

## Book Reviews

even too difficult. Maclean fortunately recognizes this fact and intelligently advises us to read first Nancy Siraisi's *Medieval and early Renaissance medicine* (1990) to receive elementary lessons before venturing into this labyrinth of humanist doctors, the *Labyrinthus medicorum errantium* of Paracelsus' cynical book-title.

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**Margaret Healy, *Fictions of disease in early modern England: bodies, plagues and politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, pp. xii, 277, illus., £45.00 (0-333-96399-7).**

Margaret Healy's *Fictions of disease* explores the rich range of ways in which disease could be conceptualized and described in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, revealing how the ailing body could function as a contested site of political meaning. Drawing on a wide range of sources from the Reformation through the Civil War, Healy places metaphors about sick bodies within a network of competing beliefs and interests, relating shifting constructions of illness to politics, religion and gender. As Healy argues, the language of disease offered a powerful discourse through which political ideas were configured: metaphors surrounding sickness and corporeality were not only open to political appropriation, they were also a part of the framework in which ideas about the self and nation were constructed.

The book begins by establishing some of the ways in which early modern women and men thought about their bodies in sickness and in health. Healy outlines the main medical approaches to understanding disease in the early modern period, and suggests that from the mid-sixteenth century the discourse of religion and morality increasingly encroached upon the medical domain. The subsequent chapters divide into three sections, each exploring a different malady and its cultural and political meaning. The first of these investigates

representations of the bubonic plague, suggesting how Protestant reformers deployed the plague as a means of criticizing the way in which the malady was being managed in the capital. She reads William Bullein's *A dialogue against the fever pestilence* (1564) and Thomas Dekker's plague pamphlets as expounding radical Protestant ideology, and criticizing the tendency to scapegoat the impoverished poor as the contaminated source of disease. The second section, 'The pocky body', explores representations of syphilis and its association with prostitutes, foreigners, and original sin in the Renaissance imagination. Erasmus is shown to be a precursor to a number of dramatists who criticize the tendency to displace responsibility for the spread of syphilis onto the corrupt female body. Whereas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The honest whore* 1 and 2 (1604 and 1605) are re-examined as offering a powerful critique of misogynistic discourse, Shakespeare's *Measure for measure* and *Pericles* are interpreted as exploiting the fear and fascination generated by the pox to achieve a charged dramatic effect. The final section on "The gutted, unvented body" considers the ideological import of images of excess in pre-Civil War literature. Examining texts as diverse as Thomas Heywood's *The English traveller* (1626), Middleton's *A game of chess* (1624), John Ponet's *A shorte treatise of politicike power* (1556), and John Milton's *Comus* (1634), Healy demonstrates how the rhetoric of appetite is variously associated with the excessive importation of luxury goods, with the court as a site of decadent indulgence, and with the gormandizing hunger of courtiers themselves.

A central tenet of Healy's study is that the use of language relating to the body will frequently seem "natural" or "true", eliding its own constructiveness. In the era of AIDS, such an insight seems as relevant for us as for the early modern period, serving both as a timely reminder that the cultural configuration of illness exerts a powerful influence in shaping political realities, and as a warning that it is often those most vulnerable in society who are scapegoated as the source of a society's ills. *Fictions of disease*

## Book Reviews

contributes to our understanding of the complex interrelation between medical and literary discourses, elucidating why metaphors of the body were so central to early modern political thought. Healy imaginatively maps the moral, religious and political implications of the language of somatic experience in the early modern period.

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**Alexandra Barratt** (ed.), *The knowing of woman's kind in childing: a Middle English version of material derived from the Trotula and other sources*, Medieval Women: Text and Contexts, vol. 4, Turnhout, Brepols, 2001, pp. xii, 169, €55.00 (hardback 2-503-51073-6).

This book by Alexandra Barratt presents the edition of a Middle English treatise on gynaecology, written for a female audience, one of whose five surviving manuscripts is entitled *The knowing of woman's kind of childing*. It claims to have been translated from French and Latin texts, which derive ultimately from Greek. The editor demonstrates that the source of a large part of the treatise is an Old French translation of the *Liber de sinthomatibus mulierum*, one of the three texts which some time in the thirteenth century became part of the compendium of women's medicine known in Europe as *Trotula*, attributed to the female physician and writer, Trota of Salerno. Other sources are a Latin epitome of a text by Muscio known as *Non omnes quidem*, an Old French version of which could have existed, and some recipes taken from the *Genicia Cleopatrae ad Theodatam*, a Latin text attributed to Cleopatra. Barratt explains that there is at least one source that has not been identified, and argues that part of the work may be attributed to the translator's own contribution. The contents of the book fall into two parts. The first section, brief but comprehensive, is dedicated to the general introduction, the description of the manuscripts and the textual introduction. The second is devoted to the

edition, which is followed by a commentary and a useful glossary. In this section, Barratt decides, following an excellent criterion, to present on facing pages the edition of two manuscripts with different versions of the text, both of which, according to her, derive from a first Middle English translation now lost. This impressive editorial work is based not only upon the five surviving copies of the treatise, but also upon Old French and Latin manuscript copies of the known sources.

As a philologist, I have to confess that reading a work with these characteristics is a treat, given the superbly accomplished edition and the consistent textual study. All the same, the role of the linguist does not consist only in making texts available and readable for other scholars. Philological analysis also contributes to the understanding of the texts not as finished products, but as the individual products of historical individuals who write (translate, compile or copy) for a particular audience or attending to different necessities. And this is one of the achievements of Barratt's work. Her concern with the "transmission and reception, rather than the reconstruction of texts" (p. 32) contributes valuable information that facilitates the task of decoding and interpreting their historical meaning.

Nevertheless, although the analysis and description of the sources of the treatise have been done with great scholarship and accuracy, I wish some reference had been made to oral traditions. Experience and actual practice have been overlooked as the plausible origin of some of the recipes and procedures recorded in the treatise, even when it has been impossible to trace all of them. While it is certainly difficult to find evidence of the influence of actual practice in written texts, recent studies have indicated that some medieval texts on women's healthcare (and not only these) were partly influenced by local traditions. Perhaps it might be suggested that what has been called "the translator's own contribution" (p. 8) might be partly indebted to the experience and knowledge of others. And if this were the case, we cannot rule out the weight of women's experience since, as Barratt notes, "[females] are directly and intimately involved