

SOLITUDE AND [DIS]ORDER/ ANNE VILA

Centre for Studies in the Long Eighteenth Century

Solitude and [Dis]order: Perspectives from 18th-Century French Literature and Medicine

Anne Vila, University of Wisconsin

Wednesday 31 May, 4pm
DLT3, University of Kent, Canterbury

"Solitude is the infirmary of the mind": so declared the French Benedictine monk François Lamy in his influential work *De la connaissance de soi-même* (1694). The therapeutic mental benefits of solitude continued to be championed by many authors (both religious and secular) in eighteenth-century France. However, solitude was also increasingly tied to mental **disorder**, for reasons that included the widespread emphasis on sociability and social engagement, alarm over self-secluding pathologies like masturbation and overstudy, and suspicion towards claustral institutions like the convent. The psycho-physical ailments imputed to solitude extended well beyond the well-studied 'disease' of onanism: they included hypochondriasis in *gens de lettres* and religious melancholy in the fanatically devout.

After considering the topos of studious and non-studious retreat in selected literary works of the French Enlightenment (by Voltaire, Graffigny, Diderot, and Rousseau), I will examine how solitude was medicalized--a development tied to the growing importance of the passions as an area of hygiene and disease theory. This part of my talk will focus on the writings of the Francophone Swiss physician Samuel-Auguste Tissot, an influential medical writer who acted as the main conduit for the dissemination in French of the ideas of Dr. Johann-Georg Zimmermann, the Enlightenment's most famous theoretician of the benefits and dangers of solitude for the psyche. Reading Tissot in tandem with Zimmermann, I will analyze the curious analogies they proposed between two pathologically contemplative types: the overly zealous scholar and the cloistered nun.