

Book Reviews

Conrad and Lieber, and two on Western Europe by Nutton and Touati. It is introduced by Conrad and Wujastyk, organizers of a conference on contagion at the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in 1993, on which the volume is based.

The book is particularly useful in presenting a global picture of the notion of contagion in various pre-modern societies by first looking at the terms that implied transmission: *epaphe*, *synanachronsis* in Greek; *upasarga* in Sanskrit; *contagio* in Latin; *adwâ* in Arabic; *xiangran*, *chuanran* in Chinese. All these ancient terms contained ambiguous and unclear notions on person-to-person contact and transmission. Many of them were related rather to ideas of pollution, or to supernatural causes. None of them was found to be of central importance in ancient medical theories. Even when the danger of being close to the sick was observed, there was generally no systematic understanding of the mechanism of transmission. No coherent contagion theory thus appeared in the West before the sixteenth century. This point is particularly well argued in Nutton's paper.

A major reason for the marginal importance of contagion in pre-modern medicine is that, for most ancient medical systems, other factors such as seasonal or environmental influences, physical constitution of the person, and religious or supernatural elements were more important in the explanation of the spread of diseases. Kuriyama emphasized the issue of seasonal influences as part of the cosmic order in the Chinese case. This is again mentioned by Chang, for whom the notion of "fetal toxin", not contagious itself, could be brought out by unseasonal breath (qi), central in the spread of smallpox. Quite similar to the Chinese case, early European doctors preferred using the categories of bodily change and external alteration in the surrounding air to explain the occurrences of diseases. Religious, ethical or ritual factors are discussed at length by Cullen, Das and Zysk for the Chinese and Indian cases. In classical âyurveda, the main explanations for the spread of diseases remained divine, supernatural, or moral. In medieval Islamic medicine as described by

Conrad, the omnipotence of God and the divine will prevented a full development of any theory of contagion, even though *adwâ* as applied to leprosy and plague did imply contagion and transmission.

One particular disease is used more frequently than others to illustrate the secondary importance of contagion in this volume, and that is leprosy. Lieber emphasizes that the Biblical *sâra'at*, erroneously translated as leprosy and categorized into two types, clean and unclean, could imply some contagious diseases. However the state of "contagion" was again a result of the lack of faith in God. The demystification of the idea of the contagious nature of leprosy in early Europe is articulated more clearly in Touati's paper. For him, the idea of contagion regarding leprosy as we understand it today remained secondary for a long time, until the growing influence of Arab-Islamic medicine in the thirteenth century. Even during the early period of segregation of lepers, the concern of contagion was not generalized. Leper houses built from the eleventh century were more a result of the concern of religious redemption and charity than of the fear of contagion. Leprosy, like many other diseases, was a common metaphor for sins such as heresy.

Many authors, however, also have the good sense to mention that the fear of contagion was more widespread in society than explained in medical texts, so that measures were taken and laws were drawn up to prevent close contact with the sick.

Angela Ki Che Leung,

Sun Yat-sen Institute for Social Sciences and
Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taipei

Vivian Nutton (ed.), *Medicine in the Renaissance city*, special issue *Renaissance Studies*, 2001, 15 (2), pp. 155, £31, US\$54. Orders to: Journals Subscriptions, Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP, UK. E-mail: jnl.orders@oup.co.uk

In his introduction to this monograph issue of *Renaissance Studies*, Vivian Nutton outlines

what “Renaissance medicine” conjured up for traditional medical historiography, especially as it concerned the rise and fall of Galenism and other aspects of medical theory. The papers collected here—a selection of those given at a conference held in 1999—all take a very different approach. In covering various aspects of the interaction between medicine and medical practitioners, on the one hand, and architecture, art and the marketplace, the collection demonstrates how one field of research, the history of medicine, has become integrated with the study of history as a whole. It is also evidence of how the field of Renaissance studies has itself evolved over recent decades. The approach adopted by many of the papers is that of analysing contemporary representations, in their various forms. Their focus is the town, and the place charlatans, hospitals, healing objects, and weasels had in it. Yes, weasels: for as Jacqueline Marie Musacchio explains in her contribution, weasels—in the form of weasel pelts as accessories or decoration—could represent pregnant or hopefully pregnant women in Renaissance art. They formed part of a wider category of talismanic objects associated with childbirth, which entered the home at marriage or shortly thereafter. Still other therapeutic objects are the focus of John Cherry’s description of English religious amulets and charms: from gold jewels in the form of the Agnus Dei to gold crosses depicting the five wounds of Christ. Relating the form of these often precious objects to their function is a difficult task. We may never know just how they were used and what meanings they possessed for their owners, but they doubtless extended the sources of healing available to Renaissance men and women.

Hospitals made up a clearly visible part of the geography of Renaissance towns. Both the papers on hospitals—John Henderson’s on Florence and Annemarie Kinzelbach’s on the towns of southern Germany—stress not only the number of different hospitals in each town, but the multiplicity of functions in any one institution. The diversity of hospitals in a town like Augsburg is reflected in the range of terms used at the time: *Spital* (hospital), *Armhaus*

(poor-house), *Arme Kinderhaus* (poor children-house), *Brechenhaus* (infirm-house), *Krankenhaus* (sick-house), *Blatternhaus* (pox-house), *Seelhaus* (soul-house), and *Siechhaus* (ailing-house). The range of names defeats any easy classification. The terms could be used in different ways and, in any case, both the regulations and day-to-day practice reveal that each had a variety of functions: social, political and religious. Even if we limit ourselves to a hospital’s programme of treatment, we find an equal (indeed complementary) emphasis on medicine for the soul and medicine for the body. This is evident in the art and architecture of Florence’s S. Maria Nuova hospital complex. Its separate male and female wards had as their focal point a chapel, each with its own altarpiece. Both wards also contained frescoes. Those of the female ward—painted along its high, open hall lined with beds in 1414—included three separate devotional scenes, as well as various saints, associated in some way with healing and the poor. The message: that sickness was only a stage on the way to health, physical or spiritual (ideally both).

Also visible in towns, particularly in their market squares, were the charlatans and other largely itinerant providers of medical goods and services. M A Katritzky’s detailed survey of this category of pedlar/healer/entertainer is based on a variety of contemporary representations of the charlatan in Europe, artistic and literary. She uses these to describe the wares they sold and the containers in which they were transported; their venues, stages and audiences; the types of entertainment offered by mountebank troupes; and the personal appearance and routines of the troupe leader. Katherine Park also discusses representations: Italian descriptions of one particular kind of street performer, the snake-handler. She begins with late medieval and early Renaissance sources, to see how the later accounts of snake-handling itinerants came to be, and why they took the form they did. The criticism evident in later representations was not so much one of medical writers against empirical practitioners. Rather it was part of a more general concern on the part of urban writers about the town as a

moral and economic environment and about the business transacted in the urban marketplace.

David Gentilcore,
University of Leicester

Irmgard Müsch, Rainer Willmann,
Jes Rust, *Albertus Seba's Cabinet of natural curiosities: Locupletissimi rerum naturalium thesauri, 1734–1765*, Cologne and London, Taschen, 2001, pp. 587, complete plates in colour, based on the copy in the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague, £100.00 (hardback cased 3-8228-1600-0).

Public museums are a relatively new invention. However, the passion for collecting things, and setting them aside as treasured objects, has a long tradition. From the sixteenth century, in many European palaces and aristocratic residences, cupboards and whole rooms were set aside to house the particular collections of princes and noblemen. The earliest of these “cabinets of wonders”, as they were most commonly called, were to be found in Italy, during the 1570s. North of the Alps, one of the most famous was the *Wunderkammer* of the homophobic Emperor Rudolf II.

Why European princes engaged in the often very costly enterprise of putting together such cabinets—none were open to the general public—has recently been much discussed by historians. It has been pointed out that these collections served not only to display their owners' wealth, taste and learning, but that they were also used to trumpet princely fame abroad and display their magnificence before foreign dignitaries and potentates.

A wide variety of objects found their way into these cabinets of wonders, all crammed together in drawers or densely arrayed floor to ceiling: antique coins and figurines, jewellery, exquisite furniture, books and paintings, were displayed next to rare plants, stuffed animals from faraway lands, minerals and even magical things such as horns of unicorns, bezoars and monstrous men and animals. The heterogeneity of these

collections was not the result of caprice or chance but was calculated to dazzle the onlooker, deliberately provoking wonder and awe.

However, not only the noble and politically important were eager to surround themselves with the marvels of God's creation. From the middle of the sixteenth century, more and more members of the middling classes were filling their townhouses with things they considered precious and rare. Their motivation for doing so was very similar to that of their noble peers, albeit their collections tended to be more specialized.

Two of the most famous collections were amassed by Albertus Seba (1665–1736), an Amsterdam apothecary. For decades, Seba haunted the docks of his home city, at that time the centre of the international maritime trade, thanks to the Dutch East India trading company. He supplied departing ships with cases of medicine and treated sick sailors from incoming ships, often in return for the rare specimens of exotic animals, plants, and minerals these men were bringing home. Seba exhibited the best specimens in a specially designed room in his Amsterdam house and the collection soon attracted many visitors from all over Europe. Even Peter the Great visited it in 1717, and was so impressed that he bought it and shipped all the items to St Petersburg.

Seba immediately set about building up a second, even larger collection. In 1731, he commissioned no less than thirteen artists to draw every single specimen he owned. He had the drawings transferred to large, folio-page copper plates for printing and these were finally published between 1734 and 1765 in four volumes entitled *Thesaurus*. Initially, the catalogues were published in black and white, leaving it to buyers to have their edition painted at their own expense by special colourists.

Seba's catalogue is now sumptuously reproduced by Taschen, the art-book publishing house. The edition, printed in folio-sized pages, leaves out nothing of the original in its single, exquisite volume, weighing seventeen pounds, copied from the richly coloured original, hand-tinted edition held by the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in the Hague. The introduction and