

Vulnerable Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Vulnerability in Nineteenth-Century History, Literature, and Culture

*Edited Volume
Call for Contributions*

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The concept of *vulnerability* is fundamental to understanding human experience. It manifests in various forms, from the physical fragility of the body to the emotional and social dimensions of nursing and caregiving, institutionalization, and medical ethics. In nineteenth-century Europe, questions of vulnerability became central to both public debate and everyday life. In this period, the body's potential for mental and physical fragility lay at the heart of debates about public health and social reform. Industrial accidents, epidemic outbreaks, and the expansion of hospitals, asylums, and workhouses confronted individuals and communities with new forms of exposure, dependence, and questions of contagion. As Chung-Jen Chen notes: "In Victorian England, contagion—the common awareness of shared vulnerability, the shared experience of suffering and of being cured, the feeling that the nation was under attack in a way which necessitated a collective national response—helped to forge an imagined community" (130). At the same time, literary and cultural texts reflected, documented, shaped and aestheticized ideas of fragility, illness, and care, negotiating between discourses of protection, discipline, and autonomy. Novelists and dramatists such as Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Georg Büchner, and Theodor Fontane mirrored these themes in their writings, depicting how vulnerability was entangled with class, gender, morality, and social change (Chen 107–108, 173; Kennedy 2013).

In Britain, the emergence of industrial medicine and the Poor Law reforms, most notably the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), exposed working-class populations to new regimes of medical inspection, while also highlighting their precarious access to care. Debates over the conditions of factory workers, cholera outbreaks in urban centres, and the establishment of workhouses brought the vulnerability of people and their bodies into sharp political focus. In Germany, the first steps toward the professionalization of nursing and the rise of large psychiatric asylums and hospitals drew attention to the fragile boundaries between care, discipline, and control (Messner 2017, Wolff and Wolff 2011, Panke-Kochinke 2020). Public health campaigns focused on the 'sanitary awakening' of the public and were shaped by figures such as Edwin Chadwick, John Snow, and Robert Virchow, who sought to improve societal health through clean water, waste removal, and vaccinations. Responses to typhus and tuberculosis epidemics further highlighted how states, institutions, and medical authorities defined and managed vulnerable populations. These examples reveal how vulnerability was embedded in society, shaping political, cultural, and healthcare-related questions through complex interactions. Simultaneously, modern medicine "rested upon the figure of the vulnerable and unstable subject on the one hand and the medical, administrative, and political expert systems taking care of mitigating the impact of unstable political and social constellations on the other" (Dickson et al. 46), creating new forms of doctor-patient dependence in which

knowledge – and its absence – actively shaped both concepts of vulnerability and the production of vulnerable bodies.

By analyzing narratives of illness, health, disability, and nursing, this edited volume seeks to illuminate the ways in which medical and nursing knowledge, power structures, and social hierarchies shaped experiences of vulnerability in British and German nineteenth-century literary and cultural contexts. Special attention will be given to how vulnerability was constructed, represented, and managed historically as well as to intersectional factors—such as class, gender, race, and disability—and their influence on healthcare access and patient autonomy. Furthermore, we are particularly interested in how literature, cultural memory, and historical narratives both reflected and challenged the dominant frameworks of nineteenth-century vulnerability. Through an intersectional and interdisciplinary lens, the aim is to underscore vulnerability as both a historical construct and a lived reality—one that profoundly influenced patient care, medical authority, and cultural representations of health, while also leaving traces in current debates on healthcare, disability rights, and medical ethics.

We invite contributions from scholars at all career stages – encouraging especially early-career scholars – working in fields including literature and cultural studies, (medical) history, medical humanities, nursing studies, sociology, art history, media studies, ageing and disability studies, cultural anthropology, and related disciplines. Papers may focus on any (inter-)disciplinary perspective and engage with any medium. Possible topics include, but are not limited to, the following:

- medical epistemologies and power: how knowledge (or its absence) shaped vulnerability/the creation and exploitation of vulnerable bodies
- medical ethics and authority: patient autonomy and doctor-patient relationship in nineteenth-century practice and discourse
- the politics of vulnerability in healthcare, social reform, and cultural debates
- the professionalization of nursing and care work
- public health: epidemics, pandemics, contagion and the management of illness and disease in nineteenth-century Britain and Germany
- vulnerability, class, and industrial labour (child labour, miners' health, factory legislation)
- institutions of care: asylums, hospitals, convalescent homes, and poorhouses as sites of vulnerability
- literary and cultural representations: nursing and therapy in British and German literature; resistance to medical power structures, patient voices and representations of suffering, healing, and care
- illness, disability, aging, trauma, end-of-life care, and childhood vulnerability in medical institutions and nursing environments
- stages of life and bodily vulnerability: childhood, aging, poverty, disability and mental health
- the medical gaze: perceptions of the vulnerable body in medicine, literature, and (popular) culture

- gendered bodies and medical authority: obstetrics, hysteria, maternal mortality, and motherhood
- genre and representation: the influence of genre on representations of vulnerability (letters, biographies, medical writing, realist novel, poetry, satire, sentimental fiction, periodicals, art)
- intersectional dimensions of vulnerability (gender, sexuality, race, class, age, etc.)
- emotional dimensions of vulnerability in nineteenth-century healthcare work
- colonial medicine: exploitation, ideology, and resistance; nursing in colonial and missionary medicine
- imposition of Western medical frameworks on colonized populations; erasure of non-Western healing methods

Submission Guidelines

Please submit chapter proposals of up to 500 words, together with a brief chapter outline and a short bio of up to 200 words, as a single .docx or .pdf file to both editors, Miriam Läßle (Department of Nursing Science, mlaepfle@uni-koblenz.de) and Sarah Schäfer-Althaus (Department of English and American Studies, salthaus@uni-koblenz.de), by **11 January 2026**.

The notification of abstract acceptance will be sent out in February 2026. Full-length articles (7,500 words, including references) are due by 30 September 2026 (tentative), with publication expected in 2028.

References

- Chen, Chung-Jen. *Victorian Contagion. Risk and Social Control in The Victorian Literary Imagination*. Routledge, 2020.
- Dickson, Melissa, Taylor-Brown, Emilie, and Sally Shuttleworth. *Progress and Pathology. Medicine and Culture in the Nineteenth Century*. Manchester UP, 2020.
- Kennedy, Meegan. "The Victorian Novel and Medicine." *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, edited by Lisa Rodensky, Oxford UP, 2013, pp. 459-482.
- Messner, Irene. *Geschichte der Pflege*. facultas, 2017.
- Panke-Kochinke, Birgit. *Die Geschichte der Krankenpflege (1679–2000): Ein Quellenbuch*. Mabuse-Verlag, 2020.
- Wolff, Horst-Peter, and Wolff, Jutta. *Krankenpflege: Einführung in das Studium ihrer Geschichte*. Mabuse-Verlag, 2011.