example, the supposed discoveries of “Plinian races” in the New World and beastly humans drawn along the peripheries in T-O maps were attempts to validate these old works in new lands (89–91, 96). The objectification of the Other required that their very humanity be questioned through assaults on their ability to reason or their appearance (93–94). This attack could then be used to justify conquest and domination in order to transmit the advantages of civilization and to humanize the beastly natives, as exemplified by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda’s arguments against las Casas’s criticisms of conquest (108). The images, conceptions, and violence of the conquest of the New World, therefore, cannot be understood without the medieval background, which already included many examples of unknown cultures as inferior and worthy of just domination.

Ramey concludes the book with an analysis of the portrayals of race in modern movies set in the Middle Ages. Although this analysis does not tell us anything about medieval attitudes on race, it does serve to point to the most important reason why such a modern construct as race has been studied in pre-modern periods; because race is an important subject to us today. Just as The Song of Roland, fifteenth-century explorers and nineteenth-century historians crafted an idealized version of their own pasts according to their interests and pre-occupations, we cannot stop ourselves from the same actions, even if we may be very far removed in time and cultural understanding from comprehending the original meaning of these texts.

Jorge Carlos Arias, History, UCLA


Rawcliffe has long been one of the clearest and loudest voices on the topic of medieval health, healing, and hospitals; among her myriad publications in that field are Leprosy in the Middle Ages (2006) and Medicine for the Soul: the Life, Death, and Resurrection of an English Medieval Hospital (1999). In Urban Bodies, Rawcliffe departs from her previous works that focused primarily on case studies in Norwich, where she is based at the University of East Anglia. In this book, she looks broadly at English health in terms of the urban population; she also makes frequent mention of useful comparanda on the continent. The result is a study that is both usefully broad while also remaining extremely attentive to specific documentary sources.

Urban Bodies is composed of an introduction, six chapters thoughtfully organized into thematic subsections, and a conclusion. Additionally, Rawcliffe provides an appendix titled “National and Urban Epidemics, 1257–1530,” which remediates the problem of cataloguing some of the smaller and lesser-known outbreaks. Paragraph long descriptions provide references to documentary evidence for each case, which is illuminating to the reader, and reflective of an impressive facility with a tremendous number of sources.

The first chapter, “Less Mud-Slinging and More Facts,” sets the historiographical stage for Rawcliffe’s project. Here, she carefully combats the Victorian idea that England in the Middle Ages was foul, polluted, and populated by people uninterested in improving poor conditions. Instead, she establishes a more nuanced picture of the period, writing about vernacular texts
on health-related topics, including manuals on disease prevention, and the laws created by and censures delivered to public officials on the topics of sanitation and disease prevention (46–49).

In the second chapter, “Urban Bodies and Urban Souls,” Rawcliffe addresses the civic concerns of public health in later medieval England; this chapter picks up on the pun of the title which addresses both physical bodies and corporate identity. She acknowledges the commonly held belief that plague was punishment for sins by God, and discusses the institution by both prelates and kings of acts of public contrition to seek forgiveness for sin (94–95). Here she considers the notion of cleanliness and health as civic virtues, as well as the material effects of plague. She addresses the impact of depopulation due to disease on the urban landscape, showing that developed areas reverted, parish churches were closed, and building projects were halted due to pestilence (70).

The remaining four chapters, “Environmental Health,” “Water,” “Food and Drink,” and “Sickness and Debility,” deal with specific thematic issues. Each of these is divided into between six and ten subsections, which address such diverse themes as “Vicious dogs and marauding pigs,” “Cooks and pie-bakers,” and “Care for the sick poor.” In “Environmental Health,” Rawcliffe discusses waste management, smells, and fire prevention. She examines London’s comparatively early waste pick-up system (137), showing that all classes, not just the elite, sought waste management. The chaos of the urban environment is evidenced by reports of stray animals wandering the streets and sometimes engaging in scuffles, but laws and bans enacted against these practices shows the widespread desire for containment (154–155). “Water” deals with the expulsion of waste and the challenge of sourcing clean water. The chapter opens with Rawcliffe gesturing to the crucial role of the friars in initiating these systems, and argues against the idea that ruling elites were “disinclined either to promote schemes for the amelioration of public water supplies, or even to shoulder the burden of maintaining whatever rudimentary facilities were already in place” (179–180). This chapter also addresses the medical beliefs about water, including the importance of Arabic texts such as Ibn-Sina’s Canon of Medicine, which discussed the health risks of consuming infected water (189). Rawcliffe showed that some of the trades were the worst offenders in terms of water purity, but that “the considerable sums of money expended on aqueducts, conduits, dikes, wells and gutters, but also the concerted efforts made to maintain them and keep them free from rubbish and pollution is indicative of the widespread concern by both religious and secular authorities, as well as the lower classes, about water quality (228). A very lengthy chapter on food and drink addresses medical beliefs, ideas about nutrition, food shortage and care of paupers, and trade and the markets. The final chapter addresses hospitals and almshouses, as well as reform associated with medicine and the ill. In this chapter, Rawcliffe uses images and descriptions of both extant and recorded buildings used for the care of the sick and indigent, and the role these played in the urban fabric.

A broad range of medievalists will find Urban Bodies pleasing to read, even without a strong background in medical history and its literature. Rawcliffe is
dexterous in her use of archival sources, and makes frequent use of vernacular quotations which add both authenticity and color to the text. She employs a sense of humor infrequently found in historical texts of this nature, exemplified in her choice of epigraph for the first chapter, taken from Monty Python and the Holy Grail, in order to express the stereotypes about medieval filth that she proceeds to debunk. Faced with the abundance of evidence and rich description that Rawcliffe provides, the reader is compelled to agree with her assessment: in spite of Victorian notions of England as filthy, retrograde, and far less sophisticated than its continental peers, the English were “just as anxious to remove recognised hazards, even if they lacked the wealth and technological infrastructure to implement more ostentatious schemes for urban improvement” (352).

MEG BERNSTEIN, Art History, UCLA


More than thirty years after the publication of The Middle English Mystics in 1981, Wolfgang Riehle revises and updates his own research on English medieval mysticism. If his previous work tended towards the metaphorical language of mysticism and relied fundamentally on philological analysis, The Secret Within seeks to interpret the main canon of English mystical works according to the authors’ own express intentions. To this purpose Riehle goes beyond the literary interpretation of early mystical texts in Medieval England and complements his previous analyses with an examination of their theological significance. While English mystics of the period between the twelfth and the early fifteenth century have usually been approached as an eclectic collection of individualities—Riehle’s book features the same case studies as Barry Windeatt’s English Mystics (1994) or Marion Glasscoe’s English Medieval Mystics (1993)—their distinctive theological nature as a group has been neglected in comparison. Riehle suggests that the assumption that English mystics were a disperse bunch of practitioners of a reclusive type of religious experience has hindered a deeper appreciation of the theology informing these practices, which was not only rich in exegesis and allegory but also inspired in the practice of contemplatio. The Secret Within delves into the nature of the contemplative experience as practiced by English mystics, and finds out that they share a theology around the theme of the human likeness to God. If mystical literature is characterized by its focus on the knowledge of God through the experience of the divine (cognitio Dei), it follows, according to Riehle, that “such a distinction allows for the inclusion of works by authors who write about mystical experience and knowledge of God without necessarily claiming to have been granted such experience themselves” (xiii). This is certainly the case with devotional writing at large and meditative texts. Whereas an unifying element in English and continental mysticism has been its enclosed character—the eremitical way of life as suggested by Riehle’s book subtitle— the experiential and secluded nature of mysticism is even more apparent in the English case. This is the secret within their walls as well as within their whole being. And it is not only to be found in the use of mystical