

Book Review

WINSTON BLACK. *Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West: A History in Documents*. (The Broadview Sources Series.) Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2020. Pp. 288; 6 black-and-white figures. \$21.95. (978-1-55481-390-2)

Winston Black has previously written one medieval history, *The Middle Ages: Facts and Fictions*, and has aided in the completion of a second edition of John Riddle's *A History of the Middle Ages 300-1500*, both of which were well received and added to an ever-growing assortment of medieval popular histories. In *Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West: A History in Documents*, Black draws on his strengths as a historian of medicine and religion to provide a concise and accessible treatment of the development of the medical arts from Antiquity to the Late Medieval Period.

As a new addition to the Broadview Sources series, the bulk of this work's evidence comes in the form of primary source documents. Of the ninety-one primary sources that are presented in translation in the book, the vast majority are not new, some having been in existence since the nineteenth century. The novelty of this collection, however, is that it is the first time that so many of these documents have been made available in one place for the casual reader. Correspondingly, the strength of this book rests in its collation of these varied primary sources and they appropriately strengthen its topical scope of analyzing the growth, development, and refinement of medical understanding across such a large breadth of time.

In the book's introduction, Black states that the impetus for compiling such a vast array of samples is to illuminate the continuities between the medical practices of Antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as emphasize the contributions of the many societies that effectively provided the foundations for early incarnations of "Western medicine." His approach conveys this notion of interconnectivity well as he draws on multiple examples from Ancient Egyptian and Babylonian medicine, classical Greek and Roman humoral theory which later informs medieval Christian European and Byzantine medical knowledge and includes the vital contributions of the Islamicate cultures of Spain, North Africa and the Near East.

Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West is broken down into ten sections, or parts. Each of Black's partite divisions begins with an introduction to the time period being discussed and the salient medical developments that distinguish it from others. The remainder of the sections consists of specific primary source examples which are briefly and individually prefaced with relevant information related to their authors and an analysis of the contents of the documents. Adding a further layer of didactic support, Black has chosen to identify and gloss particularly significant terms in the outer margins of the pages.

Black's investigation begins in Part 1 (ca. 2000-700 BCE) with two Ancient Egyptian medical papyri dealing with gynecology and pathology as well as a Babylonian spell against fever. Part 2 (ca. 500 BCE-200 CE) examines various examples of rational medicine from the Hippocratic corpus and the role of Asclepius, the god of Physicians, in popular belief. The third and fourth parts of Black's work (ca. 1-500 CE) divide Roman medicine into the spheres of professional and practical. This is an intriguing division as the many samplings—from Galen's *On the Medical*

Sects to Varro's early notion of germ theory in *De re rustica* and Pliny the Elder's remedies derived from wool in *The Natural History*—communicate a growing desire to understand the nascent art of medicine, and—to a larger degree—both the world and the human body. The enduring nature of classical Greek and Roman medical ideas and their refinement during Late Antiquity is discussed in Part 5 (ca. 300-700 CE). Many of the examples provided in the primary source list for this section deal with maintaining a healthy diet and taking care of one's body. Part 6 (ca. 600-1000 CE) highlights the differences in medical theory and practice across different religious sects, with examples from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths being presented. The remainder of the section investigates early medieval understandings of plague and pestilence—the first primary source being linked to the Plague of Justinian—and the validity of Old English folk medicine from *The Nine Herbs Charm* and *Bald's Leechbook*. The integral Arabic contributions to medical knowledge are highlighted in Part 7 (ca. 900-1400 CE) and contain samples from many of the most important Arabic writers from Late Antiquity to the Late Medieval era. Included are portions of Avicenna's *The Canon of Medicine*, case studies from Al-Rāzī, and Qustā ibn Lūqā's treatment guide against the guinea worm parasite, known as the “Little Dragon of Medina,” that plagued individuals making the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. The final three parts of Black's work all focus on the High Middle Ages (ca. 1000-1400 CE) and are divided topically, examining learned medicine, medical practice, and the competition between medicine and faith in medieval world. This portion of the book provides an apropos narrative bookend to Black's study as it demonstrates how faith and science developed alongside one another, oftentimes as competitors yet sometimes as partners.

Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West does several things well, but its foremost positive feature is that it does not overreach its intended function. Black states that this work is designed to correspond with the first half of history survey sequences such as “Western Civilization” or the “West in the World” which are taught in many high schools and colleges. With this in mind, the chronological table on pages six through nine is a fitting addition. The “Questions to Consider” portion on page ten, however, feels out of place at the beginning of the book and would better serve the reader if the questions were expanded and placed alongside the introduction of each chapter. As it is meant as an introduction to the topic, *Medicine and Healing in the Premodern West* does not stray from its path and for this reason it is a welcome exemplar of what can be achieved in future contributions of introductory works on the history of science and medicine.

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