

Book Reviews

Nonconformity during its period of greatest travail. Hunter and Gregory have given us far more than the diaries of an interesting, but minor, figure; they have given us one of the best recent books on the history of medicine and astrology in early modern England and an important contribution to economic and ecclesiastical history.

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NANCY G. SIRAIISI, *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: the Canon and medical teaching in Italian universities after 1500*, Princeton University Press, 1987, 8vo, pp. xii, 410, £31.40.

“To what part of philosophy does it belong?” asked the medieval teacher, introducing a new text to his class. The book reviewer often has to do likewise. Here, the expectations of the reader might coincide with one of the motives of the author in seeing this book as an extension of her earlier work on medieval Italian medicine. But in fact it belongs to a different part of philosophy. Although furnished with the same impeccable scholarship as *Taddeo* it is about the *fortuna* of a book, not of people, and this brings it closer in nature to the bibliographical side of the industry, to the establishment of a *Hippocrates, Galenus or Avicenna Latinus*. In this way the book is like a commentary to its appendices, which list editions and commentaries of the *Canon* appearing after 1500.

There is much to be said for the choice of topic. The *Canon* was a central text in medical education; it was used from 1300 to 1800; it was Arabic, and very large. On all counts, a history of its use in teaching links with most of the things we like to think about—humanism, scholasticism, philology, teaching, commentary, new anatomy and physiology, and the scientific revolution. As Siraisi points out, Renaissance medical commentary has remained largely unexamined and one goal of the book is to make such an examination “in an attempt to understand more clearly what it meant to study or to teach a text . . . by such a method”.

We would not expect from Siraisi anything less than first-rate scholarship, and we get it, in heaping measure, in an extensive apparatus. Many additions are made to other stories that were happening in the Renaissance, but the story of the *Canon* itself is, ultimately, not compelling. Partly this is due—quite properly—to the book’s bibliographical function. Partly it is due to the immensity of the subject matter: Siraisi is obliged to limit her attention largely to the first part of the first book of the *Canon* and to a small selection of commentators. And it is partly due to the fact that the life of the *Canon* was given to it only by the people who used it. To make a comparative study of such usage tells us more about the users than the used. Or to employ the *Canon* as a “case study of the extent to which scholastic medical learning of the sixteenth century was capable of assimilating or initiating change” is to give it something of an artificial life, maintained by ancient authority and traditions. I think it is partly this, as well as the magnitude of the field, that contributes to the difficulty Siraisi feels in “weighing the significance of the material examined in the previous pages”.

But then this is not intended to be a book full of answers but of resources and questions. Taken as that “part of philosophy” the book will become indispensable.

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LUCINDA McCRAY BEIER, *Sufferers and healers. The experience of illness in seventeenth-century England*, London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, 8vo, pp. x, 314, £30.00.

Lucinda Beier’s investigations into a few casebooks and diaries from the seventeenth century provides solid ammunition for those who seek a history of medicine from a non-medical standpoint. Yet, as she herself admits, it is doubtful if her material is broad enough to admit more than the most banal of generalizations or to mark off that century from any between the twelfth and twentieth. Even Paracelsian remedies, as Gerhard Eis showed, owe much to “folk”