

Book Reviews

argument is seriously qualified by assumptions and concerns that no longer carry an automatic conviction. This is the rub.

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DANIELLE JACQUART and CLAUDE THOMASSET, *Sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages*, trans. Matthew Adamson, Oxford, Polity Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. vii, 242, illus., £27.50.

To write adequately on the history of sexuality and medicine in the Middle Ages is far from easy. Many of the texts on which such a history can be based survive only in manuscript or in outdated editions, and a considerable knowledge of a variety of languages and dialects is needed to read the texts, let alone interpret them to a modern audience. The combination of a professor of linguistics and a historian of medicine thus offers a neat way out of this primary difficulty. The authors introduce us to writers in Latin, Old French, German, and Spanish, and are equally at home in discussing Isidore's etymologies as in explicating complicated and almost unintelligible technical terms derived from oriental languages. Their English translator is equally competent, although something seems to have gone wrong on p. 135, and some of the sexual advice is still left in the obscurity of a semi-learned language (p. 224).

The authors take us from the anatomy of the body, as described in words and later in anatomies, through physiology, to sexual practices, both licit and illicit, and finally to the wages of sin, hysterical malady, sexual diseases, and the deadly encounter with the venomous, but beautiful maiden. They discuss courtly love (which they argue was far from the spiritual purity beloved of the Victorians, but culminated in coitus interruptus) as well as contraception and abortion ("what everyone knew about . . ."), and intercourse for pleasure as well as procreation. They also endeavour to trace the effects on medical learning of successive tranches of material translated from the Greek (but the table, p. 22, is wrongly titled and Niccolò did not translate from the Arabic). They call on the advice of penitentials as well as that of pharmacopoeias, of popular legend as well as of learned treatise. In short, this is an excellent guide to the written sources on the history of sexuality in the Middle Ages.

This literary bias is both its strength and its weakness. Far too often, one has the impression of a learned debate far removed from life, of a bloodless pursuit of literary chimeras, in sharp contrast to more recent studies of sexuality in other periods, e.g. Camporesi's *I balsami di Venere*. The survey of anatomy says much about texts, but little about the formal procedures for obtaining female corpses or the regulations for students to observe such dissections in fifteenth-century Italy. The medical authors cited move almost in a historical and cultural vacuum (on p. 24, the chronological relationship between [Moschion] and his source Soranus is reversed). English readers will look in vain for some of Chaucer's ribaldries, or for any detailed discussion of the evidence of art and of its value to the historian.

Within its limits, however, this is a valuable guide, and many non-medievalists will be grateful to the authors for the way in which they lead them elegantly through the thickets of theological and philosophical speculation, or lucidly expound the differences between the Aristotelians and Galenists on the topic of the female sperm. They have made a very sound beginning, and subsequent historians will be able to rely confidently on their editorial labours.

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DAVID B. RUDERMAN, *Kabbalah, magic, and science: the cultural universe of a sixteenth-century Jewish physician*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1988, 8vo, pp. viii, 232, £23.95.

This book centres on the life and ideas of the late Renaissance Jewish scholar and physician Abraham Yagel (1553–c.1623). To place the subject in perspective, the author begins with an interesting biographical chapter in which the life of Yagel and his financial problems offset by his Cabalistic and scientific pursuits are viewed against the declining political and economic fortune of Italian Jewry in the late sixteenth century.