

**Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa (ed.), *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge (D. S. Brewer) 2015, XVI–293 p. (Gender in the Middle Ages, 11), ISBN 978-1-84384-401-3, GBP 60,00.**

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*Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture* is a rich volume of eleven essays, plus an introduction and afterword, that explores the intersections between medieval medicine and religion. The editor, Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa, emphasizes the volume's multidisciplinary approach and holistic view of medicine and religion.

Yoshikawa envisions this volume as promoting dialogue among scholars in various disciplines. To that end, both historians and literary scholars, as well as those in disability studies, contribute essays. The essays, however, cover the late middle ages and nearly all examine English texts. The volume is divided into four thematic sections: »Mary as Physician«; »Female Mysticism and Metaphors of Illness«; »Fifteenth-Century Poetry and Theological Prose«; »Disfigurement and Disability«.

In »Mary as Physician«, Diane Watt's contribution, »Mary the Physician: Women, Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages«, analyzes devotional writings that describe women as healers and the Paston letters to determine if Mary as physician was merely a religious trope or if it did indeed shape women's participation in medicine. Building on Watt's argument, »Chaucer's Physicians: Raising Questions of Authority« by Roberta Magnani, considers how medieval male writers wrote about women and medicine. Both authors conclude that depictions of Mary as a healer did correspond with women's actual participation in medicine and in providing medical advice.

»Female Mysticism and Metaphors of Illness« centers on the writings of female mystics. Naoë Kukita Yoshikawa's essay, »Heavenly Vision and Psychosomatic Healing: Medical Discourse in Mechtild of Hackeborn's ›The Booke of Gostlye Grace‹«, focuses on the fifteenth-century English translation of the thirteenth-century mystic's treatise. An interesting dimension of her analysis of Mechtild is her use of music as medical therapy – a truly multidisciplinary approach to the question of religion and medicine. In contrast to the texts examined by Watt and Magnani where Mary was depicted as a physician, Christ takes the role of a physician in Mechtild's visions – an interesting gender difference, which unfortunately goes unaddressed. In »Bathing in Blood: The Medicinal Cures of Anchoritic Devotion«, Liz Herbert McAvoy explores how sin was healed in the visions of Julian of Norwich. McAvoy makes the case that blood was central in the women's role as healers. Concluding this section is Juliette Vuille's »Maybe I'm Crazy? Diagnosis and Contextualisation of Medieval Female Mystics«. Vuille analyzes how modern scholars have interpreted medieval visionaries and

demonstrates that such modern explanations as postnatal depression and psychosis are simply too anachronistic to reflect the experiences of medieval people.

»Fifteenth-Century Poetry and Theological Prose« frames the third section, and both essays examine fifteenth-century vernacular literature authored by men. Takami Matsuda develops the link between physical and spiritual illness in regard to Audelay's ideas about Purgatory as a place for healing »spiritual disease« in »Purgatory and Spiritual Healing in John Audelay's Poems«. Louise Bishop takes up »Reginald Peacock's Reading Heart and the Health of Body and Soul« and argues that »heart« was not only at the center of a theological controversy, but also central to the political rivalries for the English king's »heart«. Bishop makes the case that medieval audiences believed that both, spiritual and physical wellness, came through the heart. Inclusion of vernacular literature makes an important contribution to the volume, as does the further demonstration of the intersection of medical knowledge and religion. But even though gender may have played a role in the shaping of these texts – for example the fact that Peacock's »Doctrine of the Hert« was translated into Middle English for a women's religious community – the essays do not engage with how gender might have shaped these authors' view of medicine or religion.

The final section of the volume contains four essays organized around »Disfigurement and Disability«. In »Disabled Children: Birth Defects, Causality and Guilt« Irina Metzler investigates how gender shaped medieval explanations of birth defects. Drawing from ideas about original sin and procreation, Metzler demonstrates that the mother's improper position or behavior during sex could leave her child with a disability or defect. Moving from birth defects to disfigurement, Patricia Skinner evaluates why three holy women threatened to disfigure themselves in »Marking the Face, Curing the Soul? Reading the Disfigurement of Women in the Later Middle Ages«. Skinner finds that illness and disfigurement were considered redemptive – in this way her essay parallels the findings for the male writers, Audelay and Peacock. But, because ideas of beauty were gender specific, Skinner argues that disfigurement was something that had particular meaning for medieval women. The last two essays both question current assumptions about how those suffering from disability or illness were treated. In »Did Drunkenness Dim the Sight? Medieval Understandings and Responses to Blindness in Medical and Religious Discourse«, Joy Hawkins explores medieval ideas about the causes of blindness, challenges the idea that the blind were thought to be sinners deserving of punishment, and argues that in fact medieval people showed the blind compassion and care. Concluding the volume is Elma Brenner's essay »Between Palliative Care and Curing the Soul: Medical and Religious Responses to Leprosy in France and England, c. 1100–c.1500«. Brenner demonstrates how religion informed how lepers were treated and perceived. She adds new insight by considering the gender component in the transmission of leprosy as women were believed to be the vector for passing on the disease. Denis Renevey provides the »Afterword«, which nicely summarizes the contributions of the essays and

makes suggestions for further research.

A strength of this collection is that the essays do effectively break down the barrier between religion and medicine. Each demonstrates how medical ideas were informed by theological assumptions, as well how religion was understood in regard to illness and health. Moreover, there are a wide variety of »illnesses« addressed in the volume: blindness, mental illness, disfigurement, etc. The volume as a whole hangs together well and there are a few stand-out essays, particularly those by Brenner, Metzler, Vuille and Watt.

Although the volume succeeds in establishing the connection between religion and medicine, it is less successful in integrating gender fully into the discussion. Several essays do not touch upon gender – which is disappointing since the volume is part of Boydell and Brewer's »Gender in the Middle Ages« series. Indeed, gender sometimes feels like an afterthought; a sentiment reinforced in the introduction where an in-depth discussion of gender only begins after 17 pages of discourse on medicine and religion (and even then it is dispatched quickly). Most perplexing is the gender divide between sections two and three. The essays in section two deal exclusively with female mystical writings, while those in three focus on the theological writing of men. Was this division intentional? Was there something inherently different how male theologians and female mystics understood the body, medicine, religion? These questions go unresolved, resulting in a wasted opportunity to interrogate how gender was or was not an influence in shaping men and women's perceptions of illness and religion.

Overall this is a valuable contribution to the scholarship. Yoshikawa's goal was to promote interdisciplinary dialogue and to demonstrate the interplay between religion and medicine in a variety of different literary and theological texts. In this, the volume succeeds admirably.