

Alisha Rankin. *Panacea's Daughters: Noblewomen as Healers in Early Modern Germany*.

Synthesis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013. xiv + 298 pp. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-226-92538-7.

Alisha Rankin has published an original and groundbreaking study of noblewomen's healing and pharmaceutical activities in early modern Germany. Rankin gives these elite women their due by enumerating and exploring their very concrete contributions to medicine and science. In so doing, she challenges those scholars who even today see women as marginal to this history. She expands upon the work of scholars — notably Monica Green, Susan Broomhall, and Katherine Park — who document “the key if sometimes hidden role women played in pre-modern medicine” (17). Rankin highlights three individual “princess-healers” who stood on the cusp of change, just before scientific societies became solely a gentleman's domain in the later seventeenth century.

By examining scores of documents from German archives, particularly the correspondence, recipe collections, and inventories of dozens of noblewomen practitioners, Rankin demonstrates that they were active participants in “the burgeoning exchange of medical knowledge” (71) taking place at the time. While the so-called prince-practitioners were involved in alchemy and practical applications of mathematics and astronomy, the women were involved in creating pharmacies and distilleries and making, testing, and distributing medicaments.

In the first of two parts of this volume, Rankin describes in some detail the recipes, books, methods, and other materials these gentlewomen exchanged by way of local and epistolary networks. She argues that such exchange networks “fostered an inclination toward empirical and experiential knowledge as a way of evaluating medical efficacy” (19). The written recipes — “the building blocks of gentlewomen's medical practice” (19) — served as a sort of currency for winning friendship and patronage and, at times, helped promote the women's role as lay healers at the court and among the general population.

In the second part of the volume, Rankin illustrates her thesis with case studies of three exemplary noblewomen — two of them legendary healers who investigated remedies and cures by taking advantage of their noble status and location at a court. Dorothea, Countess of Mansfield (1498–1578), was a widow with little means other than her title and great medical expertise. Her status as a vulnerable widow

and her extensive charitable work on behalf of the poor won her the support of wealthier patrons. With their help, she was able to keep a large garden and build a pharmacy and distillery, giving her the means to distribute her remedies widely. Dorothea was greatly renowned and sought after as a pious and expert healer and a mentor to a large network of noblewomen. Rankin insists on seeing the dialectical interplay between Dorothea's expertise, on one hand, and her piety and charitable works, on the other, although historians have tended to play up only one or the other of these traits.

Among Dorothea's patrons was Electress Anna of Saxony (1532–85), who provided her with money and ingredients for her remedies. Anna's social position, far more secure than Dorothea's, enabled her to pursue her healing work without the need to justify it by referencing its charitable dimension. She represented her work as skilled know-how, or "handiwork" (143), part of the "hands-on scientific inquiry" (130) typical of courtly experimentalism at the time. Indeed, her work paralleled that of her husband, who was engaged in alchemical experimentation. Anna also used her resources to build distilleries, an apothecary, and a garden. At the same time, her work was conducted within the framework of the good Lutheran mistress of the house. She accepted and fulfilled the traditional duties of the *Hausmutter*, endorsing the separation of the male and female spheres.

In the final case study, Rankin looks at the other side of the coin: What did a sick noblewoman do to heal herself? By examining the extensive correspondence and collection of recipes of Lutheran duchess Elisabeth of Rochlitz (1502–57), Rankin is able to describe the medical options available to her at the time. Elisabeth believes that her faith in God as the divine healer authorized her "to determine what course of action should be taken for each illness" (171). As manager of her own care, and regarding other healers as equally qualified beneath God, she chose to ignore the complicated regimens recommended by the learned physicians in favor of the more specific remedies provided by barbers, surgeons, apothecaries, and lay healers (noble or not); at times she drew from her own collection of remedies. Although Elisabeth does not quite fit the category of noblewoman healer, the inclusion of her experiences as a patient enliven the context in which we understand the healing practices of Dorothea and Anna. Dorothea and Anna operated within the parameters of the good woman as manager of the household, but each pushed the boundaries of her purview to include science and medicine.

Rankin's book is impressive and brings a plethora of new archival material to light. Her study strengthens and broadens our understanding of how elite women, in their traditional healing and caring roles, were able to contribute to the development of experimental science, pharmacology, and medicine. The book will be of special interest to scholars in early modern science and scientific culture, gender history, and the history of oral and written culture.

ALISON KLAIRMONT LINGO

University of California, Berkeley