

## Book Reviews

argument is seriously qualified by assumptions and concerns that no longer carry an automatic conviction. This is the rub.

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DANIELLE JACQUART and CLAUDE THOMASSET, *Sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson, Oxford, Polity Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. vii, 242, illus., £27.50.

To write adequately on the history of sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages is far from easy. Many of the texts on which such a history can be based survive only in manuscript or in outdated editions, and a considerable knowledge of a variety of languages and dialects is needed to read the texts, let alone interpret them to a modern audience. The combination of a professor of linguistics and a historian of medicine thus offers a neat way out of this primary difficulty. The authors introduce us to writers in Latin, Old French, German, and Spanish, and are equally at home in discussing Isidore's etymologies as in explicating complicated and almost unintelligible technical terms derived from oriental languages. Their English translator is equally competent, although something seems to have gone wrong on p. 135, and some of the sexual advice is still left in the obscurity of a semi-learned language (p. 224).

The authors take us from the anatomy of the body, as described in words and later in anatomies, through physiology, to sexual practices, both licit and illicit, and finally to the wages of sin, hysterical malady, sexual diseases, and the deadly encounter with the venomous, but beautiful maiden. They discuss courtly love (which they argue was far from the spiritual purity beloved of the Victorians, but culminated in coitus interruptus) as well as contraception and abortion ("what everyone knew about . . ."), and intercourse for pleasure as well as procreation. They also endeavour to trace the effects on medical learning of successive tranches of material translated from the Greek (but the table, p. 22, is wrongly titled and Niccolò did not translate from the Arabic). They call on the advice of penitentials as well as that of pharmacopoeias, of popular legend as well as of learned treatise. In short, this is an excellent guide to the written sources on the history of sexuality in the Middle Ages.

This literary bias is both its strength and its weakness. Far too often, one has the impression of a learned debate far removed from life, of a bloodless pursuit of literary chimeras, in sharp contrast to more recent studies of sexuality in other periods, e.g. Camporesi's *I balsami di Venere*. The survey of anatomy says much about texts, but little about the formal procedures for obtaining female corpses or the regulations for students to observe such dissections in fifteenth-century Italy. The medical authors cited move almost in a historical and cultural vacuum (on p. 24, the chronological relationship between [Moschion] and his source Soranus is reversed). English readers will look in vain for some of Chaucer's ribaldries, or for any detailed discussion of the evidence of art and of its value to the historian.

Within its limits, however, this is a valuable guide, and many non-medievalists will be grateful to the authors for the way in which they lead them elegantly through the thickets of theological and philosophical speculation, or lucidly expound the differences between the Aristotelians and Galenists on the topic of the female sperm. They have made a very sound beginning, and subsequent historians will be able to rely confidently on their editorial labours.

Vivian Nutton, Wellcome Institute

DAVID B. RUDERMAN, *Kabbalah, magic, and science: the cultural universe of a sixteenth-century Jewish physician*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. viii, 232, £23.95.

This book centres on the life and ideas of the late Renaissance Jewish scholar and physician Abraham Yagel (1553–c.1623). To place the subject in perspective, the author begins with an interesting biographical chapter in which the life of Yagel and his financial problems offset by his Cabalistic and scientific pursuits are viewed against the declining political and economic fortune of Italian Jewry in the late sixteenth century.

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Various cases of treatment recorded by Yagel demonstrate his synthesis of medicine with astrology and Judaism. The contemporary view of demonology in relation to disease is shown to include rabbinic and Cabalistic ideas. The author shows how Yagel's study of nature reaffirmed his belief in the unity of God and discusses his attitude towards prodigies of nature, contemporary scientific discovery, and various forms of magic. The interchange between Christian and Jewish thinkers at the time and the universality of all learning, a theme common to much of Yagel's writings, are cogently described. Yagel's familiarity with contemporary thinking and his use of rabbinic thought to harmonize unorthodox practice with religious doctrine illustrate the distinctive capacity of Jewish thought to adapt to current thinking while retaining continuity with its roots.

In the final two chapters, Yagel's views on metempsychosis are discussed. His wide-ranging knowledge of Christian and Jewish theology along with current scientific and philosophical thought led him to the conclusion that as life is not futile it must represent some form of purgatory. His understanding of Cabala is described as a rational science adaptable to the language of academic discourse, but at the same time Yagel claimed that only the Cabalist can fully comprehend the mysteries of creation.

The author brings us into the world of intellectual Judaism at a transitional period in European thought and demonstrates how Judaism could adapt to those ideas yet retain its identity and at the same time attempt to command respect within the larger intellectual community as a whole. This is an admirable introduction, both readable and erudite, to a very large and complex subject.

Nigel Allan, Wellcome Institute

UDO BENZENHÖFER, *Johannes' de Rupescissa 'Liber de consideratione quintae essentiae omnium rerum' deutsch: Studien zur Alchemia medica des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts mit kritischer Edition des Textes*, Heidelberger Studien zur Naturkunde der frühen Neuzeit 1, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1989, 8vo, pp. 213, DM 78.00.

The 'Book on considering the fifth essence of all things' was written around 1350 by the Franciscan monk Johannes de Rupescissa, Jean de Rocquetaillade, who was not a Catalan, as earlier supposed, but was born in the Auvergne. Because of his prophecies of the impending end of the world and coming of the Antichrist he spent much of his life on the run and in jail. Perhaps it is there that he found the time for his other writings, namely on medical alchemy. This was a method of supplementing the use of Galenic medicine by preparing remedies by means of combining distillation and dissolution in strong inorganic acids and using alchemical methods for preparing metal and mineral quintessences as well as plant distillates. The quintessence was originally the essence of the four elements. These four were in the cosmos and they were in man, and in the same way heaven was in the universe and it was in man. It was so in the healing substances and thus able to communicate with the heaven in man but it was covered by dense matter. That was why distillation and dissolution was necessary. Benzenhöfer rationalizes this in the light of modern knowledge by saying: "The basic purpose of the 'art of medical distillation' is to purify natural substances and to increase thereby their therapeutic effectiveness." Rupescissa retained the ancient humoralism but rejected the Galenic mixture of simples. The treatise became extremely popular because of its lucid and detailed descriptions of alchemical and pharmaco-chemical operations on specific substances to cure specific complaints. A great number of manuscripts has been preserved; it was translated into the vernacular several times over, and printed often, by itself and as part of other people's works. It influenced Brunswig and through him Ulstadius as well as Paracelsus.

Of the Early New High German text one manuscript in the Codex M II 180 in the Salzburg University Library has here been reproduced. There is a text-critical apparatus with variant readings and a commentary on linguistic peculiarities and historical and other facts. The apparatus and the commentary follow separately after the text, which makes reading it more cumbersome than if both were at the bottom of each page.

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