

Hospitals and Literary Production in England, 1350-1550

OVERVIEW

Medieval hospitals, unlike their modern descendants, prioritized the care of souls over that of bodies. As religious institutions, hospitals were charged with commemorating their founders in prayer and housing poor, infirm, or elderly inmates. Some catered to lepers or pregnant women. The civic responsibility of hospitals for both medical and spiritual care lends them a distinct status among premodern institutions, for they constantly negotiated the concerns of theology, medicine, and politics. Historians have offered rich accounts of individual English hospitals and traced the histories of poor relief and medical care in which these institutions figured. Yet the story of how hospitals participated in England's literary and civic histories has yet to be written. I propose to fill this gap with a new monograph on premodern English hospitals and the varied texts written, read, and performed within them. As institutions that brought disparate groups into proximity—including wealthy patrons, the poor, regular religious, single mothers, and infants—hospitals functioned not only as places of liturgical commemoration and care but also as sites for shared devotional reading, pastoral care, and performance. Daily life was highly routinized yet charged with spiritual urgency; religious and economic priorities were in constant negotiation. How were a hospital's routines, priorities, and tensions translated into literary forms? How did particular hospital settings shape book production and the use of texts? My book addresses these questions by examining the rich variety of literature produced and consumed at hospitals. Hospital chaplains produced foundation narratives, medical compendia, spiritual guides, and dramatic scripts. Hospital scribes copied devotional manuscripts and voluminous records that survive today. And hospitals were themselves subject to literary representation in contemporary poetry. Tracing the literatures of the hospital will offer valuable insights into the shifting relations among theology, medicine, and politics in premodern English cities. In considering the hospital, a milieu where textual modes and groups of people intermingled with unusual fluidity, my study offers a new perspective on a central concern for the humanities: understanding how institutions shaped and were shaped by texts, and in turn, how institutions deployed various forms of cultural production to interact with the broader world.

I seek to understand how hospital residents, patrons, and associates used textual means to foster devotional practice, promote themselves in the civic sphere, respond to controversy, and negotiate the administration of charity over two hundred tumultuous years. Between 1350 and 1550, English hospitals saw massive changes in their fortunes, from the devastation of the black death, to various fifteenth-century reform initiatives, to the creeping dissolutions of religious houses under Henry VIII and Edward VI. Throughout this period, English hospitals produced unique responses to these developments; in the heated decades of the 1530s and 40s, when religious regimes hinged upon rhetoric, strategies of representation could mean the dissolution or survival of a hospital. My study investigates how hospitals defined and defended themselves with texts and in some cases reinvented themselves in the sixteenth century, using literary means to negotiate a changed religious landscape. I envision an audience of scholars in medieval and early modern literature, English social history, and urban studies. The book will also be of interest to scholars in the history of medicine, religious studies, and manuscript studies.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Introduction: The Hospital as Literary Community

The introduction will establish the late medieval English hospital not only as a central institution for urban charitable and devotional life but also as a site for varied forms of literary activity. A range of texts will figure in my study: medical compendia, personal devotional collections, hospital records, and early modern poetry. I focus on four major hospitals: St. Leonard's in York, St. Bartholomew's and St. Thomas of Acon in London, and St. Mark's in Bristol. By focusing on these particular hospitals in England's three largest cities, all run by Augustinian canons yet serving different populations and manifesting distinct concerns, I evoke the cultural commonalities and local differences among these institutions. Each of the book's chapters approaches the hospital as a literary community. I ask how texts mattered in the lives of the houses, tracing the treatment (medical, spiritual, and literary) of their varied populations, and interrogating the broader civic impact of their cultural production.

Chapter One: St. Leonard's Hospital, Civic Drama, and Women's Devotional Lives

The book begins with two chapters that strive in different ways to recover women's central but understudied roles in the literary lives of hospitals. I begin by asking why York's great Hospital of St. Leonard sponsored a dramatic pageant representing the Purification of the Virgin as part of the city's annual Corpus Christi play cycle. Sponsorship by a religious house was unusual within a civic dramatic event produced mainly by artisan groups, and this practice suggests the hospital's desire to promote its mission within the urban sphere. In this chapter I use hospital and civic records together with the extant play text to reconstruct the Purification pageant's early form. Connecting the pageant's early fifteenth-century form to the hospital's distinct devotional culture and economic concerns, I show how St. Leonard's used the woman-centered episode of Mary's Purification to appeal to the experiences of female audiences and donors. The hospital channeled its well-established devotion to the Virgin Mary into a moving public spectacle of her Purification, placing her miraculous maternity in the context of female spiritual community. By exploiting links between Mary's Purification and the churching of ordinary women, as well as giving unique prominence to the widowed prophetess Anna, St. Leonard's advertised itself as a worthy recipient of charity from York's townspeople, particularly women, as well as an appealing institutional home for older women interested in donating or retiring to its precincts. Offering a new understanding of the Purification, as a drama linked to the hospital's female patrons and populations, I show how St. Leonard's used performance to position itself strategically within the charitable economy of early fifteenth-century York. In doing so I excavate an emphasis on women's devotional lives and economic influence that had disappeared by the later fifteenth century, as York's dramatic cycle came fully under the control of masculine civic regimes and artisan sponsors.

Chapter Two: Medical and Spiritual Constructions of Women at St. Bartholomew's, London

Unlike St. Leonard's in York, St. Bartholomew's of London admitted unmarried pregnant women and housed them through childbirth, until their ritual purification forty days later. In the fifteenth century, the hospital close also housed several widows, who may have retired there for the proximity to regular prayer and spiritual counsel. It is therefore notable that the Latin literature written at the hospital manifests a particular concern for women's wellbeing at all stages of their life cycles. The *Breviarium Bartholomei*, written by hospital chaplain John Mirfield (d. 1407), discusses conception, childbirth, purification, and postpartum depression, among other topics. Yet Mirfield's *Florarium Bartholomei*, a theological miscellany also designed for use at the hospital, contains antifeminist commentary and warns its clerical readers against associating with women. Although a few excerpts from these texts have been printed, the sections of interest to me are accessible only in manuscripts that must be transcribed and translated. By investigating medical and devotional texts produced for use in the hospital, in connection with house records dealing with the treatment of childbearing women, infants, and resident widows, I show how texts and practice combined to support a particular medical and spiritual community for women in late medieval London.

Chapter Three: "Pauperes et Infirmi": the Poor, the Infirm, and the City

This chapter takes a diachronic approach to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Building on the prior chapter, which focuses on the fifteenth century, I trace the dynamic relationships among medical, charitable, and literary practices over the house's later fifteenth and sixteenth-century history. Questions of representation loom large for St. Bartholomew's, as witnessed by Robert Copland's 1535/36 poem, *The Highway to the Spital-House*, which depicts the ancient house as besieged by repulsive ill people, "scabby and scurvy," and hordes of marauding vagabonds feigning poverty. Run by a porter and laywomen with no priests in evidence, the hospital is portrayed as overwhelmed and outdated. In conversation with such representations, I show that the rich literary remains of St. Bartholomew's tell a complex story about how the hospital envisioned and adapted its caring mission over a continuous history, from its foundation in 1123 through its refoundation in 1544 under civic auspices. These remains include *The Book of the Foundation*, a narrative of the priory and hospital's early history, extant in Latin and Middle English; Mirfield's medical and theological compilations; Latin and vernacular texts owned

by hospital masters and residents, and sixteenth-century materials including Copland's poem and records from the refounded St. Bartholomew's. These materials chart a history of negotiation between the spiritual and the commercial, of shifting treatments of the poor and infirm that rarely conform neatly to national politics or religious trends. From the founding of St. Bartholomew's in Smithfield as a transformation of this public execution site into a place of spiritual healing, to the mixture of solicitude, education, and discipline found in the mid-sixteenth century records, the hospital's literary history reflects a developing awareness of "the poor and infirm" as shifting categories whose presence both justifies and threatens the institution.

Chapter Four: Readers, Teachers, and Students: Hospital Books and Religious Practice

In the book's fourth chapter, material evidence takes center stage, as I consider surviving books from three hospitals (St. Mark's, St. Bartholomew's, and St. Thomas of Acon), to investigate the devotional and didactic cultures of these institutions. I ask how the practices of these houses were shaped by city- and countrywide religious and educational trends and by individual copyists, masters, and patrons. While these hospitals had varying missions, they shared commitments to scholarship and education. I consider several devotional books copied by known scribes: John Cok, mid-fifteenth century priest and rector at St. Bartholomew's, and John Colman, master of St. Mark's from 1517-39. In contrast to St. Bartholomew's, with its combined medical/spiritual work, St. Mark's was a learned house with minimal service to the poor. Yet notable commonalities appear among the two institutions' books, unique devotional compilations in Latin, English, or both. I focus in particular on the works of Richard Rolle (d. 1349), the Yorkshire mystic whose cult spread in the fifteenth century, especially his *Expositio super novem lectiones* (commentaries on readings from the mass for the dead) and *Emendatio vitae*, a guide to personal religious discipline. I attempt to discern how the placements of these works, attested in other hospitals too, illuminate wider devotional currents and particular institutional concerns. Cok's and Colman's books record literary relationships with individuals in their hospitals as well as efforts to intervene in wider religious and civic affairs. Thus I use Cok's interest in historical matters as a transition to the reading culture of St. Thomas of Acon, which developed alongside St. Bartholomew's during the fifteenth century. Considering textual combinations and evidence of use in this hospital's extant books of theology and history, donated by clerical or aristocratic patrons, I consider how these survivals illuminate St. Thomas's role in responding to London's late medieval educational crisis, its problem of "grete nombre of lerners and few techers," and to the widespread concern about maintaining religious orthodoxy in the metropolis.

METHODS AND WORK PLAN

In my study, these four closely interwoven chapters will demonstrate in a nuanced fashion how hospitals participated in and shaped England's religious and civic history. The book builds upon and extends my recent publications on artisan drama (*The Civic Cycles*, 2015) and devotional reading ("Lay Spiritual Texts and Pastoral Care," 2013). My methodology for this project combines expertise in literary analysis, cultural studies, historical research, and manuscript studies. I draw upon a wide range of materials in order to offer an innovative understanding of the hospital as a religious, civic, and literary institution. My study is well underway: I have completed preliminary archival research and written Chapter One, which is under review for publication as a freestanding essay. Thus I anticipate completing the book during the NEH award period of twelve months. By January 2018 I expect to have a full draft of Chapter Two. I plan to spend January through March researching and drafting Chapter Three, "Pauperes et Infirmi." I will spend April through June researching and writing Chapter Four, "Readers, Teachers, and Students." During the fellowship period I will take at least one extended trip to consult original materials in the hospital archives, relevant municipal archives, the British Library, and the Bodleian Library. (I have extensive experience working with medieval manuscripts and have already visited many of the relevant archives.) I will spend July through September drafting the book's Introduction. October through December will be devoted to a full revision of the manuscript. I look forward to completing this exciting book project with support from the NEH.