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Sophia C. Jochem, "Jochem on Newby": 58-59

Diana Rose Newby, 'Race, Vitalism, and the Contingency of Contagion in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man.' ELH* 89.3 (2022): 689-718.

Introducing the compelling nineteenth-century idea of contingent contagion, Diana Rose Newby suggests that Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* may considerably enrich the lively conversation about literature and science that the better-loved *Frankenstein* continues to inspire. Newby shows how the epidemiological slipperiness that previous critics have lamented in *The Last Man* may productively reflect on the lively debate over the nature of infectious diseases in the first half of the nineteenth century. Specifically, she argues that the novel's pandemic follows the pattern of contingent contagionist ideas, which combined elements of contagionism with anti-contagionist models of disease, in particular miasma theory.

Contingent contagionists believed that infectious diseases were transmitted by means of physical contamination, but only to an extent—successful contagion being affected by environmental factors of some kind, including, but not limited to, "climate, seasons, and other atmospherical or terrestrial influences" (Johnson cited in Newby, 695). The article leaves its readers thirsting for a more extensive and detailed exploration of contingent contagionism and its controversies here—all of Newby's historical sources have passed through the hands of James Johnson of *The Medico-Chirurgical Review*. But Newby's interest lies with how the contagionist strand of Shelley's contingent contagionism puts pressure on the more familiar vitalist ethics offered in *The Last Man*. In her reading of Shelley's Adrian, Newby sees the philosophical vitalism associated with the Romantics thrown into crisis by infectious disease: "Adrian literally embodies Spinozist sympathy," she observes: "sensitive to the point of extreme fragility, he experiences frequent bouts of illness that result from his vulnerable affections" (702). The Romantic idea that human life exists in a material entanglement with *all* life, "and that such contingency was something to be actively cultivated and celebrated," as Newby puts it, is deeply troubled in *The Last Man* by a sense that inherent in the pursuit of attachment is a risk of infection (691). Pandemic thus emerges as the much less pleasant flip-side of interconnection, signalling an "intense ambivalence" toward vitalism that sets Shelley apart from the (other) Romantics' Spinozism for Newby.

What exactly does race have to do with this? Regrettably, Newby's well-intentioned attempt to take *The Last Man*'s racialising strategies into account does not go far enough to answer this question. Newby's argument does not centre race and/or racial theories in the way the article's title leads one to expect. In fact, it is difficult to shake off the impression that race has slipped in as somewhat of an afterthought, especially as it comes to rival Newby's argument about contingent contagionism: is the unstoppable spread of infectious disease the nemesis of an unambivalent vitalist ethics of connection in *The Last Man*, or is the "latent but nonetheless destructive conviction that some [i. e., white] forms of human life are in fact more precious than others" (709)? The idea of contingent contagionism that this article introduces is intriguing and potentially disruptive and will, I would hope, generate a good amount of exciting new research. It is a shame that race is not considered as a concept of (popular) science also. The paradigms of environmental medicine that still "impacted theories and treatments of disease" in the 1820s (690), equally, and by no means unrelatedly, impacted theories

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and treatments of racial difference—a conceptual affinity rendering it likely that detailed analyses of these two sets of ideas would productively inform each other.

More importantly, a thorough engagement with racial thinking of the time may have steered this article away from some of its more problematic suggestions about Shelley's novel. It is the framing that is off here: Newby's presentist approach demonstrates successfully that *The Last Man* can serve as a powerful catalyst for continued thinking about pandemic and what it might tell us about the politics of how human beings live and die. What can be done with this text today, however, becomes dangerously tangled with its nineteenth-century politics in the altogether different language of "prescience" (passim). Arguing that "the infection scene," in which Shelley's narrator catches the plague from a dying Black man whom he violently pushes away, "also communicates a latent anxiety about the white British subject as himself monstrous, as inhabiting a body that propagates harm to others, particularly in and as the effort to radically differentiate others from the self" (711), Newby ascribes an anti-racist slant to Shelley's novel that is—without a careful analysis of how exactly this "latent anxiety" can coexist with the much less open-to-interpretation "racism on the page" (711)—not only improbable but in fact unhelpful in the ongoing project of cultivating a critically responsible engagement with race in nineteenth-century British literature.

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