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Symptomatic Subjects, Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England by Julie Orlemanski
(review)

Anita Obermeier

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graduate students and scholars alike in search of research topics to examine her multiple appearances on the stage, a topic long in need of thorough study.

KEVIN J. HARTY
La Salle University

Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects, Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England*. Alembics: Penn Studies in Literature and Science, Vol. 2. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. ix, 333. isbn: 9780812250909. \$69.95.

The historical study of medicine in the Middle Ages has flourished in the last three decades. The study of medieval medical concepts, knowledge, and application in literary texts has also been on the upswing, and Julie Orlemanski's study makes an outstanding contribution to the field of medical humanities. Subdivided into four major sections and eight chapters, *Symptomatic Subjects* 'investigates what late medieval writers were up to in using "terms of phisik" in their compositions, . . . what notions of embodiment, subjectivity, and causality medicine made available and what writers did with them' (p. 1). The uniquely explosive increase in dissemination of major medical treatises in the English fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Orlemanski argues, facilitated the incorporation of medical terminology and concepts into literary discourses.

The first section, 'Thinking with *Phisik*,' provides a treasure trove of information for both the scholar and the student interested in medieval medicine. Chapter One sets forth how the medical ideas of Hippocrates, Aristotle, Galen, and Avicenna shaped medieval medicine and specifically how it evolved in England via intellectualization and popularization. Since medieval culture lacked 'an "ontological" concept of disease . . . medieval pathology dealt instead with the patterned conditions of the human body as the result of casual factors' (p. 26). Orlemanski concludes that late 'medieval medicine, then, shares with practices of medieval narrative a vivid interest in the exemplary and explanatory functions of individual bodies' (p. 39). Chapter Two deftly discusses medical causation and its expanding Middle English vocabulary, who possessed medical authority at that time, what signs pointed to which disease (leprosy, for instance), and how medical treatises redefined their contents.

'Playing with *Phisik*,' Section Two, delineates the usage of medical knowledge in two specific medieval genres before manifesting in fictional narrative and poetry: medical satire and exempla. Chapter Three focuses on examples from Robert Henryson, Geoffrey Chaucer, and the *Croxton Play of the Sacrament*. A timeless genre, really, medical satire targets medicine's failures and shortcomings and 'takes as its starting point the convergence of language's inscrutability with experiences of sickness, injury, corruption, and death' (p. 83). Given that the exemplum is the most

prolific of medieval genres, it is no surprise, then, that Chapter Four concentrates on exhortatory narrative medicine.

The literary scholar interested in medicine will benefit greatly from the two chapters in Section Three, 'Emplotting *Phisik*.' The book shines in Chapter Five, 'The Metaphysics of *Phisik* in the "Knight's Tale,"' as Orlemanski convincingly illustrates the changes Chaucer makes to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida* to provide 'more multifarious and more mysterious' (p. 148) cruxes for Arcite's injury and death. Therefore, according to Orlemanski, Arcite's body is medicalized through 'psychological compulsion, knightly prowess, emphatic responsiveness, political calculation, planetary influence, meddling pagan deities, benevolent providence, chance, fate, literary tradition, and narratorial whim' (p. 148). Furthermore, Orlemanski provocatively argues that Arcite reappears in the *Canterbury Tales* as the Miller. Chapter Six excellently delineates the etiology of Cresseid's leprosy in Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid*. Two systems intersect in determining medieval bodies: the four humor theory and physiognomy. The only author to do so, Henryson essentially employs physiognomy by afflicting Cresseid with leprosy as an outward sign of her inner falsehood. His medical portrayal of Cresseid's leprosy is surprisingly accurate 'in its humoral etiology, its astrological affinities, and is symptomology' (p. 207).

The last section, 'Personalizing *Phisik*,' situates itself in the boundaries between the medical, the psychological, and the poetic. Chapter Seven discusses the signifiers of Thomas Hoccleve's symptomatic body in a series of his works dealing with the poet and madness. The final chapter is dedicated to Margery Kempe, specifically 'the traffic between authorial body and narrating voice . . . achieved by her enunciations ceaseless routing through circuits of symptom and explanation, noise and narration' (pp. 249, 250). While one could have expected here mentioning of the post-partum depression that clearly catapulted Margery into sanctifying action, Orlemanski focuses on Margery's tears and incessant weeping less as a medical problem but rather as 'symptoms of her sanctity' (p. 255) and narrative voice. Even though *Symptomatic Subjects* does not engage Arthurian material beyond a brief section in Chrétien de Troyes's *Cligès*, this complex and nuanced book, nevertheless, offers a wealth of factual knowledge, sophisticated connections between medicine and literature, and ultimately fundamental and overarching implications on the nature of poetic language that can be fruitfully applied to Middle English Arthurian works as well.

ANITA OBERMEIER
University of New Mexico

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