



Rinaldo Fernando Canalis, Massimo Ciavolella, eds. *Disease and Disability in Medieval and Early Modern Art and Literature (Cursor Mundi)*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2021. 375 pp. \$155.42, cloth, ISBN 978-2-503-58870-4.

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Representing Bodily Difference

This lavishly illustrated volume, number 38 of the *Cursor Mundi* series from the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA, contains twelve essays that range over time from the Byzantine Empire to the seventeenth century. The work is roughly chronological, divided into two parts: “The Medieval and Transitional Periods,” which contains five essays, and “The Early Modern Period,” which contains seven. As indicated by the book’s title, the essays focus on representations of bodily difference in visual and written works of the premodern era. They combine literary, artistic, and historical analyses that interrogate the intersections of art, the body, disease, and physical difference.

The essays are tied together by a general focus on bodily difference and observable conditions—whether transient symptoms of disease or more permanent disfigurement. The work as a whole is bookended by essays that examine artistic representations of disease in the manuscript and print traditions, opening with Alain Touwaide’s survey of depictions of disease or disability (and the lack thereof) in Byzantine medical manuscripts and closing with Domenico Bertoloni Meli’s examination of images of bone lesions in seventeenth-cen-

tury printed medical texts. In between these two, the other essays range in focus from specific diseases (Gaia Gubbini on leprosy, melancholy, and folly; Lori Jones on plague; Alfonso Paoella on syphilis) to specific artists depicting and/or suffering from disease (Manuela Gallerani on Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo; Efraín Kristal on Nicholas Poussin) to literary representations of disease (Joachim Küpper on “malady” in texts; Roberto Fedi on various authors writing of their own ailments; Sara Frances Burdorff on “medicine and maleficence” in *Hamlet*). There is a turn to architecture with Francis Wells’s enlightening discussion of the connections between healing, architecture, and decorative arts. Only one essay, Jenni Kuuliala’s “Miracle and the Monstrous: Disability and Deviant Bodies in the Late Middle Ages,” extensively engages with representations of disability. Kuuliala uses late medieval miracle narratives to explore the connections of “disability, malformation, physical difference and the monstrous” (p. 108).

This is an excellent collection that offers intriguing explorations of the questions of how and why artists and authors chose to include depictions of disease, deformity, or disorder, as well as

when and why they did not. These are not essays of retrospective diagnosis but rather offer nuanced arguments for how the representation of diseased or disabled bodies has appeared in both visual and literary form, and, in some cases, how that changed over time.

The organization of the volume into the chronological categories of “medieval and transitional” and “early modern,” however, is somewhat regrettable in that it serves to reinforce the notion of a clear break between the two eras, despite the inclusion of “transitional” with medieval. While some of the essays range across the medieval and early modern, such as Lori Jones’s excellent “‘Apostumes, Carbuncles and Botches’: Visualizing the Plague in Late Medieval and Early Modern Medical Treatises,” the editors want to argue for a separation of medieval and early modern that many historians no longer recognize. Asserting a life expectancy of only thirty-five years (though with caveats that this is only an average and difficult to confirm), they then argue that “this generally bleak outlook lasted throughout the Middle Ages but improved a bit in the second half of the sixteenth century with the reorientation of patient care from the belief in supernatural causes for disease to the introduction of therapeutic measures based on demonstrable fact” (p. 22). Indeed, the editors of the volume seem unaware of current historical scholarship which has entirely discarded the old notion that medieval medicine was “primitive and lacked logic” (p. 21), that treatments such as bloodletting were “irrational measures” or that the “vigour of the Renaissance propelled ... communities and their intelligentsia towards a new dawn for the biological sciences and a rational opposition to the onslaught of old and new maladies” (p. 69). Such statements and the lack of current scholarship in the works cited for the introduction are all the more unfortunate given the volume’s intended audience, noted as “ranging from an educated popular audience to specialized academics” (p. 52). Academics may well recognize these views as outdated, but nonspecial-

ists will sadly find reinforcement for popular notions of a superstitious and backward Middle Ages that gave way to a newly rational and scientific Renaissance.

Issues with the framing in the introduction aside, the subsequent essays contained in the volume offer fresh insights and are more nuanced in their discussions of these centuries. They are well written, nicely illustrated with numerous color images, and indeed accessible to nonspecialists. They also offer much that will be of interest and use to academics in a wide range of fields, including medicine, disability, art, literature, history, architecture, and more.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

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