

## Book Reviews

Cambridge University Press has done the authors proud. The book is superbly produced: beautiful print, high-grade paper, and seventy-six illustrations of outstanding quality which are an essential, an integral, part of the work as a whole. By today's standards £40 is a moderate price for an academic book of such high quality.

Irvine Loudon, Wantage

WILLEM F. DAEMS, *Nomina simplicium medicinarum ex synonymariis medii aevi collecta. Semantische Untersuchungen zum Fachwortschatz hoch- und spätmittelalterlicher Drogenkunde*, Studies in Ancient Medicine, vol. 6, Leiden and New York, E. J. Brill, 1993, pp. 563, Gld. 250.00, \$143.00 (90-04-09672-8).

Here is a book that gives both more and less than its title suggests. This is neither a study of medieval plant names (the introduction, pp. 1-23, reprinted with slight changes from *Ber. Physico-Medica* 1981/83, is a sketch of the difficulties involved in identifying medieval herbs) nor a proper semantic and lexicographical investigation of the ways in which plants were named. Nor is it a complete listing of medieval plant names, with all their variants, an almost impossible task, although one now facilitated by Daems' comprehensive indexes of Latin and vernacular names that form part III of the book.

Instead, Daems has chosen to use as his base two largely complementary manuscript lists of synonyms, Basel, Universitätsbibliothek D II 13, fols 2r-9r, 1402, and Kassel, Landesbibliothek 4° med. 10, fols 81r-83r, early fifteenth century, the first with 488 plant names, the second 270. Each plant name is followed by a list of the synonyms found in a variety of other manuscripts and editions, and concludes with modern plant identifications. An appendix of 61 pages adds a further series of synonyms for the plants listed earlier, a confusing procedure for which it is hard to see a convincing justification in an age of computer typesetting. Access to the material is helped by a good index of sources and of modern botanical names.

Checking Daem's listings of Wellcome manuscripts 332, 625, 642, and 708 confirms the general accuracy of the transcriptions (p. 91 has a rare error: *artemisia* in Wellcome 642 is glossed as *biboß vel buck*), but throws up other problems. Not all the synonyms in these manuscripts are included by Daems, e.g., p. 101, s.v. *aristologia*, add Wellcome 708, 43r, and many of them are included in the Wellcome glossaries under different headings, e.g., p. 109, WMS 708 glosses the word "urtica", not "acantum" as the reader might expect; p. 113, WMS 708, 43v has a variety of synonyms but divided between *ambrosia minor* and *maior*. The editor's silence should thus not be taken to indicate that a particular plant is not included in a named manuscript or that there may not be other synonyms used for the plant. But, equally, the full indexes make cross-checking from an entry in a Wellcome glossary to a series of other entries very easy indeed. No longer will an editor have to puzzle out what a synonym or word might mean, and whether this is a unique attestation. This book will be of considerable utility for medieval scholars, and for historians of botany, keen to end the confusion of centuries in botanical nomenclature.

Vivian Nutton, Wellcome Institute

IRENE and WALTER JACOB (eds), *The healing past: pharmaceuticals in the Biblical and Rabbinic World*, Studies in Ancient Medicine, vol. 7, Leiden and New York, E. J. Brill, 1993, pp. xv, 126, illus., Gld. 84.00, \$48.75 (90-01-09643-4).

This publication comprises six papers presented at an international symposium, organized by the Rodef Shalom Biblical Botanical Garden in the autumn of 1989, devoted to medicaments used in the Biblical and Rabbinical world and the civilizations that impinged upon it. A further paper delivered the following year is also included. The collection of essays is prefaced by an introduction by Professor John Riddle, in which he describes the hitherto accepted view of Jewish medicine of the Biblical period as a "valley of humility between the two mountains of conceit, Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicine" with later Jewish medicine overshadowed by "the Olympian tower of

## Book Reviews

Hellenistic medicine". The contributors have sought in their different ways to assert a place for the medicine of ancient Israel among her neighbours, and by stating what is known of a little studied subject, to provide a basis for further research and investigation.

In his study of pharmacology and dietetics in the Bible and Talmud, Fred Rosner gives a general overview of the subject and then deals in some detail with the balm of Gilead before discussing possible identities for the Hebrew term used to describe mandrakes and the disorders they were alleged to cure. He discusses various foods and describes how the therapeutic efficacy of chicken soup advocated by Maimonides to alleviate catarrh is still advocated by Jewish mothers today.

A trio of essays devoted to the relationship of Jewish medicine to Egyptian and Mesopotamian medicine follows. Walter Jacob traces ancient Israel's medical practice through her neighbours and disputes the assumption of a continuity from Biblical medicine to that of the Rabbinic period. To support his treatise, he lists Biblical plants with their provenance where known, and the symptoms they were used to cure in both Assyrian and Egyptian texts. Second, Marvin Powell discusses the difficulty in identifying both drugs and pharmaceuticals in ancient Mesopotamia where there was no clear distinction between medicine and magic. Various methods of medication are described but it is clear that the study of Mesopotamian pharmacopoeia is yet in its infancy. Third, Renate Germer, in discussing ancient Egyptian pharmaceutical plants and the Eastern Mediterranean, echoes Walter Jacob's argument that information about medicine in ancient Israel must be sought from her neighbours. Egypt, with its medical papyri and ostraca, provides a fruitful field of study, throwing light on medicinal plants of the Bible since many were, in fact, imported from the Holy Land.

An essay by Irene Jacob on *Racinus communis*, the castor oil plant, describes its various uses from antiquity to the modern age. This is followed by Dr Kottek's interesting contribution on medical drugs in the work of Flavius Josephus. The products of Jericho and Canaan, the importance of climate, the ingredients of ointments, and the plants in the mitre of the High Priest display Josephus' interest in *materia medica*. Finally, Stephen Newmyer shows the individual nature of Hebrew medicine in its concern for the poor, the ageing and the weaker members of society as reflected in the *Sefer Refuot* of Asaph, which at the same time draws on Greek medical writings, especially those of Dioscorides.

It is hoped that these essays will stimulate further study of the subject, which is of great interest but in which there is still much to be done.

Nigel Allan, Wellcome Institute

DUDLEY WILSON, *Signs and portents: monstrous births from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment*, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, pp. ix, 215, illus., £50.00 (0-415-03236-9).

Dudley Wilson describes his subject as "the gradual change from superstitious to more scientific and medical attitudes to monstrous births" (p. 1), with a focus on the sixteenth, seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries. As that synopsis suggests, his book is shaped by an unexamined positivism that strongly limits its utility as a source for the history of medicine or science.

In general, Wilson appears much more at home with vernacular and lay texts than with the medical and scientific literature, and this is where the strength of his book lies. (The dust jacket identifies him as Emeritus Professor of French.) He is a diligent compiler of sources, both verbal and visual, and he includes two substantial chapters on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century broadsides, pamphlets, diaries, and memoirs; these lay out a wealth of fascinating and at some points largely new raw material for the history of lay attitudes toward monstrous births—material that raises important questions about how people saw and read both the world around them and the vernacular texts that described that world.

As more conventional medical history, however, this book leaves much to be desired. Wilson lacks control of the medical, philosophical, and theological texts and traditions that would have allowed him to engage the complicated theoretical issues raised by his subject matter, or to produce a convincing survey of the shifting patterns of professional interpretation he describes. He equates the rise of a "scientific" attitude toward monstrous births with the increasing currency of dissection in