficulties they experience when trying to find female subjects in the past. Women's

marginality and their marriage names have hidden women from the probing eyes of historians. In each chapter, Olson effectively overcomes these obstacles by presenting the experiences of a woman in order to elucidate a particular topic.

For instance, Olson incorporates the outspoken words of former child star and breast cancer survivor Shirley Temple Black to demonstrate how breast cancer became a disease that could be publicly acknowledged and discussed in the 1970s. Olson limits the voices of women to females of high stature and status; in other words, he writes the history of breast cancer from the perspective of "great women." In his preface, he recognizes, "Prominent women who endured the disease left behind a rich paper trail" (p. ix). His tendency to emphasize exceptional women is revealed most clearly when discussing the history of radical surgical operations and the women who submitted to these procedures: "They are a nameless sorority of several hundred women today, forgotten by all but their families, their illnesses buried in microfilmed case reports filed systemat-

ically within the medical records section of the world's greatest hospitals" (p. 84).

Olson hints at the treasury of evidence available, via oral interviews and microfilm, but does not dig further to uncover it.

Olson's skillful incorporation of primary source evidence is most apparent in the later chapters of his text. He analyzes and presents current medical evidence in the battle against breast cancer. His research into and critical analysis of the amazing diversity of opinions is commendable.

Olson's excellent historical sleuthing in the second half of his book makes the reader wish that he had depended more fully on primary source evidence in the text's initial chapters. Furthermore, Olson limits his reader to written sources; the book's cover and its title are, of course, notable exceptions. The striking visual sources that document the history of breast cancer would have been powerful additions to Olson's book.

The most outstanding characteristic of Olson's work is his skill in identifying the relationships among breast cancer, technology, culture, ideology, and science. For instance, Olson shows how surgical innovations in the nineteenth century led to an increased emphasis on surgical treatment of breast cancer. The ability to prevent infection, the use of anesthesia, and the capacity to differentiate between benign and malignant tumors aided William Stewart Halsted in promoting radical mastectomy as a fundamental technique for dealing with breast cancer. Furthermore, Olson, delving into the cultural history of nineteenth-century America, describes how the emphasis on surgery depended on gender dynamics between female patients and male practitioners. Science and culture dictated therapy, or, as Olson states, "Women with breast cancer became scientific objects as well as patients, subject to the whims of male physicians afflicted with gender biases and scientific detachment" (p. 64).

Olson simultaneously presents a history of breast cancer, culture, and science. His multi-layered analysis of the history of breast cancer is most striking when he demonstrates the differing attitudes toward therapy that American and European medical practitioners hold; and how the development of medicine in different areas of the globe affects the way breast cancer is treated.

Olson clearly articulates how important context is to an understanding of this disease. Yet he falls into a trap that is common to the history of medicine—he defines and discusses scientific and medical techniques and theories of the past from the perspective of modern medicine. For instance, the chapter that analyzes the history of breast cancer in the ancient, medieval and early modern periods is titled "Dark Ages." His dismissal of practitioners of alternative therapies as "quacks" and his failure to explore the remedies employed by female healers, who served as the primary medical caregivers of women prior to the rise of professional medicine, are, likewise, regrettable.

Overall, Olson's book is a satisfying examination of the history of breast cancer. It would be a welcome addition to a course dedicated to the history of medicine, the history of women in medicine, or gender history.

Students of the history of medicine will benefit from his survey of the history of science and medicine as well as his in-depth investigation of the history of breast cancer.

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