

*Book Review*

**Vaught, Jennifer C., ed. *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. 246 pp. \$94.46.**



Readers who pick up the volume, *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England*, may well find themselves initially baffled and disappointed, but they will be amply rewarded if they persist in reading to the end. While the title is somewhat misleading, as medieval England is barely represented, and the essays of the “medieval” section are the weakest in the collection, the volume provides excellent insights and analysis applicable to early modern English studies in the subsequent three quarters of the text.

The stated aim of the collection is to examine “the vast extent to which rhetorics of bodily disease and health leave their imprint on medieval and early modern literature, religion, science, and medicine in England” (3). Unfortunately, in Part 1, “Reading the Instructive Language of the Body in the Middle Ages,” only one of the three essays included has any direct relation to the English Middle Ages. Lisi Oliver and Maria Mahoney’s contribution, “Episcopal Anatomies of the Early Middle Ages,” is an interesting comparative study of the metaphorical and typological uses of human anatomy, disease, and health in the writings of St. Ambrose and Hrabanus Maurus, but any connection that might be made between the writings of these ecclesiasts and medieval English history or literature is left entirely to the reader. In the second essay of Part 1, James C. Nohrnberg discusses the bodily manifestation of sin in the eighth circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, noting particularly the connection between dropsy, dehydration, and greed found in the suffering of Master Adam. Nohrnberg includes a few references that indicate at least some relevance of his analysis to English literature, briefly mentioning Milton in the text and

Gower, Donne, Shakespeare and Thomas Tymme in the notes. Still, the reader looking for analysis of the rhetorics of disease and health in an English context is unlikely to find the essay of any direct help. The third entry in Part 1, Laila Abdalla's "'My body to warente . . .': Linguistic Corporeality in Chaucer's Pardoner" offers the only direct correlation between rhetorics of the body and medieval English literature. Her analysis applies an Augustinian understanding of the body as sign and signifier of the health of the soul to the Pardoner's ambiguous body and duplicitous rhetoric. Abdalla's traditional but cogent argument regarding the Pardoner's body as Augustinian sign is, however, marred by her frequent references to the Pardoner as Hubert, an apparent conflation of this character with one of Chaucer's other deeply flawed churchmen, Friar Huberd.

Beginning with Part 2, "Imaginative Discourses of Sexuality, Delightful and Dangerous," where analyses of disease and health rhetorics of early modern England take center stage, the quality and content of the collection improve dramatically. Stephen Oram's "Spenser's Crowd of Cupids and the Language of Pleasure" and Emma L.E. Rees's "Cordelia's Can't: Rhetorics of Reticence and (Dis)ease in *King Lear*" address rhetorics of healthy and diseased sexuality in Spenser and Shakespeare. By comparing positive and negative images of sexuality from *The Faerie Queene* to the consummation stanza of *Epithalamion*, Oram aptly demonstrates Spenser's effort to walk the fine line of valorizing healthy and appropriate adult sexual love-making without engendering impure and unhealthy sexual fantasies in the mind of his reader. Rees focuses on early modern dis-ease with feminine potency demonstrated by rhetoric of the vagina. Exploring how the "'Nothing' which is a 'Something,' emblematic of the inversion of the patriarchal norm" is equated in *King Lear* with the "'sulphurous pit,'" Rees argues that Shakespeare pushes "misogynist ramifications to the limit" through Cordelia's silence and death (109, 115, 116). While both of these essays underscore early modern concerns with sexual purity, they demonstrate that early modern England was simultaneously in a state of great change and inextricably tied to its medieval past. Oram demonstrates the flux of the period by highlighting the cultural transition England was undergoing from its earlier Catholic veneration of virginity to the more Protestant valorization of married

chastity; Rees, however, demonstrates the persistence of misogynistic views of women found in writings from Jerome to Calvin.

Part 3 of the collection, "Bodily Metaphors of Disease and Science in Renaissance England," takes a historical turn with "Reckoning Death: Women Searchers and the Bills of Morality in Early Modern London," Richelle Munkhoff's fascinating reading of how the work of women who acted as "searchers" during England's plague years was both used in and erased from the Bills of Mortality. These women, usually old and poor, were employed to read bodies for physical signs of disease and to interpret causes of death. The use made of the interpretations of the female searchers by parish clerks provides evidence of both the power women had over the historical record and the ways this power was discounted or appropriated by the masculine hierarchy. Munkhoff addresses the importance of both traditional medical semiotics and the newer "scientific" practices of the Renaissance to the ways the work of the searchers was interpreted and accepted. In the next essay, "'Revolving this will teach thee how to curse': A Lesson in Sublunary Exhalation," Rebecca Totaro explores the evocation and implications of cursing in early modern England through its use in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI* plays and in *Richard III*. Using early modern meteorological theory alongside Galenic principals regarding balancing the heat of the body, Totaro demonstrates the early modern belief in a correlation between fiery eruptions of the sky that signaled social and political upheaval and the fiery eruptions of human emotion that produced effective cursing.

The connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm demonstrated by Totaro also dominates the argument of the first essay of Part 4, "The Power of Linguistic Infection and Cure in Early Modern Literature and Medicine." William Spates's "Shakespeare and the Irony of Early Modern Disease Metaphor and Metonymy" explores the early modern belief in indexical, or causal, connections between macrocosmic and microcosmic structures. Spates marks this connection in numerous illustrations from early modern drama, including Shakespearian examples along with instances from Jonson and others, but he focuses the majority of his argument on *Timon of Athens*, where Timon's disease of excessive generosity in the first half is countered by his disease of misanthropy in the second. Spates's argues that Timon's misanthropic rhetoric of disease is

intended as a sort of curse on the world but ironically reverses itself to take its effect on Timon, himself, and that, in this play at least, the “power of rhetoric and the capacity of humans to control both their fellows and the course of history” is called into question (170). The second essay of this section is Judith H. Anderson’s “Body of Death: The Pauline Inheritance in Donne’s Sermons, Spenser’s *Melger*, and Milton’s *Sin and Death*,” which examines the use of Paul’s lament from Romans 7:24: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” in early modern disease rhetoric equating the body and its afflictions with sin and death. Anderson’s excellent essay draws on Auerbach’s commentary on the figural nature of the Pauline text as well as Ricoeur and Lyotard’s theories of figuration and figures of speech. She notes that depending on the figural meaning desired, early modern writers and sermonists including Donne would sometimes move the demonstrative pronoun of the biblical quote so that it might read either “this body of death” or “the body of this death.” Although the sin that leads to death is a moral and spiritual ill, as Anderson notes, in either phrasing the body rhetorically bears sin’s consequences. Anderson argues that “interpretation of form and figure in fictive, or poetic, texts” demands that no “theological polemic” allow for a partial interpretation (180). Rather, she insists, a fully inclusive figural reading will reveal the paradoxical, yet inescapable, “*inextricability* of sin, death, and body” implied by the Pauline text and early modern authors’ deployment of it, using Spenser’s *Maleger* as a case in point (179). The final essay of the volume is Stephen Pender’s “Subventing Disease: Anger, Passions, and the Non-Naturals.” Pender explores the largely Galenic theories of the effects of passions, especially anger, on physical well-being as well as numerous medical texts giving advice on how to moderate and control one’s passions in order to maintain good health. He notes that early modern attention to control of the non-naturals “suggests an abiding concern with agency” and the human ability to govern disease and health through the operation of the will.

In spite of this book’s broadly inclusive title, scholars of medieval England will find little that is useful in this text. As I have already noted, only Abdalla directly addresses the English Middle Ages, and while her essay is generally solid, she fails to account for a great deal of important scholarship on the Pardoner and his body. Marshall Leicester’s *The*

*Disenchanted Self* and Tison Pugh's *Sexuality and Its Queer Discontents in Middle English Literature* are two important works that appear to have been overlooked. For scholars interested in the rhetorics of disease and health in early modern England, however, Vaught's book offers a great deal. Although some relevant scholarship seems to get short shrift—I found, for example, that Margaret Healy's *Fictions of Disease in Early Modern England: Bodies, Plagues, and Politics* is listed in the bibliography but was not important enough to any essay to make the index—most of the essays in Parts 2-4 are well-researched and nicely grounded in primary, secondary, and theoretical sources. The quality and quantity of both explanatory notes and citations given by Munkhoff, Totaro, Anderson, and Pender are excellent and promise to be exceedingly helpful to those scholars who wish to pursue their ideas further. At least for the early modern period, Vaught's text successfully achieves its goal of examining the variety and importance of rhetorics of disease and health in English literature and culture.

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