

Michael Solomon. *Fictions of Well-Being: Sickly Readers and Vernacular Medical Writing in Late Medieval and Early Modern Spain*.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. xiv + 188 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$55. ISBN: 978-0-8122-4255-3.

This book consists of a ninety-seven-page monograph buttressed by thirty-one pages of notes. The author also includes a bibliographical guide on “Vernacular Medical Works 1305–1650” that includes the location and call numbers of

manuscripts and early printed editions, and bibliographical references to modern editions and facsimiles when applicable. The book concludes with a general bibliography, an index, and the author's acknowledgements.

The stereotypical image of medicinal practices in the premodern era is that of a barbaric community of quack doctors with little or no training who invariably did more harm than good to their unwitting victims. Solomon's book shows that in fact medieval physicians honed their skills in part by engaging in a complex written dialogue with their readers — be they fellow doctors or patients — in their common quest for cures and remedies, ultimately producing a vast corpus of vernacular medical treatises on every conceivable ailment. Solomon's "sickly readers" are the patients/readers who would at best discover successful cures for their conditions, or at the very least would hope to seek some solace for their pain, suffering and misery in the pages of the medical treatises at their disposal.

As Solomon observes, in their treatises the medieval and early modern physicians pandered to their patients' potential for wellbeing. He does cite examples of anecdotes about malpractice and incompetence that could well have inspired fear, but as a general rule Solomon shows that the physicians focused a lot more on best-case than worst-case scenarios, and they certainly strove to write in a style that would appeal as much to lay readers as to fellow specialists. With the overarching aim of proclaiming the utilitarian value of their treatises, a plethora of sources or academic credentials would often be listed or discussed as a means of underscoring each writer's own solid background, depth of knowledge, and competence. Furthermore, as a means of promoting transparency some treatises also included diagrams of surgical instruments, thereby familiarizing the reader with the tools of the trade with which the practising doctors themselves would be expected to be familiar (see figure 1, for example). Solomon argues persuasively that the overall effect of these treatises was to provide a positive "quasi-clinical encounter between physician-author and patient-reader" (41). So in a sense the early modern sickly reader was better off than his or her modern counterpart for whom even a cursory glance at the Internet is guaranteed to reveal the most serious iterations of every medical condition imaginable, often without a remedy in sight, and always with an abundance of shocking images in glorious color of real human bodies in disarray.

In writing this book Michael Solomon does something that I find commendable. One of his aims, he says, is to reach the widest public possible (xiii). He thus takes a leaf out of the vernacular medical treatises under discussion by translating all quotations into English, with the original language provided in the footnotes. From a stylistic point of view this strategy makes the book flow well. On the downside I found the number of typographical errors in this book distracting. I list them here in hopes that they will be corrected if the book is republished in paperback or goes through a second edition: "ascertain" (12) should read "ascertain"; "*anathoĩa*" (29) should read "*anathomiã*"; "waiting rip" (31) should read "waiting to rip"; "the thus the" (39) should read "thus the"; "Monades's" (39) should read "Monardes's"; "with out" (87) should read "without"; "limp nodes" (93) should read "lymph nodes."

Not forgetting the specialist reader, Solomon's bibliographical guide on "Vernacular Medical Works 1305–1650" is of inestimable value and provides the necessary tools for further study of the medical literature of the early modern period. I note just a few omissions. The following modern edition is omitted under the entry on Lanfranco de Milan (148): Enrica J. Ardemagni, ed. *Text and Concordance of Biblioteca Nacional MS 2147. 'Compendio de cirugia' by Guido Lanfranc of Milan*. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1988. Similarly, the anonymous *Arte complida de cirugia* (Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional MS 2165) is not referenced. This work is also available in a modern edition: Enrica J. Ardemagni and Cynthia M. Wasick, eds., *Text and Concordance of Biblioteca Nacional MS 2165. 'Arte complida de cirugia'*. Madison: Hispanic Seminary of Medieval Studies, 1988.

To summarize, this is a pioneering work on an unjustly neglected topic. It is obvious that Michael Solomon has spent long hours in the archives coming to grips with the vast amount of primary source material that has survived. His book is not only filled with insight, but also eminently readable.

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