

## REBECCA HARDING DAVIS AND MEDICINE

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In 1848 when Rebecca Harding attended the Washington (PA) Female Seminary, she came under the notice of one of its most famous Trustees, the abolitionist and physician Dr. F. Julius Le Moyne. Invited often to the Le Moyne house, which included the doctor's pharmacy in a front room, Rebecca was allowed to wander through the room and study the various bottles of pharmaceuticals. This early experience aided her lifelong interest in physicians and medicine.

Beginning with the appearance of Dr. May in "Life in the Iron-Mills" (1861) and throughout her entire career, Davis used physicians as a staple of her literature and engaged contemporary medical debates of her era. Dozens of short stories and novels include characters who are physicians or offer insights into medical debates of the period. During the Civil War, physicians such as the title character in "Paul Blecker" conveyed the horrors of war and the travails of treating the wounded on the battlefields. In her stories for *Peterson's Magazine* that follow the cases of lawyer John Page, numerous plantation physicians populate the Virginia plantation societies. Other works such as "The Barred Acres—A Doctor's Story" (1871) and many others include physicians as narrators and as main characters, most notably *Doctor Warrick's Daughters* (1896). Davis was among the early authors of the nineteenth century to explore the role of the woman physician in society in such works as "Berrytown" (published in book form as *Kitty's Choice*, 1874) and "A Day with Doctor Sarah" (1878).

In her writings as an author and journalist, Davis explored medical issues from the rise of "American nervousness" as defined by Dr. George Beard in the late 1860s, to the physician's role in fighting alcoholism when she convinced Ticknor & Fields to publish an American edition of Dr. Charles Elam's *A Physician's Problem* (1869), and to the practice among disreputable physicians of institutionalizing a supposedly insane person without even examining the patient ("Put Out of the Way," 1870). Davis was acquainted with many of the nation's most famous

physicians from S. Weir Mitchell, who prescribed a modified rest cure for Davis when she was in her mid-thirties, to Sir William Osler, a family friend who attended her daughter's wedding in England the year after Davis's death.

Davis penned one of the first US novels to include an African American physician as the protagonist, *Waiting for the Verdict* (1868). While many of her stories lauded the care and community leadership of physicians, she also included physicians in gothic stories such as "The Solmes' Ghost" (1864) and she challenged contemporary interest in medically rooted practices such as mesmerism in the short story "Mesmerism vs. Common Sense" (1881). It is impossible to study Davis's body of work without recognizing the importance of medicine to her way of thinking about US culture and to understand the impact she had on medical debates of the day.