



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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In recent years, premodern disability and disease studies has grown as a subfield within literary criticism. Frederick Gibbs, Daniel Schafer, and Irina Metzler, among others, have contributed intriguing scholarship on disease, disability, and death in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. *Disease and Disability in Medieval and Early Modern Art and Literature*, a new collection from Brepols edited by Rinaldo F. Canalis and Massimo Ciavolella, also makes a valuable contribution to the topic by studying how premodern art and literature reveal the range of emotional responses that authors in that era had to disease, disability, and death.

In the book's introduction, Canalis and Ciavolella argue that it is imperative to consider what persuaded medieval and early modern writers to select a disability or an illness and analyze—either through writing or visual art—its impact on social issues of the time. This introduction highlights one of the major objectives of the collection, which is to examine how art and literature in this era reflected the impact and social consequences of disability and disease across premodern literature. The editors effectively open this series of essays with a question that, to some extent, each essay attempts to answer: Did artistic and literary interpretations and reproductions of

disease and disability strive to faithfully recreate nature, or did they function as a counter to the more widely accepted premodern portrayal of spiritual ideals and/or the cruciality and beauty of the human body? Canalis and Ciavolella ultimately conclude the rather lengthy introduction—sixty-nine pages in total—by stating that this collection makes a significant contribution to premodern literary and art studies because understanding illness and disability and how they were perceived in the past is critical to better understanding the premodern period, as serious illness was deeply impactful and greatly disrupted the flow of life. An epidemic, for example, would alter the function of a society, potentially for generations. Given the occurrence of the current coronavirus pandemic, it is difficult to argue with Canalis and Ciavolella's assertion that this is a particularly sensible time to explore the role of epidemics and disease in the premodern era and how they shaped the societies they affected.

Following the introduction, the book divides into two major parts. Part 1 is titled "The Medieval and Transitional Periods," and part 2 is labeled "The Early Modern Period." The essays in part 1 address the role of disease and disability in literature and visual art in the late Middle Ages, and some of the essays explicitly address how early

Renaissance texts interacted with and represented these topics as well. The first essay is Alain Touwaide's "The Art of Medicine in Byzantium," which devotes itself to representations—or rather the lack of representations—of diseases and disabilities in Byzantine manuscripts containing materials relating to medicine. Touwaide concludes that the absence of Byzantine texts related to medicine is because medical illustration underwent a deep transformation. Early Byzantine texts featured artistic depictions of medical practices, but that tendency fell out of fashion over time, and eventually, Byzantine statements on medicine were no longer accompanied by the visual support of illustrations. This reality limits scholars' understanding of diseases in the later Byzantine period. Jenni Kuuliala's chapter, "Miracle and the Monstrous: Deviant Bodies in the Late Middle Ages," confronts how often disabilities and illnesses were aligned with monstrosity in the Middle Ages, a fascinating topic already often explored within the context of medieval monster studies. Third is Gaia Gubbini's essay, "Leprosy, Melancholy, Folly, and the Physiology of Anguish: Humoral Imbalance, Emotions, and Psychosomatic Diseases in Thomas d'Angleterre, Beroul, and the Folies Tristan," which explores how humoral imbalances bring about leprosy, melancholy, and folly and the ways in which those particular ailments are portrayed in late medieval literary texts. Gubbini notes that in medieval literature, the health of the body often mirrors the morality of the soul. In "Malady in Literary Texts from the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," Joachim Kupper offers a different viewpoint, arguing that the prominence of the thematization of malady across Renaissance literary texts is likely due to the fact that the "revival" of classical parameters did not compromise the classical theory that appears and is contained within Plato and Aristotle's work. The final essay in part 1 is Lori Jones's "Apostumes, Carbuncles, and Botches: Visualizing the Plague in Late Medieval and Early Modern Medical Treatises," in which she argues that medieval plague art was full of emblematic

symbols and gestures of pestilence. It also commonly portrayed heavenly angels shooting "plague arrows" into the world as a way of highlighting the plague as the divine's way of punishing humanity for the worst of its ills. Jones notes that the plague is more often depicted symbolically in art than literally, and the depictions became less literal as the medieval period concluded and the early modern period commenced.

Part 2, "The Early Modern Period," addresses how Renaissance art and literature confronted the issue of maladies. First is Francis Wells's essay, "Architecture and the Decorative Arts in Renaissance Medicine," which argues that architects in early modern Italy attempted to construct hospitals that would facilitate mental and spiritual comfort. The second half of the essay discusses how medical illustrations from the early modern period were crucial to contemporary understandings of the inner workings of the body. Although both parts of the essay are brilliant, they do not seem as interconnected and obviously related as they could be. Manuela Gallerani's chapter, "Disease and Art and Art(ist) in Disease," builds on the idea that visual art helps clarify how Renaissance thinkers understood the human body at the time. This essay focuses on how paintings, poems, letters, and other literary forms explore the various connotations of disease. In particular, Gallerani examines the works of Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti. Alfonso Paoletta's "The Mal Franzoso Between Art, History, and Literature" reviews the early struggles against syphilis. The essay feels especially current, as it details how the art and literature of the Renaissance portray a society isolating itself to evade the disease. Roberto Fedi's "The Ailing Artist" transitions away from visual art, instead focusing on the works of poets and other writers during the Renaissance. Fedi aims to show the struggles of these writers after the disease has compromised their minds in some way. This essay, although brief, proves to be among the collection's most compelling, as the close readings so beautifully illustrate the impact

of disease on the minds of writers during the Italian Renaissance. Efrain Kristal's essay, "Nicolas Poussin's *The Plague at Ashdod* and the French Disease," focuses on Poussin's art and how it reflects major diseases as a result of God's wrath. They are, essentially, what follows a lack of morality. The chapter also details Poussin's personal battle with disease and how it informs his work. The penultimate essay in the volume is Sara Francis Burdorff's "Yet I have in me something dangerous': On the Interplay of Medicine and Maleficence in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*," which takes the collection back to England by centering on the most famous of the bard's works. The chapter contends that the textual interplay of medicine and maleficence—such as demonopathy, witchcraft, and pathology—is a crucial element in the extreme destabilization underlying the entire play. The final chapter in the collection, Domenico Bertoloni Meli's "Texture of Lesions—Textures of Prints," stresses the importance of intaglios in understanding how early modern thinkers viewed disease. Meli notes that they were not an unproblematic solution to the problem of texture but instead pose new challenges as scholars continue to explore disease in this era.

All the essays in the collection are cogently written and genuinely intriguing. Part 1 feels more cohesive than part 2 in that the essays in the former seem to often involve a balanced mixture of literary texts and visual art. In contrast, part 2 leans heavily on visual art, and despite moments such as Burdorff's excellent essay on *Hamlet*, this section ultimately feels limited with regard to literary and written materials. There is also a heavy emphasis on Renaissance Italy and on the continent in a broader sense when there could have been far more focus on Renaissance portrayals of disease and maladies from the United Kingdom and Ireland. That said, the collection is, for the most part, innovative and timely. It is innovative because it calls the necessity of periodization into question by placing medieval and early modern texts alongside one another and stressing that

they were similarly interested in the issues of disease and disability at the time. The collection's authors do address crucial differences between the two periods, but they also highlight the overlap between writers and artists of these eras in a compelling manner. Meanwhile, the collection is also quite timely in light of the global pandemic we are currently enduring. There has never been a better time to explore how creative minds viewed disease in the past because we are, arguably, positioned to understand them better than we have prior.

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