

BOOK REVIEW

Old English Medical Remedies. Mandrake, Wormwood and Raven's Eye by Sinéad Spearing

Hardback, 192 pages

Pen & Sword Books

February 2018

This book delves into the arcane world of Anglo-Saxon medicine. In 11 chapters, the reader is introduced to a fascinating world where the supernatural is commonplace and determines both the development of certain medical conditions and the timing of the harvest of appropriate therapeutic herbs. Sympathetic magic, ritual proclamations, transference, numerology, amulets, charms and talismans were all used in the treatment of the sick. Sinéad Spearing considers such therapies as the eyes of living ravens, mandrake root, the Nine Herbs Charm, stepping over dead men's graves, and a wide range of herbal simples. The prominence of women folk-healers is also discussed.

Concentrating on the third section of Bald's Leechbook, Spearing gives a very useful overview of its place in the sparse landscape of Old English medical texts, considering potential candidates for authorship, the unique characters of its structure, problems attending translation and the intellectual milieu of its composition. Engaging closely with the text, the author speculates persuasively about the impact of prevailing contemporary beliefs on prescribing practice. Constantly referring to the cures recorded, she introduces the reader to an alien cosmological framework in which belief in the activities of supernatural beings such as elves, dwarves, hags and nightwalkers was a significant element in contemporary views of disease causation.

Psychological theory, etymology, archaeology, classical and later historical texts, a broader view of herbal treatments, Christian syncretism and a delightfully expansive and erudite understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of a wide range of folk beliefs – some with echoes surviving to the present day – are all cleverly focused on elucidating the context and significance of the recipes under consideration, and lead the reader down some interesting philosophical alleyways.

The text is intelligently and clearly written, with appropriate and judicious use of quotes from a range of Anglo-Saxon texts, classical and historical sources as well as modern academic writers. The accompanying bibliography is useful but not comprehensive. Eight pages of black and white illustrations are included on glossy paper in the centre of the book; although relevant to the book's content, they are not tied directly to the text, which would have been helpful for the reader.

This volume would be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of a wide range of interested parties. The bizarre therapeutic practices of a thousand years ago – from a modern-day perspective – will be of interest to the curious lay-person, whilst healthcare professionals and historians should find much to engage them. Overall, this is a welcome contribution bringing a stimulating new perspective to a rather neglected area of historical medical literature.

Christopher Duffin
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