Female Complaints: Disease Circulation, Advertising, and the Female Body in Late-Nineteenth Century Women’s Magazines

I am interested in examining the circulation of both syphilitic rhetoric and print culture within and surrounding Ella Hepworth Dixon’s 1894 novel *Story of a Modern Woman*. The novel both literally and metaphorically sexualizes the transmission of disease, implying syphilis under cover of tuberculosis. However, concerns about female health and illness cannot be delimited to this dyad. Rather, the novel uses the symptoms, etiology, and circulation of syphilis as a metaphor to highlight a larger cultural anxiety about the process—and limits—of female disease circulation. Some diseases are imagined as transmitted between women in a quasi-sexual manner triangulated through a healthy male, while other ailments, such as the narrator Mary’s wide-ranging food aversions and “very feminine backaches” (98) circulate within a single body over time, biological but not bacteriological. In this, Mary’s indispositions are circulated socially, deepening the connection between the circulation of sexualized illness and print. How, then, is the suffering female body positioned in the novel? How are female complaints, both circulating and non-circulating, categorized and over-determined through the rhetoric of syphilis? How do the characters themselves conceive of their bodies and those bodies’ ailments within a larger cultural milieu anxious about both sexually and socially transmitted diseases? How are physical ailments transmitted or expressed, and what is the relationship between that expression and printed expression, particularly in periodical culture?

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