

BOOK REVIEW

## Nicole R. Rice. *The Medieval Hospital: Literary Culture and Community in England, 1350–1550*

**ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023. Pp. 391. \$95.00 (cloth).**

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This book explores how it may be possible to “recover” a literary community from the manuscripts compiled and owned by certain clerics within an institutional setting during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Drawing on the work of Mary Erler, in particular, for St Mark’s hospital in Bristol, and to a lesser extent for St Bartholomew’s hospital in Smithfield (London), as well as the ideas of Caroline Barron, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, and Euan Roger, Nicole Rice offers readers her in-depth analysis of the texts linked to several priests, scribes, and book collectors who worked or resided in the precincts of these two hospitals. In addition to these two case studies, she assesses the association between St Leonard’s hospital in York and the *Purification* pageant in its earliest known form during the first decades of the fifteenth century, and how this link and the later pageant text may offer ideas about how the hospital sought to position itself as a place of female devotion that was also pertinent to the social life of the city more broadly.

St Leonard’s hospital, founded in the eleventh century, is the first and shortest of Rice’s case studies. Thereafter, she moves to London and St Bartholomew’s priory and hospital, which offer some very interesting texts and compilers. It is these texts and their compilers that supply the skeletal framework as she provides detailed readings of, for example, *The Book of the Foundation of St Bartholomew’s Church* in conjunction with *The Smithfield Decretals*, and the slightly later works attributed to John Mirfield, who seemingly resided there in the later fourteenth century. By exploring the extant copies of his *Florarium Bartholomei* and *Breviarium Bartholomei* alongside *The Book of the Foundation*, Rice postulates how his *Breviarium*, as a book on bodily health, offered those in authority at the hospital a regime whereby it was right and proper to aid pregnant and postpartum poor women, whereas such “women’s sexualized bodies [were viewed] as dangerous to the priory’s ethos” (99).

Keeping with St Bartholomew’s, Rice continues her close-reading approach to investigate the community of elite Londoners who had come to reside within the hospital’s precincts in the fifteenth century. Using John Shirley’s final anthology (Bodleian MS Ashmole 59) as her route in, she argues that the purpose behind this compilation by the well-known London bibliophile was to offer moral guidance to his fellow residents—men, women, and children, thereby informing and influencing this “literary community” (101). Rice builds her argument carefully by comparing Shirley’s source texts, such as works by Lydgate and Scogan on virtue and avoidance of vices, as she sees him seeking to shape the moral and spiritual lives of his neighbors.

Taking this sense for the potential of a highly varied readership within the hospital’s precincts and “the permeability of their institutions as lay-clerical spaces” (143), Rice

draws on the works of two Augustinian brothers at St Mark's in Bristol, as well as one of their counterparts at Smithfield. Again, she adopts a close-reading method of these Latin and Middle English compilations and suggests that through a variety of approaches these texts could offer instruction on how to live a contemplative lifestyle without necessarily joining a monastery, and instead remaining in lay society. For the readers and literary culture envisaged by Rice, the hospital offered a good space, yet others have noted that such an understanding and desire to live a Mixed Life was also viewed by late medieval contemporaries as applicable within the parish and household.

Being part of the ReFormations series, her last chapters are important as she assesses the impact of the mid-sixteenth-century religious changes on her three hospitals in the light of earlier Tudor poetic commentaries on the value or otherwise of the hospital. Drawing on even earlier Lollard criticism, as well as Copland's *Hye Way* and Fish's *Supplication*, she concludes that even though some writers (and presumably readers) were critical, for others the hospital remained valuable, even if flawed. Thus, in the more difficult social and economic conditions, as well as a time that would see the disappearance of the belief in purgatory, the hospital was still viewed as a potentially useful charitable institution. Not, of course, that all survived, and Rice considers a number of textual sources to examine the differing fates of her three hospitals. As she discusses, St Leonard's was the least successful and practically disappeared, being unable to muster civic support in York when its rich holdings attracted royal attention. In contrast, although lost as a hospital, St Mark's in Bristol was repurposed as a civic chapel, allowing one of the hospital's brothers to retain a living as curate there. He ministered to some within the old hospital's neighborhood, and, as Rice concludes from the limited textual evidence, seemingly continued to hold to the "old ways" (275) until at least the early years of Edward VI. Yet in terms of continuity, it was St Bartholomew's that was the most successful, as Rice charts using a combination of texts in the form of letters, petitions, and agreements between Londoners and Henry VIII. Her detailed discussion of these sources demonstrates how the authorities viewed their new hospital's value as a place of "worship, charity, and medical care" (275).

Thus, through her detailed reading of a wide variety of textual sources, Rice offers a fascinating assessment of her three hospitals that will be of considerable interest to those working on book culture and reading practices in late medieval and Tudor society.